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# Anthropology Book Forum

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## Uncovering the Contemporary Lives of the Little Known Chinese Ewenki

Review by Jeanette Lykkegård

*Reclaiming the Forest: The Ewenki Reindeer Herders of Aoluguya*

by Åshild Kolås & Yuanyuan Xie (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

*Reclaiming the Forest*, edited by Åshild Kolås and Yuanyuan Xie, is the outcome of a joint collaboration between the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) on the research project, “Pastoralism in China: Policy and Practice,” funded by the Research Council of Norway. This cross-country teamwork has produced a remarkable volume with several contributions from Chinese scholars and also indigenous people of the Ewenki community, and this is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the book. It provides a thorough presentation of the history and life of the Ewenki of Aoluguya, and is both an important contribution to the otherwise scarce English-language literature on this particular group of people and at the same time adds valuable knowledge to the anthropology of northern Eurasian peoples as a whole. The book is thematically divided into four parts, framed by an introductory chapter.

In the introduction, Kolås clarifies that this book “challenges the implicit pessimism in popular conceptions of the Reindeer Ewenki as a relic of the past, as in the epithet ‘the last hunting tribe’” (p. 7). The purpose of the volume is thus primarily to concentrate on the present-day situation of these people and the challenges that they face, as well as their responses to these challenges. The overall objective is to raise awareness of the Ewenki reindeer herders of China by offering a “glimpse into the contemporary world of the people of Aoluguya” (p. 13). The difficulty of this worthy goal shines through, as the present situation is hard to convey without a comprehensive understanding of history. Thus, historical events, which have led to great cultural changes and loss of language and spiritual leaders, fill a considerable amount of pages (see especially the chapters by Kolås and Siqinfu). The title

of the introduction, “Writing the ‘Reindeer Ewenki,’” stirred expectations towards more elaborations on the creative collaborative process of actually writing and editing the book – something, which I would have appreciated.

The first part of the book consists of only one chapter by Siqinfu, focusing on the changes the Aoluguya Ewenki have met with from 1965 onward. Siqinfu takes a critical stand towards the story of majority China in order to bring forth the “small story” of the Aoluguya Ewenki. We follow the story of Ewenki hunters, as they are forcibly moved away from their hunting settlement Qiqian as a consequence of the collapse of the Sino-Sovjet alliance. The now Old Aoluguya was founded in 1965. The reindeer were declared government property and the Ewenki were drawn into the Chinese socialist market economy. As a new industry of antler harvesting for the medicinal market grew – and mainstream society criticized shamanism and other aspects of the Ewenki’s traditional lifestyle – the value of reindeer changed from being of social, practical and religious character to a mere economic one (p. 27). From the late 1990’s the number of reindeer decreased drastically. The official explanation blames the “primitive” methods of the Ewenki, but Siqinfu states that the problem rather derives from poachers, traffic accidents, pesticides, diseases and predators. Problems with alcoholism and lack of interest in herding from the younger population of the community led to other social complications, such as lack of intergenerational transfer of cultural education within the community, as well as a breakdown in parent-child relationships and absent fathers. Siqinfu states that “the Aoluguya Ewenki are losing their culture, largely through their integration into Chinese politics, economy and culture” (p. 35) and further that “Aoluguya Ewenki society has been offered only one path to the future – assimilation into mainstream society” (p. 39). It becomes clear that avoiding the popular pessimist outlook, which this volume sets out to do, is a challenging undertaking.

The second part, “Migrations: Reindeer Herding in Flux,” is comprised of three chapters, thematically revolving around practices and organization of reindeer herding. Tang Ge describes the transformation of the Ewenki from hunters, using reindeer mainly for transport to becoming mainly reindeer herders, a change that accelerated after the resettlement in 2003 to the New Aoluguya and the contemporary hunting-ban. This recurrent theme here focuses on how this affects the social organization in the reindeer-camps, *urilen*. Tending the herd used to be a female job, whereas now both men and women engage in managing the reindeer. The current situation is ascribed to continuous negotiation between Ewenki and the government (p. 49), where the Ewenki wanted to maintain their traditional way of life, and although a powerful government wish for the Ewenki to become sedentary reindeer ranchers, they have usually only accepted the changes to some degree while upholding some kind of continuity with traditions (p. 50). Åshild Kolas continues the discussion of this

transition by emphasizing the ambiguities hereof, arguing that the Ewenki currently find themselves in a “liminal space of law” (p. 65), where they are neither a hunting tribe, nor true pastoralists. In 1980 the production brigades were dismantled, and rights to animals and pastures were to be distributed to individual herding and farming households. In Aoluoga, however, this has not been fully implemented. Another ambiguity arises through the plan for the Ewenki to occupy guiding positions for tourist hunting trips, while they themselves are deprived of their hunting rights. To close this part, Aurore Dumont focuses on how the Ewenki use flexible strategies to maintain and adapt their economy to changing conditions (p. 77). While migrating between settlement and forest camps, new economic networks are created and she emphasizes the agency of the Ewenki to maintain a form of continuity despite serious state interventions.

The third part, “Representations: Defining the Reindeer Ewenki Culture and Identity,” offers insights into ascribed as well as self-defined identities of contemporary Ewenki. Bai Ying and Zhang Rongde open this part by problematizing the local Ewenki museums as a governmental instrument or – with a Marxist notion – a “superstructure,” both “reflecting a given society’s politics and economy” while at the same time serving “as a political tool of that society” (p. 104). Surprisingly, the latest museum in Aoluguya has been designed by a Finnish consulting firm, Poyry, which has now contributed to a representation of the Ewenki as reindeer herders in line with the Scandinavian Sami, regardless of the distinct differences between the two groups of people. Then Xie Yuanyuan questions the so-called “ecological migration” to the new Aoluguya settlement in 2003 on the ground that traditional hunters are “destroyers of the natural environment” (p. 124). We are reminded that the entire site of old Aoluguya was sold to a private enterprise (p. 121) and that “history shows that the forest ecosystem was never damaged until the government initiated large-scale industrialization,” whereas he somewhat romantically refers to the Ewenki hunters as living in an “original affluent society” (p. 124). Richard Fraser rounds off the third part with a remarkable take on the changing nature of the relations between the Ewenki and state, through an exploration of the vernacular characteristics and transformations of Ewenki dwellings over time. He argues that the adoption of ridge-tents and wood-burners are not non-vernacular transformations, but intelligent adjustments of the vernacular forms as new materials have become available.

Part four, “Local voices,” contains – as the title promises – contributions from members of the Aoluguya Ewenki community. It is comprised of the poem “Campfire” by Weijia – an artist who lives in the forest as a hunter-herder, poet and painter – followed by Gong Yu’s “My Homeland,” and Gu Xinjun’s account of a hunting expedition, “Hunting Along the Bei’erci River.” Gong Yu is named in the local language Niurika after the last shaman and she contributes with a narrative of her life story and

inheritance. Gu Xinjun's hunting story reflects back on a time that is no longer, and Kolås presents his motivation for this story to be a wish for the Ewenki youth to know about the old hunting culture. Through these local voices it becomes obvious that the historical and cultural inheritance are still very much present in the consciousness of contemporary Ewenki, and it thus becomes even more understandable (and forgivable) why history takes up so much space in a book who's objective is to spread knowledge of the present situation of this particular group of people.

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