

Mists on the River: Folktales from Siberia**Yeremei Aipin, Translated by Marina Aipin and Claude Clayton Smith**

(Brunswick, ME: Shanti Arts Publishing, 2020), 51 pp. ISBN 978-1-951651-40-4.

Mists on the River: Folktales from Siberia is a diminutive and brightly illustrated volume of Khanty folk tales by Yeremei Aipin, a Khanty writer, politician, and one of Russia's foremost indigenous rights advocates. Geared toward a general audience but also of interest to students and scholars, this collection is the latest collaborative English translation of indigenous Siberian literature undertaken by Claude Clayton Smith of Ohio Northern University. Previous cotranslations by Smith and the late Alexander Vashchenko of Moscow State University include *I Listen to the Earth* (Ohio Northern University, 1995), a chapbook of Aipin's essays and fiction, *Meditations after the Bear Feast* (Shanti Arts, 2016), a poetic dialogue between the Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday and the Nenets poet Yuri Vella, and most notably, *The Way of Kinship: An Anthology of Native Siberian Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Together they have produced a body of work that has done much to amplify indigenous voices from Russia and foster connections between the indigenous literatures of Russia and North America.

In his brief introduction to *Mists on the River*, Aipin emphasizes the continuity of the Khanty oral tradition, as well as his own personal experiences with it, by recounting how the tales were transmitted from one generation to the next before eventually reaching him. The tales are concise but far from simple, rendered gracefully into accessible English prose by Smith. Young readers will enjoy them for their vivid and often humorous depiction of the plants, animals, people, and mythical creatures of Siberia, along with the subtle moral lessons they impart. Yet the tales also contain much for scholars and educators to appreciate in terms of their narrative and rhetorical structure, tropes, and insight into the traditional lifeways and worldview of the Khanty.

In the clever etiological tale "Ptichek and His Sister," two sibling birds outwit a bloodthirsty ogre, whose dying curse is for humans to be forever tormented by mosquitoes. "Paki the Bear" conveys the significance of the bear in Khanty culture while also revealing the emotional resonance of that relationship, as in the following passage depicting a moment of intimacy between a human hunter and his bear brother: "he tussled him, murmuring many warm words, and brushing every hair of his fur" (26). "The Sandpiper" takes the form of a dialogue between



the titular bird and an unnamed interlocutor, in which the bird's body parts figuratively map the known world while also hinting at the boundaries of the unknowable:

"Sandpiper, Sandpiper, what is your nose?"

"My nose is an ice-pick."

"Sandpiper, Sandpiper, what are your eyes?"

"My eyes are two pots of water."

"Sandpiper, Sandpiper, what are your feet?"

"My feet are two forks for the fire."

...

"Sandpiper, Sandpiper, what are your wings?"

But the Sandpiper just whistled, spread its wings, and flew away. (23)

The volume's eight tales bring a compelling glimpse of Khanty culture to an English-speaking audience, but readers should be aware of the limited scope of this project. *Mists on the River* is not a comprehensive collection of Khanty folklore, nor does it purport to be. The absence of a bibliography and scholarly commentary does not impede enjoyment or understanding, but it does pique the reader's curiosity to learn more about the tales' origins, their place in the Khanty oral tradition, and current research on this topic. In his introduction, Aipin alludes to the shared Mansi origin of the tales, which invites further exploration into the cultures of the neighboring Khanty and Mansi peoples. For these reasons *Mists on the River* could be put to good use in the classroom, alongside appropriate secondary literature, in courses on folklore, indigenous studies, Russian/Eurasian area studies, and world literature.

Readers should also bear in mind that *Mists on the River* is not necessarily representative of Aipin's work as a whole, given the breadth and variety of his fifty-year career in letters, politics, and advocacy. The same author of these placid tales is also the author of fiery polemics decrying the cultural and environmental destruction caused by the encroachment of the oil and gas industries onto the Khanty people's traditional lands. Likewise, the tales in this volume seem a world away from Aipin's fiction and autobiographical writing, much of it dwelling on the traumas of Sovietization, including the brutal events of the 1931–1934 Kazym Rebellion. Yet Khanty folklore emerges as the thread connecting all facets of Aipin's work, and in that sense *Mists on the River* serves as a gateway to a complex figure who embodies the fraught history and politics of Khanty cultural expression from the Soviet era to the present.

Above all, *Mists on the River* showcases what Aipin does best: asserting the dignity and beauty of Khanty culture, stressing the importance of the Khanty people's connection to their native environment, and relating the particularities of the Khanty world to universal human experience. This endeavor seems all the more valuable in light of tragic news that came to light during the writing of this review: the Khanty artist Gennady Raishev, illustrator of *Mists on the River* and a long-time collaborator with Aipin, Vashchenko, and Smith, lost his life to COVID-19 on November 9, 2020. His passing is a stark reminder of the catastrophic impact of the global pandemic on indigenous communities, the enormity of what stands to be lost, and the urgency of protecting and sustaining what remains.

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Regional'naia elita Dal'nego Vostoka v mekhanizme vneshnei politiki: Dokumental'naia istoriia voennogo konflikta na KVZHD mezhdou SSSR i Kitaem, 1929

Marina Fuchs

(New York: South Eastern Publishers, 2020), 513 pp., 570 notes, with a summary in English, 54 pp.

Most readers will know of the Japanese creation of Manchukuo in 1931, but few will be aware of a significant imbroglio that preceded it in 1929, described and analyzed in this impressive book. By July, the virtual dictator of Manchuria known as the Young Marshal based in Mukden had completed the takeover of the Chinese Eastern Railway constructed

by the Russians on land leased from China, including the company headquarters in Harbin, adding insult to injury by replacing Red officials with White. The local Soviet officials could not take strong action, however, particularly because of their fear of complications with nearby Japan. Chiang Kai-shek's government in Nanking was not directly affected at first, but then the Soviet Union broke off relations.

Determined to accept no other solution than a return to the status quo in its dispute with China, the Soviet government set up in August 1929 a Special Far Eastern Army under the Civil War veteran General Bliukher. The TASS News Agency reported on August 20 that owing to frequent attacks on Soviet territory by White Guard detachments organized on Chinese territory, the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs had sent a statement to both Mukden and Nanking governments asserting that crossings of the border by the Red Army had been made in response to the White Guard attacks. On vacation at the beginning of the crisis and not wanting to be disturbed, Joseph Stalin nevertheless wrote to Vyacheslav Molotov on October 7 that two regiments manned by the Chinese should be organized to establish revolutionary power. However, Stalin's instructions could not be carried out for a number of reasons: the ineptitude and rivalry between Bolshevik officials in Harbin, as well as confusion there between them, diplomatic officials and representatives of the Third International; an imperfect chain of party command from Moscow to Harbin via Khabarovsk; concern about the provocation of the Japanese; and the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Chinese. Moreover, at this time Moscow was more interested in Afghanistan.

Full hostilities broke out in the Far East in November after a broadcast of the aims of the Red Army from Khabarovsk, and the Chinese forces were driven back with heavy losses partly inflicted by Soviet aircraft. Attempts by the United States to activate the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 officially coming into effect on July 24, 1929, and aimed to abolish war as a means of settling international disputes failed, with France the only other great power in favor. The British point of view expressed to a Chinese legal official on October 29 was that the Russian experience in Manchuria constituted an overhasty abolition of extra-territoriality. The United States and France argued along similar lines. Certainly, the Mukden authorities were sufficiently impressed by Soviet military success to sign a protocol at Khabarovsk on December 22 restoring previous relations between Chinese and Russian deputies, although the Nanking government would not ratify it.

After much delay, a Moscow Conference for the settlement of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) problem as provided for in the Khabarovsk Protocol opened on October 11, 1930. The Chinese side representing Nanking wanted to revert to the agreements made in 1924; the Soviet side procrastinated while protesting about the activities of White Russian activities in Manchuria. In December, the Soviet foreign minister Maksim Litvinov declared that even if the highly likely supposition that China had been pressured into its activities by some imperialist power or powers were set aside, the Nationalist Government remained confident that it could still rely on the hostility of the capitalist powers to the Soviet Union. Marshal Kliment Voroshilov completed an extensive tour of Siberia and the Far East in July 1931 to bolster up the army via a public acknowledgment of Vasili Bliukher (to whom he had already given the Order of the Red Star in Moscow in June 1930), and other complementary gestures as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria threatened.

Then, the proceedings of the Moscow Conference were brought to an inconclusive halt by that invasion in September 1931. The Japanese Army had been encouraged by the restraint of the Soviet forces and the failure of the Chinese to contemplate the takeover of the whole of Manchuria as well as by the belief of the Japanese government that it could form a solid hinterland for any action in the Pacific.

Born in Nakhodka, but now working in Berlin, Marina Fuchs has worked in archives in the Far East as well as Moscow to produce a clear description and analysis of this complicated episode, making good use of documents concerning party activity in Khabarovsk and Harbin in particular. She promises to produce a second monograph on the period between the Khabarovsk Protocol of December 1929 and the Japanese occupation of September 1931.

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Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North

Joachim Otto Habeck, ed.

(Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2019), 490 pp. ISBN paperback: 978-1-78374-717-7; ISBN cloth: 978-1-78374-718-4.

This is an edited volume about life in the Russian Arctic, while still extensive in its scope. Including the introduction and conclusion, the book contains eleven solid chapters that are serious contributions that discuss and analyze lifestyle-related topics. The collection is almost a swan song of the Siberian Studies Centre at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology from Halle/Saale. The editor Joachim Otto Habeck was the long-time coordinator of the Siberian Studies Centre at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, and this publication is a result of the last research group of the Centre—“Conditions and Limitations of Lifestyle Plurality in Siberia” from 2008 to 2012. Most of the authors in this volume should be familiar to readers of *Sibirica* as they have been active in our Siberianists’ *tusovka* for a long time. Among them are Eleanor Peers, Artem Rabogoshvili, John J. Long, Tatiana Barchunova, and Masha Shaw.

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this volume is provided by Habeck in the introduction. He starts with Bourdieu’s *habitus*, or “the mechanism that generates certain patterns of valorisation through taste, along with certain practices” (11). It is followed with references to Giddens, whose emphasis is “on the individuals’ need to select consciously from many existing options” (12). Habeck provides some juxtaposition of these two authors, and rightly so. In my opinion, Bourdieu correctly “depicts individuals as unavoidably inserted in a social hierarchy” (13). After short excursions into the theories of German sociologists, Habeck concludes this part of the Introduction with David Chaney’s view of lifestyle, that in short is a broad concept not only limited to consumption. Chaney’s concepts of *surfaces* (attire) and *sensibilities* (ethical and aesthetic significances) are central throughout the book. It continues on how the definition of lifestyle is used in the post-Socialist context and in Siberia specifically. The introductory chapter is highly recommended reading on how the concept of lifestyle makes sense in a Russian context: “Finally, we argue against the idea that lifestyle is intrinsic only to high-modern or post-modern settings and also against the tenet that lifestyle is characteristic of urban parts of society.” (p. 28) For anyone familiar with the Siberian setting, this is an accurate statement.

Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian Far North in this volume is analyzed from different angles: through the impact of infrastructure on lifestyle (Denis Zuev and Habeck), immobility (Shaw) or movement (Joseph J. Lang), perceptions of happiness (Jaroslava Panakova), ethnicity (separate chapters from Peers and Rabogoshvili), memory (Inna Schröder), and role-playing (Tatiana Barchunova and Habeck). The scope is broad, and the topics are sometimes distant from each other geographically, in time span (past versus more modern times), or in the setting (urban and rural). This diversity is exciting, but the reader may sometimes struggle to understand what brings all these diverse chapters together.

It is interesting when the authors trace their topics of research back to the Soviet era, to the Marxist-Leninist notion of ethnicity and *kul'tura* (culture). For example, Peers analyzes how ethnicity is performed and projected amongst Sakha people. When analyzing the visualization of Sakha culture in paintings and handicraft, she writes that “the Soviet-era origin of so much of Sakha (Yakutia)’s cultural production suggests that the region’s distinctive treatment of visual aesthetics also has its roots in the Soviet period.” (275). She shows how the dichotomy of the Soviet concept of *kul'tura*—which can imply assimilation in order to become part of a Soviet people as well as the preservation of the ethnic identities of non-Russian people—is still relevant for the Sakha. This paradox could be bound up with the ideology of modernization. On the one hand, an urban “enlightened” (Habeck 2011) lifestyle meant giving up “backward” pre-October Revolution village culture and entering into the modern industrial society; on the other hand, it meant creation of a contemporary ethnic culture that had its own modern literature, cinema, music or theatre. Here, she makes a common error in stating that the adoption of Cold War-era Western pop culture via rock music and fashion was “sidestepping state restrictions” (283). As a fact, being a rock fan in the Soviet Union did not automatically mean juxtaposition to the Soviet ideology (Smith 1976; Ventsel 2016; Yurchak 2006; Zhuk 2010) or that rock music belonged solely to the underground (Ventsel 2016). Most Sakha intellectuals viewed Sakha rock music as a sign of the modernization of the Sakha culture that gave the Sakha culture an equal position vis-à-vis other “developed” cultures.

Zuev and Habeck, as well as Panakova, discuss how telecommunications and new technologies of photography have both changed lifestyles but also reflect these changes. Photos of oneself that can now be produced in unlimited quantities without counting the shots of the

film roll, new tools for storing photos, and ways of sharing photos in social networks have given new meaning to what Panakova terms “portraits of self.” This is an exciting topic because the people of Russia are notably obsessed with social networks and communication through virtual media. Older researchers of Siberia know that long gone are the times when a visitor was first given a thick photo album with photos from holidays, family gatherings, or work trips. These photos have now moved to the computer, smartphone, or social platforms. Both authors also stress the “Siberian particularity”—the vast distances involved make posting photos and selfies to the internet especially meaningful.

Via role-playing, Barchunova brings extreme modernity to the picture. The author leans on Huizinga’s *separation of play and real life* (365). This chapter is theoretically strong and shows how consumption and a do-it-yourself ethos play a significant role in role-playing. This refers to how gamers construct and modify their reality via creating clothing, buying accessories, and choosing weapons. It is interesting that the gamers do not want to re-enact history but are well aware that their interpretation is “something different” (374). Gamers distinguish very well between the game reality and the world in which they have to earn money in order to finance their hobby. I did hope for more discussion about gender roles and social status in this chapter. There were some hints about women’s roles in gaming, and I would have also liked to hear more about how one’s ability to invest in clothes and other goods (i.e., consumption) affects one’s position in a club.

In sum, this volume is a solid piece of ethnography and theory that capably reflects the contradictions and variegation in contemporary Russia and between the different regions in Siberia and the Russian North. Modern society is thoroughly analyzed in its different aspects, and an impressive ethnography is presented; thus, this book is also recommended reading for those readers who do not specialize in the region. I think that Siberia in its extremes often demonstrates that there are plenty of aspects of the social life of this region that we can benefit from studying in order to understand modern society as a whole.

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