

HAN, CAROLYN, reteller; JAY HAN, translator, LI JI, illustrator. *Why Snails Have Shells: Minority and Han Folktales of China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993. vi + 73 pages. Color illustrations, color photograph, map. Hardcover US\$14.95; ISBN 0-8248-1505-X.

The body of this collection comprises three “Han Chinese” and seventeen “minority” folktales from China. Pages at the end of the volume provide information about each minority represented. Carolyn Han has retold the stories in admirable English — in conjunction with the colorful animal illustrations by the talented Yunnan artist Li Ji, they should provide children with a good bedtime read.

Han states in the introduction that while she was teaching English in Kunming she encouraged her students to “share stories,” and that her “collection of folktales started with my students.” Later, when she returned to the United States, she “wanted to share these delightful and informative stories with American readers to promote a greater cultural consciousness and a broader world view.” The next paragraph explains that the “collected tales needed to be translated into English,” for which she secured the services of Jay Han, who explained the “difficult-to-understand cultural nuances of the tales.” I must say that I found this explanation a bit confusing. If her students provided her with tales in English, why were the translation services of Jay Han needed? If they originally came to her in Chinese, how were they known to be “delightful and informative,” given Han’s self-confessed “limited” ability in the Chinese language? Or were the stories simply translated from the many existing collections of “minority” folklore published in China?

What I would particularly like to examine here is the presentation of this material as reflective of non-Han ethnics living in the political entity known as the People’s Republic of China. The volume reproduces a map of China showing the dwelling areas of the non-Han peoples she attributes her stories to. She then writes that non-Han people living in China “with few exceptions, live in remote border regions along the western reaches of China” (61). She seems not to have consulted her own map here — the regions of China that have traditionally been the homelands of indigenous non-Han peoples account for 50–60 percent of the PRC’s territory.

The stories themselves have little to offer in terms of informing readers about non-Han peoples in China. With a word changed here and there, they might be Spanish, Russian, or African folktales. Perhaps this was the rationale for the title — there would surely have been little market for an identical work entitled *Twenty Charming Fables*. Furthermore, given the elementary nature of each selection it is hard to grasp what Han is alluding to when she mentions “difficult-to-understand cultural nuances of the tales.” Han’s cursory knowledge of China often emerges in generalizations she makes about China’s non-Han peoples. She says, for example, that “many more [of the folktales] have food as a main theme. In China, where the common greeting is ‘Have you eaten?’ it is no wonder.” Actually, Tibetans, Mongols, and Monguors, to which five of the collected sketches are attributed, do not use “Have you eaten?” as a common greeting.

The most inaccurate part of the book is its verbal descriptions of the non-Han peoples, which reflect unhelpful and misleading Chinese stereotypes. Information about the “Tu” (69) illustrates this only too well. In the first place, the word “Tu” is an appellation that many of the nationality find objectionable: “Monguor” and “Mongghol” are what most members of this ethnic group call themselves. Han writes that “the Tus call themselves ‘Qagan’, which means ‘white Mongol’.” Qagan means “white,” not “White Mongol,” and in any event only a few aged Monguor would refer to themselves as “Qagan Monguor” — normally, this description is only invoked when comparisons are made to the Mongols, who are referred to in this context as “Black Mongols.” Han also writes that the Monguor have no written script, despite the fact that they have had a Latin script since the 1980s, and that the Monguor language, according to many Altaic language specialists, can be fairly easily written in

Mongol. Han's statement is simply a reflection of the common Chinese tendency to measure the cultural level of a people according to whether or not they have a written language.

Han reports that the Monguor "claim that their ancestor was a Mongol general who fought under Genghis Khan." Actually this claim is heard only in Huzhu Monguor Autonomous County, and from some, but by no means all, Monguor. It is implausible that the large number of Monguor who live elsewhere, such as Minhe Hui and Monguor Autonomous County, would claim such a general as an ancestor. Han's description concludes with the usual Chinese-style finale of "colorfully dressed minority peoples"; in fact, few Monguor, with the exception, particularly, of aged females in Huzhu Monguor Autonomous County, wear traditional clothing today.

The information on other ethnics is equally misleading, often just repeating established Chinese clichés. The Mongols, for example, are portrayed as yurt-dwelling grassland wanderers — in fact, probably less than five percent of China's total Mongol population of five million (not three million as reported by Han) live in yurts today. The assertion that "in July . . . the yurts are moved to Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia" for a traditional festival bears no relation to the facts. In Hohhot, a large, heavily polluted industrial city twelve hours by train north of Beijing, the Mongols number less than ten percent of the total population. The nearest yurt-dwellers, other than those trotted out of plastic-covered yurts for the tourists, are in arid regions hundreds of kilometers away.

Han predictably writes that "growing up on horseback, Mongols are skilled riders" (68). My own impression, based on three years of living in Inner Mongolia (1984–87) and extensive travels in the region, is that Mongols in China are predominantly agriculturalists and that most have never been on a horse.

Tibetans fare little better than the Monguor and Mongols.

What, then, is the value of this book? Other than an aid to lull kiddies to sleep, it is a fine example of how the West is willing to use people's interest in "minorities" to enhance the commercial success of a publication. Would that there was a proportional interest in obtaining more factual intelligence about the peoples so used.

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MONGOLIA

HEISSIG, WALTER, editor. *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung, Teil 5. Vorträge des 6. Epensymposiums des Sonderforschungsbereichs 12, Bonn 1988* [Problems in Mongol epic poetry, part 5]. Asiatische Forschungen Band 120. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992. x + 373 pages. Cloth DM 180.00; ISBN 3-447-03231-6.

The heroic epic of the Eurasian peoples is an ancient tradition, going back to the preliterate stages of each of the emergent pastoral nomadic tribes that arose in the distant reaches of Mongolia. Although written versions of almost all early forms of this art are lacking, the oral epics — and especially the traditions of epic poetry found within them — are ancient enough to rank with the world's oldest.

Analysis of the themes and styles of these epic traditions suggests that the genre had developed into a classic form long before the recording of such texts as the *Secret History of the Mongols* and the Geser epic. The *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung* series treats the Mongol epic in its broadest context and includes comparative studies from the traditions of neighboring peoples and of other pastoral nomads of Central Eurasia.

This volume of the series is somewhat broader in scope than the earlier ones, and is also