

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Martha AVERY, *Women of Mongolia* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1995, 220 p.)

Lovely is the first word that comes to mind after reading "Women of Mongolia" by Martha Avery. That by no means implies that the book is simplistic. It is teeming with life - feminine life. Avery has managed, through thirty-seven oral accounts, to juxtapose a sense of rootedness in the vast and ancient history of Mongolia with the shifting ground of the present and uncertainty of the future. She has allowed the rich and diverse physical, social and psycho spiritual landscape of Mongolia to emerge through the words of the women with whom she spoke. From story to story, the lives of women - their beliefs and traditions, their resourcefulness and humor, and their Mongolian womaness - unfold in a rich display of experience. Beekeepers and diplomats, street sweepers and anthropologists, camel herders and doctors, museum curators and factory workers, and a host of others, reveal the complexity of issues and influences that face the women of Mongolia today.

Mongolia is a country in transition, states Avery. It is a difficult transition from a Socialist Soviet regime to the free market economy of an independent, democratic state. The economy of the country is reeling as salaries, job security and social programs, existent under the former Soviet regime, are reduced or eradicated. Against this backdrop, Avery views the women not as passive victims of the times, but willing agents of their own change. They are women confident of their strength while realistic about the obstacles they face as they peer into the future. Apathy is rare in these accounts, yet not absent. Most share a vision of better lives and higher education for their children.

This is not a standard oral history. Avery did not set out to write this book when she travelled to Mongolia. It presented itself to her, a book waiting to be written, and this is the character of some of her interviews. A number are spontaneous - two girls waiting for a bus back to the city where

Avery's lorry breaks down; a woman out in the desert herding her sheep and goats as Avery and her party are searching for an ancient archaeological site; or Avery dropping in at a ger (a traditional Mongolian dwelling) near a coal mine where her car runs out of gas. Other interviews appear to be prearranged. In both cases, Avery's presence seems quite demure, and her questions are carefully laced throughout the oral accounts, along with background commentary, without seeming intrusive. Often she allows the women to echo her questions in their own words rather than interjecting them into the text. A generous display of beautiful photographs complements the individual accounts.

There are only a few minor weaknesses to the book. The first is Avery's decision to group the accounts under "subject areas that unite them, not between city and country." The wisdom of this decision becomes evident as the reader is introduced to a diversity of living styles throughout the various ecological zones of Mongolia. As well, a fluidity exists between the city and the country as people move from one to the other. However, some of the subject areas seem arbitrary and, at times, unnecessary. Accounts placed under one heading could easily go under another. For instance, "continuity" is both a major theme of the book (along with change, resilience and resourcefulness) as well as a subject area. Under the subject area labelled "Continuity" there are only four accounts. One of the interviews - a woman describing her desire to set up a shelter for homeless women and children - makes little sense placed under this heading. It might be better placed in the succeeding section entitled "Country to City."

Within the same section, Avery inserts a few pages of photographs under the sub-heading, "Yak Herder", accompanied by her own descriptive commentary. It is a confusing moment in the book because no interview accompanies the photographs, and no woman is specifically associated with the photos. There are also no yaks to be seen. Yet, other accounts of camel, sheep and goat herders are placed within other subject areas, e.g., "Gobi Landscape." Furthermore, the distinction between "Continuity" and the subject area, "Tradition and Buddhism," is unclear. Is tradition not continuous? Perhaps "Continuity" as a subject area is too general and should remain a general underlying theme.

Second, it is not always clear whether the women are speaking in English, or in Mongolian through a translator. In some cases we are told, but in many others it is left to speculation. The educated women, one can assume, speak English. Under the Soviet regime, some women were sent to Russia to learn English and Russian. Knowing what language was being

spoken would give some sense of the linguistic geography of Mongolia, as well as clue the reader in to different world views. It would also assist the reader in envisioning Avery's interaction with each woman.

However, these are minor criticisms given the overall scope of the book. Avery has found a means to introduce the world to the women of Mongolia through these simple, but rich accounts, each of which lends a perspective to the complexity of the forces at play in their lives. They are snapshots of their lives packaged to illustrate a wide range of experiences that make up the feminine landscape of Mongolia.

Trudy Sable