

BOOK REVIEW

Judd Kinzley,

Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China's Borderlands

(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018)

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Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China's Borderlands by Judd Kinzley is a conceptually innovative and meticulously researched history of the material foundations of twentieth-century state power in Xinjiang (literally “new frontier” in English). Drawing predominantly on Russian and Chinese language archives in Moscow, Beijing, Taipei, and Urumqi, the book tells how Xinjiang’s vast resource wealth was surveyed, mapped, and extracted by Russia and China-based states after its conquest by the Qing through to the early years of the People’s Republic. The principal argument of the *Natural Resources and the New Frontier* is that the physical and institutional infrastructure built during the late nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries by Russian, Chinese, and provincial regimes to extract and transport the region’s resource wealth formed the “bones of state power” in Xinjiang. Most of the foreign state capital that made up these “bones”—predominantly from the Soviet Union—was located in northern Xinjiang. This ultimately established a geographically and ethnically uneven pattern of development that has persisted through to today. It is from this extractive infrastructure that different political regimes drew their strength, including the People’s Republic of China (8).

Natural Resources and the New Frontier is divided into an introduction and two main parts, spread across eight chapters. In the introduction, Kinzley points out that one of the obstacles to constructing a history of Xinjiang in the early twentieth century is that political power—local or foreign—was always tenuous and ephemeral (6). The problem thus lies in finding ways to understand and conceptualize the “contingent” and patchwork nature of state building in Xinjiang. Indeed, extractive sites were chosen for a variety of complex reasons: their proximity to the Soviet Union, shifts in global demand for different commodities, the political needs of local regimes, and the production of knowledge about Xinjiang’s resources through geological surveys. The result was a “disjointed mish-mash of infrastructure and institutions” built by an array of (sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating) transnational actors (2).¹

Kinzley helpfully invents the “layered” model of state formation as a conceptual framework to help make sense of this “disjointed mish-mash” (2). When a political regime wants to extract resources from a previously untapped frontier region, it necessarily must survey that region, build extractive capital

around resource nodes, and then build transportation infrastructure to move that material. In a remote and distant place like Xinjiang, subsequent political regimes (local or foreign) are incentivized to use and expand upon the prior “layer.” A “layer” then is not merely material or infrastructural. It also includes knowledge in the form of maps, blueprints, technical manuals, and geological surveys as well as the institutions used to control extractive labor. Scholars studying the history of imperial borderlands around the world will find this term useful for conceptualizing how the extractive interests of imperial powers can transform the dispersion of state power in a borderland region over time and across political regimes.

The bulk of the book tells the story of the ever-thickening sedimentation of state layers in northern Xinjiang, from the late Qing to the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. Most chapters are thematically focused on a resource or set of resources and the “state layer” that was established in order to extract and transport that resource. Chapters 2 through 4 form part 1, titled “Lucrative Products and the Pursuit of Profit.” Chapter 2 begins with the failed attempt by the late Qing government to turn Xinjiang’s vast northern steppe into productive farmland. Such an accomplishment was seen by Qing officials as the “key to transformation of th[e] poor, restive border region” (26). This project, however, failed: perennial fiscal crises and uprisings among Turkic Muslim communities forced Han settlers to return east. One of the key takeaways in this chapter is that the failure of the steppe agriculturalization schemes motivated Han governors to think of new ways to fund their military control of the region. When exposed to Western ideas that explicitly linked national power to mineral resource extraction, Chinese officials developed a new type of “seeing” Xinjiang’s landscape. Borrowing the term “geological vision” from geographer Bruce Braun, Kinzley describes how Chinese officials were increasingly focused “on uncovering the geological secrets locked away beneath the landscape” (39).

Chapter 4 is about the earliest infrastructural layers laid in northern Xinjiang by Russian and later Soviet agents in collaboration with local officials of the Qing and Republican regimes. Though now covetous of Xinjiang’s “geological secrets,” Chinese regimes lacked the state capacity, basic capital, and geological expertise needed to extract those minerals. The Russian empire, having now conveniently expanded into Central Asia, did. Republican governor Yang

Zengxin worked with Russian and later Soviet agents to survey and build extraction sites around oil and gold deposits in northern Xinjiang, close to the border with the Russian empire. The maps, geological surveys, mines, extractive instruments, and transportation infrastructure that resulted from this Sino-Russian “collaboration” served as the first state “layer” in northern Xinjiang (45). So important was this infrastructure that, “by the 1920s, Xinjiang’s resource map was effectively frozen in amber” (65).

In chapter 4, Kinzley introduces non-mineral commodities that were important parts of Xinjiang’s resource wealth, such as furs, pelts, wool, textiles, and medicinal herbs. Though these materials did not have to be mined or extracted, they did have to be collected and transported to other markets. As a result, local Han governors and Soviet agents worked together to build cross-border transportation networks. These roads and railways served to further thicken northern Xinjiang’s infrastructural layers. They also bound Xinjiang closer to the Soviet Union and its commodities closer to global markets.

Part 2, titled “Industrial Minerals and the Transformation of Xinjiang,” is composed of chapters 5 through 8. These chapters chronicle the turn in priorities among Soviet, Chinese, and local extractive agents toward the raw inputs needed to fuel industrialization, such as petroleum, beryllium, lithium, and other non-ferrous metals. In Chapter 5, Kinzley uses the conceptual vocabulary developed by scholars studying colonialism and imperialism elsewhere to argue that the Soviet Union’s sway over, (but not direct control of) Xinjiang and its resources during the 1930s was an example of “informal empire.” World War II caused the Soviet Union to seek “direct and unrestricted access to Xinjiang’s landscape”—the region’s distance from both Japan and Germany was a strategic asset (113). Sheng Shicai, the Republican governor at the time, granted the Soviet Union access to Xinjiang’s minerals in return for loans and military supplies. Xinjiang thus remained in an awkward state of limbo: infrastructurally and economically oriented toward the Soviet Union, politically still in tenuous orbit with the Republic of China.

Chapter 6 focuses on Sheng Shicai’s decision to reorient toward Chiang Kaishek and the Nationalist Party, based on Sheng’s assumption in 1942 that the Soviet Union was about to collapse. Despite the extraction efforts of Republican officials at this time, earlier Soviet capital investments left an “indelible stamp on the region that Chiang and planners in China were largely powerless to eliminate” (121). When the PRC was established in 1949, Soviet planners and technicians returned to Xinjiang, focusing primarily on the Dushanzi oil field. These sites served as “the seeds of CCP institutional control in the region” (149).

Chapter 7 elaborates how PRC state development in Xinjiang through the 1950s and the 1960s was grafted onto pre-1949 infrastructural layers. This infrastructure led to the migration of a large population of Han settlers and created “institutions of state power that served to bind the region to China” (150). One of the most intriguing parts of this chapter is Kinzley’s analysis of resource extraction in Xinjiang during the Great Leap

Forward, which saw the implementation of decentralized “mass-based solutions” to non-ferrous metal mining and oil drilling (170). The industrial goals of the Great Leap led to enormous human effort to process metal ores in Xinjiang and to find new extraction sites outside firmly established oil fields like Dushanzi. Kinzley writes that ultimately these efforts were “illusory” and unsustainable: many sites were too far from the pre-existing infrastructural and institutional layers and mines were haphazardly drilled anywhere and everywhere to little effect. Despite the early expansionary fervor of the Great Leap, the production targets of the Great Leap served mostly to thicken already-established layers: it was easier to meet targets by intensifying production at pre-existing sites than to start anew elsewhere (172).

Kinzley importantly points out, however, that there were still significant gains in metal ore and petroleum production and processing, at least in the beginning of the Great Leap. The mass, decentralized method of surveying also yielded new mining and drilling sites that future engineers and planners successfully exploited. As the reform period increasingly falls under the purview of “history,” this chapter will be useful for identifying connections and continuities between the mass campaigns of the Great Leap and the later economic gains during the reform period in Xinjiang.

The book concludes with chapter 8, wherein Kinzley skips forward in time and connects the uneven pattern of resource extraction and state formation in early twentieth-century Xinjiang with the “growing ethnocultural tensions in the region” witnessed in the twenty-first century (19). Kinzley argues that the abundance of state capital investments in Han-dominated northern Xinjiang—following the historical trend described above—has caused tensions with Xinjiang’s Uyghur inhabitants, most of whom live south of the Tianshan and thus outside these “layers.” Indeed, under the PRC, Han-populated northern Xinjiang has become the seat of political and economic power in the region and has developed a much higher per capita GDP. The data Kinzley marshals for this point is sobering: for example, the average per capita GDP for southern Xinjiang in 2003 was 5,207 yuan, while in northern Xinjiang it was 12,723 yuan (181-182).

Xinjiang’s north-south developmental chasm, however, is not the only relevant one here. Kinzley notes that the 1999 Open the West campaign, designed to bring western China’s development closer in line with coastal China’s, served to further concretize pre-existing state layers. Much of the discretionary funding granted Xinjiang by the central government was directed to extraction sites north of the Tianshan. The establishment of the One Belt, One Road project in 2013 has had a similar effect (179-180). The Chinese government has not been oblivious to this phenomenon, but increased state investment in impoverished Uyghur-dominated southern counties has still been “filter[ed] toward Han migrants with governmental connections” (184). Kinzley concludes of all this that it is as if “the geography of economic inequality has been...grafted onto the geography of ethnicity” (182). He reasons that the rise in interethnic violence post-1990 is

connected to the stark widening of Han north-Uyghur south differences in standard of living.

Kinzley's argument here that ethnic inequalities and the resulting unrest in Xinjiang are intimately linked to geographic imbalances in capital investment is convincing and important to the field. However, some readers may find that the book's occasional framing as principally about the material roots of contemporary interethnic tension fits a bit awkwardly the bulk of the book. The back-cover, for example, frames the book as part of a broader "search for the roots of...growing tensions" and as "tracing the buildup to this unstable situation" in the region. However, "ethnocultural tensions" do not feature centrally until this final chapter (which jumps ahead several decades). One reason for this is because Uyghurs themselves exist in a state of "textual apartheid"—a term that Kinzley borrows from Laura Newby to describe the way in which Uyghurs are largely written out of the Chinese textual record (15).² This framing could also be because Western public engagement on Xinjiang and Uyghur issues is mediated through headlines like "China's restive northwest," "terror attacks," and "forced internment." Regardless, it raises an important question: what are the effects of "interethnic unrest" functioning as the hegemonic framing of the field—the touchstone that every narrative, every study must relate to? It is ethically imperative that we flesh out the history of ethnic relations in Xinjiang, but we should also be wary that the totalizing pull of interethnic conflict does not parochialize a field that already, to some, seems peripheral to the history of "China-proper". We risk sharing broader insights only amongst ourselves, such as Kinzley's innovative model of "layered" state formation; his reminder that state expansion and imperialism in any context are deeply grounded in the material world; and his crucial observation that material flows not bounded by national borders nonetheless shape national histories.

Another outstanding question raised by this book is from chapter 5, where Kinzley argues that the relationship between Xinjiang and the Soviet Union is one of "informal empire." There is a growing consensus among Xinjiang scholars that terms like "imperialism" or "colonialism" are analytically useful for understanding the historical and contemporary relationship between Xinjiang and "China-proper."³ There is, though, less consensus about the specific nature of that relationship over time and across regimes as well as its comparability to other colonial systems. Kinzley's focus on the processes of massive material extraction in Xinjiang as it relates to the Soviet Union *and* the early PRC means he is well situated to add an important perspective to this debate. One closes the book convinced that "informal empire" is an accurate term to

describe the extractive relationship between the Soviet Union and Xinjiang, but less certain to which (or whether) imperial or colonial vocabularies are useful for describing the material relationship between Xinjiang and the PRC.

Lastly, one of the most important insights from the first half of the book follows from Kinzley's application of the idea that human extraction and use of non-human material are necessarily predicated on value judgements, ideas, and beliefs about the proper use of that material. In this sense, Kinzley's book is partly a discursive history both of resource extraction in China and of Xinjiang's landscape—though he does not use this term to describe what he is doing. I noted three discursive shifts. The first was when Qing elites increasingly saw Xinjiang as less an empty, barren landscape and more a place that could be "made up of ordered, governable fields" through the agriculturalization of northern Xinjiang's steppe (28). A second shift occurred when these land reclamation schemes failed and "Qing officials came to believe the key to so called 'wealth and power' (*fuqiang*) could be found in the way that Western states managed territory and the more active role that they played in promoting the production of various resources" (38) A third discursive shift occurred in the twilight years of the Qing when Chinese officials developed Bruce Braun's aforementioned "geological vision" (39). Emily Baum, Ruth Rogaski, and Janet Chen have used Foucauldian discourse analysis to illuminate the realms of psychology, hygiene, and poverty in Republican China.⁴ I hope that a lasting contribution of this book is to open the conversation about "Xinjiang" (or other imaginatively-bounded landscapes) and "natural resources" as discursive spaces worth analyzing in twentieth-century China.

As a final note, I would encourage readers to look at Judd Kinzley's photo essay published in *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*.⁵ It includes some wonderful photographs of the "material detritus" left behind by decades of resource extraction that nicely complement the array of maps included in the book.

¹ This ultimately pits the book against nationalist narratives promoted by the CCP that seek to emphasize Xinjiang's "inexorable state-centered integration" into the nation that we now call "China" (2).

² Though a facility with the Uyghur language is increasingly common among scholars in the field, much work is still to be

done on centering the Uyghurs themselves in 20th century histories.

³ Rian Thum et al., "The Rise of Xinjiang Studies: A JAS New Author Forum," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 1 (January): 9. For a starting point on conversations about colonialism and Xinjiang, please see: Peter C. Perdue, "China

and Other Colonial Empires,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16, no. 1-2: 85-103.

⁴ For more, see Emily Baum, *The Invention of Madness: State, Society, and the Insane in Modern China* (2018); Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (2004); Janet Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (2012).

⁵ Kinzley, Judd C. 2018. "The Relics of Empire: Resource Extraction and the Making of Modern Xinjiang." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 28: 138–154. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-28/kinzley>.

Response

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Thanks very much to Brian Spivey for the very thoughtful, well considered review of my book. And thanks also to the editors at the *PRC History Review* for this opportunity to share my research on Chinese borderlands with the PRC history community. I am particularly thankful for this opportunity because I believe that my work on twentieth-century Xinjiang speaks directly to larger questions about state making, Maoist planning, and worsening socio-economic inequalities in the post Mao period that are being actively discussed among historians focused on the PRC.

I share Spivey's concerns about the ways in which the study of Xinjiang and other Chinese border regions have become "parochialized," and my hope in the book and indeed in this brief response, is to show the ways in which the twentieth-century experiences of Xinjiang and other border regions speak very directly to the questions that have helped shape the increasingly dynamic sub-field of PRC history. In this response, I will focus on three main issues raised by Spivey in his review: first, whether or not we should talk about Xinjiang as being a post-1949 Chinese imperial project; second, to what extent my work is a discussion of "landscape" and how a focus on landscape might change how we think about post-1949 China; and finally, how an intensive focus on ethno-cultural questions in Xinjiang has hampered efforts to include the region in a larger discussion about inequalities in post-Mao China.

First, Spivey wonders in his review about the extent to which my book speaks to a larger discussion underway among many scholars of Xinjiang in particular about whether the CCP is engaged in an imperial project in the far west (as well as in other border regions).¹ I have no hesitation in referring to PRC policies as being part of a larger Han imperial project in Xinjiang. But what much of the larger discussion about this question has left out is how this project was shaped by imperial competition for the region's resource wealth between state planners in Nanjing and Beijing as well as in Moscow.

The transnational competition for access to Xinjiang's oil, tungsten, and rare minerals that I focus on in the book helped shape the larger patterns of extraction in the region. This competition helped shape the distribution of large-scale capital investments, the placement of road and other transport networks, and patterns of settlement. In the end, CCP extractive policies in the region have been shaped less by a desire to maximize Chinese state power and control in the region, as much as they were by a desire to minimize the price tag on extraction by building atop the infrastructures of extraction and transport already built by the Soviet Union in 1930s and 1940s.

This transnational element of Chinese empire is not unique to Xinjiang. In border regions like Manchuria, Taiwan, the southwest, and to a lesser extent Tibet, a desire to hold down expenses prompted patterns of extraction that largely followed those first implemented by other imperial powers. The clearest example of this is in Manchuria, where post-1949 policies were built atop surveys and infrastructural investments made by the Soviet Union and Japan.² This larger pattern is one that we can discern even in so-called China-proper, where surveys made by Western geologists and explorers helped shape the distribution of state investment throughout the twentieth century.³ These efforts, concentrated around Western treaty ports along the coast, helped create dichotomies and inequalities between coastal and interior China that economic planners grappled with throughout the twentieth century. They continue to grapple with the issue well into the twenty-first.

Secondly, Spivey notes that the book can be read as a discursive history of landscape in Xinjiang. I will clarify at the outset that the book is focused on understanding the resonances of ethnic Han Chinese developmentalist visions of Xinjiang's landscape in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite this caveat, I agree with Spivey's assessment. Indeed, the discursive power of landscape played an important role in the Chinese imperial project in Xinjiang as well as in many border regions. In the late Qing period, immediately following Zuo Zongtang's re-conquest of the region, Qing reformers embraced a policy that sought to transform Xinjiang from a barren, arid "wasteland" (荒) into an agriculturally productive region populated by stable tax-paying Han settlers. This vision shattered against the late Qing financial crisis and the inability of the state to make the needed heavy investments in irrigation that would make the dream a reality.

This vision of Xinjiang's landscape potential, however, would last well into the post-1949 period. It would drive the formation of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) in the early 1950s. The images of the fields of lavender or cotton reclaimed and cultivated by XPCC units continue to be distributed widely throughout China. These images, which one can see as being connected to an embrace of ordered, agricultural landscapes with deep historical roots in China, continue to be deployed by the CCP to legitimize its control over its arid, poor border regions for mostly Han audiences in the east.

Much of the scholarship on CCP policy in Xinjiang in the 1950s by scholars in the West has taken the importance of the XPCC role in the integration of the region into the Chinese nation-state

at face value.⁴ In fact, as I show in my book, immediately following the establishment of the People's Republic, the XPCC was used primarily to support mining and oil drilling operations in the region. The deployment of XPCC units in Xinjiang closely tracked the distribution of large-scale extraction enterprises in northern Xinjiang and along the Soviet border. To be sure, the XPCC was a critical institution in driving the first waves of Han settlers into the region. But this role really begins in the early 1960s, after the larger contours of Chinese state development had already been largely laid in Xinjiang.

The role of resource extraction enterprises in shaping policies of border integration and state building is by no means limited to the Xinjiang case. I hope that future studies will address its powerful and underappreciated role in other Chinese border regions as well as in China-proper more broadly.

Finally, I am in full agreement with Spivey on what he calls the "totalizing pull" of a narrative of interethnic unrest when it comes to research on Xinjiang. When I began the research for my book as a graduate student, the increase in tensions between Uyghurs and the Chinese state since the 1990s had rightfully prompted a greater focus by scholars in the West on the roots of an emergent Uyghur ethno-nationalism. These works offered an important counterpoint to self-serving and historically inaccurate Chinese state narratives about the region's connections to a historic Chinese state.⁵ This perspective remains essential for understanding the region, as the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang have led the state to implement new hardline policies, including the construction of a network of "re-education" facilities for Turkic Muslims alongside a raft of other assimilationist policies explicitly designed to erase cultural differences in the region.

But the focus on the development of ethnic identities in the region has often come at the expense of a closer inquiry into the twentieth-century formation of the socio-economic structures, including state production priorities, infrastructural development, and the distribution of labor settlements, that

have led to enduring inequalities between Uyghur and Han Chinese in Xinjiang. These socio-economic inequalities have served as an explosive fuel thrown on the smoldering coals of Turkic Muslim ethno-nationalism.

In my book, I argue that no matter who held sway in the region during the twentieth century, whether it was the Qing Empire, early Republican warlords, the Nationalist government, the Soviet Union, or the Chinese Communist Party, state investments in Xinjiang remained largely concentrated around a small handful of resource sites situated in northern Xinjiang, in areas located close to the main Soviet border crossings. As a result, capital flowed easily to these regions, often at the expense of others.

As China grew wealthier in the 1980s following Deng Xiaoping's market reforms, the century of investments into northern Xinjiang helped channel state capital into the Han majority northern half of the region. By contrast, the Uyghur majority south remained largely untouched by China's rising economic tide. The neoliberal economic agenda that was embraced with increasing fervency by party planners in the 1990s has helped create stark socio-economic fissures within Xinjiang, between north and south, Uyghur and Han.

This story of rising regional inequalities, manifest in growing gaps in living standards, wages, and health outcomes is one that should be eerily familiar to anyone studying China in the post-Mao period. Indeed, the perspective on Xinjiang that emerges from my book suggests that there is a larger space for a critical inquiry into the roots of poverty and nagging underdevelopment that remains endemic throughout China's poor and underserved interior. The extent to which these inequalities in China, from east to west and coast to interior have, like in Xinjiang, been shaped by historic patterns of capital investment connected to imperial demands for China's resource wealth is an important question that demands further scrutiny.

¹ Justin Jacobs argues that the Chinese Republic and later the People's Republic both embraced imperial strategies in their efforts to control Xinjiang, see: *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2017); See also, James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

² To understand the role of imperial powers in shaping Manchuria, see two recent dissertations: Victor Seow, "Carbon Technocracy: East Asian Energy Regimes and the Industrial Modern, 1900-1957" (Harvard University: PhD Dissertation, 2014); Koji Hirata, "Steel Metropolis: Industrial Manchuria and the Making of Chinese Socialism, 1916-1964" (Stanford University: PhD Dissertation, 2018)

³ The role of foreign scientists operating in central and eastern China to identify resources for imperial powers in the late 19th century is an issue laid out very clearly by Shellen Wu in her book, *Empires of Coal: Fueling China's Entry into the Modern World Order, 1860-1920* (New York: Columbia University, 2015)

⁴ See Donald McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949-1977* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979); James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*.

⁵ For the earlier scholarship, see Gardner Bovingdon's: "The History of the History of Xinjiang" in *Twentieth Century China* 26, no. 1 (2001); "The Not-so-Silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang" *Modern China* 28, no. 1 (2002); *Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent* (Washington: East-West Center). Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along the Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1998). The number of works focused on understanding different facets of Uyghur identity as well as the roots of the historic tensions with Han Chinese and the Chinese state has expanded significantly in recent years. For a brief overview of these works since 2010, see: Gardner Bovingdon's 2010 book, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press); Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Ondrej Klimes, *Struggle*

by the Pen: the Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, 1900-1949 (Boston: Brill 2015); David Brophy: *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016);

Tom Cliff, *Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*.