By revising and publishing the doctoral dissertation he submitted at Harvard University in 2015, Gregory Afinogenov has given us an excellent monograph on the history of Russian information and intelligence-gathering about China. Its scope extends from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, but its main focus is on the eighteenth.

Afinogenov is primarily interested in how the tsarist bureaucracy collected, assessed, classified and used knowledge about the neighbouring Qing empire. In the book’s introduction, he outlines his understanding of the sum of “ideas, institutions, and people” involved in this process as constituting “the Imperial Russian knowledge regime” p. 13. He also defines his approach: privileging archival materials over printed texts and avoiding the murkier territory of cultural images and discourse analysis. While presenting a painstaking analysis of rare and forgotten sources in many repositories and languages, Afinogenov also displays the accomplished historian’s ability to raise his head above the details and place his specific findings in the context of larger developments and (unavoidably, and rightly so) cultural and discursive changes. We might point out that the perspectives of archival and bibliographical research are best suited to the kind of questions Afinogenov seeks to answer, and vice versa: while his research topic determines the best sources for answering the specific questions he asks, those answers are also conditioned by the sources chosen. If instead we wanted to ask, more broadly, how China was interpreted in Russia and by Russians, we would not necessarily look to the archives for our data; literature and the arts, trade in products from China and food, might prove the most promising avenues for arriving at a cultural history of that sort.

Afinogenov’s book, however, belongs to the disciplines of diplomatic and institutional history. It is divided into four parts. Part One is mainly devoted to the first Russian delegations to the Qing court and the ways by which information about China was obtained in the frontier regions at the time. It includes admirable textual research on the origins and circulation of the first description of China in Russian, by the tsarist envoy to Peking Nikolai Spafarri (Milescu), which, composed in the 1670s, remained unpublished until 1910, though it was widely read in manuscript in Russia and Western Europe. This is just one example of Afinogenov’s constant attention to the transmission of texts, which leads to many discoveries of borrowings and connections. Part Two introduces the institution that the book examines most closely: the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, which operated in Peking from 1715 to 1954. This Mission and its role in the emergence of Russian sinology have been the subject of numerous publications in post-Soviet Russia, most of which, hagiographic and celebratory, have papered over the dodgier sides of the story. Obviously, Afinogenov would have none of that. The life of the Mission in the eighteenth century as he reconstructs it from archival reports was brutal and the atmosphere toxic. The missionaries and

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students sent to Peking hated being there and only yearned to return to Russia. When they finally did, their familiarity with China was neither perceived as useful by policy makers in St Petersburg nor appreciated by the Russian Academy of Sciences—the other institution that figures prominently in *Spies and Scholars*, thanks to the author’s productive work in its archives. Afinogenov concludes that, although they were the only Europeans with a permanent presence in Peking, the Russians were unable to participate in the international conversation about China within the Enlightenment’s Republic of Letters.

The last two chapters of Part Two analyse in great detail the most distinctive on-the-ground characteristic of Russian-Chinese relations from the 1690s to the 1750s: the Russian caravans that traversed the long route between Moscow and Peking. Afinogenov sees the caravan “as a multipurpose logistical platform for a variety of intellectual and commercial agendas: a bandwagon” p. 106. Beyond its trade function, the caravan provided cover for both military and industrial espionage in the Qing empire. Mostly through the mediation of envoys from Western and Central Europe, who travelled to China in Russian service, it also facilitated scholarly exchange through the delivery of letters and books to and from the Jesuit missionaries in Peking. Even plant seeds were sent to the Jesuit fathers by the Russian Academy of Sciences and Chinese seeds were received in return, a surprising proportion of which actually sprouted at both ends. This correspondence system collapsed once the caravan system was abolished by 1760.

The situation that replaced it, a protracted “cold war” p. 140 on the Russian-Qing frontier, is the subject of Part Three. The determining geopolitical factors in border relations from the mid-1750s were the destruction and conquest of the Junghar Khanate by emperor Qianlong and the exodus of the nomadic Kalmyk people, then known as Torghuts, from the lower Volga region to Yili in Qing-controlled Jungharia in 1771 (this territory would be formally incorporated into the new province of Xinjiang, though only much later, in 1884). Russia responded to these developments by setting up a network of frontier informers, mostly Central Asians and Mongols (who were paid in furs). Drawing on this locally obtained information, successive governors in Siberia hatched various plans of dealing with the perceived Chinese threat, including military invasion.

These plans all came to nought in the eighteenth century, but Part Four, the final section of the book, shows how they were transformed in the following century, the era of imperial competition. The new governor of Eastern Siberia from 1847, Nikolai Murav’ev, succeeded in the drive to expand Russia’s borders up to the banks of the Amur and the Ussuri Rivers because he had reframed the issue: the threat to Russia, he argued, was now Britain rather than China. The Crimean War appeared to confirm this. With regard to the sources of Russian knowledge on Chinese affairs, the consequence of such thinking was to render the Siberian intelligence network irrelevant. Uncovering the alleged plotting of the English and the French became more important than assessing the intentions of frontier Mongols. This shift in perspective had the effect of turning Russian attention back to the Mission in Peking. Already in 1819, Pavel Kamenskii, a former student at the Mission, who had proposed a thorough reform of this institution, was promoted to archimandrite and sent back to Peking in order to implement his own plans. Kamenskii’s first step was to expel his predecessor, Iakinf Bichurin, whose sexual transgressions in the Qing capital had thoroughly discredited him there. Punished by a three-year exile to Valaam Island in today’s Karelia, Bichurin, a highly prolific writer on China, Tibet and Mongolia and a translator from the Chinese, nevertheless secured the standing of “the father of Russian sinology”. Kamenskii then succeeded in restructuring the Mission as both a religious establishment and a place of learning about China. As the latter, it gained
international recognition from the 1870s, much after Kamenskii’s service. By that time, the Mission’s earlier function in intelligence gathering had ended, having been used last in the build-up to the annexation of the Amur and the Maritime provinces, between 1850 and 1860.

In the last chapter of his book, Afinogenov unpacks the heroic narrative of Murav’ev’s accomplishments in wresting control of territory north of the Amur and east of the Usuri from the weakened Qing dynasty. Like the story of the Peking Mission, this story has often been told, but Afinogenov’s critical reading of the primary sources helps to peel off layers of historical mythmaking. One of these is the retrospective Russian view that, during the eighteenth century, they failed to “regain” the Amur, from which the tsarist empire had been “banished” by signing the Treaty of Nerchinsk with the Qing in 1689. Afinogenov argues that because of this negative evaluation of the eighteenth century, when academic Russian sinology emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and became aligned with the Western model of scholarship, it did so at the cost of consigning to oblivion the local knowledge, which lowly spies, obscure agents and go-betweens and unrecognized scholars had collected in the Asian borderlands.

The manifestation of an inquisitive mind always ready to question received knowledge as well as to track the routes by which such knowledge was, indeed, received, this monograph is beautifully written and is animated by humour in unexpected places. It has been produced and edited to the highest standard (the only typo I spotted is a “him”, instead of a “his”, before “missive”, on p. 134) and supplied with well-chosen maps and illustrations. The author and the publisher should be congratulated on the uncommon achievement that Spies and Scholars represents.

Mark Gamsa, Tel Aviv University.