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## In China, the Forgotten Manchu Seek to Rekindle Their Glory

By IAN JOHNSON

QAPQAL, China -- Hasutai gingerly turns on the tape recorder and places it on a table. Out of it emanates something he thought he'd never hear: his native tongue, Manchu, spoken by a living person.

Hasutai is a Manchu, descendant of a nomadic warrior tribe that conquered China in the 17th century and ruled it for more than 250 years. Generations of persecution have all but eliminated the Manchus' language.

So Hasutai, who in the Manchu tradition goes by the one name, has come to this remote corner of China on a quest. His goal is to connect with members of the Xibe tribe -- a reclusive group who speak a forgotten dialect similar to his people's. Along with a band of like-minded young people in half a dozen Chinese cities, Hasutai has started schools, Web sites, written textbooks and recorded the few remaining Manchu speakers for posterity. "At some point you realize that the first language you're speaking isn't your mother tongue," says Hasutai. "You feel like an orphan. You want to find your mother."

Hasutai is at the vanguard of an explosion of ethnic awareness and pride across China. The nation's 1.3 billion people are overwhelmingly Han Chinese, but roughly 9% of the population are ethnic minorities: Manchus and Mongolians, Uighurs and Tibetans as well as dozens of others. Although their numbers are small, minorities live on nearly half of China's territory, including most of its borderlands. Over the past two years they have been at the center of bloody riots that claimed hundreds of lives.

As China's Communist Party marks its 60th year this week with a series of festivities to symbolize national unity, Chinese society is struggling to overcome growing ethnic rifts.

For decades, China's authoritarian policies kept a lid on ethnic expression. Now, as the party loosens control over society, individuals are defining themselves by their culture -- embracing who they are, what language they speak and what their ancestors accomplished. "This is not a hobby or an interest," says Hukshen, a 22-year-old Manchu language student. "This is a burning emotion I feel, a need to find out who I am."

On some levels, this search can be a positive force, helping to give meaning to people's lives. "Having these outlets helps stability," says Sara Davis, director of Asia Catalyst, a non-governmental organization that promotes grassroots organizing. "If [people] feel proud of their culture, they're invested in their society."

But because many of China's 55 minority groups still feel marginalized, expressions of anger and violence are on the rise. Over the past two years, China has suffered serious ethnic rioting, something rare in China's recent history. Earlier this year, riots in China's vast region of Xinjiang left nearly 200 dead and 2,000 wounded.

A heightened sense of ethnic identity also poses challenges because China has few national symbols or myths to hold the groups together. Most Manchus, for example, are unimpressed with the Great Wall, a defensive fortification built by Chinese to keep them out. Ma Rong, a prominent writer and thinker at Peking University, says society is fragmenting.

"We should rethink a new framework of nation building," Mr. Ma wrote in a recent essay. He called upon people to "endeavor to make the country consider the 'nation' as the most essential and the most fundamental identification group."

Much of the identification can be traced to the Communists' policies. Soon after the party took power in 1949, it adopted minority programs imported from the Soviets. The population was divided into ethnic groups. Today there are 56. For those who didn't fit neat categories, social scientists created classifications. Even the Chinese majority got their own label, "Han." The basic idea was to keep an eye on minority groups -- especially those in strategically important regions of the country like Tibet and Xinjiang -- in order to prevent uprisings.

The policies have been a double-edged sword. By emblazoning people's ethnicity on their identity cards and passports, few can forget their past. Yet newer policies push assimilation. Officially, Beijing encourages minorities to learn languages and offers schooling, broadcasts and publications in minority languages. In practice, these offerings are minimal.

Minority education often takes place for a few grades in elementary school, while broadcasts are often just for an hour or two a day, or even a week. Coupled with economic forces that push them to learn Chinese, this neglect means that many young minorities have only a rudimentary understanding of their mother tongues.

For Manchus, the sense of loss was particularly acute. Manchu originated from China's northeast, which under the country's last dynasty, the Qing, was off-limits to Han Chinese immigration. As the dynasty collapsed toward the end of the 19th century, Chinese migrants flooded in. When Japan occupied Manchuria in the 1930s, Manchu language education was replaced by Japanese. Once China retook the region at the war's end, Japanese classes were replaced by Chinese. The Manchu language was never again taught on a wide scale.

As a result, virtually no Manchus today have heard Manchu spoken by their parents. For many, it was taboo. Gebu Algika, a 30-year-old sports promoter who helps run one of the Manchu classes in Beijing, said his grandfather, a prominent Manchu, was executed by the Communists shortly after the 1949 takeover for being a "reactionary." His family fearfully changed its ethnic registration from Manchu to Han. "People born after 1950 don't speak it," he says. "It was politically dangerous."

As rulers of China's last dynasty, Manchus suffered especially under communist rule. Members of the court underwent ideological indoctrination: Most famously the last emperor, Puyi, whose life story was filmed by Bernardo Bertolucci, became a gardener. His relatives were forbidden to speak Manchu, and Manchu schools in Beijing closed down.

Today, only one elementary school in the country teaches Manchu, and that only as an elective. In universities and a handful of private schools, written Manchu is still taught but purely as a means to reading the Qing dynasty's archives.

From two million registered Manchus in China's 1980 census, the country now has nine million -- a reflection of people's willingness to ignore stigmas and embrace their true heritage. For Hasutai, the desire to reconnect to his roots flared up when he was 11 and realized that his people's language was all but dead. He decided to teach himself written Manchu, using textbooks and old ethnographic recordings of Manchus.

Over time, he came into contact with other Manchus who shared the same goals. The group launched two Web sites, reprinted old textbooks, made up flashcards and collected recordings of Manchu speakers. Hasutai began holding classes in downtown Beijing. "We want it to be part of our life, a language we speak with our spouses and children," says Ridaikin, who also uses the Chinese name Hu Aibo. The 24-year-old graduate student in mathematics teaches one of the Manchu classes in Beijing.

The young men decided they needed more help and began by turning to academia to help promote their cause. That led to disappointment, with some scholars giving the impression that they weren't much interested in the language's revival.

Scholars familiar with the new language schools say the effort is inconsequential. "That may be regrettable but I'm afraid that's how it is," says Xu Danliang, a researcher of Manchu history at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences. "People don't know how it's really spoken in daily life."

Indeed, with virtually no native speakers left, it isn't always clear how to speak the words. In the Qing dynasty, a textbook had been developed for Chinese wanting to learn their rulers' languages, with Chinese characters to suggest how to pronounce Manchu letters. That helped, as did a system of transcribing Manchu script into Roman letters devised by European missionaries and academics. But even today, Manchus can't agree on how to pronounce one of the vowels, let alone how to make the language flow naturally.

Hasutai decided the answer lay in a remote corner of China: Qapqal, a county on the Kazakh border. In the 18th century, one of China's most famous emperors, Qianlong, sent members of the Xibe tribe to the newly conquered steppes of Central Asia. Close Manchu allies, the Xibe spoke what essentially was a dialect of Manchu. Isolated from the currents that wiped out Manchu speakers in their heartland, the Xibe kept the language in this remote region.

In July he decided to head west. The 28-year-old quit his job writing software for the Chinese computer maker Founder Group and traveled with a friend, a 22-year-old broadcasting student. They took a 40-hour train ride from Beijing to Urumqi, then a 10-hour bus ride.

The two live in a dormitory of a Xibe middle school and take six hours of Manchu lessons a day from an elderly teacher. Most of the time they wander the streets, reveling in the fact that people here are speaking a language from a bygone era.

One afternoon, they amble down a dusty, poplar-lined street to a market and watch old women haggle over seeds. Then they stop into a restaurant, where a group of Xibe men invite them over for beers and chicken. Dressed in polo shirts, shorts and sandals, the young men hardly blend in with the sun-hardened locals, mostly farmers. But the Xibe are impressed at their resolve and flattered that they have come to learn from them. Still, they find it curious that the young men are only now learning their native tongue as adults. "You Manchus, you lost your character. What happened to you?" one asks in Chinese. The young men look sheepish.

"Their language isn't bad but it's bookish," another adds. "Some of the words they say, I don't understand. We speak colloquial." Hasutai interjects enthusiastically: "That's a great advantage. It's what we want to learn."

The men immediately stand up and drink to that, downing plastic cups of warm beer, the first of many toasts. Hasutai sees the time he will spend here -- he might stay for months -- as part of an effort to make him a better teacher. "Not everyone can come out here," he says. "We're taking it back to them."

In Beijing a few days later, a group of teachers excitedly discuss the two young men's adventure. It is clear that most won't go -- obligations hold them back in Beijing -- but they are awaiting the two's return.

Soon the students crowd into the classroom, the conference room of a company sympathetic to the Manchu revival. Dekjin, a 28-year-old teacher, turns to the whiteboard and in a blue marker writes in Manchu script a word. Next to it she writes in Roman letters the way the word is spoken: m-a-n-j-u; Manchu.

Then she turns to the class and says, "This is who we are."



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