Book Review: *Ethnic Chrysalis: China's Orochen People and the Legacy of Qing Borderland Administration*, by Loretta E. Kim

Ethnic Chrysalis: China's Orochen People and the Legacy of Qing Borderland Administration, by Loretta E. Kim. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019. xxiv + 339 pp. ISBN: 9780674237193

Loretta Kim's *Ethnic Chrysalis* is a focused study of the Orochen people, a minority ethnic group in Northeast China whose history offers a fresh perspective on the region's transformation over the last four hundred years. Until the 1950s, the Orochen were nomadic hunters who ranged across the central and western Sahaliyan basin (the Amur/Heilongjiang river and its tributaries), where they came into frequent contact with Russians as well as representatives of the Qing state. Today they are a minority *minzu* of some eight or nine thousand people centered in rural Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang Province. The Orochen appear frequently in histories of the Northeast, but until now these appearances have been limited to marginal roles. The first work of its kind in English (and arguably any language), *Ethnic Chrysalis* develops a multifaceted account of the changing fortunes of the Orochen through state attempts to rule this sometimes unruly people. While it is at first glance a modest specialist monograph in ethnohistory, it is in fact much more than this. Because of where the Orochen found themselves, in telling their story, Kim has also produced an important work of borderland history.

After an introduction that maps out the themes and organization of the book, the first two chapters address the pivotal seventeenth century. Chapter One explores the situation of the Orochen and their milieu in the first half of the century. Its starting point is the Orochen's clan-based mode of sociopolitical organization, a form broadly shared by other indigenous groups in the region. From here, Kim shows how the dual political technologies of conscription and tribute enabled the slow extension of Qing influence into this stateless domain. The differential application of conscription and tribute led to the formation of two nominally distinct subgroups of Orochen, the *moringga* and *yafahan*, although one wonders what the status of this distinction was given its frequent elision in archival documents (146–48). Chapter Two continues this story into the second half of the seventeenth century, when conflict with Russia began to transform an amorphous frontier into a militarized borderland. The story of Sino-Russian border conflict has been told before, and Kim accordingly synthesizes a wide range of published primary and secondary sources to recount this complex series of events. Notably,

Kim also draws on Manchu materials from the archives of the Heilongjiang Governor-General. These new sources provide precious glimpses of conditions on the ground, detailing personnel transfer, tribute collection, kidnapping, and defection. These archival materials help bring us back to the Orochen, and what these grand political processes meant for their legibility and life prospects.

Chapter Three takes us into the eighteenth century and Qing supremacy in the lower Sahaliyan basin. Kim examines three nested facets of this period: the border regime and its “mechanisms for managing the movement of people and things from one side of the border to the other” (111), attention to the “day-to-day maintenance of Heilongjiang as both a borderland and a special administrative region” (112), and, finally, analysis of how these two macro-political processes contributed to the “incorporation of the Orochen into Qing political and social spheres” (113). If the previous two chapters face the familiar scarcity of seventeenth century sources, this chapter draws extensively on previously unexamined eighteenth century archival materials. Many memorable details emerge from this understudied but richly documented period, like the emergence of the Orochen as “wardens of last resort” (151) for slaves with a record of violence or escape attempts.

Chapter Four brings us into the late imperial period and the unraveling of the system that reached maturity in the previous chapter. Kim avoids rehashing the story of Russian annexation, and instead explores a fascinating but unsuccessful attempt to settle the Orochen through the creation of the Xing'an Garrison, as well as the slow collapse of fur tribute. Kim suggests this larger unraveling centers on the failure of official attempts to continue to treat Orochen as both border guards and as tributaries. One part of this failure was mistrust born from a history of economic exploitation by official *anda*, agents who collected tribute and engaged in trade on behalf of the Qing state. In the next chapter we learn that *anda* came in unofficial varieties as well, and that some private *anda* were Russian (245–48). Intriguingly, the Orochen's reputation as expert sharpshooters seems to have been connected to these unofficial *anda* relationships, as Orochen had long engaged in black-market trade to obtain more accurate Russian firearms. By the end of the imperial period, these unofficial economic ties led to growing concerns about Russian influence, as some Orochen came to adopt Russian clothing and names.

Chapter Five is the book's most expansive in both page count and thematic scope, taking us from the founding of the PRC to the present. It seeks to shed light on the animating questions of the book at large: “Who were the Orochen? What was their relationship to the Qing state? How did they respond to and shape the way in which they were governed? How were they related to other people of the Qing northeastern frontier?” (208). This chapter also differs from the previous four chapters in that it centers on a new kind of data: Orochen self-definition in works published in the PRC. Official

ethnic histories offer a wealth of new kinds of information about Orochen lifeways and their history, but this ethnographic revolution has its limitations. Significantly, the role of Qing policies in the formation of the contemporary Orochen is largely occluded in these sources. Here some scholars might detect echoes of other episodes in the history of the Northeast, where ostensibly ethnic categories emerge as ghosts of earlier forms of political organization.

Ethnic Chrysalis faces several directions and potential audiences. First, scholars working on Tungusic linguistics and ethnology stand to benefit from a wealth of data that complements their existing methods of archaeology, linguistic reconstruction, and oral history. Next, although this work does not directly engage theorization of indigeneity as such, it does offer a challenge to accounts of indigeneity that place authentic identity and imperial subjecthood into opposition with one another. The title of the work encapsulates its provocative thesis: state institutions were a catalyst for the emergence of Orochen identity. Additionally, historians of Russian-Chinese borderlands stand to gain a valuable perspective through thinking with the Orochen, who offer a useful complement to political history focused on elites. Finally, this work is manifestly a contribution to Qing borderland history. While deeply informed by research on the Eight Banners, it seeks to avoid taking the horizon offered by Manchu archival materials as its own, and thereby avoid a purely top-down history of the Orochen. Instead, Kim proposes we see “the imperial state and the Orochen as co-actors in a story” (17). The nature of the sources used in four out of five chapters nevertheless means that Orochen agency is primarily legible through reading archival materials against the grain.

Ethnic Chrysalis consolidates archival discoveries and existing research in several languages to offer a rich portrait of the Orochen and the Northeast. It also left me with a number of questions. Through the two chapters that dwell in the seventeenth century, I wondered how Kim’s reconstruction of the Sahaliyan might contribute to broader discussions in Eurasian imperial history and social theory. As it stands, the inconsistent ascription practices that Kim observes in the early and mid-Qing embody a latent challenge to the dominant ethnohistorical paradigm in historiography of the region. Rather than ethnolinguistically distinct groups corresponding to today’s *natsional’nosti* and *minzu*, social differences in the Sahaliyan basin appear to have been organized on other lines. Kim does not give full voice to this skepticism, but does hint at it (94). Elaborating such a perspective could transform our view of “ethnicities” like the *nadan hala* (“Seven Clans”) through appreciating other ways of being a group besides shared language and culture.

Another cluster of questions concerns the relationship between the Orochen and an indigenous minority on the other side of the Chinese-Russian border, usually referred to in Russia as the Amur Evenki. Among those who have not shifted to monolingualism, the native language varieties spoken by Amur Evenki are mutually intelligible with the

varieties spoken by Orochen. Some ongoing language revitalization projects accordingly encompass both, tellingly still referred to as separate peoples with separate languages. Given the porous and shifting border, coupled with the Orochen's high degree of mobility, I wondered if Kim's story encompasses the ancestors of the Amur Evenki as well. The situation of the Orochen/Amur Evenki might thus offer a partial parallel with the Hezhe/Nanai, pulled apart by rival national projects on opposite sides of the border.

Even if the Amur Evenki do share a past with the Orochen, symmetrical treatment of both would be out of place in a book whose subtitle defines its subject matter as "China's Orochen People." I initially read this description as highlighting Orochen inclusion in the multinational PRC, but it also affords less sanguine interpretations. One of the virtues of Kim's empirically-minded scholarship is that it does not strain to foreclose interpretive options. Instead, it strives to enrich our sense of the region's deep historical complexity, which bodes well for its prospects as an enduring contribution to our understanding of the Qing Northeast and the world that came after it. *Ethnic Chrysalis* is a welcome addition to the collections of scholars and libraries that share Kim's passion for Eurasian imperial borderlands.

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