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Mapping ethnolinguistic groups and urban space. Trends of post-nomadic sedentarisation in a Chinese peripheral town

Mapowanie grup etnolingwistycznych przestrzeni miejskiej. Trendy postnomadycznej sedentaryzacji w chińskim mieście peryferyjnym

Introduction

The trend towards the decline of the nomadic lifestyle in Inner Asia, sedentarisation and migration to cities provides a sphere for studies of spatial and social mobility. The spatial aspect comes as a natural notion with ‘nomadism’. However, mobile herding is currently becoming marginal as a core lifestyle in the strict sense. This study indicates that in the present situation when boundaries between post-nomads, sedentarised ethnicities and migrating post-agricultural communities are becoming blurred, what remains a distinctive factor is the variety of “ways of thinking” (Nakamura 2005) and “collective identity” (Bumochir 2020: 9–12). This can manifest itself as the formation of social and cross-ethnic relations – or just a mythologised discourse about it.

In this paper I focus on processes occurring between 2007 and 2019, related to rural–urban migrations of north-east China’s post-nomadic minorities. The point of

reference is a geographical and ethnic introduction to the working area of Evenk Autonomous Banner (Nantun) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which will support the understanding of Hölön Buir's ethnic composition and social dynamics. The case study of Nantun is focused on unofficial networks of sedentarised post-nomads. My approach was to incorporate a dimension of the ethnic processes into the spatial development of the urbanising areas. This attempt supports the understanding of social dynamics and spatial development of the urbanised area in the bottom-up aspect. Fieldwork results suggest the interrelation of migration and language on the examples of migration impacting language (dialect) transition and, conversely, language impacting migration. The research question is how ethnic identity impacts spatial sedentarisation in the analysed area.

The fieldwork was conducted in China, in the north-eastern part of Inner Mongolia's Hölön Buir prefecture; the area is locally called Nantun. Contrasting with the rest of Inner Mongolia, Hölön Buir has preserved nomadic pastoralism, as well as dynamic social exchange and mobilities between the rural and urban kin groups. The most important aspect here is that, unlike in the numerous heavily Sinified cities and towns of Inner Mongolia, in Nantun the post-herders are numerous enough to impact urban space. It is therefore a proper place to observe spatial and social mobility processes in multi-ethnic environments. This situation makes it possible to observe the sedentarisation and various mobilities of the nomads as ongoing processes, not as historical phenomena.

The introduction of the field itself is problematic given various terms in multiple languages, scripts, transcriptions, transliterations, as well as practices of using them. Therefore, I will subsequently refer mostly to Nantun as an exact place of my fieldwork. Although Nantun is not an official name any more, it has been in established use since the Qing period; also, it seems more efficient to use than the official "Ewenke Autonomous Banner" and its (somehow confusing) shorter version – E Qi.

Nomadism and ethnicity with Chinese specificity

The category of *minzu* refers to the Chinese state's recognition of its ethnic diversity, aiming above all to create minority-dedicated administrative units and their political representations (Szykiewicz 2003: 364–365). After its introduction in the 1950s, it used to be translated as "nationality", but since the 1980s the approach has changed and it became an "ethnicity" of a Chinese nation (Grant 2022: 8).

The Mongols' social structure remains complex (Atwood 2012; 2015). I shall therefore refer to the category of *minzu* in its old meaning of Mongol nationality.¹

¹ Which Mongols, having contemporary and historical states, as well as writing systems, distinctive language, etc., undoubtedly are. These attributes distinguish their situation from some other China's *minzu*, like Zhuang, Hani, etc.

While coping with Nantun's complexity, in order to avoid the term "tribe" in reference to the case of the Mongols I follow Prof. Szykiewicz's suggestion to call them ethnic or ethnographic groups with their further sub-ethnic classification (see Fig. 2). In the linguistic dimension, in Nantun alone four Mongol languages and around seven dialects are used.

When the nomads enter a city, their economy and way of life tend to undergo a significant evolution. Only when they fluctuate between the countryside and the city do they combine various types of economy. Hybridisation can therefore be understood as a partial likening or acculturation of the nationalities to each other, but with distinctive features remaining in place. The difference becomes more of an identity-based construct.

The spatial distribution of Nantun's communities can be seen as both a factor and a result of the social organisation. Historically, to put it in a very simplified way, the regional economy was predominantly based on nomadic or semi-nomadic herding and hunting populations (Dumont 2018), with some projects of imperial politics related to sedentary, military or administrative presence (Moniz Bandeira 2020). The socio-ethnic labour share was understandably heavily transformed after the two revolutions – the Xinhai and the Communist one. What was partially maintained was the elitist – even if informally – status of the local Dagurs² (Kuras, Tsybenov 2022) and herding occupation of some of the nationalities. The communists' sedentarisation and subsequently urbanisation policies resulted in a sharp decline of nomadic herding communities in favour of less spatially mobile settlements.

The sedentarisation of nomads since the 1950s was predominantly a state-orchestrated, multi-faceted, top-down policy of socio-economic transformation under modernisation and civilisational project (Ptackova 2019). From the 1990s onward it included "ecological resettlement", understood as removing inhabitants of ecologically vulnerable areas and their sedentarisation with fencing pasturelands (Ptackova 2011; Dumont 2017: 520–521; Xie 2015; Cerny 2010: 219–220). The top-down sedentarisation, deteriorating herding conditions impacting economic efficiency of the herding process, as well as ecological crisis (Yuan and others 2023: 10) were the main pull factors of the movement towards town and cities. Crucial among the pull factors was the demand for public services: education and medical care, as well as labour opportunities (Narenqimuge, Yi, De 2013).

² Usually they are called Hailar Dagurs, thought to be more related to Nantun. It is a separate group in comparison to the Nonni (mainly Morin Dawa), Amur and Xinjiang (mainly Tarbagatai) Dagurs. Given the existence of another Dagur population, namely the migrants from the Qiqihar, they have to be distinguished by means of this not very precise title (Narenqimuge, Yi, De 2013: 2–4, 16–17; Ding 2006: 266–268).

Methodology

This study is based mainly on fieldwork in Nantun and Hailar conducted in 2007 and in 2019.³ The main source of information about migrations, sedentarisation and social networks were non-structured interviews with the inhabitants of variety of professions. They were conducted predominantly in Mongolian, occasionally in Chinese. My interlocutors were of very diverse social and ethnic composition, from self-employed in service to the local intellectual elite, public administration officials and party cadres. In total, 39 persons have been interviewed. The informants were selected in two steps. First, they were classified according to declared ethnicity (sometimes diverging from the administrative one). In step two, they were asked about languages spoken at home and during interactions with their *khamaa* (social network). This information was confronted with data on migration and sedentarisation patterns of the interviewees themselves and their relatives (*saadam*), which they provided at a later stage of the interview. Among the variety of destinations, I focused mostly on their kinsmen being permanently resident in (a) Nantun or (b) Hailar.

Primary materials I collected included also results of the participant observation of the cityscape and interactions with its denizens. Results of participant observation were also an important part of data collection, as it allowed me to notice the possible contrasts between declarations and practice or confirm some sets of information.

The area of case study

The complex ethnolinguistic structure of the Hölön Buir, along with Nantun (Zikmundová, Kapišovská, Khabtagaeva 2019), and regional migration patterns impact Nantun's social dynamics, including social mobility. The eminent linguist and researcher of this area, Juha Janhunen (1997), classified languages spoken in the whole of historical Manchuria, of which Nantun is a part,⁴ according to the following groups:

- larger indigenous languages: Manchurian, Mongolian, Korean;
- larger non-indigenous languages: Chinese, Russian, Japanese;
- smaller indigenous languages: Dagurian, Khamnigan,⁵ Evenki and Nanai;
- smaller non-indigenous languages: Buryat, Oirad, Kyrgyz.

3 Under joint project with Adam Mickiewicz University entitled *Kinship and sedentarisation in urban areas of Inner Asia: Hailar, Ulan Ude, Ulaanbaatar*.

4 Historically, Hölön Buir was not a part of Inner Mongolia but under Heilongjiang.

5 Janhunen claims Khamnigan to be the Mongolian language, while other scholars, like Sichinbaatar, refer to it as one of the Evenki languages. Its users have very complex cross-ethnic status, but they are mostly defined as a group of Evenki. There also might be different groups of Khamnigans (Nowicka, Zhanaev 2020: 55–84).

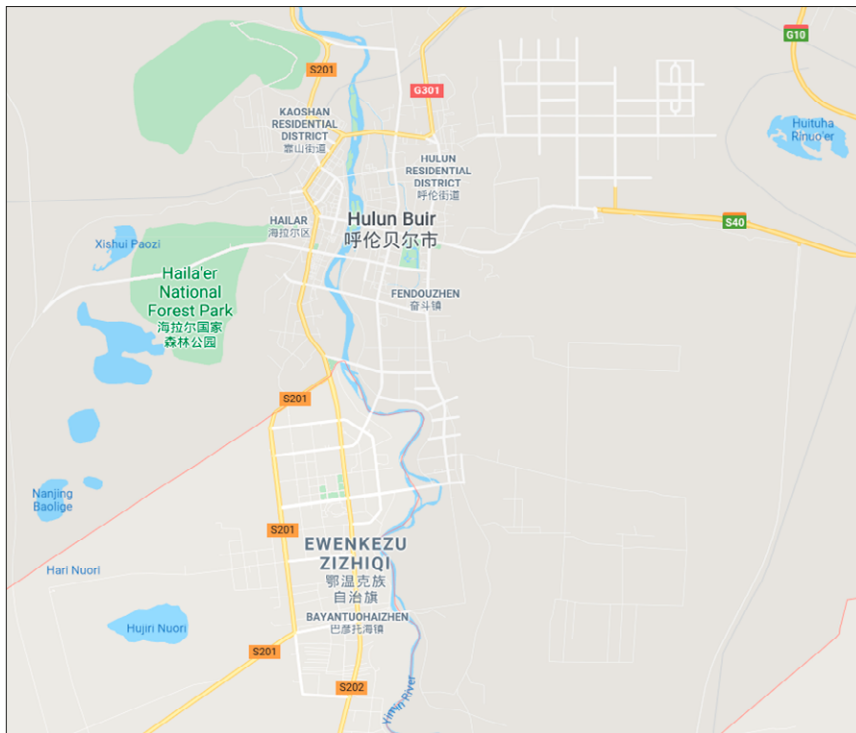


Fig. 1. Nantun (Ewenk Autonomous Banner/ Ewenke zu Zizhiqi) and Hailar (Hölön Buir). Source: Google Maps.

China's peripheries are inhabited by herding communities, among which trans-border kin groups can be found. The contemporary communities arrived in the analysed areas in different periods. In the Qing era, Hailar Dagurs (and to a smaller extent the Barguts) served as the administrative elite and Solon Evenks as the military force, while the Ööld and Dörbets were re-settled from Xinjiang. The Republican period marks the inflow of the Buriat and Khamnigan anti-communist partisans. The rise of the PRC brought the appearance of Khorchin Mongols and Qiqihar Dagurs. In the "New China", nomadic peoples became an object of communist modernisation attempts, including imposed sedentarisation. Nantun's early urbanisation (understood as *chengzhenhua*) included the stage of creating hutong-style neighbourhoods near some traditional official administrative residences or scattered settlements. The second phase of development included a significant spatial expansion coupled with an increased migration of Han Chinese. Nantun's post-nomadic population has retained the habit of rotating between rural areas, townships and metropolises. As the result of the spatial development of Nantun and the nearby Hailar, urbanised centres of the two counties (or "banners") merged infrastructurally into a dual town of two counties, but with a concurrent preservation of a distinct socio-ethnic microcosm.

The spatial development of Nantun can be easily tracked within the cityscape. The stage of brick houses (*hutong*) in the core centre that can be called the “old Nantun”, can still be observed. These houses are partially abandoned, partially in informal use. In the past, their inhabitants were largely members of the old migrations from the Qing era and early PRC period. The subsequent early Deng-era blocks (the “middle Nantun” of the transition period) covered a smaller space and were inhabited by a significant Buriat community. The most recent area of “new Nantun” currently dominates the city space. The modern apartment micro-districts became a typical Chinese town’s melting pot of various ethnic and social groups, with some exceptions for attempts to re-create Buriat neighbourhoods.

Literature

The complexity of ethnic issues is under constant and ongoing analysis by multiple researchers. This study reflects some ideas of construction, liminality and negotiations of nationalities and their identities based on: Elliott (2001; 2015), Gawlikowski (1983), Joniak-Lüthi (2013; 2015). Nomadic peoples of Mongolic areas have been a subject of long-term anthropological and ethnographic studies. Herding families, kinship ties and specific social structures were an eminent topic (Szynkiewicz 1981; Kabzińska-Stawarz 1991; Mróz 1977; 2016; Atwood 2012; 2015). The decline of mobile pastoralism and sedentarisation (Humphrey, Sneath 1999) mostly began to be investigated in recent decades. For Inner Mongolia, important work covered Höhhot’s social relations and hybridisation of the Han Chinese and Mongolian societies (Jankowiak 1993). The post-Soviet urbanisation of Mongols in Ulaanbaatar, their social mobility and networks were analysed in recent studies (Plueckhahn 2020; Empson 2020; Rakowski 2016; 2020). A special place in the research on China’s nomadic sedentarisation should be given to Erdemutu (2021), who included aspects of spatial as well as social mobilities. He analysed a flash process in Inner Mongolia consisting of the stages of sedentarisation: in a Mongolian *yurt* (*ger*), then in “dust houses” (*shoroo asar*), sometimes brick houses or hutongs, and finally city blocks. His works also included the post-nomadic creation of “cultural space” (*wenhua kongjian*) (Erdemtu 2021: 244, 258–259). Spatial mobility and urbanisation was included in a survey research on Dagurs (Narenqimuge, Yi, De 2013). Above mentioned studies focus on cases of an exact ethnic group without referring to complex interactions between nationalities. There is still a niche left to have a closer view on the migration and sedentarisation of multi-ethnic social groups.

In this paper, I include primary ethnographic data from the fieldwork on under-researched sub-ethnic groups – the Khorchin Mongols and Qiqihar (Nonni) Dagurs, and their migrations. The latter is surprisingly absent from the studies mentioned above,

as it is not distinguished from Hailar Dagurs, even though their languages, economies and social networks indicate more differences than similarities.

Nantun's ethnic mosaic – the empirical findings

The presentation of Nantun's complexity will be based on the ethnolinguistic key, which follows an approach already existing in the ethnographic literature regarding the Hölön Buir region. Imposed sedentarisation resulted in the emergence of multi-ethnic settlements of various communities. The ethnic distinction of already very diverse populations became even more problematic. "Ethnic categories are not intrinsic qualities that are active in people at every moment, but must be practiced in order to have significance" (Grant 2022: 8), and since each nationality inhabiting Nantun has historical baggage of cross-ethnic relations, putting all of them in a tiny area has created a Gordian knot of social relations. From the declining but subtle Manchu identity to the extremely fragmented and complex Mongolian one, each group contributes to the dynamic microcosm of this small town.

Nantun's newly urbanised space created more opportunities for connections between post-nomadic nationalities – not only inside themselves but, notably, between peoples with farming and urban backgrounds. These interactions created the need for a larger variety of occupations in trade, service administration, etc. Social and working networks emerged as means to survive (in the face of the decreasing efficiency of herding) or upgrade an economic status (owing to work and education opportunities). As a result, an economic hybridisation occurred: on the one hand, previously agricultural communities approached herding communities and appropriated some of their economic activities, while on the other hand, herders began to enter new occupations, but staying in constant exchange with their kinsmen in the countryside, they maintained traditional herding or hunting-related activities.

Fieldwork-based empirical data clearly suggest that the time of the given group's emergence in the region (e.g. the Qing era, the early PRC, the post-Deng era) played some importance in the creation of social networks between the groups, and this continued to impact social relations. However, not everything can be explained even by the dualistic distinction between inhabitants since the Qing era and the latecomers since, on the one hand, old social networks remained, and on the other, they were penetrated by the later waves of migrants, even though selectively. The Khorchins had better options to integrate with the indigenous inhabitants, while the Buriats symbolically questioned the established hierarchies of Dagurs and Solons. At the same time, they intermarried with Mongolian nationalities other than Buriats or even with Qiqhar Dagurs, who arrived later, in the 1960s.

Fieldwork in Nantun reveals some issues with Janhunen's classification.⁶ In the case of Nantun, the mother tongues of the population come from the Mongolic, Tungusic and Chinese linguistic groups. What makes the picture complicated is the use of various languages in spoken and written form, as well as the linguistic transitions on the dialect, sub-dialect or inter-dialect level. The Korean, Kirgiz and Nanai languages (the latter being Hezhen for China⁷), or their native users, have not been noted by Janhunen.⁸ The Khamnigan language is used, but in Nantun – unlike in Old Barga – the Khamnigans tend to declare themselves as Buryats⁹ and do not commonly use it in public. However, other researchers indicate not only the presence of the Khamnigans in Nantun, but even their command of this language. Manchurian is used only as written language; even when its users can speak it, this rarely seems to happen. The Manchu language does have a posthumous life, but its users are not of Manchu, but of Mongol ethnicity.

Significant – and not included in Janhunen's classification – are four Mongolic languages that are widely represented among the (Eastern) Mongolian, Bargu-Buryat, Oirat and Dagur population. However, most of them have dialectic variations, which are distant from each other and highly contextual. Oirat is represented by Ööld and historically by Dörbet. Bargu-Buryat has sub-dialects of New and Old Bargu and (Khor) Buryat. The Dagur language is automatically associated with the local historical lingua franca and the elitist language of Hailar Dagurs. It was commonly used in Nantun by all ethnic groups, including the local Han Chinese, and by all nationalities even until the 1980s. This indicates the continuity of the Dagur language's prestige even seven decades after the collapse of the Qing empire and three decades after changes in the official ethnic power hierarchy under the PRC. What the linguistic analysis missed (and what was clearly visible during my fieldwork) was the presence of the heavily hybridised Qiqhar Dagur, who were incorrectly considered as completely Sinitised. The (Eastern) Mongolian is associated with the Bargu (as being very close to Mongolian standards); however, it is usually classed as a dialect of the Bargu-Buryat language. Additionally, some variants of standard Mongolian close to Chakhar (standard for Inner Mongolia) and Khalkha (from the neighbouring Republic of Mongolia) are used. Strongly present is a peculiar Khorchin dialect. Its specifics are reflected by being a syncretic ethnolect incorporating not only 40–60% of Chinese vocabulary, but also multiple preserved Manchu terms. It consists of whole structures

⁶ See an alternative approach in Zikmundová et al. 2019 and Golik 2011.

⁷ The Nanais are classified as a nationality in Russia, but some researchers identify them with the Hezhen, while others see them as distinct ethnic groups.

⁸ Janhunen mentioning Kyrgyz as a language spoken in Manchuria creates a puzzle here.

⁹ On the complex Khamnigan–Buryat relations, see Nowicka, Zhanaev 2020: 53–82.

of the Chinese language and has a grammar different from Mongolian and Chinese (Shatz 2012; Baioud 2017). This dialect reflects the Khorchins' complexity in the region and the context related to the heterodoxy of this ethno-linguistic group. First of all, there are two original sub-dialectal forms, which are the Jirem variant and the Khinggan variant. The differences between them are noticeable, even to the extent of creating confusion among the users of each variant. This aspect seemed to have been omitted in linguistic research. The hypothesis is that the domination of the Jirem version makes the Khinggan variant marginal or triggers its assimilation into the Jirem variant or other Mongolian languages and dialects.

As a result of this mosaic and social networks (presented below), all combinations of linguistic proficiency are present: from monolingualism (usually in Chinese, sometimes in one of the minority languages) to proficiency in multiple languages. This situation is not surprising in multi-ethnic areas. Specific to Nantun, however, is the ability to use a variety of scripts: not only the classical Mongolian and Chinese, but also often the Japanese, Manchu, Cyrillic (Russian and Mongolian variants), and even the Latin script. The combination of languages and scripts in use varied even among the closest family members (Zikmundová, Kapišovská, Khabtagaeva 2019: 36–43).

Apart from the linguistic aspects, the ethnic categories often refer to groups linguistically assimilated into other groups, mostly Han. I was not able to track a Manchu community in Nantun. In the neighbouring city of Hailar, Manchu is still present as a main identity. In Nantun, my interlocutors referred to it only as ancestral and chose another ethnic group as a point of reference. Additionally, my interlocutors had also Orochen, Miao and Russian ancestry. These were not important minorities in terms of social relations, as their representatives had multi-ethnic origins and were already linguistically Sinified. The Russian (or Sino-Russian) minority does inhabit the region, however, including Nantun itself (Zikmundová, Kapišovská, Khabtagaeva 2019: 33). Their history results suggest that Russians were integrated into the "older" or indigenous social networks (Peshkov 2011: 137). The Miao and the Orochens were found to be integrated with migrants from the 1960s.

The example of linguistic research provides data on the basis which it is possible to indicate ethnic negotiations within social networks. Firstly, the language does not determine ethnicity, but it indicates social networks. Nationalities that approach new waves of Khorchin migrants or Han Chinese will prioritise their languages or dialects, often in combination with mixed marriages and common, urban occupations. Therefore, the rise and decline of language use can indicate a dynamic shift in social, economic and power relations.

The second issue is that among the older waves of settlers, the ethnolect evolves with subsequent generations towards a more normative form. This inter-dialect was named a "Khorchin-type Standard Mongol" (Zikmundová, Kapišovská, Khabtagaeva 2019: 34).

Minzu*	Ethnographic group	Sub-ethnic group
Mongol	Bargu-Buryat	Bargu
Mongol	Bargu-Buryat	(Shenekhen)/(Khor) Buryat
Mongol	Oirad	Ööld
Mongol	Oirad	Dörbet***
Mongol	Central/Eastern/Southern Mongol**	Khorchin
Dagur	Dagur	Hailar Dagur
Dagur	Dagur	Qiqihar Dagurs****
Manchu	Manchu	Manchu***
Evenk	Southern Tungus	Solon Evenk
Evenk	Southern Tungus	Khamnigan
Hezhen	Southern Tungus	Hezhen
Orochen	Southern Tungus	Orochen
Russian	Russian	Russian***
Miao (Hmong)	Miao (Hmong)	Miao (Hmong)***
Han Chinese	Han Chinese	Han
Hui	Hui	Hui

Fig. 2. The ethno-linguistic composition of main groups in Nantun.

* Nationality (*minzu*) according to the Chinese administration's classification, currently translated into English as "ethnic group".

** According to different classifications. Additionally, there has even been a proposal to distinguish them as a group with a separate language of Mongolian.

*** Currently linguistically almost entirely Sinified.

**** Classified as Nonni Dagurs, but their self-identification is as Qiqihar Dagurs. Sources: The author's own studies based on fieldwork (interviews) and Zikmundová, Kapišovská, Khabtagaeva 2019.

The descendants of Khorchin migrants to Nantun in the 1950s and 1960s partially abandoned their ancestral dialect and transformed their identity from “Khorchin” to “Mongol”. There has been a constant post-Deng era influx of new waves of Khorchins from their original homeland. The latter speak proper Khorchin and even impact Mongolian languages in the regions with “Khorchinsation” of other ethnographic and ethnic groups.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that persons who arrived with the “old” and “new” waves of migrations often function in multiple social networks and may even live parallel to each other. Uradyn E. Bulag writes about the Inner Mongolian perception of “bad” and “good” Han (Chinese) (Uradyn 2012). In Nantun, a similar dualistic attitude appears to be projected on Khorchins. Nantun’s indigenous nationalities (i.e. its inhabitants since the Qing era) use a distinction of Khorchins into two groups, e.g. “bad Khorchins” and “Mongols”. The perceived distance might be partially correlated with the different waves of migration. The lower acculturation of the new waves of Khorchin migrants, who use drastically distinct dialects and reflect the cultural habits of the agricultural-based cultures, may situate them closer socially to the Han Chinese. On the other hand, Khorchins who arrived with earlier migrations reflect strong acculturation to herding minorities. They become users of the already mentioned “Khorchin-type Standard Mongol” inter-dialect of Bargu-influenced or standardised Khorchin dialects which reflect interactions with indigenous languages and dialects. These persons exemplify social mobility resulting from the change of sub-ethnic status in the local community.

Migration and sedentarisation patterns – conclusions from fieldwork

Data provided by the interviews allows to conduct a preliminary mapping of the movement of various groups. The spatial distribution of nationalities and ethnic groups reflects some trends that can be linked to informal social networks.

The temporal usage of goods refers to the granted usage of belongings or pastureland by family members on granted terms. In terms of dwellings, it applies not only to the hutongs. Strikingly, the “middle Nantun” block settlements, which were dominated by the Buriats, had a daily rotation of inhabitants with each of the apartments being temporarily used by family members coming to town. Local migrations between the countryside and the town are a result of the availability of services, also to the rural population. Another phenomenon typical for the herding families is that it is not always the middle and young generation that move to town; in many cases,

¹⁰ One of the channels of this process was public schooling. Teachers are supposed to use standard Mongolian while teaching, but Khorchin teachers coming with the new migration are often unable or reluctant to learn it. Considering their significant numbers, local children leave school speaking Khorchin – either partially or even instead of their native ethnolect. Another cause of this process is a significant share of marriages with Khorchins.

older persons¹¹ moved together with the school-age children in order to receive public services, while the middle generation stayed in the countryside. Similarly as in Mongolia, urban and rural parts of the families constantly rotated, providing the circulation of goods and services.

The complex ethnic structure and regional migration patterns also impact Nantun's spatial development. Apart from the already mentioned old blocks, Sheneken Buryats stay in the countryside or move to the "new Nantun".¹² Very few families choose to move permanently to Hailar;¹³ they prefer to commute to the city if they work there. Among the nationalities present in the region since the Qing era, Öölds often migrated to Nantun. As to the diverse groups of Evenks, after the foundation of the PRC the Solon Evenks became a nominal political power in Nantun, therefore the town became their centre (with a few settling in Hailar). The Hamnigans and Olguya Evenks preferred to remain in Old Barga or move to Chinese metropolises. The Hailar Dagurs were a part of the oldest settlement in Hailar and Nantun, and consisted of an intellectual elite. In the PRC, with establishing of the Evenk Autonomous Banner in Nantun, the Dagur Hailars became politically marginalised by the Solon Evenks. They mostly remained in Nantun, with some migrations to Hailar. In contrast to those ethnic groups, the Barguts migrate to Hailar even when they work in Nantun.¹⁴

The above-mentioned ethnic groups (with the exception of Buriats) used to shape and Nantun hutong area's urban and social fabric. After its partial disintegration, fieldwork revealed the existence of relatively stable social networks from the Qing period among the inhabitants of the "old Nantun". Those *khamaa* include the descendants of such eminent figures as General Hailancha (1740–1793)¹⁵ or the scholar and politician Merse (1894–?).¹⁶ Even though the diversity of their occupations might suggest the distribution of these groups in various social classes, their status also emerges from those unofficial networks. Therefore, their relocations from former hutongs to the upgraded micro-districts cannot be considered according to the classical understanding of gentrification and precariate's experimentation. Even the poorer groups from those ethnicities have an agency via their kinsmen.

11 When elderly herders become unable to work with the cattle, they tend to move to the city. This phenomenon I have observed also in other parts of Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang.

12 Mostly to its eastern part.

13 According to my informants, some five or six families live near the reconstructed Qing residence and a few more in other parts of Hailar.

14 Except for those who intermarry with other ethnic groups and move to Nantun.

15 A statue of General Hailancha stands in front of the Evenk Museum in Nantun.

16 Or Mersentej; in Chinese, Guo Daofu.

Apart from the hutong area, a separate older neighbourhood was created and developed in the old blocks in the eastern part of Nantun by the presumably stable community of Hui Muslims. Even with the construction of the grand mosque in the western part of the town, the Huis were hardly visible there. Their older micro-district kept a small but vibrant community which, additionally, might not be quickly spatially disintegrated.

Buriats are the descendants of the anti-communist White Army.¹⁷ These new arrivals came into conflict with the earlier inhabitants of the region, but they created a vibrant community; this left them relatively less vulnerable than other post-Qing migrant ethnic groups. The waves of Khorchin Mongol migrations are an important factor.¹⁸ The older waves were partially¹⁹ inculturated²⁰ into the local population in Nantun and the countryside. Members of the most recent ones often remain culturally alien; they move to Hailar for business and public employment. The older migrants already function in stable networks, which decreases their vulnerability. The Qiqihar Dagurs came to Nantun in the 1960s, partly settling in the countryside, currently moving to both Hailar and Nantun. Yet the Qiqihar Dagurs are not the eminent elite, like the admired and romanticised local Hailar Dagurs; they seem to be a relatively vulnerable ethnic group, mainly occupying precarious positions, with a relatively significant group living on the social margins. Apart from those who merged with local communities, they were the most precarious group next to the Han Chinese.

Similarly to Khorchins, some of the Qiqihar Dagurs integrated into the herding and minority communities, while others, even within the same family, underwent Sinification and became closer to the Han Chinese. Generally, they rely on their kinship network; also, according to some civil servants in the county, they are an important group of beneficiaries of the welfare policy. This brings them into conflict with other nationalities. While newly built apartments are hardly accessible to the younger generation of old settlers (those who usually receive compensation for the land or even hutongs), the Qiqihar Dagurs living below the poverty level can receive them from the local government.

17 White Army (*Belaya armiya*) – an anti-Soviet armed movement during the Russian Civil War. For Urga (today's Ulaanbaatar), see Giżycki 2011.

18 Hölön Buir region was historically under Heilongjiang and became a part of Inner Mongolia partially with an effort of Khorchin communists (see Golik 2021: 178–180).

19 Some remained closer to Han Chinese settlers.

20 The Khorchin dialect is not mutually intelligible with other Mongolian dialects; also, the Khorchins are mostly farmers.

Conclusions

The Nantun area has experienced many waves of migrations. The most resilient, multi-ethnic social networks are based on the inhabitants from the Qing period. Those social structures selectively incorporated communities from the later waves of migrations. This paper provides a case-by-case insight into their ethnolinguistic and spatial stratification together with an attempt at drafting their interconnection. The identification with an ethnic group, as well as social and linguistic connections, impact decisions on migration directions. What has not been covered in the text, but was observed in the field, were trans-regional and trans-border migrations. Even when the main driving motivation was of economical nature, decision to migrate to closer and less developed areas in Manchuria, Inner Mongolia or Russia (rather than to Tianjin or Guandong) was interpreted by means of the presence of kin groups and cultural proximity. Based on interviews, it can be assumed that a person would be aware of the direction of migrations of their clan members and even of the people belonging to their social network. Therefore, it is possible that my informants were knowledgeable and precise when they told me how many of each family from their clan or hometown had moved from the grasslands and settled down in other places than the “standard” one for each ethnic group. As a result, even under an umbrella of universal rural–urban migrations and sedentarisation of nomadic populations, the spatial organisation of a settlement reflects not only the grand processes but also the local specificity. Even with the ongoing homogenisation of urban fabric and infrastructural connectivity between dual cities, the social fabric still distinguishes Nantun from Hailar.

Appendix



Fig. 3. Former residential hutong turned into a karaoke bar. Source: the author's fieldwork archive. Photo by K. Golik (2019).



Fig. 4. Minority *huqin* instrument craft centre in a *hutong*. Source: the author's fieldwork archive. Photo by K. Golik (2019).

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Summary

The main focus of this paper is mapping the ethnolinguistic groups with contemporary migrations and impacting urban space in the borderland town of the North-Western frontier of the People's Republic of China (PRC). A multi-ethnic Hölön Buir region's Evenk Autonomous Banner (Nantun), was selected for the research field. Its inhabitants include post-herding nationalities of Mongols, Evenks and

Dagurs. I refer to ethnic and linguistic categories to map social networks and then attempt to track their migration patterns from rural areas to urban spaces. The hypothesis is that the ethnolinguistic dimension plays a role in the spatial sedentarisation of social mobilities and migrations in this area.

The social processes in Nantun emerge on the China's borderlands. However, they do provide a glimpse of the wider transitions related to ethnic and social networks that shape the local situation, even in the shadow of the powerful and very active State. The question is how the migrants can impact the cityscape. Is ethnicity a factor in the context of urban sedentarisation?

Keywords: post-nomads, migration, sedentarisation, ethnicity, China, Mongols, Evenks, Dagurs, Inner Mongolia

Streszczenie

Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest mapowanie grup etnolingwistycznych wraz z migracjami i wpływem na przestrzeń miejską w mieście północno-zachodniego pogranicza Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej (ChRL). Do badań wybrano wieloetniczną Ewenkijską Chorągiew Autonomiczną (Nantun) w regionie Hōlōn Buir. Jego mieszkańcy obejmują postpasterskich: Mongołów, Ewenków i Dagurów. Odnoszę się do kategorii etnicznych i językowych w celu mapowania sieci społecznych, a następnie próbuję śledzić ich wzorce migracji z obszarów wiejskich do przestrzeni miejskich. Stawiam hipotezę, że wymiar etnolingwistyczny odgrywa rolę w przestrzennej sedentaryzacji ruchów społecznych i migracji na tym obszarze.

Procesy społeczne w Nantunie toczą się na peryferiach Chin. Jednak dają one wgląd w szersze przemiany związane z sieciami etnicznymi i społecznymi, które kształtują lokalny system społeczny – nawet w cieniu potężnego i bardzo aktywnego państwa. Pytanie brzmi, w jaki sposób migranci mogą wpływać na przestrzeń miejską. Czy etniczność jest czynnikiem w kontekście miejskiej sedentaryzacji?

Słowa kluczowe: postnomadzi, migracja, sedentaryzacja, etniczność, Chiny, Mongołowie, Ewenkowie, Dagurowie, Mongolia Wewnętrzna

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