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Hezhen

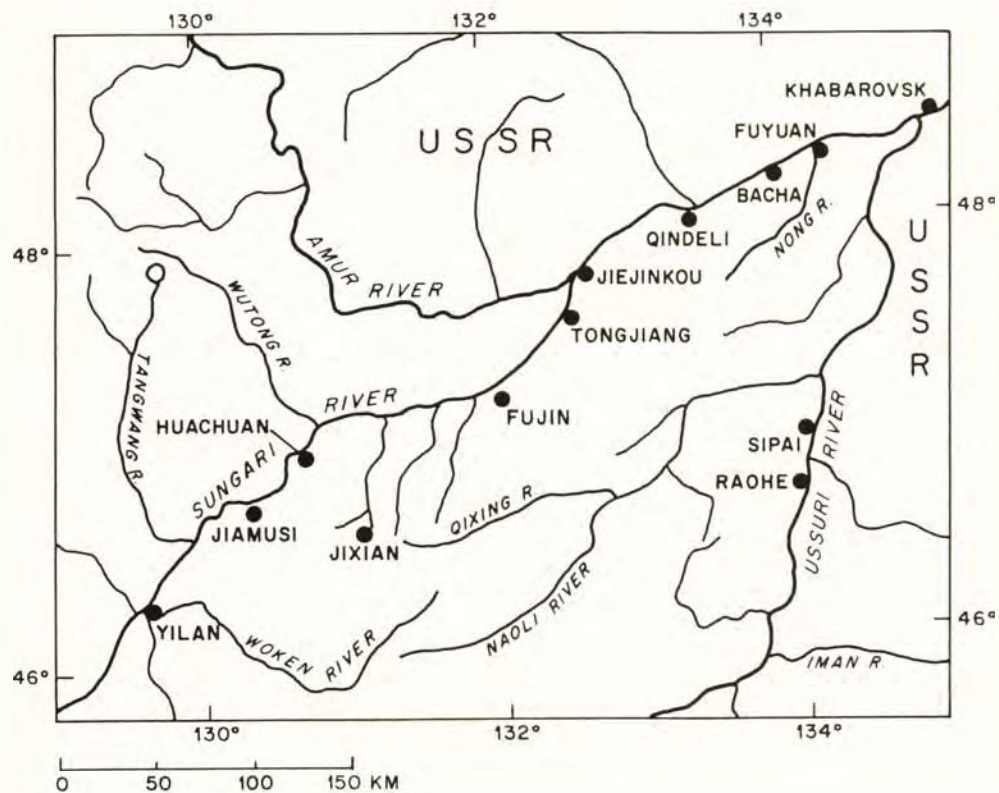
Size and Location

One of China's smallest nationalities is the Hezhen 赫哲. Most Hezhens live in the Three Rivers area (Amur, Sungari, and Ussuri) in northeastern Heilongjiang province (see Map 17). They have increased from about 300 in 1949 to 700 in 1970 and 1,476 in 1982.¹ A much larger group of Hezhens, estimated at 8,000 to 9,000 lives across the border in the Soviet Union. Most Hezhens in China live along rivers in Bacha 八岔 and Jiejinkou 街津 townships of Tongjiang county and near Sipai 四排 village, located in Xilinzi 西林子 township of Raohe 饶河 county. Others are scattered in several villages in Huachuan 桦川 and Fujin 富锦 counties and in the city of Jiamusi 佳木斯.²

History

Few specific facts are known about the Hezhens' history. It is generally believed that they can be traced as far back as the Dong Yi 东夷, about two millenia ago, who are seen as the progenitors not only of the Hezhens but of all Tungusic people.³ During China's Jin and Tang dynasties (sixth to ninth centuries), the Hezhens were part of the Heishui Mohe 黑水靺鞨 federation, living along the Amur river.⁴ Later, perhaps from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries, they belonged to the Jurchens. According to the Hezhens' oral tradition, many centuries ago their ancestors lived near modern Harbin, at a

place called Baicheng (White City) where they were farming. The Chinese destroyed the city, forcing its inhabitants to flee into the Greater Xing'an mountain range.⁵ This move necessitated a switch from farming to hunting and fishing. The Hezhens learned to build boats in which they eventually journeyed down to the Amur river where they settled in several spots along its banks. After an unspecified length of time, the Gilyaks drove many Hezhens southward where they settled on the Sungari between the town of Sanxing and the Amur river.⁶



Map. 17. Hezhen

The Hezhens did not come under Chinese control until well into the Qing dynasty which called them initially the New Manzhou. In 1716 the Qing established their first outpost in Sanxing (now called Yilan) county on the lower reaches of the Sungari, which was enlarged to a fudutong 副都统, a military

command, in 1733. Much later than other nationalities in the Northeast, the Hezhens were not included in the eight-banner system until 1882 when the Qing established a military banner headquarters in Gardang which organized the Hezhens into military units.⁷

Language and Literature⁸

The Hezhen language belongs to the Manchu branch of the Machu-Tungus group of the Altaic family of languages. It contains the following ten vowels.

<u>a</u> as in <u>nala</u> 'hand'	<u>ɜ</u> as in <u>ɜmɛk</u> 'one'
<u>ã</u> as in <u>ihã</u> 'ox'	<u>i</u> as in <u>imaha</u> 'fish'
<u>ə</u> as in <u>məmə</u> 'milk'	<u>o</u> as in <u>honi</u> 'sheep'
<u>ɛ</u> as in <u>nɛnɛ</u> 'grandmother'	<u>õ</u> as in <u>afõ</u> 'hat'
<u>ẽ</u> as in <u>ɟẽ</u> 'ear'	<u>u</u> as in <u>sabu</u> 'shoe'

The twenty-seven consonants in Hezhen are as follows:

<u>b</u> as in <u>bi</u> 'I'	<u>ɳ</u> as in <u>natɳen</u> 'master'
<u>d</u> as in <u>puda</u> 'food'	<u>p</u> as in <u>pa</u> 'sky, heaven'
<u>dʒ</u> as in <u>dʒɛkt'ə</u> 'rice'	<u>p'</u> as in <u>halap'ti</u> 'long ago'
<u>f</u> as in <u>fa</u> 'window'	<u>r</u> as in <u>mɔrin</u> 'horse'
<u>g</u> as in <u>gak'i</u> 'duck'	<u>s</u> as in <u>sabu</u> 'shoe'
<u>h</u> as in <u>nahã</u> 'kang'	<u>ʃ</u> as in <u>ʃi</u> 'you' (sing.)
<u>j</u> as in <u>ajẽ</u> 'mouse'	<u>t</u> as in <u>tili</u> 'head'
<u>k</u> as in <u>kubmahõ</u> 'rabbit'	<u>t'</u> as in <u>t'iɔkɔ</u> 'chicken'
<u>k'</u> as in <u>fɔk'ɔt'u</u> 'road'	<u>ts</u> as in <u>tsuã</u> 'ten'
<u>l</u> as in <u>lɔsõ</u> 'donkey'	<u>ts'</u> as in <u>k'uts'en</u> 'knife'
<u>m</u> as in <u>ama</u> 'father'	<u>tʃ</u> as in <u>tʃɔ</u> 'room'
<u>n</u> as in <u>nai</u> 'person'	<u>tʃ'</u> as in <u>tʃ'amtʃ'ə</u> 'robe'
<u>ɳ</u> as in <u>ɳiã</u> 'mother'	<u>w</u> as in <u>wa</u> 'to kill'
	<u>ʒ</u> as in <u>ʒikt'ə</u> 'thread'

The Hezhen language also has no less than twelve diphthongs and even some triphthongs.⁹ Stress is on the last syllable.

The Hezhens living in China speak one dialect which, however, differs from that spoken by the Hezhens living along the lower reaches of the Amur river in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

The Hezhens do not have their own script. Consequently, their entire, rather well-developed literary heritage has until recently been transmitted orally. In recent decades efforts have been made to record, in Chinese, a few samples of Hezhen folk literature. The largest collection is still that by Ling

Chongsheng, published in 1934.¹¹ One form is the epic, or imak, which is very long, some taking several days to recite. It is mostly spoken, with occasional songs interspersed. There is no musical accompaniment.¹² The imakans' themes include heroes, ghosts, animals, love, and the rise and fall of tribes. Perhaps the best known epic is about Mojulin, the god of children.¹³ Another imak is about the hero Manganmu Mergen.¹⁴

A second form of Hezhen folk literature is the shuohuli, a kind of folktale that traditionally the old people told children.¹⁵ It is short and lively and includes fables and myths. An example is Sulak mafak (The fox and the bear).¹⁶

The Hezhens also have two kinds of folk songs. The jialiankuo genre resembles Chinese folk songs. It has a fixed melody while the words are delivered impromptu. Another form of song is called henina, because this word is repeated over and over again. It is sung mostly by women during work.¹⁷

The principal musical instruments are the unte, a shaman's drum, and the mukangji, a kind of harmonica.¹⁸

The only known contemporary Hezhen writer is Xiao Han. He was born in 1942 and currently is working in the water transport office in Jiamusi. Since 1963 he has been writing short stories as well as translating and annotating traditional stories.¹⁹

Society

Traditional Hezhen society was organized along similar lines to that of the Manchus. There were seven hala (clans): Birdaki, Luir, Udinke, Futeha, Geike, Sunmun and Yuken. Some were named after rivers, while others bore the names of animals.²⁰ Usually, each hala consisted of several mokun (families), and the heads of both kinds of organizations were elected by all adult members. Beyond the hala was the common name group which, however, was not formally organized.²¹ Hezhen villages average about 300 households, with some having as many as 2,000 households.²² The village head, called gashanda, was generally elected for terms of two to three years in office, but it was not uncommon to find some gashanda serving for life. The only qualifications for office were minimal literacy and good marksmanship. Before Chinese influence reached the Hezhens in the mid-Qing period, a gashanda had the power to order any form of punishment, including death by strangulation.²³

The usual form of marriage was monogamous, but a few rich men in most villages were known to have two wives.²⁴ Marriage within one's own hala was strictly prohibited, but it was permitted within the same name group. Unlike in some other nationalities, a widow who remarried was not stigmatized but she could not return to her former husband's home.

The most common form of burial was interment.²⁵ Before the arrival of Chinese influence the Hezhens had no fixed cemeteries but rather buried their

dead in any place of their choice, after the shaman had determined that the location was auspicious. The use of coffins was also due to Chinese influence. Before that time, a hole was dug and the corpse was laid into a trough made of wood and stones. Then a lid was placed on the corpse and the remainder of the hole was filled with soil. When coffins came into use, they were made of cedar planks and were placed into the grave to face west. Childrens' corpses were not interred but wrapped in birch bark and placed in trees.²⁶ This practice was based on the belief that a child's soul was too small to escape from the ground and thus would be prevented to have other children. On the evening of the third and ninth day after a child's death, its mother left her home and spent the night at someone else's home. If she failed to do so, it was believed that the child's soul could not leave the mother.

The Hezhens used to wear many articles of clothing and shoes made of fishskin, so that outsiders often called them "Fishskin Tatars." In addition, many articles, such as tobacco pouches, were also made of fishskin.

Most Hezhens living in the Three Rivers region practice fishing.²⁷ Before the Qing dynasty, most fishing grounds were commonly owned and the catch was evenly divided. During the Qing and republican periods the fishing grounds became privately owned, and the distribution of the catch became extremely uneven. In Gardang village in 1910, for example, six of the eighty families were rich enough to own forty-three pull nets, six boats, nine seines, and 150 sturgeon hooks. Two other families owned one boat and three seines. The remaining seventy-two families owned nothing and subsisted by working for the few rich families and by engaging in hunting.

The Hezhens in the area above Datun and Gardang in Fuyuan county were mostly hunters. At first, they used bow and arrow and the gida, a front-loading gun, but later they changed to rifle and shotgun. Hunting was seasonal. Fine furred animals were hunted in the fall and winter, while deer was hunted in the spring and early summer. During hunting expeditions, groups of hunters were organized in temporary organizations headed by a mafa who was elected by them on the strength of his reputed marksmanship and experience.

The Hezhen diet was determined by the kind of economic activity. In the hunting areas, it consisted mostly of venison and in the other areas it was fish. One noteworthy practice was the eating of raw fish, quite similar to the Japanese sashimi, which is unique in China.

Religion²⁸

Like other Manchu-Tungus nationalities, the Hezhens believed in shamanism. The Hezhens worshiped the sky, the earth, sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, and trees as the abodes of various spirits. They also believed that all humans and animals possessed immortal souls. This belief formed the

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Illus. 35. Hezhen woman



Illus. 36. Repairing a Fish Net

basis of ancestor worship. There were different sects of shamans, as indicated by the number of branches on their ceremonial hats. Members of the bira taken (river god) sect had one pair of horns, those of the yurong taken (unicorn dragon) sect two sets, and those of the mamogu taken (river god) sect three horns. Moreover, rank was signified by the number of antlers. Of the six ranks, the lowest had no antlers, while others had three, five, seven, twelve, and fifteen antlers. It usually took two to three years for a novice to attain the three-antler rank and at least forty years to reach the highest rank. Ranks were also signified by the number of bells on the hat and belt as well as other insignia, but each tribe had its own regulations governing them.

Judging from several folktales popular among the Hezhens, in the remote past all shamans had been female but today all but a handful are male. The female shamans do not wear horns on their caps but are treated like novice shamans.²⁹

Although we do not have sufficient materials to make a definitive statement, it appears that the Hezhens have had more shamans than other nationalities and that they have been active longer than elsewhere. As late as 1957, of the 135 adults in Bacha township, eight were shamans, and in 1958 the 133 Hezhens living in Jiejinkou township still had four shamans.

The Hezhens recognize four different kinds of shamans, depending on their specialties. The dakesuteyi accompanies the souls of departed Hezhens to their final destinations. The bachilan is the professional fortune teller. The feililan beseeches the gods and hence is often asked by families to lead prayer services before the images of various burhans. The aha, whose respectful term is ahamafa (meaning goddess' assistant) cures other shamans who may be afflicted by mental disorders and have fallen victim to some epidemic disease. The aha is clearly the most important kind of shaman. He is believed to possess des'hu, i.e. the purest spirit, and women and children may not approach him, especially menstruating women for fear that they may cause the aha to fall ill or perhaps even die.³⁰

Recent Developments³¹

The Hezhens came under Communist control soon after the end of World War II in 1945, much earlier than most nationalities in China. By the time of the Communist assumption of power over mainland China in 1949, most Hezhen communities had already completed the first stages of social reorganization. For example, Sipai village on the Ussuri completed its reforms in spring 1948 and established its first mutual-aid team which was changed into a permanent team in 1951. The following year the village opened its first cooperative. Given the fact that the Hezhens had traditionally concentrated on fishing, many of the new economic organizations were fishing cooperatives, but the first steps toward

farming were also undertaken. In 1956 Bacha village on the Amur operated a modest farm of about 30 hectares (75 acres), but fishing remained the main occupation. There were three fishing brigades and one farming brigade in 1957.

Education progressed. The Hezhens received their first elementary school in 1949 which was located in Jiejinkou village. Others were added in 1952 in Bacha and Sipai. Health stations, another innovation, reduced infant mortality from seventy-five percent in 1948 to zero by 1958. In most communities the traditional fish oil lamps have been replaced by electricity.

Notes

¹ Zhongguo, 57; Jiankuang, v. 2, 36; Minzu yanjiu 23 (1983), 81.

² Liu 1981, 1.

³ Ling, 17-44.

⁴ Jiankuang, v. 2, 36; Zhongguo, 63; Liu 1981, 2.

⁵ Lattimore, 343 says that Yue Fei destroyed the city, but this famous general of the Song dynasty is not known to have traveled farther north than Kaifeng.

⁶ Jettmar, 249.

⁷ Jiankuang, v. 2, 38; Ling, 57.

⁸ Linguistic information can be found in Ling, 231-280. See also Jiankuang, v. 2, 37.

⁹ Menges, 175.

¹⁰ Menges, 173-174.

¹¹ Ling, 281-694.

¹² Liu 1981, 39; Jiankuang, v. 2, 37.

¹³ Ling, 294-328. A German translation of this text was done by Hefter.

¹⁴ Liu 1981, 40-42.

¹⁵ Jiankuang, v. 2, 37.

¹⁶ Liu 1981, 42-44.

¹⁷ Liu 1981, 45; Jiankuang, v. 2, 37.

¹⁸ Liu 1981, 46.

¹⁹ See his entry in the bibliography.

²⁰ Ling, 224-225; Lattimore, 375.

²¹ Jiankuang, v. 2, 37.

²² Ling, 226.

²³ Jettmar, 254-255.

²⁴ Information on marriage is based on Liu 1981, 48-50.

²⁵ The most detailed description of Hezhen burial customs is in Lopatin, 70-96.

²⁶Liu 1981, 52.

²⁷Description of economic activities are in *Jiankuang*, v. 2, 38-39. Economic tools are shown in Illustrations 99-132 in Ling.

²⁸Unless otherwise noted, information on religion is taken from Ling, 102-142.

²⁹Liu 1981, 54. Detailed information on the shaman's dress is in Liu 1981, 54-63, *passim*. See also Illustrations 178-270 in Ling.

³⁰Liu 1981, 58-59.

³¹Liu 1981, 63-66.