

Fiskesjö, Magnus. 2021. Stories From an Ancient Land. Perspectives on Wa History and Culture. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 414 pp. Hb.: \$145.00/£107.00. ISBN: 9781789208870.

Book review by

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This book answers the question of what a Swedish anthropologist from the American University of Chicago might make of the waning of a once-powerful people in the mountainous region of southern China and northern Burma. This area was on the collision track as the two great empires of Britain and China spread across the globe and collided. In this area, according to Wa mythology, people first emerged onto the surface of the planet. In their return to this origin point, these imperialists owed Wa people a debt for keeping up with the sacrifices required of them as the guardians of that area. However, the invaders did not see it that way. Each thought of themselves as the bearers of civilization and prosperity to the poverty-benighted, underdeveloped uplands.

For decades and across various evolutions of their own political and economic processes, the management of this ambiguous border was debated between the two empires until a new Communist China and a newly independent Burma settled on a boundary that divided the Wa people. On the one side, those living in China were subjected to the interminable assaults of the civilizing Chinese, and on the other, the Communist Party of Burma transformed the Wa State into a proxy for China and a locus for the Wa army's continual war against the longest-lived military dictatorship in recent history.

Fiskesjö's ethnographic work in the region from 1996 to 1998 and visits during 2006 and 2013 was mostly located on the northern side of that border, with briefer visits south of it in the Wa State of Burma. He contextualizes this ethnography historically with copious references to Chinese, British, and American missionary sources.

It is possible that the future of this egalitarian people might be in the hands of those on the Burma side of the border where Wa manage an independent existence as their own state. Meanwhile, the Chinese have exerted incessant pressure to absorb Wa into their polity and culture, to civilize and develop them, and deliver them from the poverty of independent agriculture into the riches and splendors of wage work in Chinese Communist-style capitalist factories. Their culture is preserved to some extent by the Orientalizing practices of the hegemonic Chinese in their ethnic theme parks, vying for the disposable income of Chinese and foreign tourists. However, their culture's simultaneous subjugation and romanticization inevitably lead to distortions. A lasting image is of young Wa men appropriating the image of the fierce buffalo to wear Chinese imitations of Chicago Bulls basketball team caps.

Since the 1950s catastrophic (for Wa) Chinese drive to incorporate Wa, gone are the heavily armed independent communities loosely associated with others as the people become absorbed into the generic Chinese peasantry or proletariat. Throughout, there are comparisons with the anarchic Nuer described by E.E. Evans-Pritchard.

Many features of Wa culture were formed in the collision of empires. From the British confrontation with China, they derived opium as a crop until it was outlawed in China, if not in Burma. From that worldwide market, they derived the most successful replacement activity in producing synthetic drugs on the Burma side. From the Chinese, they derived the practice of taking and displaying the heads of enemies. Thus, two of the most noted features of Wa culture are fall-outs of grander historical processes. One theme of the book is that Wa culture is no static set of procedures or rules but evolving practices that respond to ever-changing political and economic situations.

The egalitarianism, however, is Wa, as part of the larger system of repute-driven social orders that participate in competitive feasting. This, Fiskesjö argues, is maintained as a choice of Wa people. He places this discussion in the history of theoretical attempts of British and American anthropologists to comprehend egalitarian social orders. Underlying this discussion is a tacit comparison of the fates of indigenous peoples in the face of the expanding American empire in the process Americans know as manifest destiny. China, Fiskesjö suggests, is guided by a similar destiny to dominate a continent.

Ultimately, we are left with a sobering view of a proud and independent people who are "being slowly erased, [where] they can only carve out whatever benefits and self-worth they can gain while they still have time" (p. 263). The author provides a timely example of the erasure of a historic minority's culture after its long struggle against encroaching Han hegemony