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Review of Morgan Y. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh*

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In a body of scholarly literature on Central Asia that has tended to foreground dramatic themes, polarized identities and the grand abstractions of 'transition', Morgan Liu's carefully crafted portrait of Uzbek social imaginaries in the city of Osh is a striking and refreshing contribution. *Under Solomon's Throne* is an urban portrait in miniature. It is at once a brilliant example of the capacity for immersive, long-term fieldwork to bring new light to enduring questions of urban conviviality, and a demonstration that subtle, multi-layered analysis can be rendered in clear and accessible prose.

Liu's focus is on what he calls Uzbek social imaginaries. An 'imaginary' here is a regularly structured, socially organised and tacitly held model of the social and political world: one that is learned in, and articulated through, the spaces of the city. Liu's is an expressly 'ground up' approach; social relations are not merely played out in place, he argues, but 'constituted by it in a fundamental sense' (p. 135). His ethnographic narrative draws upon extensive Uzbek- and Russian-language fieldwork in several Uzbek-majority *mahallas* (residential communities) in Kyrgyzstan's second city, Osh, between 1993 and 2011. This extended temporal scope, perhaps unique in the growing ethnographic literature on the region, illuminates an ongoing process of social navigation, as Osh Uzbek men use their city to calibrate the virtues and failings of two very different models of post-Soviet statehood, those of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The result is a many-layered story of social complexity and social change. Uzbekistan's protectionist economic policy, led by the seemingly khan-like Islam Karimov, for instance, invited pervasive praise from Liu's male Uzbek interlocutors in 1995. Ten years later, after an unprecedented demonstration of state violence in Uzbekistan towards unarmed protestors, the range of attitudes was much more diverse, and many Osh Uzbeks felt relieved to live in the relatively freer environment of Kyrgyzstan.

Liu's attentiveness to the practice of social navigation enables him to bring a nuanced voice to debates about Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations that are often conducted in sharply polarised terms. His research was undertaken in a context of considerable economic

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and political upheaval—and eventually one of tragic inter-communal violence. Yet the title of the book, like the text itself, eschews a narrative framed in terms either of bristling inter-ethnic antagonism or of romanticized urban cosmopolitanism. Instead, Liu draws attention to the affordances of place, and the ways that the city itself becomes a means for articulating ideals of political community and virtuous citizenship. Place, in this reading, is more than just a site of emotional attachment or the locus of territorial contestation (though it can be both of these too). It is, more importantly, 'an epistemological frame with which to interpret the world and work out a dilemma literally on home ground' (p. 197). Drawing on the work of Brenda Farnell, Liu explores how lived space serves as a kind of material template for figuring out the world: not just a physical reality but an 'achieved structuring, simultaneously physical, conceptual, moral and ethical' (p. 127).

Liu illuminates this approach through six rich ethnographic chapters, which lead the reader through a tour of several Osh *topoi* and the 'achieved structuring' of social life that they elicit. These include the bazar, the border post, the *mahalla* neighbourhood, the mosque, the courtyard and the concrete multi-storey microdistricts that mark the spatial limits of the city. Liu is attentive to history, showing how such sites have come to be organised in particular ways (and in some cases how they have come to be seen as paradigmatically 'Uzbek' or 'Kyrgyz'). He is lso attuned to the political economy that left many Uzbek *mahallas* outside the formal boundaries of the city (and therefore disadvantaged in access to urban goods and services), just as it allowed many rural and peri-urban Kyrgyz to feel economically marginalised within a Kyrgyzstani state.

The overview of the city's Soviet and post-Soviet history in Chapter Two will be particularly interesting to students unfamiliar with the region. Yet the real depth of the ethnography comes in the attention that Liu pays to the way in which particular sites come to stand for more than themselves, inviting impassioned commentary on the proper organization of social life and the shape of virtuous political leadership. This is particularly true of the bazar, explored in Chapter One, the traditional Uzbek neighbourhood (*mahalla*) examined in Chapter Four, and the domestic courtyard (*hovli*), which is the subject of Chapter Five. Liu shows, for instance, how the *mahalla*, organized around narrow streets of domestic courtyards and a communal mosque, fosters a 'proxemics of piety,' in which extensive face-to-face interaction and observation mediates expectations of decorum, respect and relatedness. For some this is a comforting environment of communal harmony and stewardship: a city within a city, in which speech, gesture and dress all index the social commitments one holds towards other *mahalla* residents and the radical externality of the world outside. For others, this same reality of mutual visibility can be experienced as oppressively controlling. In Liu's analysis, the ethnographic interest lies in the intersections between tacit, embodied knowledge and socially shared expectations about the proper conduct of social life: the 'social and spatial dynamic' elicited through narrow streets, collective management of resources and mutual visibility 'undergirds the continuous social training of persons in the *mahalla*' (p. 124).

In the final ethnographic chapter (Chapter Six), Liu extends this process of socio-spatial navigation to the realm of political imaginaries. With detailed attentiveness to the nuances of language and idiom, Liu explores his interlocutors' understandings of what constitutes a stable, well-run and flourishing polity and their longing for virtuous political leadership. Liu engages seriously with his informants' desire for a strong, paternalistic state, rejecting an interpretation that would see in this merely nostalgia for the Soviet past or the inevitable manifestation of a stable 'Uzbek mentality.' Rather,

he is interested in the way in which the ideal paternalist polity (which Uzbekistan embodied for many of his informants during the 1990s) represented a kind of scaled-up version of the *mahalla*. 'The attributes of personal virtue that made Karimov an effective leader—honesty, industriousness, and selflessness—were precisely the character that the *mahalla* was supposed to cultivate in its inhabitants. Person, *mahalla*, and state: these all were to be cut from the same Uzbek-patterned cloth to form ideal communities at every scale' (p. 172).

Throughout the text, Liu makes a vigorous case for attentiveness to situated political imaginaries and idioms of rule. What might it mean, he asks, to speak of Uzbekistan as 'Karim davlat,' literally the 'Karim(ov) state,' with the polity the extension of the person of the president? How does the patterned proxemics of space shape expectations of peaceful social organization? Liu makes an explicit plea to take culture seriously in studies of political life, without seeing Central Asians as either "'deluded rational actors or repressed liberal subjects' (p. 16). This is an important point, and one worth reiterating in a field where commentators are often quick to resort to unreflective stereotypes ('tribal affiliation,' 'Soviet mentality') to explain social life, and especially, to explain social ills.

And yet, while Liu is keen to critique the determinism of these explanatory modes, there is also a risk that place-based cultural schemas become overdetermined in Liu's own analysis. For Liu the *mahalla* is a paradigmatically 'Uzbek' place, just as the yurt (the nomadic tent) is a paradigmatically 'Kyrgyz' one. And these in turn are seen to correlate with profoundly different imaginations of political order: the one inward looking and hierarchical, the other open, outward-facing and mobile. Indeed at one point Liu expressly develops this contrast: 'given that I am arguing in this book that, for Osh Uzbeks, the state is a mahalla write large, then for Kyrgyz, the state is a yurt writ large. Domestic space bears a homology to the ethnically marked republic' (p. 141).

This is a contrast rendered for dramatic effect, to be sure; and it is one that certainly has some resonance in Kyrgyzstani political life. But it does beg questions about in what sense, if any, 'culture' should be seen as determining social and political orientations. If this homology arises because of lived, embodied ways of being in space (and not simply because of the existence of the *mahalla* and the yurt as a kind of cultural archetype for an imagined national essence), how is this picture complicated by the fact that the vast majority of Kyrgyz people only infrequently (if ever) enjoy the embodied habitus of yurt-dwelling, just as a significant proportion of Osh's Uzbeks were not raised or socialized in the *mahalla*? More importantly, perhaps, it presupposes a kind of paradigmatic divide between Uzbek and Kyrgyz communal paradigms, one reflected in the contrasting orientations of domestic space. Yet Liu's own ethnography seems to suggest something more complex. Not only is there a huge variation in modes of social organisation and being in the world (one mediated by gender, as well as by age and region and a multitude of other dimensions); there is also a huge variety of intermediate social positions. It is quite possible to be at home *both* in the yurt and in the *mahalla*—and in the Soviet apartment building too. Indeed, many Osh people of mixed parentage identify, contextually, with both. It is part of the distinctiveness of Osh as a polyethnic city that such modes of being and relating are as much part of the identity of being *Oshlik* as are those that are more obviously ethnically pronounced. Liu's interlocutors' easy and unreflexive bi- or trilingualism is perhaps the best index of this, even as their speech attests to cultural distinctiveness.

This critique notwithstanding, *Under Solomon's Throne* is an important and provocative book. It deserves to be widely read by scholars of the region, by students of contemporary urban politics, and by anthropologists exploring the intersections between space, embodiment and social imaginaries. Among its many virtues is its subtle and nuanced attention to language, gesture and tone. It is a beautifully crafted text and deserves to find a ready place in undergraduate and graduate courses on Central Asia.