

[H-Diplo Article Review 626 on “Exile Island: Xinjiang Refugees and the ‘One China’ Policy in Nationalist Taiwan, 1949-1971.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18:1](#)

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Review by **Charles Kraus**, The George Washington University and The Wilson Center

Justin Jacobs’s article, “Exile Island: Xinjiang Refugees and the ‘One China’ Policy in Nationalist Taiwan, 1949-1971,” is a fascinating, multi-level inquiry into an unknown chapter of what he calls “Cold War ethnopolitics” (191) which reveals that the Republic of China (ROC) strove to represent the territory today commonly known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) long after losing the civil war and retreating to Taiwan in 1949.

Jacobs’ article focuses predominantly on an elder Uyghur leader loyal to the ROC, Yolbars Khan, and his competition for influence with two other prominent Xinjiang exiles, Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mohammad Emin Bugra.¹ Splendidly written, the essay demonstrates that these factional struggles to represent the peoples of Xinjiang unfolded across a truly wide cross-section of the globe: all the way from Taipei to at least Cairo, with India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, especially, Turkey functioning as some of the most important venues in between. With the defeat of the Chinese Nationalist Government in 1949, several thousand Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hans, and other peoples fled from Xinjiang, leaving in droves through 1952. The majority of the refugees were stranded, or chose to settle, in places like Kashmir, Srinagar, Kabul, Istanbul, and, of course, Taipei. The ROC, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, and several other countries all tracked these peoples and sought, to varying degrees, to win over their hearts and minds.² Jacobs’s article sketches out the international dimensions of this episode but

telescopes in on the small group of individuals who were most intimately involved in Xinjiang's refugee politics.

Yolbars Khan—Jacobs's principal subject—retreated to Taiwan, where, in effect, he became the 'shadow' governor of Xinjiang. Loyal to Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and the Nationalist cause, Yolbars was rewarded with the 'Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government,' despite being several hundred miles from Xinjiang and having absolutely no formal control over the province (or, later, autonomous region). Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mohammad Emin Bugra, in contrast, settled in Turkey. Desiring national independence for Xinjiang, Alptekin and Bugra were estranged from Yolbars and the Nationalist Government. To Yolbars's alarm, Alptekin and Bugra emerged as active fundraisers and spokespersons for Xinjiang exiles across Asia and the Middle East. The three parties competed over the next few decades to represent refugees from China's far northwest, believing that victory in this struggle would determine who could lay claim to all of Xinjiang, not just its diaspora.

There is a tremendous irony at the heart of Taiwan's backing of Yolbars, which Jacobs not only acknowledges but also unpacks. Though the Republic of China on Taiwan, driven by the "One China" ideology, desired to erode the political and moral authority of the People's Republic at every possible instance, it shared Beijing's opposition to Uyghur independence. Taipei thus chose to bankroll a man whose primary interest lay in waging an internecine struggle against two perceived political rivals living far outside of China's borders, not subverting Chinese Communist Party rule. No evidence has been found, for example, showing that the ROC funneled arms to guerrillas or smuggled other illicit materials, such as books, to Xinjiang. By sponsoring an anti-independence statesman like Yolbars, Taipei's forays into the Xinjiang battlefield indirectly bolstered Beijing's sometimes contested claims to this region—even as the ROC wished for nothing more than the total destruction of the Communists.

A rich historical essay, Jacobs's article is also full of food-for-thought for observers of Xinjiang in the post-Cold War era, particularly for those interested in the international community's awareness of developments in XUAR today. Jacobs contends that the ROC-sponsored cage matches between Yolbars, Alptekin, and Bugra during the Cold War prevented the Uyghur community in exile from producing a single, identifiable thought-leader and spokesperson who could connect well with Western audiences. Why is Xinjiang so little known in the West compared to Tibet? Jacobs believes he has found an answer: the Xinjiang exile community could not produce its own Dalai Lama. While I am not sure this is the final say on this important question, it is a novel argument based on sources that take the reader deep inside of Xinjiang's 'leadership' in exile.

Methodologically, this is true international history. Jacobs supplements his fascinating findings in the Archives of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (housed at the Academia Sinica) with colorful takes on Xinjiang offered by foreign diplomats whose papers are now stashed away at The National Archives, Kew, and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. For scholars interested in Xinjiang, this is, so-far, one of few English-language studies of the post-1949 period based on a wealth of archival data.¹⁴ Jacobs's erudite command of Xinjiang's history furthermore enables readers—especially Xinjiang novices—to contextualize and make sense of the fascinating archival sources which dominate the footnotes.

A unique and thought-provoking article, Jacobs's work does leave some questions unanswered. The impact of the 1955 Bandung Conference and the international push for Afro-Asian unity and justice, for example, are not explored. Jacobs notes Yolbars Khan's concern over the People's Republic of China's active Middle Eastern diplomacy in the mid-1950s and, especially, the use of Uyghur envoys such as Burhan Shahidi to shore up relations with Arab states (207), but did Yolbars, Alptekin, and Bugra explicitly scrutinize Beijing's "Bandung Discourse"?¹ Did Taipei use Xinjiang as a wedge to interfere with Beijing's Afro-Asian diplomatic offensive, especially with Muslim states, in 1955?

Despite the fact that more exploration of the international ramifications of the "Xinjiang question" in this particular instance would be helpful, Jacobs's "Exile Island" is sure to educate readers who are studying modern Xinjiang, cross-straits relations, refugee politics, or Chinese diplomacy during the Cold War era.

Of course, this excellent article is just the appetizer before the main course. Jacobs's new book, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, is what readers will really want to sink their teeth into.²

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Notes

[1] For helpful biographical sketches of these and other Uyghur leaders, see Linda Benson, "Uyghur Politicians of the 1940s: Mehmet Emin Bugra, Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mesut Sabri," *Central Asian Survey* 10:4 (1991): 87-104; and Benson, "The Life of Yolbars Khan: Pauper, Prince and Politician in Republican Xinjiang," in *Opuscula Altaica: Essays Presented in Honor of Henry Schwarz*, ed. Edward H. Kaplan and Donald W. Whisenhunt (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 1994), 126-147.

[2] Charles Kraus, "To Die on the Steppe: Sino-Soviet-American Relations and the Cold War in Chinese Central Asia, 1944-1952," *Cold War History* 14:3 (August 2014): 293-313.

[3] See also Zhe Wu, "Caught between Opposing Han Chauvinism and Opposing Local Nationalism: The Drift toward Ethnic Antagonism in Xinjiang Society, 1952-1963," in Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*,

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 306-339; James Z. Gao, "The Call of the Oases: The 'Peaceful Liberation' of Xinjiang, 1949-53," in Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 184-204.

[4] Chen Jian, "Bridging Revolution and Decolonization: The 'Bandung Discourse' in China's Early Cold War Experience," *Chinese Historical Review* 15:2 (2008): 207-241, doi: 10.1179/tcr.2008.15.2.207.

[5] Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).