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Tuvans Outside of Tuva : The Problem of Ethnic Self-conservation

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Tuvans Outside of Tuva: The Problem of Ethnic Self-conservation

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This article attempts to synthesize existing materials on Tuvans in Mongolia and China with the aim of emphasizing certain peculiarities of their contemporary ethnic development. Questions of their settlement, number, ethno-linguistic processes, and ethnic self-conservation are also investigated.

Key words: Tuvans, Turkic-speaking peoples, national minority, ethnic identity, ethnic self-conservation, nomads of Central Asia

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1. Introduction

The majority of the Tuvans (who, according to the 2002 census, number 243,442) live in the Russian Federation, where they have a recognized position and territory, the Republic of Tuva. These Tuvans are considered citizens of Russia. This situation governs their relationships with other nationalities and promotes their use of Russian as an international language of communication (Mongush 2010: 3).

Tuvan ethnic groups have settled not only on the territory of the Russian Federation but also in Mongolia and China. These countries have had quite different influences on the modern development of Tuvan communities.

Map 1 Most Tuvans (who, according to the 2002 census, number 243,442) live in the Russian Federation, where they have a recognized position and territory, the Republic of Tuva. These Tuvans are considered citizens of Russia.

Photo 1 A new-style tent of reindeer-breeders. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Todja Region, Republic of Tuva, Russian Federation.

In China and Mongolia, Tuvans are national minorities and do not have a national-territorial status. Because of their past settlement in various territories, the Tuvans have had to live in mixed communities with other ethnic groups, assimilating into the host population as a result.

In any case, one should not underestimate the complexity of Tuvan ethnic development in these two countries. This article focuses on elements ranging from "historical baggage" to

linguistic and cultural situations to Tuvan relations with host societies and also addresses the ways in which these factors interact. I will examine the contemporary forms of Tuvan ethnic identity and self-conservation. In the Mongolian and Chinese contexts, ethnic self-conservation is, to a great extent, generated by the environment in which the Tuvans find themselves. I find it useful to refer to other studies to help illuminate the results of my own fieldwork.

2. The Tuvans of Mongolia

There are at least four large ethno-local groups of Tuvans in Mongolia, who inhabit different *aimag* set at some distance from one another. These groups are located in the Tsengel *sum* ("district") and Buyant *sum* of Bayan Olgii, the Buyam *sum* of Khovd, the Tsagaannuur *sum* in Khovsgol, and the Tsagaan-Uur *sum*, which is also in Khovsgol *aimag* though distinct from Tsagaannuur both geographically and ethnohistorically.

Tuvans are also found in the Selenge and Tov *aimags* (in the Altanbulag and Zaamar *sums*, respectively), but because of their small numbers and wide dispersal, these two groups do not represent compact ethnic formations.

2.1 Distribution and numbers

As research carried out by Y. L. Aranchyn and M. Kh. Mannai-ool demonstrates, Tuvans have lived in Mongolia for a long time. According to their research, the Tuvan tribes that travelled as nomads along the southern ridge of Tannu-Ol (or *Tagna-Uul* in Mongolian) to the upper reaches of the Khovd River were separated in 1757 from the general mass of Tuvans, who inhabited the Upper Yenisei basin. This separation created the conditions for the foundation of four distinct ethno-local groups of Tuvans in this area (Aranchyn 1975: 214; Mannai-ool 1995: 57).

The *sums* of Tsengel in Bayan-Olgii and Tsagaannuur in Khovsgol are closest to the border of the Republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation, where most Tuvans are found.

The first of these *sums* abuts the Mongun-Taiga *kozhuun* (district in Tuva), and the second is adjacent to the Tozhu *kozhuun*. Many of the Tuvans who live in these *sums* assert that their land was part of Tuva's territory when the state border that now divides Russia and Mongolia did not exist. The establishment of the border in the first half of the 20th century, however, separated a number of Tuvans from their native ethnos.

Khovd *aimag*, which is also inhabited by Tuvans, is comparatively far from Tuva. Chinese sources suggest that Tuvan tribes under the dominion of the Altan Khans (from the 16th to the first half of the 18th century) traveled not only within present-day Tuva but also further south, along the Khovd, and east, as far as Lake Khovsgol (History of Tuva 1964: 200). In 1974, on his first visit to the Khovd Tuvans, Y. L. Aranchyn, the well-known Tuvan historian, identified remnants of the Tuvan ethnos (1975: 234). Mongolia's northernmost border region of Tsagaannuur *sum* in Khovsgol *aimag* is home to a distinct ethno-local group of Tuvans: approximately 500 people who generally call themselves "Dukha." Because most of these Tuvans have historically engaged in reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing in the taiga regions to the west of Lake Khovsgol and the Darkhad valley, they are commonly known in Mongolia as the *tsaatan* (Mongolian for "reindeer herder"). Currently, a little over thirty households lead a fully nomadic lifestyle of herding reindeer and hunting in the taiga,

Photo 2 Tuvan sacrifice to the spirit of the landscape. Photo by Marina Mongush, 1994, Tsengel *sum*, Mongolia.

while the others either live in the center of Tsagaannuur *sum* or herd steppe-based livestock in valleys throughout the area (Wheeler 2000: 6–7).

Alan Wheeler notes that, before the current border between Mongolia and Tuva was delineated in the 1920s, most Tuvans in this area were part of the Ar Shirkhten *otog* of the Khovsgol Uriankhai Borderland and paid tribute in the form of furs to the Khotgoid nobility of Zasagt Khan *aimag* (2000: 32). After the region officially became part of Mongolia, these Tuvans were forced out of Mongolia into Tuva several times before being registered as Mongolian citizens in 1955. At that time, those who had returned from Tuva's Kungurtug region were settled by the Mongolian government in Bayanziirkh and Ulaan-Uul *sums*, and those coming in from Tuva's Tozhu region were settled in Rinchinlhumbe *sum* (Wheeler 2000: 43). Because the new border was strictly enforced, many of these Tuvans were—and remain—cut off from immediate family members who stayed in Tuva. In 1985, the Mongolian government relocated the reindeer-herding Tuvans of Ulaan-Uul and Bayanzurkh *sums* to the north and combined them with the Tuvan and Darkhad inhabitants of eastern Rinchinlhumbe *sum* in order to form the current *sum* of Tsagaannuur (Wheeler 2000: 52–53).

The Tuvans in the surrounding area of Tsagaan-Uur *sum* to the east of Lake Khovsgol are descendants of those who lived under the administration of the Lake Khovsg'ol Uriankhai *khoshuun* from Manchu Qing times until the early 1920s (Ewing 1981: 186–187; Wheeler 2000: 32–35). Though known as the "Uigur Uriankhai" or "Uuriin Uriankhai" in Mongolian sources (Badamkhatan 1965: 23; Bold 1975), they call themselves and their language "Dukha" when speaking in their own Tuvan dialect, as do the reindeer herders of Tsagaannuur *sum* to the west of Lake Khovsgol. While some now live in the central village of the *sum*, about ten households along the upper reaches of the Uiir and Tsagaan Rivers have retained notable

Photo 3 Typical Tuvan landscape today. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Tsengel *sum,* Mongolia.

aspects of their Tuvan ethnic identity (Lars Hojerand, Alan Wheeler, personal communication).

With the forced resettlements of the 1960s and 1970s, Tuvans also came to inhabit Selenge and Tov *aimags* in Mongolia. In 1963, the independent Tuvan *sum* of Tsengel in Bayan Olgii *aimag* was liquidated and unified with Ak-Khem *sum*, which had a principally Kazakh population. From that point on, Tsengel *sum* no longer had a mono-ethnic population. This had a negative effect on the Tuvans, who formed a minority in the newly created *sum*. Kazakhs filled all the important posts and senior positions, and many Tuvans were left without employment.

The Kazakhs deprived the Tuvans not only of work but also of fertile pasture, without which the Tuvans no longer had any reason to remain in the area. In effect, the merging of the two *sums* forced many Tuvan families (more than 1,100 people) to leave Tsengel in search of work. They moved elsewhere, mainly to Tov and Selenge *aimags*, which were engaged in a special state program aimed at speeding up their socioeconomic development. The leadership of these *aimags* needed extra workers, and the Tuvans thus found themselves needed.

Numerous attempts made over a long period by the Tsengel Tuvans to draw the attention of the Mongolian government to their poor situation did not provide the desired results. Then, in 1995, the famous writer Chinagiin Galsan, a graduate of Leipzig University in Germany and an ethnic Tuvan and native of Tsenget, organized the return of 36 families from the Zaamar and Altanbulag *sums* to Tsengel at his own expense. This was an intentional call to the Mongolian leadership to take notice of the Tuvans' situation. The families made the 2,000-kilometer, month-long journey home by camel, shadowed the entire time by a German film crew who made a documentary about them. When the film was shown throughout Mongolia, it raised public awareness of the Tuvan predicament and influenced the Kazakh authorities in Tsengel to change their policy on the local Tuvan population. Thanks to this precedent,

the flow of Tuvans migrating from Bayan Olgti *aimag* has come to a virtual standstill.

Unfortunately, reliable reports on the numbers of Tuvans in Mongolia do not exist. Data collected from unofficial sources state that approximately 25,000 Tuvans live in Mongolia. However, as our informants clarify, this number includes both those Tuvans who have retained their native language and those who abandoned it long ago but still call themselves Tuvans. It is estimated that, of these 25,000, about 8,000 speak Tuvan as their first language.

Previous attempts at carrying out a census to discover the number of Tuvans have been unsuccessful, and it has become clear that, until recently, Tuvans have been labeled as Uriankhai, Uigur, Kazakhs, or even Mongols in their Mongolian identification passports (Wheeler 2000: 46, 2001: 23–24). Acknowledging the low status of their ethnic group, some Tuvans have chosen to identify themselves as Mongolian. Some try to downplay visible manifestations of their ethnicity or even deny it entirely; such cases are anomalous, however. In the 1990s, another tendency arose among Tuvans, when, of their own free will, they began to identify themselves as Tuvans using the ethnonym "Tuva," the standard designation used by Tuvans in Russia.

2.2 The ethno-linguistic situation

Before asking concrete questions about the ethno-linguistic processes taking place among these various ethno-local groups, it is important to note that the Tuvans of Mongolia are united linguistially: they all speak various dialects of Tuvan. Their language is wholly similar to modern Tuvan, apart from a few peculiarities in its phonetics, lexis, and melodies. It must also be pointed out that each group has, as a result of its localization, a characteristic ethno-linguistic situation.

For example, following linguistic criteria, the Tsagaannuur Tuvans fall roughly into two groups: those from Tozhu and those from Tuva's Kungurtug *khozhuuns*. This division arises from the fact that, when collectivization began in Tuva in the 1940s and 1950s, many Tuvan families from the aforementioned regions migrated into Khovsgol *aimag* on the Mongolian side of the border. There they united with the small group of Tuvans already living in the area.

Not only researchers but also the Tuvans of Tsagaannuur themselves acknowledge subtle differences between the languages of the two groups, even though they both speak Tuvan. Their language contains loan words from Mongolian, and certain words have become Mongolized in sound. These facts notwithstanding, their language may on the whole be considered a dialect very close to the Tere-Khol dialect of Tuvan. The departures made from this dialect may in truth be identified as individual peculiarities of speech. Alongside their native language, the Tsagaannuur Tuvans freely speak the Darkhad dialect of Mongolian. In general, Tuvan is used only within the narrow family circle. Because children study at the local Mongolian boarding school for most of the year, though, it is mainly those in their twenties or above who speak Tuvan fluently. While children may understand spoken Tuvan, they usually communicate with their parents and siblings in the Darkhad dialect of Mongolian (Wheeler, personal communication).

The Khovd Tuvans exhibit a similar ethno-linguistic situation in that they live surrounded by Mongolian groups, such as the Dorvots, Zakhchins, and others, and by Kazakhs. They are bilingual, speaking both Tuvan and Mongolian. Their children study in Mongolian

schools, where classes are held in Mongolian, and they study either Russian or English as a foreign language.

It is interesting to note that the older Tuvans, who migrated to this area from Xinjiang, speak Kazakh as well as Tuvan and Mongolian. The younger generation, however, who were born in the Khovd area, do not know Kazakh even though they live alongside people who use it. This testifies to the dominance of the Mongolian language as a means of communication among the various ethnic groups of Khovd.

In the autumn of 1974, Tuvan researchers Iu. L. Aranchyn and D. A. Mongush made their first visit to the Khovd Tuvans. The result of their research was a number of essays published in several different academic works. Aranchyn, for example, notes that it is surprising that, even in such a small ethnographic group as the inhabitants of the Ruyant *sum*, the preservation of certain aspects of language, folklore, and customs testify to definite similarities between these people and modem Tuvans (1975: 215). Later, the author strengthens his conclusion with folkloric and linguistic materials. His colleague D. A. Mongush notes that the language of the Khovd Tuvans is very close to that of the Tuvans in the Republic of Tuva and may be regarded as a dialect of Tuvan demonstrating a variety of phonetic, lexical, and grammatical peculiarities. These peculiarities result from the isolation of this group of Tuvans in an environment where their language was influenced by Mongolian, Kazakh, and perhaps even Altai (Mongush 1983: 144).

Distinct from the aforementioned groups, the Tuvans of Bayan Olgii find themselves in a more favorable situation in that they can converse freely in three languages: Tuvan, Mongolian, and Kazakh. Thanks to good roads, the inhabitants of Tsengel *sum* and the Tuvans in Russia have maintained close contact, a fact that undoubtedly contributes to the retention of the Tuvan language among the Tsengel Tuvans. They use their native language with skill, and its survival has not been a serious concern for them. Overwhelming proof of this is provided by the 120 songs, 17 shamanic incantations, 50 benedictions, nearly 800 proverbs and riddles, and 90 stories and myths recorded by E. Taube during her period of field research among the Tsengel Tuvans (1994: 7).

Until recently, there was only one school in Tsengel with some classes taught in Mongolian and others taught in Kazakh. Tuvan children normally studied in the Mongolian classes. Russian was taught as a foreign language. In 1991, noting the renewed interest among Tuvans in their native language, the local authorities turned this one school into two: a Mongolian school with Kazakh classes and a Tuvan school. The Tuvan school taught Tuvan language and literature classes in Tuvan (having specially ordered textbooks for this from Tuva), while all other subjects were taught in Mongolian. English was taught as a second foreign language.

The attachment of the Tsengel Tuvans to their native language is also indicated by the fact that they usually have two names, one in Mongolian and another in Tuvan. Though they usually fill out official documents using their Mongolian names, they generally address one another by their Tuvan names in everyday conversation. Thus, their Tuvan names are more resonant to them than their Mongolian ones.

This ethno-linguistic analysis would be incomplete without a discussion of the linguistic characteristics of Tuvans in Mongolia. Because its author lacks training in linguistics, this paper does not offer a structural analysis of the Mongolian Tuvans' language; however, it will

attempt (without detailing how structural elements of the language such as lexis, morphology, or grammar have changed) to outline the peculiarities of its development. These peculiarities seem to have come from lengthy residence in an area separated from the main mass of the Tuvan ethnos, which has led to a distinct reduction in lexical and morphological structures in daily use among these dispersed ethnic groups and their localized dialects. This phenomenon has in turn led to various forms of linguistic interference—the departure from existing linguistic structures due to external influence—which manifests itself in phonetics, morphology, lexis, and semantics and causes the abandonment of certain syntactic and stylistic norms. This trend was widespread among the groups in this study and serves at the moment as one of the chief reasons for the acknowledgement of their difference from the Tuvans who still live in the Russian Federation.

The question of linguistic competence also reveals certain idiosyncrasies: of the Tuvan ethno-local groups discussed in this paper, the Bayan Olgii *aimag* use (i.e., speak, read, and write) Tuvan freely, while the other groups know the language only on a spoken level. Linguistic competence is noticeably higher among the elderly than among the groups' young and middle-aged members.

These facts are directly linked to the possibility of studying Tuvan within the school system—a possibility that, our research shows, does not exist equally among Tuvan groups. One attempt at resolving this problem was made in the following way. Early in 1990, the governments of Mongolia and the Republic of Tuvareached a bilateral agreement on the preparation of young people for various specialties. According to this agreement, four students from Tuva went to study at the National University of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar in the autumn of that year, and an equal number of Mongolian students were received initially by the Kyzyl State Pedagogical Institute and then later at Tuvan State University. These students were all ethnic Tuvans and studied in the Tuvan department of the Philological Faculty. At the time of writing, the number of young Mongolian Tuvans in these exchanges has grown much larger, which allows one to hope that the Tuvan language does have a future in Mongolia.

2.3 Inter-ethnic relations

The study of an ethnic group's inter-ethnic aims is important for us, since viewing the process of intra-ethnic unification as an assimilation of extra-ethnic information allows the researcher to judge with more objectivity the direction such modern ethnic processes are taking in the Tuvan groups under study.

In order to answer the questions we have posed, we first attempted to elicit from our informants several pieces of information: whether their families or the families of their relatives had any members of different nationalities, how often marriages between Tuvans and non-Tuvans took place, whether family celebrations or national holidays were celebrated alongside representatives of different ethnic groups, and the nationalities of the people with whom they preferred to work and make friends.

The basic ethnic partners of Mongolian Tuvans are Mongols and Kazakhs. In comparison with these two, representatives of other ethnic groups are (because of their small numbers and wide dispersal) far less likely to work alongside the Tuvans. Out of all neighboring peoples, Mongols dominate as non-Tuvan spouses for Tuvans. However, their number in

Tuvan households is not really significant. The reason for this can be found in the answers given to questions on family and marriage.

Most of our respondents were not particularly well disposed toward marriage with members of other nationalities, considering it a threat to the preservation of their ethnic identity. This attitude was more common among Tuvans who live together in one locality and do not experience any marital difficulties and less common among those more widely dispersed who interact more with members of other ethnic groups (e.g., the Tuvans of Selenge and Tov *aimags*). On the other hand, none of our respondents had any concerns about the overall ethnic makeup of their collectives, and some even stressed the fact that a multi-ethnic composition was beneficial as far as economic relations were concerned. We received corresponding answers to our questions regarding preferences in friends and neighbors. Our respondents affirmed that the nationality of a friend or neighbor was of no practical importance. The most important thing was to be a "nice person."

It is interesting to note that the Tuvans themselves were very proud of their ability to relate to people of other nationalities. Not without reason, they felt that their ability to speak the languages of their neighbors made it easy for them to find a common language with anyone. The Tuvans exhibited an attitude of tolerance, as displayed by their willingness to accept people as they are and their readiness to work with anyone.

One noticeable fact is that, during certain ceremonies, particularly at the ritual benediction of the *ovaa* (or *ovoo* in Mongolian: a stone cairn dedicated to local spirits), the Tuvans of Mongolia were happy to invite representatives of other ethnic groups as honored guests provided they were of the same faith as the Tuvans (i.e., Buddhists). It follows that, of the Tuvans' closest neighbors, only the Mongols could participate in the ceremonies, while the Kazakhs, being Muslims, were excluded. Such nuances have not had a negative effect on everyday relations between these Tuvans and people of other faiths, however.

On the whole, inter-ethnic relations between the Tuvans of Mongolia and others have become more the rule than the exception, even though they take place mostly in economic and social contexts. In developing a position on inter-ethnic relations, it is important to consider the significance of factors such as education at one institute or another, military service, and participation in migratory movements (such as occurred with the Tsengel Tuvans). All these factors help contribute to an understanding of the ethnic group and its exposure to the many possibilities of inter-ethnic relations.

The next aspect of our research focused on inter-ethnic marriage. It is well known that marriages are an important indicator of ethnic processes taking place in the sphere of family life. Their importance lies in the way they can help define the character and direction of ethnic processes or, in turn, be influenced by these processes.

Referring to the Tsengel Tuvans, Taube notes that, even though they live in close proximity to the Kazakh population, marriages between Tuvans and Kazakhs are so surprisingly rare that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In addition, our respondents provided a very significant piece of information: the difference in religion between the Kazakhs and Tuvans acts as a major obstacle to marriage between the two groups. For this reason, marriages with Mongols, albeit rare, are preferable to those with Kazakhs.

It is important to note that many Tsengel Tuvans fear that such attitudes have resulted in marriages between close relatives, despite the fact that marriages in Tuvan society are traditionally regulated by exogamous prohibitions along one's paternal line. Some of our informants expressed concerns that the progeny of such marriages may be slow to develop mentally, have physical defects, and be incapable of leading a normal life. Tuvan specialists on genetics from Russia have taken particular notice of these claims and are now planning to carry out research in this sphere.

Finally, an analysis of Tuvans who migrated because of marriage has produced some interesting results. One would imagine that, notwithstanding the dispersal of various Tuvan populations in Mongolia, the most favored form of exogamous marriage would be between members of different Tuvan ethno-local groups. However, not a single case of this was reported; in other words, the boundaries of these groups' marital imaginations have not intersected. Contact between different Tuvan groups was neither frequent nor intensive: although the Tuvans of Bayan Olgii and Khovd *aimags* occasionally met, neither group had any contact with the Tuvans in Khovsgol *aimag*. In fact, discussion with our respondents proved that they were poorly informed about one another. For example, a Tuvan in Khovsgol might not know anything about how Tsengel Tuvans lived, and a Khovd Tuvan might not know how Tuvans lived in either Tsengel or Khovsgol.

3. The Tuvans of China

The majority of the Tuvan population in China lives in the Habahe and Burjin Districts of Kazakh Autonomous Province. Others live in Altai, Koktogai, and the Chingil and Burultogai Districts (Reshetov 1990: 178). Tuvans living in these places are part of the Tuvan people by origin, language, and culture. I did my fieldwork in the Habahe and Burjin Districts.

According to Russian scholar M. I. Venukov, the original Tuvan population came to Xinjiang about 200 years ago. In 1871, he noted that a small ethnic group of Uriankh (Tuvans) with a population of over 1,000 lived in this area (1871: 343).

Most Tuvans consider their ancestors to have come here from Tuva for the first time during the Manchurian Empire (1616–1911). At that time, there were two powerful empires in Inner Asia—the Manchurian and Dzungar-ian. Both aspired to dominate the whole area, and frequent military conflicts took place between them. The territory and original population of Tuva were controlled by Manchurs and Dzungars at the same time. However, at the end of the 17th century, Mnchus gained the upper hand, prompting the small part of the Tuvan population that was under Dzungar jurisdiction to move away. Thus the conflict between two powers resulted in the dispersal of some Tuvan groups. This is why they are found in Xinjiang (Abramzon 1961: 121).

Some scholars believe, however, that Xinjiang used to be Tuvan ethnic territory and that the Tuvans have lived there for a long time (Taube 1994: 6). Some of my informants supported this idea, believing that the Tuvans are a local ethnic group. Some Tuvans came here after the Tuvan revolution in 1921, as they could not accept the new Soviet power and system for various reasons.

Map 2 The majority of the Tuvan population in China lives in the Habahe and Burjin Districts of Kazakh Autonomous Province. Some also live in the Altai, Koktogai, Chingil, and Burultogai Districts.

3.1 The Kok Monchaks, their numbers and linguistic situation

In China, Tuvans are known as *Kok Monchaks*. The name was given to them by Kazakhs, and they got used to it. Deep down, though, they are convinced they are Tuvans. I could not discover what Kok Monchak means exactly, but many of my informants were sure it was the name of both an ethnic group and a clan. Actually, there is a Monchak clan among the Tuvans, and the name is believed to exist among the Tuvans in Mongolia as well. This may indicate that, many years ago, some Tuvans with this name came to Xinjiang from Mongolia.

Chinese statistics do not recognize the Tuvans as a nationality. This is why they are not included in the official list of nationalities living in China. Academic publications have given sharply contradictory information about the size of the Tuvan population in this region. According to one source, the number is approximately 1,000; according to another, the population stands at between 2,500 and 3,000 (Litvinsky 1992: 415). Some scholars refer to the last census, in 1982, which notes that over 4,000 Tuvans live in the territory of Xinjiang (Sat and Dorju 1989: 93). If this is so, we must question how they came to be included in the official statistics without being recognized as a separate nationality. My Chinese colleagues have given me verbal information on this subject. Their opinion is that the number of Tuvans is between 2,500 and 3,000. All attempts to obtain population data in my interviews with Kok Monchaks failed, and the information I obtained was controversial. One can be sure, however, that the number of Kok Monchaks is between 3,000 and 4,000 at the most.

However, while finding this information, I faced a dilemma: Kok Monchaks are registered

Photo 4 Typical Kok Monchak landscape today. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjang province of China.

as Mongols on their passports but do not tend to identify themselves as Mongols. This problem gives rise to a number of important questions.

The other subject I focused on was the language of the Kok Monchaks. Among all components of culture, a language has the most explicit ethnic characteristics. Being the main communication option, it is also a signifier indicating the inclusion of native speakers in a certain ethnic group.

Kok Monchaks definitely do speak Tuvan, which belongs to the Turkic language group. It is used mainly within the family and at ceremonial occasions such as weddings, funerals, and religious rituals for the sanctifying of natural objects.

At the same time, Kok Monchaks also have a good command of the languages of more numerous peoples—Kazakhs and Mongolians. Their knowledge of these languages allows them to adapt to the ethnic environment into which destiny placed them. When I was staying among Kok Monchaks, I very often observed their facility with switching between languages depending on the nationality of the people with whom they were talking. Because they speak three languages, there are many Kazakh and Mongolian borrowings in their Tuvan, the natural consequence of a long history of interaction among speakers of these languages. Chinese seems to be less prevalent in this part of the country: I did not meet many people who spoke Chinese very well, though it is studied in the schools. There is a hidden problem here: the difficulties that the Tuvan population has faced in pursuing higher education can be attributed chiefly to their poor command of Chinese. Although they are theoretically able to enter higher education, they have in fact been largely prevented from doing so by the obstacles they face in an educational system that operates predominantly in Chinese.

Kok Monchaks do not have their own schools; their children must attend either Kazakh or Mongolian schools. Usually, they prefer the latter, for they are officially considered Mongols. They frequently told me that they would like to keep their native tongue, but they

Photo 5 A musical instrument of Kok Monchak people—morinkhuur. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjang province of China.

have not had the chance to do so. They also lack access to media in their own language: there are no newspapers, books, radio, or TV programs to guarantee the permanent use of the Tuvan language. Occasionally they attempt to receive by transistor the Tuvan radio station, which is their only opportunity to listen to their native language. Listening to Tuvan radio programs convinces them that they have not yet lost their language, but many informants complain that the broadcast is very short—just 30 minutes every evening.

I communicated with Kok Monchaks in Tuvan, and we understood each other without any language problems. This proves that, fundamentally, we use the same language. If there is a difference, it is in pronunciation: a special accent associated with the influence of Mongolian. While the Kok Monchaks are easy for me to understand, their vocabulary is a little different from that of the Tuvan I know. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that they have been living separately, away from most Tuvans, for a long time. They use a very specific dialect of the Tuvan language that has not yet been investigated by linguists. That is why the language of the Kok Monchaks has some peculiarities, which sometimes required repetition and amplification for me to understand it. I was able to make recordings of their colloquial Tuvan—some songs and good wishes (a special ritual wishing relatives, friends, and guests happiness in the future).

Since I am not a linguist, I would not risk giving a full analysis of the language situation within this small community. I recognize that the older generation's knowledge of their native tongue is greater than that of the younger. I was told by some teachers that, although Kok Monchak children usually come to school for the first time speaking nothing but Tuvan,

they are forced to speak Mongolian or Kazakh in order to receive an education. The continued loss of their language is therefore unsurprising.

I noticed that the important linguistic feature of faringalization is disappearing, though it still exists in modern Tuvan.

As a result of my experience among the Kok Monchaks, I concluded that their knowledge of their native tongue is a unique phenomenon. They have retained their native language in spite of being isolated from the ethnic majority for over 200 years; this was a means of survival in an alien environment. They were also involved in a process of cultural assimilation, however, which forced them to make linguistic changes. This factor has certainly had an effect on the ethnic development of the Tuvan community in China and should always be taken into account.

Kok Monchaks recognize their situation as unique. The interesting point is that they are close to the Kazakhs linguistically but Lamaists like the Mongols in their religion. The Kazakhs believe that the Kok Monchaks are their younger brothers, and the Mongols think likewise. The Kok Monchaks identify themselves as Tuvans, though they do not recognize this officially for fear of being prosecuted for national separatism. One should remember that, ideologically, China is a very strict country, where any attempt by an ethnic minority to distinguish itself can be considered a symptom of "separatist tendencies." One should also not ignore the fact that China is a multinational country, where it is quite complicated to keep all the nationalities under control, particularly if they are small. This is why an ethnic minority such as the Tuvans could get lost among more numerous peoples.

3.2 Culture and living standards

The Kok Monchaks live in a mixed ethnic environment and form a very specific culture, although they retain many features of their traditional culture. Their culture is an important source for the study of ethnic variations in kinship and social relationships with other peoples. Generally, the culture of Kok Monchaks is very similar to that of the Tuvans.

Most Kok Monchaks live in rural areas. Their average settlement consists of from 100 to 140 households. Every family has its own house, some buildings (including sheds and fences) for private livestock, and a small plot of land where they cultivate potatoes and vegetables. Kok Monchaks' houses are simple architecturally and look Russian. Their attire is quite different from that of the Tuvans, however, and reflects a variety of cultural influences. For example, there are many carpets in every house, most of which are of Kazakh design.

As to their standard of living, it is not different from that of other ethnic groups in the area. They do not have electricity or the other facilities that make life more comfortable, but they seem to be content with their lives and conditions. Kok Monchaks live in harmony with nature, and nature is the source of life, energy, and everything they need.

Kinship relationships and marriage play important roles in the social lives of Kok Monchaks. Groups of related families often share work activities. They also tend to maintain very close contact with one another, which helps them maintain a high social status. Family is not only a basic social unit but also the source of a group's joint labor. This is why marriage is considered necessary for everyone. Even visual observation proves this fact: the unmarried state seems to be very unusual. However, there are some restrictions, the main one being that

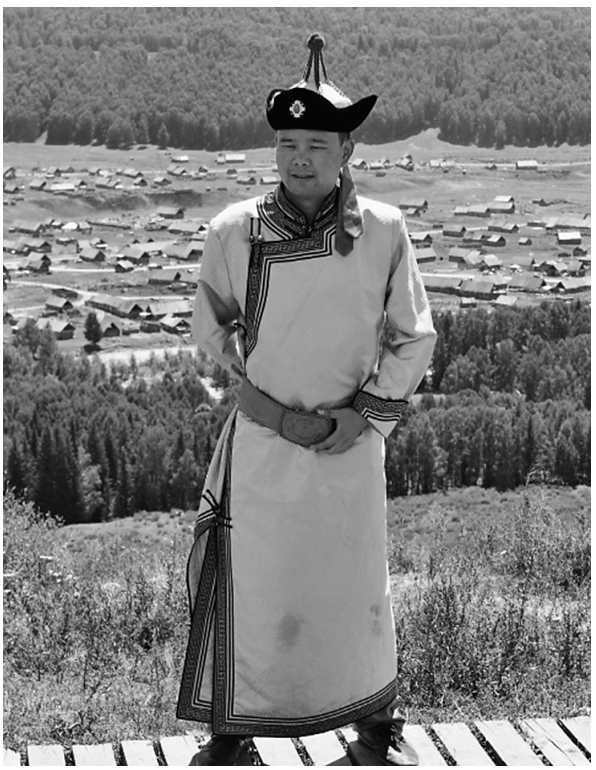

Photo 6 Traditional cloths of Kok Monchaks young. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjang province of China.

members of the same kinship group must not marry each other. If people want to marry, they have to belong to different clans.

People marry at different ages depending on the situation. However, early marriage is not common among Kok Monchaks because Chinese laws permit marriage only after one has reached a particular standard of education. Moreover, every Chinese family is limited to one child, though there is an exception for national minorities, who may have two or three children but not more. Thus Tuvan population growth is limited by external pressures. In contrast to elderly Tuvans, who usually have 7 to 10 children, young Tuvans have only one or two. People say that, of course, they would like to have more children to help them manage the domestic economy. In a traditional society like this, the number of children reflects family prosperity.

Kok Monchaks asked me many interesting questions. Some were repeated frequently, revealing common problems. They compared their own situation with that of Tuvans in Tuva, often asking about the status of the Tuvan language. Many of my informants were interested in the religious traditions of the Tuvans, but it seemed to me that they were rather afraid to talk about this because the Chinese government recognizes only Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology. Kok Monchaks also asked if there was a quick way to reach Tuva.

When I asked them if they would like to come to Tuva, though, many of them answered very carefully: they did not want me to think that they were not patriots. Some young people acknowledged that they would like to visit Tuva in order to see our reality with their own eyes, but nobody wanted to move to Tuva permanently. I think they told me the truth. Although Xinjiang is not the ethnic territory of the Kok Monchaks, they are very attached to the places where they were born.

My visit to Xinjiang was utterly unexpected and surprising to the Kok Monchaks. They never thought that a Tuvan scholar would visit them, and their unfeigned interest in Tuva and in me was quite understandable.

4. Conclusion

In any case, the data gathered show conclusively that the modem ethnic development of the Tuvans in Mongolia and China has been complex and multifaceted. First, having lived in a mixed ethnic environment for a long time, Tuvans have had to mix with others and accept their languages and culture. This led to the natural process of their partial assimilation, and the problem of their ethnic self-conservation is serious. Nevertheless, they still retain such important components of ethnicity as their native language, their ethnic consciousness, and some features of their traditional culture, which identify them as Tuvans. Second, interethnic integration—the interaction of different ethnic groups without their amalgamation—is characteristic of most Tuvan groups. This process is typical of Mongolia and China, where cultural and economic interaction among various peoples is the main method of solving national problems.

The questions presented here offer promising avenues for future investigation and could serve as an initial foundation for further analysis and broader comparison.

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