



Sarah Mehlhop Strong. *Ainu Spirits Singing: The Living World of Chiri Yukie's Ainu Shinyoshu*

University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. xvi + 314 pages. Illustrations, English translation of 13 Ainu chants, bibliographical references, index. Hardback, US\$58.00; ISBN-10: 0824835123; ISBN-13: 978-0824835125.

THROUGH the UN-based human rights regime, Japan has come under increasing pressure to recognise Ainu as an “indigenous people.” This process led to both houses of the Diet in June 2008 passing a “Resolution Calling for the Recognition of the Ainu People as an Indigenous People of Japan.” So far the government has hesitated to accept this in full, fearing that to do so might require concessions on land rights and political representation plus an obligation to include Ainu language, culture, and history in school curricula. There remains much for the Ainu activists and their supporters to fight for, but it seems clear now that the underlying premise of Japanese policy towards Ainu—that they are a dying race doomed to disappear—has been overturned, even if it is not yet obvious what has or will replace it.

This is the contemporary political context for Strong’s book. It gives us glimpses of Ainu culture at a time when it was fighting for its existence at the start of the twentieth century when government policy was guided by these social Darwinist ideas. Her book has two components: the final section, which comprises thirteen *kamui yukar* “chants of spiritual beings” recorded in written form at the start of the 1920s by Chiri Yukie, an Ainu bilingual in Japanese and Ainu, and the bulk of the book which provides the multi-dimensional context for these chants. That is to say, a description of the circumstances in which Chiri Yukie worked and a detailed explanation of the material, social, and spiritual landscape in which the *yukar* are set.

The author weaves a great deal into her narrative about the history, demography, and social situation of Ainu over the last several hundred years so that her book can be read by all kinds of readers interested in Japan, Japanese history, or folklore in general. For this reader it was the context in which the collection was collated, rewritten, and published that was most intriguing. The early 1920s was the first blossoming of liberal democracy—a time when some Japanese minds were opening up to the possibility of alternative narratives within the master narrative of the Japanese state. As Strong argues, even the liberals who assisted Chiri in her endeavours never quite abandoned the social Darwinist notions of Japanese culture and language as being modern, progressive, and therefore naturally dominant compared to the “backward” Ainu culture that was ultimately bound to be overwhelmed by their massively more populous and powerful neighbours. Chiri herself, however, was part of a tiny counter-trend that sought to assert that Ainu-ness was compatible with successful modernity, and that by preserving Ainu culture and projecting it into the twentieth century, they could obstruct or at least delay the process that threatened to erase their social and cultural memory.

Chiri Yukie's life was short. Born in 1903, she died in 1922, a year before her *Ainu shinyoshū* was published. She also worked on an *Ainu mindanshū* (Collection of Ainu folktales). That, however, is lost. She was fortunate to have been at an Ainu primary school for six years while living with her aunt and grandmother, ensuring that she was comfortable with both languages and cultures. Incidentally the aunt, Kannari Matsu, was also active in preserving and recording Ainu culture, work which was recognized by the Japanese government in 1956 when she was designated an "intangible cultural asset." It would have been interesting to know a bit more about her work, which seems to have been a continuation of Chiri's efforts and rather undermines one part of Strong's narrative that suggests the state ignored and even tried to suppress Ainu culture until the 1990s.

Chiri's short life provides Strong with only sufficient material for her first chapter. The main bulk of the book links Ainu culture and language to the landscape and material world of Hokkaido. The chapters on the roles played by animals and animal spirits are particularly engrossing.

This book is difficult to read in that the commentaries make little sense if you have not read the *yukar*, and they are hard to follow without the background knowledge provided in the substantial chapters. Most readers will, I suspect, flip back and forth. As I read the *yukar* I kept wondering about the Ainu and Japanese texts and wished they were also available. However, as Strong points out, this would have added considerably to the size of the book, even if published as appendices, and they are quite easy to access on Internet sites if anyone wants to consult them.

One wishes that there had been an Alan Lomax or Percy Grainger who could have recorded these chants. As Strong makes clear, these *yukar* were transmitted over hundreds of years as oral performances. It would be fascinating to have even fragments of the performances that Chiri heard as a young girl from which she created these texts. Indeed as I write this I feel there must surely be contemporary performances available online that inquisitive readers could be referred to.

Overall, this is a fascinating piece of work that provides a glimpse into the Ainu cultural world and worldview that robustly establishes how different this was (and still is?) from that of the dominant Japanese culture. The Ainu cultural world was struggling to survive in the 1920s, and one fears that the lukewarm formal recognition provided by the Japanese state in 2008 suggests that this book is perhaps one hundred years too late. However, if Ainu culture is to survive in any form it will be through the work of those like Strong who re-present the work of Chiri and others to a world audience.

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