

Nationalists, Muslim Warlords, and the “Great Northwestern Development” in Pre-Communist China

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ABSTRACT

This article retraces China’s pre-Communist era (1928-49) and seeks to reveal the previously unnoticed story of Chinese Nationalists’ opportunistic and strategic advancement into the Muslim-ruled territories of China’s far northwestern frontiers. It demonstrates how the originally weak, localized, and war-ridden Nationalist regime gradually infiltrated China’s inland frontiers, where it usually claimed full sovereignty but where its administrative overtures remained ineffective. It also shows how the Nationalists took advantage of every possible opportunity to penetrate its previously fictitious authority into peripheral China in the name of state building and regime consolidation. As this article illustrates, this process of authority extension, along with the resultant presence of Nationalist authority in China’s far northwestern borderlands in the 1940s, ironically paved an unintended way for the subsequent Chinese Communist take-over in the region.

Keywords • Nationalist (Kuomintang) Government • Xinjiang • Sino-Muslims • Ma Bufang • Sheng Shicai • grand northwestern development (Kaifa da Xibei)

In September 1999, the Chinese Government announced a grand project called the Great Western Development (*Xibu da kaifa*). The main purpose of this enterprise is to promote social stability and economic growth in China’s western inland regions which have largely been left out of the nation’s economic boom since 1978. With the strategy of “stability through development,” the Beijing authorities seek to safeguard national unity and consolidate border security by enhancing the regional economy, fostering business development and foreign investment, and developing infrastructure in China’s far-flung western peripheries. The introduction of this ambitious program invited excitement and attracted feverish attention almost overnight. Whereas Communist officials seldom hesitate to emphasize the significance of this “westward-looking” advancement in the context of China’s frontier territorial integrity, local inhabitants in the western regions generally expect the prospect of better job opportunities as a result of forthcoming investments. On the other

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hand, Western governments and the private sector were quick to embrace the program, which framed its objectives within an attractive discourse of modernization and reform. In scholarly circles, there is no lack of keen debate on whether the westward development project will be more rhetoric than reality.¹

The development of China's far western regions is by no means a new concept. When probing the issue of westward expansion in modern China's historical context, we discover that during the pre-1949 Nationalist period (1928-1949), the ruling Nationalist (Kuomintang; KMT) regime had already been endeavoring to undertake a series of "grand northwestern development" (*Kaifa da Xibei*) programs with the purpose of opening, colonizing and modernizing Nationalist China's northwestern outlying territories. These relatively overlooked attempts in the 1930s and 1940s, by no means less ambitious and enterprising than the present initiatives in content or scale, attracted huge anticipation and caused a nationwide sensation which was very similar to what is occurring in China today.

What motivated the Chinese Nationalists, whose political authority during the Nationalist era hardly extended beyond China proper, to launch their grandiose projects? How did the Nationalists deal with the Sino-Muslim warlords, who for most of the 1930s and 1940s effectively dominated the vast northwestern frontiers? What was the consequence of these northwestward-looking attempts? And, more significantly, in terms of a broader geo-historical perspective, what sort of impacts had been engendered by the Nationalist Government's northwestern development efforts upon a China that was dominated by its Communist rival after 1949?

This article re-traces the development path pre-Communist China, and seeks to reveal the story of Chinese Nationalists' opportunistic advancement into the Muslim-ruled territories of China's far northwest. It demonstrates how the weak and war-threatened Nationalist central regime gradually infiltrated China's inland frontiers where it usually claimed full sovereignty but where its administrative overtures were ineffective. It also shows how the Nationalists took advantage of every possible opportunity to penetrate its previously fictitious authority into peripheral China, in the name of state building and regime consolidation. As this article will illustrate, the presence of Nationalist authority in

¹ On China's Great Western Development since the late 1990s, see, for example: Yasuo Onishi ed., *China's Western Development Strategy: Issues and Prospects* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 2001); Abigail Sines, "Civilizing the Middle Kingdom's wild west," *Central Asian Survey* 21, 1 (2002), pp. 5-18; Ding Lu & William A. W. Neilson eds., *China's West Region Development: Domestic Strategies and Global Implications* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2004).

China's far northwestern borderlands in the 1940s ironically paved an unintended way for the subsequent Communist take-over in the region.

The Search for a New Power Base

In September 1931, the Japanese commander in Korea ordered his troops across the border into south Manchuria and attacked the Chinese barracks in Mukden. The Chinese troops in Manchuria under Young Marshal Zhang Xueliang did not offer much resistance, and by the end of 1931 the whole region was completely under Japanese control. In the spring of 1932, a Tokyo-sponsored Manchukuo, with the ex-Qing emperor Puyi as its nominal leader, was established. This episode, called the Mukden incident, was immediately followed by another military clash between China and Japan in Shanghai. On January 28, 1932 under the pretext of protecting their perimeter, Japanese marines stationed in the Shanghai International Settlement suddenly exchanged fire with the Nationalist troops deployed nearby. The unexpected skirmish soon developed into a full-scale Japanese bombing and attack on Shanghai's Chinese defenders. Although an armistice was arranged in May of that year, the Nationalist government was forced to accept the drawing of a neutral zone around the greater Shanghai metropolis and the withdrawal of its troops from the area.²

The intense Japanese military expansion into Manchuria and other parts of coastal China soon prompted the higher echelons of the Nationalist administration to contemplate the security and survival of their precarious regime. After the Mukden and Shanghai incidents of the early 1930s, an increasing number of Chinese officials were coming to the conclusion that an all-out Japanese invasion of China seemed unavoidable in the long run. As a result, top Nationalist leaders felt the urgent need to search for a potential inland power base capable of undertaking enduring resistance against their enemy from the east. It is a noteworthy fact that in the early 1930s, it was the vast northwest, not the southwest where the Nationalists subsequently headquartered their wartime capital. Immediately following the Japanese attack on Shanghai, the Nationalists announced that China's national capital would be temporarily moved from Nanking, which was close to Shanghai, to Luoyang, in Henan Province. Although activities gradually returned to normal in Nanking after a ceasefire was reached in Shanghai, Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province, was officially made Nationalist China's

² Lloyd E. Eastman, Jerome Chen, Suzanne Pepper and Lyman van Slyke, *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 14, 120; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), pp. 388-396.

“Western national capital” (Xi Jing) to be used in the event of repeat coastal invasion of China.³

Apart from Nationalist government officials, grassroots Han Chinese as well as the mass media in China proper were also quick to realize the strategic need to develop the northwest in the face of possible Japanese military encroachment. This growing awareness was evident from the sudden blooming of societies, study groups and publications on China’s northwestern affairs after the Mukden incident. In 1932 alone, there were at least a dozen new societies related to northwestern affairs set up in Peking, Nanking and Shanghai, each devoting itself to research on China’s far western frontier lands. These groups published their own journals and periodicals, endeavoring to systematically introduce China’s far northwestern regions to intellectuals and commoners in China proper. Some of these well-organized societies, such as the Study Group of Northwestern Affairs (Xibei Wenti Yanjiuhui) in Shanghai, were able to attract not only scholars and students, but also some high-ranking KMT officials, such as Dai Chuanxian, then President of the Examination Yuan, and Zhang Ji, an influential member of the KMT Central Committee. Gradually, the Study Group of Northwestern Affairs (Xibei Wenti Yanjiuhui) in Shanghai became an influential advisory board to the Nationalist regime vis-à-vis its northwestern dealings.⁴

After the catastrophic episodes in Mukden and Shanghai in the early 1930s, Chinese public opinion allowed no delay in urging the central government to take concrete measures to bring the northwest frontiers closer into Nanking’s administrative orbit. Nor did it forget to alert the people in China proper to the importance of opening the Northwest for the sake of national survival. Taking the influential *Da Gong Bao* (The Impartial Daily) of Tianjin as an example, on April 26, 1932 its editorial pointed out that developing the northwest was “the only way out” for the war-threatened Nationalist China. This assertion, as the editorial continued, was based on the fact that China proper could no longer be securely protected due to the fall of Manchuria to the Japanese. The *Da Gong Bao* meanwhile argued that the northwest was a better choice for the Nationalists because southwest China was plagued by ceaseless

³ “Important resolutions approved in the 4th KMT Central Committee”, March 1932, in Second Historical Archives of China ed., *Zhonghua Minguoshi Dang’an Ziliao Huibian* (Collection of Republican historical materials from the archives) (hereafter, ZMDZH) (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1994), 5: 1, Politics (2), p. 365.

⁴ Shen Sherong, “Jiu-yi-ba Shibian Hou kaifa Xibei sichao di xingqi” (The rise of the trend of thought on developing the Northwest after the Mukden incident), *Ningxia Daxue Xuebao* (Journal of University of Ningxia) 4, (1995), pp. 9-15. Other important societies on China’s northwestern affairs of this period included the Northwest Association (Xibei Xieshe) and Society for the Northwest Public Studies (Xibei Gongxueshe) in Beijing, the Developing the Northwest Association (Kaifa Xibei Xiehui) in Nanking, and the Northwest Public Forum Association (Xibei Gonglunshe) in Shanghai.

warfare among local warlords, who gave little more than superficial allegiance to the central authorities in Nanking.⁵

In response to high expectations from the public concerning much-needed northwestern development, in late 1932 the Nationalist center promulgated a series of proposals aimed at promoting regional infrastructure development in the areas of: economy, industry, forestry, irrigation, husbandry, and mining in China's western peripheries. According to this new scheme, a Reclamation Committee was soon to be set up with ministerial status under direct control of the Executive Yuan and would take charge of related affairs. Despite its financial constraints, the Nationalist regime declared that a large sum of the national expenditure would be allocated to this new governmental organ in support of its ends.⁶ The proposal was widely appreciated and welcomed, as expected, and was momentarily interpreted as a clear display of Nanking's resolution to take concrete actions towards the transformation of China's northwest into a solid new power base to be used against the Japanese.

However, the mass media in China proper may have inadvertently ignored the fact that Nationalist influence in the northwestern region was as weak as in southwest China. Since the late nineteenth century, the northwestern provinces of Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai had been administered by the local Tungan Muslim family named Ma. This Ma family achieved dominance in Chinese Central Asia, starting what was, in effect, a small dynasty of its own. From the beginning of the republican era until the end of the 1920s, the brothers Ma Qi and Ma Lin ruled the Gansu Corridor and Qinghai, followed in the 1930s by Ma Qi's sons, Ma Bufang and Ma Buqing. Another branch of the Ma family rose to power in Ningxia and southern Gansu: Ma Hongbin built his own power base in southern Gansu in the 1920s, and in the early 1930s he became Governor of Gansu Province. His cousin, Ma Hongkui, took power in Ningxia, and in 1931 became Governor of that province, where he ruled for the following decade and a half.⁷

West of the Ma-dominated territories, was the Chinese Central Asian province of Xinjiang. A vast, remote, and sparsely populated region, Xinjiang did not become an official province of Qing China until 1884,

⁵ Editorial entitled "On the construction of the Northwest," *Da Gong Bao* (The Impartial Daily) (Tianjin), April 26 1932.

⁶ "Outlines of the scheme for the development of the northwest," Executive Yuan, dated December 19 1932, in ZMDZH, pp. 391-392.

⁷ On the history of the Ma family in northwest China, see Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), esp. chapters 4 and 5; A. Doak Barnett, *China's Far West: Four Decades of Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993); Qinghai Provincial Government ed., *Qinghai San Ma* (The three Mas in Qinghai) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1988).

when prominent general, Zuo Zongtang pacified the Muslim rebellion and re-conquered Central Asia. It was ethnically and culturally distinct, with a large majority of various non-Han peoples, most of which were Muslims. Xinjiang's distance from the main centers of Chinese power and culture, together with its inherent obstacles to communication and transportation, made it extremely difficult for Chinese leaders to bind it to the rest of the country. Between 1912 and 1928, Xinjiang was under the administration of Yang Zengxin, an ex-Qing official who acknowledged the authority of the Peking republican government, but for all intents and purposes paid no attention to it. Yang was assassinated in 1928 by his political enemies in Xinjiang, and his unpopular successor, Jin Shuren, was more corrupt and less efficient than Yang. After 1928, the provincial government under Jin was even less concerned about obeying Chiang Kai-shek's new Nationalist regime in Nanking. In the spring of 1933, Jin was toppled by a Muslim *jihād* led by Ma Zhongying, a member of the same Ma family which dominated Chinese Central Asia.⁸

After Jin Shuren fled from Urumqi in 1933, the strongest militarist in the province, Sheng Shicai, seized power, and Nanking eventually confirmed him as the new leader of Xinjiang. Yet, Sheng also had little to do with Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT Nationalists. Before long, Sheng adopted a policy of close rapport with Soviet Russia which, in terms of economic importance and communications facilities, was closer than the heartland of China. The Soviets provided Sheng's provincial regime with various kinds of technical aid and, on more than one occasion, with military support against Sheng's Muslim rivals in Central Asia. Sheng Shicai ruled this vast territory from 1933 onwards. Like his predecessors, Sheng gave little more than nominal allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek's KMT central regime.⁹

Spatial Struggle and Political Compromise

Chiang Kai-shek and his associates in Nanking were fully aware that as long as the Ma Muslim warlords continued to maintain a free reign in China's northwestern sphere of influence,, there would be little chance for the KMT to effectively implement its newly proposed "great northwestern development" projects which aimed to gradually turn the region into a new Nationalist bastion of power. However, by the summer of 1933, for the first time since their rise to power in 1928, an opportunity

⁸ See Allen S. Whiting & Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1958), pp. 3-20; Colin Mackerras, *China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. chapter 4.

⁹ A thorough investigation of the history of Republican Xinjiang can be found in Andrew D. W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

appeared for the power-limited Nationalists to extend their influence into the Ma-dominated territories. In order to weaken Nanking's credibility, in early 1933 Marshal Feng Yuxiang, one of Chiang Kai-shek's major rivals, organized a joint force in Suiyuan Province with the aim of fighting against the Japanese invasion.¹⁰ Due to Feng's attempts to build an alliance of politicians and militarists in northern China among those who opposed Chiang's leadership, Nanking regarded him as a threat to its political legitimacy, and therefore sought to quell his campaign at any cost. A division led by General Sun Dianying, then deployed on the strategic Beijing-Suiyuan railroad, and still claiming to be loyal to Nanking, became very critical of Chiang Kai-shek's group. If Sun was bribed into siding with Feng's northern faction, Nanking would be in a precarious position vis-à-vis its rebels. Viewing it as imperative to move Sun out of the trouble spot, Chiang hastily instructed Sun that he transfer his troops westward into northwest Qinghai with the excuse of "colonizing and reclaiming" that piece of wasteland. Sun, viewing this order as a gift from Chiang which allowed him to create an influential sphere of his own, accepted immediately.¹¹

The Nationalist Government's maneuver was two-pronged. On the one hand it sought to keep Sun Dianying away from Feng Yuxiang's group. On the other hand, under the pretext of the political slogan of "developing the Northwest," Nanking was manipulating Sun to undermine Ma authority, and develop influence in the region. Yet Nanking's calculated strategy was greeted with tremendous opposition from almost every Muslim warlord. Upon hearing of the likely arrival of Sun's troops which numbered around 60,000, Qinghai Governor Ma Lin rejected the idea, urging Nanking to withdraw the order. Ma Lin not only instigated local Tibetan and Mongolian groups to send strong protests to Nanking, he even went as far as to threaten his resignation from the post of Governor of Qinghai.¹² Ningxia Governor, Ma Hongkui, asserted that due to "serious crop failures and lack of food provisions in Ningxia," he would not allow Sun's troops to enter his provincial domain en route to their final destination in Qinghai. Ma Hongkui, like Ma Lin, also

¹⁰ "China (Military): Situation Report", received by the U. S. War Department, May 31 1933, in *United States Military Intelligence Report, China, 1911-1941* (Frederick, MD: University Publication of America, 1983), microfilm (hereafter, USMIR), reel 5.

¹¹ See Sun Dianying's dispatches to Lin Sen (Head of the Nationalist Government) and Premier Wang Jingwei, June 17 1933, in *Minguo Dang'an* (The Republican Archives) (Nanjing), 1994 (4), p. 27; "China (Military): Situation Report", U. S. War Department, received July 19 and August 10 1933, USMIR, reel 9.

¹² Ma Lin to Chiang Kai-shek and Wang Jingwei, June 30 1933; The Qinghai Provincial Government to the Nationalist Government, July 2 1933; Ma Lin to Lin Sen, July 5 1933 in *Minguo Dang'an*, pp. 28-29.

threatened to resign from his governorship if Chiang Kai-shek did not reverse his “unwise” decision.¹³

Faced with enormous pressures from the Muslims warlords, the power-weak yet opportunistic Nanking authorities decided to abandon their attempts to use Sun Dianying as a means to penetrate the Northwest. In November 1933, in the face of growing tumult in the northwestern rim, Chiang Kai-shek finally backed down. He officially ordered that Sun’s division, then moving slowly towards the Suiyuan-Ningxia border, halt and wait for further instructions from Nanking. Meanwhile, Sun’s soldiers, who were already trapped in an impasse and were plagued with imminent shortages of food provisions in the locale, had terribly low morale and were showing signs of mental instability.¹⁴ The dire situation eventually prompted Sun Dianying to act on his own. In early 1934, disregarding Chiang Kai-shek’s open instruction, Sun ordered his troops to advance westward across the Ningxia boundary, causing an immediate military clash between Sun’s troops and Ma Hongkui’s Muslim force, which was deployed on the provincial border. With the view of safeguarding their common interests in the Northwest, almost all of the important Ma family members began to send their own forces to Ningxia as reinforcement in the fight with Sun. At this juncture, as Chiang Kai-shek no longer saw a possibility to play the Sun card against the Mas, he opportunistically changed his attitude, urging the Mas to take any “necessary actions” in order to punish the “obstinate” Sun Dianying. In the final phase of the armed conflict, Nanking even assisted Ma Hongkui with some well-equipped munitions, including a reconnaissance plane, to facilitate his battle with Sun. In March, Sun’s force was defeated and eventually absorbed into the Shanxi provincial garrison.¹⁵

The Sun Dianying incident had caused considerable damage to the Nationalist regime’s reputation. The incident also prompted high officials in Nanking to realize that the Ma family held on tightly to its traditional authority in northwestern China, and it could not be easily crushed by means of military engagement. Accordingly, Chiang Kai-shek decided to dismiss the use of drastic methods and, from the Sun

¹³ See: Ma Hongkui to the Nationalist Government, September 21 1933, and Ningxia Provincial Government to the Executive Yuan, October 10 1933, in *Minguo Dang’an*, pp. 33, 35.

¹⁴ Sun Dianying to Wang Jingwei, October 11 1933, in *Minguo Dang’an*, p. 36.

¹⁵ See: Wang Jianping, “Xibei Si Ma Heji Sun Dianying di Huiyi” (A reminiscence of the joint attack on Sun Dianying by the four Mas of the Northwest), in ed., *Ningxia San Ma Government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (The three Mas in Ningxia)* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshizhe chubanshe, 1988), pp. 169-180; Shen Shorong and Guo Yingchun, “Sun Dianying Tunkun Qinghai Wenti zai Renshi” (Reconsidering the issue of Sun Dianying’s reclamation of Qinghai), in *Guyuan Shizhuan Xuebao (Journal of Guyuan Teachers College)* 5 (1998), pp. 18-22.

Dianying incident onwards, was determined to reinforce Nationalist influence in the region by peaceful penetration.¹⁶ On the other hand, Chiang's last-minute willingness to compromise with the Muslims in the Sun-Ma conflict resulted in the payment of unexpected dividends. After the dust settled in the northern steppe, the Ma Muslim warlords continued to give nominal allegiance to Nanking. Moreover, in return for Chiang's retreat from supporting Sun, the Mas, for the first time, openly declared their readiness to allow Nationalist high officials to enter their sphere of influence, with the latter doing so, based on the excuse of inspecting and investigating the implementation of the previously proposed "grand northwestern development" program.¹⁷

Set against this political background, from the spring of 1934 through the end of that year, a cluster of authoritative Nationalist personages were busy flying between Nanking and the northwest in order to conduct their "inspection tours." In April 1934, Dai Chuanxian, Chiang Kai-shek's most trusted frontier advisor, was the first Nationalist high-ranking official to reach Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai.¹⁸ Dai was followed by T. V. Soong and Kong Xiangxi (H. H. Kung), Chiang's two brothers-in-law, who were then in charge of Nationalist China's economic and financial planning. Soong's trip, in particular, encompassed almost the entire Ma-ruled domains, including southern Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia provinces, where he was warmly received, meeting with every influential regional leader. Shortly after Soong's tour in the northwest, Nanking publicly announced that a branch office of the National Economic Council would soon be established in Lanzhou to execute the related development projects in that region.¹⁹ There were also lively discussions in the national capital over the possibility of emigrating surplus Han Chinese from China proper to the northwest in order to cultivate and reclaim that region. In addition, the Nationalist Government pledged more financial subsidies to the Mas, contingent on

¹⁶ Yang Xiaoping, *Ma Bufang Jiazuo di Xingshuai* (The rise and fall of the Ma Bufang family) (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1986), pp. 107-121; Qinghai San Ma, pp. 200-201.

¹⁷ Gao Yi, *Jiang Jieshi yu Xibei Si Ma* (Chiang Kai-shek and the four Mas in the Northwest) (Beijing: Jingcha jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), pp. 84-101; Hao Weimin ed., *Neimenggu Jindai shi* (A history of modern Inner Mongolia) (Hohhot: Neimenggu Daxue chubanshe, 1990), pp. 120-129.

¹⁸ *Zhongyang Ribao* (Central Daily) (Nanking), April 15 1934, p. 2; Dai Chuanxian's personal letter to Chiang Kai-shek, April 30 1934, in Chen Tianxi ed., *Dai Jitao Xiansheng Wencun Xubian* (The sequel of Mr. Dai Jitao's documents) (Taipei: Kuomintang Historical Committee, 1967), p. 176.

¹⁹ *Zhongyang Ribao*, May 2, May 9, May 15 and June 22 1934; *Shen Bao* (Courier Mail) (Shanghai), May 9 and 10, 1934.

their willingness to collaborate closely with the Nationalists in the development of the Northwest.²⁰

Eventually, in the fall of 1934, it was Chiang Kai-shek himself who decided to launch his own inspection tour deep into Muslim-controlled northwest China. Despite being preoccupied with his recently launched military encirclement against the Chinese Communists, Chiang spent nearly a month traveling between the borderlands of northwest and Inner Mongolia. During his stay in Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia provinces, Chiang publicly expressed his determination to turn the entire northwest into a strategic base for the survival of the Chinese nation. He appealed to his country fellowmen to “go westward,” hoping to make them aware of their past mistakes in neglecting the vast rich fertile land. Chiang, at the same time, took pains to convince the Muslim warlords that it would best serve their interests to cooperate with Nanking by allowing the entry of KMT-owned capital, technologies, and Nanking-appointed personnel into their satrapies.²¹

In hindsight, the Nanking officials’ successive high-profile visits to the northwest from 1934-35 failed to lead to the development of an alternate Nationalist power base there. Moreover, perhaps the Nationalist leaders’ experiences in the Muslim-ruled territories convinced them that northwestern China, given its rigorous weather conditions, harsh living environment and occasional famines, was actually not an ideal location for them to retreat to in the event of a full-scale Japanese invasion.²² Nevertheless, Nationalist journeys to the west, their increasingly frequent interactions with the local Muslim leaders, and the dispatches of government-sponsored survey parties to the frontiers had momentarily created a perception that the war-menaced Nationalist regime was indeed endeavoring to civilize China’s far northwestern borderland, hoping to eventually bring it under Nanking’s tighter control. The Nationalists’ “rhetorical” development of northwestern China thus brought about a certain degree of success in

²⁰ Mi Zhizhong, “Jushi Zhumu zhi Xibei” (A Northwest that catches world-wide attention), in Tuo Huang (Reclamation) (Nanking) 2, 3 (1934), pp. 3-10; Zhang Naiwen, *Yi-jiu-san-liu Nian* (The year 1936) (Shanghai: Lehua shuju, 1936), pp. 293-299.

²¹ “China (Military): Situation Report,” U. S. War Department, received September 26 1934, USMIR, reel 9; “Jiang Weiyuanzhan dui Ningxia Gejie Xunhuaci” (The Generalissimo’s admonitory talk to all circles in Ningxia), in *Kaifa Xibei* (Developing the Northwest) (Nanking), 2, 4 (1934), pp. 1-3; “Jiang Weiyuanzhan Xunxing Gesheng hou zhi Guangan” (Some thoughts of the Generalissimo after his inspection tour in the Northwestern provinces), *ibid.*, 2, 5 (1934), pp. 1-3.

²² Sheng Sherong, “Jiang Jieshi di Xibei Zhanlueguan” (Chiang Kai-shek’s strategic views on the Northwest), *Guyuan Shizhuan Xuebao* 1 (2003), pp. 53-58.

terms of the elevation of its national prestige, although its authority in that area remained illusory and fragile.²³

Breaking the Muslim Barriers

Interests in opening the northwest and transforming that region into Nationalist China's new strategic base continued to be widespread in China proper until late 1935, when Chiang Kai-shek began to divert his full attention to southwest China. The Chinese Communists' Long March, commencing in late 1934, provided Chiang Kai-shek with an unprecedented opportunity to insert his military forces and political influence into the provinces of southwest China. In order to pursue the retreating Communists, Chiang's well-equipped armies entered Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces. The autonomous provincial militarists, feeling greatly endangered by the presence of the Communists, reluctantly accepted the Nationalist armies to help expel the unwelcome Reds. Chiang Kai-shek fully exploited the opportunity to initiate regime-consolidation and state-building programs in these areas. Once the Nationalist forces had entered a province, the Nanking-appointed agents would begin to impose "reforms" designed to break down that province's isolation.²⁴ In Sichuan, for example, the local garrison districts (*fangqu*), which served as the military and economic bases for several regional warlords, were abolished and soon replaced with a more centralized system of provincial administration. A massive road-construction project, aimed at integrating the province politically and militarily with the rest of the nation, was launched. Sichuan was also drawn into Nanking's economic and financial orbit as a result of the widespread use of Nationalist currency. As a result of the KMT's anti-Communist campaigns in 1935-36, the autonomy and political maneuverability of the provincial warlords in the Southwest had been sharply reduced, and the power and prestige of the KMT regime had been commensurately enhanced.²⁵

The successful penetration into southwest China led the Nationalists to choose Sichuan as their inland power base vis-à-vis the Japanese invasion. As the national capital was relocated from Nanking to

²³ On Chinese mass media's positive comments about the KMT's northwestern advancement movement, see, for instance: Da Gong Bao, the editorials for August 13 and 14 1936; Sheng Ran, "Xibei Jiaotong Jianshe zhi Wojian" (My opinions about the construction of communication facilities in the northwest), in *Bianjiang* (Frontier bi-weekly) (Nanking), 1 (1936), pp. 12-19.

²⁴ "China (Military): Situation report", U. S. War Department, received April 9 1935, USMIR, reel 9; Eastman et al., *The Nationalist Era in China*, pp. 32-36.

²⁵ On Nanking's effort to bring Sichuan into its closer administrative orbit, see Robert A Kapp, *Szechwan and Chinese Republic: Provincial Militarism and Central Power, 1911-1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 99-120.

Chongqing after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in mid-1937, China's national center of gravity was moved from coastal provinces to the southwest provinces. Nevertheless, the Muslim-dominated northwestern China remained strategically and militarily important to the war-beleaguered Nationalist regime. During the initial stages of the war, when Soviet Russia was one of very few nations in the world offering substantial assistance to Chiang Kai-shek, its military equipment and other necessary war materials had to be transported into Sichuan proper via Central Asia. Given their geopolitical importance in bridging Japanese-besieged southwest China and Soviet Central Asia, the northwestern provinces were crucial to the survival of China and the security of the Nationalist regime.²⁶

In addition, by around 1939-40, news concerning the successful drilling of oil fields in Yumen, a previously unknown oasis in the Gansu Corridor, as well as the discovery of other potential oil deposits in Qinghai and other parts of Gansu province, added further military, strategic, and morale importance to Nationalist China's northwestern borderlands. By the early 1940s, bringing the Ma family-ruled northwestern provinces of China into Nationalist control became one of the most urgent tasks for Chiang Kai-shek and his strategists in Chongqing. Top Nationalist political and security planners were secretly planning to enlarge existing pre-war underground units in the Northwestern border areas of Qinghai, Ordos and Alashan, and were considering setting up new stations in western Yunnan, northern Xinjiang, Xikang and Tibet proper. Chiang Kai-shek and his military planners were also calculating the feasibility of deploying more KMT troops on the Muslim-ruled Ningxia-Gansu border, as a first step towards controlling the entire northwest.²⁷ It became obvious that with regime survival as their primary concern, Chiang and his staff felt it necessary to take a more proactive approach in strengthening the Nationalists' previously nominal position in China's far western frontier areas.

²⁶ Owen Lattimore, "China's Turkistan-Siberian Supply Road," in *Pacific Affairs* 13, 4 (December 1940), pp. 393-412; Martin R. Norins, "The New Sinkiang-China's Link with the Middle East," *Pacific Affairs* 15, 4 (December 1942), pp. 457-470. On the Chinese-Soviet relations at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, see also: John W. Garver, *Chinese-Soviet Relations 1937-1945: The Diplomacy of Chinese Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁷ See: The Kuomintang Party Archives (Taipei), Archives of the Supreme National Defense Council (hereafter, ASNDC), 003/103, "The Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission administrative schedule for the second stage of war", April 1939; Academia Historica (Taipei), President Chiang Kai-shek Archives, Choubi (Plans and Directives) (hereafter, CB), 08-0541, Chiang Kai-shek's instructions to Zhu Shaoliang (Commander of the 8th War Zone), January 23 1938; 08-1408, Chiang to Zhu, January 23 1939; 08-2298, Chiang's secret dispatch to He Guoguang (Director of the Generalissimo's Field Headquarters in Sichuan), January 20 1940.

In 1942, Chongqing successfully extended its full authority into the Gansu Corridor for the first time, by removing the local Muslim leader, Ma Buqing, from the region. Once again, this calculated strategy to infiltrate northwestern China was made possible through opportunism, if not luck. Ma Buqing and his valiant cavalry were caught between areas controlled by his brother, Ma Bufang, in Qinghai and his cousin, Ma Hongkui, in Ningxia. Earlier in 1941, Chiang Kai-shek became aware that Ma Bufang was on extremely bad terms with his brother, Ma Buqing, in the Gansu Corridor, whom Ma Bufang gradually perceived as a potential rival among his other Ma family members. Chiang therefore endeavored to persuade Ma Bufang into collaborating with Chongqing, and to help the Nationalists gain the control of the Gansu Corridor. In return, Chiang promised Ma Bufang that he would support his take over of Ma Buqing's force, ending this brother's military and political career in northwestern China.²⁸ Chiang Kai-shek also pledged to Ma Bufang that, upon completion of their business deal, more financial subsidies would be expected from Chongqing to Xining. Chiang meanwhile assured Ma Bufang that the KMT would soon begin to invest a considerable sum of money in his personal enterprises in Qinghai.²⁹ Obviously Ma Bufang was satisfied with Chiang's offer.

As a result, in the summer of 1942, Chiang Kai-shek instructed Ma Buqing to transfer his troops to the Tsaidam Marsh in northwestern Qinghai, with the intention of colonizing and guarding that wasteland.³⁰ This was similar to the task that Chiang had given to Sun Dianying nearly a decade earlier, although within a rather different political and strategic context. Shocked by this turn of events, the unprepared Muslim general immediately turned to his other Ma family members for aid. Predictably, he did not succeed. Unable to secure any support from his brother or cousins in Qinghai and Ningxia, the disheartened Ma Buqing could do nothing but comply. According to one report submitted to Chiang around this time, in the summer of 1942, Ma Buqing's 30,000 Muslim cavalymen moved from their Gansu Corridor garrison posts across the Qilienshan (Richtofen Mountains) to settle down in northwestern Qinghai. This move also marked the end of the legend of Ma Buqing, who, for 25 years, had been a crack horseman fighting and

²⁸ Jin Shaoxian, "Yishu Guomindang Yuanlao Wu Zhongxin" (A memorial narration of the KMT veteran Wu Zhongxin), in *Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji* (Selections of literary and historical materials), 118 (1989), pp. 118-119.

²⁹ Yang, Ma Bufang Jiazhu di Xingshuai, pp. 190-212; Public Record Office, War Office Records (WO), 208/268, Office of Military Attaché of the British Embassy in China to the British War Office, November 12 1942; FO 436/16518 F5103/254/10, Report from Teichman in Lanzhou to Sir Horace Seymour (British Ambassador to China), September 3 1943, enclosed in Seymour to Foreign Office, September 14 1943.

³⁰ CB, 09-1406, Chiang Kai-shek's instruction to Ma Buqing, July 19 1942.

guarding the Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia deserts, grasslands and oases.³¹ Henceforth, Chiang Kai-shek's own Nationalist forces quickly moved into the strategically significant Gansu Corridor along the road to Xinjiang, garrisoning the long strip of land west of the Yellow River. These troops were subsequently found, as one foreign observation report later described, "in every district city as far west as the further outposts of Gansu Province in the sands of Central Asia."³²

The successful removal of Ma Buqing from the Gansu Corridor, together with the triumph of breaking up the Muslim bloc in the Northwest, led the confident Chiang Kai-shek to launch, in the summer of 1942, another grandiose inspection tour of the Gansu Corridor, as well as nearby warlord domains in Qinghai and Ningxia.³³ During his visits to these border regions, Chiang once again urged the usually obstinate Muslim warlords to ensure that they would fully cooperate with Chongqing, and fight against the Japanese. In particular, Chiang made sure to spare some time in Qinghai to address local Muslim tribesmen, and Mongolian and Tibetan nobility, who had only paid token tribute to Chinese suzerainty, and who might have been shifting their political allegiance from China to Japan as they saw fit.³⁴ When staying in Ningxia, Chiang Kai-shek also openly appealed to the local Muslim leadership for full cooperation with the KMT. He promised Governor Ma Hongkui that more financial resources could be expected from Chongqing. In exchange, Chiang stressed that the KMT should henceforth have greater authority in the military and political affairs of the region.³⁵

It was not surprising that the Mas of the northwest welcomed the military and financial resources from Chiang's central regime. Nevertheless, the burgeoning presence of Nationalist political and military influence in the Northwest would inevitably inflict increasing

³¹ WO 208/428, "Moslem soldiers in Tsaidam Basin: Guarding Flank of China's Northwest Road", extract from *China Newsweek* 8 (October 24 1942).

³² FO 436/16605 F6275/254/10, Report from Teichman in Tihwa (Urumqi), dated September 24 1943, enclosed in the British Embassy in China to Foreign Office, November 14 1943.

³³ WO 208/268, "China News", issued by the London Office of the Chinese Ministry of Information, dated September 22 1942.

³⁴ See: Chiang Kai-shek's speech to the non-Han elites in Xining, in Qin Xiaoyi ed., *Zongtong Jianggong Sixiang Yanlun Zongji* (General collections of President Chiang Kai-shek's thoughts and speeches) (Taipei: Kuomintang Historical Committee, 1984), 19, pp. 216-218; *Zhongyang Dangwu Gongbao* (Gazette of the KMT central party affairs) (Chongqing) 4, 19 (September 1942), pp. 23-24; *Zhongyang Zhoubao* (The KMT central weekly) (Chongqing) 5, 19 (December 1942).

³⁵ Chiang Kai-shek, "Ningxia Junshi Huibao Xunci" [A speech of admonition for the military briefing in Ningxia], dated September 2 1942, in Qin ed., *Zongtong Jianggong Sixiang Yanlun Zongji*, Vol. 19, pp. 219-228; FO 436/16373 F7411/1689/10, Seymour to Foreign Office, October 5 1942.

pressures upon these Muslim generals. Shortly after Chiang Kai-shek's inspection tour, a flurry of KMT government officials, military advisors, and political organizations began to emerge (with the intent to supervise local affairs) not only in a Gansu Corridor, now dominated by the Nationalists, but also in the Qinghai and Ningxia provinces. The well-known Yumen oil fields were now entirely administered by the Chongqing-appointed officials. A number of branch offices of the KMT party committee and Chiang Kai-shek's military field headquarters were even stationed in the remotest territories of the Alashan Banner, on the Sino-Outer Mongolian border.³⁶ Towards the end of 1942, the political pressure from Chongqing became so intense, that even the stubborn Muslim general, Ma Hongkui, was obliged to instruct all Muslim *ahongs* (religious instructors) in his Ningxia domain to incorporate patriotic Nationalist political ideology into their daily sermons. This was done with the mixed purpose of counteracting the Japanese and the Chinese Communists, who were then governing the nearby border region.³⁷

The Northwest as Wartime China's Promised Land

The unexpected Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, brought Nationalist China, the U.S., Soviet Russia, and Britain together as allies fighting against the Axis powers. High officials in Chongqing were theoretically no longer fighting alone. In early 1942 the supposedly invincible Soviet Red Army suffered disastrous defeats in Eastern Europe at the hands of the Germans, and Moscow was momentarily too incapacitated to take care of affairs in remote Central Asia. On the other hand, expecting that Hitler would eventually overpower Soviet Russia, and that the trouble-ridden Stalin was unlikely to provide any further aid to his autonomous provincial regime, Xinjiang ruler, Sheng Shicai, was determined to switch from his previous pro-Moscow policy to an anti-Communist stance. The shrewd Sheng was quick enough to find out that it would serve his best interests to patch up his relations with Chiang Kai-shek, who was now backed by the U.S. diplomatically, financially and militarily.³⁸

Due to a shifting political landscape in Chinese Central Asia, Chiang Kai-shek and his regime were once again given an extraordinary

³⁶ Qi Tao, "Gaishu Guomindang Zhengfu dui yuan Alashan qi di Tongzhi" (A general account of the KMT's rule over Alashan Banner), in *Alashan Meng Wenshi* (Literary and historical materials of Alashan League), 2 (1986), pp. 49-80.

³⁷ Wu Zhongli ed., *Ningxia Jindai Lishi Jinian* (The chronological history of modern Ningxia) (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1987), pp. 286-291; Hu Pingsheng, *Minguo Shiqi di Ningxiasheng* (Ningxia Province in the Republican period) (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1988), pp. 153-185.

³⁸ Whiting and Sheng, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* pp. 51-53; Harriet Moore, "Soviet Far Eastern Relations since 1941," *Pacific Affairs* 17, 3 (September 1944), pp. 294-310.

opportunity to extend their formerly non-existent authority into Xinjiang Province. Covert negotiations between Urumqi and Chongqing had been underway until the summer of 1942, when a secret understanding was reached between Sheng Shicai and Chiang Kai-shek. Shortly afterwards, Sheng made a formal declaration of allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek. In return for Sheng Shicai's willingness to cooperate with the Nationalists, Chiang Kai-shek pledged that he would forgive Sheng's "past misdeeds in Xinjiang," assuring Sheng that his position in Urumqi would remain intact.³⁹

Toward the end of 1942, at Sheng Shicai's insistence, Soviet military and technical personnel began to withdraw from Xinjiang, giving way to a strengthened Nationalist political, economic and financial presence in the province. The Nationalist troops, already deployed in the Gansu Corridor, began to cross the Gansu-Xinjiang provincial border and were eventually stationed at Hami, replacing the well-known Soviet "Eighth Regiment" infantry force. This victory was symbolic of Chongqing's preliminary success in asserting its authority over Xinjiang.⁴⁰ Chiang Kai-shek's pleasure regarding Xinjiang's return to the Nationalist fold was revealed in his diary. In December 21, 1942, Chiang wrote:

*"[T]he territory from Lanzhou in Gansu to Ili in Xinjiang, covering a distance of 3,000 kilometers, with an area twice as large as Manchuria, has now come under Central control. With Xinjiang under Central control, our rear areas have been consolidated."*⁴¹

By late 1943, when Sheng Shicai realized that Moscow's defeat was neither imminent nor even likely, he attempted once more to reverse his pro-KMT stance. This time, however, Sheng did not succeed. In the autumn of 1944, Chongqing announced the replacement of Sheng, whom Stalin no longer trusted, with one of Chiang Kai-shek's closest advisors.⁴² This move not only ended Sheng's autocracy in Xinjiang but also marked the re-establishment of direct central government control over China's far northwestern regions for the first time since 1911.

As its authority in the northwestern borderlands grew, the KMT regime felt it necessary, in 1942-43, to begin its overdue state-building and infrastructure development projects in Xinjiang in an effort to further consolidate its position there.⁴³ High authorities in Chongqing also

³⁹ CB, 09-1413, Chiang Kai-shek's secret instructions concerning Chongqing's negotiation with Sheng Shicai, July 1942.

⁴⁰ Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 157-162; Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 271-272.

⁴¹ See Keiji Furuya, *Chiang Kai-shek: His Life and Times* (New York: St John's University, 1981), pp. 744-745.

⁴² Chen Huisheng and Chen Chao, *Minguo Xinjiang Shi* (A history of Republican Xinjiang) (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), pp. 376-382.

⁴³ ASNDC, 003/2352, Supreme National Defense Council to the Executive Yuan concerning developing the northwest, December 31 1942.

believed it was imperative to encourage capable youth and intellectuals in southwestern China to devote their energies in these “newly-acquired” northwestern borderlands. In the midst of World War II, these officials were busy traveling between Sichuan and the border provinces, where they endeavored to work out better ways to bring these frontier territories under tighter Nationalist administrative control.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, with the view to attract more Nationalist civil servants to the wartime “Going Westward” campaign, the higher echelons of the financially-stringent Nationalist regime worked hard to promulgate a series of new regulations aimed at handsomely subsidizing those who were willing to serve voluntarily in Xinjiang.⁴⁵

It is interesting how, during the war, the Nationalist regime attempted to depict the vast and sparsely populated Xinjiang as a “promised land” for a war-beleaguered China and its people. Faced with possible overpopulation in southwestern China, Nationalist policy designers thought it necessary to revive the old idea of resettling the surplus Han Chinese inhabitants in Sichuan proper to the vast border territories. In their official propaganda, as well as in government-sponsored publications, efforts were made to describe Xinjiang as a virgin land that could provide new settlers with space, natural resources and new hopes.⁴⁶ The Nationalists also sought to relate the “Going Westward” movement to patriotism, asserting that going northwestward to cultivate Xinjiang would be assisting the government in their strenuous effort to fight against the invading Japanese enemies. Leaders in Chongqing particularly urged both the youth and the intellectuals in Sichuan to contribute their knowledge and professional expertise to the efforts underway on the northwestern frontier.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ze Ren, “Lun Bianjiang Gongzuo zhi Zhanwang” (On the prospect of frontier dealings), *Bianzheng Gonglun* (Frontier Affairs) (Chongqing) 3, 12 (December 1944), pp. 1-3; Jin Shaoxiang, “Guomindang Fandong Shili Jinru he Tongzhi Xinjiang” (The entry of KMT anti-revolutionary influence into Xinjiang and its governance in this province), in *Xinjiang Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji* (Selections of Xinjiang literary and historical materials), 2 (1979), pp. 18-73.

⁴⁵ ASNDC, 003/1763, “Guidelines for the youth and personnel affairs on the frontiers”, enclosed in the Military Affairs Commission to the Supreme National Defense Council, September 3 1941; 004/114, “Regulations concerning provisions of the staff working on the frontiers”, enclosed in the Military Affairs Commission to the Supreme National Defense Council, April 25 1944.

⁴⁶ See: “Guidelines for the KMT frontier affairs”, *Zhongyang Dangwu Gongbao* 4, 19 (September 1942), pp.23-24; Zhao Minqiu, *Yuejin zhong di Xibei* (The leaping Northwest) (Chongqing: The New Chinese Culture, 1940).

⁴⁷ Chiang Kai-shek, “Kaifa Xibei di Fangzhen” (Guiding principles for the development of the Northwest), in Qin ed., *Zongtong Jianggong Sixiang Yanlun Zongji* 19, pp. 169-181; Zhu Jiahua (Head of the KMT Organizational Department), “Frontier issues and frontier works”, *Zhongyang Zhoubao* 5, 19 (December 17, 1942), pp. 26-32.

Nationalist China's second "great northwestern development" wave reached its peak in 1942-44, as the result of the wartime Nationalist regime's opportunistic advancement into China's far western borderlands. Yet in the meantime, there was no shortage of criticism from both within China and abroad regarding this development project. British diplomats in wartime China, for example, deemed the Chinese attempt to industrialize and exploit natural resources in the northwest, together with their effort to advertise their northwest-forward programs, as yet another lever to solicit American financial and technical assistance – not merely for the purpose of defending against Japan, but for possible power struggles with the Chinese Communists and perhaps with Soviet Russia. As a result, to Whitehall, northwestern China could eventually turn out to be "another gold brick that the Chinese are trying to sell the Americans." Due to the poor technologies and financial resources, British officials both in London and Chongqing were generally convinced that there would be very little likelihood that the northwest would be well developed both during and after the war.⁴⁸

Despite these negative assessments, in retrospect it is fair to argue that the Nationalists had achieved at least partial success. In early 1943, Chongqing launched a large-scale land settlement project in the eastern part of Xinjiang. More than 20,000 Han Chinese, most of who were refugees, ex-soldiers and unemployed persons from Henan, Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces, were moved to Hami and Turfan to take part in reclamation work.⁴⁹ A series of economic and colonization projects were also created, aimed at both relieving overpopulation in unoccupied southwestern China, and strengthening Nationalist administrative control in these frontier regions. One notable example at this was the demarcation of several military colonization zones in eastern Xinjiang, the Gansu Corridor, Ningxia and Qinghai to accommodate the new Han immigrants from China proper. These immigrants were given the tasks of road construction, irrigation, forestry and land reclamation. For the sake of supervising the refugees and colonization projects, officials were duly dispatched from Chongqing, and the result was a reinforcement of Nationalist influence in these border areas.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ WO 208/408, "China: Political and General Conditions in Kansu [Gansu] and Chinghai [Qinghai] Provinces", M.I.6. Political Report, dated June 28 1943.

⁴⁹ ASNDC, 003/2352, Supreme National Defense Council to the Executive Yuan concerning the removal of refugees from Henan, Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces, December 31 1942; 003/2361, Executive Yuan to the Supreme National Defense Council, February 22 1943.

⁵⁰ ASNDC, 003/2359, Supreme National Defense Council to the Executive Yuan, December 30 1942; Report of the Executive Yuan concerning the execution of immigration and colonization projects in the border provinces, May 7 1943; T.V. Soong Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Box 25, "Blueprint for the construction of the

The Nationalist regime also encouraged its party members, public servants and young intellectuals in southwestern China to serve in the border provinces. According to one statistical report, by mid-1943 there were at least 7,200 new KMT party cadres relocating to Xinjiang, where they were employed in the KMT's recently instituted organs there. In expectation of more people moving to serve in these border provinces, the Nationalist center promulgated new codes and regulations so as to facilitate this trend. Training courses were set up in Chongqing for public servants who were sent to work and live in Xinjiang.⁵¹ In addition, Nationalist ministerial officials were busy flying between Sichuan proper and outlying provinces to conduct their inspections that would surely help elevate the prestige of the Nationalist regime. Between 1942 and 1943, visits by top officials from Chongqing to the Northwest were so frequent that General Zhu Shaoliang, Commander of the Nationalist 8th War Zone, who was headquartered in Lanzhou and responsible for the security of these dignitaries, was obliged to complain to Chiang Kai-shek about his new and unexpected burden.⁵²

Epilogue

By the end of the Sino-Japanese war in the summer of 1945, most of the vast northwestern region of China was under the Nationalists' relatively effective control. The exception to this, was the northern half of Xinjiang, where the independent regime of the East Turkestan Republic was established.⁵³ The Gansu and Xinjiang provinces were both ruled by Chiang Kai-shek's closest and trusted officials. Although officially Qinghai and Ningxia continued to be governed by the Ma Muslim

Northwest for the fiscal year 1943", proposed by the Central Planning Bureau, November 1 1942.

⁵¹ Academia Historica, Archives of the Nationalist Government, 0128.12/3611.01-02, "Statutes concerning public servants in the frontier", May 18 1943. When addressing those who would be serving in Xinjiang, Chiang Kai-shek particularly emphasized that they should avoid clashes with Sheng Shicai's staff, and should pay full respect to local minority peoples. See: Chiang, "Dui Paifu Xinjiang Gongzuo Tongzhi zhi Zhishi" (Instructions to the party cadres dispatched to Xinjiang), in Qin ed., *Zongtong Jiangong Sixiang Yanlun Zongji* 19, p. 403.

⁵² ASNDC, 003/2439, KMT Central Executive Committee to Supreme National Defense Council, March 19 1943.

⁵³ Rebellion against Nationalist administration in northern Xinjiang began in fall of 1944, and by spring and summer of 1945 the East Turkestan Republic, with strong Soviet support, controlled territories north of Tianshan. Deals at Moscow in the summer of 1945 between Chiang Kai-shek and Stalin allowed for an uneasy compromise that put a coalition of KMT Nationalists and East Turkestan Republic elements led by Nationalist General Zhang Zhizhong in charge of Xinjiang provincial government. See: David Wang, *Clouds Over Tianshan: Essays on Social Disturbance in Xinjiang in the 1940s* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1999), and Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944-1949* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1990).

chairmen, Nationalist-directed institutions were omnipresent in these two provinces. The financial and economic strength of the Nationalist regime in northwest China grew to the extent that it was able to establish customs offices in various districts of both northern and southern Xinjiang. The Nationalists sought direct domination over revenues and commerce in the province, a policy that would have been completely unrealistic prior to the war. It was scheduled, according to KMT postwar policy planners, to set up a customs office at Urumqi, with branch stations at Shara Sume (Altai), Chuguchak, Kulja, Turfan and Kashgar. By so doing, the Nationalist regime would be able to gradually control trades and revenues between Xinjiang and Soviet Russia, Outer Mongolia (Mongolian People's Republic) and British India.⁵⁴

In hindsight, the war with Japan had provided the Chinese Nationalists with an unexpected opportunity to assert their authority in China's far, Muslim-dominated Central Asian borderlands, where KMT authority barely existed prior to the war. By late 1944, in the oasis city of Tashkurghan, on the Sino-Pamir border, all of the principal officials, including the magistrate, the police chief, the head of customs and the head of the postal office, were appointed directly from Chongqing.⁵⁵ By the summer of 1945, at least three Nationalist army divisions had been stationed at the remote Misgar Pass, overlooking Kashmir. The Nationalist presence grew to such an extent that shortly after the war, the exhausted British Indian authorities began to complain that the Nationalist-dominated provincial authorities in Urumqi were now in a position to monopolize trade between India and Xinjiang.⁵⁶

The consequence of the Nationalist regime's northwestward advancement was far-reaching. Suffice it to say that the Nationalists' political, military and financial influence, and the infrastructure they had gradually built up during the war, ironically paved the way for Communist control of the northwest. In Xinjiang in particular, Nationalist military personnel played a crucial role in smoothing the transition to Communism. In 1949, Nationalist generals Tao Zhiyue and Zhao Xiguang, who at this critical moment were still commanding more than 80,000 well-equipped Nationalist troops in Xinjiang, finally decided

⁵⁴ See: Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), British Library (London), L/P&S/2406, British Consulate at Urumqi to the British Embassy (Chongqing), January 13 1944; Mr. Ting Guitang (Deputy Inspector-General of Chinese Customs at Urumqi) to the British Consulate at Urumqi, February 12 1944.

⁵⁵ OIOC, L/P&S/12/2407, Travel reports by K. P. S. Menon (Indian Agent-General to China) to the Government of India, October 25, December 19 and 29 1944.

⁵⁶ OIOC, L/P&S/12/2407, Report of Mr. Etherington-Smith (British Consul-General at Kashgar), enclosed in the British Embassy in China to the Government of India, August 23, 1945; L/P&S/12/2405, British Consulate in Urumqi to the British Embassy in China, September 2 1945.

to join the Chinese Communists.⁵⁷ Without this shift in political allegiance made by the established Han Chinese, the Communist takeover in Chinese Central Asia would have been much more difficult, and in all likelihood, much more violent. How well the new Beijing-based government consolidated its power in northwestern China is still being debated.

Since the early 1930s, faced with the Japanese military encroachment from the east, the population in China proper had been enthusiastic about developing the northwest. The Nationalist regime also thought it imperative to transform the vast northwestern Chinese borderland into its new power base. After the outbreak of war with Japan, the Nationalists chose Sichuan in the southwest as their wartime base. Nevertheless, northwestern China continued to serve as the Nationalists' development priority. Throughout the Chinese Nationalists' two decade long reign in China, the idea of “northwestern advancement” was always a part of its political strategy, party agenda and official repertoire. Yet, undeniably, as this research has shown, the Chinese Nationalists' approach toward this end was largely opportunistic, mixed with the right timing, political compromises, and military maneuvering.

⁵⁷ Wang Fen, “Zouxiang Guangmin—Huiyi Zhao Xiguang Shuaibu Qiyi Qianhou” (Heading for the brightness—A remembrance of Zhao Xiguang's leading troops to revolt), in *Xinjiang Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji*, Vol. 3 (1998), pp. 109-115; Fang Yingkai, “Mianhuai Zhao Xiguang Jiangjun” (In memory of General Zhao Xiguang), in *Kashi Wenshi Ziliao* (Kashgar literary and historical materials), Vol. 5 (1990), pp. 61-74.