

Lesser dragons

Stephen Roddy

Reviewed title

Lesser Dragons: Minority Peoples of China

Michael Dillon. 2018.

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Lesser Dragons: *Minority Peoples of China* explores the recent history of a dozen or so ethnic groups scattered across China's continental periphery and in various parts of China proper. It devotes separate chapters to the largest and most prominent of these groups (Tibetan, Mongol, Uighur, Hui, Miao, and Manchu), as well as to Han subgroups such as the Hakka people in Taiwan and on the mainland. Written in a fluid style and unburdened by disciplinary jargon, it is replete with vivid descriptions of geography, ethnography, and other relevant subjects that general readers will find enlightening. Indeed, considering that very few social scientists have studied the full array of China's minority regions and cultures, it can serve as a handy reference work for almost anyone, including specialists, in search of a comprehensive introduction to the subject.

Particularly useful are its opening chapters, in which the author sketches the various historical and political roots of People's Republic of China's policies toward the 56 ethnic groups that came to be designated (not always willingly) as such by the state. The author identifies the institutional framework of minority policy as the product of a 'top-down' approach to classifying nationality (民族), first adopted based on the Soviet concept of *natsionalnost*, and discusses how it has evolved through accommodation to local conditions even while retaining elements that continue to be resisted by multiple groups. While the widely varying cultural and physical settings make each region's story unique, he refers regularly to nationwide trends, and leaders like Hu Yaobang and Deng Xiaoping, where their impacts on minorities were particularly noteworthy.

Also intriguing is the author's devotion of an entire chapter to the multi-ethnic history of the city of Beijing, as exemplified by the venerable Yonghe Temple, a Tibetan Buddhist temple that dates from the early 18th century, as well as the contemporary Beijing Chinese Ethnic Culture Park. Both institutions reflect the state's efforts over multiple eras to promote interethnic harmony, or in the ambitious phrase of the post-1978 era, the 'great unity of the nationalities'. Following this examination of such symbolic gestures toward the lofty goals of social cohesion, however, much of the book focuses on the thornier issues of widening economic disparities and growing resentment among minorities toward Han rule. Post-2000 Xinjiang, in particular receives an extended treatment that sifts through conflicting explanations and descriptions of the significant incidents of violence there. Readers will find the accounts of this situation, and of local separatist movements or other dissident political trends there, helpful in understanding the roots of local antagonism toward Beijing's policies.

Although evenhanded in evaluating both the achievements and the shortfalls of official policies toward minorities, the author does not explore some of the dimensions of these various crises that do not lie within the framework of a dichotomous relationship between minority groups and Han-dominated officialdom (or Han migrants in places like Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang). In the case of Xinjiang, for example, tensions between Kazakhs and Uighurs in the northern and central areas of the province are not mentioned at all, even though this has been a significant factor in the persistent unrest there. Given the near impossibility of conducting any sort of non-state-sponsored research in that area for the time being, we will probably have to await a more peaceful era to be able to dig deeper into the complex layers of the problematic state of Xinjiang,

Tibet, and other sensitive areas. In the meantime, the book provides a very readable overview of a rich spectrum of peoples and events up to 2017, and offsets the more contentious regions with the more placid conditions in areas like Yunnan, Guangxi, and Manchuria.

As the author notes, the sheer size of his subject required him to leave out potentially interesting groups and topics, or to provide only cursory descriptions such as that of the Naxi and Moso of Yunnan and Sichuan. If he were to supplement this already rich trove of information in a future revision, he might consult more Chinese-language sources, especially historical texts like the 18th century literary accounts of the Miao by Zhao Yi (1727-1814) and other visiting literati. Zhao's surprise at Miao sexual habits is similar to that of the missionary Samuel Pollard (1864-1915), cited by the author; less burdened by Christian prudery, however, Zhao is much less judgmental. Similarly, mid- to late-Qing Han writers in Taiwan recoil from the practice of headhunting by indigenous groups, but many write with considerable sympathy for the groups whose lands were being encroached upon by waves of settlers from the mainland.

In short, *Lesser Dragons* is a very accessible introduction to a formidably large and complex subject, especially suitable for adoption in courses on minorities or even general courses on modern Chinese history and society. One quibble: South Koreans are described (p.181) as still regularly using Chinese characters alongside *hangul*, the Korean alphabet, (unlike the North Koreans who have migrated into Yanbian in recent years); in fact, Chinese characters only rarely appear in print in South Korea these days.

Stephen Roddy,
University of San Francisco,
United States

Revisiting the fairy and the woodcutter story

Justine Guichard



Reviewed title

Elusive Belonging: Marriage Immigrants and 'Multiculturalism' in Rural South Korea

Minjeong Kim. 2018.

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Contemporary South Korea is seldom thought of as made up of towns and immigrants. In *Elusive Belonging*, Minjeong Kim studies both, providing an ethnographic account of the lives of Filipina women who married South Korean rural bachelors in two close localities where the author conducted fieldwork in the mid-2000s. By the time Kim immersed herself in the activities and experiences of this community, more than one in every 10 new marriages concluded in South Korea was defined as international, i.e. as involving a foreign-born individual. This proportion represented a marked increase compared with the rate of one in every 100 unions at the beginning of the 1990s. From one decade to the next, change in international marriage trends has not only

been in numbers, but also in diversity. While international marriages were overwhelmingly contracted between Korean women and foreign-born men – notably American soldiers – until the early 1990s, they have since primarily involved Korean men and foreign-born women from countries such as China, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Although recent, these demographic transformations have already attracted significant scholarly attention as Kim does not fail to mention. Research to date has not only centered on marriage immigrants and their families but also on the response of the South Korean state through its multiculturalism project. The gendered and ethnocentric foundations of this project have been analyzed

by a large body of literature particularly critical of how South Korea's multiculturalism expects and incites marriage immigrants to work and assimilate in the domestic space through their role as caregivers. In Kim's words, "Marriage immigrants' maternal citizenship presupposes immigrant mothers as 'Other subjects' to be Koreanized and domesticates them as mother citizens" (p.48). The contribution that *Elusive Belonging* adds to the existing critical scholarship rests on telling the intimate stories of Filipina women engaged in the process of building this and other forms of citizenship in the South Korean countryside, where no less than one third of the marriages involve foreign-born brides. The focus of the book is therefore on marriage immigrants' own agency and the varied emotions – such as love, gratitude, and anxiety – underpinning the choices they can make as well as those that are imposed upon them in the private and public realms.

By adopting such a lens Kim is enabled to reject "the image of international marriage immigrants as passive brides or victims of sex trafficking" while venturing "beyond the problems faced by marriage immigrants that have inundated popular and academic discourses", such as social discrimination and domestic violence (p.22). Her aim is obviously not to negate the reality of these experiences but to enrich our understanding of how women who immigrated for marriage to rural South Korea navigate their lives in the early 21st century. Following the 'emotional turn' that has affected migration and citizenship studies, Kim explores the attachments and frustrations shaping these women's sense of belonging in the country of their spouses, who are neither depicted as villains nor princes charming. Husbands themselves are not only taken into account in the book but they are also given a voice, alongside the state and civil society's multicultural agents as well as the Unification Church, the main matchmaker for the couples Kim encountered. In accordance with her objective to revisit the dominant perception of marriage immigrants as passive victims, Kim also challenges the assumption that their spouses are fundamentally abusive and exploitative.

In this respect, the book's central chapters (three and four, out of seven) can be seen as written against two kinds of fairy tales in which women are alternatively portrayed as saved or oppressed by marriage. Chapter 3 discusses the possibility of love among foreign brides and rural bachelors without romanticizing it, offering the idea that 'heterosexual scripts' can account for the intimacy that may develop between strangers despite communication barriers posed by language and culture. Even when love is present in their lives, the fate of Filipina women is never idealized as they join husbands who are importantly situated as "subordinate subjects of Korea's neoliberal economic system" (p.90). This position is analyzed by Kim as bringing about a range of anxieties in rural families. Chapter 4 argues that the material insecurity these families face can translate into adverse effects on foreign-born wives, particularly under the form of restrictions on their physical mobility and economic agency. Yet, the author refuses to reduce domestic tensions and conflicts to 'the Fairy and the Woodcutter Syndrome', an expression coined by the South Korean media after a folktale believed to capture the unequal power dynamics of international marriages.

In the tale, a solitary woodcutter entraps a fairy into marrying him by stealing her clothes while she is bathing. This leaves the deceived creature no choice but to escape after having given birth to two children that she takes away with her. The many trajectories that Kim retraces include some of departure – a term she prefers to escape – toward the book's end. Even then, her emphasis remains on the diversity and complexity of Filipina women's lived experiences, making *Elusive Belonging* a necessary read for anyone interested in the marriage immigrants' side of the story – a story of 'immigration for marriage' rather than 'marriage for immigration' that Kim convincingly chooses to tell in the plural rather than in the singular.

Justine Guichard,
Université de Paris, France