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## Excerpt: *The Tree That Bleeds: A Uighur Town on the Edge*

June 18, 2011 in [Books](#), Excerpt by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)  
By Nick Holdstock



*Nick Holdstock, who readers might remember from a piece on the 2009 riots in Xinjiang he posted here last month, has a new book coming out later this week from Luath Press. In [The Tree That Bleeds: A Uighur Town on the Edge](#), Holdstock recounts the story of his year teaching English in Yining, a border town that in 1997 saw an outbreak of violence, and his efforts to discover the truth about what happened there. Here, in two excerpts from the book's introduction, Holdstock explains what brought him to Yining and describes his journey to and first encounters with the city.*

I was looking at the dome of a mosque when I heard the soldiers. The bark of their shouts, the stamp of their feet. I turned and saw rifles, black body armour, a line of blank faces. We were on Erdaoqiao, a busy shopping street in Urumqi, where a moment before the main concerns had been the prices of trousers and shirts. But the crowd did not scatter in fear at the sight of these armed men. They parted in a calm, unhurried manner, as if this were a routine sight, almost beneath notice. For a moment the street was quiet but for the soldiers' marching chant. As soon as they passed, the salesmen lifted their cries; haggling resumed. But there were more soldiers on the other side of the street, another black crocodile marching through. Policemen stood in twos and threes every hundred metres, outside a bank, a kebab stall, in front of the pedestrian subway. A riot van drove up and stopped at the intersection.

Although this display of force was disconcerting, it wasn't a surprise: nine months before, on 5 July 2009, this street had seen some of the worst violence in China since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Urumqi is the capital of Xinjiang, China's largest province. There has been a long history of unrest in the region, between Uighurs (Turkic-speaking Muslims who

account for about half the region's 23 million people) and Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China). The events of July 2009 marked an escalation in the conflict. During the afternoon of 5 July, around 300 Uighur students gathered in the centre of Urumqi. By late afternoon, the crowd had swelled to several thousand; by evening they had become violent. Official figures put the number of dead at 200, with hundreds more injured. News reports on state television showed footage of protesters beating and kicking people on the ground. Video shot by officials at the hospital the previous night showed patients with blood streaming down their heads. Two lay on the fruit barrow that friends had used to transport them. A four-year-old boy lay on a trolley, dazed by his head injury and his pregnant mother's disappearance. He was clinging to her hand when a bullet hit her.

By the following morning the streets were under the tight control of thousands of riot officers and paramilitary police, who patrolled the main bazaar armed with batons, bamboo poles and slingshots. Burnt cars and shops still smouldered. The streets were marked with blood and broken glass and the occasional odd shoe. Mobile phone services were said to be blocked and internet connections cut.

There were two main explanations for what had caused these riots. On the one hand, a government statement described the protests as 'a pre-empted, organized violent crime' that had been 'instigated and directed from abroad, and carried out by outlaws in the country'. Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency, reported that the unrest 'was masterminded by the World Uighur Congress' led by Rebiya Kadeer, a Uighur businesswoman jailed in China before being released into exile in the US. Wang Lequan, then leader of the Xinjiang Communist Party, said that the incident revealed 'the violent and terrorist nature of the separatist World Uighur Congress'. He said it had been 'a profound lesson in blood'.

He went on to claim that the aim of the protests had been to cause as much destruction and chaos as possible. Although he mentioned a recent protest in the distant southern province of Guangdong, he dismissed this as a potential cause.

But according to the WUC, this incident was the real cause of the protest. They claimed that the clash in Guangdong province was sparked by a man who posted a message on a website claiming six Uighur boys had 'raped two innocent girls'. This false claim was said to have incited a crowd to murder several Uighur migrant workers at a factory in the area. Rebiya Kadeer claimed that the 'authorities' failure to take any meaningful action to punish the [Han] Chinese mob for the brutal murder of Uighurs' was the real cause of the protest.

The WUC's version of the events of 5 July was that several thousand Uighur youths, mostly university students, had peacefully gathered to express their unhappiness with the authorities' handling of the killings in Guangdong. They claimed that the police had responded with tear gas, automatic rifles and armoured vehicles. They alleged that during the crackdown some were shot or beaten to death by Chinese police or even crushed by armoured vehicles.

The WUC also reported widespread violence in the wake of the protests. Their website claimed that Chinese civilians, using clubs, bars, knives and machetes, were killing Uighurs throughout the province: 'they are storming the university dormitories, Uighur residential homes, workplaces and organizations, and massacring children, women and elderly'. They published a list of atrocities – 'a Uighur woman who was carrying a baby in her arms was mutilated along with her infant baby... over one thousand ethnic Han Chinese armed with knives and machetes marched into Xinjiang Medical University and engaged in a mass killing of the Uighurs... two Uighur female students were beheaded; their heads were placed on a stake on the middle of the street' – none of which could be confirmed. This post was later removed.

There is still much that is unclear about what actually happened during that violent week in July 2009. But however terrible its cost – whether it was a massacre of peaceful protestors, an orchestrated episode of violence, or something in between – it was not without precedent. In Xinjiang, there have been many protests which were either 'riots' or 'massacres', depending on who you believe. The largest of these took place on 5 February 1997, in the border town of

Yining. This too was perhaps a protest, possibly a riot, maybe even a massacre. There were certainly shootings, injuries, and deaths.

As for what happened, and why, it was hard to say. At the time there was an immediate storm of conflicting accounts, of accusation and counter-claim. The only chance of learning what had happened was to actually go there. And so in 2001, I did. I got a job teaching English. I stayed for a year. I uncovered a story that is still happening now.

But all of this must wait a moment. First, you must arrive.

### **The Journey**

Your train waits in Beijing West one thick September night. The air crowds close around, pressing on your head and chest, desperate to transfer a fraction of its heat.

It will be a long journey. Thankfully you'll be travelling in relative luxury: a padded compartment known as a 'soft sleeper'. You slide open its door and find the other three berths already occupied. You heave in your suitcases. You climb into bed. Beijing lapses into haze and you are far from here.

In the morning you wake to yellow valleys honeycombed with caves. Crops crowd the plateaus, anxious not to waste the space. It's a rehearsal for the desert and it is Shanxi. Or Shaanxi. But certainly not here.

You prowl the train in search of food. The restaurant car is full of people eating fatty meat. You find a seat opposite a middle-aged Han couple. The man is wearing a dark blue suit; the woman's pink sweater is embroidered with flowers in silver thread.

They ask where you're from and going. When you say 'England,' they smile. They frown when you say, 'Yining.'

'That is not a good place,' he says. 'It has a lot of trouble,' she adds.

'What kind of trouble?'

He shakes his head, mutters, looks out the window. Then your food arrives. You eat a plate of oily pork. You go back to bed.

When you wake the plain is a vast grey sheet stretched taut between the mountains. It is such a vacant space that every detail seems important: a man walking on his own, without a house or car in sight; ruined buildings; jutting graves; men in lumpen uniforms who salute the train.

Grey slowly shifts to black; sand firms into rock. Then, in place of monochrome, the space is bright with colour. Purple, yellow, red, and orange, mixed like melted ice cream.

Moving on and further westwards. The sun refuses shadow. You pull into the oasis of Turpan, a green island in a wilderness, its shores lapped by grit. You buy a bunch of grapes from a Uighur woman wearing a pink headscarf. They are almost too sweet.

Hours pass, you slip through mountains, speed through a tunnel of rock. You emerge onto to a plain of blades, white and turning, harvesting wind, chopping it into power.

Now, after 2,192km, you are getting close: this is Urumqi, the provincial capital of Xinjiang. From here it is only another 500km. But this is the end of the train.

During the trip your luggage must have bred with the other bags for now there are more than you can carry. It takes two trips to get your bags from the train, and after this, as you stand

on the platform, you wonder what you are doing. Why have you come so far, on your own? What if something happens?

But there is no time for worry. You must move your bags. You grunt and heave, to no avail. They are just too heavy. Then you see a man in faded blue jacket and trousers, a flat cap perched on his head. He catches your eye and comes over. He says he will help.

Staggering through the streets, every building that you pass is either half-built or half-collapsed. Dirt is the principal colour. There is a street where the shops only sell engine parts and the pavement is stained with oil. The shops are cubes that flicker, fade as men spark engine hearts.

You stop to rest. The sky is grey. Two boys approach with a bucket. In it, a kitten is curled.

'How much will you give me?' says one.

'I don't want it,' you say.

'You can't have it,' says the other, who swings the bucket and laughs.

Two more streets and you reach your hotel. The stone floor of the lobby is wet, as is the stairs, the corridors, where men wander in vests.

In your room the man names a price 10 times too high. After you threaten to call the room attendant, he settles for five times too much.

The room has two beds. The other bed is occupied by an old Japanese man. He sits in bed reading a book of Go problems, smoking cheap cigarettes. His underpants hang on a line at head height. At night the breath whistles out of his mouth like the wind through a crack in a door.

Next morning you go to the bus station. They refuse to sell you a ticket because you don't have a work permit.

'We can't give you a ticket without it,' says a woman in a baggy black uniform.

'But I can't get the permit until I go there.'

'Not my problem.'

'How I am supposed to get there?'

'Don't know.'

'I'll report you.'

She shrugs. 'Go ahead.'

You raise your voice. You plead. You do not get a ticket.

After an hour of angry wandering you find a car willing to take you. You haggle, fix a price, then wait for two hours while the driver tries to find other passengers.

It is midday when you leave. For the first few hours the road is smooth motorway and all but deserted. Exhaustion segues to sleep; potholes bring you back. Straw-coloured hills rise on both sides, at first distant, then slowly converging, until they funnel the road. You wind between them, seeing only their slopes; then abruptly there is a vista. You are on the edge of

a lake so blue and vast you cannot see its far shore. The road follows its edge, till mountains loom, and you begin a hairpin descent. The last of the light straggles into the valley below, lingering in jars of honey on shelves by the side of the road.

You assume the crash position as the car hurtles toward lorries. All you get are panic flashes of the countryside: cotton fields, sheep-speckled hills, tough-looking men on horses. It is three days since you left Beijing. You have the feeling that you are on the frontier of another land, that you have come to the end of China.

It is dark when you reach the teachers' college. A small woman you at first mistake for a child lets you into your flat. The strip light shows worn linoleum, concrete floors, a kitchen with a sink on bricks, no pots or any stove. There are no curtains. The toilet is a hole in the floor.

'What do you think?' she squeaks.

You look around, consider your verdict.

'Very nice,' you say.

Now, at last, you have arrived. Welcome to Yining.

\* \* \*

For all its remoteness, Yining is a place that people have heard of. It has been in the Lonely Planet guide since the first edition.

In Yining you won't know whether to laugh or cry. Nothing seems to work and half the population seems permanently drunk. The guide had mellowed slightly by its fifth edition.

Yining is a grubby place with a few remnants of fading Russian architecture. Despite these ringing endorsements, there were already 10 other foreigners in Yining when I arrived. Eleanor was the first I met. She was tall, friendly and from Derbyshire, and had already been teaching in the college for two years. She introduced me to some people.

\*

The bus crawled down Liberation Road, stopping, starting, presenting tableaux: nicotine-coloured apartments; muffled road sweepers waking dust; a donkey pulling a cart of red apples; a crowd gathered round an argument, one man pointing at a crushed bicycle, another leaning against a taxi, slowly shaking his head.

We veered right at a roundabout topped by a stone eagle. A soldier stood outside a concrete gate, a rifle by his side. More turns later we arrived at the town square, which was paved in pink and white tiles.

Two Uighur men were waiting for us, one very tall, one short, both with thin moustaches. The smaller smiled, and said in English, 'Welcome to Ghulja. I'm Murat.'

'Does he mean Yining?' I whispered to Eleanor, but Murat nonetheless heard. He snorted. 'That's what the Chinese call it. We say "Ghulja". It means a wild male sheep.'

Ismail was the taller of the two. He and Murat ran an English course in a local school. We had lunch in a restaurant called King of Kebabs. A fat man sat outside threading lumps of meat onto skewers. A cauldron of rice and carrots steamed next to him. When he saw us he stood and boomed a greeting. He shook hands with Murat, Ismail and me, nodded to Eleanor.

Inside was dim and noisy with the sounds of eating. Ismail gestured for us to sit then said, 'This is a good place, very clean. You know, Uighur people are Muslims. We shouldn't smoke or drink. What would you like to eat? Have you had *polo*? It is traditional Uighur food.'

*Polo* turned out to be the rice and carrot dish I'd seen steaming outside. In addition, there were soft chunks of mutton and a tomato and onion salad dressed in dark vinegar.

'Is it good?'

'Very.'

Ismail grinned and said, 'You must stay for a long time!' After that we ate in silence until Murat said, 'Many Han people make a noise when they eat.'

Ismail chimed in, 'That's just them speaking!'

I kept eating, quietly, a little shocked by the vehemence of their dislike. It also surprised me that they were saying such things to someone they had only just met.

After lunch we strolled through the square. Huge propaganda posters towered overhead. A composite photo loomed above, showing three generations of Chinese leaders: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin (the then-current leader). Next to it was a 20-foot poster showing all 57 ethnic groups in China. They were smiling and wearing brightly coloured costumes. They seemed about to launch into song.

There was a sense of transition on crossing the square. The bright cubes of the Han shops, their handbags, shoes and machine parts, quickly faded into market stalls – to scarves, carpets, glassware, packs of henna, crystal sugar, dried grapes, black tea and other products more reminiscent of a Central Asian bazaar. Bare heads were replaced by a hundred hats, by homburgs, trilbies, flat caps, pork pies, baseball caps and most of all, a boxy, stiffened skullcap called *adoppa*.

Murat turned and whispered, 'Don't tell anyone, but I MUST go to the toilet.'

'OK. Isn't that one, over there?'

'Yes, but I must go home.'

As we watched him scamper off, Ismail cleared his throat.

'It takes him a long time. He has this problem. With his...'

He didn't know the word. Eventually we settled on 'kidney'. Eleanor chose this moment to mention that she thought our phones were bugged. She said that sometimes she heard noises from the other end, and that there had been some dubious coincidences, like going to make a complaint about something and finding that the person in question had already taken steps to nullify her criticisms. At the time I thought she was being paranoid. After a few weeks in Yining, I was not so sure.

When Murat returned he looked pleased with himself, as if he had performed some difficult task well. He suggested looking round the market. As we drew near the entrance – a large faux-Islamic gate – three men selling pictures of Mecca started shouting at us.

'What are they saying?'

Murat laughed. 'They are saying 'Hello Russians!'

There has been a long history of Russian involvement in Yining: Russia occupied the valley from 1871–81; after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviets were granted special trading rights in the area and had a consulate in the town. Following the Sino-Soviet pact of 1924, Russian involvement in the province increased to the point where 80% of the region's trade was with Russia. Sheng Shicai – the warlord ruler of the province from 1934–44 – relied heavily on Soviet military aid. Russia was forced to withdraw from the province in 1943, after Sheng Shicai shifted his allegiance to the Nationalists. Following their withdrawal, inflation rose and trade virtually stopped. But they were soon presented with an opportunity to reestablish their influence when a revolt broke out among the Kazakhs, who had been especially dependent on trade with Russia. Direct Soviet military aid on the side of the rebels led to the capture of Yining in 1944, and the founding of the East Turkestan Republic (ETR). The Russian presence in Yining remained strong until the Communists took power in 1949. Relations between Russia and China worsened throughout the 1950s, culminating in the Sino-Soviet rift of 1960 and the eradication of Soviet influence from the region.

Today there are few traces of the city's Russian past. Apart from the Russian consulate, which is now a restaurant, there are only a few scattered buildings, some within the teachers' college. Only a handful of Russians still live in the city, running a bakery that makes perfect cakes.

So given that most foreigners in Yining had previously been Russian, it was logical that Eleanor and I should be Russian too. I didn't mind; it made a change from everyone thinking I was American.

The market was dim and busy, full of rows of traders selling leather jackets, wraps and hats, *doppas*, stiff suits, thick jumpers, sensible shoes, armoured trench coats, various fur things. The traders whistled at me, trying to get my attention. Ismail and Murat shook hands with many of them. I asked how they knew them.

'Ismail and I used to do business. We used to sell leather.'

'Why did you stop?'

'Things are difficult now. Business is bad.'

Ismail sighed. 'Many people don't have jobs. Especially Uighur people. Maybe 80% are unemployed now.'

'Why's that?'

Ismail looked at the floor while Murat said, 'In this city, there are some problems. Maybe you don't know. It is difficult.' He coughed then said, 'Please excuse us. We must go and pray.'

It was their third prayer of the day. Eleanor and I drifted round the back streets while they went to the mosque. A group of kids took time from booting a ball around to giggle at us; the braver ones ventured a hello. Two men sat playing chess, their stillness broken by sudden aggression as one slammed a bishop down. Peace returned, and then was broken. The sky showed no sign of being bored with blue.

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