

Extinction or Restoration of Ethnic Culture Compared with the Cases of Siberia : Comments on the papers of Hong Shirong and Tsukada Shigeyuki

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**Extinction or Restoration of Ethnic Culture
Compared with the Cases of Siberia:
Comments on the Papers of
Hong Shirong and Tsukada Shigeyuki**

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Hong Shirong's interesting paper demonstrated the enormous stressful pressing experienced by a little nationality of Oroqen in China, after the contact with the new industrial culture represented by the Han advance into this area. Suffice it say that people who formerly formed 98 percent on their ethnic territory now are only two percent. In his analysis, Hong often makes some optimistic conclusions, such as that the Oroqen culture generally is preserved, and that their feeling of the national or ethnic dignity is increased. However, in spite of quite sincere attempts to provide them the schools, libraries and so on, it is difficult to imagine so, having known all the terrible negative results of the oppression by the influence of modern culture of Evenki in Russia. And the Russian experience shows that the sedentarization of the endemic people of the great mobility always results in a great cultural loss.

Evenki of Russia are most closely related to the Chinese Oroqen group. In Russia and China, there are nine nationalities of the Manchu-Tungus linguistic family: Evenki, Evens, Orochi, Nanai, Ulchi, Ulta, Nigidals, and Solons. All together they make about 100,000 population, and the Evenki of Russia make about 30 percent of them.

Evenki are comprised of 11 groups living in two republics (Buryat and Sakha), two territories (Krasnoyarskiy and Khabarovskiy), and small groups in seven provinces of the Russian Federation. They are most numerous in basins of Yenissey, Angara and Lena and in Buryatia. There, their economy still is based on the reindeer breeding and hunting; elk for meat, fox and sable for furs.

In the 16th and the 17th centuries, the Evenki were paying tribute to Buryats and Yakuts, and they were partly assimilated by them. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, the Russians appeared and increased in this territory. Evenki people started to pay a *yasak*, a tax in furs, to the Russian rulers and traded furs in the exchange for various industrial commodities. Russian settlers were also active hunters, and soon the numbers of fur animals and elk were seriously reduced. The range of breeding also suffered, because many pastures were ecologically damaged. Many Evenki had to shift to cattle breeding and agriculture.

This led partly to their Russification. They started to speak Russian, to build

the Russian wooden houses, and so on. Mixed marriages with Russians intensified with sedentarization and the laws of ethnic identity also accelerated Russification. However, Evenki culture and identity was better preserved in their folklore and the religious beliefs.

Now Evenki people are included in the list of Siberian minorities. There are 27 ethnic nationalities in this list. The law on their status continues to be discussed in the Russian parliament for several years. Meanwhile, these nationalities are struggling for their survival, using the framework of the association of minorities of the north area. There is also the problem of naming. The official name of "Evenki" was given to the Evenki people in 1931. However, many of them now do not use this name as their identity and they prefer various other names, such as Ele or Orochon and so on. There are significant physical and linguistic differences between the various sub-groups of the Evenki, and therefore it's not surprising that the groups in different republics are only loosely connected with each other.

Some of them have their own cultural associations, involved only in the problems of that particular territory. The Evenki of Buryatia have such an association. At first they only raised the questions of restoring Evenki language teaching in schools and enlarging the number of reindeer. The number of reindeer was diminishing every year, and the rural traditional way of life of Evenki was based on reindeer breeding. Here, there is an Evenki problem: there are deer, there are Evenki; there are not deer, there are not Evenki.

In 1991, the Council of Ministers of Buryatia (Buryat Republic) passed a decision to create a republic center of Evenki culture in Ulan-Ude. This is the group to study problems of Evenki national development, and they have discussed the problem of revival of their national culture. The bill on the legal status of Evenki village council in Buryatia was passed in October 1991. It dealt with principles of administration, economic and social development, education, culture and health. As many similar bills, it contains many nice phrases, but no means for their legalization. Theoretically it remains in legal force, but practically it cannot be realized due to the absence of financing.

The Evenki of Buryatia have even formed districts of republic, namely in North-Baykal, Kurymkan, Barguzin and Bountovsk. In February of 1990, the first Bountovsk district in its time of conference of association of Evenki took place. It adopted a decision to create Evenki village councils in the district. In February of 1992, the second conference of All Evenki was held, and it now adopted a decision to restore to the Bountovsk district the status of Evenki national region, which it had previously in 1930's.

The status of national region would provide legal guarantee of representation in the authority structures in the district for the local population. However, this has not so far been realized. It would also provide realty property rights, subsistence

and national research, - would aid their maintenance and traditional forms of economy, the development of language and culture and would receive aid from the federal structures controlled by Russian federal government.

In November of 1992, the tenth session of Supreme Soviet of Buryatia adopted a decision to restore the status of Evenki national region to the Bountovsk district. The council of ministers of Buryatia was advised to prepare for and realize measures to enact this decision before January, 1993. So far positive results are limited to the opening of Evenki Language Department in the teacher's college in Ulan-Ude, and the creation of a republican foundation of revival of the Evenki people. Money comes to the foundation from the Buryatian Republican and Russian federal budget. This money has been mainly used to subsidize housing construction for Evenki families in the area of their habitation.

In connection with the restoration of the ethnic culture, I would like to add another case observed in Siberia. The nationality of Yakut (Sakha), together with Evenki, celebrate their festival, Ysyakh, on summer solstice. The main contents here is group dancing in circles accompanied by improvised songs. Otherwise the traditional structure and the modern transformation of this festival is very similar to the cases recently observed among the Zhuang in China (Tsukada 2001). This Siberian festival also was banned for a long time and now on the contrary it is intensively supported by the government and president of Sakha Republic.

Ysyakh plays a very important part in strengthening of Yakut national identity. However, as a rule, only Yakuts gave it to participate in it. The Russians make more than 50 percent of the population in the Republic, but very few Russians ever participated in Ysyakh. It is very interesting to know more how the government affect the native population and whether the native official festival's participant population is influenced by some joint cultural features.

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