

Xinjiang from the Han point of view

Tom Cliff

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Sophia University, Yotsuya Campus

Han settlers characterise the state stranglehold over economic life in Xinjiang as a “structural problem” (tizhi wenti). For the nonelite, this structural problem is a livelihood problem, but for the elite, it is a problem of governance. This paper will explore how connections between the micro and macro political economies of Xinjiang influenced the hopes, expectations, and actions of Han settlers at the crucial “turning point” following the July 2009 Urumqi riots. I frame this ethnographic study with a broader discussion of Han settler psychology and experiences in Xinjiang, in particular their mutually-dependent relationship with the cultural and political centre of the Chinese empire-state. Xinjiang Han are, like Xinjiang itself, seen as “behind” by people and institutions at the core. But Xinjiang, being a frontier, is also seen as a place of opportunity, innovation, even national salvation. Thus Xinjiang is “ahead” of the core in certain respects, as well as behind by definition. Xinjiang is asynchronous.

Persistent “imperial thinking” from the centre to the borderlands imposes a strange chronology on the frontier, where discourses of manifest destiny coexist with chronic uncertainty.



Tom Cliff is an ARC-funded post-doctoral fellow based at ANU's School of Culture, History, and Language. Tom has conducted long-term fieldwork in Xinjiang, and his book, *Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang* will be published by Chicago University Press in June 2016.

Institute of Comparative Culture (ICC) Sophia University
7-1 Kioicho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-8554, JAPAN
+81-3-3238-4082
+81-3-3238-4081 (fax)
Email: diricc@sophia.ac.jp
Web: <http://icc fla.sophia.ac.jp/>