Under the Skin of Central Asia

Central Asia, the stage for the 19th-century Great Game between Russia and Britain, is re-emerging as increasingly important in global politics as geopolitical contention unfolds among Russia, China, the United States and the European Union, revolving around terrorism, narcotics and hydrocarbons.

A prominent group of Western and non-Western scholars, in a consensual recognition of differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of civil society, assess in this volume the dilemmas of theorizing about civil society in an authoritarian context. The result is neither a Habermasian civil society, with autonomous groups directly engaging the state in a contest of fundamental ideas, nor a state corporatist model of near-absolute government control, but something in between. Many civil society groups are formed and funded by governments; if private, they tend to be supported by international donors and are closely monitored by the authorities.

Some chapters also illuminate how the Western and communal types of civil society, both present in Central Asia, have more in common than is generally acknowledged: these entities are more oriented toward engaging local communities and “filling gaps” than contesting the state over political issues.

This volume will be of great intellectual use to readers looking beyond the surface of Central Asian politics to discover the “hybrid character of social reality” and the forces for political change, as well as continuity, in this critical region of the world.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, associate professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book review co-editor for Global Asia.

A Post-American World? No Way

Is the American century over? Joseph Nye is clear and brisk in his response to this self-raised question: “Contrary to those who proclaim a post-American world, we have not entered a post-American world.” A rising China may catch up with the US in total economic size, but the American century, which he dates from 1941, will last to 2041 or beyond.

Nye builds his arguments on two notions of power: “power resources,” which consist of economic, military and soft power resources, on the one hand, and “power conversion,” the ways in which a country uses those resources to affect the global balance of power, on the other. Gross domestic power is but one measure of economic power, and the US remains decades ahead of China in overall military, economic and soft power at a global level. In terms of power conversion, Nye further argues that the US is far better placed to benefit from regional and global networks and alliances than any other possible contenders, including China. His policy suggestion on China’s rise is “balanced realism and integration.” He sees a more pressing problem for the US in what he calls “diffusion of power,” a rise in the power resources of many others — both states and non-state actors. He predicts that the world will face an increasing number of new transnational issues that will require “power with others” as much as “power over others.”

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and A Rising China
By Sheila A. Smith
Columbia University Press, 2015, 384 pages, $36.00 (Hardcover)

North Korea: Markets and Military Rule
By Hazel Smith
Cambridge University Press, 2015, 394 pages, $84.26 (Hardcover)

"North Korea is mad, bad and sad." Yet it is far from unique and not a very difficult country to explain. With this clear conviction, Hazel Smith, professor at the University of Central Lancashire, looks beyond a stereotyped North Korea — an un-reformable, unchangeable command society incessantly pursuing nuclear armaments — to one transforming from a rigid command economy to a market-oriented one. She reveals a country oddly similar to societies transitioning from communism to capitalism and having much in common with militarized dictatorships everywhere.

This book explores the fitful and somewhat reluctant process of "marketization from below," combined with "military rule from above." Under Kim Jong II, North Koreans' everyday lives became detached from a state whose priority was regime survival through developing nuclear weapons. In this disassociation, Smith finds a real driving force for change in North Korean people by understanding how people, not the government, took action by themselves, for themselves, in response to external and domestic pressures.

Smith's policy suggestions are no less clear: to end ideological grandstanding and devise a coherent global strategy that would require security guarantees for North Korea and entail uncomfortable compromises with the Pyongyang leadership.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

China-Japan diplomatic relations after World War II have rested on a simple premise: economic interdependence would bring post-war reconciliation between the peoples of both countries. Yet relations have worsened over the last decade. Why? Beijing often blames Tokyo's right-wing, conservative and nationalist political leaders, and neighboring countries that also were victims of Japanese militarism concur. Sheila Smith, senior fellow for Japan studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, seeks to explain this uncomfortable paradox. By exploring four cases with insights into the domestic interests that influenced Japan's policy-making on China from 2001 to 2014 — visits by prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine; the negotiations over the East China Sea; the gyosa food-poisoning incident; and the disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands — she argues that the worsening of the relationship was a result not just of China's rise but also of the greater integration of the two economies and societies.

As popular sentiment in Japan increasingly views China as an antagonistic rival, domestic interest groups, activists and opposition politicians are narrowing the scope of the Japanese government's response to a rising China, constraining its capability to find compromise and accommodation. Smith provides a concerned projection that should the Sino-Japanese relationship further worsen, a reactive and defensive national mood would undermine Japan's long-standing post-war commitment to a limited military and to its strategic dependence on the US. Is her vision coming true under Shinzo Abe's leadership? Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
Spiritual and Secular in Symbiosis

Religion and Authoritarianism: Co-operation, Conflict, and the Consequences
By Karrie J. Koesel

Religion is woefully understudied within Asian politics and international relations. Political scientist Karrie Koesel jumps into the breach with her study of state-church relations in authoritarian systems, focusing on China and Russia. She explores how rapidly expanding religiosity is transforming these two repressive secular states in surprising ways.

The conventional view sees spiritual authority as used by leaders to claim “divine right” or by laity to challenge those same autocrats. Koesel finds a more complex “negotiation” between sacred and secular authorities developing in post-Maoist China and post-Soviet Russia. State officials and religious groups search for ways to co-opt one another, borrowing material and cultural resources to form a strange symbiosis.

Religious civil society often functions as ‘partner’ to authoritarian regimes.

Religious civil society thus often functions as “partner” to authoritarian regimes. Some of this looks quite cynical: the atheistic Chinese Communist Party, for example, buys off monks and priests by financing temple construction or promoting religious tourism; local religious groups and “Christian bosses” sponsor welfare projects to win over local governments. But Koesel also sees many pious patriots genuinely seeking “harmonious” relations with the state.

Based on two years of fieldwork, Religion and Authoritarianism gives food for thought and should inspire further research on religion and politics in Asia.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

Escape from North Korea (Part II)

The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot: The True Story of the Tyrant Who Created North Korea and the Young Lieutenant Who Stole His Way to Freedom
By Blaine Harden
Viking, 2015, 304 pages, $27.95 (Hardcover)

Journalist and author Blaine Harden is back with a prequel of sorts to Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West. Harden writes an elegantly structured double biography of two figures from early North Korean history: Kim Il Sung, who is still known as his country’s “eternal President,” and No Kum Sok, an air force pilot who enjoyed 15 minutes of global fame by defecting in 1953 and was largely forgotten.

Alternating between the high politics of Kim’s relations with Mao and Stalin and No’s personal tale as son of a Japanese colonial collaborator who yearns to flee, Harden juxtaposes the mentality of rulers and ruled. Access to newly declassified US military records lets him retell, in gripping detail, No’s dramatic story of flying his MiG-15 across the 38th parallel just weeks after fighting ended in the Korean War. Two fascinating chapters detail the advent of jet combat as part of the savage US air war, which ironically gave the opportunistic Kim a post-war platform for legitimacy as heroic defender of a besieged land.

Harden’s previous book, on defector Shin Donghyuk, came under a cloud this year after Shin was found to have lied about key events. Again in this new book, Harden appears to accept No’s version of his own story somewhat uncritically, despite pointing out that No was an “excellent liar” from a young age.

The true complexity of the history of defection, from the Korean War to today, remains to be told. Still, No’s is a riveting tale, and Harden tells it with zest.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.
Lessons in China’s Tibetan Experience

Muslim, Trader, Nomad, Spy: China’s Cold War and the People of the Tibetan Borderlands
By Sulmaan Wasif Khan
The University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 216 pages, $34.95 (Hardcover)

From the outset, Xi Jinping chose the phrase “new type of great power relations” to define Sino-US relations ... but what exactly did he mean? In this dual Chinese and English language volume, leading thinkers from China and beyond attempt an answer.

Official translations in China soften Xi’s motto to “new type of major country relations,” but this volume’s editors “deliberately” stick to the original, noting that this is all about two great powers: the “hegemonic” US and “rising” China. As Da Wei, one of China’s sharpest strategic thinkers, points out, to think about a “new type” begins with the old type, namely, the notion of inevitable clash between established powers and revisionist challengers.

The new type often boils down simply to the desire to avoid such a clash amid a power transition from US dominance to US-China balance. Da Wei is optimistic, as the two great powers have avoided a clash despite decades of China’s rise. But others point out that the real transition is still far on the horizon, and it is too early to declare victory.

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Reviewed by John Delury.

Searching for a Balance of Power

New Type of Great Power Relations: Opportunities and Challenges
Edited by Jia Qingguo and Yan Jun
Peking University Press, 2015, 474 pages, $52.99 (Paperback)

Few areas of Asian historical studies are as hot as the Cold War. As archives open and documents are declassified, a rising generation of historians is reconstructing the twists and turns of that bipolar era. Sulman Wasif Khan, assistant professor at Tufts University, surfs this wave in his punchy, ambitious study of how contingencies on the Tibetan frontier triggered strategic shifts in China’s foreign policy.

The book’s title is not just homage to the great spy novelist John Le Carré: Khan wants to rewrite the grand narrative of international politics by focusing on non-state actors. Borrowing the catchy term “Fourth World” to categorize inhabitants of a stateless realm, he puts monks, merchants, soldiers and spies at the center of 1950s Asian diplomacy. Before the Chinese Communists arrived, he argues, Himalayan Tibet itself was an outpost of an anarchist zone of highland Southeast Asia stretching to Ho Chi Minh. Even after Mao sent troops in 1950 to “liberate” Tibet, due to the crippling weakness of the central state, Beijing’s writ meant little out on the Tibetan plateau. Mao had no choice but to rule Tibet with a “loose rein” — including in border policy.

Thus Sino-Indian entente was negotiated around an open trade agreement for Tibet, giving birth to the famous “five principles of peaceful co-existence.” But the Dalai Lama’s exile, Tibetan protest, and overreaction by undisciplined soldiers changed all that in 1959, ushering in a new and “more heavy-handed” era in Tibet policy and foreign policy. Khan’s historical focus might prove useful to those scrutinizing the hard and soft elements in China’s foreign policy today.

Reviewed by John Delury.
China’s Economic Game-changers

China’s Disruptors: How Alibaba, Xiaomi, Tencent and Other Companies are Changing the Rules of Business
By Edward Tse
Portfolio/Penguin, 2015, 272 pages $18.98 (Hardcover)

One of the most widely held beliefs around China’s state-owned enterprises is that they occupy the commanding heights of the country’s economy and are the engines of China’s phenomenal rise to become the world’s largest exporter and No.2 economy. The fact that bloated SOEs dominate the Fortune 500 list reinforces that view.

Less known is that the private sector accounts for three-quarters of China’s output and provides employment to two-thirds of the labor force. China’s rise from the ruins of the Maoist experiment to world economic superpower may be well documented, but not the role of what author Edward Tse calls China’s “disruptors.” Founder of a global strategy firm and former head of Greater China at Booz & Co., Tse writes about Alibaba, Xiaomi, Tencent, Baidu, Huawei, Lenovo and several other Chinese new-economy companies founded by entrepreneurs who have pushed China’s regulatory envelope to build global businesses. The way Alibaba founder Jack Ma turned China’s inefficient banking system on its head to build his own banking and Alipay payment system is a classic case of disruptive economics.

While the wealth creation the disruptors unleash is exciting, the author warns that the long-term success of the hybrid model of Communist Party control and experimenters challenging the power of the state-owned economy will depend on President Xi Jinping’s ability to continue reforms. “The real threat to China’s future is not collapse, but that its rulers will fail to manage their country’s development,” Tse concludes.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, Editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia editorial board member.

Computing Pioneer Needs New Drive

In a celebrated memo in 1961, Homi J. Bhaba, the father of India’s nuclear program and a pioneer in Indian computing, wrote: “In a big country like India, I think there would be a legitimate case of having two computing centers, and getting two computers.”

The type of computer he was pleading for took up an entire air-conditioned floor. There are now more than 900 million mobile phones in India, many with perhaps more computing power than the behemoths of the 1960s. From a humble beginning that was due partly to the socialist abhorrence of dependence on the West, India’s computing, especially processing, power has grown exponentially, making it a leading provider of IT-aided services and an outsourcing giant.

Dinesh C. Sharma, who followed the rise of India’s IT services industry as a journalist and technology enthusiast, provides a panoramic, readable account of how a poor country with bad infrastructure and worse bureaucracy achieved this feat. But his prognosis is not good. Without drastic corrective measures, India’s IT dominance might be peaking.

Without drastic corrective measures, India’s IT dominance might be peaking.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, Editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia editorial board member.
India, China and Diaspora Dynamics

Indian and Chinese Immigrant Communities: Comparative Perspectives
By Jayati Bhattacharya and Coonoor Kripalani (eds.)
Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Anthem Press, 2015, 328 pages, $99 (Hardcover)

What Got Japan Stuck in the Mud?

Japan: The Paradox of Harmony
By Keiko Hirata and Mark Warshauer
Yale University Press, 2014, 304 pages, $32.00 (Hardcover)

The US saw the clout of its Indian migrant community last year as tens of thousands gathered to give newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi a rock-star welcome. Chinese communities may avoid such displays of patriotism when Chinese leaders visit Southeast Asia for fear of hurting local sensitivities, but nobody is unaware of the Chinese business community’s economic and political power. This is a long way from 300 years ago when bedraggled Indian and Chinese workers were offloaded from sailboats and later steamships in Southeast Asia and around the world to work on plantations and in mines.

This collection of 16 essays, edited by two Indian scholars, deals mostly with today’s social, economic and political life of Indian and Chinese communities and casts a powerful light on little-known aspects of two of the world’s most important diaspora. The essays tell a fascinating story of how the two developed in different directions — one ignored by Indian authorities at home, the other cultivated by Chinese leaders from Sun Yat-sen to Xi Jinping. The relationship between these two diaspora and where they came into contact offer surprising insights into multiculturalism and religious fusion. The fierce Hindu goddess Kali was worshipped in Kolkata’s Chinatown with noodles and chop suey, and even after returning to China after the 1962 border war, Yindu guiqiao (Chinese returned from India) still celebrated Indian festivals such as Diwali and ate the local cuisine.

This book is an invaluable aid to understanding the dynamics of the people from two of Asia’s oldest civilizations making it in the countries they adopted.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.

Social harmony (wa in Japanese) and consensus has been at the heart of much of modern Japan’s success, but it is increasingly the root cause of many of Japan’s contemporary problems. Such is the core argument of this short but very accessible sociological analysis of Japan. In six brief chapters, Hirata and Warshauer focus on worker-management relations, changing gender relations and issues of identity, aging and demography, foreign and security policy, the lessons of the triple Fukushima disaster, and education to highlight some of the critical changes that Japan has experienced in the last two decades.

According to the authors, cultures evolve; they are not immutable. They argue powerfully that Japan must embrace radical change: a more open immigration policy, a greater tolerance for ethnic diversity at home, a more creative and less rigid educational system, and a regulatory system that ensures a safe, reliable energy sector. The analysis of the Shinzo Abe government’s reform agenda is balanced, acknowledging the administration’s practical innovations but expressing reservations about the contradictory messages associated with an arguably one-sided emphasis on patriotism and identity politics.

Reviewed by John Swenson-Wright, Senior Lecturer in Modern Japanese Politics and International Relations, University of Cambridge, and Head of the Asia Program, Chatham House.
How to Bridge the Tokyo-Seoul Gap

The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States
By Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder
Columbia University Press, 2015, 240 pages, $35.00 (Hardcover)

This account of relations between Tokyo and Seoul by two of Washington’s most experienced alliance-watchers analyzes the paradox of persistent tensions between two countries that arguably have powerful rational arguments for closer co-operation, not least the threat of North Korea, their individual ties to the US, and shared democratic values and economic interests.

The key to the gap between the two sides is identity politics, which the authors explore through a detailed analysis of some 10 years of public opinion poll data. Revealingly, the book challenges the facile assumption that Japan’s public is embracing a new form of assertive nationalism, and instead highlights a more cautious Japanese posture grounded on an acute sense of the country’s vulnerability; by contrast, South Koreans are more self-evidently optimistic about their country’s future and willing to pursue a more self-evidently global role.

The book ends with some valuable and highly innovative policy recommendations, including closer institutionalized links between Japanese and South Korean officials, revitalized trilateral co-operation between the US, South Korea and Japan, and a bold “Grand Bargain” between all three countries in which the US would acknowledge the sufferings it caused via the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan would give up its territorial claim over Takeshima/Dokdo, and in return South Korea would commit to a forward-looking relationship with Japan, perhaps (ambitiously) to include a new Japan-ROK treaty of friendship and partnership.

Reviewed by John Swenson-Wright.

A Country of Contradictions

Japan and the Shackles of the Past
By R. Taggart Murphy
Oxford University Press, 2014, 472 pages, $29.95 (Hardcover)

Japan is a country struggling with contradictions: Asian while not firmly a part of Asia; nominally democratic in political structure but without truly accountable leaders; a US ally, but neither truly sovereign nor autonomous in its foreign policy.

Taggart Murphy’s wide-ranging, informative and entertaining analysis of Japan’s emergence as a modern state offers a pacy and detailed introduction to the general reader. There is much to learn and admire in this account, from the wide-ranging narrative of pre-modern Japan, up to and including a detailed analysis of the latest internal political changes. Historical chapters dealing with the post-war US occupation, and the economic boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, are paralleled by thematic chapters examining contemporary society, politics, business and economic policy-making. Yet the analysis is anything but sober and restrained, adopting a combative tone likely to strike some readers as overly polemical.

Murphy writes from a perspective that explicitly identifies with the revisionist work of individuals such as Karel Van Wolferen, and the tendency to see Japan as a country in the grip of unrepresentative, nationalistic elites arguably misses some of the important pragmatic policy changes revitalizing Japanese foreign and domestic policy-making.

Reviewed by John Swenson-Wright.