

The Ili Rebellion: Muslim Challenge  
to Chinese Authority in Xingjiang,  
1944-49

Linda K. Benson



THE  
ILI  
REBELLION

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THE MOSLEM CHALLENGE  
TO CHINESE AUTHORITY  
IN XINJIANG  
1944-1949



An East Gate Book

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## **An East Gate Book**

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## PREFACE

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In November 1944, in a remote part of northwestern China, a group of Turkic Moslems and White Russians rose against the Chinese government and established an independent Islamic state. Their ultimate goal was to oust the Han Chinese from the whole of what they referred to as East Turkestan, the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

The formation of a new republic is likely to be a matter of international interest, but the new East Turkestan Republic, remote as it was, received almost no attention at the time of its formation; up to the present day no detailed account of its existence has been published in English. When I first read of this small state in the middle of the Eurasian continent and discovered that it had existed for six years before it was swallowed by the more powerful revolutionary forces of the Chinese Communist Party, I became intrigued by this fascinating subject and the many questions—indeed, mysteries—that surrounded it.

Who were these rebels, and what was the motivation behind their “Three Districts Revolution”? Were they the agents of the Soviet Union, as most available sources suggested? Or were they Turki patriots, fulfilling the old dream of an independent Turkestan? And what was the fate of the leadership in 1949?

A search through libraries revealed that there was little information on Xinjiang as a whole for this period, and detailed accounts of the region’s history were not to be found outside a few specialized libraries. Part of the reason for this appeared to be that Xinjiang is physically remote from the centers of civilization in Europe and Asia—a geographic fact that makes the region one of the world’s most mysterious and romantic. Xinjiang lies within China and yet is not a part of it, for the peoples and history of this region are more closely related to those of Central Asia, of which it is a natural ex-

tension both culturally and geographically. Deserts cover much of its territory, and the remainder boasts high mountains with lush pastureland in their foothills, suitable for animal herds but not for traditional Chinese agriculture. Thus, despite the fact that Xinjiang formally became a province of China in 1884, it attracted few Chinese settlers. Those who did arrive in this land “beyond the jade gate” were mainly soldiers sent to man the garrisons and through whom the Chinese continued their hold on the region; a smaller number were government officials and traders, hoping to acquire some of Xinjiang’s fabled riches. In the 1940s the majority of the population was the same as it had been for centuries—Moslem Turks. The largest group, people today known as Uighurs, lived in the region’s oases while smaller, more traditional peoples like the Kazaks followed their herds in the region’s rich pasture lands.

Like a true crossroads of great cultures, Xinjiang’s history offers much of interest. The region has been scarred by past waves of invasion, rebellion, and short-lived independent states, seeking to control the lucrative Silk Road which once directly linked the area to both China and the Middle East. Even in more modern eras, only the most intrepid of explorers—and the inevitable Chinese government officials—reached Xinjiang, a situation that has only recently begun to change.

Xinjiang offers much to interest scholars in many disciplines, but little work has actually been done. The reasons are only partly due to its extreme geographic isolation. There are also linguistic barriers. The greatest amount of information available is in Chinese, a language that takes time to learn to use. Other relevant materials are in Turkish and Russian, of which the same is true. Another major difficulty lies in locating the source materials. They are scattered and difficult to find; moreover, when located, they are difficult to obtain access to, due to the politically sensitive nature of this area. In other cases materials are available, but they remain unclassified and unregistered, so that consulting them is time-consuming and somewhat haphazard. When material is found, it is sometimes in forms difficult to read, due to the aging of a poor-quality medium, or damage. The reason why many works on Xinjiang have relied on existing English language sources becomes obvious.

Yet the questions about Xinjiang and the East Turkestan Republic remained, and as I became more involved in the search for information these questions quickly were joined by new ones. For example, it was often hard to make out just who the people involved were, where they came from, and what they did. If one of them was met only through a non-Turkic source, then his very name stayed in doubt. If he was met in several sources in different languages, then it had to be established whether he was one or several persons. (I hope I have avoided the possible pitfalls; I have come across one secondary work where the existence of two versions of one name has led the

author to believe two people are in question. He deserves sympathy.)

The more I inquired, the more involved I became in trying to untangle the events and answer some of the questions about this mysterious republic of Uighurs, Kazaks, and Russians. This study is the result. It is an investigation of Chinese government policy in Xinjiang between 1944 and 1949 as seen in the Chinese response to the Ili Rebellion and the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic. It is based on sources drawn from many repositories and collections. It is not an exhaustive work—no study of Xinjiang can be when major sources are incomplete and records not available. But it does manage to move beyond currently available sources on the period and so contribute to our understanding of what occurred in this region during the period in question.

Before beginning the story, it is necessary to ask the reader's indulgence and present a certain amount of introductory material. The following linguistic note explains the choices of form and of romanization for terms from the various languages, so that the reader is prepared for the "new" form some proper names assume. The next section offers a description of the sources used and a brief discussion of the problem of political bias, which affects almost every source used.

The text itself begins with a general introduction to this research, outlining its scope and purpose, as well as establishing the historic and theoretical context. Chapter 2 introduces the general field of Republican China's national minority policy; chapter 3 offers geographic and historic background to Xinjiang. Together, these chapters provide the necessary background for an understanding of the Ili rebellion and the Chinese government's response.

### Linguistic Note

Xinjiang lies geographically within Central Asia. As a result, materials concerning its history are to be found primarily in three languages—Chinese, Turkish, and Russian. Problems occur in rendering all of these languages into English and in translating between them, especially in the case of names. The following discussion on forms of romanization used in this study indicates the extent of some of these problems.

There are currently several methods of romanizing Chinese, the most recent of these being the system called "pinyin" developed in the People's Republic of China. As this form is the simplest and easiest form of romanization currently in popular use, it is the form used in this study. However, certain names that have a well-established and generally accepted English form, such as Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen, have been used as such in the text. All Chinese names are listed in pinyin, Chinese characters, and the Wade-Giles system in the glossary.

The form of romanization of the Turkic languages used is modern Turkish, which, with one modification, has been adopted for several reasons. First, Xinjiang's Turkic languages form one branch of Turkish, to which they are closely related. Variations among the Turkic languages are small so that speakers can generally understand each other whether they were born in Turkey or northwestern China.

The Turkish "c" is pronounced as an English "j." In this study the "j" has been used to replace the usual "c" so that names are more readily recognizable—e.g., Ahmet Jan instead of Ahmet Can. With only a few exceptions, such as the "c" and the "ğ" (which is silent), the vowels and consonants are pronounced as in English. A pronunciation guide to the Turkish alphabet is given in appendix C.

Second, although the People's Republic of China (PRC) has developed a romanized form for Uighur and Kazak based on the pinyin system, it has created new written symbols that make recognition and pronunciation of words and names by English speakers difficult. Furthermore, dictionaries for the pinyin form of Uighur are of limited vocabulary and do not include proper nouns and names, so that there is no authoritative guide to the writing of names and titles—an important consideration in this work since the names of Turkic individuals have often been a cause of confusion to researchers and readers alike. The use of Turkish to systemize transcription helps to clarify the identity and proper titles of important figures in Xinjiang's modern history.

A further impetus to the use of Turkish is the fact that there are now many works available in the Turkish language concerning Xinjiang, written in most cases by persons—or their direct relatives—who were involved in Xinjiang's modern history. The names in these books are in their Turkish forms and are far more complete than the names of Turkic individuals in Chinese language accounts, which are often abbreviated to the point of confusion; for instance, "Aisha" is commonly used to refer to Mr. Isa Yusuf Alptekin. The use of the modern Turkish form is clearly more accurate. Further discussion of the Chinese transliteration of Turkic names is in appendix C, which includes a list of Xinjiang Turki people's names, along with their Chinese forms in characters and in pinyin, as well as their common English renderings, many of which reflect their origins in Chinese sources.

There are, however, some exceptions to the use of modern Turkish for Xinjiang place names. Because the region is multiethnic, many of the towns and cities as well as geographic features bear several names. A good example is the city that the Chinese call "Tacheng" on the Sino-Soviet border. In addition to its Chinese name, it also appears on some maps as "Chugachak" or "Qoqek." This is the town's Mongolian name. Because the area is also the home of Manchu troops sent out to man the border under the Qing Empire, it has also been called "Tarbagatai," the name given to this outpost of the

Manchu Empire by the Qianlong emperor in the eighteenth century. However, Xinjiang's Kazaks call the same town "Savan." This example can be easily matched elsewhere in the province. The question of what to call a city, or a mountain, or a river, has consequently been something of a problem. The PRC has clearly had its own troubles deciding whether to use the local language name—and if so, *which* local language name—or the Chinese form. They have compromised, so that today the regional capital is called "Urumqi," the old Uighur name for the city, whereas the Chinese name "Tacheng" has been retained for the town on the Sino-Soviet border. Chinese names have been given to "Yining" (formerly Kulja), "Kashi" (Kashgar), and "Shache" (Yarkand), while local names are retained for "Aksu" and "Emin." This practice is a clear recognition of the problems of nomenclature in Xinjiang.

In most cases, names in this work follow current Chinese practice. In instances, however, where the currently used name is not easily recognized as the name of a city that also has a generally accepted English form of its name, the latter is used, as with Kashgar and Yarkand.

The romanization of Russian names has also been problematical: some occur only in Chinese or Turkish sources that do not include the original Russian. Moreover, in the instances where English sources refer to Russians in Xinjiang, the forms used do not appear to conform to any particular system. As a result, Russian names are not given in strict keeping with any standardized form, although the names of authors follow the standard Library of Congress form.

## Sources

In general, the history of the independence movements among national minorities in China during the twentieth century has received little attention from scholars of contemporary Chinese history. One reason for this has been the difficulty in locating primary sources, a problem that has also plagued other areas of research for the Republican era but which is particularly true of events in the border areas.

In recent years, however, two factors have made previously unavailable materials accessible. One is that the political climate has changed sufficiently in various countries to enable foreign scholars to use formerly inaccessible records and documents related to this area. The second factor is that the thirty-year period for which many Western governments' files remain closed has now passed for the events of the 1940–1950 decade. Thus relevant materials in the United States and Great Britain are now available for examination. As a result, it has been possible to explore more fully the many questions related to minority issues in such border areas as Xinjiang.

The existence of national repositories like the U.S. National Archives and

the British Public Record Office gives the neophyte false illusions about the location of sources. Not all countries are so fortunate. In the case of China, materials in the National Library in Beijing are not always available for consultation, and there are few open depositories of official documents. The National Library has organized a group to collect materials related to Xinjiang and Islam in China, but what it will produce is still conjecture. In Taiwan, many more sources are available but in various places and in varying degrees. It is to be hoped that in the future more materials from these two places will be available to interested scholars.

The major sources for the present study include both newly accessible materials and previously available but unexplored materials in Chinese, English, Turkish, and Russian. Of basic importance are the official Xinjiang Provincial Government records and the local Xinjiang newspapers of the period. Certain records of the Xinjiang Provincial Government (of the Republican period) are available at the National History Institute (Guoshi Guan) in Xindian, Taibei, Taiwan. Other repositories of relevant materials in Taibei are the Archives of the Guomindang Party History Commission (Dangshi Hui) at Yangming Shan, and the Bureau of Investigation (Diao Cha Ju) at Xindian. Access to these materials remains on a formal basis; usually one can only see those documents that one specifically requests, and as some documents remain unclassified, finding relevant materials can be problematic. After spending a considerable amount of time in Taibei, however, and having had the good fortune to elicit the sympathetic interest of officials as well as of local scholars interested in China border area research, I was able to see many items from these Taiwan collections.

One of the important holdings of the Guomindang Archives is the *Xinjiang Daily* in its original form. As this newspaper was the official organ for the Nationalist government in the region, it offers an excellent view of the Nationalist interpretation of local events as they happened. Unfortunately, neither the Guomindang Archives nor any other institution holds a complete run of this paper. As a result, it has been necessary to collect runs of the paper held in the United Kingdom, the United States, China, and Taiwan. Between the microfilms of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the National Library of China in Beijing, as well as the Taiwan collection, I have seen a great deal of the *Xinjiang Daily* covering the years 1944–1949, but a complete run of the paper does not now appear to exist, even using these various repositories. It should also be noted that the China microfilms were made from poor originals (as can be readily seen from the fragile condition of the issues available in Taiwan). On occasion, therefore, the notation “unclear” is entered for some names and data—indicating an especially faded or torn original.

In addition to the *Xinjiang Daily*, other important newspapers from Xinjiang include two published in the East Turkestan Republic between 1946

and 1949. These are the *Minzhu bao* (Democratic daily) published in Chinese in Yining, and a few issues of *Minsheng bao* (People's livelihood daily), also published in Chinese, in Tacheng. Some issues of these papers are held at the Library of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford. Although the collection is fragmentary, most of it dating only from the year 1947, the available issues make a fascinating addition to sources on Xinjiang during this period.

Issues of important Chinese periodicals on Xinjiang are also held at the Hoover, including *Aertai* (Altai), *Hanhai chao* (Desert tide), and *Tianshan huabao* (Tianshan pictorial). These offer some of the most nationalistic of the Turki writings of the period. (The British Library in London also holds good originals of the latter.)

No less important than the Chinese sources mentioned above are the files of the Public Record Office (PRO) and the India Office Records (IOR) in London. The information derived from the careful, detailed reports of the British consular officials who served in Urumqi and Kashgar is indispensable to an understanding of the period and its complexities. These British materials are among the most accessible and complete of all foreign government records for Republican Xinjiang.

Also interesting and important are materials in the National Archives of the United States. A series of reports by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and by U.S. consular officials in Urumqi complement the British and Chinese sources. A portion of the U.S. consular reports are contained in the series "Foreign Relations of the United States: The Far East" (FRUS), which includes both Xinjiang consular reports and other correspondence related to the situation in Xinjiang during the 1940s.

Another important cache of materials exists in the Soviet Union. Although direct access to these holdings is not possible, there is indirect knowledge of Soviet runs of East Turkestan newspapers, for instance, in the dissertations of Kutlukov and Mingulov. In particular, the studies by Kutlukov frequently cite *Azad Sharki Turkestan* (Free East Turkestan), so that it is possible to ascertain the contents of many of that paper's issues. The heavy reliance on Marxist interpretation, however, occasionally intrudes to detract from otherwise interesting work that has useful comments to offer on the driving force behind the rebellion and on several key events during the period in question. There is also in his work a tendency to take at face value and without critical comment any information published in the East Turkestan newspapers, but this nonetheless adds to our knowledge of the East Turkestan press.

Together, these materials, in Chinese, English, and Russian, present a fascinating picture of the political maneuvering and conflict in Xinjiang among the Chinese, the native Xinjiang population, and foreign powers, all of whom pursued their own goals in this strategic region after World War II.

Collections of secondary printed sources dealing with Central Asia used in this research include the Owen Lattimore Collection held at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, England. This consists of Lattimore's own extensive collection of books and pamphlets on Central Asia, including a wealth of titles on such wide-ranging topics as geography, ethnography, and politics. In London, other interesting collections are held at the British Library, the Central Asian Research Centre, and the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. All of these have holdings in both Chinese and English.

Collections of books in Chinese that provided general background for this research include those in the libraries of National Zhengzhi University in Taipei, the library of the Xinjiang Provincial Government (Taiwan), the University of Hong Kong library, and the holdings of the University Services Centre in Kowloon, Hong Kong.

In addition to the above sources, yet another language, Turkish, offers materials on Xinjiang's modern history. After 1949, many Kazak and Uighur refugees from Xinjiang made their way to Turkey, where the government—and the closeness of traditions and language—made them welcome. Although many were not well-educated people, the tradition of oral records among the Kazaks, especially, has meant that accounts of their histories have been kept alive in the traditional way. Today, books based on this oral tradition have been published, many of them dealing with events in Xinjiang between 1944 and 1949; their origin in traditional style accounts for the scarcity of dates and, certainly, for the heroic style in which most are written. Many also reflect the bitter intervening years of refugee life in a foreign country, but nonetheless, used with caution and restraint, they also constitute a valuable source of information, especially on the current Kazak interpretation of the 1944–1949 period.

Where possible, I followed up the use of these primary and secondary printed sources with interviews. By far the largest group of interviewees are former residents of Xinjiang, many of them national minorities from the Ili valley area. Among those interviewed are people of Uighur, Kazak, Sibo, Hui, White Russian, and Han Chinese nationalities. The list (given in appendix D) also includes both British and American nationals who were in Xinjiang during the period in question in official and unofficial capacities.

Besides often being a pleasant and extremely stimulating experience, interviews also served several important functions. First, they often corroborated existing accounts; they also resulted in the addition of further details to these accounts, particularly with regard to personalities active in the region at the time. Interviews also furthered my understanding of the role played by rumor in a region where communication was notoriously poor and a general lack of education among the population made them especially susceptible to the forces of rumor.

Afternoon talks held with Xinjiang Kazaks over bowls of hot salted tea offered a vital sense of the times in which these events took place. The insecurity, the doubt of official versions of the news, the fear that marked everyday life for many people in Xinjiang, and the complexity of the relationships between nationalities were clearly conveyed during memorable interviews with former Xinjiang residents.

Most of these interviews took place over a period of time, although some individuals could only be interviewed once or twice due to extenuating circumstances. As most of these people were trying to recall events that occurred some forty years ago, specific dates and sometimes details were missed, and often, depending on when and where the individual was living in Xinjiang, their individual accounts of the period were incomplete. The educational level and political bias of individuals were also factors that had to be taken into account when assessing a particular individual's contribution. But much information could be checked, at least partially, against existing accounts. Generally speaking, the interviews with members of the national minority peoples to a large extent reflected the records of "professional" observers such as the British and American representatives in Xinjiang; in many cases interviewees were able to fill in certain gaps in existing accounts with information that appears both reasonable and accurate. In cases where the accounts of interviewees are uncorroborated, however, this is indicated in the text or footnotes. In instances where important individuals have not been available for interview, autobiographies have had to substitute. Fortunately for this study, several important individuals have been able to record their memoirs, including Burhan Shahidi, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, and Mehmet Emin Buğra (now deceased).

Although today much material and many individuals are available for consultation, it must be pointed out that virtually all are influenced to some degree by their political views, which reflect in turn their national origin. This bias can most easily be seen in the fact that some printed sources, for instance, choose to omit information on entire incidents or series of events if the events tend to reflect negatively on the author's country or government. At several points in the following pages, there is discussion on the conflict of opinions among sources or the deletion of materials in some accounts. This type of discussion has been included primarily to show that, first, the establishment of the actual course of events in Xinjiang during this time is, in itself, a difficult task, and, second, that caution in using virtually all the materials is a constant necessity, with sources being carefully cross-checked against each other at each stage of consideration.

Another problem is the patchy nature of much of the material. As mentioned earlier with regard to the *Xinjiang Daily*, complete runs of some newspapers do not exist, and the discovery of government documents is sometimes no more than serendipity. This has made it necessary to extend

the search for relevant materials to institutions in various countries and in a number of languages. The gaps in the historical account have thus been reduced, and the interpretation of Xinjiang's modern history can once again be brought out into what will hopefully be fruitful discussion in the coming years.

For much of its history, Xinjiang has been an isolated area; this situation was just beginning to change when, in 1949, another kind of isolation began. After Xinjiang's incorporation into the PRC, the region was, for some years, closed to all but the most sympathetic of journalists. Today this situation has changed in at least one respect. Parts of Xinjiang can now be visited with relative ease, via train and air links with most major cities in China. Research facilities in Xinjiang and throughout China are not, however, yet at a point at which they can accommodate all interested foreign scholars. Even when access is gained, many materials remain unclassified and uncollected; persons in authority often seem unsure as to what exactly the holdings of the nation's repositories are. Nonetheless, the acquisition of valuable microfilm from the National Library of China in Beijing and books acquired in Urumqi both contributed to this study.

While in Xinjiang, I was also able to observe for myself something of the continuing difficulties between Han Chinese and Moslems in the palpable tension visitors experience when traveling in the region. A personal visit also conveys something of the grim grandeur of the Gobi Desert, and the incredible logistic obstacle this presents to any Chinese government intent on binding this vast territory to the Chinese state. Altogether, there is today a wealth of firsthand material on Xinjiang available to the researcher, albeit only in countries that are literally at opposite ends of the earth. Used together, these materials now permit the presentation of a reasonably full analysis of the twists and turns of Chinese Nationalist policy in Xinjiang and its response to the formation of the East Turkestan Republic. Above all, this information points to the growth of nascent Turki nationalism in Xinjiang, rooted in the pervasive anti-Han Chinese sentiment that, more than any other factor, marks Han Chinese-national minority relations during this period.

In writing and researching this book, I accumulated debts of the most unrepayable kind, and I gratefully acknowledge those to whom I owe so much. The counsel of James Macdonald, University of Leeds, England, has been of inestimable value; indeed, without his guidance and encouragement, this research might never have come to fruition. I am grateful to the many friends and colleagues I have had the pleasure of meeting during the course of my work. I thank them all—in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States, for kindnesses great and small. Special thanks are owed to Makbule Wang Shuli and her family for unflinching support during my

years in Taiwan and for an enduring friendship. In a rather different sense, I am grateful, too, to the people of Xinjiang to whom I owe much for serving as a source of inspiration. Finally, I thank all the members of my family who, despite the miles that so often separated us, were nonetheless always there.



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND MEASUREMENTS

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### Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Cn	Chinese Central Government currency, Republican period
ETR	East Turkestan Republic
GPP	Government Political Program
MPR	Mongolian People's Republic
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
Xn	Xinjiang dollars, Republican period

### Measurements

charak	20 pounds
hectare	2.471 acres
jin	2.205 pounds
sheng	31.6 cubic inches, or approximately one pint



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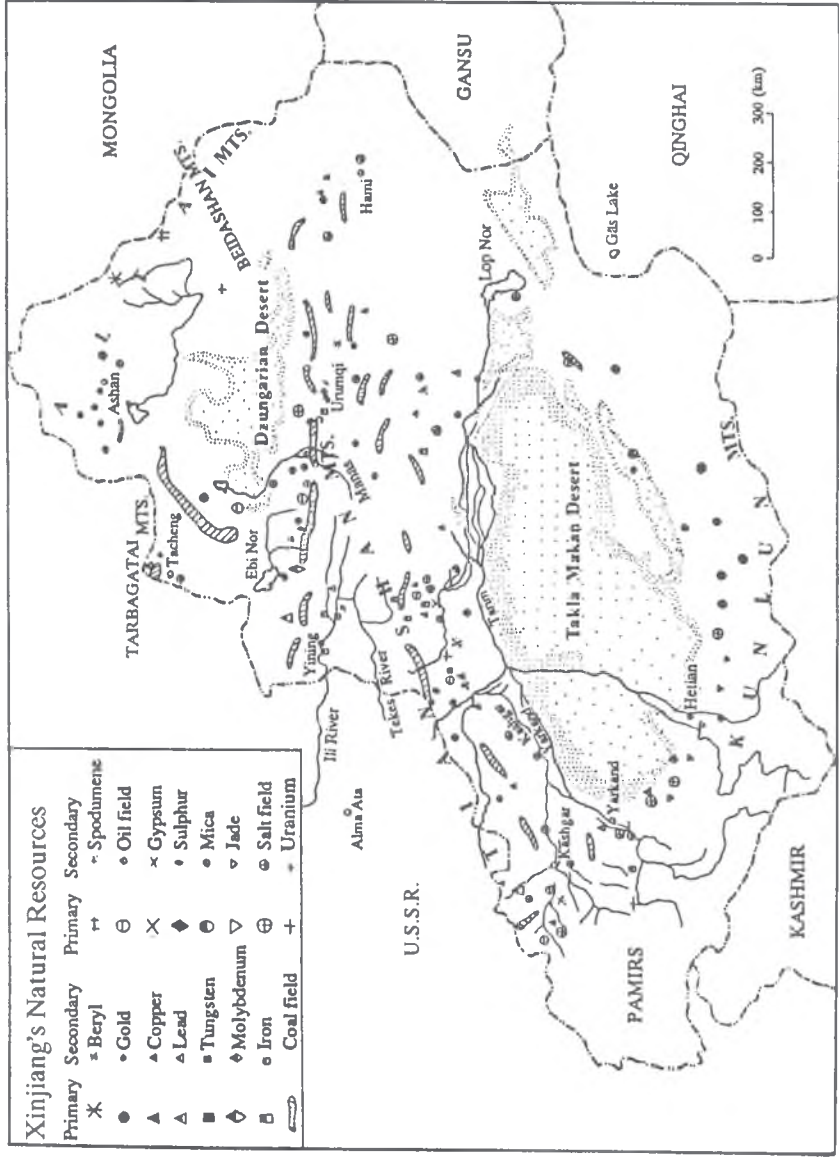
## MAPS

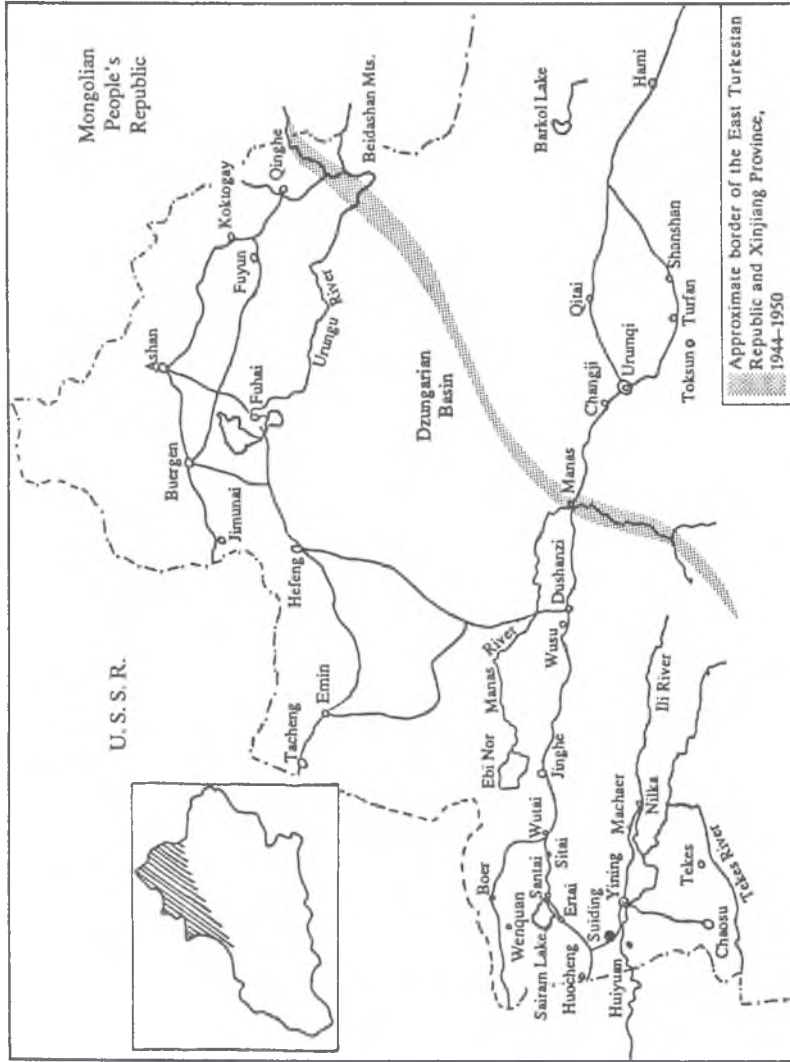
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Area of Xinjiang controlled by the East Turkestan Republic, 1944-1950



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