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Les migrations anciennes des Évenks et leurs relations avec les rivières

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/3196>

DOI: 10.4000/emscat.3196

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Centre d'Etudes Mongoles & Sibériennes / École Pratique des Hautes Études

Electronic reference

Wure'ertu, « Evenki migrations in early times and their relationship with rivers », *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 49 | 2018, Online since 20 December 2018, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/3196> ; DOI : 10.4000/emscat.3196

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Map of the repartition of the Evenki in Russia and China

[click here](#)

Positions of the case studies in the present volume

[click here](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Translated from Chinese by Aurore Dumont.

The introduction and footnotes are by Aurore Dumont (for the Chinese side) and Alexandra Lavrillier (for the Russian one), the words between square brackets are also from the editors.

Introduction

- ¹ In the following essay, the Solon Evenki writer Wure'ertu 乌热尔图 presents three legends gathered from among various Evenki groups in the People's Republic of China¹ (PRC) at different times. The first two legends, the "*Legend of the big lake*" and "*A piece of a shaman's oration concerning worship to an ancestor*", were recorded among the Evenki reindeer herders (Ch. Xunlu Ewenke 驯鹿鄂温克) and the Solon Evenki (Ch. Suolun Ewenke 索伦鄂温克), respectively. The Evenki reindeer herders form a small community

of nomadic herders and hunters living in the taiga forest in the northeastern part of Hulun Buir prefecture (Ch. Hulunbei'er shi 呼伦贝尔市)², in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The Solon Evenki living in the Zhalantun 扎兰屯 area, in the southwestern part of Hulun Buir, were traditionally hunters but adopted agriculture and sedentary farming in the first decade of the 20th century.

- 2 The first two legends were gathered between 1956 and 1957 by the “Social History Research Investigations on Inner Mongolia’s Ethnic Minorities” team, part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Composed of Guo Buku 郭布库 (Evenki), Lü Guangtian 吕光天 (Han Chinese) and Wuyundalai 乌云达赉 (Evenki), the scientific team was sent to Evenki areas during the large ethnographic campaigns launched soon after the creation of the People’s Republic of China (1949) in order to collect data about the culture and customs of “ethnic minorities” across the country. The two legends were published in the collective work “*Social history research investigations on Evenki*” (NZBZ 1986). Lü Guangtian and Wuyundalai afterwards became renowned historians whose academic works on Tungus populations had a great impact on Tungus studies in the PRC.
- 3 The third legend, “*The Evenki crossing the sea*”, was recorded by Wure’ertu among the Solon Evenki of the Zhalantun area in 2002³. The storyteller, He Xiuzhi 何秀芝, who is today 85 years old, was born into an influential shaman family and is known for having a great knowledge of shamanic practices. This legend, which seems to be unknown among other Evenki groups and clans, has been handed down from generation to generation in He Xiuzhi’s family. All three legends were recorded among the different Evenki groups and translated into Chinese.
- 4 In this essay, Wure’ertu not only describes the three legends according to former records and his own work, but also explores some theories on Evenki history developed by scholars in China. According to Wure’ertu, those Evenki interested in their ethnic group’s history still know the first two legends.

Three popular legends

- 5 Throughout history, the ancestors of the Evenki participated in many significant migratory movements closely tied to the origins and culture of the ethnic group. Since the memory of this early period is lost today, only a very small number of legends and stories have been handed down; therefore, they are very precious material. Among the Evenki living in the People’s Republic of China, three old legends have been handed down to the present day. They contain important information on the Evenki’s origin and migratory movements.

First legend: the “*Legend of the big lake*”

- 6 According to the legend, there was a big lake called “Lama” (Evk. *laamu*⁴) into which eight big rivers flowed. In the lake, a large number of beautiful water plants grew, while many lotuses floated on the water. When standing on the lakeside and gazing towards it, the sun seemed to be very close, as if it were rising from the lake. There, the weather was warm: however, as soon as one crossed the lake, it became cold. The mountains surrounding the lake were very high: the ancestors of the Evenki people all come from these high mountains surrounding Lama Lake.

- 7 The “*Legend of the big lake*” has mainly been handed down among the Evenki reindeer herders of China; however, it is also known among other Evenki groups of horse-breeders and hunters⁵. For centuries, this legend has been narrated by Evenki from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, the geographical location of the lake remains entirely unclear.
- 8 In China, two historians developed a strong interest in this legend. The first, Lü Guangtian, wrote “*A concise history of the Evenki*” (Ch. *Ewenke zu jianshi* 鄂温克族简史⁶) in the 1960s. Relying on his personal knowledge, the Soviet archaeological material available at the time, and the “*Legend of the big lake*”, Lü Guangtian suggests in his monograph that the Evenki people have their origins in the coastal areas of Lake Baikal.
- 9 While such a hypothesis obviously had a certain impact at the time, its weak spots were revealed in the late 1980s. Indeed, numerous archaeological excavations and scholarly research disclosed that before the Tang Dynasty [618-907] (at the latest), the peripheral areas of Lake Baikal were Xiongnu and Turkic cultural geographical areas. As the Evenki group belongs to the Manchu-Tungus language branch, [these areas] could not have appeared in isolation and must be considered the result of Evenki migrations⁷.
- 10 The second historian is an Evenki named Wuyundalai. He is a knowledgeable scholar of historical toponyms and a linguist. In the 1990s, Wuyundalai conscientiously analyzed the “*Legend of the big lake*” and published in 1998 a monograph, “*The origins of the Evenki*” (Ch. *Ewenke zu de qi yuan* 鄂温克族的起源) (Wuyundalai 1998). Presenting a multifaceted analysis, Wuyundalai pointed out that the so-called lake described in the legend is probably Lake Khanka, which is located at the source of the Ussuri River (Ch. Wusuli 乌苏里). According to the scholar, the areas surrounding Lake Khanka and the Ussuri Basin are the place of origin of the Evenki. This is a significant scholarly achievement and a big step forward in the study of Evenki history, which can be traced to the 2nd century BC. Thus, the origin of the Evenki took place in Manchu-Tungus geographical and cultural areas.

Figure 1. Aforementioned Evenki settlements



The yellow spots indicate the locations mentioned in the present paper in contemporary China and Russia. Map compiled by A. Lavrillier with Google Earth.

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Second legend: “A piece of a shaman’s oration concerning worship to an ancestor”

- 11 This oration was narrated by a shaman living on the Yalu 雅鲁 River⁸ tributary “according to the spirits’ rules”. It has been handed down orally from generation to generation:

We come from the shady side of the *siwoo-hat*
 Following downwards the *silkir*
 Our roots are on the *silkir*
siwoo-hat has a homeland
Amur has camps
Sahalian has branches

- 12 This memory is very important. It was gathered at the beginning of the 1960s, but afterwards was misread and became an argument for the theory that the Evenki originated near Lake Baikal. At that time, some scholars translated the term *silkir* as *shilka*, which is a tributary of the upper Amur River. In the 1990s, Wuyundalai retranslated this oration. He found that the terms *siwoo-hat* may be translated as follows: *siwoo*⁹ means “forest” while *hat* means “mountain” and *siwoo-hat* refers to the Sihote-Alin¹⁰ mountain range between the Ussuri River and the Sea of Japan¹¹. In the Evenki language, the original meaning of *silkir*¹² is “to wash”. By adding the letter -r, which is the plural suffix, *silkir* means by extension “muddy waters”. *Amur* is an altered pronunciation of *angi-mur*, which signifies “water from the right”, and is symmetric with *jieya* (meaning “the left”). Initially, *amur* referred only to the upper reaches of Heilong River¹³, but later it came to designate the Heilongjiang River as a whole. *Sahalian* comes from the Manchu language

and refers to the middle stretches of the Heilongjiang River (including the Songhua River and its estuaries).

- 13 This shaman's oration appeared among the Evenki group which migrated to the upper basin of the Heilongjiang River. Having set off from their ancestral homeland, the southern Sihote-Alin mountain range, they went from south to north, following the north side of the Sihote-Alin range. Crossing over the Heilongjiang River against the stream, they finally arrived on the northern banks. They named this big Amur River "the water from the right".

Third legend: "The Evenki crossing the sea"

- 14 A long time ago, the Evenki started to migrate. According to the elders, our [Evenki] ancestors went in many directions. One group of people went along the sea towards the north. The people going north moved and hunted sable at the same time. Afterwards, they went all along to the extremity of the continent, but could not go any further north: thus, they had to turn towards the west. This area is a triangular seacoast: the side resembling an arrowhead and facing forwards was called *niuer* by the Evenki. The encircling seawater, resembling a bow, was named *behring xiden* (this area is the Bering Strait).
- 15 At that time, several clans moved together. Upon arrival, people began to hesitate: should they follow the coast towards the west or turn and go back? At this moment, a shaman had a dream, seeing an old man with a white barb. The old man with a white barb told him that there was a coast which looked like a bow and arrow; crossing the sea from this point was like being an arrow shot from a bow: we would immediately reach the other side of the sea. The opposite bank was such a good place! The name of this place is Alaxijia (which means in the Evenki language "waiting for you"¹⁴). This refers to American Alaska.
- 16 For many days, the shaman had the same dream. He asked everyone to gather and talk over this issue, since some people wanted to cross the sea while others wished to go back. The Evenki are not afraid of sea water: they can swim, are able to make large boats and can cross the sea. In the past, Evenki made big rafts to cross over large straits.
- 17 Finally, the shaman put forward an idea. He said: "in the evening, those who are going back must sleep with their heads facing in the direction back; those who wish to cross the sea will sleep with their heads facing the sea". The next morning, the shaman saw that people really had slept facing the two directions. This incited in him determination to lead the people who wanted to cross the sea. Prior to departure, the shaman said: "Now let's break up, afterwards we will leave very far away. So how will our future generations know each other? Remember: those who wear a bow ring on their thumbs are our Evenki". Then they separated. Those Evenki crossing the sea used circular logs for the rafts and birch bark skin as buckets for portable water: they prepared food and went towards the opposite bank. Many years passed and there was no news from the Evenki who crossed the sea. Those Evenki who went back remembered that the name of the strait's opposite side was Alaxijia, meaning "waiting for you" in Evenki.
- 18 In this legend, the story about crossing the sea probably evokes a significant migration which occurred among the Evenki's ancestors. In any case, we do not have any way to verify by textual research the years in which it took place. The storyteller is He Xiuzhi, a

female descendant of the Heye'en clan¹⁵. She was born into an influential shaman family. This legend appears to be significant since it provides the following historical fact: this migration of the Evenki's ancestors started from their former place of residence, which was located in mountain areas bordering the sea. This aspect is very important. In his monograph "*The social organization of the northern Tungus*", the Russian anthropologist Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff has pointed out: "The former Tungus were a continental ethnic group, whose way was blocked by the sea". According to him, the Tungus, who were also the ancestors of the Evenki, lived in the mountain areas bordering the sea.

- 19 Regarding the former place of residence of the Evenki's ancestors, Wuyundalai's research is very thorough. In his monograph "*The origins of the Evenki*", he reminds us to pay attention to the small tributary river lying on the right side of the upper Ussuri River named *tam-gu* (today, according to the Russian translation, it is called the Tamujia River). Its estuary is situated by the southeastern part of the Lesozavodsk city¹⁶. Mineral springs are found on the left bank of this small river. In early times, this mineral spring area belonged to the Okjeo tribal state¹⁷. Okjeo is a phonetic transcription of *olgi* and was named after the mineral spring. The name *olgi* appears very early in Chinese historical sources. The Evenki are the descendants of the Okjeo people. From a linguistic approach, Wuyundalai has demonstrated that the state of boiling water swirling and welling up in the pots used by the Evenki was named *olgi*, which is why the swirling mineral spring was also called *olgi*. If we factor in phonetic alteration, we may assume that the term *Evenki* originally comes from the word *olgi* and was then transformed¹⁸. In this way, the Evenki know intuitively why their ancestors, no matter how far they migrated or whether they lived worlds apart, all stuck to their old Evenki appellation: it is because this appellation is linked with their ancestors' homeland, as well as with their souls and spirits.

The Evenki clans named after rivers

- 20 In the early stage of the Evenki's history, long-lasting migrations were very frequent among their groups. Wuyudalai has summarized seven big migrations. The first one is very important. As a result of the chaos of war, our [Evenki] ancestors had to leave their homeland, which was the Ussuri River Basin, the Suifen 绥芬 River, the Tumen River and the southern portion of the Sihote-Alin mountain range. Thus, they were forced to go from east to west. At the end of the 3rd century AD, they reached the western areas of the Second Songhua River via several migration routes.
- 21 The geographical location of the river basin of the Second Songhua River is in contemporary Jilin province. The upper reaches of the Second Songhua River have a total of five tributaries, among which are included the Huifa 辉发, Yitong 伊通 and the Yinma 饮马 rivers. In this rich and fertile territory, the Evenki from the Ussuri basin recovered and strengthened themselves. They gave appellations to the mountains and rivers and then borrowed them to name their clans¹⁹. Here, the Evenki were divided into three branches and six clans, each of them having its own appellation. Among them, the most illustrious was the Qonggirad clan. We can say that the western areas of the Second Songhua River were the cradle of Evenki people.
- 22 Around 590-591 AD, the Evenki from the Second Songhua River basin began to move towards the west: they went towards the upper Tao'er River (洮儿), crossed the watershed and entered Hulun Buir and the northeastern part of the Mongolian Plateau.

Those Evenki who migrated did not forget that the large river in their native land and called themselves to outsiders “People from the Ussuri”. This is why in the “*Old history of the Tang*”²⁰, they are called “the Wusugu clan”. Here, we should explain that the Evenki word for “water” is *mu*, which has been translated into Chinese as “gu” or “gu”²¹.

- 23 Regarding the [Solon] Evenki living in Hulun Buir and the northeastern part of the High Mongolian Plateau, both are recorded in the following monumental works the *Jāme’ al-tawāriḳ* of Rashid al-Din and the *Secret History of the Mongols*. This made the name of the Evenki Qonggirad clan²² famous. The most important reason for this is that Genghis Khan’s mother Hoelun came from the Qonggirad clan. This great mother came from the “Olgnu” branch of the Qonggirad. The “Olgnu” clan’s name comes from a river (in fact, a dry riverbed), situated in a seasonal brook of the Second Songhua River’s basin. In the *Secret History of the Mongols*, *olgnu* is written *Olar Güregen*. In the early stages of the Mongols’ rise, the Qonggirad performed an important act; at this time, a great number of Evenki clans integrated into the Mongol conglomerate.
- 24 Around one thousand years ago, the Evenki people native to the Ussuri basin moved to Lake Baikal’s peripheral areas. This involves explaining the historical appellation “Tungus”. In this regard, the scholar of historical toponyms Wuyundalai has provided a suitable explanation. According to him, the Qonggirad Evenki branch living on the Barguzin River, on the east banks of Lake Baikal, crossed the lake towards the west and entered Turkic areas. They used to call themselves the Tung-gu people before the neighboring Khakas, Kyrgyz and Kety peoples. In their own language, these Turkic groups added to the end of the word the plural suffix “s” and then called them Tun-gus, namely Tungus. Tung-gu refers to the seasonal brook of the Second Songhua River basin; indeed, this is the birthplace of the Tungus clans and regional groups. Approximately five hundred years later, in the 16th or 17th centuries, the Russians advanced eastwards and arrived in the place where Evenki called themselves Tung-gu. The Russians learnt about the appellation *Tungus* and finally spread it to Europe.
- 25 Up until now, the different Evenki groups living in the People’s Republic of China have preserved their ancient tradition of naming themselves according to the rivers and places near where they live. Generally speaking, the history of the Evenki people is surging forward with great momentum, and it is impossible to describe it briefly and simply. Regarding history, the Evenki’s large-scale migrations throughout northeastern Asia have been described as taking place in four stages by the historian Wuyundalai. The first one was from the native land of the Evenki (the southern part of the Sihote-Alin Mountains and the Ussuri, Suifen, Tumen and other rivers) through the northern side of the Changbai Mountains up to the western bank of the Second Songhua River basin. The second wave was from the western bank of the Second Songhua River basin across the Tao’er and Khakhyn rivers up to Hulun Buir. The third wave was from Hulun Buir across the Ingoda and Udy rivers up to the eastern bank of Lake Baikal²³. The fourth left from Lake Baikal, following the Yenisei River until they reached its middle and lower basins: then some people reached the eastern part of the lower basin of the Ob River and the Arctic. During this fourth migration, after having arrived at the bifurcation of the western coast of Lake Baikal, they followed the Lena River until the Aldan River estuary and went east towards the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk: they may also have reached here by following the shore of the Arctic Ocean. The Evenki crossed this great passage and made it their birthplace: and the cradle of their civilization finally spread to the whole of northern Asia.

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NOTES

1. The present text is concerned only with the Evenki reindeer herders and the Solon. For more details about the Chinese classification of the Evenki, see the introduction to the present volume.
2. Proper names, including toponyms or other geographical areas situated within the contemporary boundaries of the PRC, are also given in Chinese characters.
3. The first version of this legend was published in the Chinese journal “*Evenki studies*” (Ch. *Ewenke yanjiu* 鄂温克研究), 1, 2004.
4. Among the Russian Evenki of southeastern Siberia, the Evenki term *lamu* means either “sea” or “Lake Baikal” depending on the regional dialect (Vasilevich 1958, p. 233).
5. This refers to the Solon Evenki living in the Zhalantun area, in the south of Hulun Buir prefecture, Inner Mongolia. Their lifestyle is mainly dependent on agriculture.
6. Lü Guangtian was one of the major contributors and editors of this work. In the bibliography, the authors appear under the label *Ewenke zu jianshi bianxie zubian* 鄂温克族简史编写组编 1983.
7. Many Russian archaeologists and ethnographers have investigated the question of the kin relationship between the Xiongnu, Xianbei and Shiwei and the ancestors of the Evenki (Tungus). Half of them support this theory, while others, like Shirokogoroff and Zaldkin reject it (Shirokogoroff [1929] 1966, p. 146, Zaldkin 1937). For more details about the Russian analysis of this issue, see Lavrillier 2005, pp. 68-73.
8. The Yalu River (also called the Ya'er River) begins in the eastern parts of the Khingan range and flows through the Zhalantun area in the Hulun Buir prefecture (see Fig. 1).
9. Among the Evenki of eastern Siberia, the term *sehi* means “deep forest” (Lavrillier & Gabyshev 2017, p. 132).
10. Nowadays, this area is inhabited by the Nanai, an indigenous Tungus people of Russia. The same people lives in the Heilongjiang province of China, where they are known under the name of Hezhe 赫哲.
11. In Khabarovsk region.
12. The same meaning is found in the southeastern Siberian Evenki language.
13. The Amur river is known as “Amur” (probably from Dahur or some Evenki dialects, “river”, “big river”) in Russian, as “Heilong River” (Heilongjiang 黑龙江 which means “black dragon river”) in Chinese, as “black waters” or “black river” (Sahaliian Ula) in Manchu, and as “big river” (Mangbo) in Nanai. In the past, it was called *shilkar* or *silkar* by some local Evenki (Sverbeev 1857, p. 30).

14. When there is no explicit mention otherwise, the translations relating to the legends are provided by Wure'ertu according to his own records.
15. Heye'en clan refers to the descendants of one Solon group which has been scattered in the Yalu river basin since the mid Qing dynasty (1644-1911).
16. In the Primorskii region.
17. Okjeo was a tribal state situated in contemporary North Korea and the Tumen river areas between approximately the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD.
18. This is one of the many theories about the origin of the term *tungus*: there are many other interpretations in the Russian scholarly literature (Lavrillier 2005, pp. 68-73).
19. Regarding the relationship between Russian Evenki kinship and the river system, see Vasilevich 1946, 1959, 1963, and Lavrillier 2005-2006.
20. “*The old history of the Tang*” (Ch. *Jiu tang shu* 旧唐书) is the first official dynastic history of the Tang dynasty (618-907). Its compilation is officially attributed to chief editor Liu Xu 刘昫 of Later Jin (936-946), who submitted in 945 a final draft based on the compilation of the history by his predecessor Zhang Zhaoyuan 张昭远 (Liu Xu 1997).
21. In this context, the Chinese characters may be written *gu* 固 or *gu* 古 with the same pronunciation but a different written form.
22. According to Wuyundalai, the contemporary Solon Evenki are the descendants of the Qonggirad clan.
23. The Russian sources also mention the involvement of Tungus peoples in armies on both sides of the Sino-Russian frontier or in cross-frontier movements. For instance, “the Uriankai, considered to be the ancestors of the Tungus, were also warriors groups close to Genghis Khan” (Tamisier 1998, p. 252). Furthermore, according to Patkanov, some Tungus of China, as well as the Dahur and the Manegir, were employed as soldiers in the Manchu army during the 19th and 20th centuries (Patkanov 1906, II, p. 25-26). According to Radlow, the Evenki of the clan Samagir were employed as warriors by the Manchu in the 16th century (Radlow 1893). Later, on both sides of the Sino-Russian frontier, the Evenki were engaged by armies for defending or surveying the frontier in the 17th and 18th centuries (Radlow 1893, Rybakov 1903). From the 1990s, the Russian Evenki intelligentsia has reinvestigated such information by highlighting the glorious past of the Evenki in their various narratives (Lavrillier 2005, p. 54, 57, 66, 82, 430).

ABSTRACTS

In this essay, the Evenki writer Wure'ertu presents three legends that have been handed down until today among Evenki groups living in the People's Republic of China. The two first legends were gathered among the Evenki reindeer herders and the Solon Evenki in 1956-1957 as part of the Chinese national ethnographic campaigns launched in the late 1950s. The third legend was recorded by Wure'ertu in 2002 among the Solon Evenki. These three legends propose valuable data on the Evenki's origin and migratory movements along Northern Asia's rivers throughout centuries. Wure'ertu also explores some theories developed by scholars of the PRC on the history of the Evenki.

Dans cet essai, l'écrivain évenk Wure'ertu présente trois légendes transmises jusqu'à aujourd'hui chez des groupes évenks vivant en République populaire de Chine. Les deux premières légendes ont été collectées chez les Évenks du renne et les Évenks selon en 1956-1957 dans le cadre des

campagnes ethnographiques nationales chinoises lancées à la fin des années 1950. La troisième légende a été recueillie par Wure'ertu auprès des Évenk solon. Ces trois légendes proposent de précieuses données sur l'origine des Évenks et leurs mouvements migratoires le long des fleuves d'Asie du Nord au cours des siècles passés. Wure'ertu explore également certaines des théories développées sur l'histoire des Évenk par les chercheurs de RPC.

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Keywords: Evenki, China, narrative, migration, history, rivers, shamanism

Mots-clés: Évenk, Chine, récit, migration, histoire, rivière, chamanisme

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Wure'ertu 乌热尔图 is a Solon Evenki writer born in 1952 in the People's Republic of China. He spent his childhood on the banks of the Nenjiang River, in the Molidawa Banner, in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. In 1968, after graduating from high school, he went to the Khingan areas where he lived among the Evenki reindeer herders for ten years. In the early 1980s, his short stories won the national prize for outstanding literature for three consecutive years. In 1985, he was elected secretary of the China Writers Association. In 1990, he had the personal wish to return to Hulun Buir grassland where he read and composed works of literature. He is currently the head of the Evenki Research Association of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

Wure'ertu's literature works include short stories such as *The Male Deer with Seven Antlers* (*Qicha jijiao de gonglu* 七叉犄角的公鹿), *You Make me Drift down the River* (*Ni rang wo shunshui piaoliu* 你让我顺水漂流), *Shamans, our Shamans* (*Saman, women de saman* 萨满, 我们的萨满), and books on literature and history such as *Narrating the Evenki* (*Shushuo ewenke* 述说鄂温克), *Historical Expressions of Evenki* (*Ewenke zu lishi ciyu* 鄂温克族历史词), *A Draft History of the Evenki* (*Ewenke shigao* 鄂温克史稿) and *The Mongols' Homeland* (*Menggu zudi* 蒙古祖地).

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