

## The Last Hunting Tribe in China: The Ewenki Reindeer Herders of Aoluguya

Hang Lin

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Assistant Professor  
Hangzhou Normal University, China  
E-Mail: [hang.lin@hznu.edu.cn](mailto:hang.lin@hznu.edu.cn)

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Genhe, one of China's most northerly county-level administrative districts in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, is the site of China's lowest recorded temperature ever of  $-58^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Located deep in China's largest continuous area of primitive forest in the Greater Khingan Range, Genhe has 91 percent of its land covered with birch. Within these taiga mountains live the Manchu-Tungusic Ewenki people of Aoluguya and their reindeer; the Ewenki are known as the "last hunting tribe of China" (Wu, 2003).

A branch of the Ewenki that originated in the region around the Lake Baikal, the Aoluguya Ewenki tribe moved to live in the forests in the Greater Khingan Range 300 years ago. Aoluguya, meaning "flourishing aspen" in the Ewenki language, refers to the river where they reside. Although "Ewenki" means "the people who live deep in the mountains" in their language, most Ewenki in China have settled down in agrarian and pastoral areas. The Aoluguya Ewenki tribe, however, began to practice reindeer-breeding as early as the 17th century. While conducting fieldwork among the Ewenki clans in the early 1930s, the anthropologist

Ethel J. Lindgren (1938: 609) noted that the area of their nomadic pasture was about 7000 km<sup>2</sup>, covering the large territory along the Armur and Argun Rivers on the current Sino-Russian border.

For centuries, the tribe's life in the virgin forests remained intact: they lived by reindeer herding. Like other reindeer herders of Eurasia, the Ewenki kept small herds of domesticated reindeer, and used them for milking, riding, and carrying loads. In summer, the Ewenki sought fresh pastures for their herds; in winter, they pitched their tents wherever game animals were abundant. The taiga, as their provider of reindeer forage and good game, allowed the Ewenki to maintain a mobile lifestyle dictated by their seasonal hunting and herding activities, and exerted an enormous symbolic as well as instrumental value (Fondahl 1998: 3). As one of the few tribes that still inhabit the forest, the Aoluguya Ewenki are the only reindeer herders left in China.

## From “Old Aoluguya” to “New Aoluguya”

Following the Soviet project of “abandoning ‘nomadism as a way of life’ in favor of ‘nomadism as a way of production’” (Habeck 2005: 141), the first Ewenki “ethnic township” was established in Qiqian in Inner Mongolia in 1957, with around 600 reindeer. The Sino-Russian connect around 1965 motivated the Chinese authorities to relocate the Ewenki and their 900 reindeer away from the banks of Argun river to a newly built village named Aoluguya, some 255 km north of Genhe. In the late 1960s, when it recognized reindeer antlers' economic potential as material for Chinese medicine, the government initiated a hunting production brigade (*lieye shengchandu*) to turn the formerly small-scale reindeer herding into a more intensive reindeer-breeding business (Kong 1994). During the following two decades, reform policies promoted this livestock business in Aoluguya, with the reindeer population peaking in

the 1970s at more than 1080 animals. However, this development largely ignored the carrying capacity of the taiga forest, and the number of reindeer began to decrease from 1980 onwards.

The deterioration of pastures and forests forced the government to take action in the late 1990s. In 1996, the policy of “Converting Pasture to Forest” (*tuimu huanlin*) was initiated aiming at “adopting settled residences and controlling livestock stocking rates” (Wu and Du, 2008: 18). Two years later, hunting was brought to an end when firearms were confiscated, yet the number of reindeer still declined markedly as a combined result of inbreeding, poaching, predation and tourism. Finally, in 2003, as China called for “ecological migration” (*shengtai yimin*) to better protect the forests along the Greater Khingan Range, the Aoluguya local government undertook resettlement of the Ewenki and their reindeer 260 km southwards to a new Aoluguya township. This new town, now on Genhe’s western outskirts only 5 km from its center, consists of 62 wooden residence houses, 48 reindeer pens, a school, a museum, and medical and shopping facilities (Xie 2005: 52). The new Aoluguya has become a miniature Ewenki community, since all the 162 residents of its 62 households are Ewenki, whereas their non-Ewenki neighbors, mostly Han-Chinese and Daur Mongols, remain in the old town.

## **Coming Back to the Forest**

Although the tribe had relocated around the forests several times in the preceding decades, the last move was the biggest change of all, because the Ewenki had never before lived so close to a city.

The government introduced the resettlement to the Ewenki of Aoluguya with a promise that they would no longer need to hunt, because in the new town they and their reindeer would be provided for.

Plans were made for the reindeer to be hand-fed and kept permanently in enclosures near the settlement. Within only several weeks after the move, however, the reindeer were falling ill and perishing because of lack of lichen, their principle food source (Xie 2005: 54). The herders were left with no other viable options than to return to the forests, specifically the areas where reindeer could find sufficient food. Thus, only a short time after their relocation, many Ewenki, together with their reindeer, swarmed back to live in the mountains.

The failure of this resettlement put both the authorities and the herders in an uncomfortable situation. According to the government, wildlife protection and the ecological degradation of pastures and forests were the primary reason for imposing a hunting ban and resettling the Ewenki community in Aoluguya. Such wholesale removal of people from degraded environments was a key measure in the government's environmental strategy (Yeh 2009). In their funding proposal to the central government, the municipal government of Genhe listed depletion of wildlife caused by Ewenki's overhunting and overstocking as key grounds for the resettlement. The construction of the new Aoluguya town and the policy of ecological migration were supposed to not only save the environment, but also to improve the Ewenki's living standards.

Countering the government's claims, the Ewenki hunters and herders presented their own views about the extent and causes of wildlife depletion in the taiga. While admitting that the wildlife in their old hunting grounds had gradually decreased over the past decades, former hunters argued that this trend had not stopped with the hunting ban and the resettlement. They claimed that instead of the reindeer and limited hunting activities, uncontrolled illegal hunting was the primary culprit (Kolås 2011: 400). Moreover, because the reindeer live off the fresh lichen grown in the forests, the herders cannot ignore the call of the taiga, which offers the vital forage lacking in the settlement. With the local government's acquiescence, new reindeer herding camps were erected in

the forests, and the Ewenki herders now rotate seasonally between the new settlement where they are officially supposed to live, and the camps where they herd reindeer; this has created a new phenomenon that they call “settling but not living” (*ding er bu ju*).

## Life in the Herding Camps

Today, seven herding camps lie north to south between Genhe and Alongshan town, along the railway line that connects Genhe to Mangui. The camp closest to Aoluguya is some 30 km away, while the farthest is more than 250 km distant. A road links each camp to a township or forest station distances of 15 to 70 km. Very often, a herding camp is situated along a lane, or is even deeper in the forest. According to local authorities' records, 15 herd owners are responsible for a total of 773 reindeer (Meng etc. 2014). In the camp of Maria Suo, the 91-year-old matriarch of the Aoluguya Ewenki has the largest herd, even after a new camp branched off during the spring of 2009. The number of people in the camps varies, as some herders move back and forth between the settlement and the camps, while others stay in the forest more or less permanently (Dumont 2015: 86).

In spring, reindeer cows give birth to calves. Throughout the summer, the reindeer come back to the encampment every day to benefit from the herders' smoky fires that protect them from insects. This is also the time for milking and the cutting of antlers. From October to February, the main activities consist of looking after reindeer and hunting. Despite the 1998 ban, hunting is still practiced without firearms by using traps. Traditionally, several nuclear families gathered in the same encampment to share activities like transporting the reindeer, but today these rules are less respected, and members of a camp choose to be together according to affinity.

## **Environment, Tourism, Ethnic Culture**

The resettlement of the Aoluguya Ewenki was officially described as an “ecological migration,” and this was also how it was framed in the state-sponsored media (Wu 2003; Wang and Yang 2013). However, the protection of the environment was not the only argument for the relocation. Not long after the move, in 2003, the municipal authorities signed an agreement with the state-owned Daqing Oil Company to take over the entire settlement. Then the old Aoluguya settlement, with its exceptionally beautiful location, was transformed into a tourist resort. With a few exceptions, most of the buildings, including the school, the bank, the post office and the museum, were converted into cabins for guests, equipped with high-quality bathrooms, telephones, wooden furniture, and brand-new wood-burning stoves.

Tourism was also introduced into the new settlement in 2007, when the Finnish consulting firm Pöyry drew up plans for the “Aoluguya Ethnic Reindeer Resort.” To convert the settlement into a resort, the new town houses have been completely refurbished in Finnish designs, with modern amenities such as central heating and cable television. While 22 families have turned their dwellings into home-style inns, another 20 have opened stores selling local specialties. The school has been made into a hotel, and a new state-of-the-art museum has been built. In the newly constructed forest theme park, tourists can sit in a traditional birch pole yurt, sip tea from bark cups, and feed half a dozen reindeer kept there. Several tour guides dressed in “traditional Ewenki costumes” tell the stories about the Ewenki hunters and their shamans. More than 20,000 tourists are attracted during the peak season, between June and September.

With this project, the local authorities hope to combine environmental protection, infrastructure modernization, and preservation of the Ewenki ethnic culture. Thus, the new “Ethnic Reindeer Resort” is expected to

stand out from other resorts thanks to its “unique cultural products” (Pöyry 2008: 2), and the promotion of tourism will be a powerful means “to preserve the Aoluguya cultural heritage and old livelihoods by turning the old skills and unique lifestyle into a tourism product” (Pöyry 2008: 7). The government has come to recognize that reindeer herding is an economic sector that should be stimulated and developed to become a source of income as a tourism attraction. The Ewenki are now experiencing the effects of ethnic tourism, which can, at least to some extent, revive their traditional culture and values.

Yet tourism is a double-edged sword. Although the growth of local tourism has preserved some aspects of indigenous Ewenki culture in providing economic returns by preserving a way of life, as tourists rush in, its traditional values can be easily dwarfed by the overwhelming Han-Chinese majority. Within only one generation, most Ewenki in Aoluguya have changed from mainly speaking their own language to Chinese. In fact, across all the Ewenki communities, there are no more than 50 people who still can speak the traditional Ewenki language (Fraser 2010: 317). No matter what the future of the Ewenki in Aoluguya will be, it is certain that without reindeer, there would be no more Ewenki people; therefore, the reindeer will long remain the ethnic symbol of the “last hunting tribe of China.”

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