

# Preserving the Oroqen Culture

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The Oroqen people were China's last hunters. One of the smallest ethnic minority groups recognised by the Chinese government, the word "Oroqen" (鄂倫春 Èlúncūn) means both "people on the mountains" and "people herding reindeer." Both meanings profoundly embody the characteristics of this ancient nation. Numbering less than 9000 people (0.0006 percent of the total Chinese population), the Oroqen people are concentrated in the provinces of Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia. In September 2023, we had the privilege of visiting Jiagedaqi in Heilongjiang and Alihe in Inner Mongolia. Alihe is the administrative centre of the Oroqen Autonomous Banner. We met and talked to Oroqen leaders about the community's challenges in preserving and promoting their unique culture and heritage.

## Recent history

The origin of the Oroqen people lies buried in the past, but by the start of the last millennium, they were settled in the vast forest region of the 1600km-long Hinggan (大兴安 Dàxīngān) Mountain range. Here, they lived relatively undisturbed, hunting on horseback and fishing for their food, using the skins of their prey for clothing and the birch trees and bark for building their canoes, baskets, and other necessities. Oroqen legends told that they had descended from bears of the forest, and their belief system was decidedly animistic.

The Oroqen people were engaged by the Qing Dynasty in the latter's campaigns against indigenous rulers (1639-43 CE), and later in the Sino-Russian Border Conflicts (1652-1689). As a result, the Oroqen began using muskets, and they became adept at riding and shooting in the forests of the Hinggan Mountains. This made them a great asset to the Qing armies, who frequently enlisted the Oroqen as fighters. Between 1895 and 1915, however, the Oroqen population fell from over 18,000 to just 4000. During the Second World War, the Oroqen fought valiantly against the Japanese, but by 1945, less than 1000 remained. They still lived as hunter-gatherers, practised shamanism, and spoke their own language (Oroqen), one of the approximately 20 languages of the endangered Tungusic language family spoken in Siberia and northern China.

In the 1950s, three things began to happen that would change their lives forever. The first development was China's need for natural resources for its industrialisation and modernisation program. Such resources included the trees that grew in abundance in the forest of the Hinggan Mountains. Soon, six large state-owned logging companies were active in the region, with potential access to 92 percent of the land ostensibly managed by the Oroqen nation. A further five percent was turned over to new collective farms.<sup>1</sup> The most immediate impact was the sudden influx of migrant workers into the region. Whereas in 1950, the Oroqen constituted a significant portion of the population, by 2000, this had fallen to less than one percent in the Autonomous region (2050 out of 297,400).<sup>2</sup> Another impact was the restricted access to hunting land and the decline in wildlife. The subsequent endangerment of species reinforces the decision to prohibit hunting altogether.

The second development was that the 'primitive' nomadic state of the Oroqen nation became the object of rescue from the central government, which supervised the 'three leaps towards modernisation,' as the museum calls them. The first, in 1951, was to establish it as an autonomous nation with its government recognised by the Chinese government – the first minority nation to be granted such status. The second leap, in 1958, was to bring them 'down from the mountains' and settle them into towns and villages, encouraging the development of agriculture. The final leap, in 1996, prohibited hunting and banned the possession of hunting guns. In return for abandoning their traditional way of life, the Oroqen gained access to health care, education, and the hitherto undreamed of (and undesired) consumer goods and services that the rest of modern civilisation enjoyed.

The third development was the effort of the Chinese government to support minority cultures. To avoid the dangers of separatism, China has emphasised an ideological narrative that emphasises minority contributions to a single multi-ethnic Chinese culture. This new narrative supports the building of a plethora of modern museums, including the three we visited in Alihe Township, which we describe in detail below.

## Language

Oroqen has no written language. In Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province, we met Professor MENG Shuxian (孟淑贤 Mèng Shūxián) from the Department of National Affairs of Ethnic Minorities and Professor HAN Youfeng (韩友峰 Hán Yǒufēng) from the Research Institute for Interethnic



Fig. 2 (above): Oroqen performers showcased the 'horse-riding' dance in the rehearsal space at the Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, Alihe, Inner Mongolia. (Photo by Sarah Ward, 2023)

Fig. 1 (left): Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, Alihe, Inner Mongolia. (Photo by Sarah Ward, 2023)

Relations. A married couple, Han is in his eighties, and Meng is in her seventies. They are part of a rapidly diminishing group that grew up speaking Oroqen as their first language. Modestly, they described how they spent the best part of their lives on the preservation of the Oroqen language and culture. One result of their labours was to produce a phonetic version of the Oroqen language, as Chinese Pinyin produced sounds that did not accurately reflect their own. In 2019, they published the first Chinese-Oroqen dictionary.<sup>3</sup> The dictionary is crucial for recording and preserving the tales and legends that bind together Oroqen culture. Without the language, the stories would lose the distinctive lilt and modulation afforded by speech. The couple were, however, profoundly pessimistic over the language's chances for survival.

Oroqen is difficult for Chinese people to master since Mandarin (普通话 Pǔtōnghuà) is a tonal language, whereas Oroqen is not. Only one 'foreigner,' an American linguist, has mastered it. There were also difficulties in teaching a spoken language in schools. These problems were compounded by a lack of standard textbooks and adequately trained teachers. Additionally, outside one or two towns, Oroqen people were widely scattered such that young people leaving the area had little use for the language, whilst those remaining found themselves on islands of spoken Oroqen in a sea of Han Chinese. Moreover, traditional marriage patterns are eroding, with the result that mixed Oroqen-Han couples no longer prioritise learning the minority language. Finally, the native speakers are dying out, quite literally.

## Heritage conservation

Alihe has three museums dedicated exclusively to the preservation of Oroqen culture. We were privileged to visit them and to talk with the directors and staff. The first museum we visited is the Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum (阿里河鄂倫春民族非遺館 Èlúncūn zú guójiā fēi wùzhí wénhuà yíchǎn bōwùguǎn), located in the central area of Alihe. The Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum is housed in a beautiful purpose-built building that mimics the shape and form of the traditional Oroqen teepee-like tents, known as *sierranju* (斜仁柱 xiérénzhù) [Fig. 1]. With an area of over 3200 square meters, the museum functions as much as a cultural centre as a cultural museum.

The museum is divided into five parts: Forest Sea Hunters, Grab Economy, Traditional Crafts, Material Culture, and Spiritual Culture. The exhibition starts with a sequence of small, almost doll-like, glass cases displaying traditional Oroqen activities and structures. There are also one or two life-sized maquettes. Much of the rest of the exhibits are photographs and pieces of clothing made from treated animal hides and birch-bark artefacts, which visitors are encouraged to touch. We soon began to sense that we were in a different kind of museum. The exhibition space is devoted to the work of contemporary artists. The director's office resembled an art gallery filled with paintings. It was shared, no surprises, with two resident artists. Next to the museum space is a handicraft room where people can learn and practice traditional skills such as making birch-bark boxes or paper cutting. A small drive from the museum was an artisanal workshop where clothing, canoes, bows and arrows, and birch-bark boxes were all traditionally produced. The museum has also published a series of short videos on the Chinese social media sites WeChat and Douyin, where they have over 37,000 followers.

The next day, in the dance studio on the second floor, we were treated to a rehearsal of the Oroqen dance [Fig. 2]. Six rows of five persons each performed two lively, energetic dances for us. The first was a hunting dance, the second a horse-riding dance. The performances are designed to mimic the traditional customs and way of life as a means of transmission. We were utterly impressed with the enthusiasm coursing



Fig. 3 (left): The Oroqen Ethnic Museum, Alihe, Inner Mongolia. (Photo by Richard Griffiths, 2023)

through everyone we met. Preserving the culture was in safe hands.

The second museum we visited, the Oroqen Ethnic Museum (鄂伦春民族博物馆 Èlúnchūn mínzú bówùguǎn), also called the Oroqen Nationality Museum, was located on the main square and was being renovated as we arrived [Fig. 3]. It was distinctly more traditional than the first, exhibiting many more full-sized recreations of scenes from Oroqen life. It also showcased artefacts that were both older and more numerous than those in the Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, all reinforced by contemporary photographs. At one point in the tour, visitors venture into a time-travel tunnel, not to the distant past of woolly mammoths, as we had expected, but to the 1950s and the first of the three steps to Oroqen modernisation, showing the nation's leaders and the local tribesmen and women seizing the new opportunities opening before them.

The third museum, the Tuoba Xianbei History Museum (拓跋鲜卑历史博物馆 Tuò bá xiānbēi lìshǐ bówùguǎn), is located some 10 kilometres outside of Alihe town centre in the forest conservation area near the Gaxian cave (嘎仙洞 Gāxiāndòng). The cave contains an inscription dating to 443 CE. It has been attributed to the Xianbei, the nomadic people who inhabited the area some 3000 years before and who, in three separate waves of migration, settled in the plains and established the foundations for the Northern Wei dynasty. The strikingly modern and beautifully designed museum is devoted to this story [Fig. 4].

All three museums displayed the exhibits in roomy, well-lit spaces. Display panels told the stories and the individual exhibits were labelled correctly. The local museum guides, dressed in traditional costumes, were well-trained and able to answer all questions addressed to them. The only drawback was that there was nothing in English – we were fortunate to have a friend with us who did all the translation.

The Oroqen nation faces three distinct yet interrelated challenges. The first is the critical need to safeguard traditional Oroqen animistic/forest-based culture in the face of globalisation, urbanisation, social transformation, and mass culture. The second is promoting the safeguarded culture to a broader public. The third challenge is to channel that wider interest into local economic activities that will keep the core communities intact. We will now examine each of these in turn.

### Challenge #1: Safeguarding culture

Undeniably, the Oroqen culture is cut adrift from the natural context and rhythms that gave it its essential features. The nation no longer lives in extended family/clan groups,

hunting, gathering, moving through the mountain forests according to the seasons, and retelling their myths and legends around communal fires. The preservation of their culture is doubly threatened by the erosion of the language in which it was originally expressed. In this respect, many of the first steps have already been taken. China ratified the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2004. Since then, the Oroqen language has been phonetically recorded and translated into Chinese, as have many traditional tales and songs. However, this must be more than the preparation for embalming a dying language. It has to be kept alive, which means maintaining a critical mass of the population using the language for communication among themselves, which, in turn, means creating sufficient opportunities for them to remain *in situ*. A second effort could be to raise the language's perceived status. It is a carrier of memory, but it could also be a means to creativity and expression. It does not need to be buried in the past. In Heihe, establishing a singing and dancing troupe has, for example, helped to keep the language alive. It is not just an opportunity to wallow in nostalgia; the troupe's performance schedules require members to learn the ancestral language and perform using it. Performances of traditional hunting songs (known as *zandaren*), love songs, narratives, and shamanic chants are all delivered in Oroqen. Changing the perception of the language may increase the incentive to study it and keep using it.

The material culture is in good hands, preserved in many museums. However, there are many ongoing threats to Oroqen culture – ageing practitioners, diminishing youth interest, material shortages, and industrialisation, to name a few. Therefore, its protection and safeguarding is about transferring knowledge, skills, and meaning



Fig. 4 (above): Tuoba Xianbei History Museum, Alihe, Inner Mongolia. (Photo by Richard Griffiths, 2023)

to present and future generations. Per the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of achieving quality education (SDG4), the Oroqen Autonomous Banner Government works with many partners – all three museums, Professors Han and Meng, and community leaders and stakeholders – to strengthen and reinforce the diverse and varied processes necessary for the continuous evolution, interpretation, and transmission of Oroqen culture to future generations. The Oroqen Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, for example, balances the retention of past practices, such as birch bark art, with the transmission of the modern techniques that are needed to adapt to the present. Free training courses help people experiencing poverty. One example of this is a new birch bark texture painting technique that preserves the traditional forms and texture, and still captures the spirit of the original. A second example is the recruitment of university fine art students to innovate and integrate this 3000-year-old traditional culture with modern fashion.

### Challenge #2: Cultural promotion

The Oroqen Autonomous Banner has made great strides in protecting and safeguarding Oroqen cultural and natural heritage through the establishment of new museums and developing them with the help of the stakeholders and communities concerned. Recent research on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) conservation increasingly acknowledges that ICH has meaning for multiple stakeholders and is served best by integrating them into conservation processes. Including such stakeholders protects individuals' rights to identify, define, and decide upon their cultural heritage. Community engagement through participatory inclusion is seen as an essential key to reversing the current cultural decline. Although the Oroqen community has been successful in raising the profile of this endangered minority culture within China, they are also keenly aware of the need to provide learning opportunities for Oroqen stakeholders who have become disconnected from their culture.

Within China, the Oroqen internet presence is significant. All of the museums mentioned above have Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat accounts. None of the museums we visited have traditional websites, as it is considered old-fashioned in China to do so. Traditional websites' use (or not) will need to be reconsidered if the Oroqen are to engage an international audience. Official Government sites outline the history of the Oroqen people, mainly from their first contact in the Qing Dynasty. The websites showcase the traditional way of life, promoting the endangered Oroqen language, the birch bark culture, and traditional Oroqen clothing. However, raising awareness for its own sake is not sustainable. Promotion needs to be done in such a way as to stimulate economic growth and encourage sustainable development sufficient to provide income streams for all members of the community, many of whom remain in poverty.

### Challenge #3: Local economic activity

Promoting the local economy, especially after the Covid lockdowns, is vital if the drift of youth away from the area is to be arrested. The most direct means of achieving this is through tourism. However, although the museums have all been upgraded, there is a shortage of hotel accommodation. At the same time, increasing the provision of hotel beds risks promoting the kind of mass tourism that can destroy the very integrity of the experience offered. Equally, without ancillary attractions, like adventure rides or an 'authentic' amusement park, there is little to attract most Chinese tourists to such a remote area.

Foreign tourists may provide a more discerning source of demand, attracted by the unique culture and the beautiful scenery, though this poses other difficulties. Individual foreign tourism is not well developed. Only one tour operator in Harbin is licenced to bring foreign tourists to Oroqen. A Malaysian group was there at the same time we were. However, they had some challenges with the guide and vowed not to return. For this reason, the Oroqen leaders are developing an Oroqen-led tour company, which will operate at a standard expected by international visitors, with a bilingual guide and control of the narrative. In this sense, it means that the Oroqen people can tell their own story in their own way, and the profits will stay in the community and support those who need it the most.

If it is a couple of years before international travellers can experience Oroqen hospitality, they can at least be coaxed into buying local artisanal products. Thus, in addition to serving to promote the local culture, the internet could provide a channel for online purchasing – not only the birch-bark boxes already on offer as souvenirs but also bespoke clothing (already offered to customers), paintings by local artists, as well as CDs and DVDs of their music and dances. In addition, translations of the already existing illustrated storybooks could introduce the nation's adventures and legends to a broader international audience.

### Final reflection

The Oroqen have a rich and unique culture. Modern economic development is threatening its very survival. Ironically, though, modern communications technology may offer the way to ensuring its ultimate preservation. In the hands of the current leadership, they have the energy and the drive to make that happen.

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### Notes

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