

Original Paper

Research on the Language Protection Modes of Cross-Border
Ethnic Groups in China and Russia—Taking the Oroqen
nationality in China and the Evenki nationality in Russia as
Examples

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Abstract

Cross-border ethnic groups are a group of people living separately in two or more modern countries due to a long history of development. The Oroqen nationality and the Evenki nationality, as homologous ethnic groups living across the border of China and Russia, both belong to the Manchu-Tungusic group of Altaic languages, which are very similar and have great significance for the survival of the two ethnic cultures. With the historical changes and social development, the ethnic languages of the Oroqen nationality and the Evenki nationality are seriously on the danger of disappearing. In this regard, China and Russia have adopted institutionalized and systematic protection measures and formed their own distinctive language protection modes from three aspects: policies and laws, theoretical research and educational practice, which has alleviated the former endangered situation of ethnic languages. Based on the necessity of cross-border ethnic language protection, this paper explores the protection modes of these two ethnic languages and puts forward suggestions for further strengthening the protection in the future, in order to provide help for improving the soft power of national culture and enhancing the friendship between China and Russia.

Keywords

cross-border ethnic groups in China and Russia, Oroqen language, Evenki language, language protection

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Connotation of Cross-Border Ethnic Groups*

The issue of cross-border ethnic groups has been paid attention by ethnologists at home and abroad. Chunzi Jin and Jianmin Wang (1994) defined cross-border ethnic groups as the same ethnic groups on either side of a border, living in different countries and directly connected by their settlements. Xing Cao and Zhifang Sun (2015) proposed that cross-border ethnic groups are relatively primitive ethnic groups, which are “geographically connected and have ethnic settlements because their traditional settlements were divided into different countries”. Due to the commonness, connection and interaction of cross-border ethnic groups in many aspects such as ethnic origin, language and culture, custom, religious belief, exchange and trade, and intermarriage, Zhi Liu (2004) also regarded cross-border ethnic groups as “a community of people separated by national boundaries and marked by commonness, connection and interaction”. It is not difficult to conclude that cross-border ethnic groups are actually the same people living in two or more modern countries for long-term historical reasons. The “border” in “cross-border” refers to the national boundary, which is the demarcation of the scope of sovereignty by countries. Therefore, most of cross-border ethnic groups have very similar languages and cultures, and the collective efforts to protect the splendid civilization of cross-border ethnic groups have become the common pursuit of the countries where they are located.

1.2 *Problems Faced by Cross-Border Ethnic Languages*

Ethnic cultural inheritance is a problem that multi-ethnic and multi-cultural countries face together and need to solve urgently. As an important part of ethnic culture, strengthening the protection of ethnic language is the driving force for communication among different ethnic groups, which is conducive to one ethnic group to carry out exchanges based on the cultural characteristics and local customs of the other ethnic group, which will further enhance people-to-people bond and promote stability in the border area (Li, 2021).

However, the ethnic language itself has great fragility. As far as the Oroqen language and the Evenki language are concerned, the Oroqen language has only been expressed orally since ancient times and has no written form, and the Evenki language initially had no written form until it was created in the 1930s. This means that the hunting culture, shamanic culture, folk literature and art, myths, legends, stories, and folk songs of these two ethnic groups have been passed down from mouth to mouth for thousands of years. With the acceleration of the modernization process, the Oroqen and Evenki live together with other ethnic groups, their language environment has undergone great changes, and the intermarriage is increasing. Coupled with the increasing popularity of Chinese and Russian, Oroqen and Evenki languages are facing a great risk of extinction.

For these two ethnic groups, the disappearance of language means the disappearance of culture; To retain the ethnic language is to protect their traditional cultural genes and souls on which they depend for survival, which plays a significant role in stabilizing the multi-ethnic community (Liu & Guan, 2019). Nowadays, both languages have a serious trend of aging, and young people are gradually unable

to understand and speak them. It is urgent to save Oroqen and Evenki languages.

2. Current Protection Mode of Oroqen Language

Oroqen language is the wisdom crystallization of Oroqen ethnic culture. As a world endangered language recognized by UNESCO, the protection of Oroqen language has always been highly valued by domestic experts. Through the joint efforts of all parties, historic achievements have been made in the protection of Oroqen language.

2.1 Policies and Laws

Since its founding, China has adhered to the principle of equality among all ethnic groups, issued a series of important policy documents and formulated numerous laws and regulations.

In terms of policies, especially since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has further pointed out the direction for language reform and development, and issued a series of policy documents such as the Outline of the National Medium and Long term Reform and Development Plan of the Language and Writing Cause (2012-2020), the 13th Five-Year Development Plan of the National Language and Writing Cause, and made important discussions on the protection of minority languages.

In terms of laws, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education, and the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Common Language of the State and other laws have clearly stated the protection of the Minority language, stipulating that "all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own languages" (Ai, 2020). The Oroqen language, protected by policies and laws, has achieved unprecedented development, further promoting ethnic unity, social stability and cultural prosperity.

2.2 Theoretical Research

With the strong support of the state, the "Language Resources Protection Project in China" and the "Language Resources Audio Database Construction in China" continue to be implemented; Ethnolinguists continue to investigate the Oroqen nationality, describe, record and preserve the audio-visual materials of Oroqen language, and compile many essays, dictionaries and primary school textbooks.

For example, the anthology of Xibe Language, Hezhe Language, Ewenki Language and Oroqen Language edited by Ge Tang has made contributions to the rescue and protection of endangered languages of ethnic minorities and has certain influence in the academic circle. The Oroqen-Chinese Dictionary edited by Youfeng Han and Shuxian Meng has been published by North Literature Publishing House. In cooperation with Russia, the "The Oroqen-Russian-Chinese Dictionary" marked with the international phonetic alphabet is currently in the final proofreading stage and will be published soon. In terms of textbooks, the textbook of Oroqen Language written by Youfeng Han lays a good foundation for the bilingual teaching of Oroqen and Chinese languages in ethnic schools.

Academic research has condensed the efforts of scholars, played a positive role in the rescue and protection of Oroqen language and culture, and provided important and valuable academic materials for the future research and protection of Oroqen language.

2.3 Educational Practice

Under the common expectation of the country and people, the teaching of Oroqen language has changed from theory to practice, and various school education activities, online education activities and transnational language exchange activities have emerged.

First of all, school education activities are mainly carried out in Oroqen ethnic settlements. For example, Ulaga Town Oroqen Ethnic School offers a number of Oroqen ethnic culture courses, including ethnic customs and culture, ethnic dance and ethnic language, and teaches students the daily expressions of Oroqen language with the help of the international phonetic alphabet and the established textbook (Chen & Chen, 2010).

Secondly, online education activities include “Internet + ethnic language” online learning platform and wechat group. For example, the “Heilongjiang Oroqen Language and Culture Inheritance and Protection Learning System” relies on modern technology to create an efficient online interactive learning platform that transcends the concept of time and space and provides for people with collective learning or personalized needs. The platform integrates sound, image, video, animation and other contents, which enhances the learning interest of Oroqen students in various regions in inheriting and protecting their ethnic language. At present, the platform has 146 Oroqen language courses, 4,000 Oroqen words, 23 folk songs and 100 stories (Liu & Guan, 2019). In addition, oral transmission of Oroqen language through wechat group is also a feature. For example, Baolin Guo and his wife Xiaohua Ge, the last generation of Oroqen hunters who live in the Greater Khingan Mountains region, teach young people to speak Oroqen through live streaming in their self-created wechat group “Folk Culture Exchange Group” (Wang, 2021).

Finally, transnational language exchange activities are often held between China and Russia. For example, the Oroqen (Evenki) International Olympic Language and Culture Competition was jointly held by the Heihe Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau and Amur State University. Many young students from China’s Oroqen nationality and Russia’s Evenki nationality answered questions by computer and participated in on-site oral competition (Zhao & Zhang, 2019), which played a great role in breaking the communication barriers between the two ethnic groups, improving the ability of Oroqen language and building a bridge of spiritual communication.

3. Current Protection mode of Evenki language

On the eve of the implementation of International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) (2022-2032), Russia responded positively to the call of the Los Pinos Declaration to “guarantee indigenous people’s the right to express themselves freely, to receive education and participate in public life in their mother tongue” by taking a series of measures to preserve minority languages.

3.1 Policies and Laws

Article 26 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation states that everyone has the right to use his mother tongue and to freely choose the language of communication, education, study and creation (Aytira, 2016). In the area of education in ethnic languages, Article 14 of the Law on Education of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2012, stipulates that citizens of the Russian Federation have the right to pre-school education, general primary education and general higher education in the mother tongue (Yue, 2017). The Ethnic Cultural Autonomy Act directly grants the right to establish non-state educational institutions and to develop curricula and publish textbooks in the ethnic languages in these institutions (Zhao & Zhang, 2019).

In addition, the Russian government provides financial support for the development of ethnic languages. On January 17, 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the establishment of the Foundation for the Protection and Research of the Mother Tongue of the Peoples of the Russian Federation; In the same year, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation established the Foundation for the Support of Northern Languages in Moscow to provide financial support for the research of ethnic languages and the education of children in their mother tongue throughout Russia.

3.2 Theoretical Research

As early as after the victory of the October Revolution in 1917, Lenin put forward the principle of “equality of nationality”, and one of the measures was to create a written language for the nations without it. In 1930, the Evenki script based on the Latin alphabet was successfully created. In order to facilitate the learning of Russian and the ethnic language, the Evenki language began to be expressed in the Cyrillic alphabet in 1936.

With the unified Evenki written language, scholars have more in-depth and extensive research on the Evenki language, and have published many high-level research monographs, dictionaries and teaching materials, covering dialects, vocabulary, phonetics, grammar, comparative studies and other aspects. Among them, the most famous Evenki dictionaries include the “Evenki-Russian Dictionary” written by Vasilyevich in 1958 (Zhang, 2017). Textbooks from kindergarten to university are written by the joint efforts of Evenki teachers from all over the country, who are mostly in their 60s and 70s and are the last inheritors of the original Evenki language. The publication of academic achievements contributes greatly to the conversion of the Evenki language and the common Russian language, and to the inheritance and development of the Evenki language.

3.3 Educational Practice

First of all, family education is the cornerstone of the inheritance of Evenki language. Evenki parents are mostly positive about protecting their ethnic language, and some even send their children to the Taiga in the mountains in the hope that their children can better understand the Evenki language in communication with the local villagers.

Secondly, in the area of school education, Evenki teachers receive state-funded training every year. In kindergarten and the first grade of primary school, Evenki language is taught in the form of games, and

homework and tests begin in the second grade of primary school. At the secondary level, Evenki language is an elective subject and is not included in the National College Entrance Examination, but quiz scores are credited to the secondary school graduation certificate. At the university stage, there are three universities in the country that offer Evenki language majors, which are located in Yakutsk, Ulan-ude and St. Petersburg. In these three universities, students of this major will receive a diploma in Evenki Language.

Thirdly, in order to revive the language and culture of the Evenki nationality, social organizations in the areas where the Evenki people live have organized various activities, including language and culture forums, Olympic competitions, conferences and seminars. For example, the Evenki Language and Culture Forum 2021 was held in Blagoveshchensk from 25 to 28 August, with a combination of scientific workshops and training courses to strengthen the self-identity of the Evenki youth.

Finally, online education is based on information technology, and its effectiveness in modern Evenki language teaching should not be underestimated. Since 2021, Russia has created online courses for beginners in Evenki language, which are free for citizens throughout the country. The online courses are divided into two levels, level 1 for children and level 2 for adults. There are also a number of national Evenki specific websites in Russia, such as the Evenki Academic Exchange Network and the Evenki Phonetic Corpus. On these sites, there are many Evenki language textbooks, literature books and various audio and video recordings available. In addition, there is a special mobile phone translation software “AYANA”. This software has no threshold to use, and can automatically translate Russian and Evenki, which provides great convenience for learning Evenki language.

4. Thoughts and Suggestions on the Future Protection of Cross-Border Ethnic Languages

4.1 Joint Protection of China and Russia

4.1.1 The Necessity and Feasibility

Nowadays, the culture and language of the cross-border ethnic groups in China and Russia are facing the crisis of disappearing, which the state and society have paid considerable attention to. However, the same nationality belongs to two countries, only the cooperation between China and Russia can be complete and effective protection. Fortunately, the joint protection of China and Russia has a certain feasibility:

(1) Commonality is a prerequisite for the joint protection of the two countries. The cross-border ethnic groups in China and Russia have a common ethnic origin and historical development track, only after the border between China and Russia changed, some of the people located in Russia were officially classified as another ethnic group. Therefore, although these two ethnic groups belong to two different countries, they have a high degree of similarity in material culture and spiritual culture, which provides the possibility for cooperation of China and Russia.

(2) The friendly relations between China and Russia and the existing cooperation experience are the basis of joint protection. In recent years, with the joint efforts of the central and local governments of

China and Russia, cultural exchanges between cross-border ethnic groups have become increasingly frequent, and a relatively stable exchange mechanism has been formed.

4.1.2 The Main Forms

By combing the current protection modes of Oroqen and Evenki languages, it can be seen that the universities and research institutions of China and Russia have conducted in-depth research on their respective ethnic group from various aspects, and published a series of scientific research results with their own characteristics. Therefore, China and Russia should make use of their respective research advantages and carry out collaborative research. For example, the two countries can jointly establish research topics, strive for research projects and funds respectively, and carry out all-round collaborative research on cross-border ethnic languages on the basis of their own geographical advantages.

In addition, China and Russia should form a joint investigation team to conduct social investigations in cross-border ethnic settlements. In the process of investigation, the two countries should not only pay attention to their own key contents, but also get a clear understanding through comparison, so as to form more comprehensive audio-visual and documentary materials in ethnic languages. China and Russia should also continue to actively promote the holding of various forms of exchange activities to promote the inheritance and protection of the two ethnic languages and cultures.

4.2 The Development of Cultural Tourism

“Cultural tourism”, as the industrial upgrading of tourism, is to introduce culture into the tourism industry and transform it to high quality and high efficiency. It not only improves the cultural attributes of the tourism industry, increases tourists’ interest in playing, but also promotes the spread and protection of ethnic culture (Li, 2020). As the core of ethnic culture, the combination of ethnic language and tourism products can not only produce economic value, but also achieve the purpose of promoting and protecting ethnic language.

For example, it is possible to add the Oroqen (Evenki) cultural performance and “Close to Oroqen (Evenki)” entertainment projects to the tourism that receives foreign tourists, so that tourists can feel colorful ethnic language and culture through close contact with the Oroqen (Evenki) people. It is also possible to set up ethnic characteristic museums in scenic spots with a large flow of people to introduce ethnic language to tourists by means of video and audio. At the same time, in the museums stationery products and video products with ethnic language characteristics can be sold, such as tape, postcards, bookmarks, records and so on. For Evenki language with written form, creative promotion can be carried out in local scenic spots through bilingual signs in both mainstream and ethnic languages.

4.3 Clever Use of Video Websites

The advent of the new media era makes everyone with information become the “media”, which promotes the information is no longer limited to one-way communication from professionals to non-professionals, but becomes multi-directional communication between professionals - professionals, professionals - non-professionals, non-professionals - non-professionals (Liao, 2020). This means that those who have ideas and master simple video production skills are capable of becoming the source of

information dissemination on video websites, which has undoubtedly injected new vitality into the spread and development of cross-border ethnic languages.

According to the classification of language and culture videos on video websites, this paper holds that Oroqen and Evenki languages can be spread in the following three forms, which are of great help to increase the public's awareness of Oroqen (Evenki) language, strengthen the identity of the ethnic group, and awaken the consciousness of mother tongue and intangible cultural heritage protection of the young generation of Oroqen (Evenki) nationality.

(3) Hot or classic movies, TV plays, animations and their theme songs can be re-dubbed or re-covered in Oroqen (Evenki) language. This form is very interesting, with the basis of the original material, the young people of ethnic groups will naturally understand and accept the new version to a higher degree; And because the difficulty of "re-creation" is relatively low, young people are likely to join the ranks of dubbing or covering, making their own works and re-distributing them.

(4) The Oroqen (Evenki) language can be used to narrate and comment on the general situation of movies and TV series, games and sports events, as well as to recommend various products, food and tourist places. In this form, young people will be immersed in their native language while watching the video itself, which will make young people have different perceptions and understandings of the use of their native language, and enhance their sense of mission to inherit their native language.

(5) The Oroqen (Evenki) language can also be used to popularize ethnic cultural knowledge. Different from the above two interesting forms, the popularization of basic knowledge of ethnic language and culture is relatively serious but very necessary. In this form, the role of the older generation of Oroqen (Evenki) and ethnologists is greatly highlighted. They can not only explain the basic situation, pronunciation and daily use of the Oroqen (Evenki) language, but also compare the Oroqen (Evenki) language with other minority languages to enrich the content of creation.

5. Conclusion

Along with the process of globalization and the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Russia have jointly ushered in new opportunities to strengthen the development of the Far East region, achieve mutual learning and common prosperity of different civilizations. At the same time, cross-border ethnic groups in China and Russia are moving towards the road of heterogeneous coexistence, mutual exchange and inclusiveness, which is consolidating the bridge of friendship between China and Russia.

In February 2019, UNESCO officially issued the Yuelu Proclamation, which introduced 20 initiatives to the world, calling on the international community, countries, regions, governments and non-governmental organizations to reach consensus on the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity of the world. This undoubtedly points the way for further strengthening the protection of ethnic languages.

By combing the existing language protection modes of the typical cross-border ethnic groups in China

and Russia—the Oroqen nationality in China and the Evenki nationality in Russia, this paper puts forward suggestions for further protection and development of the cross-border ethnic groups in China and Russia in the future, which is conducive to cultivating the sense of identity of the cross-border ethnic groups beyond the national level, and making great achievements in the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.

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