

**The Buryats in China (Shenehen Buryats):
the Role of School Education System in the Preservation of Identity**

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Abstract: This chapter is concerned with a Buryat origin minority in China named Shenehen Buryats. The Buryats originally reside in the Russian Federation around Lake Baikal. After facing serious administrative problems, several tribes preferred to flee from Russia. Administrative and land reforms shattered the traditional self-administration system and deprived the Buryats of about 30 % of usable land. The Buryat migrants settled in Inner Mongolia preserving their traditional nomadic economy. Nowadays the Shenehen Buryats are noted for their original culture and occupy their own ethnic and cultural niche in Inner Mongolia, a province of China. Schooling is one of the main factors helping them preserve native language and traditions. Undoubtedly, the specific linguistic situation among the Shenehen Buryats is a reflection of their history, relationships with their neighbors and a degree of internal unity. Nowadays Chinese is widely used in official discourse, economy, and inter-ethnic relations. At the same time Buryat continues to be a means of everyday communication. The Buryat language became a key element of ethnic identity when in the 1990s some Shenehen Buryats returned to their homeland. Two social worlds were formed as a result of separate existence and different ways of historic development. Under such conditions the language became a verbal marker of a common ethnicity.

Keywords: migration, ethnicity, schooling, native language.

The Buryats in China form a small minority. It is a little over six thousand people. According to the Chinese census data, they are officially identified as a separate ethnic group and classified as the Mongols. However, they represent a steady community, united by a common history, ideas of the same origin, local self-consciousness and system of immanent interrelations. Their self-definition, the Shenehen Buryats, highlights a deliberate separation of an ethnic group from the others. By calling themselves, the Shenehen Buryats, these people specify their original culture and demarcate its ethnic and cultural space.

Historical and cultural experience of living in emigration, preservation of the language, customs and traditions attracts not just scientific, but also practical public interest. Some scholars rightly state that this Buryat ethnic group in China can be considered a unique laboratory to study the problems of conservation and transformation of identity, migration, diasporas, and the so-called “national revival projects” (Baldano & Dyatlov 2008: 165). The specific tendency of ethnic and cultural development of the Buryats in China is their orientation on reiteration of norms, values, and meanings. Traditionalism is mainly a result of geographical locality, relative isolation, living in compact groups, and late involvement into modernization processes.

Taking into consideration recent discussions concerning the Buryat language and the ethnic identity issues it is important to emphasize that the Buryat language continues to be a means of information transfer, carrying out communicative functions within the community. It persists in this role despite the acculturation processes in the recent years. It is the language that still continues to be an integrating ethnic factor for the Shenehen Buryats. In other words, it is an identification symbol modeling their world.

The language situation of the Buryats in China is closely connected with the peculiarities of historical development in general and the school system in particular. Thus we consider that it is important to study the history of schooling as a social institution that shapes a personality and the rules of the adaptation practices.

1. Reasons of migration and process of diaspora formation

Each ethnic group has its own specific protecting methods of reaction to situations of environmental change connected with political and cultural reality. In emergency situations (discriminatory reforms, social cataclysms) an ethnic group with a well-established self-defense mechanism, consciously or unconsciously develops certain survival and ethnic identity preservation practices. Perhaps one of these “responses” was the Buryat migration in the late 19th – early 20th centuries southward from the Russian Empire. Formation of the Buryat ethnic community in Mongolia and China was a result of this trans-boundary migration.

According to the official data of the most recent Mongolian 2010 census the Buryats in Mongolia numbered 48,450 persons, making up 1.7 % of the total population of Mongolia (2,805,825 people). As in the 2000 Mongolian census data, the Buryats still remain the fifth largest ethnic group (yastan) after the Khalkhas, Kazakhs, Derbets and Bayats. In Mongolia the Buryats are settled mostly in Dornod aimag (region) in Bayan Uul, Bayandun, Dashbalbar, Tsagaan Oboo somons (counties), Khentei aimag (Batshireet, Binder, Dadal, Norovlin and Byaan-Adarga somons) Selenga aimag (Ereø,

Huder, Shaamar somons and district of Altanbulag), Central aimag (Møngønmor and Erdene somons), Khubsugul aimag (somons of Tsagaan-γγr and Hanh), Bulgan aimag (Teshig somon). More than 10.000 Buryats live in the capital Ulaanbaatar. According to printed media and scholarly studies the Buryat population in Mongolia ranges from 30.000 to 100.000 people. This considerable range is the evidence of policy issues affecting the census, the ambiguity of census data interpretation and complexity of determination of Mongolian Buryats' identity (Varnavskii, Dyrkheeva & Skrynnikova, 2003).

2. The historical background of Buryat migrations to Inner Mongolia and Manchuria

After the revolution of October 1917 seasonal migrations of the Buryats to Mongolia and Manchuria acquired mostly economic and ethno-preserving character. The urge to preserve ethnic identity was the result of Russian reforms in the late 19th – early 20th centuries aiming at the involvement non-Russian national territorial entities into the modernization process.

One of the specific features of nomadic Buryats' migratory behavior was absence of tight territorial limitations before they were imposed by the final incorporation of Transbaikalia into Russia confirmed by the Nerchinsk Agreement in 1689 and the demarcation of the Russo-Chinese border in the Bura Treatise of 1727. The Buryat nomads freely roamed from Lake Baikal to the Khalkha lands and back season by season. In various circumstances they were under the Russian administration or the Mongol rulers' control. In the first half of the 18th century border control was not strictly enforced despite the demarcated boundary between Russia and China. This situation persisted in the future. Migrations of families and even larger groups in both directions continued. Because of border transparency among Mongol local territories, then between Qing China and Russia, many Buryats freely moved in neighboring Mongolia, Barga and the territories of border Cossacks. Most of them belonged to different tribes of the Aga Steppe Duma. There was a certain dependence of Buryat traditional economy and lifestyle on land resources of the neighboring states. In its turn, this resulted in porous frontiers and increased "contact" functions of borderlands.

Describing the economic life of Aga Buryats in the pre-revolutionary period L. Linkhovoin noted that the Buryats living in Adun-Chulun (Tuurge, Zharan Sunhereg, Borzya, Taree Lake, Ulirenge), did not make hay for the winter season. During blight they wandered with their cattle searching for forage often moving into the Mongolian

territory and Manchuria. After wintering there, they usually returned to their homeland in spring. As one can see, the migrations of Buryats to Mongolia and Manchuria had seasonal character and were not cases of final and determined settlement. This type of migration is concerned with limited pasture resources in winter. This means that nature was the determining factor for this type of migration.

Administrative and land reforms destroyed the traditional governing system and deprived the Siberian natives of about 30 % of their land in use (Dameshek 1986). This inevitably led to a civilizational conflict between the Buryats and the Russian state (Varnavskii et al. 2003). The increasing number of Russian migrants from the European part of the empire came to Siberia, including the territories of the Buryat settlement, for the purpose of land settlement. They “changed the relationship of the indigenous population with the Russians and promoted the development of identification process” (Varnavskii et al. 2003: 37). This process revitalized legends, rhymes, and prophecies about migration of the Buryats to Mongolia.

This attempt of the tsarist government to carry out administrative and land reforms with disregard to the existing cultural differences between the Russians and the Buryats was interpreted as forced Russification and infringement of national rights (Zhamtsarano 1907: 5).

At the beginning of the 20th century the Buryat national intellectual elite declared an idea of the protection of ethnic interests. This was triggered by the reduction of Buryat land holdings down to the norms of Russian landowners. A real threat of displacement of the Buryats from their ancestral lands loomed ahead. M. N. Bogdanov, a prominent representative of the pre-revolutionary Buryat intelligentsia, called the process of land settlement by Russian settlers the “forcible pushing out of the Buryats”. Taking into account the fact that extensive nomadic cattle breeding remained the main economic activity of most Buryats, especially nomadic Aga Buryats, reduction of land holdings meant a threat to the traditional ways of life. The Buryats were searching for variants to settle down this issue. They sent letters to various departments, addressed various authorities with appeals, petitions and deputations, even refused to pay taxes. Migration to Mongolia was a last resort measure.

Buryat Revolutionary Committee’s chairman and member of the Russo-Mongolian Commission M. I. Amagaev commenting on the change of allegiance of the Buryats in Mongolia back to Russian citizenship argued that the main cause of migration was the beginning of land reform in Transbaikalia. Many contemporaries also assumed that the reduction of the land plots and transfer of the best Buryat lands for resettlement sites were the prime factor for migration (Fund R. 278 (o. 1, d. 20, l. 210), State Archive of 10

the Republic of Buryatia).

Immigration intentions among the Buryats were also stirred up by World War I and the Tsar's decree "On the requisitioning of ethnic minorities" issued on 25 June 1916. By decree indigenous population of the Russian Empire's borderlands was mobilized to work in the rear of the regular army.

Migration in the border areas intensified during the October 1917 revolution and the Russian Civil War, collectivization, persecution of Buddhist clergy and Stalin's repressions. It should be noted that during the revolution and the Civil War emigration was still caused by the unsolved land issue. At that time it erupted into an open conflict between the Russians and the local Buryat population.

The immigration of the Buryats from Russia could be considered a form of nomadic migration. Baldano and Dyatlov (2008) argue that the nomadic migration to new areas can be considered a specific form of flight. In this case, unlike "classical" flight, there was no marginalization (economic and social) and poverty because most of the refugees managed to cross the border without any loss of property and cattle, the basis of material prosperity. At a new place they could reproduce not only their traditional social structure, but also the traditional lifestyle in general. Territories of new settlement similar to natural habitat of Transbaikalia contributed to preservation of traditional production skills.

Thus, the Buryats who migrated to Mongolia and Manchuria (Hulun-Buir in the northeast of modern China) were people forced to leave the place of the traditional nomadic life under life-threatening conditions.

3. The specific features of Buryat Migration to Inner Mongolia

As an integral part of the 20th century global migration process, the resettlement of Buryats to Hulun-Buir has a number of specific features. Unlike the occasional migrations to Khalkha this process was initially well-organized. Right from the start, the key issues, such as the resettlement permission providing status, allocation of land for settlement and farming, right to self-government and self-regulation, were negotiated. All these factors were of great importance for the adaptation and functioning of the ethnic group (Boronoeva 2000: 36-51).

In 1917 a delegation led by Aga Buryats M. Bogdanov and N. Bazarov went to Hulun-Buir and received resettlement permission from the local authorities. A territory named Shenehen was allocated for their settlement. The first group of people headed by N.

Bazarov arrived in Hulun-Buir in 1918. By the moment of formation of self-administration the number of the Buryats settled in Hulun-Buir was 700 persons or 160 households. The immigration continued till 1933.

According to some sources and eyewitness accounts the majority of Buryats moved from the Aga steppes. One of the informants knowledgeable in history and culture of the Shenehen Buryats, Tsoktyn Zhamso (born in 1926 in Zuun Husay, Nantung) stated that the Buryats from Transbaikalia were most receptive to the idea of migration and active in the resettlement process. In his words, around 80 % of Buryat migrants came from places like Borzya, Ulirenge and Onon. Among the Buryats who settled down in Shenehen there was a little percentage of those who came from places in Buryatia, such as Barguzin, Horinsk, Bichura, Selenginsk and Dzhida regions. Also among the Shenehen Buryats were people from Cisbaikalia (Pirozhkov Sokrat, Khazagaev Appolon). In our view, the existence of double names like Horiin Dondok, Horiin Dubdan, Tsongol Damba and so on (informant Damyn Tsyren-Dulma born in 1954, Husay, Baruun somon) and the ethnonym “Balaganskaya buryaad” referring to western Buryats highlight the existence of a certain intragroup differentiation depending on a place of origin in Russia, noticeable at an early stage of the Shenehen Buryats’ history.

Currently, Shenehen is home to eight Khori Buryat tribes (Galzut, Huasay, Hubdut, Sharayd, Hargana, Bodongut, Tsagan and Halbin).

The dearth of indigenous people in the settlement, restriction and then prohibition to move across the border created the conditions for permanent residence in Hulun-Buir. All these factors contributed to cohesion and isolation of the ethnic group. Living in an alien environment apart from the original ethnos gave birth to the dichotomy “we-they”, which highlighted the ethnic integrated features. If division into regional and local groups was typical for the original ethnos, for the ethnic group of Shenehen Buryats sub-ethnic belonging was of minor importance since the entire group was opposed to non-Buryats.

The territory given to the Buryats was an abandoned land. It was abandoned by the Olets (one of Mongolian ethnic groups) because of anthrax outbreak. For nearly a hundred years nobody farmed that land and, consequently, nobody applied for settlement there.

During the Soviet era the Buryats of Inner Mongolia could not maintain contacts with their homeland. Ties were completely severed since the mid-1930s. The Soviet government accused them of being enemies of the people, counterrevolutionaries and Pan-Mongolists and banned all contacts with them. Of course this policy affected

scholarly studies. As a result, in the mid-1980s very few people in the USSR knew anything about the Shenehen Buryats. When all communication with the historical fatherland was severed, historical memory of the native land became extremely important for the Shenehen Buryats. Field research data (Boronoeva 2000: 70) indicate that their local private world where a real man's life takes place is very closely connected with the phenomenon of wholeness with the community of a higher taxonomic type, the Buryats in Russia and the image of the faraway ancestral land.

As history demonstrates, it is difficult to keep and display loyalty to authorities in the conditions of rapidly changing political regimes. The Shenehen Buryats are, perhaps, one of the few ethnic minorities in history, who suffered from four consecutive waves of repression in a lifespan of just one generation. The first started in the country of origin. Dekulakization and political repression in the Soviet Union forced them out. After World War II mass deportations and repression continued as punishment for their service to Manchukuo. Then the Chinese communists persecuted them and confiscated their cattle for connections with the Kuomintang and, finally, the repressions continued during the Cultural Revolution. All hardships had a deep impact on the moral and psychological self-perception of the Shenehen Buryat diaspora.

In the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's era, when a policy of socialist modernization was declared, collective farms were disbanded. The Shenehen Buryats farmed out the land and continued to lead a traditional type of economy based on cattle and sheep breeding. Inevitably, in the conditions of economic freedom and competition changes in social structure and the growth of territorial mobility gradually led to destruction of isolation and self-sufficiency of the group. Since the mid 1990s Khorchin-Mongols, small Chinese entrepreneurs, public managers and farmers began to arrive in the Buryat somons.

The new economic policy brought forth new territorial challenges. Some Shenehen Buryats were again pushed out of their lands. The convincing example of such expulsion is the story concerned with rich coal deposits in Tumen Huzuu brigade. Mining started in 2007 and since that time people have been resettled to other places in exchange for a miserable monetary compensation.

4. The specifics of Shenehen Buryat self-administration

The contemporary administrative and territorial structure of self-administration of the Shenehen Buryats originated in the beginning of 1958, when the Shenehen somon was reorganized into Shenehen Baruun, Shenehen Zuun and Mungen Shuluun somons,

which, in turn, formed a part of Evenki hoshun of Hulunbuir County.

Territorially each somon was divided into several gachaas (brigades). By the mid-1990s the administrative-territorial division looked as follows: Bayan hoshuu, Shiwei, Temeen Huzuu, Holboo, Malay Talbay (Brood factory) brigades formed Shenehen Baruun somon; Shenehen Zuun somon included Byrde, Hargana, Haan Uula and Hartohoy brigades; Mungen shuluun somon was formed by Mungen Shuluu, Mungen Tuya, Bayan Uula and Uedhen brigades. Over the last ten years in line with the tendency in Chinese policy to integrate local administrative-territorial structures the reforms of Buryat settlements were carried out. In 2002, Shenehen Zuun and Mungen Shuluun somons were merged and the resulting territory was transformed into the administrative unit Shenehen Balgas in 2006.

As for the demography of the Shenehen Buryats, the available statistical data suggest a conclusion about the phenomenon of “critical number preservation” (Dyatlov 1999). The Shenehen Buryat population steadily remains at about 6.000 people for the past 30 years. It is one of the necessary conditions for the preservation of the community. Most of them dwell in the original areas of the first settlements. Some Shenehen Buryats reside in Huh-Hoto, Hailar, Shanghai, Manchuria, and Nantung, the center of the Evenki hoshun. Some dwell in Arshaan, Bayan Tala and Hoy somons. As a result of repatriation to their historical homeland about 400 people reside in the Republic of Buryatia and the Aga Autonomous Region of the Russian Federation since the early 1990s.

5. The role of schooling in the life of the diaspora

The most important characteristics of Hulun-Buir’s ethnic space are various ethno-demographic structures and mosaic multiculturalism. Compact ethnic groups dwelling in this region are of Mongolian and Tungusic origin, such as the Barguts (Old Barguts and New Barguts), Dagurs, Evenki, Hamnigans, Khorchin Mongols, Buryats, Russians and Hans. The Russians in China are officially recognized as a national minority. The Russians may consider themselves descendants of mixed Russo-Chinese marriages down to the fourth generation. Russian settlements are concentrated in the three rivers area: the Haul, the Derbul and the Genhe (Gan) rivers, tributaries of the Argun.

6. The peculiarities of inter-ethnic and language contacts in Hulun-Buir

In our informants’ opinions (Ошорой Дулма, 1946 г.р., боохай хуасай, Нантунг; Tsoktyн Zhamso (born in 1926 in Zuun Husay, Nantung), Hulun-Buir is a place, where

“ethnic and national differences quite obviously stand out” (“undeseteny ehe ilgaatay gazar” (Boronoeva 2010: 280). Apparently, this is mostly explained by the ethnic administrative and territorial organization (for instance there are the Old Bargut hoshun and the New Bargut hoshun, Evenki hoshun, Dagur somon and Hamnigan hoshun). The duration and depth of contacts and cultural differences exercise strong influence on the relationships between these groups. Each ethnic group makes its own network of social ties.

For example, Boronoeva (2000) and Badmaeva (2007) noted that the Buryats and the Barguts have long been connected by common historical origins reflected in the generic structure of the two groups, as well as myths and legends. Linguistic and ethno-cultural affinity between the Buryats and the Barguts has a positive impact on the formation of ethno-cultural interactions. The Barguts are principal ethnic partners of the Buryats in the rarely occurring inter-ethnic marriages. Some tensions and, sometimes, conflicts characterized ethno-cultural relations between the Buryats and the Solons (an Evenki origin minority) at the initial stage of emigration. This left a negative impression in the collective memory.

Baldano and Dyatlov (2008) point out that “despite the ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and historical relationship with many neighboring ethnic groups (for example, the Barguts) the Buryats did not display a slightest tendency to dissolve in the Mongolian cultural environment” (p. 173). It can be explained by the fact that the economic system of Buryat migrants that at the initial stage was practically a subsistence economy did not require active cooperation and exchange with neighbors. This circumstance mostly predetermined their little interest in contacts with the outside world, cultural isolation and economic self-sufficiency of the ethnic group. As a result, the ethnic Buryat component became instrumental for self-expression.

Absence of the necessity to communicate with neighbors on a daily basis assisted to solve a serious adaptation problem of the receiving nation’s language. The Buryat language still remains a means of everyday communication. Interacting with regional authorities and in routine paper work the Buryats used familiar Mongolian script instead of the official Manchu language. Such exclusive knowledge and skills were obtained thanks to the efforts of the leaders of the first settlers. Although the Buryat language is not official, so far it keeps its function of intra-ethnic communication (Pataeva 2004; Vasilieva 2005; Boronoeva 1999). All Shenehen Buryats speak their native language. In a sociolinguistic research carried out in 2005 about 7 % of all Shenehen Buryats were surveyed. All respondents indicated that they were able to understand or speak the Buryat language (Shozhoeva 2007). Thus, the language continues to be one the most

important factors of ethnic integration. It makes the Shenehen Buryats more ethnically distinct in comparison with other ethnic minorities.

Nowadays, however, the Shenehen Buryats also communicate in Mongolian, Chinese, Bargut, Dagur and Evenki languages depending on a language environment. The results of a sociolinguistic survey conducted in 2005 by B. T. Shozhoeva showed that besides their native Buryat tongue 100 % of the respondents knew Mongolian, 95.4 % knew Chinese, 60 % – Bargut, 42.5% – Dagur and 15.8% – Evenki (Shozhoeva, 2007). In addition to these languages, some elderly Shenehen Buryats knew Russian and Japanese. All this provides the evidence of multilingual elements within the ethnic group.

The specific linguistic situation among the Shenehen Buryats is definitely a reflection of their history, nature of relations with their neighbors and degree of their internal unity.

7. Schooling in Shenehen as a factor of ethnic consolidation

The idea of opening schools is closely connected with the establishment of the Buryat hoshun. The first study groups to learn the basics of the Mongolian script were opened for children in 1922 (Abida 1993). The first elementary school in the Buryat hoshun was set up in 1927. Some traditions of secular Russian schools were used in teaching practice. Tsoktyn Zhamso was the founder of the school and its only teacher. He knew both Mongolian and Russian. In teaching he used parochial school textbooks. The subjects were Russian, Mongolian and arithmetic. This school existed for over a year. The reason for its closure was lack of space. Two yurts, one used for teaching, the other – as a student dormitory, were passed over to the hoshun administration.

History and practice of first Shenehen schools and our observations and interviews with the informants were aimed to clarify the contemporary ethno-linguistic situation. In the course of research work we came to a conclusion that Buryat-Russian bilingualism prevailed among the first settlers in Hulun-Buir. During the field survey in 1998 (Boronoeva 2000: 77) it was revealed that almost all elderly people aged 70 to 75 and older did not forget the Russian language and could almost fluently express themselves (Darmyn Nima, born in 1908, Hargana, Bayan hoshuu brigade, Serenzhabay Abid, Zhamsyn Tsokto, Namzhalay Namsarai and so on).

Besides, the modern everyday vocabulary of the Shenehen Buryats reveals a number of borrowings from the cultural and daily routine exchange with the Russians. Many Buryats, especially of younger age, consider these borrowings as native Buryat words.

This may be explained by living in a different linguistic and socio-cultural environment as opposed to living in the native land and lack of communication in Russian. The following words confirm Russian borrowings: *astahan-glass*; *ustul* - chair; *sumhe* - bag; *kotomha* - big bag, *duhovha* - oven; *peeshen* - stove; *harmaan* - pocket; *gown* - casual traditional clothes; *palaati* - dress; *zavaalin* – *argaal* - gathered along the fence; *senic* - annexe to the house, and sometimes a balcony; *podnyag-well*, *patret* - portrait (photo), *shoper* - driver, *competa* – candy, *karandas* – pencil, *eroplan* – aircraft (Buraeva 2010).

In the period of Japanese occupation of Hulun-Buir and the existence of the puppet Manchukuo state (1932 -1945) a number of primary schools were opened to teach Japanese to the local people. In January 1933 a two-year primary school was opened in Shenehen. About 10 students studied the Mongolian and Japanese languages. Later many school graduates entered a military school and then served in the Japanese army as non-commissioned officers. An outstanding professor, Doctor of Sciences in Medicine A. Albazhin graduated with honors from this school and continued his education in Japan.

A three-class school and a two-year primary school were opened in Burde and Uedhen areas in the fall of 1933. It should be noted that the presence of Japanese teachers was a compulsory requirement for schools organization. As the result of reorganization of these two schools in 1934, a primary four-year school № 3 of the Evenki (Solon) hoshun located near the Shenehen datsan (Buddhist temple) was founded. By 1940, this small school achieved the status of a privileged school with six-class education. At the time of liberation from the Japanese occupation more than 60 students studied in it. In the previous years before seven teachers taught there. Their names were A. Naidan, S. Sumaya, Teentey (Dagur) Amgalan, Sawada (Japanese), S. Bata-Munkhe and B. Demsheg (Abida 1893).

Some students and graduates of the Shenehen school continued their education in such regional institutions as Railway Transportation Institute in Harbin, Agricultural Institute in Changchun, Military School in Huhe-Hoto, Military-Medical school in Harbin and in Japanese universities. During the 14 years of the Japanese colonization a very small percentage of young Buryats learned to speak Japanese fluently. Knowledge of Japanese gave them a chance to make a career in the army and even get a higher education.

After World War II, at the request of the Shenehen Buryat majority a primary school based on traditional principles was opened in Ulaan-Hargana area. Ba-Munkhe was its headmaster. Due to the lack of literature on teaching methodology and teacher training manuals the Buryat educators published textbooks based on the translations of Japanese

and Russian teacher's manuals. According to Bodonguud Abida, this school played an important role for the development of Shenehen Buryat culture and literacy. The school became a peculiar cultural pillar of the diaspora.

The further development of school education in Shenehen was carried out in compliance with the official schooling system of China, which is divided into the following stages: primary school from 1st to 5th grade, grades 6-9 – junior high school, grades 10-11–high school.

By 1966, there were more than 10 primary schools in Shenehen. The enrollment of children was about 90 %. In 1984 there were 1181 students in nine elementary schools and 167 students in junior high schools. The schools employed 122 teachers.

In 1998, in Shenehen, and as a result of closure and merger of small schools three primary schools functioned in somon centers (Baruun somon, Zuun somon, Mungen Shuluun) and one secondary school in Baruun somon. Those who wanted to complete the full secondary school course had to continue their study in Hailar or in Nantung, the center of the Evenki hoshun. At present, in compliance with state standards and plans two primary and one secondary school work in Buryat somons.

There are some peculiarities of the teaching process at the Shenehen schools (Boronoeva 2000: 79-80). Teaching at schools of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is in Mongolian. The Mongolian vertical script is used for writing. It is important to note that in parallel with the "Mongolian" schools there are also "Chinese" schools, where teaching is in Chinese. In our view, the use of Old Mongolian script as standard language was one of the most important factors to preserve sustainability of the Buryat language within such a small ethnic community as the Shenehen Buryats. One of the advantages of the Old Mongolian script is that it "enables native speakers of different dialects and languages to read the same symbols in their own way" (Chimitdorzhiev 1996: 42), and because of that the Old Mongolian script is an effective instrument for "consolidation of kindred Mongolian peoples, who by the course of history found themselves in different states, countries and state associations" (Chimitdorzhiev 1996: 42). As a result of migration to Hulun-Buir the Buryat migrants did not face a language crisis since the Old Mongolian script was the cultural heritage of all Mongolian people. It was a consolidating factor for them serving, as Poppe (1928) argued, as "the means of cultural communication of all Mongolian tribes" (p. 37).

Professor Gombozhab Tsybikov wrote that, having survived in many historical periods, the Mongolian tribes preserved their national language and its unity is preserved in the script.

The literary language developed certain formal laws of language ... It preserved the unity of the nation. Many Mongolian tribes understand each other in written language, in colloquial speech they understand each other with great difficulty. Therefore, the Mongolian written language is the unifier of the Mongolian tribes (Tsybikov 1991: 179).

According to the contemporary Mongolian linguistic studies ((Burayev 1996), no more than 8-9 Mongolian languages can be considered independent. These are Mongolian of Inner Mongolia in China, Mongolian in Kukuinor China, Bao'an language in Gansu and Qinghai China, Donxiang in southern Gansu, Dagur in Heilongjiang province (former Manchuria). The Khalkha language functions in Mongolia, the Buryat and the Kalmyk languages function in Russia (Burayev 1996). The use of Old Mongolian script in the educational process enabled the Buryats in China to preserve traditional perception of the Buryat language as a part of the whole, as opposed to the Buryats in Russia, who consider Mongolian a foreign language. This fact prevented them from forgetting a simple truth that "the Mongolian languages including Buryat comprise the whole language family with their common laws of development and functioning" (Chimitdorzhiev 1996: 48). On the basis of the sociolinguistic survey, B. T. Shozhoeva came to the conclusion that the Shenehen Buryats "did not clearly distinguish between closely related Buryat and Mongolian languages" because they "use the Old Mongolian script" (Shozhoeva 2007: 67).

8. The current situation with bilingualism in Shenehen

One of the specific educational features in Inner Mongolia is the compulsory study of the Chinese language in primary school and the division of 10th and 11th grade students into classes with Chinese and Mongolian languages of instruction.

As it is generally assumed, the development of ethno-linguistic situation of this or that ethnic group is under the influence of their linguistic orientation and psychological attitudes. In Shenehen many informants emphasized the popular tendency when parents envisage their children's future with the command of the Chinese language. For this reason, many parents try to send their children either to Chinese schools or to classes with Chinese as the language of instruction. That is the reason for which many families move to Nantung, the administrative center of the Evenki khoshun or Hailar. Thus, according to Boldoy Nordob (born in 1929, Hargana, Bayan hoshun brigade), in 1998 about 100 Buryat families lived in Nantung. They were mostly elderly people, who changed their place of living to look after their grandchildren of school age, while their parents engaged in cattle breeding in the countryside.

At present, all researchers and observers (Boronoeva 2000; Pataeva 2004; Vasilieva 2005; Shozhoeva 2007) note the increasing popularity of the Chinese language for pragmatic purposes. One of them is a need to continue education. In this connection, the students and their parents are specifically interested in advanced learning of Chinese.

According to the participant observation (Boronoeva 2000), the degree of proficiency in Chinese displays a certain pattern. The older the person is, the less he or she knows Chinese and vice versa. One of the informants Darmyn Nima, born in 1908, who spoke good Russian, bitterly stated during the interview in 1998 (Boronoeva 2000: 81), "I was hoping that I could return back home, and did not learn the Chinese language."

We have also noted the growing importance of Chinese in the industrial sector and interpersonal communication among some youngsters. The Chinese language actively penetrates into such an intimate sphere as interfamilial communication. This phenomenon specifically applies to families, who lived in hoshun or regional urban centers for a long time.

It is considered that the development of bilingualism may have extensive and intensive trends (Guboglo 1970: 5). In the first case bilingualism goes breadthways, which means that the second language (Chinese in the given context) is acquired by a growing number of ethnic representatives. In the second case, the tendency is manifested through "deepening" of the second language command and its use for communication within the ethnic group.

Based on our observations, we can emphasize that at this stage the Buryat-Chinese bilingualism in Inner Mongolia of China is developing extensively, that is, breadthways. As mentioned above, many Buryats of Inner Mongolia know Chinese. The level of linguistic competence (proficiency) and speech activity is based on the educational level of the Buryats, and it is directly determined by belonging to a particular age group.

The current linguistic situation of the Buryats of Inner Mongolia is characterized by a certain distinction in functioning of the Buryat and Chinese languages in real-speech communication. The Chinese language is widely used for official purposes, in economics and for inter-ethnic communication. The Buryat language continues to be in use for the entire range of language needs within the ethnic group and the language is also used by Shenehen immigrants in Russia for communication with the local Buryats.

9. Repatriation of the Shenehen Buryats and its results

At the beginning of the 1990s repatriation of the Shenehen Buryats to their historical fatherland became possible. Very soon it was shown that separate existence of the Buryat communities in China and Russia led to the formation of two Buryat cultures (Baldano Dyatlov 2008: 165). The repatriated Buryats immediately surprised the locals with their true “Buryat nature”, “pure and soft” Buryat speech organically filled with proverbs, lingering melodies of ancient Buryat songs apparently long forgotten, luxury of traditional Buryat clothing and jewelry. All this was relevant and necessary for the Buryat society. Within the frameworks of national and cultural revival in Russia there was the “demand for tradition” and, therefore, on the emotional and psychological levels the repatriation process was positively perceived by the society. It was considered a unique resource for the recreation of the lost Buryat traditions. Baldano and Dyatlov (2008) argue that the Shenehen Buryats were declared “carriers, born natives and experts in traditional Buryat culture, customs, knowledge, language, i.e. all that has been partially or completely lost in the process of modernization” (p. 186).

Knowledge of the Buryat language helped immigrants enter the existing social networks, communication systems and relationships. The Buryat language became the key element of ethnic identity in a dialogue of two socio-cultural worlds formed as a result of prolonged separate existence and different ways of historical development. In this way the language became a verbal evidence of the common ethnicity.

Unlike other Mongolian ethnic groups and national minorities in China the Shenehen Buryats have largely remained unaffected by Chinese cultural and linguistic assimilation. In our attempt to analyze the integration processes in terms of assimilation, it is plausible to agree with Z. Shmyt (2010) who highlighted the existence of “the effect of external binary distinction between the pastoral ethnic minority and the Chinese majority” (p. 290).

The Mongolian and Tungusic ethnic groups share the common type of traditional economy – cattle breeding, which is a consolidating factor for them. In addition, China’s national policy promotes ties between them. These groups are officially recognized as national minorities. This guarantees them a number of benefits, such as the rights to have more than one child, to be educated in the Mongolian language, to invest in the preservation of cultural heritage, to rent-free lands for grazing and the access to higher education. This, of course, contributes to the establishment of notional “legal” boundaries between the ethnic minorities and the Han.

Referring to Chinese scholars, such as Fei Xiaotong and Chen Lyankaya, we should note that their classification of contemporary Chinese national policy and the structure of the entire whole Chinese nation (Zhonghua Minzu) as united diversity comprises three levels (Namsaraeva 2007: 250). The first level (tsents) is actually the Chinese nation as a whole. The second level encompasses 56 nations of China (Han and all non-Han nationalities including the Mongols). The third level includes both units (different ethnic groups – “tszutsyun”) within the second level of nations. According to this classification the Buryats of Inner Mongolia are considered one of the ethnic groups (tszutsyun) within the Mongols (Namsaraeva 2007). They stand out among ethnic Mongols of Inner Mongolia thanks to their reputation of being “very original and traditional” (tebe yui feychan chuantun).

Future development of the Shenehen Buryats depends on many factors, both internal and external. First and foremost, they are China’s national policy and the development of all Mongolian minorities, relationships with the country of origin and the Buryats in Russia and Russo-Chinese relations. Will the Shenehen Buryats be able to preserve the reputation of the most “true, original Mongolians of the steppes” (tsaoyuan di chzhenchzhen mengu), holders and custodians of ethnic traditions? The answer to this question depends on the choice of adaptation practices and educational strategies in the conditions of intensive economic development.

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