



10-30-2014

Review of Xin Luo and Roger Covey, *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia*

Christopher P. Atwood
University of Pennsylvania, catwood@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/ealc>

 Part of the [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Atwood, Christopher P., "Review of Xin Luo and Roger Covey, *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia*" (2014). *Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations*. 35.
<https://repository.upenn.edu/ealc/35>

At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/ealc/35>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Review of Xin Luo and Roger Covey, *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia*

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | East Asian Languages and Societies

Comments

At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

As a result, high-quality translations still have a valuable role to play, alongside international conferences, visiting positions, and other face-to-face methods of communication, in further communication between different groups of scholars in the same sub-field of area studies. Journals like the *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* have long fulfilled the role of introducing the path-breaking Japanese scholarship to non-Japanese audiences. Similarly, the much-heralded rise of China has led to a growing awareness of the immense amount of high-quality area studies research being done in Chinese, not just on Chinese civilization but on Inner Asian civilization as well. In these fields, Chinese scholars have a special position, due to the immense significance of Chinese language for the study of all of Central and Inner Asia. In recent years, some far-sighted private foundations have recognized this role, and have helped fund such endeavors, including the online *Silk Road* journal edited by David Waugh and *Eurasian Studies* edited by Yu Taishan and Li Jinxiu in Beijing. The book under review, *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia*, is a landmark volume in this same direction, produced by Luo Xin 羅新 of Peking University and Roger Covey, an independent scholar.

For specialists in Central and Inner Asian history, the immense volume and continuity of the Chinese classical records on the area are both blessing and bane. Blessing for the obvious reason that they provide by far the earliest and up until the seventh century quite often the only record of major events in the area's history. Bane, however, in that as a language typologically vastly different from most of the other languages of the area, written in a ideographic script that obscures pronunciation, and imbued with a great cultural momentum that often leads to the repetition of outdated information, classical Chinese records are often extremely hard to interpret and relate to the documentation available in western languages (Greek, Arabic, Persian) and the native languages of the area. Adequate translation of Chinese scholarship on Central and Inner Asia is thus a task qualitatively more difficult than doing the same with scholarship on China or Japan. Simply spelling names in a way that will be familiar to the intended readership is often an immense difficulty. I recall an English-language survey of China's nationalities which once spoke at length about the Tatars' origins along the mysterious "Fuerjia 伏尔加 River"—a name which a little dictionary work would have recast as the much more familiar Volga! But such cases are too easy. What is one to do with the Suiye 碎葉 River or the Shi Kingdom 石國 that appear in the Tang dynasty? There is no dictionary to tell the inexpert translator that the former is actually the

DOI 10.1515/olzg-2014-0132

Luo, Xin / Covey, Roger (Hg.): *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia*. Bloomington: Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Indiana University 2012. XXIII, 707 S. 8° = Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series 174. Lw. \$ 55,00. ISBN 978-0-9330-7058-5.

Area studies have always had a complicated relationship with the Tower of Babel. On the one hand, it is the diversity of tongues and nations begun at Babel that constitutes the *raison d'être* of area studies as type of field. Yet at the same time, the enduring divides between language communities are only partially and temporarily bridged by area studies specialists. While theoretically, area studies scholars should all be multilingual enough to find reading equally easy in their native tongue as in the language they research, in reality, there usually remains enough of a gap in reading ability, particularly when it comes to the large, dense tomes that often do the most to reshape scholarly discourse, to keep scholarly communities noticeable separate. The problem is compounded when it comes to what we might call third-language problems – i.e. English-speaking scholars keeping up with the Japanese literature on China, or Russian-speaking scholars keeping up with the Chinese-language literature on Central Asia.

Bespr. von **Christopher P. Atwood**, Indiana,
E-Mail: catwood@indiana.edu

Suyab River and the latter is Chach or modern Tashkent. But if these equivalencies are not correctly made the result is a translation that is virtually meaningless for any one not already familiar with Chinese historical phonology, and hence for precisely the readership intended to be reached by such translations. That *Chinese Scholars on Inner Asia* by and large gets these equivalencies right is thus a major success. Indeed the index will undoubtedly serve the world of scholarship as a handy way of looking up Central and Inner Asian terms in Chinese transcription with correct English spellings and translations.

The volume as a whole is thick and dense – 23 pages of introduction, 604 pages of text, and 103 pages of end matter. Making its bulk much more navigable are a number of wise decisions made by the editors. Perhaps the most important of these were the decisions first to include Chinese characters for names and book titles throughout (rather than being relegated to a list of characters at the end) and second to translate each book title, modern or classical. The first will make the volume much easier to follow for those with some knowledge of Chinese, while the second will make the range of Chinese sources and research much more graspable by those with no useful Chinese competence. Both groups are an important part of this book's audience. Of course including both characters and translation is rather bulky and so something had to be sacrificed, and that was the customary Romanization of the footnotes. Such Romanization is, however, provided in the Bibliography, although only after the translation, which supplies the key word for the alphabetized listing. With modern authored works, this may not be a problem – the reader can easily negotiate the seven items listed under the name of Han Rulin 韓儒林, for example – but for the list of “Chinese-Language Primary Sources Cited” it is rather contrary to usual practice to have *Heida shilue* 黑韃事略 listed not under “H,” but under “B” for its translated title, “Brief History of the Black Tatars.” Surprising, yes, but in the end, ordering these works by English translation may allow the Chinese-less reader for once to get a broader sense of what Chinese primary sources actually are, and to treat them as something other than incomprehensibly labelled containers for random bits of information.

The editors chose for translation articles that represent the range of Chinese scholarship, both in terms of areas and time periods covered (although it should be noted that Tibet has evidently not been included in this iteration of “Inner Asia”). The articles chosen for translation are mostly by scholars who are either middle aged and currently at the height of their careers, or else those

of a more senior generation (two of whom are currently deceased). This is worth emphasizing, since despite Luo Xin's appropriate caution that “it is impossible to use this selection to generalize about the entirety of research on Inner Asia by Chinese scholars” (p. xii), the reader will certainly come away with the impression that the scholars in this volume are, with one or two exceptions, not very engaged with current thinking in the humanities and social sciences—an impression which would certainly not be true for the recent Ph.D.'s and new professors in the field today in China. It is also important to note that many of the translations have been checked and updated by the authors, most of whom have some degree of English fluency. The volume is thus for some of these works the go-to place for the authors' most recent conclusions.

The organization is basically chronological, although for reasons I cannot understand, the one essay on the Xiongnu, by Luo Xin, was placed second to last. Other topics covered include the Türk empire as seen in documents from Turfan, Sogdian settlement and culture in China, Khitan culture, language, and society, the rise of the Mongol empire and its impact on Siberia and the Tarim Basin, and liquor in China and Inner Asia. The final essay, by Fudan 復旦 University's Yao Dali 姚大力, is a truly impressive examination of Manchu ethnogenesis, one which merges both the heritage of “evidential scholarship” (*kaozheng* 考證) that has dominated Chinese Inner Asian studies since the mid-Qing, with deep, critical (not to mention deeply critical) engagement with Western research on the same topic.

The following is a few brief observations on the various papers, organized not by topic, but by methodology:

Zhang Guangda's 張廣達 “The Nine Zhaowu Surnames (Sogdians),” Zhou Qingshu's 周清樹 “Critical Examination of the Year of Birth of Chinggis Khan,” Han Rulin's “Kirghiz and Neighboring Tribes in the Yuan Dynasty,” Chen Dezhi's 陳得芝 “Kerait Kingdom up to the Thirteenth Century,” and Liu Yingsheng's 劉迎勝 “Study of Kūsān Tarim in the Yuan Dynasty” are all basically *kaozheng* or “evidential” studies, sorting out the “who, what, where, and when” of a given topic as found in Chinese sources. It is common for naïve new Ph.D.'s in the English-speaking world (of whom I myself was once one) to look down on such studies as being “positivist” and “insufficiently theorized.” But those who actually attempt to utilize Chinese sources will quickly realize how much self-sacrificing effort, wide reading, good judgment, and painstaking thought goes into an outstanding piece of evidential research (which these all are) and will soon drop their pretension that “theory” is everything.

Luo Xin's "Reflections on the Appellations of Xiongnu Shanyu Titles" breaks new ground by foregoing the so-far fruitless effort to link Xiongnu 匈奴 names or titles with those of later Altaic languages and instead attempting to understand internally how Xiongnu titulare functioned. The result is much-needed light on when and how Xiongnu rulers took new titles, one which will undoubtedly be the foundation for much further research. Similarly, Liu Pujiang 劉浦江 and Kang Peng 康鵬 in their "Forenames and Courtesy Names of the Khitans" tease out a pattern of father-son name linkage in the surviving Khitan-language texts that is valuable both as a clue in how to read the partially deciphered Khitan script and for what it says about Khitan society.

Rong Xinjiang's 榮新江 "Religious Background to the An Lushan Rebellion" and Wang Xiaofu's 王小甫 "Establishment of the Khitan State and Uyghur Culture" both look at western (i.e. Middle Eastern) religious influences on the culture of people living on the border between the North China plain and the Mongolian steppes. Although both scholars deploy impressive knowledge of the sources, my personal feeling is that they adopt somewhat over-simplified views of how religion is practiced, particularly in public life. The recent turn in religious studies from a focus on abstract doctrine and discrete cultural markers to a more ethnographic focus on religions in practice does not appear to have had much influence on Chinese Inner Asian studies yet.

Wu Yugui 吳玉貴 ("Turks in the Gaochang Provisioning Texts"), Jiang Boqin 姜伯勤 ("Chinese Persia Expeditionary Force"), and Luo Feng 羅豐 ("Liquor Still and Milk-Wine Distilling Technology in the Mongol-Yuan Period") all make use of new discoveries recently excavated, whether texts or material objects, to revisit long-standing issues. These three studies all highlight the growing importance of new archeological discoveries in rewriting the history of Inner Asia. They also illustrate the way in which such discoveries are interpreted within a textual framework, based primarily on the existing classical Chinese source tradition. Chinese academic traditions, unlike the British or American ones, link archeology to history, not to anthropology, a link only amplified by the crucial importance of archeologically-unearthed texts in rewriting history.

Cai Meibiao's 蔡美彪 "Khitan Tribal Organization and the Birth of the Khitan State," Yekeminghadai Irinchin's 亦鄰真 "Regarding the Mongol *Bo'ol* in the 11th

and 12th Centuries," and Yao Dali's "From Tribal Confederacy to Ethnic Community" all tackle the range of questions found under the rubric of "state formation" and "ethnogenesis." Professors Cai and Irinchin both follow basically Marxist categories in addressing this issues, but since (as Adam Kuper pointed out in his *Invention of Primitive Society*) "state formation" is the subfield in which there is the most common ground between Marxist and non-Marxist social thought, none but the most fastidious of bourgeois thinkers will find the framework inherently objectionable. Of course whether this "tribe to state" paradigm is worth embracing in either bourgeois or proletarian guise is a separate question, one to which I would return a much more negative answer. Despite his title, Professor Yao's discussion is rather less invested in this class-based "tribe to state" paradigm, and is rather focused more on issues of ethnic identity. As I mentioned I personally found it to be a fitting close to the outstanding papers collected here.

The translator-editors deserve tremendous accolades for taking on this vast task and acquitting themselves of it so well. Needless to say, there are a number of scattered errors in equivalences—for example *Wangji* 汪吉 is not the Önggüd of p. 381, nor the Wang Ji of p. 461, but rather the Ongi (classical orthography Onggi) River of modern southwestern Mongolia. Such lapses are inevitable and appear in all such works (including mine, of course). They would not be worth mentioning except that many non-Chinese speaking scholars will be tempted to treat this volume's impressive translated scholarship as the last word on the topic. For that reason, it might be worth repeating the caution that as with all scholarship, corroboration is essential and no one scholar's word is final.

But all such quibbles aside, this attractively-produced volume brilliantly fulfills its mission to present to English-speaking readers a range of Chinese scholarship on Inner Asia. In so doing it should prompt scholars who already read some Chinese (perhaps slowly) to dig deeper into the existing literature they know exists but may not have fully appreciated. For those who do not, the articles will be important sources for alternative perspectives and previously under-appreciated sources. Finally, for students beginning to approach Central and Inner Asian studies, the volume should serve as a challenge to consider whether mastering classical and modern Chinese might not be the right study in which to invest time and effort. For this, the editors are to be lauded.