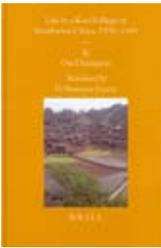


## REVIEWS



## China



**Ou Chaoquan, *Life in a Kam Village in Southwest China, 1930–1949* (Trans. by D. Norman Geary)**

Leiden: Brill, 2007. 264 pages, 31 illustrations, 48 plates, 3 maps, glossary, references, index. Hardback, US\$125.00: ISBN 978-90-04-16229-7.

*LIFE IN a Kam Village* is a work of auto-ethnography that concerns the Kam (Gaem) people of Guizhou and neighboring provinces, a people officially known in China as the Dong ethnic group (Dongzu 侗族). The author and the translator collaborated on an earlier work (GEARY et al. 2003) which is a more general overview of Kam culture in south China and along with ROSSI and LAU's 1991 photo-rich work is one of the few studies in English on the Kam/Dong people. One of Ou's goals in the present book is to present a more nuanced "warts and all" portrait of a local Kam culture than was possible in the former text.

In its use of subjective recollection the book is in some ways similar to KAYANO (1994), in which the author sought to recollect a vision of traditional Ainu life in Hokkaido, Japan, in the 1930s. Other works in this vein include LIMUSISHIDEN and STUART (2011) concerning ethnic culture in Qinghai 青海 province in about the same time period, and the somewhat chronologically later and more novelistic *book* by YANG and MATHIEU (2004) about Mosuo 摩梭 culture around Lake Lugu 泸沽 on the borders of Yunnan 云南 and Sichuan 四川 provinces in southwest China.

The book under review concentrates on life in several small towns located in Jianhe 剑河 and Rongjiang 榕江 counties in the southeast quadrant of Guizhou 贵州 province in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the detail centers on the more conservative town of Xiangye (a Dong/Kam word) known as "Liukai" in Chinese (this name, used in the text, indicates modern Liukaicun 柳开村), and a town named Langdong 朗洞 which long ago was acculturated to Han 汉 Chinese ways. A series of short chapters introduce location, ethnonym, origins of local families and populations, and aspects of agriculture, foodways, life cycle, and festivals. The complex

and layered multicultural nature of the area with its Kam/Dong, Han, and Miao 苗 populations is vividly illustrated by details of migrations, settlement patterns, and mention of physiognomic measurements and descriptions from Russian and Chinese anthropologists in the 1950s and earlier western ethnographers.

The chapters typically begin with a brief introduction to a certain aspect of local customs, which is then illustrated by recollections from Ou's youth. A series of chapters detail local coming-of-age, courting, engagement, marriage, divorce, unorthodox marriages, and child-rearing customs. One pair of chapters, "Courtship by Night," and "Courtship by Day," deals with different styles of courtship, which are opportunities for premarital socializing between young men and women, despite the fact that many participants were already arranged to be married in their late teens. Many aspects of the marriage process provide anecdotal data for comparison with customs of other ethnic minority groups in south and southwest China.

Possibly the most unique dimension of the text, which accords with Ou's goals of complete disclosure, are the occasional glimpses at "unofficial" sides of community life. One example is the chapter entitled "Intimidating Situations for Young Women," set in the 1940s. The anecdotes concern young Kam men from Xiangye who went outside to study and returned with urbane, Han ways. Young women avoided them, putting up insurmountable physical and emotional barriers. Even if they joined the wholly local young men in the nightly visits to chat outside young women's windows they were shunned. Of seven young men who left the village to study, all ended up marrying women from outside Xiangye. Interestingly, some young Kam women married Han men who came seeking second wives or concubines, sometimes at festival times. As the Han and Kam interacted in the markets, there was a certain degree of conviviality between the communities. Also, the Han men were said to be bold, pursuing women (many who could not speak Chinese) near the village wells, sometimes grasping their hands in the street, or even approaching them in daylight at their homes.

The chapter entitled "Marriage Relationships" describes the estrangement that the author claims was often a fact of married life. In part due to the custom of arranged marriages (which still allowed the premarital courting activities) husbands and wives seldom interacted and public affection was discouraged. "Marriage was only for sexual intimacy and this was not based on love" (175). After children were old enough to speak, communication was often done indirectly through them. Boys slept with the father, and girls with the mother. Sex between the parents occurred on stealthy night visits to the mother's room. Affairs, which due to the estrangement factor sometimes occurred, had to be conducted with the utmost discretion, lest the families involved invoke disgrace. Women working in the fields were sometimes the subject of forced liaisons. Furthering the discussion of sexual dichotomy is a chapter on gender profiles of men and women in terms of labor and customary behavior. One example is foodways, in which women would eat glutinous rice and "raw sour fish" (180) and sometimes ate with their hands, while men usually ate regular rice, only cooked food, and always used chopsticks.

As a translation, *Life in A Kam Village* generally succeeds in communicating Ou's intent of an intimate look at a local community and conveying the intimacies

of the ethnographically rich detail. In combining focused vignettes with painstaking minutiae supported by content-rich woodcuts and crisp black and white photos, the text is a welcome contribution to the small but growing number of insider accounts in English from the era just before the establishment of the People's Republic of China when isolated minority communities were already feeling the winds of change and on the brink of even more pervasive changes in the coming decades.

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