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Lesser dragons

Stephen Roddy

Lesser Dragons: Minority Peoples of China

London: Reaktion Books
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In international marriage trends has not only marked an increase compared with the rate of more than one in every 10 new marriages activities and experiences of this community, bachelors in two close localities where the women who married South Korean rural ethnographic account of the lives of Filipina regions and cultures, it can serve as a handy considering that very few social scientists general readers will find enlightening. Indeed, unburdened by disciplinary jargon, it is and Manchu), as well as to Han subgroups in China proper. It devotes separate chapters to the continental periphery and in various parts of regions and cultures, it can serve as a handy 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 (p.88), first adopted based on the Soviet concept of nationalities, 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 national 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 17th century, as well as the contemporaneous Beijing Chinese Ethnic Culture Park. Both institutions reflect the state’s efforts over many decades to promote intercultural harmony, or in the ambiguous phrase of the post-1978 era, the ‘great unity of the nationalities’. Following a survey of examination of assimilatory gestures toward the lofty goals of social cohesion, the book focuses on the thorny issues of widening socio-economic disparities and growing resentment among minorities, particularly Han, in Xinjiang, in particular receives an extended treatment that sifts through conflicting experiences and descriptions, and significant incidents of violence there. Readers will find the accounts of this situation, of local separations, emigration, or other discordant political trends, helpful in understanding the roots of local anarchy, as well as in the 21st century. Following the ‘emotional turn’ in research, the author refuses to negate the reality of these experiences, but to enrich our understanding of how they have affected the lives of Filipina women, and the author sketches in the private and public realms. By adopting such a lens Kim is enabled to reject “the image of international marriage as a simple, passive event and that the agency of marriage fatality that has 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, and the challenges of living in the multicultural project. The gendered and ethnicnic foundations of this project have been analyzed by a large body of literature particularly critical of how South Korea’s multiculturalist-project incites marriage immigrants to work and assimilate in the domestic space through their roles as caregivers. In Kim’s words, “Marriage immigrants’ maternal citizenship presupposes immigrant mothers as ‘other subjects’ to be regulated and domesticated, often in the interest of their own mother citizens” (p.14). The contribution of Elusive Belonging adds to the existing critical scholarship, and especially in the cases of Filipino women engaged in the processes 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 cultural experiences and varied emotions – such as love, gratitude, and anxiety – underpinning the choices they can make that are important to them in the private and public realms.

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Revisiting the fairy tale of the woodcutter

Justine Gulichard

Revised title Elusive Belonging: Marriage Immigrants and ‘Multiculturalism’ in Rural South Korea

Hanazono University Press (ISBN 9789881102065)

Contemporary South Korea is seldom thought of as made up of towns and immigrants. In Elusive Belonging, Minjoo Kim studies both, providing an ethnographic account of the lives of Filipino 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 ten 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 involved primarily 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 fall to malign. 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 ethnicnic foundations of this project have been analyzed 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 involved primarily Korean men and foreign-born women from countries such as China, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

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Chapter 4 argues that the material insecurity, these fairy tales, 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 an expression coined by the South Korean media after a folklore belief to capture the unequal power dynamics of international marriages.

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