

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Theorizing Violence in Mongolia

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Christopher Kaplonski. *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014. 280 pp. \$54.00 (cloth).

Franck Billé. *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$57.00 (cloth).

In early 2015 an intellectual kerfuffle erupted about the state of violence in our contemporary world. On one side of this debate were scholars like Steven Pinker (2012) and Richard Bessel (2015), who argue that things are getting better; namely, the amount of violence today is at historical lows. This is an argument that others, such as John Gray and Nassim Nicholas Taleb, find preposterous.¹ Whatever the case may be, it is certainly true that violence still exists in today’s world and that many scholars are trying to explain it. Indeed, understanding such violence is the driving force behind the excellent books under review here—two works that not only bring Mongolia into these larger intellectual debates but do so through an engagement with two distinct theoretical approaches to the question of violence: Giorgio Agamben’s political philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

On Christmas Day 1933, when Joseph Stalin met with two leaders of the Mongolian People’s Revolution Party (MPP), he asked them, “Who do people trust more, you or the lamas?” They replied, “The lamas,” and Stalin apparently responded, “Chinggis Khan wouldn’t have put up with this; he would have killed them all.” Yet, even after this admonishment, the leaders of Communist Mongolia did not go after the lamas, who continued to be a problem. The following year, when Prime Minister Genden spoke about the “fundamental threat” the lamas

posed to the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), Stalin observed, "It looks as if there is a state within your state. One government is Genden's government. The other is the lamas'."

Stalin's observation explains in a nutshell "the lama question" that shaped so much of the early history of the MPR; namely, how could this fledgling Socialist state break the power of the Buddhist establishment and thereby shore up its own legitimacy, but in a manner that would not alienate the vast majority of Mongols? Of course, as is well known, the final solution to this question was—as Stalin suggested—a bloodbath. In the late 1930s the MPRP killed more than 18,000 lamas (as well as 18,000 Buriats and other intellectuals) and destroyed hundreds of monasteries (figure 1). Thus, from September 1937 to July 1938, the number of lamas dropped from 82,203 to 562. The lama question was thereby solved.



Figure 1. Ruined monastery outside Ulaanbaatar, 2009. Photo by C. Kaplonski.

As much social theorizing has noted, violence and political terror can be effective means of consolidating state power. Indeed, the list of twentieth-century governments that used mass violence to initially shore up their legitimacy is both long and sordid, from Taiwan to Argentina, Chile to Indonesia, and Singapore to Iran. Yet in Mongolia, the turn to mass violence was

apparently something of a last resort, and thus Christopher Kaplonski, in *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia*, grounds his work on the perplexing question: why did it take so long?

In exploring this question, Kaplonski begins by rejecting the conventional explanation, which has it that the Mongols were simply following orders from Moscow. As such, the mass killings in Mongolia are thus generally explained as being simply an extension of Stalin's Great Purge. Yet, as Kaplonski convincingly shows, this was not case. Moreover, as he is at pains to explain, this facile explanation obscures the specificities of the Mongol case and also lets the Mongols too easily off the hook. They were the ones who actually did the killings, and they did so not on Stalin's order, but on their own, after realizing that their sixteen-year-long careful, deliberative, and legal approach to the lama question had ultimately failed.

It is precisely this complicated process—and all its twists and turns—that Kaplonski brilliantly brings to light through his remarkable use of the recently opened archives in Mongolia. In so doing, he not only rewrites the early history of the MPR but also uses the Mongolian case to reappraise the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of the exception and scholarly approaches to state political violence:

Agamben notes that the state of exception is, in essence, rule by decree rather than rule of law, and it is this that makes it an “exception.” It is “state power's immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts” (Agamben 2005, 2), or what is more commonly known in English or American terminology as a “state of emergency.” Agamben's concept of the exception has been a starting point for much fruitful work in recent anthropology, particularly since it focuses attention on state violence as foundational. (6)

Yet, as Kaplonski notes, Agamben's work has two major flaws. The first is its overarching unitary model, which recognizes only a single “state of exception” and thus a single mode of action (i.e., political violence). Drawing on recent anthropological literature that recognizes the dynamic and contested nature of the state—as well as Geertz's idea that sovereignty is performance—Kaplonski proposes instead that states use a range of techniques and policies to contain the exception. And these “technologies of exception” are the “constellation of policies, propaganda, and a range of forms of violence—structural, symbolic, physical—that were enacted at various times” (28).

In particular, Kaplonski argues that the MPRP employed three distinct technologies of exception; in doing so, they betrayed an overriding concern with legality. Thus, contrary to Agamben, who juxtaposes rule by decree with rule by law, the Mongolian case and its technologies of exception were fundamentally about consolidating power under a legalistic regime. Thus, “rather than seeking recourse to a state of exception, the Mongolian state’s emphasis on legality highlights an attempt to encompass or even deny the exception rather than to exclude it. The exception needs to be contained, to be made unexceptional. To do otherwise, to highlight the exception, could be read as highlighting the contingent nature of the state” (7).

Indeed, the weak nature of the Mongolian state was a fundamental issue in the MPRP’s deliberations on the lama question. In short, they had neither the power nor the legitimacy to take on the Buddhist establishment, which wielded enormous economic, political, and social power at the time. Thus, in dealing with the lamas, the MPRP was trying not simply to contain this exception, but also to do so in such a way that the approaches taken would be accepted as legitimate and thereby justify their sovereign claims to power. It was a delicate balance, making the exception seem unexceptional. Unlike in Agamben’s model of exception, whereby certain groups can readily be declared “bare life” (*zoe*) and thus outside the *bios* and thus outside the protection of the law—like Jews in Nazi Germany—the reincarnated lamas “simply had too much meaning to be declared ‘bare life,’ killable. That is, their cultural and social resonances were too strong; they could not simply be removed from the sphere of *bios*” (87).

For this reason, the MPRP developed other technologies of exception, which it used not only to contain the lamas but also to legitimate its own sovereign claims to power. In this regard, it is important to recall that the government was attempting to shape a new society and new people to live in that society. As Kaplonski aptly puts it, the MPRP was trying to socialize a country and people that resembled a pre-Reformation European kingdom. This was no easy task, and the measures taken to deal with the lama question need to be seen as part of wider technologies of state power and state building, including everything from hygiene and literacy campaigns to building a modern military. Thus, the first technology of exception that Kaplonski identifies was carried out from 1926 to 1934 and involved non-physical violence, such as punitive taxation, propaganda, and bans on certain practices, as well as offering education and job opportunities to the lamas. The party also advocated for the lamas to adopt “Purer Buddhism” (37–38), meaning a reformed, modern Buddhism. Yet these approaches failed,

especially on account of the “Leftist deviation” and the 1932 civil war it generated. The second technology, carried out from 1934 to 1937, shifted the focus toward class-based critiques. Indeed, unlike the Soviets, the MPRP never attacked religion directly—many party members were in fact Buddhist—and thus in this phase the lamas were not attacked for being bad Buddhists, or even for being Buddhists at all, but for being class enemies.

Both of these technologies were carried out through conventional legal channels and not done arbitrarily. There were no special commissions, military tribunals, or nighttime raids—in other words, nothing “exceptional.” It was all done according to the law, since, as Kaplonski rightfully notes, “arbitrariness is not a hallmark of a legal, functioning polity” (227). Indeed, in dealing with the lama question, the MPRP was trying to “contain the exceptional (uprisings and resistance to the state) within the ordinary, to perform sovereignty through the application of legal procedures.” And this focus on legality continued even when the MPRP finally did turn to the third technology of exception—namely, state terror. Thus, again, unlike in the Soviet Union, where the Great Purge was carried out through legendary show trials, the killing of lamas in Mongolia was all done by the book, so to speak. In other words, contrary to Agamben’s claim that the exception is dealt with by extraordinary means, the Mongolian case offers us evidence of the reverse. It also contradicts much theorizing about states carrying out violence simply since it is deemed “effective” or a “practical tool.” In the case of Mongolia, the opposite was true: violence was avoided precisely because it would delegitimize the state.

Of course, as such, the lama question in early socialist Mongolia may seem to be an exception itself. Yet viewing it that way would be a mistake. As Kaplonski notes in his conclusion, “My contribution to the debate has been to show why and when states we may perceive as authoritarian and inclined to violence avoid turning to it” (226). And understanding that reality is extremely important; thus, Kaplonski should truly be commended for writing a remarkably rich and theoretically sophisticated work that addresses fundamental issues of our time.

Another fundamental issue of our time is intolerance and hatred of others. As Rodney King famously asked, “Why can’t we all get along?” It is a good question, and one that scholars have explored from a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, using as test cases any of the innumerable fault lines around the world (black and white, Hutu and Tutsi, Indian and Pakistani, Jew and Palestinian, Serb and Bosnian, Russian and Ukrainian, Turk and Kurd, etc.).

And, invariably, there are probably as many explanations for why, say, Jews and Palestinians keep killing each other as there are people trying to answer the question. Indeed, it is this conundrum that drove Franck Billé to try to better understand the rise of virulent anti-Chinese sentiments in Mongolia over the last twenty years. To his mind, none of the conventional explanations—such as the old standby of ancient historical or “tribal” animosities, or the newer fear created by the economic and political rise of China—is sufficient. Rather, he believes that we need to go deeper. We need psychological explanations. Thus, he brings to the task “Lacanian theory, most specifically by the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis spearheaded by Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2005, 2008b), Mladen Dolar (1991), Renata Salecl (1994, 2004), and Alenka Zupančič (2003)” (8).

On one level, I find such a “psychological turn” remarkably refreshing. At the same time, however, I also agree with Noam Chomsky that Lacan is a “total fraud.”² Moreover, as anyone who has had the misfortune of trying to read Lacanian theory can attest, doing so is generally a far from pleasant—much less sensible—experience. For example, here is Billé using the Lacanian theory of individuation and its link with language acquisition to explain Mongol anxieties about their southern neighbor:

The residue of the Real, which Lacan termed *objet petit a*, is by definition an excessive object, something that lacks a place in the structure (Žižek 2005, 174). It is linked to the process of individuation insofar as it stands as the “hypothetical mother/child unity” (Moore 2007, 54) and represents “part of the pre-oedipal real that exists after and despite separation from the mother” (Moore 2007, 55). In contrast to the Big Other, the ego ideal with which the subject identifies (Salecl 1998, 98), the *objet a* is not external to the subject but stands as the original lost subject (Žižek 1989, 178). Since not all of the Real can become symbolized through language, entry into the Symbolic necessarily leads to a splitting of the subject. The *objet a*—that which remains outside symbolization—then turns into an object of desire (or more precisely an object around which desire circulates). At the same time, the *objet a* represents a threat, since individuation is contingent on continued separation from it and regeneration of the lost object would destabilize the boundaries between subject and object. (64)

Despite my misgivings, if Lacanian theory is what got Billé to make sense of the recent surge in Mongol animosity toward the Chinese, then it has apparently served some purpose. If you strip away all the jargon, then the fact of the matter is that he actually has a really great argument, which is that “Sinophobia is intimately connected to Mongols’ desire to distance themselves from China and Asia as a whole, and that this ambition is problematic because

Mongols appear, physically and ‘racially,’ to be Asian” (3). Or, simply put, they’re self-hating Mongols.

Of course, to understand this predicament a little history is in order. In particular, we must review the Mongol experience of seventy years under Communist rule, when they were made to believe that everything good, clean, modern, scientific, and dynamic came from the West. In other words, they swallowed whole the conventional Orientalist paradigm whereby everything from the East—with China standing as a synecdoche for the whole—was understood as bad, dirty, feudal, irrational, and static. And, as Billé brilliantly reveals based on a reading of a fascinating array of cultural products—from newspapers to graffiti, and movies to rap songs—the Mongols learned these Soviet lessons exceedingly well. Moreover, as he also poignantly makes clear, on account of Sino-Soviet tensions, there were virtually no real interactions between Mongols and Chinese for almost seventy years. Even the Department of Sinology at the main university in Ulaanbaatar was closed in 1965. Thus, it should perhaps be no surprise that very few Mongols really know anything about China, much less actual Chinese people. Nor should it be a surprise that when they do go to China, meet Chinese people, or eat Chinese food, they often find that they actually like all of them.

Such cognitive dissonance is seemingly inherent to many cross-cultural conflicts; this, as psychoanalytic theory tells us, is the rub. It is precisely such unresolved tensions that lead to irrational anxieties, and ultimately violence. In the Mongol case, a great example of this tension lies in the pervasive notion of Mongolness as residing in some idealized nomadism, although the reality is that 75 percent of Mongols now live in cities and find the countryside “boring” and “dirty” (see figure 2).

Indeed, as Billé reveals in a fascinating chapter on the medical and hygiene discourses of the Soviet period, it was precisely through such processes that the benchmarks of modernity came to be premised on an erasure of the Mongols’ Asianness. And thus, as Billé further makes clear, it is for this reason that these tensions and anxieties rarely generate violence directed outward. Rather, on account of such discourses being bound up with intraethnic notions of Mongolness, the victims of Sinophobia are actually other Mongols, especially those “bad subjects” who do not conform to socially sanctioned desires and behaviors, such as female prostitutes and gay men, whose “readiness to interact with Chinese men on a physical and

emotional level may simply be a relinquishment of the very idea of resistance, a loss of belief in the very need for the nation to resist” (191).



Figure 2. Gated community in Ulaanbaatar, 2009. Photo by C. Kaplonski.

The importance of giving up such resistance rests on the fact that at the core of all the anxieties and tensions that shape the multifarious discourses of Sinophobia is the fear that Mongolia may potentially disappear. This fear is shaped by everything from historical memories of the Qing dynasty, to foreign mining companies currently exploiting Mongolia’s natural resources, to contemporary Mongolia’s falling fertility rate. And thus, since “Mongolia’s existence remains contingent on absolute separation of China, it is no less dependent on the continued existence of China itself. The notion of *ressentiment* against a historical injury on which contemporary Mongolianness largely articulates is reactive by its very nature; as a result, it ‘needs a hostile external world in order to exist at all’ (Brown 1995, 44)” (196).

One is invariably left with the question of what to do. Are these problems intractable? Can the irrational fears of the Other that shape oneself be remedied? Can it be done by

something as simple as learning more about “those people”? Or by meeting them? Sleeping with them? Or with psychoanalysis? Billé concludes with a hopeful story:

[My informants] related one thing that had really touched them, following the Sichuan earthquake [in May 2008]. They had thought, deep down, that the Mongols wouldn't care. However, as it turned out, they were surprised to see so many Mongols coming to the [Chinese] consulate every day to express their sympathy and to make donations. An elderly Mongol entered the consulate and, having located Sichuan on the map that hung on the wall, immediately knelt to the ground (“Zai Mengguguo de jianwen” 2008). (198)

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Notes

- 1 John Gray, “Steven Pinker Is Wrong about Violence and War,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining>; Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “The ‘Long Peace’ Is a Statistical Illusion,” <http://www.fooledbyrandomness.com/pinker.pdf>.
- 2 “Noam Chomsky Slams Žižek and Lacan: Empty ‘Posturing,’” *Philosophy*, June 28, 2013, http://www.openculture.com/2013/06/noam_chomsky_slams_zizek_and_lacan_empty_posturing.html.

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