

Asian Highlands Perspectives. 6 (2010), 303-306.

Wu Yazhi 吴雅芝. 2006. *Zui hou de chuanshuo: elunchun zu wenhua yanjiu 最后的传说: 鄂伦春族文化研 (The Final Legend: Research on Oroqen Culture)*. Beijing 北京: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe 中央民族大学出版社 (Central Nationalities University Press). 246 pp.

Reviewed by Anne Henochowicz (The Ohio State University)

Wu Yazhi, Director of Preservation at the Central Nationalities University Museum in Beijing, presents an encyclopedic work on her native ethnic group that fills a wide gap in Sino-Siberian folkloric scholarship. Her book is the fruit of the '211 Project', a 1990s government initiative to consolidate and streamline governance and funding of China's top one hundred universities. Wu weaves history, folklore, and modern social trends into her descriptions of ancient customs, revealing changes to Oroqen life as a consequence of political and environmental change, calling for sustainable land use that will support not only the natural world, but the world of the Oroqen as well.

Numbering 8,196 in the 2000 Chinese census, the Tungusic Oroqen (Orochen, Orochon, Oroqin) people are among the smallest officially recognized ethnic minorities in China. They are the 'Kings of the Hinggan Mountains', traditionally inhabiting both the Greater and Lesser ranges. Wu cites numerous pre-modern sources describing the Oroqen; her book is especially rich in Manchu-era sources, such as the *Heilongjiang waiji 黑龍江外記 (Unofficial Chronicle of Heilongjiang)* and various *difangzhi 地方志* (local almanacs). Qing scholars will be particularly interested in the imposition of the banner system on the Oroqen and the balance of the people's lives between local/personal and state/imperial interests. Many Oroqen migrated southward across the Amur River (Heilong jiang) in the seventeenth century to escape encroaching Russian

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colonialists. Currently, the Russian government does not recognize the Oroqen as an ethnic group; instead, they are considered to be Ewenkis, who live predominantly in the Yakutia Republic. Indeed, despite their different lifestyles, both Oroqen legend and anthropological evidence link the hunting Oroqen, reindeer-herding Ewenki, and fishing Hezhen peoples to a common ancestor. Scholars of ethnic minority policy and Siberian/ northeastern Asian culture will delight at the care and precision of Wu's observations, while the color photographs will hint at connections to circumpolar culture. Do the skis on the feet of the smiling man on page 106 prove a link to the Fennoscandian peoples of ancient Norway, Sweden, and Russia? With its rich illustrations of roe deer leatherwork, canoes, and other artifacts of material culture, *The Final Legend* presents fascinating material for scholars of other northern peoples, be they in Asia, Europe, or North America.

The Final Legend works within the discourse of social evolution to chronicle aspects of Oroqen culture pre- and post-settlement. Until the 1950s, the Oroqen were nomadic hunters, raising only horses and dogs. By 1959, the Chinese government had settled the entire people on farming compounds. The Oroqen today live in the Oroqen Autonomous Banner in Inner Mongolia and nine counties in Heilongjiang Province. The book is organized by types of custom and aspects of life: individual chapters cover social organization, foodways, the life cycle, and so on. Wu looks at the Oroqen people from three layers of historical depth, comparing traditional, Manchu-Qing-era, and modern practices surrounding each facet of life. The author brings together folk, poetic, and academic writing. Rather than setting aside a section for 'folklore' or 'folktales', Wu retells stories where they offer a traditional explanation for the topic at hand.

The first portion of the book explains the origins and brief history of the Oroqen people. Wu details the various

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divisions of the Oroqen, both traditional and under the Manchu banner system, as well as their relation to the Ewenki and Hezhen peoples. Wu describes the intricate *mukun* 穆昆 (clan) and *wulilin* 烏力鄰 (units of several families), from the development of exogamous marriage arrangements to the assignment of Chinese surnames to *hala* 哈拉 (clan names). She emphasizes the importance of the 'green cradle' of Oroqen civilization: her people shape their lives around the benefits and restrictions of life in the Hinggan Mountain environment.

Chapter Three explains aspects of hunting—weapons, animals, techniques—as well as "abandoning the hunt and returning to the farm." Chapter Four describes the materials supplied by the forest for building shelters, clothing, and tools. Succeeding chapters focus on the lifecycle, ethics, and religion.

Chapter Eight returns to the discussion of material culture with an emphasis on modern Oroqen arts and the transmission of culture. Chapter Nine concludes with an evaluation of the adaptation of the Oroqen to the demands of nature and 'civilization', alerting the reader to the interdependence of a healthy natural environment and survival of the Oroqen as a people.

The Oroqen became sedentary farmers in the 1950s under government pressure. Wu sees this phase of Oroqen history as an advancement out of a 'late primitive' period. Leaving the hunting ground for the farm may be viewed as a sacrifice made for the good of the Hinggan eco-system. Wu expresses concern at government policies which, in the name of 'progress', ignore the unique structure of the local environment, citing the recent case of penning Ewenki reindeer; unable to graze on lichen in the mountains, herds died within weeks. Wu is optimistic about the strength of her native people, but issues a warning to migrant farmers and policy makers: let us not yet tell the last legend of the Oroqen.

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