

the written, elevated lurid details to the point of horror, and poked holes in the state's claims to legitimacy. Johnson's "underground historians" (a gloss on the Chinese *minjian* 民间, which could mean "popular," "folk," or simply "unofficial") follow all these conventions. They are storytellers rather than academics, even if they hold academic positions. They aim at educating mass audiences rather than excavating the absolute truth of disputed events. They are not memoirists—few are victims of the horrors they describe, though many have personal connections. In the early 2000s, many of the now-underground figures circulated in public. They published in liberal newspapers and historical magazines, they hosted salons, and they showed their work at film festivals. More recently, these public venues have shut down. Johnson is interested in the tipping point represented by the advent of digital file-sharing methods, which has allowed underground historians, particularly filmmakers, to work in open secret and to ensure their materials are found outside China as well as within.

Though not explicitly stated, *Sparks* is in conversation with a formidable body of scholarship on the role of intellectuals and the politics of historical memory in modern China. Most notably, Sebastian Veg's 2019 book *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* profiled an overlapping cast of individuals and concerns. But whereas Veg and others are interested in intellectuals' broader social presence, in *Sparks*, Johnson hones in on their ability to keep politically unwelcome topics in public conversation. According to Johnson, these "underground historians" have been remarkably successful in maintaining awareness of tragic stories of the recent past within China, and to a lesser sense beyond. In this way, their activities as "historians" are most relevant because they seek to ensure that experiences like prison labor camps, forced removals, and minority experiences during the Cultural Revolution remain part of Chinese history and are not written out by the domineering state.

Recent pressure upon academic historians and institutions in China to toe the line on sensitive topics, such as ethnicity, empire, gender, and relations with the West, makes the efforts of these unorthodox intellectuals even more impressive, but also introduces anxiety: What lies in the future for the "historians" themselves? And what will be the outcome of their work? Notably, Xi Jinping's efforts to invalidate historical projects that question the Communist Party's successful steering of China to present-day glory resembles other international political movements that have become increasingly resistant to the acknowledgment of systematic wrongs in the past or present.

Like Johnson's previous work, *Sparks* sits comfortably in the interstices of journalism and academic study. In this book, Johnson also strikes notes

of advocacy. As a journalist, Johnson has long been engaged with religious and civil society movements in China. These close associations allow him to make claims with ease about his interlocutors' motivations and interests. He contextualizes their stories with measured references to academic theory, particularly in the realm of memory studies. For instance, Johnson uses scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen's concept of "just memory"—a version of memory considered acceptable by those on multiple sides of a conflict—to criticize the Chinese Communist Party's heavy-handed deployment of myths and its refusal to accept popular memory as history. Johnson also decries Americans' willingness to accept blanket representations of Chinese intellectuals as complicit with current regime. Why, he asks, are Chinese dissident intellectuals not celebrated, hosted, or at least known in the West in ways comparable to the embrace of Soviet dissident intellectuals in the 1980s?

This book's journey to fruition was interrupted in 2020, when Johnson was forced to leave China during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, both Johnson and some of his main subjects—such as Ai Xiaoming—began to look with interest and fear at the Chinese government's handling of the initial outbreak and its subsequent zero COVID policies—as well as the men and women who conspicuously spoke out against these practices in the form of smuggled diaries, WeChat posts, and videos. Their inclusion in this volume suggests continuity between present-day repression and the overt violence of the Mao era. Though an awkward fit, these stories are a reminder that all historical sources were once documents of the present. As portrayed by Johnson in *Sparks*, the stakes seem higher than ever in present-day China to keep "underground" histories and experiences visible.

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**Adeeb Khalid.** *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present.* Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 576. Cloth \$35.00.

In an illustrious career spanning some four decades, Adeeb Khalid has explored the effects of Russian and then Soviet rule on Central Asian (especially Uzbekistani) Muslim societies. His previous three books have examined Jadist reform under the tsars, the role of Muslim intelligentsia in shaping early Soviet nationalities policies in Uzbekistan, and the question of what happened to Muslim societies after the collapse of the USSR. In the acknowledgments to this his fourth book, *Central Asia: A New History*, Khalid writes that it "synthesizes most of what I know about Central Asia." He does this geographically by expanding his focus outside Uzbekistan—particularly including East

Turkestan (the Uyghur homeland)—and conceptually by identifying how a range of political, intellectual, and religious ideas and movements impacted the region.

Khalid begins his text with an insistence on the centrality of Central Asia. Growing up in the 1970s in Pakistan, he tells us, although his hometown of Lahore was only twelve hundred kilometers from Tashkent, “it might as well have been on a different planet” because travel was difficult and news in short supply (2). He provides other anecdotes about how, from US diplomatic practice to Japanese documentary makers and British comedians, Central Asia was seen as inscrutable, exotic, timeless and unknown. This general level of ignorance is arguably no longer the case, and an early-career scholar embarking on a similar project today would be less likely to place their argument in such a framework. But it makes sense of Khalid’s formative experiences, and he uses it to compelling effect to insist that Central Asia “has experienced every current of modern history, every achievement of modernity and every one of its disasters, and every extreme of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (3).

Following an introduction that offers a whistle-stop overview of the region’s history up until the eighteenth century, Khalid unpacks this argument through four sections. Over seven chapters, the first section covers the Manchu/Qing Chinese conquests of Eastern Turkestan and the tsarist Russian conquest of Western Turkestan. But this is not simply a story of empire: Khalid draws out the complex and contrasting responses of local intelligentsias in attempting to respond to and mold new colonial political realities. The section concludes with a chapter on the collapse of the Qing and tsarist empires in the 1910s. This intertwining of the stories of both parts of Turkestan is a defining and standout feature of the text.

Section 2, “Revolution,” continues the story by following the immediate aftermath of Qing and Tsarist rule. It traces well-worn themes, such as the ways that socialist feminism influenced gender norms and practices, and how Central Asia was divided up along ethnonational lines with new territorial boundaries. Chapter 10 epitomizes the book’s framing, as Khalid shows Central Asia (East and West Turkestan) as a nexus of global ideas and movements in the revolutionary period, and how the Russian Civil War spilled over from Western into Eastern Turkestan.

The remaining two sections, “Communism” and “Post-Communism,” are much shorter. This reflects Khalid’s expertise, and they are based more on extrapolations and informed observation and reflection than on the same depth of detailed research that underpinned the earlier sections. Nonetheless they are delivered with some panache. For example, in the Communism section, Khalid pithily summarizes both the intent and the contradictions of Soviet nationality

policy by writing, “All nations were destined to tread the path of progress to the final destination of a classless society, but they were to do so in their own languages and wearing their own costumes” (212).

Section 4 sketches the divergent paths that post-Soviet states have taken as they found themselves cast, unwittingly, into an increasingly neoliberal world of nation-states. The final chapter summarizes the horrors of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) so-called “de-extremification” policy in East Turkestan. Informed by media, human rights, and academic reporting, it also includes a personal anecdote, based on a visit Khalid took to Xinjiang in 2019 on what he describes as “the strangest research trip of my career” (493). He reports seeing shut-down mosques draped with CCP propaganda banners. Since the book was published, we have become aware of ever more terrible developments. In view of this, it is surprising that both here and throughout the book Khalid does not more explicitly identify militant atheism as one of the extreme currents of modernist thought that Central Asia has seen inflicted upon it since the 1910s.

The book’s conclusion steps back and contrasts Soviet and Chinese Communist policies on Turkestan. Soviet developmentalism enshrined ethnic-based nations (Uzbek, Kazakh, etc.) as part of the greater Soviet project, whereas the CCP seeks to advance a nation defined as Han Chinese. In Khalid’s view, this accounts for Western Turkestan now being free of colonial rule while Eastern Turkestan still languishes under it. Khalid puts this down to “Marx’s philosophical moorings” (501). To this reviewer’s mind, given that the CCP came to believe it represented a more authentic interpretation of Marx than its Soviet counterpart, that is only partially correct. It misses how Communist development was territorialized differently in the USSR (*federal* Soviet Socialist Republics) than China (Xinjiang as a “new province”). Had Chechnya, for example, been federated along the same political geographical lines as the Uzbek or Kyrgyz SSRs, it would likely have become independent in 1991—instead, Russia fought two brutal wars on the Chechens to prevent them gaining the independence that their leaderships sought. As a geographer, I would suggest that Khalid seems to view space as the inert stage on which real historical ideas progress and therefore underplays its crucial role in the story he tells.

Nonetheless, the real genius of this book is precisely its geographical framing. By insisting that East and West Turkestan are an inseparable part of the same story, and by fleshing that out throughout each stage of the book, he subjects a critical lens to the ongoing activities of the CCP in the Uyghur homeland that many scholars and international lawyers are increasingly naming as genocide. Too often, in its research, publications, teaching, and conferences, the scholarly

field has looked at post-Soviet Central Asia and forgotten its Chinese-occupied counterpart. This is to fall into what political geographers call “the territorial trap,” viewing the world through the lens of the nation-state. Khalid shows that, given the cultural, religious, political, and historical linkages across Turkestan, this is inadmissible. His approach should serve as a model for wider scholarship on Central Asia.

When Khalid opened this book by saying that he was going to tell the reader almost everything he knows about his favorite subject, I felt a certain sense of trepidation—not least because I had read quite a lot of what he had previously written. This fear proved unfounded. *Central Asia: A New History* is precisely that, revisiting familiar themes through a fresh lens. Khalid invites the reader to stand back and see the bigger picture of how a range of powerful modern forces impacted Turkestan (East and West). Adeptly balancing rigorous scholarly insight with broadly accessible prose, this book is an excellent introduction to the modern history of the region. It will be useful to established scholars and students alike, as well as appealing to the general reader. Given the tragedy unfolding in the Uyghur homeland, it is also stamped by a political urgency that demands a wider readership.

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**Paul Kreitman.** *Japan's Ocean Borderlands: Nature and Sovereignty*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 300. Cloth \$110.00.

In this extensively researched and engaging study, Paul Kreitman considers how “the conditions under which particular ideas about how the natural world ought to be governed came to take hold” (20). Focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on uninhabited islands in the Pacific and South China Sea, he tracks the economic activities and territorial thinking that turned these sites into spaces of imperialist and post-imperialist competition and sovereignty-making, as well as the environmental factors that augmented or reduced their value to private and state actors, from Japan and the Euro-American empires to China and Taiwan. Examining both the rapacious extraction that led humans to claim these islands and the ways that wildlife conservation campaigns shaped international relations, he elucidates “the connections, dialectical inversions, and latent continuities between these two ways of claiming” (15).

Kreitman begins with the Bonin Islands, showing how long-distance whaling expeditions in the North Pacific produced a “trans-Pacific maritime proletariat,” the gunboat diplomacy and extraterritorial imperialism that protected whalers and their goods along

their routes, and the Euro-American beachcombers who exploited these structures to assert leadership of island settlements. After unsuccessful Tokugawa attempts to colonize the Bonins in the 1860s, the Meiji state incorporated them and their inhabitants into Japanese territory by 1882, succeeding because their value as a provisioning hub had not materialized, and the dwindling beachcomber population found themselves devoid of powerful overseas defenders.

As the whaling industry declined, Anglo and Japanese prospectors plunged into a rush for guano for fertilizer and feathers for mass-market fashions, massacring bird populations as they justified their claims to uninhabited bird islands via the dominant imperialist logic of settling land and making it productive. The US and Japanese governments each sought pragmatic advantages, but imperialist anxieties over the latter’s plans to annex Marcus Island (Minami Torishima) nearly led to military conflict in 1902. American naturalists next turned to a rhetoric of conservation to repel what they saw as an invasion by Japanese bird-hunters of US territory in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. As Kreitman observes, the Japanese government’s decision to mollify US concerns via measures to suppress bird-hunters paralleled the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” limiting Japanese migration to the US.

By the time of World War I, Japanese guano and phosphate mining entrepreneurs had gained support from navy leaders interested in resource security but primarily in remote islands’ potential as submarine and air bases. The militarization of the islands in the 1930s fully trumped civilian economic interests (as well as Foreign Ministry efforts to cooperate with China regarding resource and sovereignty claims in the South China Sea). War brought massive destruction and, in the case of Micronesia’s inhabited islands, intensified oppression of the indigenous population. Japan had already abandoned a number of islands by 1945 and would abandon dozens more over the following decades (while regaining the Bonins and the Ryūkyūs from US control in 1968 and 1972, respectively). Remote inhabited islands that remained under Japanese control (such as Hachijōjima, whose inhabitants had played a key role in settling other islands) became sites of profound economic crisis tied to anxieties about national survival, to which the government responded with infrastructure projects and economic subsidies.

Conservation campaigns, meanwhile, facilitated Japan’s reintegration into the postwar order. Complementing Annika Culver’s recent study, Kreitman shows how elite Japanese ornithologists worked with US occupation authorities to normalize the understanding that Japan’s democratization and civilized status hinged on its people’s ability to conserve nature. By the late 1950s, aided by the resurrection of Steller’s