

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of “Reclaiming the Forest: The Ewenki Reindeer Herders of Aoluguya” by Åshild Kolås and Yuanyuan Xie

David George Anderson

Book details

Kolås, Å. and Y. Xie
Reclaiming the Forest: The Ewenki Reindeer Herders of Aoluguya
New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books; 2015
198 pages, ISBN 9781782386308

Keywords: Ewenki, Evenki, China, Siberia, Rangifer

This unique and well-documented edited collection is the product of a Norwegian-funded research project on pastoralism in China. The volume is unique for presenting the work of acknowledged foreign- and China-based ethnographers on Tungus-speaking peoples in China, as well as sections written by Ewenki authors and representatives. It is represented as the first English-language book devoted solely to the Ewenki community of Aoluguya.

Aoluguya Ewenki are a small but conspicuous nationality living today in Northern China close to the boundary with the Russian Federation. In official Chinese government documents, they are distinguished as being ‘the last hunting tribe’ and being the only ‘reindeer-herding tribe’. Historically, they are linked linguistically and culturally to much larger reindeer-herding groups in southern Siberia, such as Siberian Ewenkis and Orochens, and only became isolated from their neighbouring pastoralist societies relatively recently. The term Aoluguya Ewenki reflects the result of two forced resettlement projects which first concentrated and then moved the entire community into a newly built settlement at Aoluguya in 1965, and then to ‘new Aoluguya,’ even further south, in 2003. It is true that there is very little in European languages about the Tungusic reindeer herders of 20th and 21st century China and that at the time of publication this was the only collection specifically about this resettled community. There are of course other works about Ewenki/Evenki reindeer

pastoralists across Eurasia, and there is a scattering of articles and dissertations in European languages on Chinese Ewenkis. There is a much richer Chinese-language literature. This edited book is complemented by an English-language translation of a single author monograph on Aoluguya by one of the co-editors of this study, Xie (2015), called *Ecological Migrants*.

The collection is broken into four parts, with a foreword written by the distinguished historian of Chinese Ewenki communities F. George Heyne and an introduction written by the principal investigator of the project Åshild Kolås. The first part ‘Encountering the Ewenki’ features a single chapter by the Chinese Mongolian historian Siqinfu. Based on fieldwork, it presents an account of the Aoluguya communities from 1965 to 1999. Readers of this journal would be interested in the central sections describing reindeer-herding techniques and strategies including a description of the Chinese pastoral strategy of keeping reindeer to harvest their antlers. The second part, entitled ‘Migrations: Reindeer Herding in Flux,’ is comprised of three chapters. The chapter by Tang Ge complements the preceding chapter with a detailed description of the seasonal round and what to my view is an interesting analysis of kinship and gender roles in contemporary Chinese Ewenki reindeer husbandry. The chapter by Åshild Kolås summarises the political context of the multiple resettlements the ambiguities of use-rights and property rights in a liberalizing socialist state and describes the destabilizing forces of market liberalization on the reindeer herders. The final chapter in

Correspondence: david.anderson@abdn.ac.uk
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

this section, by the distinguished French ethnographer Aurore Dumont, maps out how mobility patterns among the pastoralists have changed in recent years. She presents a model of nomadic and settled 'spheres' and demonstrates how exchange relations integrate the reindeer-herding households. The third part, 'Representations: Defining the Reindeer Ewenki Culture and Identity', is a set of three chapters analysing how Ewenki representation and self-representation has changed in this fastly changing political context. The museum ethnographers Bai Yin and Zhang Rongde describe the role of museums in representing minority identities. The chapter by Xie Yuanyuan summarises her book on the history of the 2003 resettlement - the so-called ecological migration - designed to limit the damage of human hunting activity on the unique taiga forests in this region. This chapter documents the problems and dissatisfaction of the community. The final chapter, by the Cambridge-based anthropologist Richard Fraser, is a detailed study of the symbolic and pragmatic aspects of Ewenki dwellings and in particular the iconic conical tent *dju*. The final section 'Local voices' presents three chapters by members of the Aoluguya community itself. Chapter 8 is a poem by Weijia describing the importance of the campfire to Ewenki people. The next chapter by Gong Yu is a biographical essay on the changes that this woman experienced growing up in old Aoluguya with a particular emphasis on kinship institutions. The final chapter by Gu Xinjun describes hunting adventures in the region.

This is a finely crafted, rich volume on a wide variety of topics of importance to Aoluguya Ewenki society. The articles have a heavy emphasis on reindeer husbandry and reindeer pastoralism, which is arguably the way that their nationality is most clearly defined by the state. On reading this book, I get the feeling that hunting, taiga life, and exchange are likely dearer to the hearts of people there. Keeping reindeer allows those important relationships to grow. Being better acquainted with Evenkis on the Russian side of the border, I am constantly surprised and challenged by texts like this on their Chinese kin. It is remarkable how the power of the Chinese state, and the influence of neighbouring peoples, create different concerns and challenges to a group which likely once shared many of the same features and traditions as Evenkis on the Russian side of the border. In terms of reindeer pastoralism, it is striking how the velvet antler economy dominates the pastoral techniques. In terms of the politics of forced resettlement, it is striking and somewhat sad how little seems to have been known in China about the social and ecological effects on indigenous communities of resettlements worldwide, if not nearby in the Russian Federation. With this book, and the project that sponsored it, one could hope for increased dialogue and communication with this rich and ultimately transnational pastoralist community at the edge of the Chinese taiga.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Received: 28 March 2017 Accepted: 10 April 2017

Published online: 28 June 2017

Reference

Xie, Y. 2015. Ecological migrants: The relocation of China's Ewenki reindeer herders. (*Asian anthropologies*: 8). Oxford: Berghahn Press.

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