

## **A Taoist 'Still Point': Governing East Turkistan in an Age of Revolution (1912–1928)**

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# A Taoist ‘Still Point’: Governing East Turkistan in an Age of Revolution (1912–1928)

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*The first quarter of the twentieth century plunged China and its periphery into systemic collapse and ideological ferment. Amidst this turmoil—encompassing the Qing Dynasty's fall, the rise of warlordism and revolutionary movements in Russia and Central Asia—East Turkistan under Yang Zengxin presented a geopolitical anomaly: a frontier that remained stable under Chinese sovereignty. This article addresses: How did Yang engineer this stability against overwhelming odds? Drawing on Yang's monographs, restricted documents from the Xinjiang Historical Documents and multilingual sources (Uyghur, Chinese and English), this study argues that Yang's success stemmed from his application of Taoist political statecraft. Although his strategy cannot be categorised as Taoist only, it can be said that his governance demonstrated core Taoist tenets: wuwei (strategic non-intervention), yumin (maintaining population simple) and the 'power of weakness' through a minimalist military policy and strategic balancing. Yang's self-authored biography the Buguozhai Riji, along with his personal engagement with Taoist thought, accounts in the Xinjiang Historical Documents and modern Chinese scholars' academic research, further reinforces his Taoist statecraft in the region. Through these methods, Yang constructed a version of the Taoist 'small state' (xiao guo gua min), a sealed political entity insulated from revolutionary ideologies and conflicts beyond its borders. This study offers a framework for understanding early twentieth-century China–East Turkistan relations, positioning Yang as a practitioner of classical political philosophy. It demonstrates the relevance of Taoist statecraft as a model for crisis governance and frontier administration, illustrating the interplay between ancient thought and modern political survival.*

**Keywords:** Taoism, wuwei, Yang Zengxin, Chinese political philosophy, Uyghurs

## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty, resulting from the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, led China into an era of unprecedented fragmentation. Rather than heralding a stable new order, the revolution triggered a cascade of centrifugal forces: Mongolia declared independence, the nascent republic dissolved into the internecine violence of the Warlord Era and the New Culture Movement sparked profound debates over national identity. This internal chaos was exacerbated by a world in the midst of violent transformation. The First World War redrew global maps, the Bolshevik Revolution sent ideological shockwaves across Eurasia and the pan-Turkic Jadidist movement for

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modernist Islamic reform swept through Central Asia, directly challenging traditional forms of authority.

At the geographical heart of this vortex stood East Turkistan (Xinjiang), a vast Turkic Muslim frontier. However, from 1912 until his assassination in 1928, Governor Yang Zengxin (杨增新) maintained the region as a pocket of remarkable stability. While China disintegrated and powerful ideologies lapped at its borders, Yang secured East Turkistan's status within the fractured Chinese state with only a minimal military force. Minor conflicts, such as the 1912 Ili revolution and the Tömür Halifa uprising, were exceptions that ultimately proved the resilience of his rule.

This striking anomaly presents a significant historical puzzle. How did Yang successfully insulate this critical frontier from pervasive revolutionary pressures while preventing its secession? The prevailing scholarly consensus attributes this stability to Yang's tactical acumen as a pragmatic warlord. One school of thought emphasises Yang's shrewd internal management of military and economic resources. Huang and Luan (2009), for instance, suggest that Yang enhanced governing efficiency by reducing troop numbers and using multi-ethnic forces, such as the Hui Detachment, to balance and control local power dynamics—a classic tactic of 'using barbarians to control barbarians' (以夷制夷). Fu (2001) similarly described this as a deliberate 'weak military policy' (弱兵政策), designed not out of weakness, but as a strategy to prevent the rise of internal military challengers and conserve state resources. This administrative pragmatism was matched by a calculated ruthlessness in the political arena. Lü (2015) and Xin (1992) argue that Yang operated on the maxim of 'eliminating potential troubles before they arise' (消患未然), ruthlessly purging any perceived threat, from powerful warlords like Ma Fuxing to other revolutionary figures.

Forbes (1986) corroborates this view, describing Yang's style as a flexible blend of despotism and pragmatism, using both coercion and negotiation to manage complex alliances with Muslim elites in a politically charged environment shaped by Soviet and British rivalries. Ultimately, these internal controls served a larger goal: to seal East Turkistan off from the outside world. James Millward (2021) and Michael Dillon (2005) both highlight Yang's creation of an authoritarian and isolationist state. They detail how he consolidated power by dismantling local autonomy, enforcing strict censorship, blocking Soviet publications, suppressing modern education and manipulating the economy to ensure the province remained under his autonomous control, insulated from external ideological and political influence.

While these accounts provide a compelling portrait of Yang's statecraft, they tend to frame his policies as a series of discrete, ad hoc responses to immediate threats. They detail what he did—purge, isolate, divide—but they do not fully explain the ideological coherence behind his actions. What remains undertheorised is the unifying philosophical architecture that connects his military minimalism, political purges, and cultural and geographical isolationism into a systematic and internally consistent governing strategy. By portraying him merely as a pragmatist, existing scholarship overlooks the intellectual tradition in which Yang, a classically educated scholar-official, consciously operated.

This article argues that Yang Zengxin's success was rooted in his careful application of Taoist political philosophy. Lacking overwhelming military power, he governed East Turkistan as a 'Taoist ideal state', employing classical principles of statecraft to create a self-contained and politically inert society. This approach was built on three core tenets: a policy of 'keeping the people simple' (愚民政策), which sought to preserve political stability by limiting intellectual and material desires; 'closing the door and isolating' (闭门隔绝), to prevent the region from political and ideological development in China and the world; and 'rule by inaction' (无为而治), which favoured strategic non-intervention as a result of serious pragmatist political actions. This philosophical framework, I contend, was the crucial factor that allowed him to neutralise revolutionary forces and secure East Turkistan as a part of China.

To substantiate this claim, this study analyses Yang's own monographs, the Taoist classic *Laozi Dao De Jing* (道德经), *Xinjiang Historical Documents*, restricted state documents and other academic research in Uyghur, Chinese and English languages. By placing his actions in direct conversation with Taoist precepts, this article reconstructs Yang's governance not as a series of reactions, but as an implementation of a Taoist political model. It analyses how Yang translated this philosophical model into a pragmatic policy.

The analysis is divided into two main parts. The first section establishes the theoretical framework, elucidating the core tenets of Taoist statecraft and its vision of an 'ideal state'—a stable, backwarded and isolated polity where governance is achieved through minimalist intervention. The second section demonstrates how, during the critical period of East Turkistan, Yang translated this philosophy into a policy through his strategy of keeping people simple, isolating the region from the outside world and by 'managing with stillness' (*yijing zhidong* 以静制动).<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, this analysis reveals how an ancient philosophy provided a pragmatic blueprint for modern crisis governance, illuminating the paradox of a political theory that uses passivity and simplicity to achieve totalising autocratic control.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE TAOIST MODEL OF STATECRAFT

Taoist political philosophy, far from being a doctrine of passive retreat, offers a sophisticated and pragmatic technology of statecraft. Rooted in foundational texts like the *Laozi Dao De Jing*, it provides a political science for engineering an 'ideal state' designed for maximum stability and insulation from chaos. This framework is

<sup>1</sup>The Taoist concept of *wuwei* is often translated as 'rule by doing nothing', 'rule by inaction' or 'managing through non-intervention'. Furthermore, in Taoist philosophy, the governing method of *wuwei* is also referred to as *yijing zhidong* (以静制动), meaning 'managing with stillness'. This article uses these terms interchangeably as various expressions of *wuwei*.

not a utopian fantasy but a blueprint for autocratic control, resting on a sequence of interlocking principles: the strategic objective of a self-governing system, *wuwei* (无为); the primary social strategy for achieving it, *yumin* (愚民); the ruler's operational method for implementation, the 'power of weakness' (*ruozhi dao zhiyong* 弱者道之用); and the ultimate societal vision of a 'small state with few people' (*xiaoguo guamin* 小国寡民) (Liu 2014, 322–33).

#### THE STRATEGIC GOAL: WU WEI (无为) AS PURPOSEFUL NON-ACTION

The apex of Taoist governance is *wuwei*, a state where the political system functions so seamlessly that the ruler's overt intervention becomes unnecessary. This is not passivity but the culmination of practical statecraft, achieved through a process the *Laozi Dao De Jing* terms *wei wuwei* (为无为)—'acting to achieve non-action' (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 3). This paradox requires an initial, often forceful, period of purposeful action, *youwei* (有为), to structure society correctly. The ruler's actions are front-loaded to eliminate the very sources of social friction: ambition, desire, competition and strife. Once these catalysts are neutralised, the state can govern itself, achieving the ideal of 'doing nothing, yet leaving nothing undone' (*wuwei er wu bu wei*, 无为而无不为) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 48). Thus, *wuwei* is the strategic end, and the following principles are the means to achieve it.

#### THE PRIMARY STRATEGY: YUMIN (愚民) AS SOCIOPOLITICAL ENGINEERING

If *wuwei* is the goal, *yumin*—best translated as 'keeping the populace simple'—is the primary social technology for engineering a state where *wuwei* is possible. This is a direct application of *youwei* to social management, designed to remove the catalysts of unrest, which the *Dao De Jing* identifies as 'knowledge' (*zhi* 智) and 'desire' (*yu* 欲). As the text commands, the sage ruler 'empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their ambitions but strengthens their bones' (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 3), ensuring that the people remain without disruptive knowledge or excessive desire. *Yumin* is a comprehensive programme to create a politically inert society through several key tactics:

1. Radical isolation (*biguan zishou*, 闭关自守): To prevent the influx of new ideas and desires, the ruler must seal the state from external influence. This involves restricting information flow by metaphorically 'blocking the openings and shutting the doors' (*sai qi dui, bi qi men*, 塞其兑, 闭其门) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 52). Isolation minimises complex social interactions, prevents destabilising 'change' (*bian*, 变) and allows the ruler to 'deal with things before they exist; regulate things before they become chaotic' (*wei zhi yu wei you, zhi yu wei luan*, 为之于未有, 治之于未乱) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 64).

2. Devaluing intellectualism: The ruler must ‘not honor the worthy’ (*bu shang xian*, 不尚贤) to prevent social competition and ‘abandon sagacity and discard wisdom’ (*jue sheng qi zhi*, 绝圣弃智) to eliminate the intellectualism that breeds dissent (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chaps 3, 19).
3. Eliminating material desire: The pursuit of material wealth (*you yu*, 有欲) is seen as a root of disorder. The ruler’s strategy is therefore to remove the objects of desire, rendering the populace content with simplicity and extinguishing the ambition that leads to conflict (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chaps 19, 44).

#### THE RULER’S METHOD: THE POWER OF WEAKNESS (RUOZHE DAO ZHI YONG, 弱者道之用)

If *yumin* is the sociopolitical strategy, the ‘power of weakness’ is the ruler’s operational method. This paradoxical principle posits that what is soft, yielding and seemingly weak will ultimately overcome that which is stiff, rigid and aggressive (Liu 2014). The maxim ‘the soft and the weak overcome the hard and the strong’ (*rouruo sheng gangqiang*, 柔弱胜刚强) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 36) translates into a set of sophisticated political tactics:

1. Strategic stillness (*jingguan*, 静观): Rather than reacting to every movement, the sage ruler adopts a posture of quiet observation, waiting for turmoil to exhaust itself and for the opportune moment to act decisively (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chaps 16, 26).
2. Humility as a tool of control: Authority is cemented through humility and non-contention (*bu zheng*, 不争). By placing himself below the people, the ruler secures his position above them. This is a superior form of competition—‘using non-contention as contention’ (*yi bu zheng wei zheng*, 以不争为争)—whereby the ruler achieves a state where ‘no one in the world can contend with him’ (*yiqi buzheng, gu tianxia moneng yu zhizheng* 以其不争，故天下莫能与之争) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 66).
3. Concealing strength (*shencang bulou*, 深藏不露): A crucial tactic is to conceal one’s true power. The ruler must understand that ‘the state’s sharpest weapons should not be displayed’ (*guo zhi liqi bukeyi shi ren* 国之利器不可以示人) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 36). This practice of veiling reality with an appearance of simplicity (*yixu yanshi* 以虚掩实) is a master strategy that extends to manipulating opponents. Through ‘micro-manipulation’ (*weiming* 微明), the ruler applies the principle that things move towards their opposites (*wuji bifan* 物极必反): ‘If you want to weaken it, you must first strengthen it ... If you want to take from it, you must first give to it’ (*jiangyu ruozhi, bigu qiangzhi* 将欲弱之，必固强之) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chaps 36, 70).

This deep planning allows the ruler to achieve long-term objectives by leveraging the natural dynamics of power.

**THE CULMINATION: 'A SMALL STATE WITH FEW PEOPLE'**  
(XIAOGUO GUAMIN, 小国寡民)

The logical end point of these principles is the political vision articulated in chapter 80 of the *Laozi Dao De Jing*: the 'small state with few people'. This ideal state is the perfect embodiment of a society engineered for *wuwei*:

Let there be a small state with few people. Let them have tools ... but not use them. Let them take death seriously and not migrate far. Though they have boats and carriages, they have no occasion to ride in them. Though they have armor and weapons, they have no occasion to display them. Let the people return to the use of knotted cords for records ... Though neighboring states are within sight of each other, and the sounds of roosters and dogs are mutually heard, the people live to old age and death without ever visiting one another. (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 80)

This model describes a perfectly isolated, self-sufficient and de-developed society where the sources of ambition—technology, travel, foreign contact and complex culture—have been systematically eradicated. By enforcing isolation and the *yumin* policy, the ruler creates a static and stable social order, impervious to internal strife or external influence. It is the final and triumphant achievement of *wuwei*—a peaceful, stable and effortlessly governed polity.

## CRAFTING THE TAOIST STATE IN EAST TURKISTAN

Having established the theoretical blueprint of Taoist statecraft, this analysis now turns to its practical implementation under Yang Zengxin. Yang's governance was not a series of ad hoc reactions but demonstrates a careful application of a coherent philosophical model. This section illustrates how his policies of intellectual containment and geopolitical isolation, coupled with severe repression, transformed East Turkistan into a Taoist ideal of a 'small state' that can be governed by the principle of *wuwei*, or 'non-action'.

### YANG ZENGXIN: THE SCHOLAR-GOVERNOR IN AN AGE OF CHAOS

Yang was a product of the very system he sought to preserve. A classically educated scholar from Yunnan, he passed the Imperial Examinations and was appointed to govern in China's northwest. By 1908, he was a key official in Aksu, East Turkistan,

representing a Qing Dynasty on the verge of collapse (Pan 1981). As a conservative Han nationalist, Yang's political lodestar was the 'Great Unification' (大一统) ideology, which demanded the preservation of the Qing's multi-ethnic territory within the new Chinese republic (Bai and Li 1992). This commitment to territorial integrity, however, was immediately tested by the chaos of the Xinhai Revolution in 1911.

As the Qing Dynasty fell, East Turkistan was beset by the same centrifugal forces tearing China apart. Outer Mongolia declared independence, threatening the northern border (Ying 2007). Internally, a military rebellion erupted in Ili, while in Qumul, an Uyghur uprising led by Tömür Halifa challenged Chinese authority. All this unfolded against the backdrop of the Warlord Era in China, the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the pan-Turkic Jadidist movement in Central Asia. It was in this crucible of internal and external threats that Yang, as the new governor, deployed his Taoist-inspired statecraft to forge a zone of stability.

At this point, it is important to note that attributing Yang's governance tactics in the region solely to Taoism can be misleading. As a pragmatist governor, he adopted various realpolitik strategies. nevertheless, his diary, the *Buguozhai Riji*, along with his preference for Taoist statecraft, accounts in the *Xinjiang Historical Documents* and academic research of modern Chinese scholars indicate that Yang primarily adhered to Taoist teaching as his main strategy for maintaining East Turkistan as part of China during that critical historical period. Yang authored seven volumes of commentary on Taoist classics, including *Notes on Reading Laozi* (读老子笔记) and *Laozi Commentary* (老子诠释), to educate his officials on 'soft governing' (Du 2021). His diary, the *Buguozhai Riji*, reveals a leader who turned to Laozi for profound strategic wisdom, explicitly linking the Taoist ideal of *wu wei* to the capacity for great achievement (Yang 1966).

Moreover, the *Xinjiang Historical Documents* included articles on Yang's governance, detailing his policies of isolating the region from both China and Central Asia, his power struggle with warlords such as Tömür and Ma Fuxing, his educational and industrial policies described as the application of Taoist strategy of 'close and rule', 'ruling with inaction' or *wuwei*, and 'keeping people ignorant' or *yumin* (Liu 1981; Pan 1981; Zhang 1981). It is also important to note that these article were written by Chinese authors who witnessed his policies. For instance, Pan was a governor in Ili in 1911 and moved to Urumqi, the capital of the region, in 1913. Finally, there is also a strong consensus within modern Chinese scholarship in this regard. They concluded Yang's strategy as Taoist 'isolationism', 'keeping the people in ignorance', 'non-contention', 'soft governing', etc. (Chen 1987; Dong 2014; Duan 2011; Fu 2001; Lü 2014).

#### IMPLEMENTING YUMIN: THE POLICY OF INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL CONTAINMENT

The cornerstone of Yang Zengxin's domestic policy was a meticulous application of *yumin*. In alignment with *Laozi Dao De Jing's* directive to 'empty their minds ...

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weaken their ambitions' (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 3), he sought to engineer a politically inert society by systematically neutralising the catalysts of social agitation. As the scholar Shang noted, his aim was to create an ideal society where the people would remain 'simple and unspoiled, citizens of the ancient times', enabling him to achieve 'governance through stillness' (*yi jing zhi dong*, 以静治动) (Shang 2005). This was not a passive policy; rather, it constituted an active programme of intellectual and cultural suppression, anti-modernisation and the controlling of information and communication flow.

#### SUPPRESSING INTELLECTUALISM: THE WAR ON MODERN EDUCATION

Yang's educational policies were the primary instrument of his *yumin* strategy, designed not to enlighten but to pacify. He viewed modern education as a direct threat to stability, labelling new schools as the 'source of chaos' and actively shutting down institutions associated with the Jadidist movement, which promoted 'dangerous' subjects such as science and foreign languages (Chen 1987; Millward and Tursun 2015, 73). He argued that an increase in educated graduates competing for office would inevitably lead to 'great chaos in the world' (Chen 1987; Yang 1966).

His philosophy was an echo of Taoist precepts. He explicitly endorsed the ancient principle that rulers should govern by keeping the people ignorant, not enlightened (*fei yi ming min, jiang yi yu zhi* 非以明民, 将以愚之) (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 65), and repeatedly invoked the Taoist call to 'abandon sagacity and discard wisdom' (*jue sheng qi zhi* 绝圣弃智). Yang argued that excessive popular wisdom leads to deceit and makes the populace difficult to govern, famously quoting Laozi: 'governing the state with wisdom is the thief of the state; not governing the state with wisdom is the fortune of the state' (*yi zhi zhi guo, guo zhi zai* 以智治国, 国之贼; 不以智治国, 国之福) (Chen 1987; *Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 65). Quoting from Taoist philosophy, he suggested that 'ignorant people are energetic, like the spring; to compare them to humans, they are like as simple as babies. Knowledgeable people, on the other hand, are lazy, like old men ...' (Liu 1981, 23–120).

Consequently, instead of modern curriculum, he mandated the Confucian 'Four Books' (四书) and 'Five Classics' (五经) in schools. This curriculum was a tool for moral conditioning, not intellectual expansion, intended to produce obedient subjects who understood 'filial piety' rather than critical citizens (Shang 2005). Interestingly, in 1924, he personally gifted *Laozi Dao De Jing* to the first graduates of the Political-legal Institute, which gave education in Russian language (Liu 1981, 111). This policy of deliberate underdevelopment left East Turkistan with a skeletal educational infrastructure; a 1918 survey found only 62 primary schools for the entire region and one low-level teachers' college in the area with only 40 students (Zheng 2003, 1).

#### ENFORCING ISOLATION: THE INFORMATION VACUUM

To prevent the 'contamination' of his 'simple' society, Yang enforced a policy of isolation, a practical application of the Taoist directive to 'block the openings and

shut the doors’ (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 52). His administration created an information vacuum by banning all publications in Turkic languages, monitoring mail and blocking newspapers from both Central Asia and revolutionary China (Forbes 1986, 19; Millward and Tursun 2015, 69). He posted signs in public spaces forbidding political discussion and implemented a rigorous surveillance system to halt the spread of news (Forbes 1986, 19). This quarantine was designed to insulate the populace from the ideologies of pan-Turkism and Bolshevism as well as other political debates in China, which Yang feared would incite unrest. His commitment was so absolute that he even requested Soviet authorities to prohibit Chinese expatriates in their territory from reading newspapers (Jacobs 2016, 70), demonstrating his belief that ignorance was the primary tool for maintaining power.

#### *PRESERVING SIMPLICITY: THE REJECTION OF MODERNITY*

Yang’s *yumin* policy extended beyond education and censorship to a broader rejection of modernity itself. His manipulation of religion served the same purpose: to keep the populace backward and straightforward. He promoted a form of religious education for Hui Muslims that emphasised rote memorisation of the Qur’an and Arabic letters without comprehension, effectively preventing theological or intellectual development (Chen 1987).

Furthermore, Yang actively opposed industrialisation, a stance perfectly aligned with the anti-technological vision of the Taoist ‘small state’. He viewed large machinery and advanced weaponry as catalysts for conflict that would turn the world into a ‘world of thieves’. He argued that industrialisation concentrates wealth, creates severe inequality between the rich and the poor, and inevitably leads to worker strikes and revolution (Chen 1987; Forbes 1986, 32; Yang 1966). By rejecting industrial modernity, Yang was not simply being conservative; he was systematically eliminating the economic and technological forces that, in the Taoist view, generate the very desires and complexities that make a populace difficult to govern.

#### **CONSTRUCTING THE ‘SMALL STATE’: ISOLATIONISM AS GEOPOLITICAL QUARANTINE**

Beyond suppressing internal intellectual development, Yang Zengxin’s statecraft was aimed at constructing a politically and physically self-contained entity, a real-world application of the Taoist ideal of a ‘small state with few people’ (*xiaoguo guamin*, 小国寡民). This vision, articulated in chapter 80 of the *Laozi Dao De Jing*, describes a perfectly insulated society where ‘neighboring states are within sight ... but the people ... live to old age and death without ever visiting one another’. For Yang, this was not an abstract philosophy but a pragmatic strategy for survival. By constructing a multi-layered quarantine around East Turkistan, he sought to neutralise the disruptive ideologies sweeping across his borders and preserve the static social order he believed essential for stability. His stated goal was to turn the region into a ‘paradise outside

the world' (*shiwai taoyuan* 世外桃源),<sup>2</sup> where 'chicken and dogs hear each other, but people grow old and die without interacting', a direct echo of the isolated, self-sufficient Taoist ideal state (Chen 1987).

*THE EXTERNAL THREAT: PAN-TURKISM, JADIDISM, BOLSHEVISM AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN CHINA*

Yang's isolationism was a direct response to the acute ideological threats posed by Jadidism, pan-Turkism and Bolshevik Revolution, which were gaining momentum in adjacent Russian Central Asia. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution threatened East Turkistan's stability through the influx of defeated white Russian forces and the spread of subversive Bolshevik propaganda intended to incite local Muslims and the poor against the ruling class (Share 2010; Zhu, 1999). Amidst this critical juncture, recognising the lack of military strength and funds to fight, Yang adopted the policy of inaction and strategic neutrality, even refused Beijing's order to crush the Bolsheviks in support of Tsar forces (Zhu 1999). When the Bolsheviks won the Russian Civil War, rather than provoking powerful Soviet regime by expelling them from the region, Yang employed soft tactics to negotiate a deal. He skilfully secured a formal treaty that prohibited the Soviets from propagating communism in East Turkistan in exchange for trade opportunity (Share 2010; Zhu 1999).

Domestically, in addition to isolating the region, he imposed severe postal censorship and banned all Bolshevik books and pamphlets. To prevent the spread of revolutionary ideas, Yang even rejected Russian offers to build modern infrastructure, such as paved roads (Share 2010). Furthermore, drawing on Taoist ruling philosophy that 'the more knowledge people have, the harder they are to rule', Yang adopted anti-intellectualist policy, deliberately hindering educational development. He even monitored the Uyghur, Kazakh and Han Chinese individuals travelling to Central Asian cities such as Osh, Tashkent and Almaty by establishing major spy network (Zhu 1999).

The Jadidist movement, a cohort of 'Islamic modernizers', sought to reform the society through modern education (*usul i-jadid*) and rapidly politicised after the 1917 Russian Revolution (Martin 2017, 22, 172–74). Intertwined with this was pan-Turkism, a political ideology advocating for the unity of all Turkic peoples, which found expression in Central Asia through figures like Ottoman general Enver Pasha (Feneis 1992, 23–24).

Given East Turkistan's geographic proximity and Turco-Islamic identity, these movements inevitably infiltrated the region. Pan-Turkist activists from Turkey established modern schools in cities such as Artush and Ili, teaching a nationalist

<sup>2</sup>The expression originates from the renowned essay 'The Peach Blossom Spring' (桃花源記, Taohua Yuan Ji) by the poet Tao Yuanming (365–427 CE). The narrative tells of a fisherman who accidentally discovers a concealed, idyllic and harmonious community entirely isolated from the chaotic world of the Han and Jin dynasties. Over time, the term *shiwai taoyuan* has come to symbolise a utopian escape or a tranquil, secluded sanctuary in Chinese culture.

curriculum that proclaimed the Ottoman Sultan as a common leader and promoted the idea of a ‘Turan’, the great motherland of all Turkic peoples (Yu 1996, 362).

During this period, China was engulfed in devastating conflicts among warlords and engaged in intense ideological debates concerning national identity and the future governance of the nation. The end of despotic feudalism created an open ideological environment, allowing Chinese intellectuals to freely engage in discussions on critical political topics such as the abolition of feudalism, the creation of a Chinese identity and the establishment of a representative governance system (Li 2017). Conversely, at least one warlord, the Christian general Feng Yuxiang, had plans to utilise East Turkistan as a base for material resources to support his military struggle against other Chinese warlords (Jacobs 2016, 69).

Yang Zengxin viewed these two as an existential threat as well. He believed that if the local Turkic Muslim population were incited by this fusion of modern education, ethnic nationalism and political activism, neither his local authorities nor the fractured central government could maintain control. General Feng’s plan was even more perilous because Yang believed it invited chaos into a region where he intended to ensure tranquillity.

#### *BUILDING THE QUARANTINE: SEALING THE BORDERS*

In response, Yang implemented a radical policy of geopolitical quarantine, designed to sever the flow of people and revolutionary ideas. He strictly regulated cross-border travel and tightly controlled movement, only opening the Horgos pass in the west for Soviet trade (Zhu 1999) and Yultuz Valley in the east with strict control. A formidable system of information control was his first line of defence. He issued an order forbidding foreign Muslims from preaching in local mosques and strictly prohibited the hiring of Turks as teachers. To enforce this, he requested the central government in Beijing to officially prevent Turkish clerics from entering East Turkistan (Fu 2016). Furthermore, he instituted a rigid passport system that required his personal approval for anyone to enter or leave East Turkistan. He was deeply suspicious of any cross-border communication, particularly the seasonal migration of labourers to Russia, believing that ‘seasonal expatriate laborers of today will become the ten thousand agitating returnees of tomorrow’ (Jacobs 2016, 69).

In light of developments in China, Yang restricted cross-border travel and instituted a strict ban on printed materials produced within China. He intercepted students travelling to Beijing for advanced studies and refused to accept officials despatched from the central government, viewing them all as potential carriers of revolutionary ideas (Pan 1981, 42–43). Yang imposed a strict blockade on publications, confiscating major Chinese newspapers such as *Shenbao* (申报), *Xinwenbao* (新闻报), *Dagongbao* (大公报) (Chen 2006, 39) and any press items from Central Asia and Russia (Share 2010) and subjecting all letters and books to multiple inspections (Chen 1987). All incoming and outgoing correspondence was examined, and newspapers were banned unless he personally authorised them. This censorship was so absolute that it extended to ‘even his highest officials’

(Forbes 1986, 14). These measures were the pragmatic enactment of the Taoist ideal state, where ‘though neighboring states are within sight of each other, and the sounds of roosters and dogs are mutually heard, the people live to old age and death without ever visiting one another’ (*Laozi Dao De Jing* 2011, chap. 80).

#### SECURING THE FORTRESS: INTERNAL CO-OPTATION AND SUPPRESSION

To complement his external quarantine, Yang implemented a sophisticated internal strategy of control, combining the soft power of co-optation with the hard power of suppression (*duinei ruan ying jian shi*, 对内软硬兼施). His primary soft tactic was to co-opt the region’s religious leadership. Recognising that Imams held more influence than officials, he supported popular selection to ensure their legitimacy while simultaneously enlisting them in the state apparatus. He then instructed these leaders to preach obedience to the law and actively warn their congregations against ‘incitement from wicked people’—a clear directive aimed at neutralising Jadidist messaging (Fu 2016).

This co-optation was backed by unwavering hard power. He did not allow new religious ideas and movements from outside to be introduced in the region, prohibited the Muslims clerics from making religious preach outside their own village, banned religious books other than the Quran and Hadiths, and did not allow private madrassas to exist (Chen 1987; XUAR College History Textbook Compilation Group 1992, 587). Yang used the co-opted Imams and local police as an intelligence network to report ‘special figures’ or progressive social elements (XUAR College History Textbook Compilation Group 1992, 587). He cracked down severely on any subversive activities, as demonstrated by the swift suppression of the 1918 Kuqa uprising. Due to his hostility towards intellectual progress, he famously imprisoned advocates for modern Uyghur education, such as Mas’ūd Sabri Baykuzu (Forbes 1986, 209; Millward and Tursun 2015, 70). By sealing East Turkistan’s borders from foreign powers and the chaos of the Chinese Republic alike, Yang was able to ‘sit tight and wait for the day when the central plains have calmed down’ (Jacobs 2016, 7). In doing so, he transformed the region into his personal fiefdom, an autonomous, self-contained state and the closest possible approximation of the Taoist ideal in a modern world.

#### THE ART OF WU WEI: MINIMALIST GOVERNANCE AND THE POWER OF WEAKNESS

Having constructed a sealed state, Yang Zengxin’s most sophisticated achievement was its internal management. His methods, a paradoxical mix of minimalist administration and ruthless brutality, align with Taoist statecraft: achieving the strategic goal of *wu wei* (无为, effortless control) through the operational method of *you wei* through the framework of the ‘power of weakness’ (*ruozhe dao zhi yong*, 弱者道之用). This was not the governance of a conventional warlord relying on overwhelming force, but

a calculated system of strategic balancing, concealed strength and surgical violence designed to create a self-regulating political entity.

#### STRATEGIC MINIMALISM: THE 'WEAK ARMY' POLICY

Yang's military posture was an embodiment of the Taoist precept that 'the soft and the weak overcome the hard and the strong'. He pursued a 'weak army' policy (*ruobing zhengce*, 弱兵政策), believing limited resources of East Turkistan were insufficient to maintain a large, modern force and that stability must be achieved through political means. Rather than building a formidable army, he drastically reduced troop numbers to a fraction of their Qing-era levels, allowing his Han Chinese units to become a deliberately neglected 'tatterdemalion throng' (Bai and Li 1992, 98–132; Fu 2001). This demonstrated the application of the principle that 'the state's sharpest weapons should not be displayed' (*guo zhi liqi bukeyi shi ren*, 国之利器不可以示人). By avoiding the appearance of a military threat and the immense financial burden of a modern army, Yang prevented both external provocation and internal unrest, viewing a large military not as an asset but as a primary source of chaos.

#### ENGINEERING EQUILIBRIUM: THE ART OF DIVIDE AND RULE

Behind this facade of weakness, Yang engineered a self-regulating system of checks and balances, applying the Taoist method of *wei wuwei* (为无为), 'acting to achieve non-action'. The principal military forces in the province were Turkic Muslims (Uyghurs), Han Chinese and Hui Muslims. Yang's masterstroke was to ally with the Hui battalions, strategically favouring them over his own Han soldiers. This prevented the infiltration of influence from warlords in China proper and, most crucially, thwarted a potential pan-Islamic alliance between the Turkic and Hui Muslims. Adding exploiting sectarian differences and using Hui favouritism, he made Uyghurs and Huis, the two largest Muslim groups in the region, rivals.

He then systematically used these Hui troops as his primary internal security force to police and suppress the Uyghur population, a strategy that cleverly distanced Han officials from the direct application of 'bloodshed' (Jacobs 2016, 38). He further stabilised his rule by co-opting local elites—officials, religious leaders and merchants—into his system, while simultaneously ensuring that the upper classes of different ethnic groups checked one another's power (Forbes 1986; Starr 2015, 70–71). The result was a system of small, divided power blocs that kept each other in check, allowing Yang to remain inconspicuous while maintaining ultimate control.

#### PREEMPTIVE FORCE: THE BRUTALITY BEHIND THE STILLNESS

Yang's notorious brutality was not merely a random terror, but it was aligned with the application of Taoist forceful action, *youwei* (有为), a prerequisite for establishing the order of *wuwei*. As the Taoist sage must be willing to 'eliminate potential troubles before they arise' (*xiao huan wei ran*, 消患未然), Yang did so with chilling precision. His dealings with rivals were a masterclass in the Taoist tactic of 'if you want to

take from it, you must first give to it'. When revolutionaries overthrew imperial authorities in Ili in 1912, Yang eschewed direct confrontation. He negotiated a peace agreement, promised to pay their debts and offered to integrate their leaders into his administration. Once he had lulled them into complacency and consolidated his own power, he systematically eliminated the revolutionary commanders and members through a series of secret assassinations, eradicating the entire network (Pan 1981, 9–10; Sha 2012).

This strategy was honed during the Uyghur uprising led by Tömür Halifa. Fearing an alliance between Tömür's forces and the newly independent Mongolians, Yang again avoided open warfare. He dispatched a Hui Muslim general, Li Shufu, to lure Tömür into a truce. Leveraging their shared religion, General Li swore on the Qur'an that Yang's offer of a power-sharing agreement was sincere (Zhang 2008). Tömür accepted the oath and travelled to the capital, Urumqi, where he was appointed a commander. Shortly after, on 6 September 1913, Yang ordered another Hui general Ma Fuxing to capture and kill Tömür, and his soldiers were ambushed and massacred on their return journey (Pan 1981, 23–27). Through this act of supreme deception, using a holy oath to mask lethal intent, Yang surgically removed a major threat without a costly war.

This system of minimalist posture, engineered equilibrium and surgical violence created a state that was internally tranquil and static. By ensuring no single faction could become too powerful, Yang created a system where the constituent parts policed one another, allowing the ruler to maintain control with the lightest possible touch. He had achieved the Taoist ideal of governance: ruling as if 'cooking a small fish' (*ru peng xiao xian*, 如烹小鲜).

## CONCLUSION

In an era defined by revolution and fragmentation, when China disintegrated and powerful new ideologies swept across Eurasia, East Turkistan under the rule of Yang Zengxin remained a remarkable anomaly: a vast frontier held in a state of stillness. While not immune to resistance from local Turkic peoples and Chinese revolutionaries, Yang successfully neutralised these threats, preventing them from escalating into the mass movements that convulsed China proper and Central Asia. This article has moved beyond the conventional portrayal of Yang as a mere pragmatic warlord to argue that the key to his 17-year rule was the careful and conscious application of a coherent Taoist model of statecraft. By reframing his governance as an attempt to construct a real-world 'Taoist ideal state', this study has demonstrated that Yang's policies were not simply ad hoc reactions to chaos, but the calculated execution of a cohesive philosophical blueprint.

The analysis traced this blueprint through the core domains of Yang's administration. His policy of *yumin*, or 'keeping the populace simple', was translated into an active

programme of intellectual containment through the suppression of modern education and the rejection of industrial modernity. The Taoist ideal of a ‘small state with few people’ manifested as a geopolitical quarantine, sealing East Turkistan’s borders against the ideological contagion of pan-Turkism, Jadidism, Bolshevism and Chinese revolutionary fervour. Finally, his minimalist military posture, coupled with a sophisticated system of ethnic divide-and-rule and the ruthless application of surgical violence, was shown to be a masterful application of the ‘power of weakness’—using forceful, pre-emptive action (*youwei*) to achieve a state of effortless, systemic control (*wuwei*).

This study’s main contribution lies in offering a new perspective on a significant figure and era in the history of China’s modern frontiers. It repositions Yang Zengxin not just as a pragmatist but also as a skilled practitioner of Taoist governance. This new interpretation challenges the singular view of the Warlord Era by highlighting the strong impact of classical political ideology on an important regional actor. Furthermore, it demonstrates the enduring relevance of ancient Chinese statecraft as a pragmatic toolkit for modern crisis governance. It illuminates a model of frontier administration based not on integration or development, but on strategic insulation and induced stasis, offering a new perspective on the complex relationship between the Chinese state and East Turkistan.

A necessary limitation of this study is its primary focus on the Taoist dimension of Yang’s thought. While the evidence for his adherence to Taoist principles is substantial, as this article has demonstrated, a singular focus risks obscuring the complex synthesis of his worldview. Yang was also a staunch advocate of the Confucian ideal of ‘Great Unification’ (*dà yītǒng*, 大一统), a philosophy seemingly at odds with the isolationist tendencies of his Taoist methods. Therefore, while this paper highlights the Taoist means by which he governed, it is possible his ultimate ends were Confucian. Future research could fruitfully explore this intellectual synthesis: how did Yang reconcile the universalist, centralising aims of Confucianism with the insular, minimalist statecraft of Taoism in his administration of a multi-ethnic frontier?

Ultimately, East Turkistan under the control of Yang Zengxin stands as a striking paradox: a pocket of archaic stillness carved out of a world hurtling towards modernity. His long and stable rule serves as a powerful historical testament to the potent, and often brutal, reality of a political philosophy that achieves absolute control not through grand projects and overt force, but through the deliberate engineering of a society where nothing is allowed to happen.

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