**A Look at Real Life in North Korea**

North Korea Confidential is a reporter’s travel guide, taking the reader down Pyongyag alleys, along rural roads onto hard-scrabble farmland, underground into interrogation centers and behind gates of political prison camps, all the way up to the traders with wads of renminbi at the porous China border. We acquire a new vocabulary, a lexicon of real life in North Korea: jangmamdang, marketplaces, mini-engines of the civilian economy and social change; choekmaedae, bookstalls where reading material, not all of it political, is usually rented; nongtaeogi, homemade moonshine that is often a family business; bingdu, crystal meth that brings profit and addiction.

Both authors know South Korea well, speaking the language and reporting from Seoul (Tudor formerly for The Economist, Pearson currently for Reuters), and they make judicious use of parallels between the divided Koreas. The book endows North Koreans with individuality and complexity, without shying from the brutal or bizarre elements of North Korea. Hopefully, there will be a sequel exploring topics that are littered with “we should,” “we must,” or “we will” — and the reader is left wondering how many of sequel, he recounts a parallel process of erasure of Old Beijing, making it home. In his previous book, Manchu, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese influence threatening ancient ways of life in the countryside. Meyer has a teacher’s gift with language and a teacher’s tenacity for facts. These make for great storytelling as he explores northeastern rust-belt cities with one quixotic journey after another. In one he stumbles into a band of Manchu history buffs who help him look for the Willow Palisade, built by their ancestors to keep Chinese out after the Manchu takeover of Ming China in 1644. In another journey, Meyer seeks out the tombs of Japanese colonists trapped in hostile territory after their empire’s sudden defeat of 1945.

**China’s Smog Crisis Caught on Film**

Investigative journalist Chai Jing’s devastating documentary expose on China’s pollution crisis went viral within days of its release. Probably tens or even hundreds of millions watched in just the first week, when authorities began restricting online access.

By marshalling a wealth of scientific evidence on smog’s public health toll, and presenting complex information in graphics and stirring language, Chai Jing, a former CCTV news employee, suddenly established herself as China’s Rachel Carson and Ai Gore wrapped into one. Her film, shot in hi-tech lecture style reminiscent of Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth, could mark a watershed in civic and governmental efforts to reduce emissions and clear the air. Aside from its environmental significance, too, it pushes the borders of investigative reporting and political commentary. Chai courageously travels the industrial interior to document flagrant violations, then sits down disarmingly with senior officials in Beijing who only realize too late that they are being cross-examined for hypocrisy and mismanagement.

The root of Chai exposes is gross negligence of power, and the smog’s source as systemic collusion between corrupt officials and a greedy economic elite. As she comments morbidly, toxic air respects no walls or borders. China’s environmental crisis is a daunting challenge for Asia, and indeed, the world.

Reviewed by John Delury

**Under the Dome**

A video documentary produced by Chai Jing

Self-produced documentary released online Feb. 28, 2015

**See the World According to Xi**

During former Chinese leader Hu Jintao’s full decade in power, not a single major publication came out under his name — tellingly, one of the few biographies in English was subtitled “China’s Silent Ruler.” What a contrast with his successor Xi Jinping, who is anything but silent. After only two years in charge, the first “Book of Xi” is already in print.

Stitched together from formal speeches, meeting transcripts, press conferences and the like, it presents Xi’s public face, policy priorities, and political thinking. While hardly a page-turner, it does give a coherent picture of the image Xi wants to present thus far in his tenure. Amid all the sloganeering about The Chinese Dream and peaceful development, there are moments of insight into Xi’s foreign relations strategy to be gleaned from reading his speeches in succession. For example, adding his reference to a “new pattern of regional ecological integration” in the fall of 2013 to his proposal of a “new regional security architecture” the following spring, Xi’s effort to build an alternative regional order comes into focus.

Befitting a leader new to office, Xi’s speeches are littered with “we should,” “we must,” or “we will” — and the reader is left wondering how many such promises he can fulfill. Curiously, after many upbeat speeches on foreign affairs, the book ends on a dark note. The final sections contain Xi’s talks on corruption, in which he frankly acknowledges the grave risk posed by internal rot. Ironically, Xi identifies Communist Party officials’ greed and venality as the primary obstacles to realizing the party’s overarching goal of “wealth and power” for the nation.

Reviewed by John Delury

**In Manchuria: A Village Called Wasteland and the Transformation of Rural China**

Asia doesn’t get much more global than Manchuria. Michael Meyer’s funny, smart record of years living in an out-of-the-way village, appropriately named Wasteland, reveals the repressed cosmopolitanism of the region, famously described as “the pivot of Asia.” Meyer has a teacher’s gift with language and a reporter’s tenacity for facts. These make for great storytelling as he explores northeastern rust-belt cities with one quixotic journey after another. In one he stumbles into a band of Manchu history buffs who help him look for the Willow Palisade, built by their ancestors to keep Chinese out after the Manchu takeover of Ming China in 1644. In another journey, Meyer seeks out the tombs of Japanese colonists trapped in hostile territory after their empire’s sudden defeat of 1945.

A panoramic history of the region unfolds, showing layers of Jurchen, Korean, Manchu, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese influence like sediment in cut rock. But perhaps the story Meyer is most interested in telling is that of the humble village of Wasteland, and the transformations under way across rural China that are visible by temporarily making it home. In his previous book, The Last Days of Old Beijing, Meyer described the razing of the capital’s centuries-old hutong alleyways. In this kind of sequel, he recounts a parallel process of erasure threatening ancient ways of life in the countryside.

Reviewed by John Delury

**Tales of a Vanishing Manchu Village**

By Michael Meyer

New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, 384 pages, $29.99 (Hardcover)
Is Corruption a Cause or Effect?

Democracy, Inequality and Corruption in Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines Compared
By Jong-sung You
Cambridge University Press, 2015, 308 pages, $89.10 (Hardcover)

The relationships between economic inequality, corruption and democracy have long drawn attention from academics and policy-makers. What explains cross-national variations in corruption? What causes or helps to increase or reduce it? What countries or regime types are better at combating it? Numerous observations have been made on these questions, and this makes the subject very familiar to most readers. This book is another, but genuinely meaningful, addition to the long intellectual quest. First, the author, an activist-turned-professor at the Australian National University, makes it very clear that the causal flow runs from inequality to corruption, not the other way around. He supports his argument by a comparative historical analysis of three East Asian cases that show democratic variations in the levels of corruption: Taiwan (low), South Korea (medium) and the Philippines (high). He seeks to expand his argument’s applicability with a cross-national statistical analysis. In this way, his theoretical arguments are well supported by solid empirical research.

Alas, this academic strength turns into its own shortcoming. Incessant theoretical argumentation, decently woven from the perspective of academics, might be painful to digest for most general readers. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

Pakistan as China’s Eurasian Partner

The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics
By Andrew Small
Oxford University Press, 2015, 288 pages, $45.00 (Hardcover)

Small argues that Pakistan is a central part of China’s transition from a regional to a global power. Andrew Small, a fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, elaborates on this familiar issue as he argues that Pakistan is a central part of China’s transition from a regional to a global power, particularly to its west. While encountering its strategic rival the United States to its east, Beijing also runs west and south, where the China-Pakistan relationship is a core nexus of its geopolitical strategy. The author goes back to the 1960s to trace a bilateral relationship long seen almost entirely through a subset of the China-India and India-Pakistan rivalries. He finds a host of new factors beyond the focus of that lens, including the security link between Xinjiang and Afghanistan. The linkages between security threats in and out of China and the rise of extremists in Southwest and Central Asia have recently become the greatest sore spot in Sino-Pakistani ties. An economic angle adds to a partnership hitherto almost all about security. A “Eurasian corridor” linking China’s interior to Europe and the Indian Ocean is now embodied in a grand vision of Beijing’s “One Belt, One Road” strategy. Pakistan has a crucial address in this economic corridor. As the China-Pakistan axis is almost ready to step from the shadows, Small is clear in his message that China’s western geopolitics is now unfolding. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Is an Instant Nation Really a Nation?

Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions
By Mariya Y. Omelicheva (ed.)
Lexington Books, 2015, 198 pages, $76.00 (Hardcover)

The collapse of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago set in motion a simultaneous triple transformation in the 29 former Soviet bloc countries — political regime change, marketization and nation building. Only five of those countries had retained their statehood under socialism, with the rest quickly building up new “nation-states” after the Wall came down. This book, a collection of 10 essays contributed by nine Central Asia specialists, delves into the dynamic process of post-Soviet nation-building and national identity formation in five Central Asian countries.

How can new nations arise without nationalism bringing them into being? Sharing the common puzzle, and a common perspective of nations as discursive, strategic and tactical formations, the contributors jointly illuminate how nationalism in Central Asia has been a top-down process, with the ruling elites, not the populace, as the main architects of national identity construction. They also spot two distinguishing features common to the five countries. A primordial nationalism prevails in the region in which political leaders seek to revive traditional identities of major ethnic groups and make them the core of new national identities. Such national identities are exclusivist in nature, and its financial reserves by his cronies. She sees this kleptocracy evolving since Putin was a deputy to St. Petersburg’s mayor in the 1990s. The state takeover of private oil giant Yukos in 2003 paved the way for the latest phase of kleptocracy, characterized by Putin’s cronies now having public and visible positions controlling both the state and the economy. Putin’s position on Ukraine, for example, is deeply affected by the political elite’s private, clan interests. This book thoroughly reveals who owns Russia and who drives its foreign policy. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.