

***EX ORIENTE LUMINA***  
***HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE***

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen  
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**



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## THE TAZ ETHNIC GROUP: ITS PAST AND FUTURE

*Albina Girfanova*

The Taz people were recognized officially as a distinct ethnic group in 2000, when on 24 March a Government decree included them in the list of native minorities belonging to the Russian Federation. From the mid-1930s, the USSR maintained a policy of unification and amalgamation of the “socialist nations” under the guidance of “chief architect” Josef Stalin. In compliance with the Soviet Constitution of 1936, the authorities employed a strategy of “simplification”, which led to attempts to avoid the registration of “superfluous” nationalities (i.e. ethnic groups). Looking at figures from the 1929 census, there were 194 nationalities; in 1939 there were only 100, and by 1959 this number had been further reduced to 75.

Perestroika, on the other hand, marked a tremendous increase in feelings of self-identity. In the most recent census, this has produced several bizarre results. People have claimed to be Scythians or, in the North, Pomors. Less serious-minded people listed themselves as Hobbits or Elves. The 2002 census contains 180 nationalities, including a thousand Americans and approximately the same number of British.

For example, the Cossacks, whose mother tongue is Russian and who inhabit the southern parts of Russia (as well as Siberia and the Far East), have been making claims for their own status. To date, the Cossacks have been considered a military order that existed prior to the Revolution of 1917. Communities of Cossacks first came into being in the fiveteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were located beyond the borders of Russia – on the shores of the Dnieper, Volga, Terek, Ural, and Don – and were comprised basically of peasants who had fled from their lords in mainland Russia. They were heavily involved in the peasant uprisings in Ukraine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the peasant rebellions in Russia a century later. The government of Tsarist Russia tried to use the Cossacks as border-guards and in the regular army. In the eighteenth century, the Cossacks became part of the military establishment. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were already several Cossack military units (e.g. Siberian, Transbaikal, Amur, and Ussurian). In 1920, however, the order of Cossacks was disbanded. This example begs the question of the criteria

of the selection of an ethnic group, and it points to the fact that ethnic self-identification and the selection of an actual ethnic group do not necessarily coincide.

Some years ago, at the beginning of the new millennium, the process of converting Soviet passports into Russian ones was completed. For the first time in the history of Russia, no information about nationality is included on passports. It is not clear how the number of people belonging to this or that group will be calculated when the next census comes. On the other hand, ethnic background is not registered in the USA. It is difficult to get data on how many Chinese or Russian people live there, for example.

The Taz have managed to maintain a distinct ethnic profile in spite of their very small number (only 300 people, according to the latest census) and a high percentage of mixed marriages. This people lives in Primorye and has a strong ethnic identity with distinctive household features and characteristics.

The first explorer who met the Taz was the Russian traveler and geographer Michael I. Venjukov. While traveling in the Ussuri area in 1857, he remarked (Venjukov 1868) on an aboriginal group derived from mixed marriages between Chinese men and Oroch women.

My interest in this group is based on more than twenty years of study of Udeghe language, traditions, ethnography, and culture. In particular, it was inspired by S.N. Brailovsky's *The Tazy and the Udeghe*, published in St Petersburg in 1901. Containing very valuable material, this book provides an analysis of the economic conditions of these groups, as well as their material and spiritual culture. The ethnic name for the Udeghe was introduced by Brailovsky, but until the 1920s there was no clear understanding about their identity. However, we have now come to realize that Brailovsky described the Udeghe, Taz, and Oroch as a single common group. While investigating the process of how the Chinese first settled in Primorye and their subsequent diffusion, V.K. Arsenyev (1926) – the famous Russian ethnologist, writer, and traveler – arrived at the conclusion that the Taz represent a part of the Udeghe (“forest people”), who had been assimilated by the Chinese. Arsenyev was also the first to distinguish between the Udeghe and the Oroch.

The Taz issue would later be considered by Vladivostok ethnographers, whose long history of observations and field research led them to propose that this ethnic group had been formed in the 1930s when small separate groups of Taz, who lived in groups of two or three families along the rivers which flow to the Japanese Sea, were resettled to the Olginsky District (Sem & Sem 2001).

In the second half of the 1960s, all publications on the Taz were halted. This was due to the China-Soviet détente and the direct association of the origin of the Taz with the Manchu Chinese colonization of what had formerly been the Ussuri

region (now Primorye), which had been particularly intense in the nineteenth century. The settlers from the Northeast of China had mostly been men, who married women from local aboriginal groups (such as the Udeghe, the Nanai, and the Oroch). This marked the beginning of a new ethnic group, the Taz.

L.I. Shrenk, a famous Russian ethnologist of the nineteenth century, wrote (Shrenk 1883) that Jesuit missionaries sent to Amur with a mission from the Beijing government called the local population by the Chinese word *jui-phi-taczy*, meaning ‘fish-skin aliens’ or ‘savages’. The Chinese settlers appear to have used this name for all Tungus-Manchu tribes, calling them “Tadzy”. The modern name “Taz” is a phonetic variant of this term. The Taz did not preserve any family names (kinship names). Probably they did not have any, due to the special conditions of their origin. The structure of surnames primarily follows the Chinese system, which consists of the surname, name, and the original location of the father. For the Taz, all three of these components are aggregated into a single word, followed by a Russian name and a patronymic (e.g. Piphalun Maria Alexandrovna, Xishen Ljudmila Vasiljevna).

The language of the Taz is one of the northern dialects of Chinese, containing many words borrowed from the Udeghe or Nanai. By the time of the first census in 1870, there were approximately 638 Taz; by 1989, there were only 203 people left.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Taz had formed a typical household culture based not on hunting, fishing, and gathering, but on agriculture and cattle farming. The Chinese played an important role in the development of agriculture among the Taz. Even the names of the main crops, tools, and agricultural techniques show the influence of Chinese traditions.

Material culture, being a mix of multicultural traditions, incorporated new features. For example, the architecture of the houses included some elements that were not typical of traditional structures, yet nevertheless were basically Udeghe or Nanai.

Alongside the traditional Tungus male hairstyle – a plait called the *pjandza* – appeared the Chinese style of plait, called the *tkhinoudai* (Sem & Sem 2001: 130). For women, a Chinese bun was worn instead of traditional plaits. The Taz stopped wearing a ring in the nose, which was typical for the Tungus. Headwear protecting the back of the head from mosquitoes and snow was replaced by a silk scarf, which was worn over headwear, not underneath as used to be typical for the Tungus (i.e. the Udeghe or Nanai).

The religious beliefs of the Taz are practically unknown. As far back as the nineteenth century, the scholars who studied this region considered religion to be the most difficult subject. On one hand, there was obvious Chinese influ-

ence. On the other hand, a lack of knowledge of the local languages hindered the spread of Christianity.

Brailovsky (1901: 392) wrote that a Taz woman was very excited to tell him that “the Taz do not have any God at all” and that they worshiped Chinese deities. Indeed, in any more or less populated Taz village, there was a Chinese place of worship, and some were even seen in the taiga. Until very recently, one could find such places of worship in the Udeghe territories, especially in areas of mutual contact of the Udeghe and the Taz, in spite of Udeghe shamanism. These tended to be small constructions (3 x 3 meters) with thatched roofs, while the back and side walls were covered with clay. The front was painted red, yellow, white, and black. Two red poles with a variety of special decorations were placed outside, facing the door. The interior was decorated with images of Chinese gods. In front of these was a sacrificial area, a rectangular table with wooden cups, chopsticks, and candlesticks. Chinese scrolls could also be found on the walls.

Although the Taz copied the Chinese, however, they did not deeply understand their religion, but instead only borrowed its symbols and religious articles. Sometimes places of worship were so small that they could be placed in gardens or fields. And yet it is not possible to say that the aborigines were completely assimilated within the Chinese population.

To escape deportation, many Chinese were compelled to adopt another nationality. For this reason, by the early twentieth century, the Russian authorities had become afraid of the “yellow danger”. In the face of tens of thousands of Chinese, there was instituted a policy of expulsing them from the Russian borders. To avoid deportation, the Chinese came up with various tricks. One was to pass themselves off as natives. According to one old Taz, they had to pass a test of fishing with a fish-spear (a special tool for stabbing fish). Being able to successfully fish like this was considered as proof of local ethnicity.

When administrative measures and economic limitations led to a considerable reduction of the Chinese population in the Primorye region, the Taz had the opportunity to develop themselves. This was enhanced by their settlements, where separate families lived along the rivers. In these conditions, with their mixed language and culture, they came to be recognized as a unique people.

From the mid-1920s, the Taz started to become integrated with the Soviet culture. Russian hunting tools, clothes, and modes of housing were introduced, and the process of acquiring the Russian language began. By the early 1960s, all Taz were bilingual, and the Taz language was used only within the family. The number of mixed marriages increased, especially with Russians. The Taz came to be characterized by a structural parallelism of two cultures and two languages. However, there was no complete assimilation. For example, their

private plots were different from those of the Russians. Their primary crops were beans, peas, corn, and poppies. The Taz did not keep milk cattle, and they only used bulls for work.

Unlike the Russian population, the Taz tended to be more connected with familial agriculture. The traditional fiscal orientation of the Taz made them tougher in the face of new economic conditions, and is the most important factor for the survival of this ideoethnic group.

In recent years, we have witnessed the strengthening of feelings of identity, as well as social and political activities. The modern generation seeks a return to specific cultural features. For instance, some families created the Chin-San community (meaning 'clean mountains'), which subsists by hunting, fishing, and collecting wild food. On the other hand, the Taz have the same economic problems as the rest of the Tungus ethnic groups. These include unemployment, inadequate social services (while the Taz have officially been adopted on paper, they cannot receive services due to a lack of money), and environmental degradation. Like the other minority groups, the Taz would like to regain their territories for traditional land use and put a halt to illegal clearing of the forest, which has not been controlled by the state. In turn, this would provide them better conditions for hunting and fishing.

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