

## **Book review**

### **Gazing at the cradle of the dust storm: a photo story of humans and environment in Alxa**

In Alxa, the largest and most westerly of the twelve Leagues in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, China, the Ford Foundation supported a project in participatory communication using the technique of photo “novella”: local people are provided with still cameras with which they are free to photograph anything they want in order to make up a picture story of their everyday lives. This process is meant to give them the opportunity to record and reflect their needs, to learn together by engaging in dialogue among themselves and with “outsiders”, to encourage community-led action and to inform policymakers.

The “Photo Story” project was implemented by three environmental non-governmental organisations: Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecology of Alxa (SEE), the Development Institute for Tradition and Environment in Kunming (DITE) and the National Culture and Gender Research Institute in Lijiang (CGRC). The main purposes were to explore local people’s perspectives on and understanding of their environment, their livelihoods and their traditions; and to stimulate them to reflect on environmental protection and community development.

The project also helped “outsiders” understand local views, concerns and aspirations. The project was coordinated by a young Han Chinese woman from Zhejiang Province, Ding Pingjun, working together with a young Mongolian woman, Meng Gen.

Over a period of one year, local people -- men and women, young and old, from two ethnic groups (Mongolian and Han Chinese) -- at two sites in Alxa League were given simple cameras and “plenty of film”, and were trained how to use them. They took pictures of whatever was important to them; a total of about 2000 pictures were developed and printed. The selection of photographs to be published was made by the project coordinator who, together with her colleague Meng Gen, interviewed the local photographers and other members of their families on the basis of their pictures. In 2008, they produced a book of photographs and accompanying texts that depict Alxa through the “eyes and hearts” of the farmers and herders in the area. The roughly 100 photographs selected for the book were taken by 23 farmers and herders -- a well-balanced number of women and men, ranging between 24 and 63 years of age, 70% of them Mongolian.

The photographs are clustered in seven sections on: 1) the general history and ecology of the area; 2) the key and scarce resource, water; 3) the desert vegetation; 4) the local ways of production inextricably linked to their religion; 5) the local traditions and ways of life; 6) the camel festival – which appears to be a dying tradition; and 7) environmental activities of the local people. The book concludes with some photographs of the project process, showing, for example, how the herders toured with an exhibition of their photographs to raise wider public awareness about environmental issues. Each section has an introductory text by the author, and quotations to accompany the photographs, which the author selected from the interviews made with the photographers. The participatory communication methodology is described only briefly in the forward. However, the process was documented in another book produced in

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Chinese in 2006: *Participation and Development: A Guide to Photo Novella* (Yunnan Minorities Press).

Alxa is an extremely dry area that lies just south of the border to (Outer) Mongolia. The Alxa desert is more or less an extension of the Gobi Desert. Here, for centuries, transhumant herding of camels, sheep and horses had been practised in a way that was ideally suited to the dry and highly variable climate with extremes of heat and cold. In recent decades, however, the population in Alxa increased from 30,000 in the 1950s to about 200,000 now. This was due to a strong influx of Han Chinese farmers from famine-struck Gansu Province, who were resettled in Inner Mongolia. Today, over 70% of the population in the Alxa League are Han Chinese. Government policy promoted land privatisation and distribution to individual households. Mongolian herders were encouraged to settle and taught to farm like the Han.

The pressure of this influx of people on the sparse arid resources was immense. The resulting environmental disaster and human suffering are clearly depicted in the photographs in this book and in the words of the photographers. Rivers were dammed to allow irrigation of the land, which was ploughed up by the Han farmers. Grazing areas diminished as a result, but livestock numbers grew. Water tables dropped, lakes dried up, the irrigated land became increasingly saline. Dust storms began to have serious effects on more densely populated areas of China, Korea and Japan, and the government and the press identified Alxa as the source. In the last few years, the Chinese government has undertaken massive interventions intended to rehabilitate the environment. Livestock are being excluded from degraded rangelands. People are being moved out of these "ecologically vulnerable" areas to closely spaced housing blocks on the edge of towns. The idea is that grazing land should return to grassland.

Through their photographs and the accompanying texts, the local people have been given the opportunity to express their views on these developments and on their future. They show and tell how land use has changed from mobile herding to cultivation, accompanied by deforestation, pollution, desertification and sandstorms. They question the ecological wisdom of the development interventionists, such as the construction of dams, the use of barbed-wire fences and pesticides, and the restrictions on herd size and on seasonal movements of the livestock. They see the interrelations of livestock and vegetation in other ways than do the development planners. They mourn their departure from the free-standing yurts in the open spaces of the steppe to the grey rows of "immigrant houses" into which they have to move. They realise that the freedom and laughter of their old way of life is coming to an end. But the book also shows how, through this project, the local people have organised themselves to try to rehabilitate the environment through tree planting, more ecological methods of pest control and use of alternative sources of energy (biogas, solar, fuel-saving stoves) to reduce the pressure on the woody vegetation. The author reports that the "Photo Story" project has allowed local people to develop their own ideas for environmental protection and community development.

The book of 112 pages is well presented in terms of photographs and layout, although not particularly well language-edited. It is a book that, at first glance, contains glossy pictures of the fascinating Inner Mongolian desert and the colourful traditions of the Mongolian people. However, a closer look reveals this to be a moving expression by the local people of immense sorrow and fragile hope and also -- in an indirect way -- protest at what has happened to their land and to their lives.

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*Gazing at the cradle of the dust storm: a photo story of humans and the environment in Alxa*, by Ding Pingjun. Academy Press, Beijing, China, 2008. ISBN: 978-7-5077-3071-5. To order a copy for 128 Yuan (about USD 19), contact SEE ([lauriegan@hotmail.com](mailto:lauriegan@hotmail.com)) or the publisher ([xueyuanyg@sina.com](mailto:xueyuanyg@sina.com); [www.book001.com/en](http://www.book001.com/en)).

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