

Review - The Chinese Question in Central Asia

Written by Barrett L. McCormick

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The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor
By: Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse
London: Hurst and Company, 2012



This 200 page book offers a broad and detailed view of Central Asian perspectives on China. This is a welcome topic inasmuch as Chinese relations with Central Asia have received less attention than China's relations with other neighboring regions and less than even China's relations with Africa. It is an excellent choice for those who have not previously considered China's impact on Central Asia, but provides so much information that I suspect it will be of use even to those who have already worked in this area.

One of the book's major strengths is the focus on Central Asian perceptions of China. The authors explicitly avoid analyses of Chinese perceptions or intentions. Instead, they explain what China looks like from Central Asian perspectives. Perceptions reported include strategic interaction, economic relations and culture. It allows different Central Asian states to have different perspectives, and different groups such as political leaders, entrepreneurs and scholars each to have their own debates.

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This book is more empirical than theoretical. The data is rich and thick. For example, while discussing border trade, the authors discuss the conditions and level of activity at each border crossing starting in the north and proceeding south. The degree of detail – efficiently inserted into what remains a 200 page book – is such that one strongly suspects the authors have been at each of these crossings where they interviewed truck drivers, traders and local officials, perhaps while enduring long waits in customs halls.

Many of the elements of Central Asian perspectives on China will be familiar to those who have considered other countries' perspectives on China, but Central Asia's special circumstances mean that they are here found in a mix not found in other places. The authors, for example, conclude with an explicit comparison of China's economic relations in Central Asia with China's economic relations with Africa. They find broad similarities, with the Chinese arriving as large firms in pursuit of raw materials and building infrastructure on an enormous scale, as petty traders offering consumer goods at prices appreciated by local consumers, and as a government professing a desire for equal relationships and avoiding conditionality relating to environmental or transparency. But unlike Africa, issues at play include Chinese dams which limit the flow of water into neighboring countries and border settlements. In other spheres, Central Asian perceptions more closely resemble those of some of China's neighbors to the east or southeast who are alarmed by China's increasing military capacity. Kazakhs, the authors note, are keenly aware that the military forces stationed in China's northwestern Lanzhou Military Region alone are three times the size of the Kazakh military. Central Asian cultural and academic analysis is colored by its Russian heritage so much that the 'yellow peril' imagery common in Russia is also found in Central Asia. The authors report that some alarmists speculate that Xinjiang's present is Central Asia's future.

Laurelle and Peyrouse report that Central Asians are compelled to respond to two special Chinese concerns. First, the Chinese government has made extraordinary demands on Central Asians regarding Uighurs. These range from the extradition of individuals wanted for political crimes to demands that research institutes be reorganized to limit the impact and conclusions of those studying Uighur history and culture. The authors take us beyond the broad observation that Central Asians and Uighurs share a common Turkic culture and heritage to detailed observations on the size and social role of Uighur minorities in various Central Asian countries. They claim that Central Asians are prone to a more secular orientation and are apt to be put off by the more traditionally religious Uighurs in Xinjiang. Central Asian elites with an interest in China might send their children to highly rated universities in eastern China, while Central Asians with more limited means might have to settle for sending their children to less schools in western China where both tuition and the cost of living are more affordable. Turkic identity, it seems, is only one reference in a crowded landscape.

Second, China has a cluster of interests linked to the success of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Xinjiang's security is a priority, but the Chinese government also wants to be seen by the broader international community to be successfully engaging in multilateral diplomacy. From a Central Asian perspective, the big success of the SCO came early on in the form of resolving border disputes. While Central Asians take satisfaction in resolving these disputes, they also note that it was China that was pressing claims against their territory and not the obverse. To varying degrees in different countries, there are regrets about the extent of the concessions they were compelled to make. Central Asians are cynical about the security side of the SCO, viewing, for example, the joint counter-terrorism military exercises as lacking serious intent. Finally, Central Asians are alarmed that the SCO agreements need to be renegotiated in 2020. By that time they expect that the balance of wealth and power will have shifted even more decisively in China's favor such that Russia will not be able to provide an effective counterweight.

In a review of this scope it is not possible to do justice to the degree of nuance. But the authors document several spectra of opinion. For example, the countries that border China and which were required to make territorial concessions have a different take on the potential threat posed by China than those further west. The poorer countries view Chinese trade and investment in different terms than those more economically dynamic. Kazakhstan, which is the largest and most prosperous of the Central Asian countries, has a different take on China than Kirghistan, which is small and poor.

One of the main points that Laurelle and Peyrouse make is that whatever concerns Central Asians have about China – and they do chronicle many concerns – it is more or less unthinkable that Central Asian leaders would not make

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efforts to get along with China. First, the relationship is powerfully asymmetric. Central Asians cannot hope to match the Chinese military. Nor can they expect to find others as willing as the Chinese to invest in their infrastructure and other development projects. Those who are smaller, weaker and poorer have few real choices. Second, the more or less parallel relationship between wealth and power in both China and the Central Asian states means that leaders who collaborate with the Chinese (and their families and cronies) have access to lucrative business arrangements.

Issues like North Korea and the Senkaku-Diaoyu dispute in Northeast Asia and the South China Sea disputes in Southeast Asia surely present more risk to world politics than anything currently happening in Central Asia. Moreover, given Russia's current strategy of collaborating with China and the huge disparities in wealth and power between China and the Central Asian states, it is unlikely – if not impossible to imagine – that Central Asia will gain that level of strategic importance. That said, understanding how China looks from this perspective surely helps us to better understand China's impact on the wider world and provides an illuminating take on Central Asia's special circumstances. This is a useful book for many readers.

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Barrett L. McCormick completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1985 and since that time has been in the Political Science Department at Marquette University. His research and publications concern topics such as political reform in China, China's international relations and the role of media in Chinese politics.