

The Life of Yolbars Khan: Pauper, Prince and Politician in Republican Xinjiang

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Like many of Xinjiang's leading political figures in the Republican era, the career of Yolbars Khan is a matter of some controversy. The standard English language reference for personalities of the Republican era, Boorman's *Who's Who in Republican China*, describes Yolbars as an Uygur leader who, in the 1920s and 1930s, "... opposed the oppressive administrations of Ch'in Shu-jen and Sheng Shih-ts'ai in Sinkiang."¹ The description of Yolbars as hero and patriot is reinforced by the summary of his career which follows, including a list of his various appointments under the Nationalist Chinese that place him firmly in the Guomindang camp. Sources from the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), however, portray him as not only the tool and puppet of Chiang Kai-shek but also as a coward and a thief, repeatedly fleeing the province in times of danger and ultimately plundering his own people as he made a final escape to Taiwan in 1950.²

Other contradictory images of the man have also been preserved. European visitors to his home in Hami, for instance, depict him as a sophisticated, astute businessman, a gentleman who, although somewhat crumpled in appearance, was invariably polite and helpful, seeing to the comfort of his guests, as far as was possible in a small oasis on the edge of the Gobi desert.³ This gentlemanly portrayal contrasts most sharply with Turkish sources, which accuse him of no less a crime than the 1951 murder of some of his own followers.⁴

This study is an initial effort to sort out these conflicting images of Yolbars and to examine his role in the tangled political scene of

¹ Howard Boorman and Richard C. Boorman. *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* (New York: 1967-1969), Vol. 2, 58.

² Xu Zhi, "Wo suozhidaode Yaoleboshi," [What I Know About Yolbars], in *Xinjiang wenshi ziliao xuanji* [Collection of Historical Accounts of Xinjiang] (Urumqi: 1984), Vol. 14, 132-136.

³ See accounts by Sven Hedin and Mildred Cable with Francesca French, as cited below.

⁴ See pages 144-145, and notes 37, 38 and 39 for further references.

Xinjiang prior to 1949. Sources for the study of Yolbars' life include a few, scattered English language accounts, American and British archival records, as well as PRC and ROC materials in Chinese. Further important sources for this study are interviews with Yolbars' two sons, now living in Taiwan, and Yolbars' own autobiography, which provide the basis for the following discussion of his role in 20th century Xinjiang history.

Yolbars' Early Life

According to Yolbars' memoirs, he was born on August 12, 1890, near the town of Yengi Hissar [New Fortress], an oasis town on the edge of the Tarim basin, in the district of Kashgar, southern Xinjiang. In keeping with tradition, his Muslim name, Mohammed, was chosen by an Ahong from among the names in the Qoran. But on the day he was formally named, the Ahong also referred to him as "little tiger," or "yolbars" in Uyghur.⁵ This was a common nickname for little boys whose fathers were in the military, but in his case the nickname stuck, giving rise later in his life to the quite unofficial title "The Tiger Prince." This descriptive name was popularized by the Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin, and other western visitors to Hami in the 1920s.

Yolbars' parents died while he was still young, his father when he was only three and his mother when he was six. He was raised by an older sister whose husband had once held an official post in the city of Kashgar. Due to political troubles in the area, however, the brother-in-law had been dismissed. In order to support his family, he decided to go into business selling Xinjiang products to merchants in China proper. As a first step in this new venture, the family moved to Hami in 1896.⁶

At that time, Yolbars tells us, Hami was a city divided into three distinct sections. There was the old Muslim city where most of the Uyghur population lived; there was also a Han Chinese city which dated from the early Qing and housed the county offices, the court and official residences as well as Buddhist temples; finally there was the New Town, or Manchu City, founded by General Liu Jintang, who had accompanied General Zuo Zongtang on his military campaign in the late 19th century. The latter area was surrounded by a city wall when

⁵ Yolbars Khan, *Yaoleboshi huiyilu* [Memoirs of Yolbars] (Taibei, 1969),

6.

⁶ Yolbars, 8.

Yolbars first arrived in Hami, but this wall had disappeared by the 1930s.

Hami was then a prosperous oasis town of nearly 10,000 people. It was the first major oasis settlement that travellers reached after traversing the emptiness of the Gobi. It had, therefore, both strategic and commercial importance. Two intrepid British missionaries, Mildred Cable and Francesca French, vividly described the Hami of the 1920s as a thriving, relatively affluent place:

Cumul [Hami] occupies a geographical position of great strategic importance. Like Anhsi in the south, so Cumul in the north is a step-off and landing place for all travellers who cross the inhospitable tract of Gobi between the provinces of Kansu and Chinese Turkestan. The approach to the oasis is by long and desolate stages, but from the moment that the traveller's foot touches watered land, he is in the midst of beauty and luxuriant agriculture, and for several miles before reaching the town the road leads through fields and by farmhouses surrounded with elm and poplar trees. Everything indicates prosperity and an abundance of every product.⁷

Hami's bazaars and business sections seemed equally prosperous to Cable and French and they offer us this description of the merchants of Hami:

The Turkis, called by the Chinese Chantows (turbaned men) were purveyors of goods from all the South Road towns as far as Kashgar. The poorer among them did the arduous work of collecting merchandise at Turfan, Aksu, Kuche, Khotan and Kashgar, and carrying it by cart or on horseback to the more prosperous merchants at Cumul. These rich retailers spread the gay attractive goods on a low counter, where they themselves sat cross-legged. The Chinese of the bazar were bankers, pawnbrokers, druggists, cooks, or vegetable and fruit vendors, and a few rich merchants owned handsome shops where all kinds of goods from Peking were displayed.⁸

It was in this busy commercial center that Yolbars began his education, paid for by his sister and brother-in-law. He attended the Muslim city school first, having his lessons at the Great Mosque, which was some 500 years old, according to Yolbars. Here he studied the

⁷ Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *The Gobi Desert* (London: 1942), 133.

⁸ Cable and French, 134.

Qoran and twenty-three Uyghur books as well as the Chinese language.⁹ He soon decided that he should concentrate on Chinese so that he could be of more assistance to the family business, and with his brother-in-law's support he began his studies at a private Chinese school. At this point in his autobiography, Yolbars writes that it was in this school that he first learned the correct concepts of history as it related to Xinjiang. That is to say, he learned that the region of Xinjiang was an integral, indivisible part of the Chinese state and that the people of Xinjiang were all Chinese. He repeats the analogy, popular today on both sides of the Taiwan straits, that the Han Chinese are the older brothers of the Uygurs and other Turkic peoples, and that it was, therefore, the responsibility of the Han to assist in the development of the Xinjiang region. This and other such references to Xinjiang history follow closely the Guomindang line which, then as now, places the region unequivocally within the confines of the modern Chinese state. As indicated in the discussion below, however, Yolbars' attitude toward the Chinese and the Chinese state in particular was not always so sympathetic.

By 1900, the family decided to undertake a more drastic measure to improve their fortunes by moving to Beijing, where they hoped to establish themselves as traders. They began the long and difficult journey across the Gobi, taking with them local Xinjiang products such as carpets, jade and furs which they hoped to sell in China. Although the journey was clearly arduous, they arrived safely, making the last part of the trip to Beijing by train. Unfortunately, the city was still in turmoil from the Boxer Rebellion. They set up a stall in Jade Seller's Lane, but people were unwilling to buy because of precarious conditions in the capital. The family also worried that Yolbars might be press-ganged into the military--either the Imperial forces or the ranks of the Boxers. To avoid such a calamity, they decided to move to the relative safety of Guangzhou. Due to unsettled conditions, however, they only reached as far south as Changsha, where they remained for two years, unable to sell enough goods to either move on or to return home. Finally, in 1902, they sold their remaining merchandise for whatever they could get and made their way back to Xinjiang.¹⁰

⁹ Yolbars, 13-14.

¹⁰ Yolbars, 10.

Having returned to Hami with their resources exhausted, the family was unable to launch a new business. They were reduced to making a living like the rest of Hami's poorest residents, selling melons along the roadside. Yolbars did very well at this. Because he spoke good Chinese after the long sojourn in China proper, he quickly built up a clientele of wealthy Chinese customers. His good relations with the local Chinese community grew, and these connections soon led to his serving as local agent for Chinese traders. He began buying up any of their unsold goods when the traders were anxious to return home to China, sometimes buying at only half price. As a result, he was able to open up three small shops by the time he was seventeen. Three years later, his business acumen, plus "diligence and frugality" and good connections with the Chinese, enabled him to open a department store, with a signboard proudly announcing his new enterprise.¹¹

Among his customers at this new emporium was the local ruler, variously called the Khan, the Shah, the King, the Prince of Hami, or the Muslim Prince (*Huiwang*). The origins of Hami's hereditary ruler can be traced back to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when all Xinjiang cities were under the control of the *Dudu*, the Mongol official who controlled the political and military affairs of the region. Hami at that time was an important military post. In recognition of this, toward the end of the Yuan, the Emperor appointed a local ruler or *Weiwwang*, 威武王. This man's successor, who ruled in the early Ming (1368-1644), was recognized by the Ming dynasty as overlord of the Hami area and was given the title of *Zhongshunwang*, 忠順王. Although succession disputes later arose, by the time of the great Qing ruler Kangxi, an heir named Abdullah was formally recognized by the Qing court and given the new title of *Chasake yideng daerhan*, 扎薩克一等達爾汗, which usually referred to the head of a Mongol banner in the Qing. Locally, however, the ruler was simply known as the *Huiwang*, 回王, or Muslim King.¹²

Abdullah and his successors reigned over a fairly stable and peaceful city-state for more than a hundred years. Even the Jungarian

¹¹ Yolbars, 20.

¹² Information on the various titles can be found in H.S. Brunnert and V.V. Hegelstrom (trans. A. Beltchenko), *Present Day Political Organization of China*, (Beijing: 1910), 445-446. The title *daerhan* is listed as "Tarkhan," defined as a Mongolian term for master, usually given to princes who had in some way distinguished themselves. These were hereditary titles by the time of the Qing, and entitled the bearer to an increased official allowance from the imperial government.

uprising in the 18th century did not, in Yolbars' view, disrupt life in Hami, since most of the battles were fought further to the west and south. However, when Yakub Beg declared the independence of all Xinjiang or "Kashgaria" in 1866, the northern part of the region also experienced instability. At that time, many of the northern oases came under the rule of a local Ahong who took the title of *Qingzhenwang*, 清真王, or Muslim King. This man asked the Huiwang of Hami to assist him in the anticipated fighting against the forces being sent from China, but his request was refused. In retaliation, the self-appointed Muslim King and his men attacked Hami and seized the Huiwang who was subsequently executed by being pulled apart by five horses. Not long after this grisly execution took place, General Zuo Zongtang and his troops arrived to take control of the oasis. The unfortunate Huiwang was ceremoniously buried in a tomb which Yolbars describes as second only to that of Xiangfei, a famous Muslim woman who had been given to the Qianlong emperor.¹³ The Huiwang tomb, however, was destroyed by communist troops when they took Hami in 1949-1950, according to Yolbars.¹⁴

The heir to the title of Huiwang duly took the throne. When he died and left no son, a nephew was given the title. This new Huiwang was the man Yolbars was to serve in the 1910s and 1920s in various official capacities. In Chinese, his name appears as Sha Muhusote, 沙木胡索特, or Shah Makhsud. By all accounts this new Prince of Hami was a very wealthy man. The largest landholder in the oasis, he owned some 40,000 mou (or 6,000 acres).¹⁵ He continued to demand and to receive a fixed amount of corvée labor through the 1920s, in addition to the usual rents and taxes. Taxation, as elsewhere in China, lent itself to abuse, and one local observer noted that the system as administered by the Huiwang was "a matter of custom rather than law." Further, as he saw himself as having no real responsibility to the government in Beijing, he "naturally evaded his obligations as far as he could."¹⁶

¹³ For a fascinating study of Xiangfei, see James Millward, "A Yarkandi Muslim in Qianlong's Court: The 'Fragrant Concubine' in History and Legend," unpublished paper presented at the AAS Annual Meeting, April 1991, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Yolbars, 24.

¹⁵ Wu Aitchén, *Turkestan Tumult*, (Hong Kong: 1984 reprint), 61.

¹⁶ Wu, 62.

Nonetheless, during his lifetime, his relations with the provincial authorities appear to have been peaceful enough, allowing him to maintain a certain aura of the potentate within his small kingdom. The Misses Cable and French were duly impressed and offer a vivid description of the man, his palace and his lands as they were in the late 1920s:

When we first came to Cumul [Hami], Maksud Shah, the Khan, was already a very old man. When younger, as vassal of the Emperor of China, he was permitted to act as personal servant to the Emperor for a term of 40 days. Cumul also sent a yearly tribute to the Imperial Court, which included a consignment of the famous fragrant Hami melons.

The reception hall of the Khan's residence held many souvenirs of those regal days. It was sumptuously furnished with divans and soft carpets, and contained many beautiful things, but the supreme treasures were the scrolls written by the hand of her Imperial Majesty the Empress Dowager herself . . . From the palace, visitors were taken to the gardens which were formed of many orchards, flower-gardens and a beautiful lotus-tank . . . There were Chinese landscape gardens with slender camelback bridges thrown over running streams, and among the winding paths peacocks swept their trains regally and paraded their magnificence.

A Western visitor once asked the Khan how far his territory extended. With a sweep of his arm, he indicated the distant snowy peaks of the Barkul mountains and all that lay between Hami and the Horizon. "All that you see is mine," he said, "and more that you cannot see." The answer was correct, for the mountain slopes of Barkul were his pasturelands; in the natural fortress of Bardash which towered above his summer palace his word was law, and oases far and near acknowledged his rule and paid tribute to him, but his domain was of that unique character which, in spite of palaces and grandeur, still justified that most strange title--Khan of Cumul and King of the Gobi.¹⁷

In fact, the Khan had three palaces: the largest of these was at Hami, but a summer palace of some size was located at Aratam and a third, used by his nephew, was near Turfan. The main palace at Hami was said to contain a deep, hidden well, which, over a period of many years, had been filled with gold, silver and other treasures. By the time of Sven Hedin's visit to the region in 1935, however, whatever riches

¹⁷ Cable and French, 134-135.

the well had contained were gone, and the Swedish explorer was only able to peer into the well's empty depths.¹⁸

In the early 1900s, as Yolbars was establishing himself as a trader and businessman, the Huiwang was very much in control of the city. As Yolbars' business expanded, the Huiwang began to buy provisions from Yolbars, and in 1912 he was offered an appointment as the Huiwang's purchasing agent with the title of *Wupinbazhaer boke*, 五品巴扎爾伯克, or Bachar Beg of the fifth rank. A year later, his services having obviously proved satisfactory, he became the youngest man ever to hold the title *Sipinzongtaergua boke*, 四品總大爾瓜伯克, a Beg of the fourth rank.

This rapid promotion, and the new financial opportunities that came with it, made Yolbars some enemies. He writes that many people reported false tales about him to the Prince, but because the Huiwang understood him well, he was trusted and his responsibilities increased. As a Beg of the fourth rank, he was in charge of maintaining all the Huiwang's accounts, directing his personal guards and the local police force, controlling the arsenal and the purchase of military supplies, managing the farms and the animal herds, and overseeing the collection of rents from all the tenants. Because relations between the Hami county government and the Prince's government were not good, Yolbars took great care in collecting rents and in overseeing the labor service required of the local Muslim population. He reports that he managed to have the number of days of labor reduced, from five to four and then, in 1921, to only two days a month. As this pleased the people and made them more content, Yolbars was again promoted, becoming a Beg of the third rank in 1923, with the title of *Sanpinde milan Zhangjing beg* (三品米蘭掌經伯克). He was then thirty-four years old.¹⁹

Yolbars now had far greater responsibility for and power over the affairs of Hami. He was responsible for all public affairs, such as official functions and ceremonies and also for overseeing education and religious affairs. During the Qing, the holder of this post had been responsible for sending tribute to Beijing, but during the 1920s, gifts were instead sent to the President of the Republic and to provincial leaders.

¹⁸ Sven Hedin, *The Flight of Big Horse*, (London, 1936), 35.

¹⁹ Yolbars' various titles are given in his memoirs, 30-31.

Under Yang Cengxin, who served as Xinjiang governor from 1911 to 1928, relations between the Huiwang and the provincial governor were reasonably good, with no cause for complaint on either side because (according to Yolbars), each recognized his respective responsibilities and role in maintaining peace and harmony in the region.²⁰ These days of relative stability under the leadership of Governor Yang came to an abrupt end in 1928, when he was assassinated. Control of the region passed to Jin Shuren, a man who lacked the ability of his more astute predecessor. Relations between the Prince (now a man of some seventy years) and the provincial government deteriorated.

In the year 1930, on the eve of what became known as the Hami Rebellion, Yolbars' wealth and power had made him an important figure in Hami. Physically, he was "powerful and rather clumsy, both in figure and in face, with blunt features, a coarse, pock-marked skin, and just enough beard to give him something to stroke when he salaamed." Although he dressed in silk, as befitted a man of his rank and importance, he was, nonetheless, "incapable of looking well-tailored," an impression generally borne out by photos of him from that time.²¹ He owned a very large house on the main street of Hami and the place was always busy with petitioners and guests, among the latter being Sven Hedin, a Swede who described Yolbars rather dramatically as "the mighty Turki chieftain in Hami."²² A missionary contingent visiting Hami in 1930 noted that:

As the mighty Khan grew old and feeble, the power of Yolbars increased and he became the best known figure in Hami. Everyone looked with favour on him as he rode to and fro, busy with matters of administration, between the palace of Makhsud Shah and his own town residence.²³

Yolbars evidently worked well with both local Turkis and Chinese, as he could speak with each in his own language. From his own account, as well as from descriptions of him and his varied responsibilities in the city, Yolbars appears to have become indispensable to the Huiwang. In

²⁰ Yolbars, 31.

²¹ Photos of Yolbars can be found in the books by Hedin, Cable and French, and Wu Aitchén, cited in these notes.

²² Hedin, 31.

²³ Cable and French, 244-245.

addition to official duties, which included such commonplace but important matters as approving travel permits and granting permission to trade in Hami, Yolbars also served as an intermediary, expediting official business and smoothing relations between ruler and subjects.

In 1931, the well-ordered life of the Hami oasis was disrupted by a province-wide revolt against the Chinese authorities in Urumqi, and Yolbars found himself playing a pivotal role in the years of turmoil which followed. Much of his autobiography is concerned with his role in this revolt. The following discussion offers a brief summary of the major events in Xinjiang between 1931 and 1935, focusing on those events in which Yolbars played a significant role.

The Hami Rebellion: 1931-1934

When the old Huiwang died in March of 1930, the new governor, Jin Shuren, saw an opportunity to end the old "feudal" system in Hami. The heir to the throne, Nasir, was summoned to the provincial capital to meet with the governor, and Yolbars was told to accompany the young man. Upon arrival, the two were informed that the government planned to eliminate the office of Huiwang and to divide Hami district into three separate administrative units. All the lands of the Huiwang were to be distributed among the people, with title to the land going to the sitting tenants in most instances. Nasir would not be without compensation: the governor proposed that he remain in Urumqi with the new title of "Senior Adviser," drawing a government salary and living permanently in the provincial capital. Presumably because he did not see the merits of the proposed changes, the young man was forbidden to return to Hami. Yolbars writes that the Huiwang was thrown into prison, but no other source corroborates this.²⁴

For his part, Yolbars returned to Hami without protest to assist in the distribution of lands and to draw up boundaries for the proposed new districts. To illustrate the historical links between Hami and China, the governor chose to call the new administrative units by the names Yihe 宜禾, Yiwu 伊吾, and Hami 哈密, all of which had been used in the Hami area during the time of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.). The changes apparently were acceptable to the people of the oasis in the first instance. After all, they were to receive title to lands they had formerly rented, and, as an official Chinese

²⁴ Yolbars, 62.

observer noted, in Hami justice had been "a matter of personal caprice; taxation had been desultory and inequitable; modernization had been obstructed by ignorance, prejudice and self-interest."²⁵ While Yolbars must have been a party to some of the injustice and malgovernance suggested by such comments, he was evidently not opposed to the changes *per se*, as he willingly returned to Hami and assisted in both the marking of the new boundaries and in the re-organization of the land-holding system.

The new arrangements, however, proved to be far from satisfactory. Although the old system clearly left much to be desired, the new magistrates for Hami appointed by the government in Urumqi were not much of an improvement over the Huiwang's administration. The new, young Chinese magistrate assigned to Hami, Lin Xieli, was supposed to see that the re-distributed lands of the Huiwang yielded taxes to the provincial government. Payment of taxes on their newly received lands was the means by which the former tenants were to secure their titles, but the government also decided that they would collect taxes back to 1930, which people considered most unfair. On top of this perceived injustice, the new magistrate appointed to Yihe "took advantage of legal technicalities" to dispossess large numbers of Muslims and to give their land to new Chinese arrivals in the area, refugees from war-torn Gansu, the home province of Governor Jin Shuren.²⁶ These new Chinese settlers were exempted from taxes for two years, making the tax burden on the local Muslim population seem particularly heavy in comparison. Wu Aitchen, special representative of the central government in Xinjiang, noted that, "The whole business was sheer robbery only thinly disguised as law."²⁷

Outcry over the situation was led by the wealthy of Hami, who protested with a telegram and letters to the provincial government. There was no immediate response. While the people awaited an answer, they were further outraged by the conduct of another new Chinese appointee to the area, a young tax collector named Zhang, who seduced a young Muslim girl and then decided to marry her. The family, represented by the girl's father, refused to accept the marriage proposal, but the official was adamant and a wedding banquet was arranged for March, 1931. The night of the wedding feast, a Muslim

²⁵ Wu Aitchen, 62.

²⁶ Wu, 63.

²⁷ Wu, 64.

mob broke into the house and seized the bride and groom. Both were killed in the fighting which ensued, as were seven guards who had been on duty outside the building. With captured weapons, the mob then swept into the area where the new Chinese settlers were living and massacred them. Thus began the rebellion in Hami.

Fearful that troops would be sent by the authorities in Urumqi, the people of Hami decided to dispatch envoys to neighboring Gansu province, where a young Muslim commander, Ma Zhongying, was headquartered. The plan was to ask this leader and his troops to come to the defense of Hami against the "infidel" Chinese.²⁸

Entrusted with this task were Yolbars Khan and a local religious leader, Niyaz Hoja, scion of an old and respected Muslim family of Hami. Yolbars offers a rather different version of this mission to General Ma than that given in most accounts. He writes that when he first heard of the incident involving tax collector Zhang, he went immediately to the commander of Hami's military garrison, General Liu Xiceng, who was supposedly the offender's superior. Liu, however, refused to listen to him and as a result Hami's Muslims continued to vent their anger on the local Chinese community. When Liu's army moved to end the disturbances, he and his men were quickly defeated and forced to retreat into their fortress. Yolbars then decided to inform Governor Jin personally, to explain the situation fully and request government intervention. His hurried trip to Urumqi, however, only resulted in an admonition to return and assist General Liu in quelling the uprising. Furthermore, to make things even more difficult for Yolbars, Governor Jin appointed him captain of the Hami police force in order to give him greater local authority upon his return. Once again, Yolbars obediently returned home and, according to his own account, he was successful in persuading local leaders to stop fighting and to talk over their grievances with the local authorities. The inept Liu had been replaced by a new garrison commander, General Zhu, who agreed to see the local leaders, provided Yolbars supply him with a list of the names of all those involved in the revenge killings of Chinese settlers. Yolbars, in an act of almost unbelievable naïveté,

²⁸ For a discussion of the Ma warlords in northwestern China, see Jonathan Lipman, "Ethnicity and Politics in Republican China: The Ma Family Warlords of Gansu," in *Modern China*, 10:3 (July 1984), 285-315.

gave him the list. These men were then summoned to an audience with General Zhu. When they arrived, he promptly executed them.²⁹

Yolbars' reaction to the executions was to resign from his post in the police force and plan another journey, this time to tell the central government what had happened and to ask for redress. He was en route when he contends he met with a group of Muslim leaders at the village of Zhangliushui. After talking with them, he writes that he accepted their plea to argue on behalf of all people of the area and thereby became a representative of not just the Hami people but all the residents of Xinjiang. In June of 1931, he reached Lanzhou where the young Muslim commander Ma Zhongying was headquartered. Yolbars met with him, and, impressed with his ability, decided that instead of going on to Nanjing he would accept Ma's offer to come to Xinjiang to drive out the Chinese.³⁰

Yolbars adds that he thought Ma had a large force of some several thousand men with him. He was disappointed to learn that there were only some 500 troops in all. Nonetheless, with this military force behind him, he returned to Hami where he and Ma launched an attack on the Han Chinese city and then on the Manchu city (where the bulk of the Chinese provincial forces in the area were massed). This attack was not successful, but they were able to take control of the Muslim city. With the Chinese garrison confined to the fort, General Ma then decided to take over the Barkol area, where he defeated the small local Chinese garrison and occupied the larger town.

In the summer of 1931, Ma once more laid siege to the Chinese garrison in Hami, but when it appeared he would have no immediate success, he decided to launch an attack on the provincial capital. Troops from Urumqi had been preparing their own attack on Ma and his forces. The provincial troops included well-trained and disciplined "White" Russians, refugees from the struggle against Bolshevism in the USSR in the pay of the Governor.³¹ The two forces met outside Urumqi in August of 1931; Ma and his men were victorious, driving

²⁹ Yolbars, 81. Wu Aitchén, however, writes that it was General Hsiung who received such a list and who subsequently had all those on it killed. Hsiung is also blamed for the almost total destruction of the town of Hami during the course of the rebellion (Wu, 71).

³⁰ Yolbars, 81.

³¹ For discussion of the Russians in Xinjiang, see "The Russians in Xinjiang: From Immigrants to Minority Nationality," *Central Asian Survey* 8:2 (1989).

the combined Russian and Chinese force back toward the city, but Ma was wounded in the fighting. As a result, he and his men opted to return to the relative safety of Gansu until he could recover from his wounds.³²

Yolbars was not involved in the battle for Urumqi, nor did he accompany Ma back to Gansu. Instead, he remained in Xinjiang, living in the Turfan area (where he had a large second residence and good connections).

Hostilities continued in and around Hami. By 1932, these had spread to neighboring areas of Shanshan (Pichuan), Turfan, Karashar and even to southern cities such as Kucha, Aksu, and Khotan, all places with grievances against Jin's provincial government. In Hami itself, efforts were made by the Chinese to fortify the garrison against the possible return of Ma Zhongying. The young commander, however, remained in Gansu recovering from his wounds. In early 1932, Ma was approached by the Nationalist Chinese who offered to confer on him the rank of Commander and to incorporate his troops into the Nationalist Army as the 36th Division.³³

In terms of Yolbars' later career, the Nationalist offer was especially propitious. Although Ma became a part of the Nationalist forces only after the events described above, Yolbars' request for Ma's assistance is recounted as being a patriotic act, an attempt to restore true central government authority and to eliminate the corrupt provincial authorities. The fact that those same provincial authorities were nominally under the same central government is an issue not dealt with in Yolbars' account. At the time, the allegiance of Ma, like that of Jin Shuren in Urumqi and, indeed, of Yolbars himself was unclear. Nonetheless, Yolbars' alliance with Ma against Jin can be seen as patriotic only in light of later events. Assessed in terms of the situation which existed in 1931-1932, Yolbars' actions seem opportunistic at best, an ad hoc response to an uncertain military situation rather than a patriotic act.

Having accepted the Nationalist offer but not yet recovered from his wounds, Ma sent a subordinate and relative, Ma Shiming, to Hami in his place. He arrived in Hami in May of 1932, and began

³² Yolbars writes that Ma was wounded in the waist (Yolbars, 106). Missionaries Cable and French, who saw him after he was wounded, wrote that he was wounded in both legs (Cable and French, 226).

³³ Yolbars and other sources agree on the time and the offer made to Ma. See various sources cited in these endnotes.

attacking local garrisons manned largely by Chinese and Russians. As the Gansu troops' victories mounted, more and more local Muslims rallied to the cause, joining General Ma's forces. By early 1933, the Gansu troops decided they were strong enough to attack Urumqi itself. The defenders of Urumqi were able to drive off the winter attack, but the Urumqi garrison was clearly in trouble and in need of assistance. In March of 1933, before the attacks on Urumqi were renewed, additional men reached the provincial capital in the form of the Northeast Salvation Army from Manchuria. These men had few weapons and, furthermore, had been in transit from northeast China for months, resulting in low morale. Despite this, their arrival boosted the number of Chinese troops in the capital city and strengthened the will of the defenders.

At this important juncture, with the defenses of the capital still tenuous, there was an abrupt change in provincial leadership. The White Russian troops, whose presence was so vital to the defense of the city, revolted on April 12, 1933. The men seized control of the government offices and demanded redress of grievances suffered at the hands of Governor Jin. As a result of this coup, Jin Shuren was forced to flee. At a meeting held two days after the revolt, power shifted into the hands of General Sheng Shicai. Sheng, by far the ablest local military leader, was a native of Manchuria and he had the confidence of the newly arrived Manchurian forces. Sheng was named Provincial Commander of the Border Defense Commission and a Chinese official, Liu Wenlong, was named Governor to replace the deposed Jin.

In early spring of 1933, Yolbars made his way back to Hami. Because it was widely feared in Hami that the newly constituted government would now choose to strike, he once again appealed to Ma Zhongying. Recovered from his wounds, Ma once more arrived in Hami. But now the new leader of the provincial authorities, Sheng Shicai, was anxious to bring the fighting to an end while he consolidated his own power in the region. In June of 1933, he wired Ma, offering to negotiate their differences. A delegation was duly dispatched from Urumqi to meet with him. An uneasy peace descended as a result of these talks, but the situation was far from resolved. By September 1933, the Governor appointed the previous April was forced to resign, and power became further concentrated in the hands of Sheng, who eventually took the old title of *Duban*. In effect, he had become warlord of Xinjiang.

The peace settlement with Ma brought the region respite, but the military situation in Xinjiang remained volatile. To ensure his survival as warlord of Xinjiang, Sheng decided to seek the assistance of the USSR, sending a delegation across the border in the fall of 1933 to seek Soviet intervention on his government's behalf (should the need arise). Having a long-standing interest in the natural resources of Xinjiang, the Soviets willingly offered military support. When Ma Zhongying broke the negotiated peace by attacking Urumqi once more (in January of 1934), Soviet planes and troops came to Sheng's assistance as promised. Ma and his forces were defeated by the combined Soviet and Chinese forces and, in some confusion and much haste, they retreated to the south.

In view of this new development, Ma decided to combine his forces with those of Niyaz Hoja, who had emerged as leader based in the south of an insurrection movement against the government in Urumqi. In September of 1933, this movement had declared the foundation of the East Turkestan Republic with Niyaz as President. Yolbars writes disapprovingly of Niyaz' movement for independence, which appears to have enjoyed widespread support in the south. A close relationship between Niyaz Hoja and Yolbars is suggested in many secondary sources, but Yolbars himself insists that their relationship was never strong. His memoirs seek to distance him from Niyaz and his move for independence, a position that would be in strict keeping with the Guomindang interpretation of events but which is not clearly supported from the historical record. In fact, Yolbars appears to have allied himself according to prevailing military winds, shifting allegiance during the course of the Hami rebellion from local allies (like Niyaz), to an outsider (like Ma), and then to the warlord Sheng as representative of the Chinese provincial government against which the rebellion began in the first place.

What began in 1931 as a localized insurrection against Chinese authority in Hami had spread throughout all of the Xinjiang region by 1932, but by 1934 fighting was confined to the southern Tarim area. As Ma retreated south leading increasingly undisciplined and disillusioned troops, Niyaz decided he would not join Ma. Instead, he chose to make a separate peace with General Sheng. Free to pursue Ma, the provincial army moved quickly to take cities which had fallen to Ma and his marauding troops. In July of 1934, Ma abruptly withdrew into the Soviet Union, leaving most of his men behind. His troops continued to disrupt life in the southern oases for another year, but the

provincial forces gained control of the towns and ultimately eliminated or captured the remainder of Ma's men. They also eliminated the East Turkestani Republic, whose officials had continued to resist the efforts of the Chinese to resume control of the southern oases under their leader Sabit Damullah (who was ultimately captured and executed by Sheng's military).

For Hami and for Yolbars Khan, the rebellion had in effect ended in January of 1934. The fighting, however, had taken a heavy toll on the small trading enclave. Sven Hedin described the scene when his expedition entered the oasis in February of 1934:

It was three o'clock when we crossed the eastern border of the irrigated vegetation-clad area of the Hami oasis. More ruined farms and devastated gardens appeared. Even in Marco Polo's time the Hami oasis was reknowned for its luxuriant gardens and its aromatic fruit . . . But for three years past no melons or any other fruit had ripened under Hami's sun. Where in 1928 we had walked through orchards, only isolated trees now remained. Even the charming poplar and willow avenues, which, within the boundaries of the oasis, cast their shade over the great caravan road, had been levelled to the ground. Only stumps bearing the marks of axes bore witness to the splendour that had been.³⁴

As for the glories of the palaces of the Prince of Hami, the sight that greeted the visitors was equally dismal at the royal residence:

What a fearful sight! All the walls had been pulled down, everything which would burn set on fire . . . Shah Mahksud's harem and summer palace had stood amid odorous fruit trees, grapes and melons, but nothing was left of them now but a few scorched timbers, and the trees were cut down to the roots. And beyond the garden spread the unhappy Mohammedan town, a greyish chessboard of demolished houses. Only the streets remained, but most often blocked by debris and rubbish. Between them nothing was to be seen but heaps of ruins and a few isolated houses.³⁵

Yolbars' memoirs end with the defeat of Ma Zhongying at Urumqi and he does not comment on his own return to Hami or how he managed to resume his life there. At some point, he returned to Hami from Turfan, but he soon found his situation untenable.

³⁴ Hedin, 24.

³⁵ Hedin, 34.

He had supported the now defeated and discredited Ma Zhongying; indeed, he had been instrumental in bringing the man into Xinjiang in the first place, as his own account attests. He was also widely considered to have been a close ally of Niyaz Hoja, who realized too late that his alliance with Sheng was only a ploy to gain Sheng time to pursue Ma. Niyaz's movement was crushed and its leadership dispersed, leaving Sheng in total control of the region. Yolbars' purported friendship with the leader of a separatist movement was not likely to gain him Sheng's confidence. Even more difficult, in local terms, was the common knowledge that Yolbars was the one who had given the names of local Muslim leaders to the Chinese at the very start of the rebellion, which ultimately resulted in the Muslims' deaths.

For these reasons, Yolbars made a tactical retreat, taking his family to Nanjing where he was welcomed by the Nationalist government and rewarded with various appointments. As a result, PRC sources label him a coward, but this move very probably saved his life.

In 1937-1938, Yolbars and his family moved with the Nationalist government to Chongqing. By 1942, they were living in Chengdu, not far from the wartime capital in Sichuan. Yolbars began to accumulate a series of government appointments with impressive titles: Counselor of the Sichuan-Sikang Pacification Office, member of the Board of Directors of the Islamic National Salvation Society. In 1945, he was named a delegate to the Sixth National Congress of the Guomindang and elected a member of the party's Central Supervisory Committee.³⁶ The following year he attended the National Assembly in Nanjing, where he had an opportunity to meet with other Xinjiang delegates. Upon conclusion of the Assembly, Yolbars accepted a government appointment as special executive commissioner of the 9th District of Xinjiang (based in Hami), and thus he had the opportunity to return once more to northwestern China.

Secure in the backing of Guomindang troops who continued to move into the region in 1945-1946, Yolbars resumed his important role in Hami's political affairs. To bolster his authority, he was concurrently the Peace Preservation Commander of Hami and Inspector General, a post that made him directly responsible to the central government.

But Yolbars' tenure was short-lived. By the summer of 1949, it was clear that the Guomindang forces would be defeated by the PLA. Late that summer, Yolbars was advised to surrender to the Communist

³⁶ Boorman, 59-60.

army along with the rest of Xinjiang's government officials and military leaders (including provincial chairman Burhan Shahidi and Tao Zhiyue, Commander of Xinjiang's military forces). Some Guomindang-appointed Turki leaders refused to surrender, and instead made preparations to leave the region before the PLA arrival. A few decided to launch a resistance movement and Yolbars was among those who briefly joined with a resistance group led by the Kazak leader Osman Batur. It soon became clear that this armed resistance was futile, and Yolbars decided that the only reasonable alternative was to leave Xinjiang. With a group of followers that included White Russians who had been with Osman, as well as his own family members, Yolbars attempted the long and dangerous journey to India through Tibet. His party (some ninety people in all) arrived in Lhasa in January of 1951. They dared not delay long in the Tibetan capital and proceeded on to the India border.

Here a crisis arose. According to Boorman, who partly corroborates other accounts of this crisis, the Indian government would only give the party six entry permits.³⁷ Kazak writer Halife Altay's account, based on interviews with Kazak refugees now living in Turkey, states that at the border most of the group accompanying Yolbars simply disappeared and were never heard of again. Among those who mysteriously disappeared was the Kazak leader Salis, a long-time supporter of the Guomindang and member of the Xinjiang provincial government.³⁸

A second Kazak account, by Hasan Oraltay, also refers to the disappearance, but he offers an explanation. He writes that Kazak refugees who arrived in Lhasa sometime after Yolbars' party discovered three Kazak children there, all of whom had originally been part of the Yolbars' party. These children said that at the border all the members of the party had been together, but that they had been sent to look after some of the animals and were therefore away from the main camp. When they returned early one morning, they heard shots in the camp and as they approached they saw Yolbars and the Chinese soldiers with him shooting into the tents of the other refugees. The three witnesses, all boys in their early teens, fled the scene. They were found by Tibetans who took them to Lhasa, where they subsequently joined

³⁷ Boorman, 60.

³⁸ Halife Altay. *Anayurttan anadolu'ya* [From My Homeland to Anatolia] (Istanbul: 1977), 415.

other Kazaks and finally made their way to Turkey. Their story was recorded by Oraltay but remains uncorroborated by any other evidence.³⁹ Yolbars' political enemies repeat this and other stories of Yolbars' perfidious character, but the record of Yolbars' life in those last years of Nationalist rule in Hami and of his escape to Taiwan remain shadowy at best, with Yolbars himself remaining silent on this difficult period.

Once safely out of Tibet, Yolbars and members of his family and entourage were evacuated to Taiwan, where he was appointed Governor of Xinjiang, reinforcing Taiwan's claim to be the legitimate government of all China and all its citizens, including the Uygur and other Turkic peoples of the northwest. Yolbars' wife, who is little mentioned in his autobiography, died during the journey to Taiwan; he re-married, choosing as his bride a young Chinese woman of nineteen. She looked after her elderly husband until his death in 1971. A wealthy and honored supporter of the Nationalist cause, a merchant and government official, a resistance fighter and refugee, Yolbars has remained a controversial figure, praised and denigrated for surviving a precarious period in modern China's bloody history.

Conclusion

In writing his autobiography, Yolbars Khan of Hami clearly had several objectives in mind: like other such autobiographical works by political figures, this account seeks to trace his early life, his rise to fortune and his influential role in Hami politics. As was appropriate to one who received a sinecure on Taiwan, it was also written to reinforce Guomindang pretensions as the legitimate government of all China, including Xinjiang, from a historical as well as cultural and economic perspective. Above all, his autobiography may be read as a justification of his role in the Hami rebellion and as an attempt to correct the historical record of his relationships with Ma Zhongying and Niyaz Hoja. While some aspects of his life as discussed in his own account are deeply colored by his political status (and are therefore largely self-serving), it is nonetheless a revealing document which, taken in conjunction with other source materials, provides some insight into regional politics in the 1930s and Yolbars' own role in the events of those years.

³⁹ Hasan Oraltay. *Kazak Turkleri* [The Kazak Turks] (Istanbul: 1961), 165.

The first point of interest is the fact that Yolbars, after recounting his rags to riches rise from melon seller to member of the Prince's staff, does not offer criticism of the Huiwang or his policies, as do other Nationalist Chinese of the period. Rather, he portrays the Huiwang as a man who maintained peace in the area and who worked harmoniously with the provincial authorities. Although Yolbars writes that he himself was the person who convinced the ruler to reduce the amount of *corvée* labor, he also writes that in his view most people did not find this service particularly onerous. In general, his account of his years working for the Huiwang leave the impression of a man unwilling to speak ill of a ruler who, in Yolbars' view, contributed to the general welfare of the people of Hami.

A second point of interest is that despite Yolbars' long association with the Guomindang, there is no indication that, during the lifetime of the Huiwang, Yolbars sought closer ties with the Guomindang or the central government of China. While he does mention several times in the course of the book that he learned at an early age to respect China and to accept its rule over Xinjiang as being correct, he does not mention any efforts to join the Guomindang prior to 1931 or evince any interest in political ideology of any form. By his own account, he was a man who had risen quickly in wealth and political influence, who had a vested interest in the old "feudal" system of the Huiwang, and who, prior to the death of the Huiwang and the outbreak of rebellion, had little interest in the wider politics of the nation of which he and his town of Hami were only a peripheral part.

The death of the Huiwang was very likely traumatic for Yolbars not simply because it posed a threat to his continued position of influence but also because it forced him to choose between the Chinese as represented by the Urumqi government and the Muslim community of which he was assuredly a part. The Chinese were key to his continued wealth and prosperity, as he derived much of his business from Chinese traders and political contacts, but the Muslim majority of the area also had claims on Yolbars, both as co-religionists and as the consumers of his emporium's products. Yolbars' dilemma in 1931 when Jin Shuren ordered dramatic changes that, in effect, signalled the end of the old system, must have been acute. His means of handling this challenge was clumsy at best, and his attempt to recount the events of the Hami rebellion show an ambivalence that was only resolved when he was forced to flee the area in 1936, having angered or aroused suspicions of

all factions as well as earning the animosity of the warlord Sheng Shicai.

It is unlikely that the role of Yolbars in the Hami rebellion will ever be resolved, any more than the mystery of the disappearance of his party of refugees in 1951 will be. Accusations, defense, and counter-accusation remain the hallmarks of political biography and autobiography of Xinjiang officials of every stripe. In the case of Yolbars Khan, what can be asserted with some confidence is that this was a man who rode the proverbial tiger, and perhaps because he shared a name with that wily and unpredictable creature, he lived to tell his version of the tale.