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IN OR OUT OF THE TAIGA, WITH OR WITHOUT REINDEER: RESETTLEMENT AND THE CHANGING LIFE AND CULTURE OF THE AOLUGUYA EWENKI

HANG LIN

ABSTRACT

In 2003 the Ewenki of Aoluguya, Inner Mongolia, were relocated to a purpose-built settlement as “ecological migrants”, justified on the grounds of environmental protection and social development. Although many Ewenki herders are increasingly attracted to the lifestyle offered by regional centers of urbanization, others interpreted the relocation as an attack on the traditional lifeworld, with a number of the Ewenki moving back to the forest where they reside in five major campsites. Together with the changing way of living and the increasing importance of tourism as a revenue source, indigenous cultural practices have declined, including shamanistic performances, traditional medicinal use, and traditional dress, whereas the incidence of alcoholism has increased. By analyzing the specifics of Ewenki reindeer herding and domestication, concentrating in particular on how reindeer shaped the economic and religious lifeworld, this article explores to what extent did their distance to the reindeer and the increasing importance of tourism changed their indigenous way of economic, social, and religious living. Through an examination of the enormous influence of the 2003 relocation, it further explores the multi-dimensional interaction between environment, human, and animal, and by doing so probes into the complex relationship between environmental change and adaptability of ethnic culture.

Keywords: Aoluguya, cultural dilemma, ecological migration, ethnic culture, Ewenki, reindeer herding.

The taiga mountains of the Greater Khingan Range, China’s largest continuous area of primitive forest, is home to the Manchu-Tungusic Ewenki people of Aoluguya and their reindeer. For centuries, the Ewenki in the area have preserved their way of living as reindeer herders. As the only reindeer herders in China, the forest-dwelling Ewenki kept small herds of domesticated reindeer and

used them for milking, riding, and carrying loads. As their major livelihood source and partner, the reindeer have allowed the Ewenki to maintain a mobile lifestyle dictated by their seasonal hunting and herding activities, offering enormous symbolic as well as practical value (Fondahl 1998: 3). However, after the local government undertook to resettle the Ewenki as “ecological migrants” (*shengtai yimin* 生态移民) to a new town in 2003, they suddenly became the focus of public interest both in and outside China.

The resettlement was presented to the Ewenki of Aoluguya with a promise from the government that they would no longer need to live in the forest, since in the new town they and their reindeer would be provided for (Wu 2003). Not long after the relocation, however, the reindeer began to fall ill and die due to a lack of food. Some Ewenki herders felt that they had no choice but to return to the mountains along with their reindeer. However, given that the new town provided the necessary living facilities and schools for their children, these herders did not completely vacate the settlement but chose to move back and forth between the town and the forest camps where they would herd. On the other hand, a growing number of the Ewenki have begun to move away from reindeer herding and gradually adopt a sedentary way of life, taking up service industry jobs centering around tourism.

Even before the 2003 resettlement, the Aoluguya Ewenki had already attracted both domestic and international scholarly attention as the only reindeer herders in China. In their pioneering ethnographic accounts of the reindeer Tungus in Manchuria (today’s Aoluguya Ewenki), Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (Chin.: Shi Luguó 史禄国, 1887–1939) (1929, 1935) and Ethel J. Lindgren (1935, 1938, 1939) had respectively produced in-depth documents on the Ewenki way of living and their trade with the Cossack farmers. The hitherto most comprehensive study of the history and ethnography of the Aoluguya Ewenki is provided by Kong Fanzhi (1994), who has meticulously traced their move to the old Aoluguya and charted their herding system and indigenous cultural practices. After the Ewenki’s story became known to the world in 2003, there has been a growing body of literature focusing on the relocation: Based on extensive fieldworks from 2008 to 2009, Huang Jianying (2009) has produced a detail account of the Ewenki’s living conditions in the new settlement. Xie Yuanyuan (2005, 2010, 2015), on the other hand, vividly describes the resettlement process and offeres an analysis of the role of the local government in the move. Richard Fraser (2010) and Åshild Kolås (2011) focus on the varied opinions of the central government, the local authorities, and the Ewenki themselves regarding the move. Aurore Dumont (2015, 2017) also focuses on the role of the authorities in the changed life pattern of the Ewenki and further examines their mobility and exchange networks in the new settlement. A recent volume, edited by Åshild Kolås and Xie Yuanyuan (2015), is devoted to the

efforts of the Ewenki to reclaim their forest-dwelling lifestyle and the changed herding organization in the forest.

These inspiring works have laid the cornerstone for our understanding of various aspects of the Ewenki relocation process, yet it remains largely neglected in the literature on the formidable dilemma caused by this resettlement, as to choose to embrace new urban life or to return to traditional herding in the forest, as well as how to deal with the arrival of modern popular culture and the eclipse of their indigenous customs. In particular, little attention has been paid to the changed human-natural environment relationships and the lifeworld of the Ewenki, which focuses on the peculiar and intimate relationships that exist between humans, reindeer, and the taiga itself. What were the relationships between the Ewenki and reindeer and how did such relationships shape the economic and religious lifeworld of the Ewenki? How did the resettlement effect their physical and spiritual distance to the reindeer? In what way did this changed distance, together with the increasing importance of tourism, transform their indigenous way of economic, social, and religious living? To tackle these questions, this paper combines results of fieldworks conducted in Aoluguya between 2011 and 2017 to analyze the influence of reindeer herding and domestication on the Ewenki's culture and way of living. By tracing their resettlements in the past decades, with a particular focus on the 2003 relocation, it explores the resettlements' tremendous impacts, together with the consequent growth in tourism, on the way of living and ethnic culture of the Ewenki. By doing so, it aims to explore the multi-dimensional interactions and complex relationships between environment, human, and animal.

REINDEER HERDING AND TRADITIONAL ETHIC EWENKI CULTURE

In their own language, the name Ewenki means "the people who live deep in the mountains." The Aoluguya branch of the Ewenki originated in the region around Lake Baikal and moved to live in the forests north of the Amur River some 300 years ago (Kong 1994: 35–36; Neimenggu zizhiqiu bianjizu 2009: 129). Whereas most Ewenki people in China, namely the Solon and the Khamnigan Ewenki, have settled down in agrarian and pastoral areas, the Aoluguya Ewenki tribe began to breed reindeer as early as the 17th century.

Whereas the large-scale reindeer ranchers of Scandinavia and northern Siberia reside in tundra areas and live off the meat of large herds of reindeer, the Aoluguya Ewenki, similar to other reindeer herding peoples such as the Soyot of Buryatia, the Tofalar of Irkutsk Oblast, and the Tsaatan of Mongolia, practice reindeer husbandry by raising small herds in the taiga as pack and riding animals for their milk, relying on wild game as their principal source of food.¹ The Ewenki

¹ On their way of living and use of reindeer, see Donahoe and Kyrgyz 2003: 12.

reindeer are used to being saddled and either ridden or burdened with a pack, and their cows are used to being milked. They are tamer than their tundra counterparts, thus allowing for a closer relationship between the herder and herd. In fact, the Ewenki reindeer are dependent on specialized technologies that require intensive contact with humans, such as firing smoke to protect them against biting insects, provision of salt, and protection from predators.

Such way of herding has a long history, as the Ewenki initially viewed the reindeer is a means of food reserve to offset the uncertainty of game acquisition. In the process of domestication, however, they gradually recognized other characteristics of the reindeer. First, the reindeer foraging migration in the forest is consistent with the lifestyle of the Ewenki hunters. In order to match the reindeer's migration habits, the Ewenki people follow a relatively fixed migration route in roughly a one-year cycle (Lin 2018: 6). With reindeer by their side, the hunters can easily obtain a better harvest—the reindeer attract their natural enemies, the target of the Ewenki hunters.

Secondly, the reindeer has a high load capacity and is an important tool for packing and riding. Its large hooves allow it to walk on the marsh without much difficulty, and even through bushes and mountain rocks. A single adult reindeer can carry about 40 kg of goods and walk 5-6 km per hour for 10 hours. When equipped with a sledge, a reindeer can draw up to 160 kg, far exceeding the capacity of cattle and horses, which enable their herders to carry their households and freely move about in the large forest (Zhao 1975: 25). Together with the hound, the reindeer are the herders' most important help-meets. As an old Ewenki saying goes: "There is a reindeer and a hound. It is especially labor-saving when hunting. The reindeer can ride the game while the hound prevents the beast from escaping. It is convenient for the hunter in the mountains and forests" (Abenqian 2015: 46).

Being a hoofed species uniquely adapted to the tundra and taiga areas, the reindeer are able to venture far during the winter to search for lichen, their principal food. Thanks to their extraordinary olfactory sense, the reindeer can smell the lichen and even scoop their food from the snow. While they do not need to be fed or driven to pasture land, the reindeer do rely on their herders to acquire salt. Despite their fondness for salt, it is not a local product easily accessible to the reindeer. The Ewenki can easily summon their herds by tapping the salt bag, since upon hearing the sound, the reindeer would return to the campsite from afar and compete for their favorite refreshment (Kong 1994: 176). Before their departure for the next campsite, the herders would feed the reindeer with salt in advance; this way the herds would become more docile and their endurance will be greatly increased.

In spring, reindeer cows give birth to calves. Throughout the summer, the herds return to the encampment every day so that the herders' smoky fire would protect them from insect bites. The Ewenki herders pile up thick logs to set up a wooden frame and ignite a layer of yellow-green wet lichen to produce this smoke.

As the smoke rises, the reindeer gather around the smoke to take refuge from mosquitos and midges. The herders keep watch over the smoke and regularly add wood and lichen to the fire, ensuring that it doesn't burn out until the reindeer have had sufficient rest (Tang 1998: 92). Typically, both Ewenki men and women engage in herding activities: men manage the herds, organize moving, cut wood, and cut off the antlers; and women are responsible for making food, looking after calves, and milking.

In this way, the herders and herds together form a reindeer-pastoralism necessitating intimate human-reindeer relations, which Florian Stammler and Hugh Beach term “symbiotic domestication” (2006: 8). As herders, the Ewenki provide salt to their animals while lighting smoke to deter biting insects. The reindeer rely on their herders for refreshment and, in doing so, seek interaction with human without coercion. With the assistance of shamans, the Ewenki herders perceive their world as a universe populated by spirits of various kinds.² While such view is on par with many Tungusic peoples in North Asia, what makes the Ewenki unique is their perception of the reindeer as the proper domain—in other words, the site from which the complex relationships between the sky, the earth, the taiga, the human, and other animals can be maintained.

Under the influence of such beliefs, the Ewenki even attribute to their reindeer characteristics typically reserved for humans. As Richard Fraser points out, when the reindeer are led back to the campsite, the herders would recount descriptions concerning their herds' experience from the perspective of the animals themselves (Fraser 2010: 335). In another instance, Joachim Otto Habeck records that an Ewenki sledge driver speaks of how his reindeer “listens well” and “obeys well” (Habeck 2006: 133). In emphasizing the animal's sensual perception, the herders characterize their herds as possessing their own personalities, thereby redefining human-reindeer relations. Yet as their living environment changes, such relations are also bound to change in accordance.

FROM THE FOREST TO NEW AOLUGUYA

Following the repeated incursions of Tsarist Russia into northeast Asia, a few groups of Ewenki reindeer herders crossed the Amur River between the late-18th and mid-19th centuries to settle in Qing Chinese territory (Heyne 2002). They remained anonymous to Qing authorities until the early 20th century while continuing to pay taxes to the Tsar and marry in the Orthodox tradition (Shirokogoroff 1929: 67-68). The Ewenki herders also engaged in regular trade with Cossack farmers, borrowing many Russian words that are still in use today,

² Similar opinions are also expressed by several interviewees in my conversation to them in 2016. For a discussion of the Ewenki world view and Shamanism among the community, see Heyne 1999.

including personal names.³ While conducting fieldwork among Ewenki clans in the early 1930s, the anthropologist Ethel J. Lindgren noted that the area of their nomadic pasture was about 7000 km², covering a large territory along the Amur and Argun rivers on the current Sino-Russian border (Lindgren 1938: 609).

Although the Ewenki reindeer herders chose to remain on the southern banks of the Amur after the Russian Revolution, they only had very limited contacts with the Chinese state. In 1957, the first Ewenki “ethnic township” (*minzu xiang* 民族乡) was established in Qiqian, south of the Amur. The state recognized the medical effect of the antlers and collectivized the reindeer, yet they still remained under the care of the Ewenki herders and continued to live in taiga encampments (Lü 1983: 12). As Sino-Russian conflicts intensified in the early 1960s, the Chinese authorities grew uneasy about the Ewenki’s Russian connection and sought to relocate and sedentarize them. In 1965, 35 Ewenki households and their 900 reindeer were moved southward to a newly built village named Aoluguya, which meant “flourishing aspen” in the Ewenki language (Nentwig 2003: 36). The settlement, with its wooden houses and antler-processing factory, would evolve into the principal domain of the community. Some herders began to find employment in other economic sectors, including the forest industry.

During the following two decades, reform policies promoted livestock business in Aoluguya, with the reindeer population peaking in the 1970s at more than 1080 animals. The 1980s’ economic reforms saw the redistribution of 755 heads of reindeer to 24 Ewenki families in 1984. The antler industry remained under state control, in which a state-owned enterprise was responsible for processing and sale of the antlers in exchange for 20 percent of the profit (Huang 2009: 62; Beach 2003: 34). In doing so, the state attempted to turn small-scale reindeer herding into an industry of reindeer-breeding in the Soviet form of “production nomadism” (Vitebsky 1990: 348). It was also during this time that the grazing lands of the reindeer herders caught the attention of the rapidly growing forest industry, which resulted in appropriation of land by forestry authorities and gradual reduction of reindeer pastures. The deterioration of pastures and forests forced the government to take actions in the late 1990s. In 1996, hunting was brought to an end when firearms were confiscated. Two years later, following the nation-wide campaign to “Open Up the West” (*Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发), the policy of “Converting Pasture to Forest” (*tuimu huanlin* 退牧还林) was deployed to “adopt settled residences and control livestock stocking rates” (Wu and Du 2008: 18). Finally in 2003, as China called for “ecological migration” to better protect the forests along the Greater Khingan Range, the local government resettled 62 Ewenki

³ For examples of Russian words used by the Ewenki, see Dumont 2017: 524.

households and their reindeer 260 km southwards to Genhe and built a new township at its western outskirts, known as “New Aoluguya.”

COMING BACK TO THE FOREST

The New Aoluguya town, only 4 km from the center of Genhe, consists of 31 chalet-style residence houses, 48 reindeer pens, an antler processing factory, a school (soon turned into a hotel), a museum, a government building, as well as medical and shopping facilities. This settlement was offered to the Ewenki herders as compensation for the relocation and the hunting ban (Xie 2005: 52). Following the plan drawn up by the Finnish consulting firm Pöyry, the houses are designed in the Finnish style and are all equipped with modern amenities such as running water and central heating. Each house is divided into two halves, one for each family.

The resettlement plan was presented to the Ewenki herders with a promise from the authorities that they would no longer need to move and hunt in the forest, because in the new town they and their reindeer would be provided for. According to the plan, the reindeer are to be hand-fed and kept permanently in enclosures outside the settlement. However, it overlooks the fact that although New Aoluguya is located in the taiga, it is too close to a city for lichen to grow. Moreover, the reindeer are not accustomed to the enclosures in which their moving space is considerably limited. As a result, within but weeks after the move, the reindeer began to fall ill and die (Xie 2005: 54; Kolås 2011: 398). Anger and despair spread among the herders as they realized that the government was incapable of restoring the health of their herds. They were forced to return to the forests where reindeer could find sufficient food. Thus only a short time after the relocation, many Ewenki, together with their reindeer, returned to live in the mountains.

Their life in the mountains and forests, however, has changed substantively. Currently there are six herding campsites that lie between Genhe and Alongshan town, from south to north along the railway line that connects Genhe to Mangui.⁴ Located in the taiga off smaller logging paths that diverge from the main road, the campsite closest to Aoluguya is some 20 km away, while the farthest is more than 250 km. The size of the herds varies, with the smallest consists of 50 reindeer and the largest about 700 (Fraser 2010: 330). Each encampment has two to six tents, including the traditional cone-shaped tepee-tents known as *zuoluozi*, and modern ridge ones equipped with solar panels and wood-burning stoves (Dumont 2015: 88–89). Altogether some 50 Ewenki herders live and work in the taiga, only a small minority of them spend almost all of their time in the campsites. The

⁴ The 24 herding families, to which the reindeer were assigned to in the decollectivization reform in 1984, formed five campsites. I was informed in my conversation with Pu Lingsheng in 2011 that Maria So’s campsite, also the farthest from Aoluguya, was split into two in 2009.

majority of the herders stay only temporarily and visit the settlement on regular basis, primarily to purchase daily supplies, visit family and friends, and to deliver antler harvest. No bus service is available: once a month, the local government sends a car to take basic supplies such as vegetables to the campsites. For other necessities such as rice, oil, medicine, and alcohol, the herders need to ride motorcycles or hire taxi service.⁵

As the camps move around four times a year, a certain level of mobility continues to be an essential feature of Ewenki reindeer herding, yet their movement across the taiga is no longer an act of free choice. Even before 2003, the state has already established special zones for natural conservation (*ziran baohuqu* 自然保护区) in the forest, drastically reducing the area available for the herds to roam. As the forests are state-owned, the herders are required by environmental legislation to report the location of their campsites to the local forestry station (*linchang* 林场) responsible for overseeing their movement and stay within its confines. Consequently, although the Ewenki herders still view the forest as pasture and hunting ground, they now have to move with demarcated frontiers in mind and follow established routes allotted to them. Such boundaries, as Emily Yeh argues, expands state power by creating greater control over both the resources and the people within this sphere, thus restricting the mobility of the herders (Yeh 2005: 16). To compare, while Siberian Ewenki reindeer and their herders travel ca. 1000 km per year, the movements of Aoluguya Ewenki are far more limited, moving only 15-20 km annually.⁶

The herders themselves, too, have changed. Everyday life at the campsite revolves around the reindeer, with all tasks focusing on the husbandry enterprise. In many respects, such social relations between human and nature are consistent with the observations made long ago by Shirokogoroff and Lindgren (Shirokogoroff 1929; Lindgren 1933). However, unlike traditional campsites that were organized by clans, the new ones are run by individual families or several nuclear families together. After reindeer decollectivization in 1984, the reindeer are now privately owned, their pastoral activities are communally organized, including setting up the site, sharing firewood and salt, and most notably, antler cropping. The organization of herding labor, however, has made a decisive shift from a family-based model to a male-dominant one. Under this new model, men (some of whom do not own reindeer but are hired by the owners) have taken on women's traditional husbandry responsibilities such as cooking, tending animals, and milking. Women and children, on the other hand, stay almost permanently in the settlement or even in Genhe, where schools and other facilities are available.

⁵ Most of the taxi drivers are Han-Chinese who worked in the Old Aoluguya and were thus familiar with the herders.

⁶ On the movement of Siberian Ewenki, see Lavrillier 2011: 217.

With the ban on hunting and their economic reliance on antlers, the Ewenki's link to nature has accordingly shifted to a growing emphasis on herding. While previously reindeer were considered to be a pack animal that facilitated the Ewenki's hunting movements in the taiga, as their living equipment become more modernized and weighty, motorcycles and trucks have replaced the reindeer as the main means for riding and transporting (Dumont 2015: 84–86). Given the hunting ban, the reindeer—instead than the game—have become the primary reason for the herders to remain in the forest, since the forest is the only place which allows them to perpetuate their relations to the reindeer. In this way, the reciprocal relationship between the herder and the reindeer is again strengthened, in which the herders provide for their reindeer the necessary substance (e.g. lichen) and take the antlers from the reindeer in return. This relationship sustains the Ewenki concept of personhood and lifeworld, “not only for their movements in the landscape, but also for their sustenance and reproduction, their life and death” (Stammler and Beach 2006: 12).

Their love for and attachment to the taiga and the reindeer takes on an even greater significance when the herders at their campsites sing their traditional song:

Dear friends,
do you know where is the most beautiful place in the world?
Please come to our unbounded forests,
and take a look at the woods which are as many as the reindeer's fur,
the mountains as green as emerald,
and the lakes as bright as mirror.⁷

CHANGED LIFE AT NEW AOLUGUYA

During the migration project that lasted from August to September 2003, 62 Ewenki families (162 persons) were relocated to the New Aoluguya settlement. Each family was assigned a half of the residence house. In the state media, all the relocating Ewenki were described as “practicing” reindeer herders; however, only 24 families had received reindeer during the decollectivization reforms of 1984 and were herders in the true sense (Wu 2003). Such discrepancy is due to the fact that prior to the move, a number of Ewenki had already lost their connections to the reindeer lifeworld, some even before the 1984 reform. New Aoluguya became a Ewenki community, since all of its 162 residents are Ewenki: Their non-Ewenki neighbors in the old town, mostly Han-Chinese and Daur Mongols, either stayed put or had to look for new residence with compensation from the government.

⁷ Translated from Liu 2010: 110. I heard a song, sung by Nurika in Ewenki, with quite similar lyrics in my visit to her home in 2017.

As aforementioned, the greatest impact of the move has been on those who are still connected to the reindeer, especially those herders and their family members who do not reside permanently in the campsites. Since almost all financial funding and living facilities are allocated to the new Aoluguya settlement, the government support that the herders receive is extremely limited, almost solely in forms of trucks that occasionally help them move in the forest. Next to a minimal amount of welfare allowance provided by the local government, the herders need to rely on their settlement-based families or services to deliver food and daily necessities and to sell the cropped antlers. In addition, they have to cope with the new challenge of dividing their time between the campsite and the settlement. As for their families, only few women reside in the campsites, typically because they maintain shops to sell antlers or their children attend schools in the settlement. In this sense, New Aoluguya has become an indispensable space in Ewenki life, since even though the reindeer are largely herded in forest campsites and not all Ewenki reside permanently in the settlement, it still functions as the administrative and herding headquarters by offering spaces for the herders' families and the sale of the antlers, thus acting as the connecting point in their changed life as "mobile reindeer herders" (Dumont 2015: 89).

However, New Aoluguya is far from an ideal base for the herders and their families. Although it has residence houses and reindeer pens, the settlement gives an impression of an artificial village as it lacks essential social and economic infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and food stores. In fact, there are no commercial services apart from the tourism industry and very limited means for community interaction. Such tourism-oriented structure is not a design error nor a misapplication of the original plan, rather the intention of the authorities from the very start. The state's goal for the relocation, which is officially described as "ecological migration," is not only to restore the taiga environment but also to advance the economic well-being of the Ewenki community (Xie 2010: 100–110). In their funding proposal to the central administration, the local government explicitly emphasized the need for infrastructure modernization and economic growth (Huang 2009: 22). The local authorities introduced tourism into the new settlement as a way to modernize the Ewenki community and integrate them into the development scheme of the region.

With funding from the central government and technical assistance of the Finnish firm Pöyry, the settlement was to be transformed into "Aoluguya Ethnic Reindeer Resort," with the stated goal of "to preserve the Aoluguya cultural heritage and old livelihoods by turning the old skills and unique lifestyle into a tourism product" (Pöyry 2008:7). Under this plan, the school was turned into a hotel that, after two rounds of expansion and renovation, achieved a 110-guest capacity. The forest theme park, called the "Aoluguya Reindeer Tribe" (*Aoluguya shilu buluo* 敖鲁古雅使鹿部落) features reproductions of cone-shaped tents made of birch bark. Visitors can sip tea from bark cups and feed the near-dozen reindeer

kept there, while the tour guide dressed in “traditional Ewenki costumes” tell the stories of Ewenki herders and hunters. After visiting the museum, the tourists are encouraged to stay in the hotel or home-style inns offered by the Ewenki residents to gain a sense of the ethnic uniqueness of the reindeer tribe. At the highest peak around the settlement stands a wooden reindeer statue gilded in gold, marking this place as the home of the reindeer herders.

Aiming at providing modern housing for the Ewenki while simultaneously creating tourism-related employment opportunities for the community, the local government envisions new sources of income for the local residents, including hotel services, souvenir production, and ethnic show. Such efforts to promote the image of China’s reindeer people have been relatively successful. Although not a well-known tourist destination, Aoluguya attracted over 15,000 tourists from its opening in June 2007 to the end of that year (Huang 2009: 77). As of 2017, the Aoluguya has received a total of 512,000 tourists (including 30,000 foreigners) who came to experience the reindeer herding lifestyle and learn about its history (Aoluguya shilu buluo jingqu 2018). In 2010, China was admitted to the Association of World Reindeer Herders on account of the Aoluguya herders. Three years later, Aoluguya hosted the 2013 World Reindeer Herders Congress.

TAIGA, REINDEER, AND ETHNIC TRADITION: THE DILEMMA

Although the Ewenki have already experienced several rounds of relocation during the preceding decades, none of them has so dramatically altered the lifeworld of the Ewenki, both herders and non-herders, as the 2003 relocation. The relocations of 1957 and 1965, both which were also state-mandated, did not have the same dramatic impact because the Ewenki were relocated within the taiga; as such, their economic and cultural base of reindeer herding was largely maintained. Their ties to the forest were not severed, and the settlement simply provided them with alternatives to herding and hunting. Alongside their traditional way of living with the reindeer, the Ewenki were afforded new opportunities to enjoy the material benefits of the modern life. In 2003, however, the relocation project was carried out with a hitherto unseen level of authority, with the state actively integrating the community into its scheme of modernization and economic development. Being assigned to a sedentary settlement so close to an urban environment, the herders were moved out of the taiga and a large share of them could no longer engage in subsistence hunting and reindeer herding.

The resettlement was imposed upon the Ewenki by an iron state will and it irreversibly changed their lives, yet with fifteen years passed by, many Ewenki gradually accepted their fate and came to see the changes in a positive light. Pu Lingsheng, the former mayor of Aoluguya, is among this camp. As one of the increasing numbers of Ewenki who do not own reindeer, Pu was among the first to appeal to the government that they should be given a new settlement in order to

modernize the community. As he sees it, it is the move to New Aoluguya, with its desirable location and modern infrastructure that makes the antler processing industry possible and profitable. Although reindeer and their antlers have traditionally constituted the cornerstone of the Ewenki economy, the rapidly-emerging reindeer-based tourism should be prioritized because it will “not only increase the income of the Ewenki, but also protect and revive the ethnic culture.”⁸ Pu’s view is shared by Wu Xuhong and Suo Ronghua. When asked about her feeling for the new settlement, Wu, a university graduate currently working for the local government, firmly answers that she would prefer the new over the old, since “it is near the city of Genhe and the living conditions are much better, which makes life more convenient than before.”⁹ Running a store for souvenirs, Suo is pleased to see that Aoluguya is welcoming more and more tourists, a trend that has significantly increased her family’s income. For her, the new environment is more comfortable than the forest camps and the close distance to Genhe means better education for her children.¹⁰

The relocation has indeed improved the material well-being of the Ewenki, but it has proved to be a double-edged sword. With a large number of the Ewenki becoming sedentarized and increasingly attracted to the lifestyle provided by urban infrastructure, their new generation are now largely cut off from the taiga where their ancestors had lived for generations. This separation has negatively impacted the Ewenki’s way of living and their indigenous cultural practices. Due to the hunting ban, the Ewenki stopped hunting; except for few old hunters, no one knows how to use guns, ground arrows, or birch bark skis. The reduction in the number of reindeer hide and the complexity of the traditional way of skinning have kept the young generation away from learning it, while their feather garment has been quickly replaced by the more fashionable and convenient modern clothing (Wang 2015: 957). Even the reindeer, which used to be the most important means of transport for the Ewenki, have given place to motorcycles and trucks. As a result, the traditional skills of training reindeer for riding and loading are also on the verge of being lost. Although children and youth still go to the campsites, most of them are students who only stay there temporarily during holidays, and few of them are willing to continue practicing reindeer herding.

In addition, the preservation and continuance of the Ewenki language and religious belief is also under threat. When they go to school, Ewenki children are put into the classes as their Han Chinese peers, with all lessons given in Chinese. While working in the tourist industry, the former hunters and herders also speak

⁸ Personal interview with Pu on August 13, 2011.

⁹ Personal interview with Wu on July 24, 2016.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Suo on July 22, 2016. She also notes that she was initially unhappy about the changes occurred to her life, but as tourism increased her income, her attitude began to change.

Chinese, as their customers are overwhelmingly Han Chinese. Within only one generation, most Ewenki in Aoluguya have changed from speaking predominantly their own language to conversing in Chinese. Now only about 40 people can still speak the traditional Ewenki language (Fraser 2010: 317). Similarly, even though for generations Shamanism has played an irreplaceable role in the Ewenki's spiritual beliefs and cultural practices, it is gradually fading out from their religious lifeworld, especially after the death of Niula, the last Shaman, in 1997 (Lin 2018: 10). Since then there has been no new shaman in Aoluguya, nor have the Ewenki held any shamanistic activities.

Many Ewenki who now reside in the new settlement are aware of the relocation's negative impacts. Although the majority of them are still directly or indirectly involved in reindeer herding, many feel coerced into the relocation and lament that they are forced to distance themselves from hunting and herding economies. Anta, one of the few Ewenki who are still proficient in traditional skinning skills, notes that although she has gradually accepted the resettlement, she still prefers the forest since there "it is free and unstrained, which is irreplaceable by the material comfort of the sedentary life" (Huang 2009: 124). While Anta remains in the settlement, some have chosen to return to their campsites in the taiga. For instance, the sisters Maria and Hasha Bu, two eldest members of the community, find the divide between the taiga and the settlement insurmountable. To cope with this, they have abandoned their places in the pension facility to live in the forest because they feel themselves emotionally attached to the taiga and their reindeer. After living almost their whole lives in the forest, they "are accustomed to everything there"; they can only meet the spirits of the nature and thus "feel good" in the reindeer's presence (Xie 2010: 66).

Such displeasure with the changed life and eroded spiritual attachment to the forest are also shared by the younger generation. Wang Ying, an Ewenki woman in her early 40s, is among those who stay in the settlement while her husband returns the forest to take care of their reindeer, since her daughter attends school in Genhe. She complains that her family's income is low despite the hard work and misses the old days in the forest when the whole family could live on hunted game and stay with their reindeer (Huang 2009: 132). Wu Xusheng, a 37-year-old Ewenki man who herds his reindeer seasonally while residing in the settlement during the off-season, explicitly voiced his disappointment in New Aoluguya, for "it is too close to the city and the temperature is higher, which is unfavorable for the growth of lichen." He admits that life is much harder in the forest, but says he would rather choose to bear the hardships at the campsites than stay at the settlement, where there are too many people but no animals. For him, the living conditions of his family and himself is secondary to that of the reindeer; and only in the taiga, where

lichen is abundant, that the reindeer can survive and that the Ewenki community can survive.¹¹

For those who cannot bear the sedentary life at the new settlement but are not able to return to the forest, some try to cope with the grief at their changed life by drinking. Asuo, who used to be a renowned hunter in the community, lost his source of income and rhythm of life after the hunting ban. Since he is among those who do not own reindeer, he now lives on government welfare. Although he had been assigned a job as tour guide in the forest theme park, he was soon dismissed due to alcoholism. When asked why he could not stop drinking, he replies: “I am from the forest, and there is nothing for me here. All I can do now is drink every day” (Xie 2010: 172–174).¹² While alcohol is not foreign to the Ewenki, the community’s drinking habits have considerably changed post-resettlement. Like many other reindeer herders across North and Inner Asia, the Ewenki has the tradition of making ritualized offerings before drinking, practiced by tipping the liquor cup three times to show respect for the sky, earth, and the hearth.¹³ Through such offerings, the hunters and herders are seeking to appease the non-human agents of the forest. In New Aoluguya, however, such acts are now seldom seen. Now people are drinking directly from their own bottles and often reaching a degree of intoxication, as Asuo frequently does.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For many Ewenki, their people’s way of life has always been tightly connected with the taiga and the reindeer. For many generations, they have maintained particular relationships to the domain that contains all the natural resources and creatures, which together consist their lifeworld. In this lifeworld, the reindeer doubtlessly occupy the central role. In contrast to the large-scale tundra reindeer herders in other parts of the world, the Ewenki enjoy a much more intimate connection to their reindeer, developing a particular model of “symbiotic domestication” in which the herders and the reindeer are mutually dependent on each other. As pack and riding animals that facilitate their movement in the forest, the reindeer is a principal source of income, storytelling, cultural practice, empowerment, and identity.

In the face of state authority that seeks to forcefully integrate the community into its project of economic development and modernization, however, the Ewenki

¹¹ Personal interviews with Wu on July 22, 2016 and 26 August, 2017.

¹² The story about Asuo was reiterated by Yu Lan, deputy mayor of Aoluguya, in my talk with her in 2017. But according to Yu, Asuo’s conditions changed dramatically and he has now a stable job in the tourism sector.

¹³ On the drinking rituals among reindeer herders in North and Inner Asia, see Humphrey & Onon 1996; Vitebsky 1990.

herders and hunters are left with little space to practice their indigenous way of life. Being relocated to a new settlement distant from the forest but close to the urban center, they are now far from the environment that once nurtured their ancestors and shaped their economy and ethnic culture. Some of them welcome the material benefits provided by the sedentarized way of life, residing permanently in the modern houses and taking up jobs as tour guides and souvenir shopkeepers. Yet at the same time, many found it difficult to adjust to the drastic transition, choosing either to return to the campsites to stay with their reindeer or to drown their sorrows in alcohol. No matter how the relocation is experienced by different individuals, the Ewenki are now in the middle of a “confrontation with the natural as well as the social environment” (Bird-David 1999: 84). In other words, the whole Ewenki community is caught in the dilemma of coping with life between the taiga and the urban center, reindeer herding and tourism, ethnic culture and modernization.

Behind such dilemma lies the seemingly unresolvable ambivalence of how to deal with the changed environment with the human-reindeer relations that has structured the social organization of the Ewenki and defined their cultural identity for generations. The Aoluguya Ewenki have no more than 250 members in their community; while they are resisting the modern urban life to a certain extent, it is evident that many are eager for governmental assistance—even if they have issues with the form it currently takes. As one Ewenki herder puts it: “We hope that the government can care about the development of the reindeer in the campsites, but the government believes that it is better for us to leave the forest. Isn’t it good for both the government and us that assistance is offered according to our wishes?”¹⁴

In fact, it is this contradiction between the inner desire and reality that makes the Ewenki trapped in an awkward situation. Should the government take full responsibility for taking care of the Aoluguya Ewenki community? If the answer is yes, the community must accept the resettlement and stay away from the forest and the reindeer. For those who answer “no”, however, it seems impossible for them to completely return to the original way of life, because their living environment and lifeworld have already undergone tremendous changes. No matter how the future of Ewenki in Aoluguya turns out, it is certain that without reindeer, there would be no Ewenki, while without the herders, the reindeer cannot live as they do in the taiga, nor to serve as the ethnic symbol of the Ewenki.

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¹⁴ Personal talk with an anonymous Ewenki who accompanied Zhang Wanjun, currently mayor of Aoluguya on the Arctic Circle China Forum (Shanghai) on 10 May, 2019.

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