

The Collapse of Empire and the Transformation of Frontier Elite Politics: Frontier State-Building in the Greater Xinjiang Region, 1911–1919

Zikui Wei

Extended Abstract:

Studies on empire mostly focus on the transition from “empire” to “nation-state”—with almost exclusive focus on the problem of nation, nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnic violence. This focus was mostly an afterthought: because nation-state was the dominant end product, the master process of imperial collapse itself must be the same. However, nation, nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnic violence were better explained by the policy of the nationalizing states rather than by specific features of empire itself. Consequently, little attention was paid to other aspects of imperial collapse and the specific political order that emerged out of the ashes of empire.

Compared to the other two major contiguous empires on Eurasia—the Russian empire and the Ottoman empire—the Qing-Chinese empire retained most of its territory during the twentieth century. This paper focuses on Qing-China’s northwestern frontier, Xinjiang, during the 1910s, immediately after the collapse of the Qing empire. I look at how specific imperial economic, political, and military institutions and their change brought about by imperial collapse actually contributed to state-building on the frontier. Here, I define state-building narrowly as the process through which a state-builder eliminate its rivals within a given territory. This frontier state-building during the 1910s reduced the cost for the future Chinese state to integrate this region politically.

When the Qing empire collapsed in 1911/2, its northwestern frontier, Xinjiang, was comprised of four administrative units—Xinjiang, Ili, Tarbaghatay, and Altay. Eight years later in 1919, the whole region winded up in a single state. Throughout this paper, I shall use the “greater

Xinjiang region” to refer to the combined geographical area of Xinjiang, Ili, Tarbaghatay, and Altay, and use “Xinjiang” to refer to the region under Yuan Dahua (1891–1935) and Yang Zengxin’s (1864–1928) jurisdiction.

The political history of the greater Xinjiang region during the 1910s and 1920s was often narrated as a story of how the governor Yang Zengxin dealt with various crises and consolidated his rule (e.g., Bai and Koibuchi 1992, chaps. 1–2). This narrative, however, was based on several implicit assumptions that could not bear further scrutiny. First, during most of the 1910s, there were several other competing centers of power within the greater Xinjiang region other than Yang Zengxin. It was only from hindsight that the greater Xinjiang region wound up in a single administrative unit in 1919. Second, and more importantly, we cannot assume that the political elites within the greater Xinjiang region wanted a unified state and administration in the region in the first place. Indeed, Yuan Dahua was perfectly fine with Ili being a state independent from Xinjiang. In other words, the intentionality of state-building of various elites in the greater Xinjiang region needs to be explained rather than assumed. Third, the timing and specific ways of state-building happened differed. In the case of Xinjiang’s incorporation of Ili, despite strong opposition, the incorporation was achieved through negotiation and administrative maneuverings in 1914. In the case of Tarbaghatay, it first sided with Xinjiang but then moved to distance itself from it. Xinjiang’s incorporation of Tarbaghatay was achieved administratively without much opposition in 1917. Xinjiang’s incorporation of Altay happened the latest. Although Xinjiang was moving to incorporate Altay in 1914, the process was called to stop with the arrival of a Beijing-appointed governor. The incorporation happened only when the Altay state collapsed in a military mutiny—presumably caused by a worsening of fiscal situation—in 1919. Taken together, state-building in the greater Xinjiang region during this period was achieved politically, not through major warfare and military conflict.

This paper seeks to explain these puzzles: Why state-building was deemed necessary and possible by the frontier elites in the greater Xinjiang region? Why was state-building achieved by negotiation and administrative maneuvering without large-scale military competition? How and why the timing and the specific patterns of state-building differed?

I argue that both the legacies of empire and the changes brought by the imperial collapse in 1911/2 help to explain these puzzles. One of the most important legacies of the Qing empire was the frontier military. The changing dynamics between the Manchu and Mongol banner forces and the New Army came to define the broader contours of frontier elite politics.

The collapse of the Qing empire in 1911/2 brought about three major changes. First, it changed the political geography in and around the greater Xinjiang region. On the one hand, it left the region with four independent state units—Xinjiang, Ili, Tarbaghatay, and Altay. On the other hand, Mongolia's independence in 1911 (itself a result of Qing's downfall) presented the greater Xinjiang region, and Altay in particular, with persistent external military threat.

Second, the collapse of empire changed the fiscal situation of the local states and the mode of center-periphery interaction. More specifically, the interprovincial assistance arrangement that had long supported the financial survival of the states in the greater Xinjiang region was gone. As a result, the local elites were forced to think twice before building up military forces that they cannot feed. Politically, the authority of central state on these local states declined. The nominal authorities that the central state had over the local elites left ample room for new interpretations and maneuvering by frontier elites.

Third, political events accompanying the collapse of empire—primarily the New Army uprisings in Ili and Dihua—changed the stakes of frontier elite competition. It created a condition in which frontier state elites came to see their own political survival as fundamentally conflictual with one another. The perception of threat, of course, varied case by case.

All these changes brought about with the collapse of empire, I argue, fundamentally changed the dynamics of elite competition on the frontier. This in turn lead to a situation in which state-building was deemed indispensable. In the greater Xinjiang region, the collapse of empire actually contributed to state-building in the absence of large-scale military conflict.