What can a long view of history – one that puts contemporary conditions in
dialogue with pre-modern and even ancient phenomena – tell us that narrower
studies cannot? Rian Thum gives examples of contemporary issues in Chinese
Central Asia (Altishahr, Xinjiang, Eastern Turkestan) that cannot be understood
outside of such deep historical context, including identity, cultural destruction,
and Islam. He then asks how close attention to the contemporary world can in
turn help us avoid historical distortions, arguing that ethnographic awareness
can alleviate common problems like elite-heavy history, as well as drawing us
closer to the world views of historical actors.

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local pilgrimage and manuscript culture.