

Editor's Note

The June 2021 issue of *Acta Via Serica* contains articles from leading scholars in the study of anthropology, history, and international relations in Central Asia. As the third issue to be published amid the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, this edition addresses the impact of the rapid expansion of Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan on women's rights (Gulmiza Seitalieva), the effectiveness of an important new Kyrgyz government education measure to combat student radicalization and extremism (Kanykey Jailobaeva's research team), China's interests in providing mutual benefits to its neighbors through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Michael Dunford), the shifting balance of power in Central Asia and possibility of conflict between China and Russia (Jeanne Wilson), Russia's interests in forming strong ties with Turkey in light of recent gas discoveries in the Mediterranean Sea (Dmitri Shlapentokh), the crucial role played by the Khitans in the creation of the Ilkhanate (George Lane), and the experiences, networks, and commercial nodes formed and operated by Afghan traders along two key inner Asian long-distance networks (Magnus Marsden).

To determine the effects of the rapidly proliferating new Islamic educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan on their female students, Gulmiza Seitalieva analyzes curricula, observes student and teacher behavior and attitudes in the classroom, and undertakes structured, in-depth interviews with administrators, teachers, and students at madrassas and university theological departments across the country. She finds that Islamic schools have succeeded in training Kyrgyz girls for sheltered, dependent lives, and by indoctrinating future mothers and their children, hope to spread conservative beliefs and fundamentally erode women's rights. Seitalieva calls on Kyrgyz leaders to reinterpret the Quran to strengthen believer's support for women's rights and preserve Kyrgyzstan's secular state and legal protections for women.

Kanykey Jailobaeva's research team is also concerned with the rise of radicalization in Kyrgyzstan, and their study examines the effect of a key government anti-radicalization measure involving the introduction of a new course, titled the History of Religious Culture, to the country's public schools. The results of their extensive survey demonstrate that teachers involved in the pilot course reported that the material

expanded students' and teachers' knowledge of various religions, and they find that students who took the course reported statistically significant declines in support for violence. The program's success, though, they point out, poses the risk of turning education into a tool of security.

Articles by Michael Dunford and Jeanne Wilson take different views of rising China's relationships with its neighbors. Michael Dunford describes the mutual gains to China and neighboring countries from Chinese developmental loans provided through the country's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The program serves Chinese economic interests by addressing natural resource dependence and excess capacity, easing China's transition from investment promotion and factor-intensive growth to promotion of technologically advanced industry, and effectively deploys China's foreign exchange assets, while helping to develop the country's poorer western region. Dunford argues that the BRI provides mutual benefits to China's neighbors, meeting global needs for peace, development, governance, and problems relating to climate change and human health. The BRI, he argues, advances China's interest in constructing a multipolar world characterized by principles of peaceful coexistence and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Adopting a Realist perspective, Jeanne Wilson predicts that the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia through the BRI is likely to lead China to conflict, particularly with Russia, which had long ruled the region during the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. Wilson comprehensively measures trends in the balance of power between Russia and China in each of the five Central Asian states, economically in terms of labor remittances, foreign direct investment, lending, trade, and technological capability, militarily in terms of arms sales, joint military exercises, military officer training, military bases, culturally in terms of language use, media sources, political and business ties, and exchange students, and in terms of leadership of regional multilateral institutions. In contrast to the official narrative of a functional division of tasks with China concentrating on economic activity while Russia provides for regional security, Wilson finds that China's thorough economic dominance is leaking into cultural, social, political, and security realms. She sees China's increasingly active military and security presence in Central Asia as a long-term challenge to cooperative relations with Russia.

Dmitri Shlapentokh also examines the effects on alliances of shifts in the distribution of power, in particular exploring how declining American power and the discovery of large gas reserves in the Mediterranean off of Cyprus have strengthened Turkey's ties to Russia. Shlapentokh explains how Moscow sees strong Turkey relations as a means of sowing dissension within the NATO alliance and helping Moscow preserve its role as the dominant supplier of gas to Europe. He explains how the unattainability of EU membership, conflicts with the U.S. over the Kurds, and a decline in America's ability to project power have led Turkey to pursue greater autonomy and move closer to

America's rival, Russia, recently demonstrated by the Turkish purchase of Russia's S-400 surface to air missile system. Russia has sought to minimize areas of potential conflict with Turkey, respecting Turkish interests by not attacking Idlib, Syria. Strong Turkey ties provide Moscow with a hub through which to send gas to southern Europe and Russian-backed Turkish assertiveness with Greece and Cyprus serves Russian interests by obstructing the supply of non-Russian gas to Europe from the Mediterranean.

George Lane charts the critical, but often overlooked history of the Khitans, who greatly influenced Iran's cultural and political history, from 1141 to 1300, illuminating the crucial role they played in facilitating the absorption of Iran and China into the Chinggisid Empire. The Khitan were a Turco-Mongol clan who dominated northern China north of the Yangtze River during the early medieval period. After being expelled by the Jurchen, the Khitan leadership re-grouped in Turkestan and sought accommodation with the Muslim world in order to return to their perceived homeland in northern China. During their exile from China in the Islamic world, the Khitans assimilated with the local people and institutions so that when Chinggis Khan arrived needing practical help in establishing administrative and military control, the Khitans offered logistics, intelligence, knowledge of military technology and administrative know-how and in return were rewarded with positions of power and prestige. Lane explains how the last remaining group of Khitans were instrumental in the creation of the Ilkhanate (1258-1335), an imperial polity encompassing Greater Iran, China, Yunnan, and Tibet.

Magnus Marsden's important fieldwork brings attention to two key inland long-distance networks formed by traders from Afghanistan and Central Asia who have forged trans-regional connections within Asia, consisting of a 'Eurasian corridor' connecting post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia, and a 'West Asian corridor' linking Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula, and Central Asia in a triangle. By describing and analyzing the experiences of mobile traders from Afghanistan, the networks they form, and the multiple inter-Asian commercial nodes in which they operate, Marsden illuminates the vitality of the commercial activities, histories, communities, and geographies of trading networks in present-day Eurasia. Marsden suggests that the study of 'inter-Asian' connections stands to benefit from deploying oceanic and inland models of geography in a non-dichotomous manner, in order to bring attention to the relationships between oceanic and inland connections.

In addition to the thematic articles, Merlijn Veltman, Paul Kubicek, Rafis Abazov, Dmitry Shlapentokh, Aijan Sharshenova, Marco Ferrario, and Onur Ağkaya provide their critiques of recent Silk Road Scholarship with book reviews on publications by Jeff Eden, Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, Olga Alinda Spaiser, Roman Silant'ev, Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Lawrence P. Markowitz, Gulnar T. Kendirbai, and Salih Can Açıksoz, respectively.

There are some changes in the *Acta Via Serica* editorial committee. Dr. James Christopher Schopf is departing his position as Associate Editor, a post he has held with distinction since 2019. The journal has benefitted enormously from his dedication, editorial talent, and vast expertise. We are deeply indebted to his contribution. We wish him the best of success in his coming endeavors.

We welcome, on the other hand, three new board members who joined us from this issue: Henri-Paul Francfort from the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France, Timur Dadavaev from the University of Tsukuba in Japan, and Mohammad Badgher Vosooghi from the University of Tehran in Iran, who is also a founding and returning member of the board. We are very pleased to work with them.

We owe a debt of gratitude to all of the contributors to this issue, the anonymous peer reviewers, and the members of our editorial board without whom this issue would not have been possible. We hope that our readers find this issue to be of value in their ongoing research as we ready ourselves for the publication of the next issue of *Acta Via Serica* in December of 2021.

Acta Via Serica Editorial Committee