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**THE TUVANS IN CHINA: THEIR LANGUAGE SITUATION<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is an attempt to investigate Tuvan ethnic groups living in China, where they are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. Object of research are ethno-local groups of Tuvans, who inhabit the Habahe and Burjin Districts of Kazakh Autonomous Province. They also live in Altai, Koktogai, Chingil and Burultogai Districts of Altay *aimag* of Xinjiang Autonomous District of China, set at some distance from each other.

The authors focus on their historical background, settlement, number, ethnic identity and contemporary ethno-linguistic processes. This article is based on materials gathered during field-works, which were conducted by the authors in China in different time – in the 1990s and 2000s.

**Keywords:** China, Tuvans, Xinjiang, Turkic-speaking peoples, ethno-linguistic processes,  
ethnic minority, ethnic identity, nomads of Central Asia.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The majority of Tuvans (according to the last census in 2002 the population was 243,442) live in the Russian Federation, where they have a recognized position and territory – the Republic Tuva. These Tuvans are considered to be citizens of Russia. This affects their system of contact with other nationalities, and promotes the dissemination of the Russian language as the international language of communication.

Tuvan ethnic groups are settled not only on the territory of the Russian Federation, but also in China. This country has quite different influence on the modern development of Tuvan communities.

In the territory of China, Tuvans are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. Because of their settlement in various territories in the past, Tuvans have had to live in mixed communities with other ethnic groups: this had led to processes of assimilation, and as a result they became parts of the host population. In any case one should not underestimate the complex nature of ethnic development of Tuvans in China.

In this paper, we will introduce gathered material about the Tuvans in China in 1990s and 2000s. This article focuses on elements ranging from “historical baggage” to the language of this community, to relations with host societies and to the interaction between these factors.

**Historical Background**

The majority of the Tuvan population live in the Habahe and Burjin Districts of Kazakh Autonomous Province. They also live in Altai, Koktogai, Chingil and Burultogai Districts [3:178].

According to the 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-M.M., E.A.), with a population of over 1.000 people, lived in this area [2: 343].

Most Tuvans consider their ancestors to have come to this area from Tuva for the first time in the period of the Manchurian Empire (1616 - 1911). At that time there were two powerful empires in Inner Asia: Manchurian and Dzungar-ian. Each of them aspired to dominate in the whole area and frequent military conflicts took place between them. The territory and the original population of Tuva were controlled by Manchurs and Dzungars at the same time. However, at the end of the 17th century, Bacchus gained the upper hand, which led 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. It is for this reason that they are found in Xinjiang. It is for this reason that they are found in Xinjiang [1:121]. But there are some scholars who

tend to consider that in the past Xinjiang was a part of ethnic territory of Tuvans and they live there ever (long since) [4:6]. Some of our informants support this idea and believe that Tuvans are one of the local ethnic groups. At the same time, one of our informants said that his grandparents had come to Xinjiang in 1913, that is two years after the collapse of Qing Dynasty (Manchurian Empire). Some Tuvans came here after the Tuvan revolution in 1921, for they could not accept the new Soviet power and new system for various reasons.

#### ***Their numbers and identity***

In the 1993, when we visited Chinese Tuvans for the first time, they were known as “KokMonchaks”. This name had been given to them by the Kazakhs, and they have become accustomed to it. But deep down they are convinced they are Tuvans. We could not explain what “KokMonchaks” means exactly, but many of my informants were sure that it was the name of an ethnic group and clan at the same time. Actually there is a Monchak clan among Tuvans. This name is believed to exist among Tuvans in Mongolia as well. This may indicate that many years ago some Tuvans with this name came to Xinjiang from Mongolia, where they had lived before.

However, in 2012 when we visited KokMonchaks again, they declared: “We are Tuvans.” On the car which served us,

was written in beautiful hieroglyphs: “The Tuvan House in the Khom,” using the word Tuvan instead of Monchak.

Chinese census statistics do not recognize Tuvans as a nationality. This is why they are not included in the official list of nationalities, which consists of 56 ethnic groups living in China. Our Chinese colleagues have supplied us with verbal information on this subject. Their opinion is that the number of Tuvans is approximately 2,500 to 3,000. All attempts to obtain data about population in our interviews with Tuvans failed and the information that we obtained was controversial. One can, however, be certain that the number of Tuvans is not more than 3,000 to 4,000.

However, while obtaining this information, we faced the following dilemma: Tuvans are registered as Mongols on their passports; at the same time they do not tend to identify themselves as Mongols. This problem gives rise to a number of important questions.

#### ***Their language situation***

The main subject we focused on was the language of the Tuvans. They definitely do speak Tuvan, a language which belongs to the Turkic language group. It is mainly used within the family and at ceremonial occasions such as

weddings, funerals and religious rituals for the sanctifying of natural objects.

At the same time, Tuvans also have a good command of the languages of more numerous peoples—Kazakh and Mongolian. In this context, their perspicacious possession of these languages is the instrument they use to adapt themselves to the ethnic environment to which destiny has brought them. The interesting point is that they are close to Kazakhs in their native language, but in their religion they are, like the Mongols, Buddhists.

In 1993 we communicated with Tuvans in their native tongue and we understood each other without any language problems. The older generation's knowledge of their native tongue is greater than that of the younger. This proved that fundamentally we use the same language. If there is a difference, it is in pronunciation, a special accent, which is associated with the influence of Mongolian. While they are easy to understand, their vocabulary is a little different from standard Tuvan. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that they have been living separately from the majority of Tuvans for a long period of time. Their speech forms a very specific dialect of the Tuvan language, which was understandable to me. However, if earlier we understood everything that the Chinese

Tuvans said to us, and everyone could understand us, in 2012 we were often faced with language misunderstandings. This means that during the last 20 years the Tuvan language strongly degraded and became less used under the impact of Chinese which has become the dominant language in this region.

As for the Chinese language, in 1993 it seemed to be less prevalent in Xinjiang. At that time we did not meet many people who spoke Chinese very well. It is, however, studied in the schools. But there was a hidden problem in this situation. The difficulties that the Tuvan population has faced in entering higher education can be largely attributed to their poor command of the Chinese language. Although in theory they are able to enter schools of higher education, in fact they have been largely prevented from doing this by the obstacles they faced in an educational system that is predominantly conducted in Chinese.

Now the situation with the Chinese language looks different. It has become a language of international communication in Xinjiang. During the last 15 years, many Chinese moved here permanently. As a result of this, many young Tuvans speak Chinese rather well and they can write Chinese as well.

When we were staying among Tuvans, we very often observed their

facility for switching between languages, depending on the nationality of the people with whom they were talking. Actually they speak four languages: Tuvan, Mongolian, Kazakh, and Chinese. Because of this, there are many Kazakh, Mongolian and Chinese borrowings in their dialect of Tuvan, which is the natural consequence of long historical interaction between these peoples.

Chinese Tuvans do not have their own schools. Their children have to go either to a Kazakh or a Mongolian school. Usually they prefer the latter, for officially they are considered to be Mongols. They frequently told me that they would like to keep their native tongue; however, objectively they did not have the chance to do this. They also do not have access to media in their own language; they have no newspapers, books, radio or TV programmes, which could guarantee them the permanent use of the Tuvan language. Occasionally they attempt to receive the Tuvan radio station by transistor, which is their only opportunity to listen to their native language. Listening to Tuvan radio programmes convinces them that they have not yet lost Tuvan. But many informants complain that the broadcasting time is very short—just 30 minutes every evening.

As a result of our experience among Chinese Tuvans we came to the conclusion

that their possession of their native tongue is a unique phenomenon. They have retained their native language in spite of isolation from the ethnic majority for over 200 years; it was a means of survival in an alien environment. But they were also involved in a process of cultural assimilation, which forced them to make linguistic changes. This factor certainly has had an effect on the ethnic development of the Tuvan community in China and should always be taken into account.

### **CONCLUSION**

In any case, the data gathered shows conclusively enough that the modern ethnic development of the Tuvans in China is complex and multi-faceted in character. Firstly, having lived in a mixed ethnic environment for a long time Tuvans have to mix with other peoples and accept their languages and culture. This leads to the natural process of their partial assimilation. However, in spite of this, they still retain such important components of ethnicity as their native language, ethnic consciousness and some features of traditional culture, which allows them to be identified as Tuvans. Secondly, the process of interethnic integration is the characteristic of most of Tuvan groups: this means the interaction of different ethnic groups without their amalgamating. This process is typical for China, where cultural and economical

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interaction between different peoples is the main measure to solve 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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