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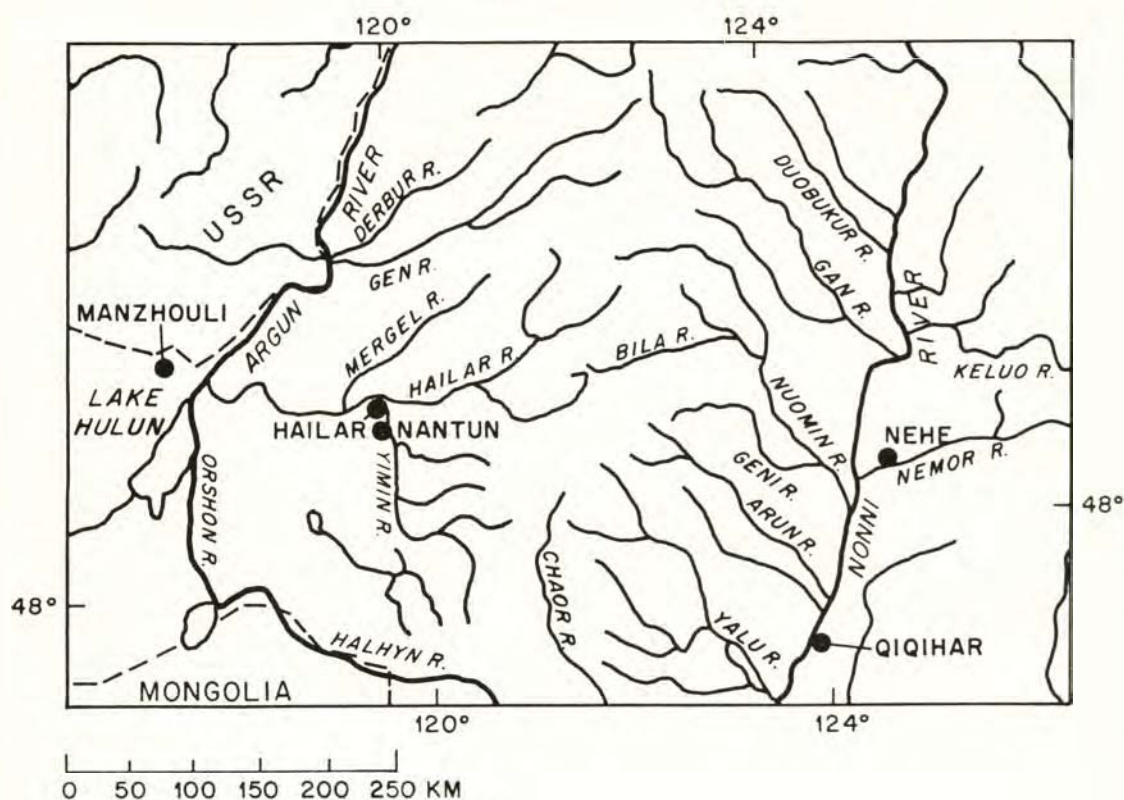
Evenk

Size and Location

The Evenks 鄂温克 of China, are a rapidly growing nationality which increased from 7,200 persons in 1957¹ to 19,343 in 1982.² They live in seven banners of northeastern Inner Mongolia and in Nehe 讷河 county of Heilongjiang province. A few Evenks live in the Mongolian Peoples' Republic, but most live in the Soviet Union.³ The Evenks have an autonomous banner, with its seat at Nantun 南屯, just south of Hailar (see Map 15). Its 19,110 square kilometers include the foothills of Qiuling 丘陵 mountain, a spur of the Greater Xing'an range, and about 9,200 square kilometers of grasslands.⁴ Besides Nantun, the autonomous banner includes nine townships, two towns, and forty-five villages and settlements.

History

During their long history the Evenks have been called by various names such as Solon, Tungus, and Yakut, but in 1957 they were officially given the name Evenk which in their language means the mountain forest people. It is a fitting name for a nationality which, according to the oldest findings, originally lived in the forested mountains northeast of Lake Baikal and the adjacent area of the Shilka river's upper reaches where the Evenks were engaged in hunting and fishing.⁵ Since during Bei Wei times (420-533) this area was the home of two Shiwei 室韦 groups, namely the northern and the Bo 钵, it is generally believed that the Evenks descended from these Shiwei.⁶



Map 15. Evenk

During the first half of the seventeenth century, the original Evenks moved east and spread along several tributaries of the upper and middle Amur river. Qing documents referred to them as Solonbu 索伦部 and Kamnikan 喀穆尼堪. At that time the Evenks already were in frequent contact with Manchus with whom they exchanged furs for cloth, silk, and iron goods. Some Evenks who already lived a settled life and practiced small-scale herding began to wear Manchu dress.

In 1633-34 the Manchus adopted the Ming name Solonbu for the Evenks, and in 1639-40 they forced the Evenks into the eight-banner system. Soon thereafter the Qing government prodded the Evenks to settle down in the Nonni river region, specifically along the banks of the Gan 甘, Nuomin 诺敏, Arun 阿伦, Jiqin 济沁, Yalu 雅鲁, and Nemor 讷莫尔 rivers, where some of the Evenks took up herding and farming. In 1732 more than 1,000 Evenk officers and soldiers in the Butha 布特哈 region and their relatives were dispatched to Hulunbuir to guard the frontier where they gradually

developed into the present-day population of the Evenk autonomous banner. The Evenks evidently acquitted themselves rather well as border guards there so that, along with Daur and Oroqen, more Evenk banner troops were sent to many other border assignments, especially in the Northeast and the far-away Northwest.

Language and Literature

The Evenk language belongs to the Tungus branch of the Manchu-Tungus group of the Altaic family of languages. Compared to the other four Manchu-Tungus languages spoken in China, namely Manchu, Sibe, Oroqen, and Hezhen, the Evenk language has largely been ignored by modern scholars. Not a single outline has been written since 1949 (nor before), compared to the many book-length works and dictionaries on the Evenk language in the Soviet Union.⁷ This remarkable difference is partly explained by the relative size of the Evenk populations in the two countries, as already mentioned in the introductory paragraph. The dearth of linguistic information may also be explained by the fact that due to the Evenks' long historical association with the Oroqens, their languages are extremely close.⁸ Scholars in China have evidently felt little pressing need to study the Evenk language, and anyone seeking information on it may get at least a general idea by perusing the existing literature on the Oroqen language.

There are seven vowels in the Evenk language:⁹

a as in anma 'mouth'
ə as in əreəfi 'polite'
i as in iəni 'tongue'
ɔ as in ɔgo 'thigh'

ʊ as in umahan 'finger'
o as in ohotʃiən 'cowherd'
u as in ushən 'knife'

The nineteen consonants are:

n as in naal 'hand'
l as in ligkir 'cork, plug'
m as in mugliən 'bullet'
g as in gutin 'thirty'
h as in hond 'few'
b as in bol 'autumn'
p as in pəidsə 'injured'
s as in saasun 'paper'
ʃ as in ʃinarin 'yellow'
t as in tog 'fire'

d as in dil 'head'
tʃ as in togtʃ 'cloud'
dʒ as in dʒur 'two'
j as in jəgin 'nine'
r as in orogt 'grass'
w as in waar 'tile'
f as in feodalism 'feudalism'
k as in kinu 'movie'
ŋ as in ingə 'sand'

Chapter 15

The list just cited also contains examples of the four long vowels in the Evenk language, aa, əə, oo, uu. The consonants w, f, k are used only for loan words.

There are said to be three dialects spoken among the Evenks of China, but no further details are available.¹⁰ While the Evenks in the Soviet Union have had their own script since 1930, most Evenks in China use the Chinese script while some living in Inner Mongolia also use the Mongolian script.

Traditional Evenk literature is very close to that of the Daur and Oroqen.¹¹ Among contemporary Evenk writers, the most prominent is Urertu, born in 1952.¹²

Society¹³

Most Evenks are herders and live in basic units called nimor which are groups of three to ten families related by blood. In size and composition, the Evenk nimor is thus quite close to the Mongolian ail and the Kazak awel. Evenk herders also share with herders of these other nationalities their type of housing which is like the Mongolian ger. Moreover, children of Evenk herders are raised like Mongol children: boys begin to ride when they are about seven years old and girls start milking when they are ten.



Illus. 29. Evenk Woman

One of the more important holidays among Evenk herders is the Mikol festival which takes place at the end of May. It marks the opening of the

summer pasturing season and is attended by members of a clan. Married women visit their paternal clans on this occasion. Young girls wear straight skirts made of lambskin, the small fry ride around on hobby horses, and the older folks let the young men break in horses, quite in the same manner as this is being done in the American West. In addition, they brand and castrate some of the animals.

Evenk hunters who live in the mountains used to be grouped in ulileng which is about as large as the herders' nimor but is not always based on kinship. The head of an ulileng is called xinmamaleng and is elected by the general membership. He assigns members into groups, called angenajia (meaning fellow hunters) of four to five men each for the purpose of going on hunts. Until the end of the nineteenth century, members of each angenajia shared their tools and booty among themselves, but then rifles became private property and soon each hunter would keep his own booty. As a consequence, the larger ulileng lost some of its former importance as some individual families became entirely independent.

Besides hunting, the mountain Evenks also engage in charcoal making and as lumberjacks. Some also maintain small farms. Earlier this century, many Evenks worked for Daur and Chinese who received two-thirds of the hunt. A group of mountain Evenks live in primeval forests of Argun left banner who hunt and raise deer and, unlike other mountain Evenks, have no fixed abode. They live in a kind of pup tent, about 3.3 meters in height and 4 meters in diameter. About twenty-five pine branches are used for building an umbrella-shaped structure. During summers, the sides of this structure are covered with birch bark and in winters with the skins of David's deer. These Evenks move quite frequently; during summers and falls they stay no more than ten days in any one place, while in winter, when they hunt squirrels, they move every two to three days. Each time a group moves, the men first erect the house and then the women follow with the reindeer which carry the group's belongings. The Evenks have a long history of raising reindeer which they call oron.¹⁴ These animals are especially useful in winter when they can travel as much as 25 kilometers through the snow. The Evenks use them for transportation, riding, and hunting.

Evenk society has been monogamous, even in traditional times. Like in other herding societies, the rules of exogamy are strictly observed, and in the past marriages were arranged by the parents.

One notable exception, however, was in Chen Barga banner where Evenks had the custom of choosing their own partners. After the wedding day was agreed upon, the man informed his parents. They then built in back of the woman's family camping ground a small pup tent and selected an old woman to sit in it. The night before the wedding, the bride-to-be slipped out of her parents' home and rode off with her fiancé. When they arrived at the pup tent, the old woman replaited the girl's eight small pigtailed into two big ones. Before dawn the couple entered her parents' home and paid their respects to the fire and ancestral spirits. At the same time, two men from the groom's family visited



Illus. 30. Evenk Hunting Equipment (1930) Illus. 31. Evenk Cradle for Strapping on Reindeer (1930)



Illus. 32. Reindeer Loaded with Flour and Rolls of Birch Bark (1930)

Evenk

the bride's camping ground and presented to the ancestral spirit a hadag (a ceremonial scarf) and prostrated themselves.

When the girl's parents noticed her absence and saw the two men, they would realize what had happened. They would pretend to be angry whereupon the two men gave them liquor which they refused. After a second offer, the parents would consent to drink, thereby signaling their agreement to the marriage.

All members of the groom's family and neighbors then assembled at the bride's parents' home and celebrated. In the ger for the new couple, located near the groom's parents' home, a clan elder was seated on the west side, with a hadag on his head or shoulders, while the bride and groom paid their respects to the ancestors, then to the fire spirit, and finally to their parents. The wedding festivities ended with a banquet accompanied by much singing and dancing.

Like other herding and hunting societies, Evenks are known for their great hospitality. In the herding areas, guests are routinely treated to tobacco, milk tea, and shoubarou.¹⁵ In the hunting areas, they are given milk tea, deer and elk stomach, and the elk's large intestines, backbone meat, and nose. Reflecting the harsh living conditions during winters in the mountains, Evenk hunters place caches of food, clothing, and equipment in various locations in the forests. Anyone in need may freely help himself to the supplies and compensate the owner later.

Recent Developments¹⁶

The Evenk autonomous banner was established on August 1, 1958. By that time, there were also five Evenk autonomous townships and one autonomous somon,¹⁷ a Mongolian-style township-level unit, elsewhere in the Northeast.

At present, about half of the Evenk population lives in the autonomous banner and in Chen Barga banner, also located in Hulunbuir league, where it is principally engaged in herding. The Imin and Hun rivers, originating in the Greater Xing'an range, feed the rich Hulunbuir plain and make herding quite profitable. Between 1949 and 1978, herds owned by Evenks increased from 66,000 to 455,000 head. Virtually all herders have been settled, seventy percent of them between 1954 and 1968.

Evenks living in Butha and Arun banners as well as those in the Morindawa Daur autonomous banner divide their activities between farming and hunting. Exclusive farming is practiced by the Evenks living in the vicinity of Nehe city, while some Evenks in Argun left banner are engaged in hunting.

Hunting has been the oldest economic activity and is still quite popular. Almost one-half of the Evenk autonomous banner is covered by forests, and the most sought-after animals are roe deer, bears, wild boars, deer, elks, Mongolian gazelles, swans, and crows. Hunters, and occasionally farmers living near

forests, gather white mushrooms. In 1981 Evenks harvested over 2,000 kilograms of these mushrooms which they sold in nearby cities. They also sold sheep skins, ox hides, horse hides, and the skins of wild animals. Another economic resource in the Evenk autonomous banner is a 50,000 hectare (about 124,000 acre) area of reed marshes which each year yields 350,000,000 tons for the paper industry.

At the time the Evenk autonomous banner was created, it had only 501 Party members. Twenty years later, this figure increased to 1,450 of whom 240, or about twenty-two percent, were Evenks. Evenks also hold about the same share of all cadre positions in the banner.

Universal education of five years has been reached in all areas where Evenks live, and some townships now offer seven years of instruction. The number of elementary schools in the autonomous banner increased from nine in 1958 to thirty-six in 1977, with 5,020 students attending. There were also eighteen middle schools with 3,900 students.

Health care has also progressed in the recent past, with health stations dotting the grazing areas of Hulunbuir league. There is also a hospital in Nantun which practices traditional Mongolian medicine and, indicative of two persisting health problems, a tuberculosis sanitarium and several stations for treating venereal diseases.

Notes

¹Jiankuang, v. 1, 36.

²Minzu yanjiu 23 (1983), 81.

³According to the Atlas narodov mira (Moscow, 1964), 150, of a total of 33,000 Evenks in 1961, 26,000 lived in the Soviet Union, 6,000 in China and 1,000 in the Mongolian People's Republic.

⁴Zhongguo, 97.

⁵Jiankuang, v. 1, 37; Zhongguo, 99.

⁶Another hypothesis, no longer favored, holds that the Evenks descended from the Mohe.

⁷See entries in the bibliography. Only a few months ago a trilingual glossary, Ewenggi helen-ü üges-ün tegübüri, was published in Beijing.

⁸See Qui Pu 1978, 133. Full citation is found in the bibliographical chapter on the Oroqens.

⁹Examples selected from Ewenggi.

¹⁰Zhongguo, 97.

¹¹See Daur, Evenk, Oroqen minge; also the collection on Evenk folksongs in the popular magazine Caoyuan, listed in the bibliography.

¹²See his entries in the bibliography. No fewer than four different articles, by Bai Gui, Narangowa, Hua Guozhang, and Zhou Tingfang, have been published about Urertu. See also samples of contemporary Evenk literature by Du Mei and the twenty-eight-year old woman writer Anna.

¹³Information on Evenk society in China can be obtained from Zhongguo, 101-105. See also the article by Ma Wei on Evenk folk dances.

¹⁴Oron is the same word used by the Oroqens to describe themselves as the "reindeer people." See the chapter on the Oroqens.

¹⁵This Chinese term, written 手把肉, lacks a precise equivalent in the English, Evenk, and Mongolian languages, and refers to a large chunk of boiled mutton eaten with the hands.

¹⁶Information on recent developments is found in Zhongguo, 97-108 and in Jiankuang, v. 1, 36.

¹⁷Called sum in Mongolian.