From hunters to herders. Reflections on the “Ecological Migration” of the Chinese Evenki reindeer herders

*Des chasseurs aux éleveurs. Réflexions sur la « migration écologique » des
Évenks éleveurs de rennes de Chine*

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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

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Introduction

- 1 The Evenki reindeer herders of China are part of the “Evenki ethnic minority” (Ch. Ewenke shaoshu minzu 鄂温克少数民族) and today have a population of approximately 300 people¹. Their nomadic lifestyle was once constituted by a combination of reindeer herding and hunting: they domesticated reindeer for milk and transportation while hunting other animals for meat. Before 1949, the cornucopia of

animals living in the Greater Khingan Range, like birds, animals, and various species of fish, were the Evenki's principal sources of food and clothing. Over the years, the Evenki developed reindeer domestication, learned to utilise birch bark to make tent covers and containers, and became skilled at tanning animal skins. This group has a lot in common with the Evenki reindeer herders in eastern Siberia.

- 2 The Evenki reindeer herders, or “Aoluguya Evenki” as they are known today, were given various official appellations over the years. In the official documents of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), they were called the “Reindeer-using tribe” (Ch. Shilu bu 使鹿部); after the foundation of the People's Republic of China (1949), they were officially designated the “Evenki hunters” (Ch. Ewenke liemin 鄂温克猎民). “Hunter” is not only a professional identity, it is also a political one. Up until the 2000s, the Evenki had the right to hunt, but they lost the right to do this in the forest in 2003. However, although they are not entitled to hunt, they have retained their political identity as “hunters”, which means they receive more social welfare than before: this has fed into a reputation of hunters who receive social welfare but do not work. However, after the “Ecological Migration” of 2003, the appellation gradually became “reindeer herders” (Ch. Xunlu yangzhi zhe 驯鹿养殖者).
- 3 In 2003, I conducted one year of fieldwork in Genhe city, in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and revisited the site three times from 2011 to 2014.
- 4 In my fieldwork, I ate, talked, and worked with the Evenki: I spent most of my time in Aoluguya, although I also sometimes accompanied the herders to Jinhe, Alongshan, and Mangui (townships about 200 km from the village). Every day I made observations and conducted interviews. The setup of the tents (like the *malu*'s² location, the tanning hides, etc.) was similar to what Lindgren described in 1931, when she was conducting fieldwork among the Evenki group (Lindgren 1935). This means that this group has kept some of its traditional customs for decades. Thus, some mass media hold them to be a living fossil of one of China's nomadic ethnic groups. However, in reality many aspects of their lifestyle have undergone changes³.
- 5 In this article, I first describe the “Ecological Migration” in 2003 and then trace the development of state-led Evenki hunters back to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Finally, I consider the transformation of the social standing of the Evenki people over the course of 60 years. The main purpose of the paper is to reveal the changes in the life of the Evenki people under the external pressure of the government-led modernisation project.

The 2003 “Ecological Migration”

- 6 A series of governmental policies known as “Ecological Migration” (Ch. *shengtai yimin* 生态移民) caused a shift from the administrative category of “hunter” to that of “reindeer herder”. In Chinese, “Ecological Migration” refers both to the people who are required to move (the “ecological migrants”) and the policy regarding migration. In 2000, in order to balance the unequal development between eastern and mid-western China, the central government launched the “Open up the West” (Ch. *xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) campaign. To improve the ecological environment in the western regions of China, the Chinese government relocated people and their animals out of areas where

the environment was officially declared under serious threat and then closed off these places in order to nurture plant life through artificial cultivation techniques.

- 7 Nowadays, the only group of Evenki reindeer herders in China live in the Aoluguya Evenki ethnic village (Ch. Aoluguya Ewenke minzu xiang 敖鲁古雅鄂温克民族乡) in Genhe county (Hulun Buir prefecture, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region). The appellation “Aoluguya” refers to the two villages shown on the map below: the first was the Evenki settlement before the “Ecological Migration”, the second one afterwards. The former is called “Old Aoluguya” and the latter just “Aoluguya”. For simplicity’s sake, the local people shortened the official name to the “Ao township” (Ch. Ao xiang 敖乡).

Figure 1. The “Ecological Migration” of the Evenki from Old Aoluguya to new Aoluguya in 2003

© Max Fisher (in Xie 2015)

- 8 The “Ecological Migration” in 2003 was the third relocation of the Evenki reindeer herders since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Kolås 2011, Xie 2015). The previous two relocations occurred in 1957, in 1959 and in 1965. In 1957, the government built the first Evenki ethnic village in Qiqian 奇乾, next to the Soviet border; in 1959, a special fund of 48,000 RMB⁴ was allocated to the construction of 30 wooden houses in Qiqian. The purpose of the previous two relocations was to provide better material conditions for the Evenki and to make them give up their nomadic lifestyle. An investigation conducted by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission⁵ at that time showed that, in addition to the eight families who had already been settled in Qiqian, another 18 families (out of a total of 31) also requested settlement (Guobuku & Mandu’ertu 1960). However, except for the leaders of the village and the supply and sales store (both of whom resided in town for most of the year), all of the other nomads spent long periods of time hunting and herding in the forest. As such, the government’s

aim to see the Evenki hunters settled in a fixed location was never completely realised. This was because a permanent residence was not conducive to either hunting or reindeer herding, both of which require a nomadic lifestyle in the forest.

- 9 In 1965, with the relationship between China and the USSR turning sour⁶, the situation in Qiqian became complicated. This was the context within which the “Jimide incident” occurred. In the winter of 1964, a child fell sick; the situation was very urgent, since no treatment was available locally. Jimide, deputy head of the Qiqian Evenki ethnic village and deputy head of the village police station, went to his superior to request a helicopter to airlift the sick child to an out-of-town hospital. However, he was refused. Jimide therefore argued that it was necessary to cross the Argun River and enter the USSR to save the child. This resulted in a fight between the two men: Jimide attempted to grab his superior’s gun and was shot dead in the attempt. He was labelled a counter-revolutionary who had surrendered to revisionism and treason. Concerned with the safety of the border, the government decided to move the Evenki from Qiqian to what is today called “Old Aoluguya”. The government also intended to use the relocation plan to sendentarise the Evenki. It was believed that this people were engaged in a “primitive hunting lifestyle”, the lowest stage in the Marxist conception of human history; therefore, they had to be reformed by the Chinese state. However, these two relocations did not completely alter their nomadic life in the forest. The Evenki were satisfied with both new situations because the government allowed them to open up new hunting areas; equally, their living conditions improved through the provision of government support (Kong 1989, pp. 30-43). However, the third relocation in 2003 aroused serious discontent among the Evenki. The plan to have the reindeer pen-fed failed, which resulted in the restoration of forest-based herding.
- 10 In 2003, mass media spread news about the “Ecological Migration”, attracting international attention⁷. The head of the World Reindeer Herders’ Association invited Aoluguya to participate in its conference; the village became a member of this organisation soon afterwards. In 2009, a delegation of Evenki reindeer herders attended the Fourth World Reindeer Herders’ Congress in Norway, where the Aoluguya township was elected as the host of the fifth congress to be held in 2013. Since then, the local government has begun to redesign its development plan for the Evenki reindeer herders. In contrast to the original policy of forcing them to abandon their traditional lifestyle, the government is now encouraging the Evenki to recover some aspects of their “traditional lifestyle” by wearing ethnic costumes, learning the Evenki language, maintaining reindeer herding, building nomadic camps, and making handicrafts for tourists; however, hunting has been completely banned⁸.

Old Aoluguya before the “Ecological Migration”

- 11 The Evenki reindeer herders lived in Old Aoluguya for 38 years. According to the herders I interviewed, Old Aoluguya was a good place for hunting and herding. While they resided there, the local government adopted different guidelines to shape the Evenki’s lifestyle and mode of production.
- 12 In 1967, at the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Aoluguya was organised into a people’s commune. The “Oriental Red Hunting Unit” (Ch. Dongfang hong lieye dui 东方红猎业队) was formed to implement the “Hunting at the Forefront: Protecting, Herding, and Hunting Simultaneously” guideline⁹. In 1979, due to the exhaustive

exploitation of the forest and the large number of drifters who arrived in Aoluguya, the number of games began to decrease. The government adopted a new guideline titled "Herding Reindeer at the Forefront: Protecting, Herding, and Hunting Simultaneously¹⁰". The main activities of the hunters shifted from hunting other animals to herding and managing reindeer. Acknowledging the reality of this situation, the local government developed the aforementioned guideline further, renaming it the "Herding Reindeer at the Forefront: Protecting, Herding, and Hunting Simultaneously: the Active Development of Diversified Modes of Production and Livelihood¹¹" in 1980. The development was aimed at stressing the application of scientific knowledge and methods to traditional styles of herd management. The goal was to transform the lives of Evenki hunters from what the government saw as something approaching vagrancy to a proper, civilised lifestyle in fixed residences.

- 13 In 1980, the government provided the hunters with 72 semi-automatic rifles and 100,000 bullets in order to improve hunting conditions. The government invested tens of thousands of RMB¹² to turn wooden houses into more durable structures made of bricks and tiles. The government also laid power lines from Mangui to the Ao township, expanded schools and dormitories, and opened a nursing home. Old Aoluguya was given permission to fell 1,000 cubic meters of timber each year: this was a significant source of financial support at the time. Tents, movable plank houses, generators, and winter clothing were provided to the Evenki nomadic families in the forest. Experimental pens were built and a contract production system for raising reindeer was adopted in 1983. In an effort to boost production and improve the quality of the herds, Chinese scientists undertook research on reindeer breeding. At the same time, the local government responded quickly to natural disasters and organized rescue efforts¹³.

- 14 According to the Evenki hunter Bart, the people were satisfied with life in Old Aoluguya:

The government built brand new wooden houses for us. The houses were tall and spacious and of good quality. The site was well chosen too. The officials back then were very nice. They lived and ate with us in the forest. They knew that we were hunting for a living. The relocation to Old Aoluguya in 1965 essentially helped us open up new hunting areas. After the move to Old Aoluguya, the government's policies were very beneficial for us. Back then, food coupons were in use. Each month we could receive 25 kg of rice and white flour. The flour we received was refined wheat flour, whereas the forestry workers¹⁴ only got coarse grain flour. Additionally, each month we received more bean oil than they did. Many hunter families purchased cameras, bicycles, and several wristwatches. At that time, we all bought thick wool coats. Actually, wool coats got caught very easily on things in the forest, but because the village's leaders all wore wool coats, we did the same. When we had money, we also purchased floor rugs. Although they were not as warm as bear hides, they were an indicator of our wealth. We enjoyed excellent welfare then. Schooling and health clinic visits did not cost money. The students all received living allowances. Each of us male Evenki hunters was a forest patrol worker, and every month we were entitled to a forest patrol salary of 18 RMB. Later, it increased to 36 RMB. Women from outside all wanted to marry "hunter men". Men from outside were also willing to marry "hunter women".

- 15 From the above interview, we can see that despite the fact that the Evenki families had been relocated to Old Aoluguya and owned wooden houses, they did not give up their nomadic lifestyle. Except for the village's officials, workers, and students, many people were still living in the forest. However, as time went by, fewer people were still

engaged in their traditional lifestyle. Before the “Ecological Migration” in 2003, there were about 40 people still constantly living in the forest.

- 16 Living in Old Aoluguya had tremendous influence on the lives of the Evenki reindeer herders. Firstly, the facilities and infrastructure the government built needed management and staff, so workers were brought in, which increased the population of Old Aoluguya. Secondly, the good living conditions in Old Aoluguya attracted many outsiders, which greatly expanded the scope of potential marriage partners for the Evenki hunters. Thirdly, the obligatory nine-year boarding school education provided by the government enabled all Evenki children of school-age to obtain an education. However, this practice gradually drew Evenki children away from their familial environment and traditional lifestyle.

At Aoluguya after the “Ecological Migration”

- 17 After the “Ecological Migration” in 2003, it quickly became apparent that the reindeer herds were not doing well in the low lands. This was one of the reasons why some Evenki refused to move their camps. The reindeer suffered serious losses in the first month after the relocation. Over 300 reindeer were transported to the new village during the first phase of the relocation. To the Evenki’s dismay, about 90 reindeer either went missing or died. Originally there were over 100 reindeer at the enhancement station of Aoluguya. After the heavy losses in the herds that had been relocated, most of the station’s herd was given to the herders to compensate for their losses; only 21 reindeer remained at the station. This demonstrated that the reindeer preservation project, which involved the purchase of reindeer from Russia and an investment of over 400,000 RMB¹⁵ from the government in 1996, had failed.
- 18 Many reindeer died: they either starved to death, since there was a lack of lichen, or were killed in poachers’ traps. The surviving reindeer were bony and weak, a complete contrast to the strong and healthy reindeer living in the Alongshan area before 2003. The old Evenki reindeer herders were more determined than ever to remain in their old homes.
- 19 After 2003, the Evenki reindeer herder families retained their dual lifestyle between the village and their camp¹⁶. In 2004, the reindeer herders would leave the forest every few months and stay in their new houses in the village for several days. Every quarter, they received subsistence allowances. They would then gather together to go to restaurants in the downtown area and enjoy good food. One person’s three-month subsistence allowance (300 RMB¹⁷) was thereby squandered away in a single day. The herders also frequently went to quietly sit in front of the government building to protest. On each such occasion, they were warmly treated by the department head in question, who, after much persuasion, was able to convince the Evenki to accept rides back to the village in government vehicles.
- 20 The village officials were left scratching their heads helplessly in the face of the continuous hassle that the hunters created. In private, the officials expressed to me their regret at having moved the Evenki so close to Genhe city centre (Ao township was only 5 km away). The Evenki’s proximity made it easier for them to hold silent demonstrations in front of the city hall, which caused a great deal of trouble for the government. After the relocation, not only did the conflicts between the Evenki and the

government become more frequent and intense, but fierce disputes, distinct from those of the past, also broke out among the hunters themselves. The Evenki believed that life had become more difficult after the relocation, and they felt a sense of deprivation with the loss of their hunting rights.

Resource conflicts

- 21 Resource conflicts have emerged as a result of different “political identities”. After the relocation, the Evenki have faced many predicaments. The biggest conundrum has been that various parties are unable to reach any consensus about the use of the most important natural resource, the forest. The Evenki, with a long history of living in the forest, felt a strong sense of deprivation and mistreatment when they were moved out of their traditional ecological setting. They argued: “the forests used to belong only to us. But now the mountains have been quietly taken away from us and we have now been reduced to a people adrift in the forests”. Outsiders who come to the forests to make a living by exploiting the resources, including unemployed workers who pick red berries, have often complained: “We are all citizens of China. It is unreasonable to let the Evenki hunters have exclusive access to the rich resources in the forests. Of course we should have the right to pick berries and gather herbs in the forests”.
- 22 When faced with limited resources, can the conflicts that arise over access to resources be resolved by finding the right balance between the need for long-term sustainability of resources with the need for economic growth and development? Access to resources may be managed regardless of whether management methods are based on the taboos and lifestyles of traditional societies or on laws and regulations passed by the government. However, in practice, there has been resistance from both the local government and the Evenki.
- 23 Before 2003, the Evenki’s “ownership rights” of the forest were based on traditional usage, not on any state-recognised system of legal and economic ownership. Today, however, there are Han Chinese forest workers in the region who also make claims on forest resources, a phenomenon that has given rise to problems regarding resource allocation and the delimitation of property rights. Population growth in the region and the corresponding increases in competition for resources eventually led to more serious conflicts. In addition, the Evenki have established relationships with other reindeer herding groups in other countries, which means that they have international support that could help them fight for more rights and resources locally. The Fifth World Reindeer Herders’ Congress was held in Aoluguya in 2013: this bestowed significant publicity upon the Chinese Evenki reindeer herders, thereby giving them an advantage in future negotiations with the government. The recent “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation and Enhancing Carbon Stocks” (REDD+) mechanism may also provide another opportunity for indigenous peoples who live in forests (Sikor & Stahl 2011) to obtain rights to resources.
- 24 In the past, the local government often adopted simplified measures for dealing with troubles relating to resource management. In particular, the government’s development of ethnic tourism in the Evenki village has meant that it has had to re-evaluate its stance vis-à-vis the lifestyle of the Evenki. In 2003, the government made efforts to persuade the Evenki to give up living in the forest; however, the government now encourages them to return to the forest during the summer season in order to

prepare the area for tourists. The government previously decried forest-based reindeer herding and was in favour of pen feeding, but now offers stylish conical tents¹⁸ and beds to encourage the practices of traditional life.

- 25 As we know, shifts in government policies often create larger social conflicts. Even in Norway, strife emerged recently between Sami reindeer herders and the government with regard to monetary compensation for herd loss (Kintisch 2014, Tveraa *et al.* 2014) and a de-stocking policy (Johnsen *et al.* 2015). Assumptions and actions based on patronising self-conceit, regardless of whether such assumptions and actions are intended to benefit others, will likely lead only to estrangement, grievances, and violent conflict.

Government measures

- 26 In order to improve the living standards of the Evenki reindeer herders, the local government has been implementing some new measures since 2003.

Attracting commercial investments

- 27 In November 2003, a small wood processing factory was built in Aoluguya. The owners of the factory rented village houses from the Evenki trading shop. The small factory mainly produces round wooden sticks used for corn dogs. Two months after production started, the factory began to make a profit. Its estimated annual sales were worth over 300,000 RMB¹⁹.
- 28 This factory is privately owned by a Han Chinese couple in Genhe and employs a total of 15 people. Initially, there were eight Evenki from Aoluguya among the employees. When the factory was constructed, village leaders encouraged all the unemployed Evenki to take jobs there. Many young Evenki gave it a try, but they quit in less than half a day, saying the work was boring. Now there is only one Evenki woman working there; all the other women are laid-off employees from the Genhe forestry industry. They are paid piece rates. Those who work hard can earn about 400 RMB a month.
- 29 The village provided a free warehouse for the factory, which meant that the owners only have to pay for water, electricity, and heating. The monthly heating fee is 3 RMB per square metre. For each heating period (about nine months), the factory only has to pay eight months' worth of fees. The government offered this factory many favourable conditions, including low rent and tax deductions.
- 30 However, the Evenki are unhappy with the preferential treatment that the village government offered the factory. As the herders said, "the factory has occupied the large space of the Evenki trading shop while claiming that it helps the Evenki solve employment problems. If so, how many Evenki work there? We want to sell reindeer antler slices and leather but have no place to do this; nonetheless the village allowed outsiders to use a large lot to open their factory. The place should benefit the hunters; however, the Han Chinese just use the excuse of offering work opportunities to the Evenki to earn benefits for themselves". The hunters believe that the preferential benefits offered by their government have been encroached upon by the Han Chinese.

Development of tourism

- 31 In order to increase revenue, in 2004 the local government planned to build an ethnic tourism village near the new Aoluguya community before the beginning of the busy tourism season from July to September. They chose a location about 4 km southwest of the community in an open patch surrounded by dense woods. A large military tent was pitched about 500 m from the road. However, there were weeds both inside the tent and around it, so obviously this “hunter’s campsite” was not at all like the real ones. The so-called village consisted of only two structures: a canvas tent and a conical tent²⁰. The local government arranged for Asuo, a 35-year-old single Evenki man, to live in the tent and tend to six reindeer. As long as Asuo lived in the tent, he received a salary of 100 RMB each month from the “4050 Reemployment Project” fund²¹.
- 32 Soon, the village officials said that this tourist site was too remote, which meant that the local government decided to move it to another site, where they would build a larger village. Consequently, Asuo was told that he no longer had that position. This tourist site only existed for a week. Several officials stated that two main concerns led to its abandonment: firstly, local government officials thought that its inauthenticity would not attract tourists and, secondly, they were also worried that Asuo would hurt the image of the Ao township. Three years later, in July 2007, Gejun, another Evenki, was contracted to develop and manage the relocated tourist camp. Today, it is the one of the major touristic attractions during the summer period.
- 33 The local authorities devised yet another scheme to develop tourism: the hand-made crafts that the hunters produce. It would show the “special aesthetic characteristics” of Evenki arts and crafts. The local government set up a “Handicrafts Production Studio” in a room of the village’s museum. Those Evenki who could tailor, carve, sew, and make various handicrafts were asked to teach traditional craft skills, like fungus-carving, root-carving, making boxes out of birch bark, and creating purses out of leather. The local government planned to display the crafts in the museum for viewing and selling.

International focus

- 34 Although these measures did not bring economic benefits to the reindeer herders, Aoluguya became ever more famous thanks to the increased media attention after the 2003 “Ecological Migration”. These reports attracted interest from international reindeer herding associations.
- 35 The establishment of the Association of World Reindeer Herders (WRH) provided reindeer herders a forum for contact and cooperation, which contributed to putting reindeer husbandry on the international agenda. As early as 1999, the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Knut Vollebæk, took the initiative of placing reindeer husbandry on the agenda of international Arctic cooperation: this resulted in the WRH being given the status of observer on the Arctic Council in 2000.
- 36 The first conference of the WRH was held in Russia in 1997. This organisation brings together reindeer herders from across the world to promote professional, cultural, social, and economic exchange and collaboration. In 2001, the WRH announced the Anar Declaration as a guide for sustainable reindeer husbandry. In 2005, the Yakutsk Declaration was published in order to emphasise the need for international collaboration to bring reindeer husbandry to the Arctic region.

- 37 The International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry (ICR), based in Norway, and an “observer” in the Arctic Council²², made the Aoluguya Evenki members of their organisation; this offered the local government an opportunity to recognise the cultural value of the Evenki herders.
- 38 In 2007, the secretary of the ICR came to Aoluguya and issued a formal invitation for the Evenki reindeer herders to participate in the WRH. Hence, in 2009, the Evenki attended the Fourth World Reindeer Herders’ Congress in Norway.²³ It was here that the Aoluguya Evenki officially joined the WRH and won the privilege of holding the fifth congress in 2013. The main theme of this congress was “Human-Reindeer-Nature: Sustainable Development”. The Aoluguya Declaration pointed out that international collaboration has shown promise; it praised the Evenki for providing new species of reindeer for breeding and offered support for young Aoluguya Evenki to visit Russia so they can exchange skills related to herding. This case demonstrates that international influence can also be a promising political strategy for helping the local Evenki to reclaim their original right to live in the forest.
- 39 It is hoped that different knowledge and know-how will inspire the Chinese Evenki reindeer herders to improve reindeer herding. In fact, much research has been conducted on reindeer food intake and biting patterns (Trudell & White 1981), as well as the harassment caused to the animals by Oestridae flies and mosquitoes (Hagemoen & Reimers 2002). GPS tracking has been used to demonstrate migration routes (Panzacchi *et al.* 2011 and Anttonen *et al.* 2011). Pollen analysis of the peat profile of forest vegetation in areas used for reindeer herding has been conducted (Räsänen *et al.* 2007). Similar tools have been used to investigate Evenki-Yakut activities along the Zhuya River (Anderson *et al.* 2014).
- 40 Over the past two decades, the Evenki have seen their economic status decline as China modernises and develops. Due to large-scale mechanical felling in the 1970s-1980s and prohibitions against hunting and entering the forest during the warm season to prevent fires, the Evenki feel they are in a poorer condition compared both to their position a few decades earlier and to that of the ethnic Han Chinese. International attention has instilled awareness among the Evenki: they want to reclaim the right to live in the forest without restriction and use forest resources freely.

Shifting identities

- 41 Today, the social and ecological conditions in which the Evenki live are vastly different from those in the past. Although the forest ecosystem was capable of sustaining the hunting-herding lifestyle of the Evenki, the government persisted in pushing through the policy of “Ecological Migration”, considering it to be the only method by which they could force the Evenki to abandon their lifestyle. This compels us to reconsider the government’s ideological notions. Although some local government officials may claim that Ecological Migration was undertaken to ensure the survival of the Evenki, my field research has proved that this is entirely unfounded. When reflecting on the group’s history prior to the 2003 relocation, it is apparent that their living conditions were already dramatically different from the fully nomadic lifestyle they maintained prior to the foundation of the People’s Republic. Prior to 2003, living conditions among the Evenki were nowhere near as low or “backward” as portrayed in media reports. In fact, their food, clothing, and community services were of a far higher quality than

those available to most rural communities in China. They owned houses in Old Aoluguya in addition to having tents and reindeer in the mountains.

- 42 The “Ecological Migration” was carried out under a government directive to “preserve the people”, which meant ensuring the survival of the Evenki reindeer herders: the government believed that it was necessary to change their lifestyle by means of relocation. However, at the same time, the government advocated “preserving Evenki traditional culture”. Clearly, these goals give rise to a paradox: how is it possible to change the “traditional” lifestyle of the Evenki whilst simultaneously preserving their “culture”? We need to examine which “people” the government wants to preserve and what “culture” it seeks to protect.
- 43 First, let us examine to whom “people” refers to in this context. The people who live in the Aoluguya Evenki ethnic township are not all Evenki. Most of them are Han Chinese, while others are from different ethnic groups, including the Man, Hui, Dahur, Russians, and other branches of the Evenki; all of these individuals have married Evenki. Evenki do not necessarily possess “hunter” status: indeed, only Evenki who do not have jobs may claim this status. In other words, “hunter” is more of a political identity than an ethnic identity, a fact that is directly related to the 2003 migration.
- 44 After the 2003 “Ecological Migration”, jobless Evenki still were registered as “hunters” however, they began to question this appellation. They stated: “we are forbidden to hunt, so we are not real hunters”. Gradually, the appellation “hunters” was replaced in official documents by the term “reindeer herders”. This was especially the case after 2009, when the Evenki attended the Fourth World Reindeer Herders’ Congress.
- 45 When considering the relationship between “preserving people” and “preserving culture”, Kong Fanzhi²⁴ believes that culture can be preserved only when the people themselves are preserved: “Only when we help them to break away from their barbarous and primitive lifestyle and living environment can we begin to talk about advances in culture and the development of civilisation” (Kong 2003, pp. 16-17). This opinion is not entirely without logical merit: if people are the bearers of culture, they are thus the foundation upon which culture rests. However, from the perspective of cultural ecology (Kottak 2010), it is the mutual interaction between people and their ecological environment that gives rise to cultural developments. All cultures have been strongly affected by the environment in which they live.
- 46 When the Evenki gave up their original nomadic hunting lifestyle and their spiritual links to the mountain environment, they were no longer “hunters”. Instead, they only retained a “political identity” through the official category of “Evenki hunters”. Today, this category has been renamed “Evenki reindeer herders”, which has allowed them to receive preferential treatment from the government. However, in reality, for many Han Chinese observers, the Evenki have almost lost the “cultural characteristics” which are usually presented as defining them as Evenki. Hunting was one of them. Since hunting was banned in 2003, what was considered as “hunting culture” is now missing from their lifestyle.
- 47 One of the Evenki elders expressed this succinctly when she said: “After the relocation it will not be long until, once all the old hunters die, our ethnic group will cease to exist”. So what do these old hunters represent? They are Evenki hunters who grew up traditionally in the forests: they were never severed from their traditional lifestyle and

practices. The old hunters are the last remaining Evenki who serve as carriers of their “traditional culture”.

- 48 The people are the bearers of culture. When the old Evenki started to talk about modern people who do not have faith, I seriously considered the role of shamanism in Evenki everyday life (Heyne 1999), although I have never seen a shaman among them²⁵. When E. J. Lindgren did her fieldwork in 1931, she witnessed several shaman performances and met with the shaman Olga, who managed the daily affairs of the group and led it through tough times (Lindgren 1935). Following the death of their last shaman in 1997, the Evenki are struggling to adapt to ever-changing Chinese society. Frustrated by interactions with the government and the reality that surrounds them, they are trying to find answers or even just consolation. However, it is very easy to get lost, especially for the younger generation. Over the last 20 years, there has been a high death rate among the Evenki, which was caused by excessive drinking. The comfort of alcoholism is a kind of escape from cruel reality. The boom in Russian shamanism demonstrates the extent of the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union (Humphrey 2002). The role of religion in maintaining a society’s spiritual world is not negligible.

Epilogue

- 49 The “Ecological Migration” in 2003 was a complex social and economic programme. Under the push from the local government, the Evenki reindeer herders underwent a series of historical changes, especially the harsh consequences of industrialisation, have affected local culture, the minority’s growing self-identity, and their understanding of the wisdom of “traditional culture”. In recent years of study on Evenki reindeer herders of China have revealed that Evenki culture is undergoing a transition from depression to recovery, constituted by the revival of the Evenki language, the reappearance of ethnic costumes, and other factors. “The more ethnic, the more international”: when this government slogan was cemented into place as the consensus among local government and academic circles, the resurrection of “traditional culture” through the use of museum displays became an established practice. These practices are supposed to represent the lifestyle of the Evenki, but they have lost the spiritual core at the heart of the lifestyle; thus they are more like “cultural performances”. The reverence for nature and sacred human-reindeer relations (Nyyssönen *et al.* 2013) that Lindgren describes during ritual performances is gone (Lindgren 1935).

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NOTES

1. Existing historical records indicate that the Evenki population has generally fluctuated around several hundred people (Kong 1989, p. 190).
2. In the belief system of the Evenki reindeer herders, *malu* (Evk.) refers both to a spirit and a sacred place. Usually found in the northern area of the tent, the *malu* area is off limits to adult women because this sacred place is reserved for the *malu* spirit, the shaman, and the guest of honour.
3. Details about the current daily life of the Evenki can be found in Xie 2015, Kolas & Xie 2015, and Dumont 2015 and in this volume.
4. About 6,500 euros.
5. The State Ethnic Affairs Commission (Ch. Guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui 国家民族事务委员会) is in charge of the administration of minority affairs.
6. In the 1960s, USSR wanted to build a naval base in China. The Chinese leader refused, so the USSR withdrew all the Russian experts helping the Chinese and demanded that the Chinese pay off the war debts incurred during the Korean wars. In 1965, the international communist movement broke up due to differences in thinking, leading China to sever all ties with the USSR.
7. CNN and China Daily reports attracted interest from international reindeer herding associations (Easen 2002, Xinhua 2003).
8. After the “Ecological Migration”, they moved closer to the city. For public safety reasons and in order to protect the forest and wildlife, their guns have been confiscated.
9. *Yi lie weizhu, hu, yang, lie bingju* 以猎为主, 护、养、猎并举.
10. *Yi siyang xunlu weizhu, hu, yang, lie bingju* 以饲养驯鹿为主, 护、养、猎并举.
11. *Yi siyang xunlu weizhu, hu, yang, lie bingju, jiji fazhan duozhong jingying* 以饲养驯鹿为主, 护、养、猎并举, 积极发展多种经营.
12. About 2,000 euros.

13. Winters can create “white disasters”, where the snow is too thick for the reindeer to dig down to the moss, thus creating a food crisis. In order to save the reindeer, the government would provide soybean cake feed.
14. These forestry workers were mainly Han Chinese from various areas of China. They had high levels of income and welfare compared to people with other occupations at the time.
15. About 5,100 euros.
16. For more details about the mobility between the village and the camp, see Dumont in the present volume.
17. About 40 euros.
18. Since 2015, the Evenki who are engaged in summer tourism are no longer provided with “touristic conical tents”: they have to buy them out of their own pockets.
19. About 40,000 euros.
20. The conical tent (Ch. *Cuoluozi* 撮罗子, Evk. *diu*) is made with a frame of 20-30 stripped pine wood poles. Until the 1980-1990s, the outside of the tent was covered with birch skins during the summer and animal skins during the winter. On top, there is a hole for ventilation and light. Experienced hunters can set it up without any nails or pins. This unique structure is the material embodiment of the Evenki people’s wisdom and talent.
21. This project was designed to provide employment opportunities for laid-off workers in state-owned enterprises. The programme targeted women over the age of 40 and men over the age of 50 who lacked specific skills but wanted to re-enter the workforce.
22. The ICR was established by the Norwegian government in 2005 in Kautokeino in order to contribute to international cooperation between circumpolar reindeer herding peoples. It is an independent professional unit with its own board and budget. Its core funding is provided by the Norwegian government through annual grants from the budget of the Ministry of Reform and Government Administration (ICR 2016).
23. In the delegation from Aoluguya, two of the seven were Evenki reindeer herders: they both had official positions in the Genhe and Aoluguya governments.
24. This local government official and scholar conducted an investigation into Aoluguya Evenki for over 20 years.
25. This does not mean that the Evenki no longer believe in shamanism (Lavrilier 2010).

ABSTRACTS

The “traditional way of life” among the Evenki reindeer herders of China has faced many changes after their “Ecological Migration” in 2003 and the hunting ban. Evenki identity has thus shifted, as they are officially categorised as “reindeer herders” rather than “hunters”. Being identified as a “hunter” meant access to welfare within the government’s institutional arrangement. Furthermore, since 2009, the local government has reconsidered its stance towards the traditional lifestyle of the Evenki and has striven to foster tourism. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2003-2004 and during several visits from 2011 to 2014, this paper first examines various governmental policies aimed at the Evenki. It then analyses the present situation of the Evenki, in particular examining resource conflicts and changing identities.

Le « mode de vie traditionnel » des Évenks éleveurs de rennes de Chine a connu d'importants changements suite à la « migration écologique » de 2003 et l'interdiction de la chasse. Ainsi, l'identité des Évenks est passée du statut de « chasseurs » à celui d'« éleveurs de rennes ». Dans le passé, la désignation de chasseurs ne renvoyait pas seulement à une identité ethnique, mais également à une identité politique. Par ailleurs, depuis 2009, le gouvernement local tente de revaloriser le mode de vie des Évenks éleveurs de rennes en développant le tourisme. Basé sur une enquête de terrain d'une année menée en 2003-2004 et sur plusieurs visites effectuées entre 2011 et 2014, cet article examine dans un premier temps les diverses politiques gouvernementales conduites chez les Évenks éleveurs de rennes. Il analyse ensuite la situation actuelle des Évenks, les conflits liés aux ressources et les changements d'identités.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Chine, Évenk, minorités ethniques, identité, chasse, élevage, conflits, tourisme

Keywords: China, Evenki, ethnic minorities, identity, hunting, herding, conflicts, tourism

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