

## The Rise of Xinjiang Studies: A *JAS* New Author Forum

**RIAN THUM, JUSTIN JACOBS, TOM CLIFF,  
DAVID BROPHY, KWANGMIN KIM, AND  
MADLEN KOBI**

**Keywords:** censorship, colonialism, empire, fieldwork, People's Republic of China, Qing, Uyghur, Xinjiang

PERHAPS NO AREA OF China-related scholarship has taken longer to recover from the access limitations of the mid-twentieth century than the study of Xinjiang. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the study of Xinjiang was so fashionable that it had a wide following in the Western popular press, where the region was better known as Chinese Central Asia, Chinese Turkistan, or Eastern Turkistan. When the turmoil of the Republican and Mao eras made the region almost entirely inaccessible to outsiders, the study of Xinjiang began a long sojourn in the Western academic wilderness. After all, the earlier interest had always been tinged with Orientalist travel fantasy and imperial desires that required scholarly boots on the ground.

By the time of China's reopening in the 1980s, there were few scholars left with the expertise needed to train new generations of Xinjiang specialists. Growth in the field was slow, hampered by a lack of training in the many languages of the region, particularly Uyghur, and, at least into the 1990s, a sense among sinologists that the geographical peripheries of China were also peripheral to the history and identity of China. By the early 2000s, language resources began to accumulate, access improved, and the growing academic interest in empire, borderlands, and identity made Xinjiang relevant. At the same time, the political resonance of a China-controlled, Muslim-majority region in the post-September 11 world made Xinjiang books attractive to publishers.

Barriers remained, of course. Contributors to the 2004 edited volume *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* were subsequently denied visas to enter China, seriously curtailing their ability to undertake new research.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in the 2000s scholarly monographs trickled out at a rate of about one per year.

Rian Thum ([thum@loyno.edu](mailto:thum@loyno.edu)) is Associate Professor of History at Loyola University New Orleans. Justin M. Jacobs ([jjacobs@american.edu](mailto:jjacobs@american.edu)) is Associate Professor of History at American University. Tom Cliff ([tom.cliff@anu.edu.au](mailto:tom.cliff@anu.edu.au)) is Research Fellow at the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University. David Brophy ([david.brophy@sydney.edu.au](mailto:david.brophy@sydney.edu.au)) is Senior Lecturer in Modern Chinese History at the University of Sydney. Kwangmin Kim ([kwangmin.kim@colorado.edu](mailto:kwangmin.kim@colorado.edu)) is Associate Professor of History at the University of Colorado Boulder. Madlen Kobi ([madlen.kobi@usi.ch](mailto:madlen.kobi@usi.ch)) is post-doctoral researcher at the Academy of Architecture of the Università della Svizzera Italiana.

<sup>1</sup>S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004); James A. Millward, "Being Blacklisted by China, and What Can Be Learned from It," *The China Beat*, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=3746> (accessed November 21, 2017).

Until 2016. That year looks to be either a high point or a turning point, with the publication of at least five academic monographs, all by new authors. What this burst of publishing will represent in the long term is uncertain. Access is tightening again,<sup>2</sup> with reports coming out of Xinjiang that Uyghurs are being sent to reeducation camps for merely speaking with foreigners. On the other hand, there are probably more Xinjiang specialists in tenured and tenure-track positions than ever before, and a strong contingent of graduate students is set to follow them.

Whatever the future of Xinjiang studies may be, we have for the first time a large enough body of work to talk about trends in what is beginning to look like a true academic field. Indeed, senior scholars have already begun to weigh in on this question through multi-book review essays like the piece by Ildikó Bellér-Hann in the previous issue of this journal.<sup>3</sup> I interviewed the five new Xinjiang authors of 2016 by email for their perspective on the nature and direction of the field. Their books are:

*Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier.* By DAVID BROPHY. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016. xvi, 347 pp. ISBN: 9780674660373.

*Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang.* By TOM CLIFF. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xi, 252 pp. ISBN: 9780226360133.

*Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State.* By JUSTIN M. JACOBS. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. xvi, 297 pp. ISBN: 9780295742649.

*Borderland Capitalism: Turkestan Produce, Qing Silver, and the Birth of an Eastern Market.* By KWANGMIN KIM. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016. viii, 299 pp. ISBN: 9780804799232.

*Constructing, Creating and Contesting Cityscapes: A Socio-Anthropological Approach to Urban Transformation in Southern Xinjiang, People's Republic of China.* By MADLEN KOBİ. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz verlag, 2016. xi, 214 pp. ISBN: 9783447105903.

— Rian Thum

<sup>2</sup>Emily Feng, "Security Clampdown Bites in China's Xinjiang Region," *Financial Times*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/ee28e156-992e-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b> (accessed November 21, 2017); Tom Phillips, "In China's Far West the 'Perfect Police State' Is Emerging," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/in-chinas-far-west-experts-fear-a-ticking-timebomb-religious> (accessed November 21, 2017); Rob Schmitz, "Wary of Unrest among Uighur Minority, China Locks Down Xinjiang Region," *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/09/26/553463964/wary-of-unrest-among-uighur-minority-china-locks-down-xinjiang-province> (accessed November 21, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Xinjiang Close-Up," *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 1092–1100; Christopher P. Atwood, "The Uyghurs from Modular Community to Partisan Nation," *Journal of Chinese History* 1, no. 2 (2017): 353–63; Peter C. Perdue, "Xinjiang Studies: The Third Wave," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 21 (2016): 137–56.

*Rian Thum:* Before moving to a more general discussion of the field, I'd like to start by asking about a remarkable thread I see running through the 2016 Xinjiang books. Many of you use the words "colonial" or "colony" to describe Xinjiang. This seems to me to represent a new and important consensus, one that would be anathema to current Chinese leaders. Much of academia sees the world today as either postcolonial or neocolonial, but it strikes me that some of this new work suggests that the case of Xinjiang is a chance to examine a continuous and still-active colonial system of the classic sort. What do you think the study Xinjiang has to contribute to the global study of colonialism and empire?

*Justin Jacobs:* I think Xinjiang is a great case study through which to include China in global comparisons of empires and their fates in the age of nationalism and decolonization. Once you get into the twentieth century, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to make China a part of these discussions. Xinjiang is the one provincial-level territorial unit in China where a major demographic of non-Han peoples lives alongside a roughly equivalent number of Han, without either side grossly outnumbering the other. And, unlike with Tibet, Han officials, merchants, and migrants have had a continuous presence in Xinjiang throughout the twentieth century, leaving behind an unparalleled trail of paper documentation for historians to analyze. In my opinion, Xinjiang offers the richest and most promising avenue for scholars of modern China to engage the rest of the world in issues relating to imperialism and colonialism, and for the rest of the world to engage China.

*Tom Cliff:* Xinjiang today combines key characteristics—forms, practices, events, sequences, subjectivities—that are recognizably derived from past versions of colonialism. But, first, they are derived, not necessarily direct copies. So Xinjiang offers an opportunity to study how these characteristics mutate and develop in nonlinear and sometimes unpredictable ways, then come together. Second, because not all of the contemporary influences on Xinjiang hail from the past, I suggest that this derivation/recombination statement extends also to contemporary capitalism—especially perhaps its postsocialist variations in China and the former Soviet bloc and those that have long been (and remain) in operation in the democratic West's Third World. These, too, are imperial formations—modes of domination—that have aims and objectives beyond the purely economic. Xinjiang shows how these techniques are applied contemporaneously in a different place. Frontiers are where things get tried out, as well as receptacles of past forms and practices, and the mechanics of politics, society, economy, etc. tend to be stripped bare, making them easier to see and analyze. That means studying Xinjiang can help us to reflect critically on our own societies, their practices within and beyond the borders of the nation-state, and their histories and futures.

*David Brophy:* If there's a consensus here, it's because it's glaringly obvious that Qing Xinjiang was a case of empire-building, and that, at least from the late nineteenth century onwards, it was a colonial situation. For a period, Chinese officials consciously invoked models from empires elsewhere to justify themselves. I'd hesitate to call it a "classic" form of colonialism though. Obviously, there are peculiarities to the Chinese tradition that shape Beijing's approach to this day. We also have to keep in mind that late Qing and Republican China was weak, and constrained by the presence of Russia and

Britain as colonial actors in Xinjiang. In my own work, I've been interested in how different colonial policies intersected in Xinjiang. Finally, there's the fact that Chinese rule was redefined midcentury in Marxist-Leninist terms. Maybe the PRC still is just a colonial empire, but we can't entirely dismiss this new rhetoric of development and affirmative action.

*Kwangmin Kim:* Arguably, the biggest contribution of recent Xinjiang scholarship to the field of global imperialism and colonialism is its challenge to European exceptionalism, in the sense that colonialism is assumed to be a specific development of Western Europe. According to this position, non-Western empires such as China's did not have imperialist or colonial empires in the strict Western sense. In this view, a main point of difference was that European empires were commercially driven, while Chinese expansion in Inner Asia was supposedly security driven, carried out for defense against nomadic threats. Although the rigid economic interpretation of European imperialism itself has been called into question for quite some time now, the above-mentioned distinction is still current when it comes to the comparison between the European and non-European empires.

In my opinion, new scholarship on the Qing empire in Xinjiang provides serious challenges to the argument of European exceptionalism, by highlighting the Qing empire's active involvement with commerce and economic development in colonial Xinjiang. The pioneering works of Peter Purdue and James Millward convincingly demonstrated that the empire's security concerns and involvement in economic development were often mutually reinforcing.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, my book shows that the Qing was not just involved with the expansion of Chinese commercial interests. It also cooperated with native landholding magnates (*begs*) in Xinjiang, helping them to conduct capitalist transformation of local society. In addition, authors like Millward and Hua Li at least hint at the possibility that Xinjiang may have functioned as an ecological reserve, in a way that New World colonies did for Europe.<sup>5</sup>

*Rian Thum:* The colonialism question is only one of many new research directions recent Xinjiang books have opened up. What continuities and ruptures do you see with works from the 1990s and 2000s? Is there a direction to the field of Xinjiang studies?

*Kwangmin Kim:* The most obvious change from the 1990s and 2000s is the diversification of the topics. While earlier scholarship focused on Qing imperial policies broadly conceived, the new books published in the 2010s deal with the various local actors on the ground in Xinjiang: "Uyghur" diasporas in Russian Central Asia (Brophy), Chinese migrants in southern oases since 1949 (Cliff), Han Chinese governors of Xinjiang during the late

<sup>4</sup>Peter C. Purdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); James Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Hua Li, *Qing dai Xinjiang nong ye kai fa shi* [History of agricultural development in Qing-era Xinjiang] (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994); Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, *op. cit.* note 4.

Qing and Republican period (Jacobs), local Muslim landlord magnates (Kim), and ordinary oasis Muslim pilgrims who frequented the local Sufi shrines (Thum).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the new direction of Xinjiang studies could well be characterized as the change from the study of Chinese, or Manchu, imperial policy in Xinjiang to the study of Xinjiang society under Chinese rule.

Another difference may be the chronological focus. Unlike the earlier studies, which focused primarily on Qing imperial history, the majority of the recent works focus on twentieth-century developments, especially of the Republican era (1912–49). Yet I also see a strong, even foundational, influence of earlier imperial histories and their analytical insights on the new works: like the earlier imperial histories, the new works analyze Xinjiang society and politics within the broader transnational and global contexts of Eurasia, and examine Xinjiang's relationship with China as a colonial one rather than domestic one. Therefore, consciously or unwittingly, the new works collectively suggest an important point: in the history of the Xinjiang in the last 300 years, the artificial dividing line of the 1911 Chinese Rebellion between imperial and modern history does not matter much; the imperial legacy of the Qing Empire still lives on in Xinjiang, albeit in a substantially revised form.

*Tom Cliff*: Situated fieldwork in Xinjiang that is informed by knowledge of Qing imperial history leads to scholars on the ground seeing colonialism close up. The visibility of imperial legacies in present-day Xinjiang highlights these legacies' persistence across contemporary China. Certain structures and patterns become very clear when viewing the metropole from the periphery, and vice versa.

But, with regard to Xinjiang, which way is the metropole? And where is home? To these questions, the human subjects of each recent book would surely have different answers (compare Brophy's exiles with Waley-Cohen's; Thum's present-day inhabitants of Xinjiang with Cliff's or Kobi's; Jacobs's Republican-era Han political elites with Kim's Uyghur *begs* of a century or so earlier).<sup>7</sup> The former question, at least, is a point already made by James Millward and perhaps others, but these recent monographs grant the answers significant empirical substance. The field of Xinjiang studies goes beyond Xinjiang. The diversification of topics and actors mentioned by Kim, and the

<sup>6</sup>David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016); Tom Cliff, *Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Justin M. Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); Kwangmin Kim, *Borderland Capitalism: Turkestan Produce, Qing Silver, and the Birth of an Eastern Market* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016); Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup>Brophy, *Uyghur Nation*, *op. cit.* note 6; Joanna Waley-Cohen, *Exile in Mid-Qing China: Banishment to Xinjiang, 1758–1820* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, *op. cit.* note 6; Cliff, *Oil and Water*, *op. cit.* note 6; Madlen Kobi, *Constructing, Creating and Contesting Cityscapes: A Socio-Anthropological Approach to Urban Transformation in Southern Xinjiang, People's Republic of China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz verlag, 2016); Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, *op. cit.* note 6; Kim, *Borderland Capitalism*, *op. cit.* note 6.

details of culture, politics, and economy that they are involved in, highlights and complicates Xinjiang's role and position on multiple core-periphery axes.

*Madlen Kobi:* Concerning the multiple core-periphery axes, I perceive that one of the continuities in scholarly approaches to Xinjiang is the variety of angles for embedding our research: while some scholars treat Xinjiang as a border region of China, approaching it from sinology or Chinese studies, others focus instead on the Uyghur population and on Xinjiang's cultural, historical, and social connections to Central Asia. We still find few scholars who master both the Uyghur and Chinese languages, but language skills of course shape the kinds of accessible written and oral sources and the research results. It is the conglomerate of perspectives that enhances our understanding of the political, economic, and social positioning of Xinjiang. I think that Xinjiang scholars should be aware of their limitations and engage in dialogue with different regional disciplines—apart from their contributions in thematic fields like migration, state power, or ethnic studies.

*David Brophy:* I think the literature that might eventually define a field of “Xinjiang studies” is coalescing. There are still so many gaps that it's tempting to occupy a niche, but we're starting to see more reflexivity and debate within our community. People have mentioned the time scholars now spend in Xinjiang. We also have a much richer body of written sources to work with than we did twenty years ago. It's hard to generalize, but I see these books each reaching beyond Xinjiang in some direction, be it geographically or theoretically, to find more active conversations for which the place is a natural fit, but from which it was missing. That could mean trends in the anthropology of the Islamic world, the debate on Eurocentrism, or something different. At least in the China field, this is becoming a two-way street; we're seeing Xinjiang “normalized” as part of the wider discussion.

*Rian Thum:* Research access to Xinjiang has certainly increased since the Mao era, but even at the peak of openness in the first decade of the 2000s, the region was a very difficult place to work. Today the region has some of the most intense state surveillance and information control in the world. To that we can add linguistic challenges—few recent books make use of sources in Uyghur or other local languages, and important secondary literature is spread across Russian, Japanese, and other languages. How do you think Xinjiang's particular access issues are shaping the questions we ask and the research we produce?

*Madlen Kobi:* This is definitely a key question for anthropological research in the region. During my ten months of fieldwork in southern Xinjiang in 2011 and 2012, I developed different strategies for data collection. Doing research in urban areas in Xinjiang was an advantage. In order to grasp the socio-material nexus that urbanization entails, I explored public spaces quite extensively, did urban mapping of the city of Aksu, and engaged in all kinds of public activities, as well as meeting interlocutors in restaurants rather than in their homes. In general, I opt for a transparent research strategy that entails communication about one's research and engagement with local institutions. A lot of time may be

needed to organize and administrate fieldwork, which can be seen as a loss of time to work on one's specific research questions, but it has to be reflected as part of Xinjiang's social reality. Staying in the region for several months allows not only work on one's topic but also insights into different aspects of everyday lives. Further, when leaving the field, the political sensitivities of the region have of course shaped the way I write and publish.

*David Brophy:* Currently it's hard to conceive of a research program deeply grounded in local conditions, and collaboration with scholars in Xinjiang is almost impossible. When I decided to focus my archival work on the ex-Soviet Union and Russia, it was partly for intellectual reasons, but also partly for practical reasons. Right now the field is receptive to this kind of work, linking Xinjiang to neighboring regions. I'm not sure what I'll do if people start asking for more of a "Xinjiang-centered history" though! On sources, there's plenty of work to be done in all languages, and as an archival historian I tend to think Chinese and/or Russian will always be crucial. For me, learning Uyghur was partly to do with sources, but it was also that I felt I couldn't write about nationalism without talking to Uyghurs in their own terms. That imperative wouldn't apply to every question in Xinjiang history.

*Tom Cliff:* Language and political access barriers very directly shaped my research. I made a strategic decision to focus solely on the Han. This was firstly because I saw a gap in the research, with contemporary ethnographies of Han life in Xinjiang underrepresented. It was also a question of language ability and the resources that I would need to devote to learning even the most basic level of Uyghur. But methodologically the decision was motivated by the reality of interethnic and interpersonal relationships in Xinjiang, and how I fit into that. Even before 2009, interethnic relations were characterized by mistrust. Actively performing not studying the Uyghur language and not cultivating Uyghur contacts allowed a greater depth of trust to be built up with my Han interlocutors. In this way, I used language barriers with Uyghurs to cross political access barriers with Han. (That said, within six months, I had been told in no uncertain terms to stay away from the *bingtuan*, and especially from recent *bingtuan* settlers. Many questions are still unanswered there.)

*Justin Jacobs:* I think that problems of access and language in Xinjiang present more barriers to anthropologists, who require access to living informants, than they do to historians, who rely on documents. For historians, gaining access to primary sources related to Xinjiang isn't terribly different from any field whose archives are held by an authoritarian government, including those located in the inner provinces. As with all fields concerned with the history of twentieth-century China, archival access in Taiwan is now abundant while access to the same on the mainland is unpredictable and spotty at best. I was fortunate enough to gain limited access to the Xinjiang regional archives, but was turned away at the No. 2 Archives in Nanjing. As for non-Chinese materials, several important collections of Uyghur-language materials exist outside of China, and Manchu- and Mongol-language documents are accessible at the No. 1 Archives in Beijing. In the end, only a handful of historical narratives are "tellable" at any given moment, and historians invariably tell the ones that time and circumstance dictate—in Xinjiang as elsewhere.

*Rian Thum:* Xinjiang studies has the unfortunate distinction of being a field in which we can link the blacklisting of scholars to their participation in a particular publication. China's banning of thirteen authors demonstrated that PRC authorities were willing to target individual foreign scholars based on their publications, including some very tame essays. How has this affected your work and the field in general?

*Tom Cliff:* The possibility of being visa-blacklisted for writing or commenting on Xinjiang affairs is a constant concern for me. With everything I write, I make a conscious effort not to censor myself. And I feel that it needs to be conscious, because self-censorship can operate subconsciously, or unconsciously. Subconscious self-censorship is driven, at least in part, by uncertainty about what the effect of critical commentary might be on fieldwork; we never know, and we never can know whether we are about to pop up on the wrong person's radar, for the wrong reasons, at the wrong time. The way that I deal with this is to assume that I am already on the radar, to remind myself that I have a responsibility to tell it as I see it, and then to imagine myself relating my observations and analysis to my Han Chinese friends. They are not unreasonable people; they may disagree—even vehemently—with me, but we will remain friends. My sense is that the very real threat of visa-blacklisting affects most people working in the field of Xinjiang studies, but I think that this (increasingly) applies to Chinese studies more broadly. If there is a difference, it is a matter of degree.

*David Brophy:* I don't worry about it all that much, though I imagine that incident might've discouraged some young scholars from entering the field. The case you mention was a combination of bad luck—the book getting into the wrong hands—and a perception that it represented an organized effort by Western scholars who were linked to US policy-making in some way. There's no evidence of any uniform policy of banning individual scholars. Of course, it's always possible, and it would be a pity to end up on a blacklist, but it's a small price to pay when you think of the pressure now being exerted on Uyghur scholars outside China not to publish, and the suffocating surveillance of intellectual work inside China. One thing we need to ensure is that university administrations support scholars who face these various threats, and not view them as a liability in the university's dealings with China.

*Madlen Kobi:* The banning of these authors has of course had consequences on the work of Xinjiang scholars until today. The problem is that no one knows exactly where the “red line” is, what we are able to publish or not without losing access to China. But for me, the worst thing that can happen is not that I get denied a visa (which would of course be a deplorable loss!), but that my interlocutors in Xinjiang face problems because of having interacted with me. I agree with David and Tom that this not only concerns Xinjiang scholars, but scholars in Chinese studies more broadly. The situation in China (and in Xinjiang especially) for foreign scholars has become tenser in the last five years. The censorship disclosures of articles with “sensitive” keywords that Springer Nature and Cambridge University Press restrain from the Chinese market remind us that our research output is closely monitored. Nevertheless, as foreign researchers we have a



certain responsibility and freedom to keep publishing fieldwork-based scientific papers on social, historical, and cultural developments in Xinjiang.

*Justin Jacobs:* I don't worry about it anymore at this stage of my career, but when I was in grad school I was terrified of being blacklisted, afraid that such a designation would ruin my career in academia. I was so paranoid that one year I even delivered a paper at the East Turkestan Refugee Association conference in Istanbul under the pseudonym "Jefferson Roberts." What has always struck me, however, is the spotty inconsistency with which the censorship regime is applied, at least toward foreigners. Access to archives is tightly restricted, but then these same archives turn around and publish thousands of pages of documents filled with the most sensitive material. And last summer I was invited to give three completely uncensored talks on highly sensitive topics at Sichuan University. So there are plenty of holes in the system for the foreign scholar to exploit, given enough patience.

*Rian Thum:* How much sense does it make to talk about "Xinjiang studies"? After all, Xinjiang, the "new territory," is an odd administrative construction inherited from the Qing state, fusing the Uyghur-majority region of Altishahr with the now Han-majority region of Dzungaria. And of course there was no Xinjiang before the eighteenth century.

*Justin Jacobs:* I think it makes about as much sense as any field of study that derives its basic theoretical parameters through artificially imposed political boundaries. Pretty much every political construct, be it an empire, nation, province, state, or county, has been cobbled together in piecemeal fashion in ways that appear arbitrary at first, but later undergo a process of ideological naturalization. I don't think there is any more "natural" or "organic" alternative to the political constructs we inhabit, in Xinjiang or elsewhere. If we were to say, for instance, that a more logical unit of analysis would be "the Uyghur-majority region of Altishahr," then we would be imposing the idea that the identity politics of Altishahr is the most salient characteristic of that field. But depending on one's perspective, the most salient characteristic might be economic trade links to Fergana, Muslim religious networks from Xi'an to Cairo, or interactions with the nomadic Kyrgyz, Kazaks, and Mongols. So while I agree that Xinjiang is an odd administrative construct of relatively recent vintage, I also believe that the late Qing, Republican, and Communist states largely succeeded in naturalizing its once artificial existence. For better or for worse, by the twentieth century "Xinjiang" meant something important to a great number of people, and it makes sense for this to be reflected in the work of scholars who study this region.

*Kwangmin Kim:* I would agree with Jacobs that Xinjiang could and should be an effective unit of historical analysis, at least for post-eighteenth-century study. Although Xinjiang was originally an arbitrary Qing administrative term, this Qing construction has since taken on a real life of its own and has become a political, economic, and social reality, especially under the Republican and Communist governments. One cannot simply ignore that. The very fact that the five authors in this forum all deal with "Xinjiang" as

a research topic testifies to the staying power of Xinjiang as a meaningful spatial conceptualization.

In addition, it seems to me that the north-south connection (the Zungharia-Altishahr connection) that is crucial in the conceptualization of Xinjiang as a single region is not purely arbitrary, even in the historical sense. Even before the Qing conquest in the mid-eighteenth century, the Zunghar empire had already integrated the Altishahr within its fold, and one may even argue with Owen Lattimore that Altishahr's political connection with the northern steppe and also with the Chinese empires was ancient and even structural, say, since the Xiongnu era, (c. third century BCE to the first century CE).

In a nutshell, I would say that the concept of Xinjiang and Xinjiang studies is relevant and useful—as long as one is mindful of its historically constructed nature and of the existence of other competing spatial conceptualizations that are just as meaningful as Xinjiang.

*Madlen Kobi:* Of course, Xinjiang is a political construction as so many other regions are. However, and here I agree with Kwangmin, the fact that we all feel like we belong to the field of Xinjiang studies makes it a meaningful term to use, at least in the current decades. Because there are not that many scholars working on Xinjiang, we are all eager to exchange knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries. While my socio-anthropological research in other regions of China is more oriented towards exchange with other anthropologists, Xinjiang studies are characterized by a broad variety of scholars from history, anthropology, Islamic studies, geography, language studies, and others. In my experience, Xinjiang scholars get in contact very easily and feel a kind of bond due to their common field—at least those from Europe and the United States. Regrettably, the collaboration with Chinese scholars working on Xinjiang is more complicated. I also observe that Chinese scholars identify themselves less as Xinjiang scholars, but are more discipline-oriented.

*Rian Thum:* By way of conclusion, what do you think are some of the big unanswered questions in the field?

*David Brophy:* Not so much a question, more a direction of research, but I'd like to see Islamic history widen beyond its long-standing interest in Sufism to give us a better genealogy of the Tarim Basin *ulama* and their fate in the twentieth century. I'd also like us to go beyond the clichés about isolation and parochialism, and think more about what an “oasis society” really means in terms of political economy. I think we're still a fair way off a good analysis of political dynamics at the village level in Xinjiang, and how popular mobilization occurred in periods like the 1930s. And of course, like millions of Uyghurs, I'd like to know whether Stalin really was responsible for the plane crash that killed off the leadership of the second East Turkistan Republic!

*Madlen Kobi:* As elsewhere in China, we have to inquire into the impacts of rapid urbanization on the fragile desert ecology and into the implications of the increasing demand for natural resources to sustain urban living. Furthermore, the “One Belt One Road”

initiative is currently a hot political topic, but what does it mean for the people on the ground? In what ways does such a policy inscribe itself onto everyday lives? Then there are a number of minor issues that I would be interested to know more about, for example, the spread and relevance of Christian religion in Xinjiang today, or the organization and actors involved in tomato production in northern Xinjiang, because apparently, one-fifth of tomatoes for worldwide ketchup production comes from Xinjiang. All in all, instead of always highlighting the edge or border situation of the region, we could make an effort to inquire into some astonishing (hi)stories about social life in Xinjiang.

*Justin Jacobs:* One word: *bingtuan*. The military colonies established by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps after 1949 represent the single greatest agent of sinicization in the history of the region. But we know precious little about how these institutions and their members interacted—or didn't interact—with the people who already lived in Xinjiang prior to 1949. To me, the history of modern Xinjiang can be divided into B.B. and A.B.: “before *bingtuan*” and “after *bingtuan*.” Of course, we know the general outline of the *bingtuan* presence in Xinjiang, but this doesn't really go beyond dry statistics and politically correct reminiscences of aging settlers. More generally, I'd also agree with David that we know woefully little about how the masses experienced the various forms of Chinese rule in the twentieth century, with the Soviet-style popular mobilization efforts of Sheng Shicai a particular area of interest.

*Kwangmin Kim:* Not so much a research question either, but the most glaring gap in the coverage in Xinjiang history is the late Qing period, especially from 1864 to 1911. This was an important period, in which the transition from the imperial politics to national politics happened in Xinjiang, thus holding the key to unlocking the origin of modernity there. Yet, few scholars have studied this period in its own right. Scholars do cover this period—but primarily as the epilogue of the eighteenth-century Qing rule, or the prehistory of the twentieth-century history. Hodong Kim's *Holy War in China* is the only monograph devoted to this period published in recent years.<sup>8</sup> In particular, I would welcome an in-depth study of the post-reconquest Qing regime, which examines the establishment of Xinjiang as a Chinese province (*sheng*) in a nuanced local context. I would also like to see a study of the late nineteenth-century Xinjiang Muslim rebellions, which examines not only the Ya'qūb Beg regime but also the Tungan regime in Urumchi and the Taranchi regimes of Ili comprehensively. Such a work might inquire as to whether these rebels provided any native/subaltern source of modernity, which interacted with, but was distinctive from, the metropolitan vision transmitted from China, Russia, or Istanbul.

*Tom Cliff:* The big questions for me revolve around money. I would be impressed to see detailed, historically contextualized research on Xinjiang's security economy. With most other aspects of the economy stagnating or going backwards, the security economy is where things are growing and opportunities are to be had. Examples abound: How

<sup>8</sup>Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864–1877* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

does project funding under *duikou* work? Has securitization benefited the *bingtuan* economically? Who gets (and who doesn't get) a "stability maintenance" bonus in their pay packet?

I am especially interested in the banal aspects of the security economy, such as the provision of canteen meals for troops stationed out of the area. Government contracts like this provide a guaranteed return, so people in the right sort of positions are competing to get those contracts. Who are those people? How does the competition play out? What role do state redistributive organs (*shiye danwei*) and enterprises (*qiye danwei*) play in transferring money into the private economy, and what do they extract in return? How legitimate are these transfers? Is any significant sector of private business unaffected by the state policies and subsidies of the post-2009 security economy? This sort of research could throw light on interest structures and sources of social power in contemporary Xinjiang.