

Book Review

CHIH-YU SHIH (ed.), *Sinology in Post-Communist States: Views from the Czech Republic, Mongolia, Poland and Russia* (Hong Kong: Chinese University HK Press, 2016), pp. 277 + xxvii, US\$55.00, ISBN 978-962-996-694-2(Hardcover).

How former Communist bloc countries have looked at China is fascinating on several counts. Rather little of what those fellow-socialist scholars deciphered came out in the open before 1990, even while other China affairs specialists knew of the scholarship that existed within that closed circle. What the Asian socialist scholars (e.g., Mongolians, North Koreans and Vietnamese) understood was even less known. In the Soviet Union days, all this was a black box. That changed after 1990, and this book tempts us with insights into that box, now opened up. The book also tells us how four post-Communist states, Czechia (to use that country's new name), Mongolia, Poland and Russia, now view China.

This edited work has 12 contributors apart from an introduction and conclusion by the editor, Chih-yu Shih, a professor at Hong Kong. We may not remember today that Communist states long back developed language and area expertise on China that was intrinsically different from that of Western and other academics who wrote in mainstream English and European language journals and publications.

In the introduction, the editor offers four conclusions: (a) Studying China, the more so a rising China, speaks to the scholar's self-identity. (b) Scholars present China in the context of their own country experiences. This takes place in 'multi-sited reinterpretations of the sinic order (that) challenge the singular text of "China rise" as well as that of the "China threat"', which points to a different view of global international relations (p. xv). (c) Positioned at different sites, Sinologists do not respond to China's rise in the same ways. One's travel experience is intrinsically a method of China studies. (d) 'No view of China can be politically neutral. Sinicisation is inevitably shaped and impacted by conceptions of identity and political practice' (p. xxi).

The first of the two parts of the book examines sinology in these four countries from a post-communist perspective. Sinology developed in Czechoslovakia at Charles

University at Prague, and focused on modern literature and poetry, growing into a 'Prague School' of China studies that also influenced other East European neighbours, especially Poland and the *German Democratic Republic* (GDR); the most famous scholar was Jaroslav Průšek. As one of those, unnamed, interviewed for this book said: in the 1950s, they acted as propagators of China. Another chapter, using 'critical discourse' analysis, picks up the story after the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, quoting an interviewee: 'no one wanted to write negative things about China even though we all knew there was nothing positive to say about the Chinese Revolution...People held back, they didn't want to become involved' (p. 37).

In the case of Mongolia once Soviet control ended, its sinology rapidly reverted to its focus on the humanities and to their historical tradition of language contact, via the three routes of translations, dramaturgy and narration. During the Cultural Revolution, claims were advanced by Red Guards on Mongolia as part of China, producing a low for sinology, with Mongolian scholars marshalled to counter these claims. After 1990, research on China has expanded to cover all possible subjects, in keeping with extensive mutual contacts, and the fact that classical Chinese documents are a key source material for the study of Mongolia's own history. But we miss in this analysis clear indication of how Mongolian scholars deal with ethnic and political issues relating to China's Inner Mongolia.

China studies commenced in Poland at the University of Warsaw in 1933, and after the collapse of communism, language study has taken off at schools and universities. Four Confucius institutes are currently active in Poland. This chapter is illuminating because it is directly based on a series of interviews with Polish sinologists and extensively resorts to anonymous quotes from them, describing the erratic manner in which the state-run system in the pre-1990 era 'allocated' this specialty to young academics, with no clear indication of career paths (we read of similar accidental allocation of China specialisation in the Soviet Union, in another chapter, making the point that rather few specialists chose their career out of personal passion or even strong commitment). After 2000, sinology became more interdisciplinary, not confined to linguistics and history; 'the greatest change is that sinology has moved from philology to cultural studies' (p. 74). One is tempted to say that this is a kind of change that has relevance in India; in Poland, tension continues between the proponents of specialisation in particular areas of study and the recognised sinologists.

The chapters relating to Russia are especially interesting. We read of 'Interkit' which existed between the 1960s and 1980s, a multi-level effort by the Soviet Communist Party to ensure that 'the academic discipline of China studies...was influenced and indeed warped by ideological and policy imperatives...shaping elite and popular perceptions of the Middle Kingdom throughout the Warsaw Pact' (pp. 102–3). But despite the restrictions of that time and an 'iron veil', personal contacts among sinologists persisted, and exchanges of documentary materials continued, often through personal contacts in China and other countries. Another chapter looks at the ideological frame in which Soviet and Russian sinologists have viewed China; a major work published

after 1991 concludes that the country's history should be seen in its unique entity, not framed in notions such as 'Asiatic feudalism'. Another contributor to that book examines China's reforms from the perspective of its success factors, including the evolution in the legal framework. One outcome has been the strong emergence of interdisciplinary research.

The second part of the book looks at the situation of sinologists in post-communist societies. In respect of Poland, these phases are captured in the evocative titles used in one chapter: 'The great wave', 1950–57; 'A cautious friendship', 1958–66; 'The great vacuum', 1966–82; 'Same bed, different dreams', 1982–89; 'The children of Tiananmen', 1989–2008; and 'A "strategic partnership", 2011–present' (pp. 162–70). This article concludes that Polish elites are still prejudiced towards China and see it as a Third-World state, even while recognition dawns that it is becoming a global power. But no lobby in favour of closer ties exists in Poland. Another chapter cites pioneering Czech sinologist and translator Bohumil Mathesius: 'Chinese poetry expressed in the metaphor of "a gurgling stream of clear water", that is a distant and soothing voice of an alien culture which promises salvation to a Europe which has proved to be self-destructive in the great wars' (p. 196).

The penultimate chapter covers a very narrow specialty, Tangut studies, covering a Tibeto-Burmese linguistic group from what is today the northwest of the Tibetan plateau, in Gansu Province. In its heyday, it was a 'Khaganate' considered to be among the most dangerous vassals of the Tang and Song dynasties. In the 10th century, they established an independent dynasty, called in Chinese the 'Xi Xia'. In 1227, Genghis Khan destroyed this state, but the culture survived and continued to contribute to subsequent Chinese dynasties. Russians became interested in Tangut studies and the language, from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards, via their Siberian and Mongol connections; Leningrad became the centre for these studies in the 20th century. The fact that 'Tangutology' survived the vicissitudes of Oriental studies in the Soviet Union tells us that 'it is important to remember those in the past who literally gave their lives to continue their research' (p. 243).

The concluding section notes that in the former communist states, in this non-English-speaking academia, scientific curiosity and not a policy agenda now drives research on China; sinologists 'have moved away from a territorially delineated China...they look out, instead of looking in, from a universal, comparative and simplified frame of reference' (p. 269). Language training is the key requirement for them, rather than training in social science methods or ability to develop a universal theory. They rely on interaction with Chinese colleagues and gathering on-site observations.

This book is part of a transnational project driven by Taiwanese institutions titled 'Comparative Epistemology of China Studies', which grew out of a pilot project run from Japan. It mentions the late Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea and Vidya Prakash Dutt among those that had contributed to it. A study on sinology in Asia seems a logical sequel.

Overall, the book tells us that by its nature scholarship is contextual, guided by perceptions of the time, often rooted in national circumstance. One might conclude that the holy grail of objectivity in scholarship is a myth. Why are we not surprised?

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