

# 12

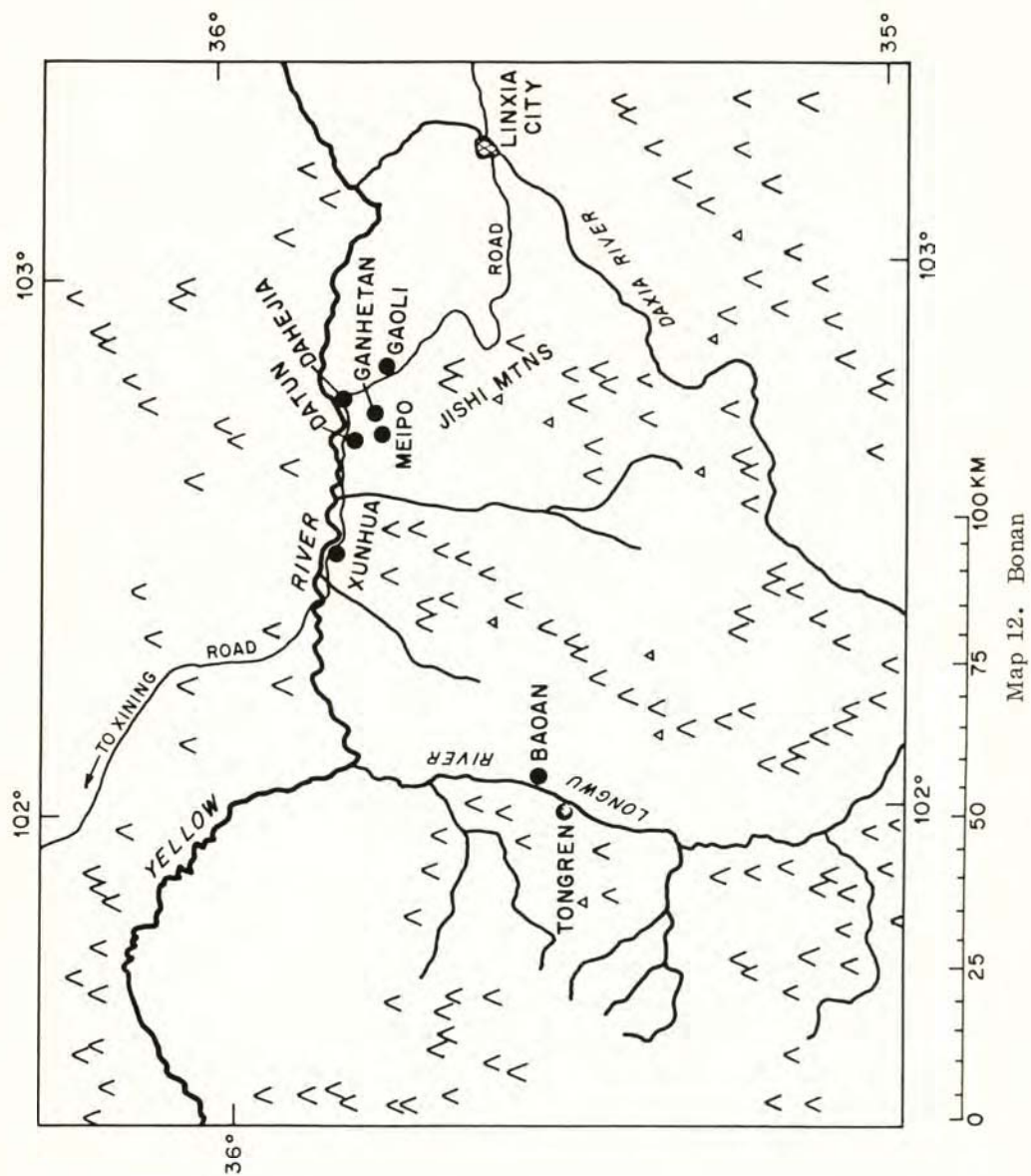
## Bonan

### Size and Location

The Bonan 保安 are among China's smallest minority nationalities. In 1982 they numbered 9,027,<sup>1</sup> an increase of about 3,400 since 1959.<sup>2</sup> About 7,000 to 8,000 Bonans live in the villages of Dadun 大墩, Ganhetan 甘河滩, and Meipo 梅坡 of Dahejia 大河家 township and in Gaoli 高李 village of Liuji 刘集 township. All four villages are located in the foothills of the Jishi 积石 mountains of Gansu.<sup>3</sup> Dahejia is situated on the Yellow River, just inside Gansu and only a short distance downstream from Xunhua, the home of the Salars (q.v.). The relatively few Bonans who reside in this nationality's original homeland (see below) live in three or four villages on both banks of the Longwu 隆务 river in Tongren 同仁 county of Qinghai (see Map 12).<sup>4</sup> Since 1980 the Gansu Bonans have been included in the Bonan, Dongxiang, and Salar autonomous county. The Bonans in Qinghai still do not have their own autonomous area.

### History

Nothing definite is known about the Bonans' origin, but it is believed to be rather similar to that of the Dongxiang (q.v.). The relatively few samples of Bonan oral literature recorded so far strongly suggest that the Bonans had originally been Mongol soldiers who either during Chinggis Khan's time or the



subsequent Mongol world empire were sent to the area around modern Tongren county. After the fall of the Mongol Yuan state in China in 1368, most Mongols retreated to Mongolia, but a few, including the later Bonans, stayed behind. After many generations of mingling with neighboring Tibetans, Hui, Han, and Tu, a distinct nationality emerged whose members began calling themselves Bonan.<sup>5</sup>

It is not known exactly when the Bonans began to be called by that name, but records of the Wanli reign (1573-1620) report the existence of a Bonan camp in what is now Tongren county. Later this camp became a town which still exists on the banks of the Longwu river under the Chinese transliteration name Baoan. Sometime in the early nineteenth century, a portion of the Bonan nationality converted to Islam, a fact which caused friction to develop with the surrounding Buddhist Tibetans and Tu. Finally, in 1862 this conflict reached a point where the Islamized Bonans decided to move. First they lived for several years in Xunhua 循化, the home of their fellow Muslims, the Salars, and then they followed the Yellow River downstream to the Dahejia area where they still live. Those Bonans who retained their Buddhist faith remained in Tongren but became strongly acculturated to their neighbors, especially to the Tibetans. As a result, only a small but unknown number of persons remain in Tongren who from an ethno-linguistic point of view can still be considered Bonan.

#### Language<sup>6</sup>

Bonan belongs to the Mongolian group of the Altaic family of languages. It is closer to Tu and Dongxiang than to Mongolian, Daur, and Eastern Yugur. The Bonans do not have their own script but use Chinese in their written communications.<sup>7</sup> There are two major dialects, one spoken in the Dahejia and Liuji townships of Gansu<sup>8</sup> and the other around Tongren in Qinghai. A language rather similar to the latter dialect is spoken by some Han and Hui who until the 1950s had sometimes been referred to as the Tongren turen 土人 (natives). They live in the four villages of Niantong, Gomar, Gaser, and Xiazhuang near Baoan city in Qinghai. While the Bonans can communicate in their own language with the Tu in Tongren, they cannot do so with the main body of Tu who reside in Huzhu, Minhe, and Datong counties of Qinghai.<sup>9</sup>

The Bonan language has five short and three long vowels, as follows:

|                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <u>a</u> as in <u>amar</u> 'mouth' | <u>ā</u> as in <u>bār</u> 'mud'    |
| <u>e</u> as in <u>ere</u> 'man'    | <u>ī</u> as in <u>iajī</u> 'child' |
| <u>i</u> as in <u>ita</u> 'narrow' | <u>ū</u> as in <u>sū</u> 'water'   |
| <u>o</u> as in <u>olu</u> 'many'   |                                    |
| <u>u</u> as in <u>uder</u> 'day'   |                                    |



The twenty-one consonants are:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <u>b</u> as in <u>bata</u> 'firm, solid' | <u>c</u> as in <u>caṅku</u> 'storehouse' |
| <u>p</u> as in <u>puqi-</u> 'to write'   | <u>s</u> as in <u>sara</u> 'moon, month' |
| <u>m</u> as in <u>more</u> 'horse'       | <u>j</u> as in <u>juan</u> 'tile'        |
| <u>f</u> as in <u>fulaṅ</u> 'red'        | <u>q</u> as in <u>quan</u> 'boat, ship'  |
| <u>w</u> as in <u>dawu</u> 'cloth'       | <u>š</u> as in <u>šuji</u> 'secretary'   |
| <u>d</u> as in <u>deraṅ</u> 'four'       | <u>y</u> as in <u>bayan</u> 'rich'       |
| <u>t</u> as in <u>nata-</u> 'to play'    | <u>g</u> as in <u>gar</u> 'house'        |
| <u>n</u> as in <u>under</u> 'high'       | <u>k</u> as in <u>kuṅ</u> 'person'       |
| <u>l</u> as in <u>labquṅ</u> 'leaf'      | <u>h</u> as in <u>hor</u> 'nose'         |
| <u>r</u> as in <u>taraṅ</u> 'food'       | <u>ṅ</u> as in <u>saṅ</u> 'good'         |
| <u>z</u> as in <u>zulaṅ</u> 'gadfly'     |  |

The consonants c, j, q are used exclusively and š mostly for Chinese loan words.

The Bonan language observes no strict vowel harmony. Like Mongolian, it maintains a qualitative difference between short and long vowels, except that long vowels appear only in monosyllabic words and in the initial syllable of polysyllabic words. Examples are ū- 'to drink'; ābe, 'father'; ōle 'mountain'.

Like Tu, Dongxiang, Daur, and Moghul, the Bonan language has preserved the initial consonants f- and h- of Middle Mongolian which are no longer found in Modern Mongolian.<sup>10</sup> For example, fulaṅ, 'red', cf. Dongxiang hulan, Tu fulān, and Daur hulān, but Mongolian ulagan; harvaṅ, 'ten', Dongxiang haruan, Tu harvan, and Daur harban, but Mongolian arban; hodon, 'star', cf. Dongxiang hodun and Daur hod, but Mongolian odon.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Bonan has kept other initial consonants which no other Mongolian language retains. Examples are nā-, 'to fall', but Mongolian una-, Dongxiang una-, and Tu una-; se, 'water', but Mongolian usun, Dongxiang usu, and Daur os; da, 'now', but Mongolian edüge, Dongxiang ede, and Daur ede; lā-, 'to cry', but Mongolian uyila-, and Dongxiang uila-.

Another characteristic of the Bonan language is the use of initial n- in place of the e, u, ū, i and eu found in other Mongolian languages. For example, ndan, 'door', but Mongolian egüden, Dongxiang uijien, and Daur eud; ndegi, 'egg', but Mongolian öndege, and Tu ndige; ndže- 'to see', but Mongolian üje-, Dongxiang uzhe-, and Daur üdže-; nde-, 'to eat', but Mongolian ide- and Dongxiang ijie-.

Still another feature of Bonan is the presence of two initial consonants as a result of the gradual elimination of the vowel between the two. Examples are šdon, 'tooth', but Mongolian šidün, Daur šide, and Dongxiang šidun; hgo, 'big', but Mongolian yehe, Daur hig, and Dongxiang fugie; fdu, 'long', but Mongolian urtu, and Dongxiang fudu.

Although many Bonan words are the same as or similar to Middle Mongolian words, their meanings are not always entirely identical. Some Bonan words have more restricted meanings, e.g. Bonan səmu, 'arrow', but Mong. sumu, 'arrow', 'bullet'; Bonan mutun, 'timber', but Mong. modun, 'tree', 'timber'. In other instances, Bonan words have wider connotations, e.g. batə, 'sturdy', 'tight'; Mong. batu, 'firm'; and Bonan xalə ar, 'excrement', 'fertilizer', Mong. aryal 'dry excrement'.

Loan words are very common in Bonan. By 1960 investigations yielded a sample of 3,000 commonly used words, of which fully one-half were loan words. Three out of every four loan words are Chinese. These can be divided into two classes: old, i.e. pre-1949, and new, i.e. post-1949, words. The older words are mostly for everyday use, such as bəisəi < Chin. baicai, 'cabbage'; kuedzi < Chin. kuaizi, 'chopsticks'; and tsədzi < Chin. chezi, 'vehicle'. The newer Chinese loan words tend to be political and economic terms, such as giəmin < Chin. geming, 'revolution'; gənšə < Chin. gongshe, 'commune'; mindzu < Chin. minzhu, 'democratic'.

Some compound words have been formed with words from two different languages, e.g. pu (< Chin. pu, 'gun') + man (< Tib. sman, 'medicine') = puman, 'gun powder'.

Other loan words are of Tibetan origin adopted when the Bonans still lived in Tongren county in Qinghai where they had Tibetans as close neighbors. Like the older Chinese loan words, Tibetan loan words tend to be for everyday use. Examples are Bonan gamo < Tib. k'ag-po, 'difficult'; Bonan gatə iə < Tib. skad, 'language'; and Bonan man < Tib. sman, 'medicine'.

The Bonan language has only very few Turkish loan words, two examples of which are Bonan təitəixan, 'mouse' (cf. Kazak texqan), and Bonan dam, 'wall' (cf. Uigur tam).

### Religion

The Bonans living in Gansu belong to either the Old Teaching or New Teaching sect. During the republican period, the warlord Ma Bufang sent the head of the New Teaching sect from Qinghai to strengthen his sect's control over the Bonans living around Dahejia.<sup>12</sup> In 1958, say the official historians, in concert with the Hui, Salar, and Dongxiang living nearby, the Bonans "abolished the feudal powers and system of oppression in Islam." They accused the mullahs of "trying to smash social reforms, poisoning the relations among nationalities, and arbitrarily interfering with the freedom of marriage."<sup>13</sup>

The relatively few Bonans living in Tongren, having extensively acculturated themselves to their neighbors, are Buddhists.<sup>14</sup>





Illus. 23. Bonan Farmers

#### Recent Developments

The Bonans' main economic activity is farming, with wheat and rye being the two most important staple crops.<sup>15</sup> By 1978 food production had increased some 160 percent over that of the early 1950s.<sup>16</sup> Major sideline activities are logging, silversmithing, and charcoal making. Perhaps the best known product of the Bonans is the so-called Bonan knife which enjoys considerable popularity in much of Gansu and Qinghai provinces. It is made of either brass or copper, with artistically carved bone handles. In 1949 there were 110 persons in the three Bonan villages making this kind of knife. By 1973 their numbers had increased to more than 500, and they were producing some thirty different varieties of this knife.<sup>17</sup>

Starting in the 1950s, the Bonans have cooperated with the Salars of Xunhua in planting trees on the slopes of Jishi mountain which stands athwart the line separating these two nationalities. Industry is relatively little developed in the Bonan villages, the most notable evidence for its presence being repair shops for farm implements. There are a number of irrigation ditches in the area, an 102-kilometer all-weather highway connecting Dahejia with Linxia, and a post and telegraph office.<sup>18</sup>

Before 1949 there was only one grammar school with about thirty students.<sup>19</sup> Now the three Bonan villages have four grammar schools, and one production brigade has a junior high school, with a total enrollment of 400 students. Several graduates have gone on to the Northwest Nationalities Institute in Lanzhou and to the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing. In addition, the Bonans have winter schools, evening schools, and literacy classes.

The Bonans' medical needs are looked after by a diagnostic center and a health care station, as well as several paramedics, the so-called barefoot doctors. Patients requiring more professional care are taken either to Linxia or to Lanzhou.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Minzu yanjiu 23 (1983), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Jiankuang, v. 5, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Buh and Liu, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jiankuang, v. 5, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, most information on the Bonan language is taken from Buh and Liu.

<sup>7</sup> Jiankuang, v. 5, 46.

<sup>8</sup> The Bonan of Meipo village no longer speak their own language but only Chinese. Buh and Liu, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Todaeva 1963, 176.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., 177.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., 180.

<sup>12</sup> Jiankuang, v. 5, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Zhongguo, 162.

<sup>14</sup> Todaeva 1963, 176.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zhongguo, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit., 162.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., 163.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., 164.