

Warlords and Revolutionaries in Xinjiang

A dissertation about Sheng Shicai's government of Xinjiang in the mid-20th Century, including an analysis of its political character and a discussion of where this placed it in relation to other actors in China at the time.

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List of abbreviations

- KMT Kuomintang
- CCP Chinese Communist Party

Preface

The majority of the background chronology and setting of this dissertation comes from a reading of Andrew Forbes' detailed political history of Xinjiang. The title of this dissertation is directly inspired by his PhD thesis 'Warlords and Muslims.' It is the most comprehensive and well-researched book on the subject written so far in English.

I am grateful to my family for their moral support, and to my friends at university who consistently asked me 'what is Xinjiang and why are you so interested in it?' This dissertation is the answer to that question.

I am also grateful to Delda Nazar, a Chinese student who showed me around Urumqi and Turfan some years ago. She answered my many awkward questions about Xinjiang's history and culture and without her the idea for this dissertation would not have emerged.

Introduction

This essay is as an attempt to understand and analyse the government of Sheng Shicai in the Chinese province of Xinjiang in the 1930s and early 1940s. The history covers a formative period for both the Soviet Union and the Chinese Republic. The international relations of the time still contain hangovers of the Great Game, mixed with the revolutionary political movements which created modern China and the Soviet Union.

This situation produced a number of unorthodox movements and actors, chief among them the figure of Sheng Shicai, who governed Xinjiang for a decade from around 1934 to 1944. This dissertation is an attempt to provide a revisionist perspective on him as a revolutionary figure, while also maintaining a critical attitude of his commitment to socialism.

Sheng's predecessors

In his reading of Chinese history, Hsiao-Ting presents the rulers of Xinjiang between 1912 and 1944 as margraves who perpetuated the Qing Dynasty's ancien regime long after it had fallen.¹ Subsequently, the reassertion of central control from Chongqing under the Kuomintang brought “*a twentieth-century nationalist political party-state to Central Asia.*”² He's correct up to a point, however he discounts the notion that the modern state machine might have already arrived much earlier under Sheng's rule.

It's certainly true that Sheng's predecessors were a continuity of the feudal system. The first waves of the Xinhai revolution in Xinjiang were put down by the then-governor Yuan Dahua. Despite the revolution's failure in Xinjiang, it was carried through to victory in the rest of China. Unfortunately for Dahua, after having violently suppressed the revolutionary coup in Urumqi he was unable to declare allegiance to the revolutionary government in Beijing.³ Upon seeing that his position was untenable, Dahua abdicated and privately handed over power to his Commissioner for Judicial Affairs, Yang Zengxin. After being promoted, Zengxin quickly recognised the new republican government and in turn the government recognised his position as governor of the province.

This transaction which took place between Zengxin and the republican government was nothing more than a mutual recognition of the balance of power. While Xinjiang was legally under republican control, Zengxin sought to rule the province as his own personal fiefdom. The relationship established here gave Xinjiang *de jure* participation in the wider Chinese state and *de facto* local control and autonomy. This ensuing *status-quo* goes on to animate the politics of the region, and one of its first effects was to prevent a republican advance on the ground in Xinjiang.

In the first few years of his governorship Zengxin prosecuted a counter-insurgency in south Xinjiang against remnant Gelaohui forces who were still loyal to the republican cause. In 1915 when Yuan Shikai proclaimed himself emperor and attempted to restore the monarchy, Zengxin supported him. In 1917, when the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian provisional government, Zengxin continued to recognise it.⁴ Then, during the Russian civil war, Zengxin allowed White Russian forces to use Xinjiang as a vast base area from which to attack the new Soviet republics of Central Asia.⁵ As part of an overall policy to isolate the province from revolutionary changes he refused to build a paved road to Soviet territory,⁶ and established censorship of news from outside.

Combined with his conservative attitude to external events, Zengxin also maintained a semi-feudal order within Xinjiang. According to Forbes, during Zengxin's rule the province was systematically 'stripped of its assets' and he “*ran the [local] economy largely for his own benefit.*”⁷

The next handover of power in 1928 followed a similar pattern. Zengxin was assassinated as part of an attempted coup by pro-republican officers, his deputy Chin Shu-jen had the putschists arrested and executed, before himself stepping into the vacant leadership position. As with his predecessor, Shu-jen sent a message to the capital in Nanjing informing them of his promotion and declaring his recognition of the KMT's authority. In turn the government in Nanjing replied by recognising Shu-jen's authority as the new Provincial Chairman & Commander in Chief of Xinjiang.

Shu-jen's period in power was relatively short and beset with rebellions. He shut down the borders, curtailing travel in and out of the province, meanwhile strengthening surveillance and censorship operations to suppress outbreaks of dissent. Taxes were increased and, as with Zengxin, Shu-jen directed the economy towards expanding his own wealth. According to Andrew Forbes, Shu-jen was intent on "*maintaining in Sinkiang a closed, almost medieval society.*"⁸ Despite this, he was forced to turn towards British India⁹ and then the Soviet Union¹⁰ for material and military aid to put down various invasions and uprisings. In return for their assistance, Britain and the Soviet Union both demanded political and trade concessions, and so the isolation of Xinjiang was broken.

Both Owen Lattimore¹¹ and Forbes present this opening up of the province in geopolitical terms. Lattimore was probably influenced by Ellsworth Huntington who ended his account of an earlier journey through Xinjiang with a chapter on 'the geographical basis of history'¹² – which expresses basic geopolitical themes. On the Soviet side the completion of the Turksib railway improved the transport connection between Russia and Central Asia, which had a knock-on effect on nearby Xinjiang.¹³ Irrigation projects on the Ili river in Soviet Kazakhstan required construction work to be done on the Chinese side.¹⁴ This would have introduced modern industrial activity, accompanied by a proletarian labour force. In either case the physical infrastructure laid down by Soviet engineers had political consequences for Xinjiang's relationship with the Soviet Union. One specific consequence was that information about land reform and improved living conditions in Soviet Central Asia was seeping into Xinjiang via word of mouth.¹⁵ This coincided with the arrival in Xinjiang of Kazakh nomads seeking refuge from forced settlement, bringing with them news about socialist collectivisation. Uyghur peasants began learning about socialism and looking to the Soviet Union as the solution to their troubles.

These were the conditions which prompted Xinjiang to forge ever closer ties with the Soviet Union, but it's important to reiterate that Chin Shu-jen resisted this movement until it became absolutely necessary for the preservation of his position.

Both Shu-jen and Zengxin maintained the Qing-era bureaucracy for an impressive 22 years after the advent of republicanism in China. They both sought to enrich themselves through their rule and, despite having exhibited general conservative tendencies, neither of them followed an organised political programme. They played off various ethnic groups in the province against one another and manipulated pre-existing ethnic tensions to support their rule. They continued to extend patronage to historically loyal local elites, such as the wangs of Kumul, at least until 1930.¹⁶ As such the regime they built was neopatrimonial in nature,¹⁷ drawing on tradition and organisational inertia as a source of authority.

In these respects Hsiao-Ting was justified in writing about Xinjiang's warlord governors as the remnants of feudalism. Hsiao-Ting himself is a Taiwanese academic and his research focuses on the Kuomintang, which also helps explain why he emphasises the KMT's unique role in bringing republican society to Xinjiang. For sure, in 1944 the KMT did bring Xinjiang under the centralised control of Chongqing, and therefore the tension between *de facto* autonomy and *de jure* unification was resolved. However, the KMT does not hold a monopoly on republican ideas and to present that as the case means to overlook independent and alternative revolutionary tendencies in China - in particular the government of Sheng Shicai.

The features which defined Shu-jen and Zenxin, also serve to separate them from Sheng as their successor. Sheng's decade of rule was an experiment in republican and proto-socialist principles which precedes the KMT's official arrival in Xinjiang and the later managed transition to Communist Party control.

Sheng's background

The first aspect which defined Sheng's rule was his personal background. Unlike his predecessors he did not have a long career in the imperial civil service prior to arriving in Xinjiang. Instead he began studying political economy in Japan, then trained as a soldier to enlist firstly Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian Army, and subsequently in the KMT's National Revolutionary Army. His career path was clearly formed by deliberate choices, he identified that power could be won through military means, and he pursued an avenue which left him with substantial military resources at his disposal. Then he took advantage of his position to put into practice his political ideals.

Another explanation for Sheng's career path comes from an 'anonymous associate' of his, quoted by Allan Whiting:

*"[Sheng was] one of a group of young officers, increasingly dissatisfied with the political orientation of the Nationalist movement as it moved into the financial strongholds of Shanghai and Nanjing. This group felt a betrayal of the initial purpose of the revolution, as landed and vested interest groups appeared to play a more prominent role in determining policy. [...] These 'progressives' looked to the remote areas of northeast and northwestern China as bases for building power which could later be utilised in a 'second revolution'."*¹⁸

Whiting is sceptical of this idea, in part because Sheng's recruitment to Xinjiang was not on his own initiative. Sheng was approached in Nanjing by one of Chin Shu-jen's aides and invited to come re-organise the Xinjiang army. If he was seeking another position in the outer provinces Sheng would have been actively petitioning for it. But, at time he had just resigned from his post in the National Revolutionary Army and was sitting idle when the opportunity fell into his lap.¹⁹ He never joined the KMT during this period, and perhaps this combined with his adherence to scientific socialism cut short his official military career. However, even if this analysis was produced with the benefit of hindsight, the facts do bear out that he focused his activities towards building revolutionary 'bases of power' in Manchuria and Xinjiang.

Red Warlords

The anonymous associate's analysis also nonetheless implies an alternative interpretation of the warlords. Far from being isolated bandits, their existence should be located within the context of an evolving revolutionary process.

Throughout the 1920s fissures broke open on multiple levels, firstly between the national and comprador sections of the bourgeoisie, which was in turn part of a wider conflict between the bourgeoisie as a whole and non-capitalist forces as a whole.

The 4th May movement and the subsequent founding of the Chinese Communist Party demonstrate the steady formation of nationalist and anti-capitalist tendencies among the new intermediate strata. These strata were made up of mid-ranking army officers, as already mentioned, as well as academics and managerial staff. It was a very thin slice of the population, although given their size they were relatively well-placed to exert pressure on the state. Given the very low level of large-scale industrial activity, the material conditions for capitalist & socialist construction were weak. However the political desire for a transition to industrial capitalism & socialism was evident. For example, the CCP went from a handful of activists in 1921,²⁰ to 30,000 members with 940,000 workers & peasants 'under communist guidance' after the May 30th Movement in 1925-26.²¹ It would not have been able to raise such support without a basic level of class consciousness among the population.

Nor can it be claimed that these 940,000 early CCP supporters were well-read students of Marxist theory. In the Jiangxi soviet established a decade later CCP activists were still running village education campaigns against illiteracy.²² This means the peasantry's understanding of Marxism-Leninism was for the most part derived from their lived experiences, not through the direct consumption of philosophical literature. The CCP's programme of New Democracy demanded an accelerated transition away from oppressive feudal practices, more specifically to put into practice Sun Yat-Sen's slogan to give "*land to the tiller.*"²³ It appealed to practical material concerns expressed by the peasantry and the new working class. The CCP's politics were backed up by concrete economic demands, and their insistence on these fundamental principles repeatedly put them at odds with the pro-capitalist forces within the KMT.

In the 1920s, China was a semi-colonial country, with key territories under foreign ownership or occupation. Added to this, the growth of industrial capitalism was concentrated almost completely in a few coastal cities.²⁴ So China's economic landscape was imbalanced, and it was physically fragmented by outside powers which held claims on its territory. It's understandable to see progressive forces trying to export radical models for economic reorganisation from the coastal cities to inland areas where central state authority was weak.

This explains how Sheng went from serving in the Fengtian warlord army, then joining the National Revolutionary Army during the Northern expedition to wipe out the warlords, to eventually becoming a warlord himself. The establishment of autonomous military authorities –

illegal, warlord states – was a stage in the historical movement towards a unified modern nation-state. It served to engage the inland masses in state-building and reorganisation of production away from feudal models. For example, in the following decade the CCP's Long March ended in Yen-an, in Shaanxi province. Far from the coastal cities where labour militancy was at its highest. The natural constituency of the CCP was the industrial proletariat, but as China still lacked a large enough capitalist base to support a mass working class, the CCP built a stronghold in the vast Chinese rear zone, drawing on the peasantry for support. In this rear zone the CCP set about putting production under collective control and establishing a form of state structure to govern their territory.

Inherent in the understanding of China's warlords is their illegal nature. They defy the central authority of the state, and are thus outlaws in the classical sense that they are neither subject to nor protected by the dominant legal order. They can be attacked or even killed without legal repercussions.

This point is compounded when considering that one of the outcomes of the Northern Expedition was the legalisation of some warlords and their subsequent integration into the state. Former warlords were transformed into provincial military governors without any substantial alteration in their ruling position. The only stipulation for the surviving warlords was that they 'pledge allegiance to Chiang [Kai-shek] in the name of the Three Principles'.²⁵ Therefore the practical distinction established by the Kuomintang between an illegal warlord and a legal provincial governor, was their willingness to submit to the legal authority of the KMT.

A second distinction needs to be made here to clarify the position of the CCP, whose actions and politics repeatedly pushed them into conflict with the dominant order established by the KMT. By rejecting the KMT's order and launching a people's war against it, the CCP became illegal. From the perspective of the KMT, when the CCP was holed up in Yen-an in the 1930s it could be considered a warlord government. It's here that we have to introduce the second distinction, which is between a warlord and a revolutionary.

Both types are characterised by their illegality, but the special characteristic of a revolutionary is their political character. This attitude is clear from a KMT member called Hu Han-min who personally defined a warlord "*a soldier who ignores the interests of the nation.*"²⁶ Han-min's definition relies on an understanding of the warlord as a subjective, non-political actor. A warlord commands military power without regard for its political consequences. The same attitude comes out in Thomas Sankara's well-known slogan that "*a soldier without political or ideological training is a potential criminal.*"²⁷

The fact that some warlords swore loyalty to the KMT in exchange for protection underlines their non-political character. If we take from Schmitt the ability to distinguish between the public friend and enemy as the arbiter of politics,²⁸ the warlords ceased to be political when they lost their enmity for the KMT. What separates the CCP from a bandit gang, or why was Mao not a warlord? Because of his unwillingness to deviate from the friend-enemy distinction within the class struggle.

Those who sell their labour in order to live identify as a class, and their interests are antithetical to the class which exploits labour for profit. This is the contradiction between worker and capitalist established within capitalist society.

Following Schmitt, class becomes a political factor when it reaches the point of identifying another class as a public enemy; where one class moves to defeat its antagonist class.²⁹ The CCP identified the KMT as a bourgeois party, and despite long periods of alliance and co-operation with the KMT, the CCP never lost its goal of defeating of the bourgeoisie. By fighting the KMT before and then immediately after the Japanese invasion, the CCP elevated the class struggle from an economic dispute to a political one. Through its first three decades the CCP was committed to wresting the state away from the bourgeoisie, it never wavered from its understanding of the bourgeoisie as the true enemy. It's this insistence on identifying a public enemy which separates the non-political warlord from the political revolutionary.

Sheng and Marxism

Sheng himself falls easily into the camp of a red warlord. Prior to engaging in a military career he had participated in the May 4th Movement as a student representative of his home province of Liaoning/Fengtian.³⁰ Also in that same year, he claimed to have read a scattershot of books by Marx, Hegel, and Stalin, leading to him becoming a Marxist. So before even beginning his army training he already had sufficient political education to qualify as a political warrior in the Sankarist fashion. Sheng alludes to this himself in a letter to Stalin, that after having read some of Marx's books, he was thus able to escape "*the ranks of blind imitators or collaborators*"³¹ - a dig at his contemporaries who lacked the same ideological background. As further evidence of Sheng's Marxist credentials, he went on to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.³² His party membership came into play during the breakdown of his relationship with the Soviet Union over the tin mines agreement. Viktor Karpov pointed out that by dragging his feet in the negotiations he was working against his party. At this point Sheng mounted a defence of his party membership:

"I have faith in Marxism because I believe it will bring about the liberation of China and of the oppressed peoples of the world. Because of my faith in Marxism, I joined the Communist Party so that I could fight [for these things]."³³

It's at this point that Sheng in his autobiography begins to highlight a discrepancy between Marxism-Leninism from the actions of the Soviet Union. To Sheng the Soviet Union appeared to take on an aggressive and even imperialist attitude towards Xinjiang, which caused Sheng to wobble in his commitment to socialism. The accumulation of doubts about the sincerity of the Soviet Union and the CCP likely contributed to his volte-face in the early 1940s when he reoriented Xinjiang towards the KMT. By the time he came to write his memoirs in Taiwan in the 1950s, he had made the transition to becoming a complete anti-communist.

Forbes is generally skeptical of claims that Sheng led a progressive movement in Xinjiang.³⁴ If we take into account Sheng's dithering in the 1940s, he comes off as a pragmatic character, willing to jettison his political project to protect himself. To begin with he mounted a brutal purge of CCP cadres and initiated a friendly dialogue with Chiang Kai-shek. In a bid to improve relations with the

KMT, Sheng demanded the expulsion of Soviet troops from Xinjiang. This was the first turn. Next he pivoted again and turned to Stalin to beg forgiveness. Then, when it became clear he had burned his bridges with his erstwhile Soviet allies, he renewed ties to the KMT. Chiang presented him with a graceful path out of office in which he could retire into a twilight position as the national Minister of Forestry & Agriculture. Even then Sheng clung to power, resisting and deflecting Chiang's gentle-but-firm offer to step down with dignity. Finally he agreed to give up only once he had completely lost control of the military situation and was in danger of being ousted by force.

Geopolitics of Xinjiang

Through it all Sheng's stumbling, clumsy fall from power in Xinjiang closely tracks the ebb and flow of the geopolitical situation. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 forced it to divert resources and attention away from Central Asia and China. Most of the way through 1942 the Red Army was on the defensive and there was a real threat that the Soviet Union could be destroyed. The Soviet role therefore as a source of resources and assistance to Xinjiang and China was put into jeopardy. This was compounded by a diplomatic rift between the Soviet Union and China. Shortly before Operation Barbarossa in 1941, the Soviet Union had concluded a non-aggression treaty with Japan. The pact of neutrality indicated that the Soviet Union was unwilling to send troops to defend China against Japan. From Sheng's perspective, the Soviet Union was cutting its ties with Xinjiang, and this was the context in which he opened discussions with Chiang Kai-shek.³⁵

Sheng's second pivot also closely aligns with a geopolitical shift. In 1943, Sheng briefly attempted to rebuild relations with the Soviet Union, making a secret request for the Red Army to enter Xinjiang to attack KMT forces.³⁶ This coincided with two movements; the Red Army victory in Stalingrad, and a series of Japanese military manoeuvres which put pressure on KMT troops in southern China.³⁷ The balance of power tilted such that the KMT was weakened and the Soviet Union was strengthened. Sheng's flip-flop back towards a pro-Soviet position can be read as a response to these events. By this point he had lost the trust of all his allies, the Soviet Union refused to back him and tacit Soviet support of the Ili rebellion suggests they were prepared to see him or his KMT successor overthrown.³⁸

Lattimore describes Sheng as a 'chameleon,'³⁹ implying that he had no genuine desire to instil socialism in Xinjiang, his alliance with the Soviet Union being simply a pragmatic choice. Linda Benson repeats a similarly critical perspective on Sheng, arguing that although he may have tried to pursue social reforms, he ended up following in the footsteps of his predecessors.⁴⁰ Sheng himself actually used the geopolitical situation to justify or otherwise explain his earlier enthusiasm for the Soviet alliance:

“Xinjiang was isolated on the frontiers. If we sought assistance from the Center, it would be too far and too long to wait, so we had no choice but to solicit a helping hand from the Soviet Union.”⁴¹

So by his own reckoning the pro-Soviet position was a historical inevitability. There's no denying that the physical geography of the region ties Xinjiang closer to Central Asia than to the coastal metropolises of the south-east. However, the extent of Sheng's individual agency is contestable; in

1934 Chiang Kai-shek planned a military campaign to unseat Sheng but was unable to carry it through due to logistical difficulties in transporting troops to Xinjiang. Subsequently Sheng boasted that the geography of the region gave him the freedom to pursue an independent policy.⁴²

The Taklamakan desert certainly plays a role in isolating the province from China proper, but what Sheng did with that isolation was his own decision. His predecessors decided to use the isolation to preserve the remnants of the Qing dynasty.⁴³ For his turn Sheng took advantage of the geography to promote his particular vision of an anti-imperialist republic. He may have deviated towards the end as his grip on power faded, but in the beginning his actions were driven by this clear political vision. He could have trod the path furrowed by Tibet and turned to Britain for support and protection. Both provinces sat on the fringes of British India and held unrecognised autonomous status. It would have been an option for Xinjiang, yet Sheng consciously declined to pursue it.

Popular participation was also a factor in Xinjiang's political drama. The confrontations between military factions in Xinjiang did not take place above the people, they contain a social dimension. It's a radically different image to the idyll of oasis settlements aloof to the power struggles in Urumqi or Kashgar, let alone in Beijing or Moscow. The geography of the vast desert couched in impassable mountains is particularly attractive to the pre-modern understanding of feudal governments. This stereotype refers to dispassionate administrators whose government differs little in its execution from one sovereign to the next. The struggles which take place within the ruling class appear contained and distant from the everyday concerns of the public. The inhabitants of oasis communities are reduced to passive observers. They express no preference who they pay their taxes to, so long as they receive the same measure of security or protection in return.

However, what animates the scene in Xinjiang is a complete reversal of the sleepy solid-state society. The social landscape of the 1930s is pregnant with upheavals and disruption of class relations. The cultural and ethnic features around which communities formed also begin to cleave them apart into discrete groups, on the basis of which they form mass publics. The twin movements of nationalism and socialism cut across ancient geographical lines to bring people together under the banner of the republic, the organism of the people as a whole. Sheng's project in Xinjiang was not a like-for-like replacement of the ruling clique, it drove up into society seeking to include every strata in the ordering of the state.

The same can be said of Sheng's enemy Ma Chung-ming, whose military campaign was also nourished from a well of popular sympathy. Georg Vassel described how Chuguchak's muslim population had been banished from the town fortress by a suspicious White Russian general preparing for Chung-ming's arrival.⁴⁴ When the Islamic army arrived in the town, the muslims remaining in the streets were sympathetic to Chung-ming's cause and they were not slaughtered.⁴⁵ The welcome displayed by muslims to an Islamic army entering their town perfectly demonstrates the existence of a newfound body politic which overcomes the traditional loyalties they might have held to their town or its local leaders. One Dungan general underlined this point in a speech to his troops in Kumul:

“Dungans, although we are a section of the Chinese nation, we are also disciples of Mohammed, just as the Turks and the Arabs are. And so we are all bound together by the tie of our common faith.”⁴⁶

Islam became a unifying standard under which geographically disparate rebel forces were able to rally to attack the central government in Xinjiang. They came together not as autonomous individuals but as a collective body with a common vision of Islamic rule.

Sheng demonstrated a keen awareness of geopolitics, he responded to geopolitical shifts and consciously measured his government in relation to the powers around him, particularly the Soviet Union. Xinjiang is a pivot region, a neutral zone between Central Asia and China. However, this doesn't mean the inhabitants of Xinjiang can't play an active role in shaping the region. Sheng's switching of allegiances shows on the contrary that he was unwilling to run a puppet government subservient to foreign powers, instead he chose to chart an independent course. Even if this course zig-zagged across different alliances, it kept Xinjiang free from full domination by either China or the Soviet Union.

Challenges to Sheng's rule

As already discussed, Sheng's first doubts about his alliance with the Soviet Union emerged around the tin mines agreement. He was unhappy at being strong-armed into a treaty which he clearly felt didn't benefit Xinjiang or China as a whole. Given his personal experience in the May 4th movement he must have been aware of the so-called 'century of humiliation' arising from the unequal treaties of the 19th Century. This aggravated pre-existing insecurities about his rule and when he switched allegiance to the KMT he was convinced the Soviet Union was plotting to have him overthrown.

Sheng's early period as governor was marked by an expansion of the state intelligence force, and periodic purges of his perceived enemies. He was very wary of suspected plots to have him removed, first from the KMT, then allegedly from trotskyists and fascists, then the Soviet Union and the CCP. By the end of his rule he was regarded as a jumpy, paranoid leader.⁴⁷

The credibility of some of the alleged plots against Sheng are questionable, however he may not have been as paranoid as Benson suggests. Throughout 1939 the British consulate in Kashgar recorded unconfirmed numerous rumours and reports of Soviet troops passing through southern Xinjiang. In winter of 1939/40 British informants were able to directly observe and confirm movements of Soviet lorries, tanks and camel trains carrying ammunition.⁴⁸ The affair demonstrates that Sheng might have been losing his grip on events in the province. Although his later switch of allegiances was triggered as a reaction to the more immediate geopolitical shift, it was foreshadowed by worrying behaviour from the Soviet Union over troop movements and the tin mines agreement.

It's also understandable that, considering the polarising nature of his rule, Sheng would face challenges along political lines. The primary military aspect of his rule rested on support from eight groups of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army who had retreated to Xinjiang through the

Soviet Union. This army was partly composed of CCP guerilla forces and was initially formed by the Manchurian Provincial Committee of the CCP.⁴⁹ It introduces a qualifier where the troops he commanded were loyal to him, but only insofar as they were communists and he was a communist. If he were to have deviated too far from socialist ideals he would have lost the support of his troops, and therefore lost the armed force backing his authority.

The second armed group crucial in supporting Sheng's rule were irregular White Russian forces. These were comprised of the remnant Russian population which fled over into Xinjiang following the October revolution and subsequent Basmachi insurgency in Central Asia. Although they were naturally reactionary, Vassel came to be convinced that the White Russian ranks were 'infiltrated by GPU agents.'⁵⁰ The British consulate in Kashgar also reported that, like blue litmus paper, the whites had "*the habit of turning red when life grows too acid.*"⁵¹ These troops, having proved themselves useful in the initial coup which brought Sheng to power, in the same action proved themselves politically unreliable. This perhaps explains why Sheng had them disarmed and 'sent to till the land in Ili' two years later.⁵² As an independent, armed, and politically motivated force, he might have considered them a potential threat.

His fears about imperialist intervention also held some merit, in light of what happened to his native Manchuria, which was turned into a Japanese protectorate after the assassination of its warlord. Ma Chung-ming's return through Xinjiang in 1938 only underlined this danger.⁵³ Chung-ming's initial revolt was styled as an anti-Bolshevik intervention to push back Soviet encroachment, and with Japanese backing his victory would have meant transforming Xinjiang into another Manchukuo. That the Soviet Union agreed to release Chung-ming back into China suggests they no longer considered him a threat to their interests, but that was no comfort to Sheng.

There was also an abortive attempt to reclaim the rebel Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan as a new state called Islamistan, which was to be ruled by a self-styled king called Dr. Khalid Sheldrake.⁵⁴ There were multiple attempts to establish Islamic statelets in Xinjiang, but what sets this attempt apart is its direct association with Sheldrake who was a British citizen. The Turkish-Islamic Republic also sought assistance from British India and followed a pro-British policy.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, their requests for assistance were not met, and British officials repeatedly denied knowledge or approval of Sheldrake's royal ambitions. Again this was of no particular comfort to Sheng, for whom the affair proved that Islamic rebels looked to Britain for support. An article published in *Izvestiya* around the same time mentions a scheme to partition southern and northern Xinjiang between British India and Japan respectively.⁵⁶ None of these alleged imperialist plots ever came to fruition, but nonetheless the friction caused by overlapping British, Soviet and Chinese spheres of influence put pressure on Xinjiang, and subsequently on Sheng.

To conclude here, Sheng did not hold power in abstract, it was bolstered by armed force, at least initially. He did not come to power through a popular revolution, and he was conscious that his position was predicated on the acquiescence of external actors, namely the Soviet Union, and internal actors, such as his own military regime. Beyond this, Sheng's experience of political power was, again initially, drawn from armed force.⁵⁷ It's useful to point out that in the formal government

hierarchy Sheng came second in order of precedence to Lin Wen-lung, who as provincial chairman was the highest civil authority. Sheng's power as a military commander existed in grey area between the government structure on paper and the reality that a civilian chairman without the support of armed force was effectively powerless.

He reacted to exaggerated or even completely fictitious threats because although he received some measure of popular legitimacy, he lacked the proper legal authority to rule. His government could be legitimately overthrown in a palace coup, or a local rebellion, or an external invasion, and he could not expect it to be saved with assistance from anyone else. His rule didn't rest on a higher divine right, nor was it subordinated to a higher authority in the Chinese capital. Instead he played the role of a modern sovereign carefully balancing armed repression against social progress.

The demobilisation of the White Russian irregulars demonstrates that balance between coercion and consent tipping towards consent. A period under which begrudging acceptance turns into positive approval, and furthermore, the transformation of the population itself into a pillar of Sheng's rule. It's this step which also elevates him from a simple warlord to something approaching a revolutionary leader.

Sheng's political programme

Despite a wealth of debate over Sheng's personal belief in Marxism, there's relatively little systematic study of the practice and policy of his government. From early on in his rule Sheng defined a political programme which would guide his vision of a 'new Xinjiang,'¹⁵⁸ taking after Mao's formulation of 'new China.'¹⁵⁹ His programme took the form of the eight points, and the six great policies.

Eight points:

1. Equality between races.
2. Religious freedom.
3. Immediate rural relief.
4. Financial reforms.
5. Administrative reforms.
6. Extension of education.
7. Realisation of self-government.
8. Judicial reforms.

Six policies:

1. Anti-imperialism.
2. Kinship to Soviet Russia.
3. Racial or National equality.
4. Clean government.
5. Peace.
6. Reconstruction.

His explanation of this programme refers to the need to cement his rule in popular legitimacy. Again, he was aware of the dangers of rule by coercion alone and sought to complement it by a genuine attempt to improve living conditions.

“In the face of this crisis, the first task of the new provisional government after the April coup was to win support among the people so as to rally unity against those who would overthrow the regime. Restoration of peace demanded a cessation of nationality tensions among the fourteen races of Sinkiang [sic]. Religious freedom must assure safety of worship. Corruption could no longer plunder the provincial wealth, bandits must be exterminated, and the food problem solved.”⁶⁰

The underlying themes of the programme also attempt to foster a sense of political community around anti-imperialism, racial equality, and a vague notion of economic solidarity.

Racial politics in New Xinjiang

The first effect of his programme is to replace the distinctions of racial, ethnic, and religious allegiances and subordinate them to a broad citizenship tied to Sheng's republican model. This model for wiping away inter-ethnic conflict under a single category of citizen shouldn't be taken as a universalising trend however. It does seek to unite the population, but not to the extent that the boundaries of citizenship vanish and the concept becomes meaningless. There is still an element of discrimination which distinguishes one polity against another. The old cadre of Qing-era imperial administrators were not welcome in Sheng's new Xinjiang; nor were those such as Ma Chung-ming who sought to supplant Sheng's authority for that of god. Private religious and cultural differences are still acknowledged, but they are robbed of their political character, exiled from the public realm.

The successful depoliticisation of religion is evident in Sheng's negotiations with Hoja Niyaz Haji, the president of the Turkish-Islamic Republic. Niyaz was eventually offered a ceremonial position as Vice-Chairman in Sheng's government, and in return he dissolved the rogue Republic.⁶¹ The Islamic Uyghur forces that Niyaz commanded were also allowed to continue to serve under his command for a while until they had retaken Kashgar. In this way the religious and ethnic character of the insurgents was respected, but the political basis for their struggle was cut away as they were integrated into Sheng's 'New Xinjiang'. To Sheng, the focus of the conflict revolved around their withdrawal from the political community, once this was resolved the remaining ethnic and religious differences were politically irrelevant. Or to put it another way, Sheng sought to defeat the Turkish-Islamic Republic not because of any innate hostility towards turkic-speaking muslims, but because their republic challenged his rule. Once Niyaz was stripped of his army and title he retired in relative safety to Urumqi, before being killed in a purge in 1937.

This extends to the notion that even under a particularly authoritarian ruler, the public can still enjoy wide sphere of liberty, limited only by their loyalty to the sovereign. It follows that anything is permitted so long as it doesn't threaten public order or counteract the power of the sovereign. This bears out in Lattimore's observation that under the loose coalition of radicals and socialists in Xinjiang there was *“more freedom of political action than had ever been granted by any previous Chinese Governor.”⁶²*

Aside from the different philosophical approach of a republican government, there were also functional benefits to racial equality:

“One of the chief changes thus brought about [under Sheng's leadership] appears to be the greater equality of all races. Government office, to be held by merit and ability, is now open to the subject races equally with the Chinese. In order to assist them to take part in public life, education is being widely promoted, whereas formerly the native education of both Moslems and Mongols was almost entirely religious and the Chinese were only interested in training interpreters to transmit the orders of their administration.”⁶³

The meritocracy inherent in allowing all races to compete for positions in the civil service not only allows for the recruitment of a greater number of skilled specialists, it also ties various ethnic groups into the government machinery. Opening up participation in government also wears down the historical animosities of Turkic-speaking Muslims who did not consider themselves Chinese and were resentful of being ruled by an alien people. By broadening out the concept of Chinese nationalism from a narrow category based on language or ethnicity, Sheng was implementing in practice the republican principle of 'five races under one union'.

Sheng's programme in practice

Beyond the policy of racial equality there were also genuine attempts made to improve public welfare and pursue economic modernisation. For example, in the winter of 1935/6, Soviet doctors were invited to Kashgar and then Khotan to help combat plague.⁶⁴ In summer of 1936, Sheng's government set in motion a programme of rebuilding & expanding a network of radio stations across the province.⁶⁵ In Kashgar the roads were widened to make way for cars and trucks.⁶⁶ Road-building as a whole extended across the province, leading to an increase of trucks in circulation from 400 in 1938 to around 3,000 in 1941. Meanwhile 1,350 miles of telephone lines^a and 20 factories were constructed.⁶⁷

When the value of the Tael dropped by a third relative to the Ruble, the government stepped in to fix the rates of grain, meat, and other foods at set prices. Grain hoarders were threatened, and money-changers were persecuted.⁶⁸ Meanwhile the Soviet Trade Agency also introduced price controls on basic goods.⁶⁹ The number of students in education jumped from 3,000 to 150,000 between 1933 and 1936. Schools were also permitted to teach students in their own language. Five new newspaper offices were built and they produced editions in seven different languages. Inspectors were sent out to visit public officials and check the spread of corruption.⁷⁰

These achievements show that Sheng was committed to improving the material living conditions in Xinjiang. The laying down of infrastructure, expansion of education, and regulation of food prices were all interventions from the state. They were the result of a self-conscious and planned reconstruction effort, funded to a large extent by the Soviet Union.⁷¹ From the outset Sheng's government aimed to develop Xinjiang's economy and it successfully pursued that goal right up until the turbulent period of the 1940s.

a For some reference of comparable length, the road between Kashgar and Urumqi passing over the Tien-Shan mountains is approximately 860 miles.

However, despite the generally progressive nature of Sheng's reforms, they cannot be taken as explicitly socialist. Patterns and relationships of production were disrupted but not inverted. There's no evidence of workers being granted control of their industry, or of peasants forming agricultural co-operatives. There were no local bodies created to collectively and democratically organise society. CCP cadres criticised Sheng for this, taking particular issue with his fixation on personal rule over devolving government to a collective leadership.

Sheng was happy to send weapons and coats and other aid to the CCP in the Jiangxi Soviet, but while the CCP was throwing all of its diminished resources into the class struggle, his government made little progress in Xinjiang. Sheng did not establish a soviet republic in Xinjiang, even when the conditions were suitable to do so. The result was an uneasy middle ground formed of introducing a modernising tendency to an underdeveloped traditional society. Re-casting Sheng from a tyrant and traitor to a progressive ruler requires a recognition of this disparity between his apparently genuine personal belief in Marxism and his reluctance to fully commit to socialist construction.

Sheng and the state of exception

The ambiguous nature of Sheng's socialism reflects a broader theme present throughout the study of his rule: the constant violation or redefinition of legal norms. From the very beginning, Sheng was brought to power in a coup and was immediately faced with putting down Ma Chung-ming's rebellion. Sheng's experience, and the experience of his predecessors, reflects a brutal struggle broken free from the orderly rituals of the legal transfer of power.

Upon taking office he continued to exercise his exceptional status by ruling as a military governor and dismissing the state hierarchy under which he would have been second-in-command. Thus his position as head of state, and the constitutional limits on his authority, were not formally defined. Sheng also claimed to be building democracy in Xinjiang, yet his role as leader wasn't legitimised in elections. Instead he governed according to the 'general will'⁷² of the people. Again, this order is not defined, it relies on Sheng to personally interpret and act in the public interest. The ambiguities of his position leave him the leeway to act without being bound by formal legal structures.

On the international level, Xinjiang was legally part of China, yet it was also self-governing; the command emanating from the national government in Nanjing/Chongqing did not apply there. More importantly, Xinjiang conducted international relations with the Soviet Union independently of Chongqing. The Soviet Union recognised China's territorial integrity and declared its respect for China's national sovereignty. However, at the same time it undermined China's national sovereignty by concluding the tin mines agreement directly with Xinjiang and bypassing the national Chinese government.

This contradiction is identified by Carl Schmitt as a conflict between universal international order, and regionally-specific order. Under this practice:

“*The external, emptied space of the controlled state's territorial sovereignty remains inviolate, but the material content of this sovereignty is changed by the guarantees of the controlling power's economic Großraum.*”⁷³

Xinjiang sat within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, its *Großraum*, the nearby territory in which geography trumps universal values. The tin mines agreement and the military incursion to support Sheng both stand out as examples of this. Soviet respect for the rights of all nations did not prevent it from mounting economic and military interventions in Xinjiang. Nor was this a particular quirk of Soviet proletarian internationalism; the policy of intervening in Xinjiang while recognising its nominal status as part of China, is a historical policy inherited from the Tsarist empire.⁷⁴ Furthermore, because the relationship between the Soviet Union and Xinjiang lacked reference to universal legal order, it was reliant on local and specific circumstances. It was ambiguous, left open to interpretation and only valid by mutual agreement. When Sheng revoked the relationship the Soviet Union had no recourse to an established legal order.

The rift between Sheng and the KMT is also useful in that it highlights the political imperative of republicanism. Both Sheng and Chiang Kai-shek paid nominal allegiance to the idea of the Chinese republic. However, during his time as leader of Xinjiang Sheng refused to join the KMT nor to submit to the unified central authority of the republic. Yet, at the same time he strengthened China's northwestern frontier and maintained a zone of opposition to Japanese and British imperialism. The point here is that the republic was not a neutral mode of government, it was a revolutionary political principle, and it only existed as such in the areas where it was contested. The principle of the republic flourished in Xinjiang, far away from the official republic led by the KMT in Nanjing and Chongqing. Unlike Chiang, Sheng never gave up on Sun Yat-sen's third principle, that the welfare of the public is a fundamental element of the republican idea. The value of the republic should be realised in its relation to the people. Because of this, Sheng's government in Xinjiang and the CCP's Jiangxi soviet can be seen not as deviations from the Chinese republic, but as authentic expressions of republican principles in opposition to the KMT.

Sheng is fascinating because the order he built fell outside the currents of socialism and liberalism. Nor was it a continuation of feudal rule, he created a new government, something deliberately cut away from the 'tradition of dead generations.'⁷⁵ Therefore it merits examination as something unique, framed by the dual conditions of isolation and intense geopolitical rivalry. It's also very much a product of Sheng's actions; much as there could have been no New China without Mao and the CCP, there could have been no New Xinjiang without Sheng.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sheng Shicai's accession to power in Xinjiang represented a conclusive break with his predecessors, who can be generally read as hangovers from the Qing Dynasty. He attempted to create a social republic, and with the help of the Soviet Union his government oversaw a leap forwards in social progress. While this was not a socialist government, it nonetheless represented the introduction of industrial economic development, paired with the creation of a modern state machinery.

Sheng failed to take the experiment further, unwilling to cede his authority to collective leadership, and therefore unable to empower workers to defend or advance the social gains he created. The experiment failed when Sheng began swivelling his orientation towards outside interests in the province.

Sheng's experiment in Xinjiang was defined by its ambiguities, its ability to move within the grey areas of law. Despite this the experiment still had a political character which was validated with political legitimacy. This defies the liberal notion of politics as a written set of universal legal codes. Ultimately it exemplifies politics as an expression of popular organisation, as a social process.

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