Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity
Franck Billé
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Sinophobia is a worldwide phenomenon with an enduring history. It has long been the subject of historical and literary studies. The notable ones are surveys of "Western images of China" that examine how imperial powers like the United States, Britain, and other European nations represent the Chinese people as the weak, feminine, yet threatening Other (e.g. Mackerras, Mason, Pan, Zhou). Franck Billé's *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity* is a timely contribution to this scholarship for two reasons: first, the book focuses on an often overlooked neighbor of China, Mongolia, providing a fresh perspective to Sinophobia discussions centering on Europe and the United States; second, the "peaceful rise" of China in the last two decades has led many to simply attribute Sinophobia to the nation's fast-growing economy and (with it) status, thus neglecting subtler factors that inform Chinese relations with other peoples.[1]

Billé challenges these kinds of "'snapshot' ethnographies"; he intends "to look beyond immediate historical and economic aspects and to focus on the recurrent imagery and metaphors of depictions of the Chinese" (3). Such a longitudinal perspective is particularly suitable for Mongolia, uniquely caught between China and Russia, Asia and Europe, in terms of culture and geography; between Qing rule, Russian socialist control, and the recent transition to market economy in terms of history. Billé puts a wide range of anti-Chinese discourses and sentiments in *and* between these geo-cultural and historical contexts; he argues that Sinophobia is more related to the "Mongols' desire to distance themselves from China and Asia as a whole" than to the neighboring country's economic, political, and military threat (3).

The birth of this desire can be traced back to the socialist era during which Russia introduced to Mongols modern European institutions and infrastructure such as schools and medicine, roads and houses, which were seen as more advanced than their counterparts in China. This intention is problematic—at least superficially—since Mongols bear some physical resemblances to Asians. The so-called "spectral presence of China," "imagined to be everywhere and potentially in everyone," leads to widespread anxiety and "produces a climate of mistrust, suspicion, and paranoia" (3-4). It is against these backdrops of insecurity that Billé interprets Sinophobia less as "a discourse of resistance against the Chinese" than against the Mongols' own longing to be like their southern neighbor (4). Above all, this

discourse is shown to discipline Mongolian women and homosexuals.

Sinophobia is an interdisciplinary work combining anthropology, history, social psychology, linguistics, and cultural studies (8). In terms of a theoretical framework, Billé draws heavily on Lacanian theory to probe Mongolian representations of themselves and Others for emotions and affect that may not be verbalized but are nonetheless embedded in them. He also follows how certain discourses become "embodied, practiced, and subverted" (8). His field site was the capital and largest city of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, and his informants were predominantly urbanites there. Unlike traditional anthropologists, the author did not rely solely on interviews as he found early on that interviewees were "too guarded, self-conscious, and uneasy about voicing sentiments they perceived as negative and ugly" (12). He instead focused on the capital's mass media in which he found "unmediated expression" of Sinophobic thoughts and feelings (13). These included the "respected" newspapers, the tabloids or "yellow press," YouTube videos, films, graffiti, songs, and historical accounts. Though he abandoned interviews focusing on Sinophobic sentiments, he conducted a number of "indirect" interviews on related topics including education, medicine, and prostitution (13). On the whole, the anthropologist's wide-ranging sources in three languages—Mongolian, Russian, and Chinese—are impressive. These sources supplement one another to expose complex, changing, and not necessarily coherent views of China among Mongols from different walks of life.

Each of the seven chapters is filled with insights about the various representations of Sinophobia in Mongolia, which are often divorced from realities. The fear of Chinese construction workers in Chapter Two is a case in point. Billé weaves together a range of texts and interviews to offer a nuanced reading of the phobia. According to some informants, the workers who are confined in the construction sites are quite harmless; they "do not go beyond the fence. Basically after they've finished their ten-hour-plus day they're tired and go to sleep" (88). The newspapers, on the other hand, disseminate more negative images of these temporary migrants. Their pictures "consistently portray them as dirty, rural, and poor, huddled together at the train station about to be deported back to China, or contained within the fenced construction site" (87). The photos' accompanying texts are even more negative, describing these workers as "predatory and violent criminals" (87). To enrich these blanket depictions, Billé adds the voice of an unusually outspoken Mongol, a cosmopolitan professional woman: "If you go to building sites around the time they finish their shift, you will see some girls hanging around, wanting to have sex with the Chinese for money. It's terrible" (86-87). Why, then, are these largely contained Chinese targeted and feared more than other foreigners such as Russians? Billé continues to probe by combining the Lacanian conception of excess and Mary Douglas' reading of "dirt as being matter out of place" (88). He argues that the insulated Chinese are seen as exceptionally menacing because they are both "excessive to Mongolia" and "extraneous to the physical and social body"; they are thus "bodies out of place" (88). And since the

Chinese look like Mongols, they can "potentially blend in and disappear" (88). "It is precisely because the threat lacks visibility and palpability," the author sharply observes, "that the frontier requires unambiguous marking and is associated with highly paranoid narratives" (89).

Visibility is often seen as a major factor in racial stereotyping and discrimination. Billé's study calls into question this popular wisdom by exposing how other discriminating mechanisms set to work between peoples even without or with less physical difference. The book thus provides an inspiring model for studying Sinophobia especially in areas close to China geographically and culturally. One example is Hong Kong. The author's methodology and insights may point us to a fruitful direction to explore why mainland Chinese tourists—among all other tourists including Japanese—have recently been singled out and discriminated against there. Sino-Mongolian relations are, of course, historically quite different from China-Hong Kong relations. However, the anthropologist offers a useful analytical framework to examine the intersection of anxiety, anti-mainland Chinese sentiments, and identity crisis among Hong Kong people during the prolonged transition from colonial rule to "one country two systems"—a framework that problematizes the "rise-of-China" explanations.

Notes

1. At the time of writing this review, Sino-U.S. relations dominate the media worldwide as President Xi Jinping is making a state visit to America. China's economic threats, including its alleged cyber attacks, are frequently on the headlines.

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