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Transition Phase From Hunter to Farmer – After a Present Field Work¹ on Oroqen People of Northeast China

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I. Former hunters: Way of Living

Oroqen (*ᠣᠷᠣᠴᠢᠨ*) people² live in the mountainous areas of northeast China. They were nomadic hunters and gatherers (till 1980s). All the year round, Oroqen people would go into the forests on horses with their hunting groups, either of several families or of several men. The only occasions for them to come out are for trading daily goods such as salt, flour, millet, gunpowder or lead for making bullets, and winter time when the spring closed in for celebration, match-making and cultural activities such as get-togethers.

Their hunting areas were about several thousand kilometers in the mountains, so Oroqen people seemed never to know where was the final destination. However, they were relatively confined to certain areas, for example, they divided themselves into Minor Xing'an Mountains (in the present day Heilongjiang Province) groups and Bigger Xing'an Mountain (in the present day Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region) groups. Among one group, there were also smaller area limitations for small hunting groups.

Wherever they went during hunting, they would build temporary houses (*ᠰᠢᠯᠠᠩᠳᠤ*) and leave them behind, only taking the outer coverings, either made of hide or white birch bark, away with them. Anyone who saw the empty houses could use them and even eat the dry meat, when

¹ The present population is 6965. (<http://www.nmg.xinhuanet.com/zjcy/hlbe/zfelc/>)

² The author has done several field works in the past 20 years with the recent one in August 2001.

they were not able to have any catches, stored in the store house (built in the trees) left by the former group. The only thing they could pay back is the food if they happened to come back to the store houses from which they took the meat.

Oroqen women went with the hunters. They were helpers to hunters in skinning, cooking, making clothes. They would never stay behind the hunting group even when they gave birth to children. The cultural history and oral language (being without written form) passed down the generations only within the hunting groups. Fishing was occasional and only as supplementary, so Oroqen fishing skills were far less sophisticated than Hezhen people who used to belong to the same bigger ethnic family. Gathering was done only by women but they could only recognize no more than a dozen edible herbs. They used herbs for vegetable and medicine or for brewing low alcoholic beverages. Their clothes and quilts came solely from animal hides. Every woman knew how to use every part of animal for different kinds of clothes, such as shoes, overcoats, gloves, or shoes.

The animals they hunted were roe deer (*giwutʃən*), deer (*kumaxa*), moose (*bəjun*), bear (*ηɔηxu*) (occasionally), wild hog (*tɔrxi*), but never tiger (*taʃka*) or wolf (*gujka*). Wild fowls were never the like to Oroqen. Shamanism was prevailing. Shamans (*saman*) were not professional. Anyone who was thought to possess magic power could be one though some of them had the special knowledge of how to conduct ceremonies by singing or dancing.

II. Now farmers: adaptation and problem

1. Settling down

Being traditional hunters and gatherers in the forests, they would rather continue their way of living though they were aware of the “advanced way of living” and obviously better hygienic and education conditions. The turning point of their transition of living mode is after 1949 when the newly established government was making a policy to modernize them, seeing the undesirable living condition in the eyes of the more “advanced culture”, by asking them adopting a new way of living. They were arranged to settle down at the places where they were

right at and assigned village organization with head (normally the former head of the hunting groups or bigger kinship groups). The government constructed brick houses and furnished them with schools and clinics though may not be right on the village level and moved them in and offer them free farmland.

At the time between 1950s to 1960s, even to 1970s, Oroqen people were still able to lived as they would before, going hunting and gathering and moved around in the forests with guns provided by the government and the only thing they would pay for was the bullet at very low price. They could be able to either come to live in the brick houses any time or in the huts (*gilanǵu*) (tepee like) in the forests as they preferred.

The hunting organization (*ulilen*: collective hunting group composed of several families or peers, or *aya*: temporary small hunting group or individual hunters) was the same as they had before with head elected. The games were distributed almost equally among the group members with women who were acting as accompanying aids in both cooking and gathering and or in families.

With the depletion of animals and forests in their living areas as well as the changes of policy on the side of the government seeing the environment and natural resource protection, hunting was gradually restricted and is now banned. The guns were collected by the government (though in Heilongjiang areas some people are still having guns, the guns are collectively looked after during festivals and bullets are not easily bought) and game wardens were assigned, some of whom Oroqen people themselves. Modern sense livestock feeding was established with deer as the staple animals. So, Oroqen people are forced to adapt to a living on farmlands though having no knowledge of how to, unwilling as they felt.

Oroqen people have been noted for their carefree characters. They would rather enjoy what other peoples regard insufficient material, nomadic and hard life than being confined to a special place though with better hygienic and educational environment. They preferred drinking liquor and idling around than being tied to a specific job. So, settling down and tying themselves to farming are the least thing they want. The mentality of the people is not easily changed even today after settling

down for more than 50 years.

2. Housing

The brick houses for the Oroqen people are modeled on the northern Han (Mandarin) people and sufficient enough for both living and heating³. However, in some areas, say, MuKui Village in Inner Mongolia where Oroqen people are still less used to settling down, people would prefer to build their own hut-like houses than living in the brick houses claiming that they feel stuffy inside and afraid that roofs might fall down.

The hut-like houses were cold in winter as there are not enough insulating materials to seal the gaps between wooden planks. Oroqen people living in these houses would keep their traditional sleeping bags made of treated hide and cook the same way as in their traditional *silandzu* (huts/house) with fire on which the pot is placed set in the middle of the house and sleeping places around in three sides except the entrance path.

In some other areas villages lying close to the pass ways or highways, such as Xinsheng Village, Xin-e Village, Bajna Village, Shi-ba-zhan Village in Heilongjiang province, Guli Village, Wurbute Village, Tuohe Village in Inner Mongolia, the hut-like houses are only used for storing places and there Oroqen people have small courtyards fenced by chopped tree branches. Obviously, this way of fencing the yards is influenced more by the nearby peoples, especially the majority Han people.

Oroqen people, at the time of settling down, seemed never to have learnt how to get used to the way other settled people to make full use of the brick houses. For example, they would never heat “*kang*” (brick bunk heated by smoke tunnels built under) the way other northeastern peoples did. They would still sleep in the sleeping bags made of hide. They would also not use the oven which was attached to the “*kang*” for both heating and cooking. Their traditional way of cooking was either grilling

³ The brick houses offered to the Oroqen were free, and they are much better houses than the Han people who lived in the same area. During the 1950s, most of the Han houses are mud brick houses.

meat directly over the fire or in the pot supported by the branches over the fire. But using big pot (about 1 meter in diameter) buried in the oven was not something they prefer. They would believe that the pot could hurt people when hot water splashed and the food cooked in such a way was never as good. So, most often they would cook out doors. Now, Oroqen are used to cooking in Han people's way, but still longing for grilling. Whenever there is occasion, they will go out for this.

To the author, their preference in grilling and traditional way of cooking is for cultural reasons. Oroqen people's cultural activities are most done during either having a big get-together or eating when most of the time they were hunting in the mountains. Their cultural activities, such as folklore telling, singings, drinking will be easier when people sit together. But if women are cooking in the separate room (kitchen), and food is ready served, they would have less time for such occasions and the enjoyments they had of throwing big junks of meat into the pot and having it served by using knives is no longer there.

Brick houses tend to be more spacious than their traditional house in which beds were placed in a circle around the fire. When sleeping on "*kang*", the Han traditional is: people sleeping on/in their own quilt in a line with parents on one side and children on other according to the age, smallest ones near the parents. Oroqen will think this way of place arrangement is not convenient for talking before everyone falls asleep.

3. Land leasing

Oroqen people never seem to learn how to farm. When the free farmland allocated to them or when they were offered government's favorable policy to open up farmland into the forests, they would leave the crops grow after planting, caring not the management or weeding or fertilizing. After several cycles of farming, the tiny harvest made them lose interests. For living, they normally lease the land for other people to farm and spend their daily lives doing what they want, but not hunting anymore as there are basically no wild animals to hunt. The money charged for land leasing is enough for their way of living.

Sometimes they are cheated by leaseholders falsely claiming the downfall of crops due to the natural adversities. Most of them still have no sense what it is all about. With the sense of "making money"

enhanced, they now gradually involved themselves in other industries such as running restaurants, doing odd jobs in cities, but they are not businessmen by nature. Though some of them know that tourism can be a good source of income, most would still not take the trouble putting on shows or producing handmade birch bark utensils as souvenirs selling to tourists. Some local governments encourage or organize them into show groups, but not many, especially the elder ones, would like to do that.

Land leasing will not benefit them in the long run, but they seem not to care about the future. Their natural or historical folk education does not teach them that way. Their innate nature is longing for forests as some like to take a day's time going on foot tracking wild hares or geese into woods for scanty gaining, and come back to show to their friends, and share what they get.

Though leasing their farmland does not change much of their nature, change of attitudes can be observed. Some families feed pigs or sheep or domesticated fowls such as chickens or ducks or domesticated geese, few even have deer for meat and medicine (Han people generally think that deer antlers, especially fresh-grown ones, are valuable to be used as medicine) and cows for milk. All the families have television sets right now as the most indispensable source of entertainment or time killer. When asked the question of a better life, they seem to have the awareness of making money though not quite know how to.

4. Language assimilation

At the time of settlement 50 years ago, Oroqen language was well spoken by the people. But after living around by other peoples, their language was gradually lost. Even in the now language relatively well preserved villages, such as Wurbutye in Inner Mongolia, the language is only spoken by the aged (about 20 people around or over 60 years of age and children before schooling)⁴. In other villages in Inner Mongolia, such as Mukui and Guli, the language is almost gone as the elderly ones pass away. The author would estimate that within 20 years, the language will be gone forever as the children who go the school will never come back to work in the fields since they think it is backward in their home

⁴ Statistics from the author's field work.

villages in terms of economy, environment and culture. Thus, receiving education is a means to stop the history of the language.

In the villages in Heilongjiang Province, almost no Oroqen people can use their language fluently. The extinction of language there is due to the passing of the old people, intermarriage between Oroqen and other peoples, and co-settlement, especially with Han people. In Inner Mongolia, though most of the older Oroqen are bilingual (able to speak other languages other than their mother tongue such as Dawur or Mongolian or Mandarin Chinese), they will not think their own language better or prestigious or superior in expressing ideas than their less fluent second language(s).

The school in Oroqen villages in Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang Province teach only Mandarin Chinese. In Guli village, for example, among different grades, most of the pupils are Dawur or Mongolian. So when at home, children, influenced by their classmates or neighbors, will generally speak Chinese or other languages to each other. The parents seem not to care about what language their children use.

The present assimilation in language is very obvious. For example, Oroqen language does not have diphthongs, but now, diphthongs are frequently used and become part of the Oroqen sound system, such as *luə* (kind of percussion instrument “*luo*”), *ʃuədən* (school), *xuəŋgwa* (sweet melon), *ʃuanla:ran* (election), *duanjuan* (league member) as the direct borrowing words. Though some of the diphthongs are changed according to Oroqen sound system, such as *de:nhua* (telephone), *məjliʈfen bəjə* (American people), *hujʃə bəjə* (Hui people) by changing diphthong “*i*” into “*j*”, this sound pattern is still not quite Oroqen one.

Borrowings in vocabulary are obvious, but some blending words are used even though Oroqen language has the similar expression, for example, young people tend to use *bula wunta* (leather shoes) for *wunta* (traditional winter fur shoes).

The change of living habits and manners of production give rise to meaning changes in Oroqen vocabulary. Some meanings have been enlarged while some narrowed. For instance, *ɕʒu* (house) is now used to

re mean “house of any kind”. The word *murin* (horse) is now used to denote horse(s) for farming. *səkduwn* (traditional hide mattress) to mean “any mattress on either bunks or *kang*”. *amaxa* (father’s brother) is now used to refer only to father’s elder brother.

5. Leisure activities: folklores, traditional ceremonies, festivals, sense of time

In tradition, Oroqen people would spent their leisure time telling folklores, holding traditional ceremonies when there were occasions or festivals. They care not how long a time they would spend on these. During 1980s, one could see people sitting together outdoors in the dark, drinking and singing and telling anecdotes of people or hunting events. But right now, they spend their leisure time in their brick houses, watching TV in Mandarin Chinese and rarely tell even broken episodes of stories, most of time in Chinese language.

However, presently, there is no one who is able to tell folklores in Oroqen language in full. Some researchers try to record the oral history of both stories and national makings, but what they can do now is write out what the former scholars jotted down or recorded.

Traditional ceremonies are now held only for show, and this is asked for by government. Bonfire dancing accompanied by music is reinvented by musicians and professional designers of dance. New songs are created for competitions and the words of the song are all new without any trace of implication of former forest life as the composers and writers are non Oroqen people.

Shamanism is no longer existing among the people because it is thought to be superstitious. Some people collected former shaman clothes, bells and drums or shoes and put them in museums, but ritual activities, such as songs, words or tones are not well recorded or documented.

Traditional festivals disappear, so are foods. Oroqen people now observe Han festival such as Spring Festival and eat the same as Han people around them. Oroqen wedding ceremony is never seen again. The tradition of boys marrying into and live with the wives’ families disappear too. Traditional wedding food such as *lukte* (sticky rice) is no longer made and worship to *onduli* (Oroqen omnipotent god) is changed

to bowing to parents, to sky and village leaders at the wedding.

In tradition, Oroqen had not clear cut time demarcation. They divide a year into four periods based on weather changes: spring (*nəlgi*) – the time when snow melts, summer (*dʒuje*) – hot time, autumn (*bolo*) – the time when snow falls, winter (*twə*) – cold. Or they count the month according to hunting activities by dividing a year into 3 periods, namely, time for deer pregnancy (*intfixan ərin*) (from mid March to April), antler time (*pəntu ərin*) (from mid May to June), hide time (*nana putara ərin*) (October to November). But now, influenced by Han people, they count months the same way by placing numerous before “moon/month (*be*)”: *aŋi be* (January), *dʒur be* (February), *ilan be* (March), *dojon be* (April), *əundʒa be* (May), *ŋuŋun be* (June), *nadan be* (July), *dʒapkun be* (August), *ujun be* (September), *dʒo:n be* (October), *ujəun be* (November), *oron be* (December).

6. Environmental changes: gathering, wild animals, farming machinery, education, hospital, water supply, electricity

Since their settling down, big changes have taken place in the environment they live in. Turning to agriculture, they have to open up farmland for crops as other farming peoples do and farmland pushed all the way to the forests which were their former sources of life. Gathering and hunting become less important and wild animals are moving away. This can be seen in all the living areas of Oroqen in both Heilongjiang Province and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region where forests are either cut or burnt down for farmland use.

With the introduction of farm machinery like tractors, combine harvesters, threshing machines, and with the de-ownership of hunting guns, Oroqen is becoming more less like a hunter. Their traditional hunting skills are gone with the passing away of the old people and legends of hunting disappear.

Education begins to show its force in changing the attitudes of people: in both Heilongjiang Province and Inner Mongolia Region, 100% children go to school. The young now see the possibility of gathering wealth with literary programs, but they are not yet up to the

stage of making full use of what they learn at school to preserve their culture and language. The government offers each schooling child with certain amount of grant-in-aid for encouraging Oroqen parents to send their children to school. Though some parents in the villages far away from cities or towns are unwilling to do as supposed and squander their money on buying liquor or cigarettes, most of them think schooling for kids are important.

Clinics are in every village. In some big or relatively big villages, such as Bayna and Tuohe village, there are even hospitals. Death rate at childbirth drops down, but traditional folk medicine knowledge is going extinct. People under 30 years of age can not tell which herb can be used as medicine except few herbs which are also grown or gathered by other people. Oroqen used never to get water from wells, but from rivers. But now, after being told the hygienic knowledge, none of them would get water from rivers believing that it is polluted and in some places, and tap water is popular.

Electricity kills the time for story telling. Some families would use electricity heated quilts in winter instead of heated *Kang* or their traditional fur sleeping bag. Telephone is becoming popular. But it wiped out the times for get-together when in the past people would visit other people's house without notice in advance. Some families have washing machines and other kinds of electric appliances since water pipes and drainage system are installed. Loudspeakers are still in use for the occasion of meeting calling from the leadership of the village.

7. Fading of a culture: artifacts, drinking pattern, horses, dogs and helpers to hunters

Birch bark was the major sources for containers and hide was the one for clothing in the past. But containers made out of birch bark are no longer used – the only occasion for making them is either for show or for making money though only a few visitors come. Techniques for hide dress making is forgotten. As big birch trees are becoming less, birch bark is difficult to get. Formerly, Oroqen people were very skillful at peeling bark without killing the tree. However, the young people, when they hope to make birch bark containers, will peel the tree in different way and kill the tree by depriving the bark from the lower trunks.

Oroqen is noted for their special preference for drinking liquor which is still the case. But drinking pattern has changed: they will cook several delicious dishes with drinking while in the past, *mālikdā* (a kind of small black fruit with bitter taste) would be the best dish. Traditionally, they would not toast (bottom up) with other people as they drink out of bottle directly outdoors in summer and around the fire, but now, people will sit at the table, out of cups. Now they will never have the feeling of “fire baking the chest and cold wind piercing the back”. Though they still like grilled meat, what they can have are domesticated animals, meat like pork or mutton, and only will dream of meat from wild games. And they cook the meat in different way with lots of all kinds of seasonings put in the cooking pot.

Horses used to be the main helpers in hunting and so were the dogs. Now, few families have horses as keeping horses even for farming can be extremely expensive, much more than maintaining a tractor. Dogs are fed as pets or watch dogs. Only about 20 years ago, if one stranger went to visit an Oroqen family, the first thing they would not be afraid of were dogs as they would almost not bite. They were good at hunting with one dog taking the lead, but tame at home and never cared about strangers. However now, one should be watchful to dogs. Oroqen used to feed dogs with intestines of games on the first catch. But they feed dogs with anything that dogs can eat though Oroqen dogs used to be carnivores only.

III. Reflections on the transition of the Oroqen people and Present endeavor for language and culture saving

No real anthropologist does the job to observe, record if not all cultural aspects and mentality of Oroqen people during this period of time. Writers and painters are the most seen people visiting Oroqen living quarters. They are aware of the problem but do not have either knowledge or skill for the cultural and language preservation. In China, there are very people who are qualified as anthropologists and even fewer such scholars would like to stay in far less desirable condition for field work with not enough funding⁵. Foreigner anthropologists are

⁵ The author used to apply for a fund for the field work, and was finally given 2000 yuan

having hard time in their field work there since most of the villages are quite not open to even Chinese field workers. What villages expect are investors, but not experts in culture and language research.

Monetary help to Oroqen is needed but without careful study on the need first. Several scholars of ethnic studies in China have put forward plans for Oroqen culture and language preservation. However, their suggestions are not feasible in themselves as the details for study and field work as well as names of scholars are not listed clearly. And the aim is not clear enough to be persuasive, thus leading to the impression in the mind of the leadership that when monetary aid is allocated, everything can be realized automatically. The leadership normally regards economy development is the utmost goal for Oroqen people, so the mentality prevails that money should offer only for securing income of the people, though the officials realize the urgent need for reserving both culture and language.

No saving endeavors in real sense. The increase in income does not naturally lead to the enhanced awareness of culture saving and study on the causes that make the culture extinction, language assimilation and psychological changes of Oroqen people at the transition period⁶. Some people argue that when Oroqen people become more well doing, there will appear self awareness for culture saving efforts. This is obviously mistaken as it can be too late to save when people are wealthy enough to put money into culture saving.

Language teaching can not be done without the real life situation. There used to be efforts in teaching Oroqen children their mother tongue.

RMB (less than 300 US dollars) for a two-month field work, and this money is barely enough to pay for the travel fare and village hotels.

⁶ Reports show that the average annual income of Oroqen in Heilongjiang Province is 1659 Yuan RMB (about 200 US dollars) (*Harbin Daily*, August 18, 2003) while the average income in Inner Mongolia is about 1000 Yuan RMB (*Oroqen Journal*, vol 2, 2002). The income increase is really several times more than the income 20 years ago (in 1949, it was about 100 – 300 Yuan RMB. See Zheng Dongri, *Changes of Oroqen Society*, Yanbian People's Publishing House, 1985, Yanji). But the fact is that in the past income did not denote the real economic situation in Oroqen people since money was not that important for a self-reliant people with abundant natural resources. They might be more wealthy in every aspects than present day city dwellers for whom nothing is free throughout their lives.

But neither the teacher was fluent in language nor the textbook was compiled. The author learnt while doing the field work in language that there was a teacher, Mo Xiaohua (Xin'e Village, Heilongjiang Province), who used to teach Oroqen children the language only from learning a few phrases from her elders. She would have no idea on how to put the sound into symbols, when most of the time, Chinese characters or Roman letter symbols (*pin yin*) are used instead. The teaching of Oroqen language lasted only about 2 months since both children and their parents did not see the outcome of language use when only a few words or phrases or sentences do not make them fluent speakers. After learning, children still would not communicate with their elders who use their mother tongue. In Alihe (Oroqen Autonomous Banner), when TV sets were not popular in the 1980s, there used to be wired broadcasting service with a few Oroqen sentences such as "This is Alihe Broadcasting Station". Obviously, this is not a real mother tongue station/program, but just for show. Even this few short sentences in broadcasting stopped as the wired radio transmission is no longer there.

This "artificial way of language teaching or language using" certainly results efforts in vain. an Youfeng, researcher in Heilongjiang Minority Research Institute, an Oroqen himself, realizes that textbooks are almost useless unless there are written forms. So, he takes to writing a textbook and right now he is finishing it. He uses Roman letters to note down the sound for he thought it would be easy for the teachers to master as international phonetic alphabet in noting sounds would be too difficult even for the local teachers who received no more than 5 or 8 years of education. He knows the difficulty he will face in training teachers and in persuading the leadership for allowing using it.

Oroqen people at the transition time have perplexing mentality that they really do not know how to and what to adapt. Everything around them changes too fast for them to understand. They see the prosperous side of life through their naked eyes and desiring for that, but at the same time, still longing for free hunting life. They would have not time to reflect on their own past as they are persuaded that hunting and gathering is "primitive, backward" way of living. One informant (an lady aged 62 in Guli village in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region) told the author that in the past people would not care about the death of babies or small

children as they believed everything was natural. If one died, he/she was doomed by fate. However, she did not understand why people around her, especially village doctors or nurses, pay such an attention to death rate at child birth. When elder people sit together talking about the happy hunting lives and stories of themselves, most young people would think it senseless to recall the past although they by nature do not prefer to be tied to farmland.

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