https://www.hakaimagazine.com/features/prejudice-pride/

From Prejudice to Pride

In the 20th century, Japanese anthropologists and officials tried to hide the existence of the Indigenous Ainu. Then the Ainu fought back like their cousins, the bears.

Authored by

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The Nibutani neighborhood in Biratori has a population of about 500: nearly 70 percent are Ainu. “It’s a nice place to live,” says museum curator Hideki Yoshihara. Its valley still produces a wealth of food—20 percent of Hokkaido’s tomato crop grows here—and the bucolic pastures of cattle and horses offer a peaceful vista to tourists looking for peace and quiet. But outsiders have to want to come to this rural enclave. No tour buses swing through town. Nearly half of the annual visitors arrive from Europe and North America: they’re tourists who are comfortable renting a car and exploring on their own, often seeking out Ainu culture.
Over lunch, Yoshihara explains that the Nibutani museum is unique in Japan: it’s owned and operated by the people of Biratori. Many are descendants of the people who created the fish hooks, the dugout canoes, the salmon skin boots, the intricately carved knife handles and prayer sticks in the display cases. Kaizawa, the man talking to the high school students, is the great-grandson of a renowned 19th-century Ainu artist from Nibutani.

After the students leave, Kaizawa takes us to his studio, which sits in a cluster of artists’ workshops near the museum. Inside are tools, blocks of wood, finished pieces, and all sorts of art books—including a book from the popular manga series *The Golden Kamuy*, which features Ainu and Japanese characters. The cover depicts a man clutching a traditional Ainu knife—it’s based on a real object made by Kaizawa.
A few years before *The Golden Kamuy* came out, a prominent Japanese nationalist, artist Yoshinori Kobayashi, published a manga challenging the idea of the Ainu people and indigeneity in Japan. Kobayashi and other nationalists believe that all Japan belongs to just one founding ethnic group: the Japanese. I haven’t met any nationalists on this trip, at least not that I know of. But Kobayashi gave them a popular voice in the 1990s, when Japan’s economic bubble burst and the disenfranchised sought a target for their anger: Koreans, Chinese, Ainu.
Even so, the government is moving forward on its Ainu policy today, if slowly. It has yet to issue an official apology to the Ainu, or recognize Hokkaido as traditional Ainu territory, or even rewrite textbooks to reflect a more accurate history of Japanese colonization. One government official I talked to explained that the Japanese and Ainu had a very short history of *officially* living together. If the government were to offer a public apology, the Japanese people would be shocked. The first step would be to let people *know* of the Ainu, then apologize.
And that’s partly the problem: how do the Ainu assert their modern identity? Ishihara says it’s a question that she often asks herself. When she tells friends and colleagues about her family background, they often respond by saying that they don’t care if she is Ainu—something that makes her wince. “It’s like saying, despite the fact you are of despicable Ainu blood, I like you anyway,” she says.

And this reaction may be the reason why the number of self-identified Ainu dropped from almost 24,000 to 16,000 in less than a decade, from 2006 to 2013. It’s not as if claiming Ainu ancestry comes with many perks. Compared with ethnic Japanese, the Ainu have less education, fewer job opportunities, and lower incomes. The main thing that being Indigenous offers to the Ainu is pride.

https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/08/28/national/japans-government-stipulate-ainu-indigenous-people-first-time/#.Wsb8py7wbX4

Japan’s government to stipulate Ainu as ‘indigenous people’ for first time

Aug. 28, 2017

The central government is likely to stipulate for the first time in law that the Ainu are an “indigenous people” of Japan, according to sources.

Using the phrase “indigenous people” in a law would be an additional step by the government to clarify its stance on the Ainu, as it issued a statement in 2008 recognizing them as an “indigenous people that have their own language, religious and cultural identity.”

The sources said Monday that the reference is likely to be made in a law the government is considering to improve Ainu living standards and education.

The Ainu people have lived for centuries in Hokkaido and nearby areas, including Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands.

They have struggled to pass down their language and culture after the government implemented an assimilation policy beginning in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) as Japan was undergoing rapid modernization.

A law was enacted in 1997 aimed at preserving Ainu culture and guaranteeing their human rights, about 100 years after the government introduced the assimilation policy. It was the nation’s first legislation acknowledging the existence of an ethnic minority, but it stopped short of saying that the Ainu are an indigenous people.

In 2007, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, asking each country to take legislative steps to protect their rights. Japan was among the countries that supported the declaration.

In addition to the new Ainu law, the government is planning to open facilities to promote Ainu culture in Hokkaido in 2020, when Tokyo will host the Olympics.

In the past, politicians have made remarks drawing flak from the Ainu, including when Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone said in 1986 that “Japan is a homogeneous nation.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/world/asia/03ainu.html

Recognition for a People Who Faded as Japan Grew

By NORIMITSU ONISHIJULY 3, 2008

NIBUTANI, Japan — The Ainu had lived on Japan’s northernmost island for centuries, calling their home Ainu Mosir, or Land of Human Beings. Here, they had fished, hunted, worshiped nature and established a culture that yielded “Yukar,” an oral poem of Homeric length.

> But just as with America’s expansion West, the Japanese pushed north in the late 19th century in the first sign of their imperialist ambitions. Japanese settlers decimated the Ainu population, seized their land and renamed it Hokkaido, or North Sea Road.
>
> And yet it was only a few weeks ago that the Japanese government finally, and unexpectedly, recognized the Ainu as an “indigenous people.” Parliament introduced and quickly passed a resolution stating that the Ainu had a “distinct language, religion and culture,” setting aside the belief, long expressed by conservatives, that Japan is an ethnically homogeneous nation.
>
> The recognition — coming after decades of opposition by a government fearful of compensation claims — seemed timed to an international conference of indigenous peoples that Japan is hosting this week in Hokkaido. The Ainu’s lack of recognition could have proved embarrassing for Japan’s government, particularly since the conference also comes close to the Group of 8 summit meeting in Hokkaido next week.
>
> In Hokkaido, and particularly in towns like Nibutani that have a high concentration of Ainu, official recognition has engendered strong emotions ranging from satisfaction at a long-sought status to suspicion that Tokyo’s commitment to the Ainu will not last beyond the summit meeting.

“We were really deeply moved,” said Tadashi Kato, president of the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, the country’s largest organization of Ainu. “I felt that, not only our members, but especially our ancestors were rejoicing, even though they were of course silent. We couldn’t hold back our tears.”

Mr. Kato, 69, added: “Some people are saying that this is meaningless. But that’s not the point. That Parliament approved this is big — this is the first step.”

> What, then, is the next step? Is it to reclaim traditional lands or argue for special hunting or fishing rights, as indigenous peoples elsewhere have done? Is it to ask for an apology? Mr. Kato was not saying just yet, and opinions here were divided.
>
> Complicating matters is the government’s studiously vague recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous people. So far, it has not said whether recognition will entail certain rights and has indicated that its own definition of “indigenous

people" will be narrower than the one adopted by the United Nations General Assembly last year in its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Japan voted for the nonbinding declaration, but the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand opposed it on the grounds that it went too far in giving indigenous peoples rights over land and legislation. Still, in recent months, Canada and Australia have offered apologies for mistreating their indigenous populations in the past, and New Zealand transferred about 435,000 acres of plantation forest and forest rents to seven Maori tribes.

Shiro Kayano, director of the Nibutani Ainu Museum here, said the Japanese government should follow other governments' examples and offer the Ainu a broad apology, though he was pessimistic.

"In other countries, governments have reflected on and apologized for their mistaken policies of the past, but the Japanese government will never do that," said Mr. Kayano, 50, who is the son of the late Shigeru Kayano, the first — and so far only — Ainu to have been elected a national lawmaker.

Mr. Kayano's museum — with its displays of traditional thatch houses and clothes made of bark — occupies a central spot in Nibutani, a town where 64 of its 190 families have registered themselves as Ainu. In the town center, a large red sign, "Nibutani, home of the Yukar," and a single, modest restaurant called Bee's and offering "Ainu cuisine" are the only tip-offs that Nibutani is not your average Japanese town.

On the edge of town, next to a river and the entrance of the forest, Yasuko Yamamichi runs an Ainu language school and called the official recognition "empty." She also wanted an apology but, like other Ainu interviewed, was hesitant about reclaiming traditional lands.

"It's a little late for the Ainu to start telling the Japanese to do this and that," Ms. Yamamichi, 61, said.

In a study by the Hokkaido prefectural government in 2006, just under 24,000 people identified themselves as Ainu. Most were of mixed blood and lacked the telltale fair skin or hirsute features that distinguished older Ainu from the Japanese. But it is not known how many live outside Hokkaido since Japan has never conducted a nationwide census of Ainu.

The study found that 3.8 percent of Ainu received welfare benefits, compared with 2.5 percent of the non-Ainu living in the same communities. Only 17.4 percent of the Ainu had graduated from college, less than half of the 38.5 percent for the rest of the population.

"There is certainly a gap between the Ainu and the general population, but the gap is far smaller compared to, say, Native Americans or Inuits," said Teruki Tsuneomoto, a law professor and director of the Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies at the University of Hokkaido.

But the downside is that the Ainu have few of the special rights granted to indigenous peoples elsewhere and all but a minority were absorbed into the larger culture, said Mr. Tsuneomoto, who is not Ainu. "In Japan's case, for better or for worse, the assimilation policies since the Meiji era were so successful that almost nothing remains of the Ainu's traditional way of life," he said.

In 1869, one year after the start of the Meiji era, Tokyo set up the Hokkaido Colonization Board to encourage Japanese settlers to move to Hokkaido. The Ainu were eventually stripped of their land, forced to abandon hunting and fishing for farming, forbidden to speak their own language and taught only Japanese at school. That history — little known by the Japanese today and even among the Ainu themselves — was repeated later in Japan's Asian colonies.

"That's why I think it's a good thing that Japan lost World War II," said Koichi Kaizawa, 60, an official at the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Association. "If Japan had won, so many others would have lost their language and culture."

But Jin Sunazawa, 45, a businessman, said he did not feel the "hostility toward the Japanese government" that some older Ainu did. Economic independence, he said, should be the Ainu's leading priority.

"It's not healthy to keep blaming discrimination or history, and not work and pay taxes," Mr. Sunazawa said.

"I don't think assimilation is bad," he added. "I'm Sunazawa first, Ainu second."

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/world/asia/china-xinjiang-manchu-xibe-language.html

Manchu, Former Empire's Language, Hangs On at China's Edge

By ANDREW JACOBS Jan. 11, 2016

QAPQAL XIBE AUTONOMOUS COUNTY, China — Loyal to the core and prized for their horsemanship, several thousand Manchu soldiers heeded the emperor's call and, with families and livestock in tow, embarked in 1764 on a trek that took them from northeastern China to the most distant fringes of the Qing dynasty empire, the Central Asian lands now known as Xinjiang.

It was an arduous, 18-month journey, but there was one consolation: After completing their mission of pacifying the western frontier, the troops would be allowed to take their families home.

"They were terribly homesick here and dreamed of one day going back east," said Tong Hao, 56, a descendant of the settlers, from the Xibe branch of the Manchus, who arrived here emaciated and exhausted. "But sadly, it was not to be."

Two and a half centuries later, the roughly 30,000 people in this rural county who consider themselves Xibe have proved to be an ethnographic curiosity and a linguistic bonanza. As the last handful of Manchu speakers in northeast China have died, the

Xibe have become the sole inheritors of what was once the official tongue of one of the world's most powerful empires, a domain that stretched from India to Russia and formed the geographic foundation for modern China.

> In the decades after the revolution in 1911 that drove the Qing from power after nearly 300 years, Mandarin Chinese vanquished the Manchu language, even in its former stronghold in the forested northeast. But the isolation of the Xibe in this parched, far-flung region near the Kazakh border helped keep the language alive, even if its existence was largely forgotten until the 1940s.

For scholars of Manchu, especially those eager to translate the mounds of Qing dynasty documents that fill archives across China, the discovery of so many living Manchu speakers has been a godsend.

> "Imagine if you studied the classics and went to Rome, spoke Latin and found that people there understood you," said Mark C. Elliott, a Manchu expert at Harvard University who said he remembered his first encounter, in 2009, with an older Xibe man on the streets of Qapqal County. "I asked the guy in Manchu where the old city wall was, and he didn't blink. It was a wonderful encounter, one that I'll never forget."

Despite the local government's best efforts, which include language instruction in primary schools and the financing of a newspaper, what is known here as Xibe is facing the common fate of many of the world's languages: declining numbers of speakers and the prospect of extinction.

> The publication Ethnologue identifies almost 300 living languages in China, half of them on the edge of the abyss as Mandarin, the nation's official language, continues to subsume minority tongues. Among those under pressure, 20 have fewer than 1,000 speakers, according to the website the World of Chinese.
>
> Although many young people here still speak Xibe at home, few of them can read its graphically bold script, made up of 121 letters and written vertically, from left to right. One recent day in the offices of The Qapqal News, a four-page gazette composed mostly of articles translated from the state-run news media, He Wenjun, 72, a teacher and translator, said he worried that his children and grandchildren could not read or write Xibe.
>
> "Language is not only a tool for communication, but it ties us to who we are and makes us feel close to one another," said Mr. He, who has spent decades translating imperial Qing documents into Chinese. "I wonder how much longer our mother tongue can survive."

Even as intermarriage and migration to other parts of the country dilute their identity, the Xibe remain proud of their history and especially their role helping to secure the lands that greatly expanded China's borders. It was the Manchu emperor Qianlong who tapped the Xibe to settle the Ili Valley here after Qing soldiers massacred or exiled the nomads who had long menaced the empire's western borderlands.

> In the decades that followed, a succession of rebellions, many of them led by the region's ethnic Uighurs, kept the Xibe garrisons busy and sometimes thinned their ranks. One battle in 1867 nearly halved the Xibe population, to 13,000.
>
> Until the 1970s, the Xibe remained isolated from the ethnic Kazakhs and Uighurs who settled Ghulja, a city that sits on the far side of the Ili River. The Xibe also ate pork and practiced a blend of shamanism and Buddhism, making intermarriage with the Muslim Kazakhs and Uighurs relatively rare.
>
> "We happily lived in our own world and rarely took boats to the other side of the river," said Tong Zhixian, 61, a retired forestry official who sings and performs traditional Xibe dances at the county's new history museum.

The Xibe language has gradually evolved from Manchu as it absorbed vocabulary from the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Mongolians and even the Russians who passed through Xinjiang. Unlike Mandarin, which has few borrowed words, Xibe is flecked with adopted nouns like pomodoro (tomato), mashina (sewing machine) and alma (the Uighur word for apple). Scholars say that the phonetic diversity of Xibe, a language thought to be related to Turkish, Mongolian and Korean, allows speakers to easily produce the sounds of other tongues.

> "We fought with the other groups, but there were so few of us here and no one else spoke our language, so we had to learn theirs to survive," said Mr. Tong, an engineer at the county power company who is vice president of the Xibe Westward March Culture Study Association, a local group that promotes Xibe language and history. "That's why we are so good at learning foreign languages."
>
> Those linguistic talents have long been an asset to China's leaders. In the 1940s, young Xibe were sent north to study Russian, and they later served as interpreters for the newly victorious Communists. In recent years, the government has brought Xibe speakers to Beijing to help decipher the sprawling Qing archives, many of them of imperial correspondence that few scholars could read.
>
> "If you know Xibe, it takes no time for you to crack the Qing documents," said Zhao Zhiqiang, 58, one of six students from Qapqal County sent to the capital in 1975, and who now heads the Manchu study department at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences. "It's like a golden key that opens the door to the Qing dynasty."
>
> But generous government funding might not be enough to save the language of the Manchus. At the county museum here, a sprawling collection of dioramas depicting the westward exodus, Mr. Tong spends most days performing to an empty room. After one recent performance, an ensemble piece that featured Xibe matrons twirling with very large knives, he wondered aloud whether he might be the last of his generation to keep such traditions alive.
>
> "Young people just aren't interested in this kind of thing," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Sure, they might study some Xibe in school, but once they leave the classroom, they plunge right back into Mandarin."

Yufan Huang contributed research from Beijing.

http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000272/manchu%2C-once-chinas-official-language%2C-could-lose-its-voice

Manchu, Once China's Official Language, Could Lose Its Voice

With few practical incentives to preserve their language, 10 million Manchus have found their mother tongue in a critical state.

Fan Yiying

May 29, 2017

HEILONGJIANG, Northeast China — Tao Qinglan can still speak her mother tongue, Manchu, but everything else has changed since she was born 72 years ago in Sanjiazi Village.

She now lives with her Manchu daughter and Han son-in-law in a modern brick house, and they speak Mandarin at home. None of the houses in the village have preserved the traditional Manchu feature of a kang stove-bed surrounding three sides of the room, and almost all their traditional clothes and books were wiped out during the Cultural Revolution.

"The clothes we wear, the house we live in, and the language we speak are now no different from those of the Han people," Tao sighs.

At the Two Sessions political meetings earlier this year, policy advisors proposed multimedia and educational strategies to protect ethnic minority languages, which they say are disappearing at an alarming rate. Manchu is one of 15 languages with fewer than 1,000 speakers.

The Manchu people are China's third-largest ethnic group, ruling over the entire country from 1644, when they established the Qing Dynasty, until 1911, when China became a republic. Their language, which has its own script, was the official language of government in China for nearly 300 years. But despite its high-status history compared to other ethnic minority languages, Manchu, too, is facing acute decline. Many young Manchu people see learning the language as an impractical and unprofitable hobby.

Many Manchus began to learn Chinese in the mid-1800s while their people were in power, because of the necessity of communicating with the country's Han majority. Now, after decades of education administered in Chinese script and Mandarin speech since the government pushed language unification in the 1950s, only a small number of the country's 10 million Manchus still speak and write their native language. In 2009, the United Nations declared Manchu a critically endangered language.

Most of the few remaining people who are fluent in Manchu are clustered in China's northeast, and particularly Sanjiazi, 90 kilometers northeast of Qiqihar City in the Manchu heartland. Built in 1689, Sanjiazi has remained relatively secluded from the outside world. That explains why the village has preserved a more authentic variety of spoken Manchu while most Manchus scattered through the country have lost their mother tongue.

Sanjiazi means "three families" in Mandarin, and most villagers are descended from three main families with the surnames Ji, Meng, and Tao. According to official statistics, 65 percent of Sanjiazi's 1,100 villagers are Manchu. When Tao was little, she spoke with her parents and grandparents entirely in Manchu.

But things changed when Tao went to school in the 1950s. China has 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, many with their own languages, as well as dozens of distinct regional languages that are not associated with a single ethnic group. To ease communication across the country, the State Council, China's cabinet, began to promote Mandarin in 1956, after establishing the Beijing dialect of Mandarin as the national standard for spoken Chinese the previous year.

"After I started school, I would speak Mandarin at home, and then gradually my parents spoke with me in Mandarin as well," Tao tells Sixth Tone. She became embarrassed to speak Manchu in public, feeling that people looked down on her for it.

Manchu was still the dominant language in Sanjiazi until the 1970s, when many Han people, mainly from Shandong province in China's east, migrated to the village. The Manchu villagers had to communicate with the Han settlers in Mandarin, and with high rates of intermarriage between the two groups, the Manchu language gradually declined.

Sanjiazi's village head, 52-year-old Meng Yanjie, says he mostly speaks Mandarin since he married a Han woman in 1984. "If I talk with my folks in Manchu when my wife is around, she thinks I'm trying to hide things from her," he says. "My son didn't want to learn Manchu because his mom is Han and talks to him in Mandarin all the time."

Manchu language experts predicted in 2007 that Manchu would die out within 10 years, but as yet the language can still be heard in the village. "But it goes without saying that it's dying little by little," says Meng's father, 86-year-old Meng Xianxiao. Of his nine adult children, the three eldest can speak Manchu decently, while the younger ones only know a few words.

The elder Meng says he can count on one hand the number of villagers who can speak Manchu as fluently as he does, and he doesn't even consider his own speech to be authentic. "Those who can really speak authentic Manchu have passed away already," Meng Xianxiao says.

Meng believes Manchu has not received the same official attention as other ethnic minority languages. "Unless it is a language that the government particularly values and takes seriously — like Tibetan, for instance — it's really difficult to protect and pass on," he says.

The central government has made efforts to protect ethnic minority languages in recent years, with an emphasis on the far western regions. The State Council has plans to roll out bilingual education from preschool to high school by 2020 in Xinjiang, Tibet, and the Tibetan areas of southwestern Sichuan province.

In Sanjiazi, too, the local government has supported Manchu language preservation and education, but the attempts have been less systematic. In 2010, the local government selected 16 seniors with proven ability in the language to help transmit Manchu, and another three in 2012. Each language guardian is paid 2,400 yuan ($350) per year — about one-quarter of their annual income — to meet regularly with the others at the village's language activity room, speak Manchu, and help interested villagers pick up the language.

Tao and Meng senior are two of the current language guardians. Nine have died since the program began. Tao feels a heavy sense of responsibility to help younger villagers learn the language, especially given that she receives a government stipend. "But what can I do if they don't want to learn?" she asks.

Sanjiazi has transformed over the past few decades, shifting from dairy farming to rice growing. Targeted investment since 2005 because of its status as the homeland of the Manchu language has made it relatively prosperous compared to its neighbors, such as a nearby village that is mostly home to the Daur ethnic group. Sanjiazi villagers now have internet access and modern appliances — but their priority is still farming.

Even the language guardians, who are all over 60, still meet mostly in the off-season, when the land is less demanding. "It's true that ethnic integrity should be prized, but our primary job is to farm and work to support our families," says Tao.

For most younger people from Sanjiazi, life offers two options: farm in the village, or work in the city. Learning Manchu is at best a hobby, at worst a distraction.

However, 40-year-old Shi Junguang is an exception. When he was in fifth grade, his school began to give occasional Manchu lessons, and it was only then that he realized Manchus had their own script, written in fluid cursive forms from top to bottom, and left to right.

‘‘It's silky and graceful," Shi says. "When writing in Manchu, it's like painting a beautiful picture." He immediately felt an affinity with the language and vowed to be part of passing it on, though other villagers discouraged him, saying it was a waste of his potential as the only high school graduate who remained in the village.

But Shi persisted, farming during the day and learning Manchu from his grandmother in the evenings. Shi's family is one of few in Sanjiazi where four generations still live under the same roof, and he took the opportunity to record his conversations with his grandmother so he could practice. He also treated other elders to dinner so he could chat with them.

‘‘Language is the key to a nation," he would tell skeptical villagers. "If I don't do something, it'll be gone before we know it."

In response to the central government's call to promote ethnic minority cultures, Sanjiazi Manchu Elementary School — the only school in the village — established the country's first official Manchu course in 2006. Naturally, Shi became the teacher. All pupils have two Manchu language classes each week from first to sixth grade.

But after 10 years of classes, Shi says few of his students can actually speak decent Manchu. "They don't have a language environment that enables them to practice at home," Shi says. Some parents are supportive, but others feel their children should focus on core subjects like Chinese, math, and even English.

In Meng Xiaoxian's eyes, the primary school lessons are in vain, as the students will have to attend middle school outside the village, where Manchu courses are not offered. "They'll forget it all in time," Meng says.

The local government believes they have done all they can. "The future of the Manchu language must rely on the Manchu people themselves," says Bai Ping, the deputy director of the Fuyu County bureau of ethnic and religious affairs, who is not

Manchu himself. “Whether or not Manchu is passed down depends on their self-discipline. As outsiders, we can’t be too strict with them.”

Shi, too, says that Sanjiazi alone can’t save the language, given that there are more than 10 million Manchus in China. “The language can only be preserved when all the Manchus in the country work and study together,” he says.

Lü Ping, a Manchu professor at Changchun Normal University in the northeast province of Jilin, has been researching Manchu for over a decade. She says that with more than 100 academic experts and Manchu majors — most of whom are ethnically Manchu — throughout the country, the language is unlikely to die out completely, which is fortunate, given that millions of historical records from the Qing Dynasty still await translation.

Lü feels it is unrealistic to expect all Manchus to reach a level of fluency in the language. “It is against national policy to revive Manchu [as a first language], as we’re not living in the Qing Dynasty anymore,” Lü says. But she believes consistent Manchu instruction from primary school to university is a viable strategy for ensuring that more people will be equipped to help carry the mantle.

Shi is optimistic about the language’s longevity, as long as students are willing. “The living Manchu elders are like sparks of fire,” he says. “If we have sufficient grass, it will burst into flames.”

Editor: Qian Jinghua.

https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/16/world/asia/16iht-manchu.4935046.html

China's Manchu speakers struggle to save language

By DAVID LAGUE MARCH 16, 2007

SANJIAZI, China — Seated cross- legged in her farmhouse on the kang, a brick sleeping platform warmed by a fire below, Meng Shujing lifted her chin and sang a lullaby in Manchu, softly but clearly.

> After several verses, the 82-year-old widow stopped, her eyes shining.
> "Baby, please fall asleep quickly," she said, translating a few lines of the song into Chinese. "Once you fall asleep, Mama can go to work. I need to set the fire, cook and feed the pigs."
> After 5 children, 14 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren, Meng has the confidence that comes from long experience. "If you sing like this, a baby gets sleepy right away," she said.
> She also knows that most experts believe the day is approaching when no child will doze off to the sound of these comforting words.
> Meng is one of 18 residents of this isolated village in northeastern China, all older than 80, who, according to Chinese linguists and historians, are the last native speakers of Manchu.

Descendants of seminomadic tribesmen who conquered China in the 17th century, they are the last living link to a language that for more than two and a half centuries was the official voice of the Qing Dynasty, the final imperial house to rule from Beijing and one of the richest and most powerful empires the world has known.

> With the passing of these villagers, Manchu will also die, experts say. All that will be left will be millions of documents and files in Chinese and foreign archives, along with inscriptions on monuments and important buildings in China, unintelligible to all but a handful of specialists.
> "I think it is inevitable," said Zhao Jinchun, an ethnic Manchu born in Sanjiazi who taught at the village primary school for more than two decades before becoming a government official in the city of Qiqihar, 50 kilometers, or 30 miles, to the south. "It is just a matter of time. The Manchu language will face the same fate as some other ethnic minority languages in China and be overwhelmed by the Chinese language and culture."

(While most experts agree that Manchu is doomed, Xibo, a closely related language, is likely to survive a little longer. Xibo is spoken by about 30,000 descendants of members of an ethnic group allied to the Manchus who in the 18th century were sent to the newly conquered western region of Xinjiang. But it too is under relentless pressure from Chinese.)

> The disappearance of Manchu will be part of a mass extinction that some experts forecast will lead to the loss of half of the world's 6,800 languages by the end of the century. But few of these threatened languages have risen to prominence and then declined as rapidly as Manchu.
> Within decades of establishing their dynasty in 1644, the Qing rulers had brought all of what was then Chinese territory under control. They then embarked on a campaign of expansion that roughly doubled the size of their empire to include Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia and Taiwan. However, the dynasty's fall in 1911 meant that the Manchus were relegated to the ranks of the more than 50 other ethnic minorities in China, their numbers dwarfed by the dominant Han, who today account for 93 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people, according to official statistics.

Indistinguishable by appearance, the Manchus have melded into the general population. There are now about 10 million Chinese citizens who describe themselves as ethnic Manchus. Most live in what are now the northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang, although there are also substantial numbers in Beijing and other northern cities.

For generations, the vast majority have spoken Chinese as their first language. Manchu survived only in small, isolated pockets like Sanjiazi, where, until a few decades ago, nearly all the residents were ethnic Manchus. Most are descended from the three main families that made up a military garrison established here in 1683 on the orders of the Qing emperor, Kangxi, to deter Russian territorial ambitions, according to Zhao.

The traditional Manchu-style wood- and-adobe farmhouses have largely been replaced by Chinese-style brick homes, the local residents say. The village now looks just like any other settlement in this region as a biting wind whips snow across the bare ground between the houses and the piles of dried cornstalks, stacked high to feed cattle and pigs through the winter.

Traditional shamanistic rites, along with ethnic dress and customs, have also been mostly abandoned, although some wedding and funeral ceremonies retain elements of Manchu rituals, Zhao said. But, villagers still observe one Manchu taboo that sets them apart from others in China's far northeast.

"We don't eat dog meat," Zhao said. "And we would never wear a hat made from dog fur." The prohibition, tradition has it, honors a dog credited with having saved the life of Nurhachi, the founder of the Manchu state, who lived from 1559 to 1626.

Even now, about three-quarters of Sanjiazi's 1,054 residents are ethnic Manchus but the use of Chinese has increased dramatically in recent decades as roads and modern communications have increasingly exposed them to the outside world. Only villagers of Meng's generation now prefer to speak Manchu.

"We are still speaking it, we are still using it," said Meng, a cheerful woman with thick gray hair pulled back in a neat bun. "If the other person can't speak Manchu then I'll speak Chinese."

But Meng disputes the findings of visiting linguists that there are 18 villagers left who can still speak fluently. By her standards, only five or six of her neighbors are word-perfect in Manchu.

Zhao, 53, on the other hand, estimates that about 50 people in the village have a working grasp of the language.

"My generation can still communicate in Manchu," he said, although he acknowledged that most villagers speak Chinese almost all the time at home.

Meng supports efforts to keep the language alive. Her 30-year-old grandson, Shi Junguang, has studied hard to improve his Manchu and teaches speaking and writing to the 76 pupils, 7 to 12 years old, at the village school.

This is the only primary school in China that offers classes in Manchu, according to officials from the local ethnic affairs office. These lessons, which Shi shares with one other teacher, take up only a small proportion of classroom time but they are popular with students, say the school's staff and other residents in the village.

"Because they are Manchus, they are interested in these classes," Shi said.

He is also teaching basic conversation to his 5-year-old son, Shi Yaobin, and encourages him to speak with his great-grandmother. "It would be a great blow for us if we lose our language," he said.

But most experts say that with so few people left to speak it, attempts to preserve Manchu are futile.

"The spoken Manchu language is now a living fossil," said Zhao Aping, an ethnic Manchu and an expert on Manchu language and history at Heilongjiang University in the provincial capital, Harbin. "Although we are expending a lot of energy on preserving the language and culture, it is very difficult. The environment is not right."

While scholars agree it is now only a matter of time before Manchu falls silent, in Sanjiazi, Meng clings to hope.

"I don't have much time," she said. "I don't even know if I have tomorrow. But I will use the time to teach my grandchildren.

"It is our language, how can we let it die? We are Manchu people."