

***Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek visions of renewal in Osh.* By Morgan Y. Liu. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. xv, 280 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$29.95, paper bound.**

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A place one calls home holds mysteries of attachment and influence that are not readily apparent to the outsider. Family, friends, and memories made in familiar places constitute much of what makes “home” a recognizable concept, and in *Under Solomon's Throne*, Morgan Liu gives us an ethnographically rich description of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and how ethnic Uzbeks understand the city as home. In the book, we see how the life of one's everyday is shaped by his/her surroundings and how place itself—created by history, people, and geography— influences presents and futures. And in narrating the intersection of locally-shaped experiences and concomitant aspirations, we see that the ethnographic insights of the human condition are most revealing when told in relation to one's environment.

*Under Solomon's Throne* is a very good book that will be warmly received by those interested in Central Asia. As a contribution to the study of post-Socialist change, human adaptability, and the influence of one's material surroundings on everyday life, however, it is a book that deserves broad cross-regional and cross-disciplinary readership. For in detailing how people make sense of their lives in the context of where they live, it serves to exemplify how social scientists can better see our interlocutors' experience of place through local eyes. In this respect, the city of Osh is a heuristic for how urban space gives us an idiom through which to think of social collectivities and the dynamism of one's surroundings. Home is not only a place of “emotional attachment, narratives of identity, or ethnic territoriality... [but also] an epistemological frame with which to interpret the world” and the testing ground on which the dilemmas of life are worked out. (197)

The book tells the story of ethnic Uzbeks living in Osh during the first two decades of post-Soviet independence (roughly 1991-2011). Despite the uniqueness of this population, Liu convincingly shows how the story of Osh is also a story of Central Asia more generally, for Osh Uzbeks' engagement with their city characterizes the dilemmas of post-Soviet change and the corresponding uncertainties such change evokes. Describing the city as an interpretive frame through which the Osh Uzbeks think, we see how people utilize “the city as an *explanatory* framework with which to interpret Soviet and post-Soviet life and as an *emancipatory* framework with which to create conditions that would ameliorate their predicament.” (15) As such, the dynamic relationship of people to their surroundings gets imbued with a robust affective quality that is part hope and part constructive response to the sufferings of life's condition. In engaging with place, people are changing the environments of home and also being changed by it.

The changes we see include the seemingly paradoxical position of Osh Uzbeks that during Soviet rule correspondingly became “more Soviet and more distinctively Central Asian” (103) and during post-Soviet rule have found themselves in a peculiar liminal space of being neither Uzbek nor Kyrgyz yet both at the same time. Post-Soviet border politics plays a role in this marginalization of Osh Uzbeks who are close to the border of Uzbekistan yet not citizens and who feel minority citizens of Kyrgyzstan in a city where they long constituted the majority. Being split between two political spaces is a common enough predicament for many in Central Asia.

To understand the context of such dynamics, Liu leads the reader through a biography of the city and how it is structured in the eyes of the Uzbeks who live in it. We are first taken to the bazaar, the nexus of exchange that historically and contemporarily constitutes the heart of the city, for it is here that people of the city meet and negotiate wares, ideas, and ideals. As the tour leaves the market and looks upon Solomon’s Mountain and the Imom Buhori Mosque (36 ff.), the city’s juxtapositions of traditional and modern can be seen in relief in the post-Soviet accommodations of urban life. Moving further, we see the various divisions of the city through the eyes of an Osh Uzbek: stuck between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz states they view the Kyrgyz as deficient rulers (56 ff.) and, particularly in the 1990s, admire the Khan-like authority of Uzbek leadership that did not always serve their best interests (160); and stuck between the “ancient Central Asian core (mahalla neighborhoods, hand-built houses, narrow streets, bazaars) and a modern Soviet city (boulevards, shops, government buildings, institutions, parks, Lenin statues).” (74)

It is the encounter within these environments that the book offers its most significant insights, for Liu shows how the structures of home and everyday life are not only the representative form of Uzbek social relations but also the idiom through which they conceptualize the state. (188) Described as “Uzbek ethnic authenticity made concrete” (6), the mahalla is “a distinct kind of Uzbek-majority neighborhood” (3), known for its “intense mutual involvement and accountability” (129) that is central to the idea of seeing like an Uzbek. It is the site of moral formation that exemplifies a way of being in the world (109, 115, 124); a way of understanding the inward-looking orientation of Uzbekness contra the outward-looking posture of Kyrgyzzness (141); and a way of relating to the state and ideals of leadership (188).

While theoretically sophisticated, the compelling narrative makes the book accessible to general readers as well as a useful teaching text. The thick ethnographic description gives readers a feel for Uzbeks in Osh and for how they see themselves relating to each other, their neighbors, and post-Soviet reality more generally. Idioms of the city reveal the interrelated nature of place to ways of seeing and being in the world. Ultimately, for Osh Uzbeks the story of their everyday presents and futures is “thought” through the city as an extension of mahalla life. And in trying to capture what the experience and aspirational context of life means to a population, Liu gives us a model from which to appreciate the epistemological character of a place.