

LIFE ON THE BORDERLAND: BURYATS IN RUSSIA, MONGOLIA AND CHINA

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This article' discusses the relations and some of the mutual Buryat-attitudes of three countries, namely Russia, Mongolia and China. The mass migrations which took place in the first half of the twentieth century divided state borders and the way these countries political contexts affected their identity and mutual opinions. This article also explores some relational aspects o of Buryats with the rest of Mongols in these countries and the role of Buryats in the development of culture.

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Artykuł omawia relacje i wzajemne postawy Buriatów z trzech krajów: Rosji, Mongolii i Chin. Masowa migracja w pierwszej połowie XX wieku podzieliła Buriatów granicami państwowymi. W tekście ukazujemy sposób, w jaki kontekst polityczny tych krajów wpłynął na tożsamość Buriatów i wzajemne opinie. Omawiamy także niektóre aspekty stosunków Buriatów z resztą Mongołów oraz ich rolę w rozwoju kultury.

K e y w o r d s: Buryats, Mongolia, Russia, China, ethnicity, Buryatness, Mongolness

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in Buryatia, Aga Buryat Okrug (in Zabaikalski Krai, a constituent unit of the Russian Federation) and the Mongolian territory of Khentii aimag². As Buryat settlements in China were not visited, the data on the Buryats and other Mongols of China were obtained both from our field research but predominantly, from the rich materials gathered by other scholars (Namsaraeva 2013, Nanzatov 2010, Boronoeva 2008, Bulag 1998, Szmydt 2013 and others). During our field work, we were present at some important Buryat festivals including *Altargana* (in 2012 in Aginskoe, Russia; and in 2014 in Dadal, Mongolia)

¹ The article is based on research undertaken in project No. 2011/03/B/HS6/01671 under the title “Between Russia, Mongolia and China. Buryats facing the challenges of the 21st century” [“Między Rosją, Mongolią i Chinami. Buriaci wobec wyzwań XXI wieku”], 2012–2015, conducted by Prof. E. Nowicka, financed by the National Centre of Science [NCN], total amount: 240 826 PLN.

² Aimag is a first-level administrative subdivision.

and *Noch' Yokhora*³, during which we had the opportunity to come into contact with Buryats from the three countries gathered to celebrate. It was our intention to examine the way these three different states have conceptualized the border and in doing so have created different images and conceptions of history, ethnicity and a sense of nationhood. It should go without saying that the interdependency of these contacts depends on the political relations between the countries.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first challenge every researcher faces is how to distinguish “real Buryats” from other Mongolic groups. Until recent times, the territory of modern Transbaikalia bore the name Ara Khalkha – Northern Khalkha [Tsyrendashiev 2008, Chimitdorzhiev]. Khalkha is the name of a territory of independent outer Mongolia which back in the XVII century extended to the north beyond its modern state border with Russia. The large territories in Buryatia, Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaikalski Krai were within the *aimags* of Tusheetu, Zasagtu and Setsen khans. After the gradual fall of the Mongol Empire in 1644, Khalkha Mongol lands were incorporated into the Qing (Manchu) Empire, which was another alien dynasty that came into being after the Mongol and which controlled China and other territories where once the Yuan state used to. This historical event was also known and remembered by the Buryats in the nineteenth century. Thus, the territory of Siberia was not closed within contemporary boundaries, but was an integral part of the historical and cultural formations of the Asian mainland. After the incorporation of Siberia into the Russian state in the seventeenth century, there began a long process of cutting Siberia off from the rest of Asia, which was not completely achieved. The time period involved in numerous treaties fixing the eastern frontiers of the Russian Empire was a long and painful process changing the ethnic and cultural mosaics of the borderlands. The Mongolic Daguur/Daur people living in the modern Zabaikal region in the seventeenth century left their lands for contemporary North China territories. The Old Barga Mongol tribes, which moved from the Barguzin/Bargazhan valley on the Eastern shore of Baikal to the modern Hulunbuir steppes followed suit. At the same time, the Khori, modern Selenge Buryats left Inner and Outer Mongolia to settle in Transbaikalia. It is fair to assume that the migrations within and beyond current ethnic Buryatia⁴ were even more numerous back in that period.

³ *Noch' Yokhora* means Yokhor Night. Yokhor is the circle dance of Buryats.

⁴ This term is generally used by modern Buryat scholars to emphasize the fact that Buryat people live not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in two other districts: Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug, located to the west of Lake Baikal in the Irkutskaya Oblast' and the Buryat Aga Okrug to the southeast of Chita in the Zabaikalski Krai on the Russian-Mongolian-Chinese border. In addition, the term also encompasses the Buryat areas off any autonomy, in Irkutskaya Oblast' and Zabaikalski Krai.

After the incorporation of Northern Mongolian territories into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century, the population living there migrated soon afterwards to territories cut off⁵ from the rest of the Mongol lands. They then formed the Buryat Nation. It is quite problematic to ascertain to what degree the “Buryat” groups had been integrated into other Mongol groups before the Russian colonization.

This article predominantly wishes to examine the results of migrations that occurred later at the beginning of the twentieth century. The policies of the newborn Soviet state triggered gradual mass migrations throughout the former Russian Empire, including the Buryats. We argue that after two centuries of common experience in the Russian state, the differing groups of Buryats developed a feeling of national solidarity that they kept to different degrees throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, we wish to present the memories, narrations and opinions of Buryats from the three countries. It should be noted that the state borderland significantly influenced the differences of these narrations. Moreover, we wish to extend our research to include the relations which exist with other Mongolic groups in Mongolia and China.

BURYATS FROM MONGOLIA

The Buryats in Mongolia and Shenekheen Buryats in China are the descendants of Russia migrants which followed the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918–1920 and which lasted until the end of 1930s when the Mongolian-Russian border was completely closed. According to the contemporary narrations of Buryats from Russia, the migrants escaped the Soviet projects of collectivization and land policy to save their cattle, belongings and lives. We have even heard the opinion mooted that the best and richest people of the Buryat nation escaped during these years, though we noted that the migrants were composed of both rich and those considered poor.

It is not known what percentage of the Buryat population escaped from Russia to Mongolia – numbers vary from 35,000–60,000 refugees in Mongolia. In 1897, the Buryat population stood at c 298 050 while in 1926 it had dropped to 238 100 – a differential of 60 000 people which would coincide with the approximate number of Buryats who migrated to Mongolia⁶. 32.5% percent of Aga Buryats migrated to Mongolia in the period between 1908 and 1916 (Boronoeva, after Szmydt 2013, 152). The proportion of migrants in relation to the total population was indeed very high. In Kizhinga district, we were told that the local Buddhist leader, Lubsan–Sandan Tsydenov, advised Buryats to stay on their grasslands and refrain from migrations and had it not been for this then the population decrease would have been even much higher. People often found that

⁵ However, it is known that migrations did not stop after the establishment of the Qing and Russian borders.

⁶ (Turin 2010).

the neighbours they had met and talked to the day before, left without warning the following day leaving their houses and property in their wake. However, what should also be borne in mind here is the relatively high mobility of ancient Buryat Nomads.

Memories of the Buryats' kin who remained in Russia are ones of ambivalence and we were frequently told of stories of people who would be afraid to confess of having relatives who migrated to Mongolia. In the seventies, one of our informants who was a child at that time remembered how her father would bury the letters of relatives from Mongolia afraid of the repression which might ensue. However, more frequently, we heard about the mutual visits and quite open contacts which took place between them. It is likely that these contacts depended much on the dynamics of Russian-Mongolian state relations. In the Soviet period Mongolia was commonly referred to as "the sixteenth Soviet Republic". Today, many of the Buryats we talked to were aware of having Buryat relatives in Mongolia, some of whom they used to pay visits to. It would be true to state that they do not know much about them and perceive them as quite distant since the migrations took place about one hundred years ago. Curiously, they are not very eager to seek them out and renew contact – for them they became Mongols and so turns the wheels of history.

During our visit of the Buryat settlements in Mongolia, Ayur (one of the authors) was very frequently asked for his clan name⁷ and his place of origin. The inhabitants would seek out areas of commonality and would continue asking whether Ayur knew this or that family. Overall, we had the strong impression that the Buryats from Mongolia missed their relatives in Russia more so than their Russian brethren did their Mongolian. A fifty-five year-old man informed us that he had visited one of his kin in Yaruuna (the Yeravninski district of Buryatia) and Ulan-Ude a number of times, but on his last visit while making his way from Moscow, he was not picked up at the train-station, although promised. He complained that the ties of Buryats in Mongolia and Russia were waning with time and the death of those who remembered them. When old men die, he told us, there will be nobody who will know and maintain the kinship.

The history of the Buryats after migrating to Mongolia at the beginning of the twentieth century turned out to be a traumatic one that has left deep scars on their identity. In 1924, Bogd Khaanate became independent from the Qing Empire and the new socialist state of the Mongolian People's Republic was born. Initially, the ethnically close Buryats were not obstructed and were even encouraged to take up Mongolian citizenship and they actively participated in the political life of Mongolia (see more: Nanzatov 2010, 94). However, the enormous wave of purges which took place in the Soviet Union in 1934–1941 also affected Mongolia, where thousands of Buddhist clergy, aristocrats, "Japanese spies" and "traitors" were persecuted, including the recently migrated Buryats. The exact number of fatalities is unavailable, but

⁷ Surprisingly, most of the local Buryats could remember their *obogs* (clan names) and use them to construct ties of solidarity, while in Buryatia they are either forgotten or used only for conducting ancestral rituals.

would be very large. Uradyn Bulag reported that in Khentii and Dornod aimag alone about 5 368 Buryats were killed. Large numbers of Buryats were exterminated in other aimag too, but exact figures are unavailable (Bulag 1998, 85) with different figures ranging from 7–10 000 being bandied around. In the village of Dadal, with a population of 2 617 (National Statistics 2010), we visited a Buddhist complex with stupas and praying wheels containing the names of more than 600 men. This was reported to be 90 percent of the male population of Dadal at that time. According to recorded memories, many Buryats afraid of being killed concealed their origin and dialect and began declaring themselves Khalkha. In addition, there were those who declared that as children they had lost their parents and thus their origin remained unknown.

It might seem that the great sufferings the Buryats in Mongolia had to endure would have created some form of antagonism between the Khalkhas and the Buryats. Indeed, it did not go without bloody traces, but we had the impression that the frightful facts are downplayed, at least in conversations with us. The criminals were referred to a *nogoon malgaitai* (those with green hats)⁸, and this certainly does not contribute to the maintenance of harmonious relationships within the nation. It is the USSR and Stalin who are blamed for this catastrophe rather than their own state. It must be remembered that the Khalkhas too also suffered much during that time (Bulag 1998, 89). The memory of the purges is also suppressed for cultural reasons because of its painfulness for those living here and now. In karmic terms it is also considered an act of purification to atone for the previous sins that were committed on a national level.

What is even more striking is that some Buryats described their migration to Mongolia as a kind of “happy” escape from the destiny that would have faced them had they stayed in Russia. In addition to the Stalinist purges which occurred all over the USSR and which also touched the Buryats, their Mongolian kin watched with horror how rapidly their kin on the other side of the border lost their language and culture – all the time aware that if they had stayed put a similar misfortune would have happened to them. This is in sharp contrast to the life they have in Mongolia, where their culture is protected by the state as part of the Mongol people’s heritage. They also think that they live in a much better “democratic” and financial environment, while “those from the North” – their kin in Russia – lack these opportunities and possibilities. This has resulted in the emergence of a great patriotism in the Mongolian state for those who contributed, participated and even gave their lives for its existence.

In addition, the dialect and the traditional (or rather defined as “traditional”) culture of the Buryats in Mongolia was also damaged. As a result of the political suspicion of the Buryats and an ideological striving to be a “real Mongol” (*jinhin* Mongol) – that is Khalkha Mongol – the Mongolian Buryats essentially lost the dialectal features of the Buryat Mongol language. In Dadal, there are no lessons conducted of the Buryat

⁸ See more Bulag (1998) about the debates among the intelligentsia and politicians on the *ethnic* character of the purges in Mongolia.

language at schools. Local activists have started to teach children the Buryat dialect mainly to prepare them for contests held during the “Altargana” festival.

Teachers readily admit that children’s tongues are not smooth and flexible anymore in a way required in the Buryat language. The same holds in regards to traditional dress, which, as aforementioned, was almost totally abandoned during the 1990s. In order to organize the first edition of the “Altargana” festival they would search the old garments and dresses of their elders in an attempt to reconstruct them from scratch but the results often lacked precision. One woman explained this situation: “We here are assimilated with Mongols, and you there with Russians”. Generally, despite their comparatively better off position in Mongolia, the Buryats are still worried quite a lot about the state of their culture. The younger generation of Mongolian Buryats are extremely active and productive in terms of restoring their traditional culture and dialect. They have organized a Buryat collective “Amin Toonto”, shooting films, clips and establishing webpages, FB communities and blogs. The internet and not their physical proximity serves as the key channel of cooperation between the Buryats in Mongolia and their kin in Russia and these kinship ties mostly involve economic and cultural exchanges.

The Buryats are well aware that in addition to being a part of Mongolia and Mongolian culture, they have another motherland in Buryatia⁹. The culture of Buryatia, especially that of Soviet times, still provides them with cultural symbols and tenets. The songs from that period are widely known in Mongolia and not only among the Buryats. They are considered to be folk songs (Gamnaarai, Toonto and nyutag to name but a few). The circle dance *Yokhor* which is a classic example of Hobsbawmian “invented tradition”, was promoted as the national dance of the Buryats in Soviet times and is considered a central mark of their identity. The same situation arises with the Buryat language, when they try to imitate the “proper” Buryat pronunciation altering the -s- sound to the distinctive Buryat -h- even in positions where it is not required.

At the same time, they are more adept at constructing lexically and syntactically complex sentences in Buryat language since on a structural level they still operate within the native language, even though officially they are expected to operate with the structures of the Mongolian language. The Buryats from Russia, in this context, feel they are the worst off because even though they are capable of distinguishing the differences between the strong Khalkha accent in the speech of the Mongolian Buryats, they admit that the shift from Buryat to Russian is irreversible in their case. We even heard that old people in Buryatia maintain a stereotype that the Mongolian Buryats speak pure Buryat language because their parents forced them to speak it at home, though our research has proved that this was not entirely the case. In conversations with Buryats from Russia who are currently living in Mongolia, we were informed that the local Buryats and those in China had lost none of their abilities to run businesses in contrast to the

⁹ Their Buriat identity is increasingly recognized as part of their Mongol affiliation [Bulag], while it may look different among the Buriats from Russia, although it seems to be a recent trend.

Buryats in Russia who had lost it during Soviet acculturation. The former are said to be rich in cattle, cultivated land and often run a business in a village or in Ulaanbaatar.

The general impression was that there is a great gap between different versions of Buryatness, formed during the twentieth century, in completely different political, cultural and ethnic environments; various kinds of Buryatness maintains cohesion merely on the level of elementary symbols. Together with a rapid loss of the language in ethnic Buryatia and with the cultural transformations being experienced by the Buryats in Mongolia, the gap seems to be enlarging. Symptomatic of this state of affairs are the differing attitudes held by both – the Buryats from Mongolia think of their kin in the North as strongly russified while those in Russia simply refer to the Mongolian Buryats as Mongols. This appears to be an irrevocable gulf to bridge.

THE ROLE OF MONGOLIA IN THE CULTURE OF BURYATS

Surprisingly, from the very beginning, an integral part of the “Mongol world” was anti-Pan-Mongolism. The sovereignty which Mongolia gained through enormous efforts at the beginning of the twentieth century, was more important than saving an ‘All-Mongol world’, which continued to be part of China (Inner Mongolia) and Russia (Buryatia)¹⁰. In this intricate political game, Mongolia thought it wise to employ a strategy of not antagonizing its two neighboring powers. Naturally, Mongolia turned a deaf ear to the Pan-Mongolist proclamations emanating from Buryat-Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, as such a union perhaps seemed mythical and dangerous and could have led to the destruction of all three (Varnavskii 2003). Mongolia did not want to come to the rescue of other Mongol lands in China and Russia and justified its stance by declaring that Mongolia was working on its own state independence and this aim took precedence. This policy was most clearly seen in respect of the Buryats in contemporary Russia. Though the Mongolian Intelligentsia expressed sentiment and lament over the state of Buryat-Mongol culture and language in Russia, no political interventions could be expected from it. Russia, as an economic and political partner, was more important than the cultural matters of the Buryats. Mongols view the Buryats from Mongolia and Russia differently. Those from Mongolia are counted as their own Mongol community and are not attributed with a separate nationality. Those in Russia, on the other hand, are considered to have been russified and thus an alien group. The culture of Buryats itself is seen as a fusion of Mongol and Russia; the symbols of Buryatness include wooden houses, hay and bread with sour cream. In contrast to the sedentary and agriculture related symbols of Buryats in Mongolia, those, in Russia, tend to be associated with felt houses, steppes and lost nomadism¹¹.

¹⁰ Here also should be included other regions like Sinjan and Kalmukia.

¹¹ We do not dwell into deeper consideration on this very topic as it is beyond the confines of this paper.

We wish to now turn to the expectations and hopes that the Buryats from Russia have in relation to Mongolia. Perhaps we should begin with the great envy harboured by the Buryat Intelligentsia (and simply people too) and what they feel about the independence of Mongolia. Mongolia is what Buryatia could have become: “It is nice in Mongolia – everything is ... is in Buryat!” a young Buryat girl said. Indeed, the highly developed Mass Media, the cinema industry, education, governmental policy and structure – all employ a language, which remind them of their native Buryat. The terms that appear in the language to reflect this new phenomena of the attitudes to Mongolia is largely patterned on the constant Khalkha-Mongol connotations:

“In general, the closer we are to the state language of Mongolia which TV programmes, films, magazines, newspapers and web pages are conducted through, the more we have the opportunity to use our own language. The language is a living entity when used and not simply learned”

writes ‘Erzhenā’ on an internet forum (vk.com). Mongolian pop-culture has had a major influence on the Buryat. A Buryat singer with whom we talked in Aga, said that while composing Buryat songs she felt impacted on greatly by what she had learned in Ulaanbaatar. Such an influence is viewed very positively in artistic circles. Similarly, contemporary Mongolian slices of such genres such as Rap and others are actively adopted by the Buryats. Here is where tradition is being combined with the modern which in Russia has a very different configuration.

However, this has not always been the case. Some decades ago when Mongolia was still considered a backward poor country, Buryats were advantaged by the fact that they knew Russian – thus making them more mobile and competitive on the job market. The restrained relations had their roots in the deep trauma arising for being persecuted for Pan-Mongolism during the Stalinist purges along with the general Soviet policy of eliminating the Mongolness from the Buryats. The soviet ethnographers working in Stalinist times “searched” and “found” other “substrata” in the “ethnogenesis” of Buryat ethnicity. This resulted in the elimination of the word “Mongol” from the name “Buryat-Mongol ASSR”, which simply became Buryat ASSR in 1958 and the Buryat-Mongols became plain Buryats (see more: Bulag 1998).

The recent economic changes and the general euphoria felt in Mongolia arising from economic growth, which in 2011 was the highest in the world (17 %) as a result of the development of the mine industry (in contrary to the economic stagnation in Russia), changed the image of Mongolia’s values among Buryats positively. Ulaanbaatar became a modern city for the Buryats, where people flocked for shopping tours and entertainment. Some Buryats held out real hopes on Mongolia becoming a strong country with a capacity to protect the interests of Mongol peoples and culture in the world, including the Buryat. According to one of our informants:

“It was a call to all Mongols to return to Mongolia and start work for the good of Mongolia. They even had a marketing campaign. In contrast however, we have not heard that there was any govern-

ment support. The President of Mongolia announced this [for Buryats to come and live in Mongolia – E.N., A.Zh.] two years ago”.

This alleged Mongolian announcement was expressed in the following sentence: “We have the land, river, oil and we cannot only have a two million population. Come to us!” (2012, 721001). These kind of opinions (represented by the citation above) seem to be exaggerated, and largely illusory, but the Mongols who in 2014 had many contacts no doubt took for granted the ethnical or cultural proximity of the Buryat and Mongolian population of Mongolia. In 1993 and 1994 when Ewa Nowicka (the author) was conducting research in Buryatia, respondents spoke of Mongols as their closest relatives, pointing out various aspects of similarity (see more: Nowicka and Wyszynski 1996). Buryats are competing with the Khalkha Mongols in terms of their ancestral, territorial, as well as symbolic affiliation.

Such disputes can be seen, for example, on issues of Genghis Khan’s ancestry and burial place. The birthplace of the great Khan was officially discovered in Khentii Aimag in Mongolia. However, right on the other side of the border in the Aga Okrug, local people showed us two other possible birth sites of Genghis Khan in the localities of Budalan and Kunkur. At the same time, we were told about other possible burial places of the Khan on the bottom of the “Buryat part” of the Onon River. Despite these disputes, Buryats admit their common roots and cultural and linguistic similarities:

“The Mongols [after the collapse of Genghis Khan’s empire – E.N., A.Zh.] were divided. Those living in Ulaanbaatar were called Mongols [and they were] the same as the Buryats. Someone said «it is just such a dialect» [Buryat]. [There is a similar] difference between the Mongolian peoples on a linguistic level compared to the differences between the Slav nations: <<Russians can understand Ukrainians and Ukrainians can understand Poles>>. Such is the language – one can understand a lot. Our Buryats participated in the war expeditions of Genghis Khan” (13, 801,013).

Participation in the history of the Mongol Empire raises the prestige of their own ethnic group and at the same time points to their historical communality with the Mongol world.

BURYATS FROM CHINA

In the 1990s., after some thaw in Russian-Chinese relations, the Buryats from China suddenly appeared in the Russian public life. Buryats from Russia found out that Chinese Buryats seemed – as some researchers have said – “living ancestors”, they were speaking a very “authentic” form of the Buryat language. Undoubtedly, “They spoke as my grandmother”, wrote in a classic Mongol script abolished in Russia and Mongolia in communist times. They also wear and sew their own traditional Buryat clothes and keep traditional forms of nomadic/semi-nomadic pastoralism. The most important traditional singers of song are all from Shenekheen – Badma-Khanda, Sesegmaa, Dashimaa

as well as Butidee Dondog, Gandig and many others. Buryat singers in China did not change the traditional way of singing, which in Russia was much transformed by academic canons. The Shenekheen Buryats have produced a large number of items that have become symbols of authentic Buryat culture. These include Shenekheen buuza dumplings and other dishes in Buryat cuisine. Shenekheen degel, the Buryat dress, is also made by them. This was how Buryats from China (who are actually few in number 8–10 000) have impacted enormously on the cultural life of Buryatia in Russia. We can also confirm that the Shenekheen Buryats still rear traditional Buryat breeds of cow, sheep, horse, goat and even camel, which all are treated as purged and deemed as “not to rent” to other herds in ethnic Buryatia (in order to keep the purity of the races).

Naturally, many intellectuals are puzzled as to how a small community of Buryats managed to keep traditional Buryat culture so strong, while the main Buryat community almost faced extinction. Interestingly, the Shenekheen Buryats state that the reasons for this is that in comparison to the Buryats from Russia and Mongolia they had a comparatively peaceful life in China through managing to escape the traumatic collectivization, Stalinist purges, World War II losses and did not have to endure the strong assimilative policies of the USSR. However the life of Shenekheen Buryats in China was not as peaceful as many of the Buryat intelligentsia tend to present it. Mass migrations to China started from 1918 and continued until 1932 mainly from the areas of Aga Buryats, and as a consequence of the social and political changes in Russia. The lands they moved to were not completely unfamiliar to them as they were near the Russian border, where they used to have temporary pasture lands. They were also familiar with the Barga Mongols (who lived in China since Qing Dynasty), whom they thought of as being close kin.

The destiny of the Buryats lay in the hands of the great Powers including Russia, Japan and China. Soon the border became much more militarized and in 1931 a Japanese puppet state – Manchukuo- on the territory of North-East China was formed. The Buryats were incorporated into the military troops and administration of the new born state. A Buryat who had migrated from Aga – Urzhin Garmaev- was even promoted to the rank of General of the Manchukuo Army. During Japanese-Soviet/Mongolian conflicts, Buryats and Mongols from the three countries were faced with a situation where they had to kill each other.

In 1945, before the Soviets entered Manchuria, half of all Shenekheen Buryats migrated to the Shilin-gol aimag fearing Soviet aggression, which was indeed perpetrated on those who stayed in Shenekheen. Buryat lamas and lay people were transported back to USSR work camps and those who migrated to Shilin-gol and formed partisan troops on the side of the Kuomintang during the civil war in China, were exterminated. Those who survived migrated westwards to the Kukunor region. In 1956, they were moved back to the Shenekheen by Chinese authorities and in 1957 obtained Chinese citizenship (Hureelbaatar, after: Szmydt 2013, 90). The Cultural Revolution left its scars on

them also. They had almost no contact with their kin in the north, especially from the sixties, because of frozen Sino-Soviet relations and the threat of military confrontation. In the 1990s, the Buryats on both sides of the border did not know that much about each other. The first scholars going there, told us that they had no idea what kind of Buryats to expect. Despite their turbulent history in China, scholars think that it was diaspora consciousness that allowed them to keep their traditional culture and language relatively intact. They moved there with intentions of returning soon to their homeland and thus the first generations did not even learn the Chinese language.

In 1947, Shenekheen Buryats numbered about 7 000, and today there are about 10 000 (these numbers are approximate numbers for the Buryats in China and Mongolia). They do not have the official status of the Buryat minority, but are considered to be part of the Mongol minority. In the first decades after the fall of the Soviet-Union, many Shenekheen Buryats moved to their Buryatia homeland. In 1993, about 300 Shenekheen Buryats moved to different regions of ethnic Buryatia. In contrast to the Mongolian Buryats, the Buryats from China strived more to migrate to Russia, but due to the poor legal basis of their repatriation and the recent economic boom in China, their desire to migrate has waned. As Sayana Namsaraeva, a researcher of Mongolic borderland communities, expressed during a conference entitled "Boundaries...", young Shenekheen Buryats feel more comfortable and attracted to living in China now than in contemporary Russia.

The Buryats are not very familiar with the rest of the Inner Mongols. We met a woman, who had undertaken a pilgrimage to Inner Mongolian monasteries and told us that the Mongols living there were all Buryats and spoke an almost pure form of the Buryat language. It happens very often that Buryats mistake Shenekheen Buryats for the Inner Mongols, who consist of several Mongol ethnic groups (Khorchin, Chakhar, Ordos and others), totaling more than the population of the independent Mongolia. Among Buryat elites, Inner Mongolia is gaining an increasing popularity because – in Buryats' eyes – is an example how minority groups in China can maintain their culture relatively intact.

CONCLUSION

The Buryats in Russia perceive their kin on the other side of the border as those who have managed to keep their traditional culture, lifestyle and mentality alive, while those in China and Mongolia seek their roots and relatives in the North. The Buryats from Russia consider those in China and Mongolia to be migrants, but interestingly, the Buryats from those countries feel themselves to be at home due to the fact that myths and recent history have no borders and the cultural background they found in the South is not so alien to them.

The Buryats in the three countries have different ideas in regards to their ethnicity and cultural development. While in Russia, they are treated (and tend to treat themselves) as a separate nation from Mongols, in Mongolia and China their Mongolness is a central element of their identity. Moreover, although in Mongolia they and other Mongolic groups are viewed as inferior to the true Mongols – the Khalkhas, in China, their situation differs. Internally diverse groups of Inner Mongols seem to be more tolerant to different variants of this Mongolness, of which Buryatness is a part.

As has been shown above, the relations between the groups used to be dependent on the policies of the great powers, which in different periods tolerated or did not tolerate them. It will be interesting to know in future the way these relations are going to be shaped. As mentioned in the introduction, this article is only an outline of the relations of Buryats to other Mongols living on different sides of the border. This is, of course, a work in progress, and only a part of what could, and, hopefully, will be realized in the future.

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