

JOURNEY INTO CHINA



Xu Ying & Wang Baoqin

Ethnic Minorities of **China**

translation by Li Guoqing



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
PRESS

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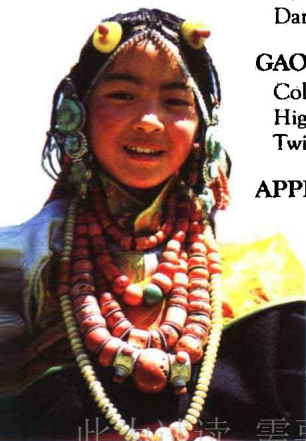
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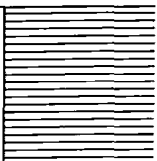


Preface

China has a long history behind it, the civilization being an important contributor to the evolution of mankind. China is also a multi-national country. The cultures of its ethnic minorities are vital components of Chinese civilization. Today, the 56 nationalities, including the Han nationality, live on China's 9.6-million square kilometers of territory. Although 55 ethnic minorities take up just 8.41% of the Chinese population, they are widely dispersed over 50% to 60% of the land, mostly on plateaus, grasslands or in forests.

The areas where the ethnic minorities live have beautiful sceneries: grand mountains, deep forests, huge rivers and lakes with abundant natural resources. Along with the Han people, these minorities have added to the profound Chinese civilization with their own fascinating cultures.

Among these minorities, 53 have their own languages, 21 have written ones, and almost all have their own religious beliefs and festivals. The 21 ethnic minorities included in this book represent different areas and different cultures of the minority groups living in China: the Tibetan, Qiang and Tu peoples on Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen and Mongolian peoples in north China, the Dai, Dong and Miao peoples in the south, and the Uygur, Kazak and Hui in China's west. Their beautiful costumes with unique accessories, diverse food customs, fascinating traditions, celebrations and history represent significant elements of Chinese civilization. Such diversity is the basis from which China, as a multi-national



country, continues to develop. China's sustainable development and prosperity can also be ascribed to this diversity.

When you travel with us to the "homes" of these families of China, you will find their life and customs endlessly fascinating and their cultures, ancient and mysterious. No matter where you're from, you won't fail to be charmed. Let's begin our journey now.

Mongolian: The People on Horseback

- ◎ Nomadic Life on Grasslands
- ◎ The Three Necessary Skills of
Mongolian Men
- ◎ The Ancient *Urtiin duu*
(long-song)

The Mongolian people used to be one of the nomadic tribes on the grasslands in north China. In the early 13th century, the Mongolian people, led by Genghis Khan, unified all tribes on the Mongolian Plateau, and thus formed a group, the Mongolian nationality. Today, the Mongolian people in China mainly live in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, and autonomous areas in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu,

Flocks of sheep and cows roaming on grasslands are like white clouds floating in the sky.

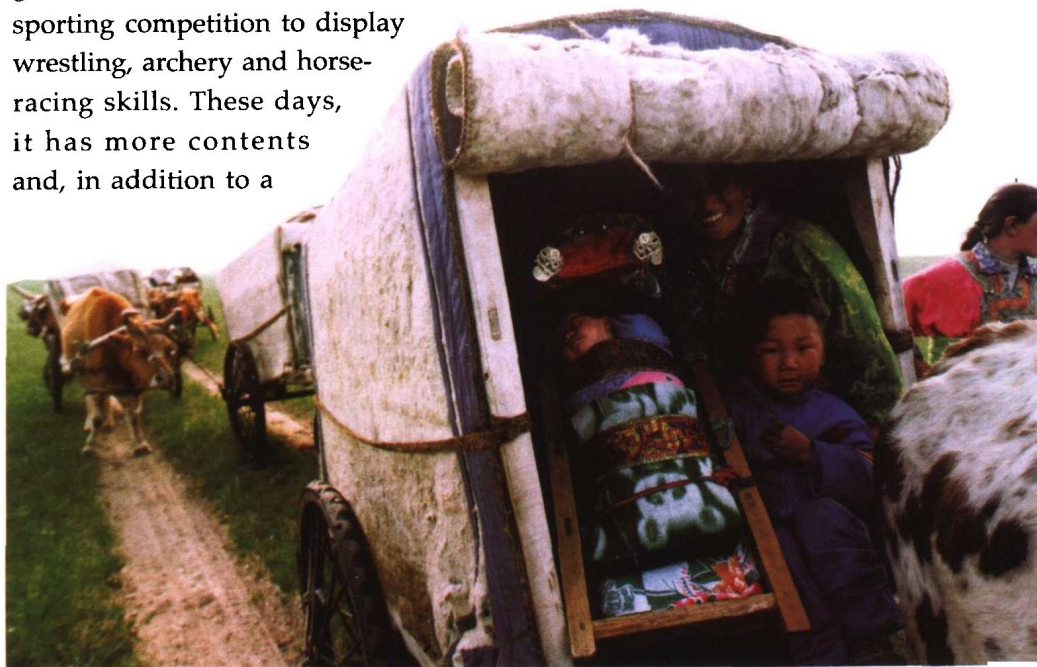


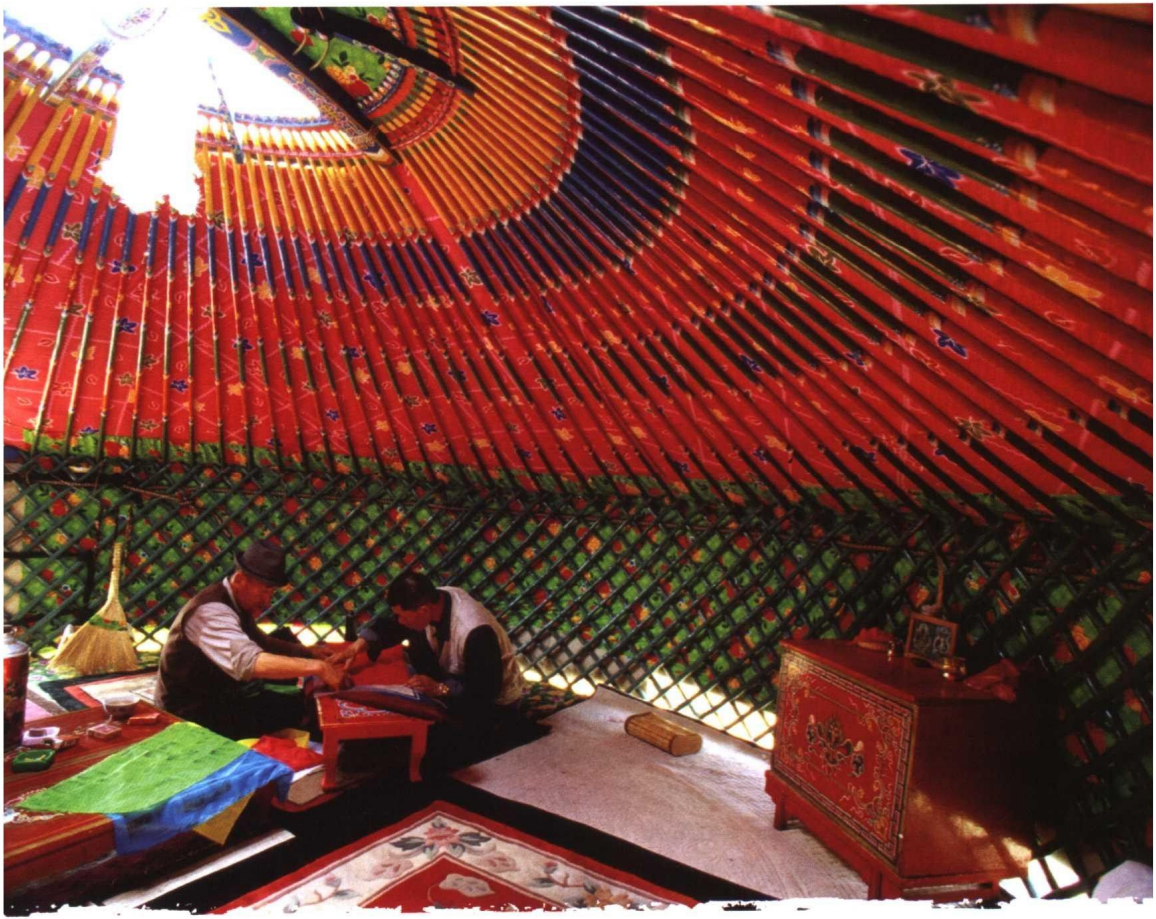
Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning—5.81 million people in total.

The ancient Mongolian Plateau connects the Changbai Mountains and Heilongjiang River in the east, the Tianshan Mountains and the Tarim Basin in the west, the grand Siberian grasslands in the north and the Yinshan Mountains in the south. Geographically, the Mongolian Plateau has a dry grassland climate. As it is in China's north, which is high, cold, dry and snowy, the plateau is not suitable for farming. Yet the vast grasslands are ideal for developing animal husbandry. For this reason, animal husbandry has long been the foundation of Mongolian people, the best basis of their life. For hundreds of years, the Mongolians have lived a nomadic custom of migration of following the grass and water, leaving footprints in the country's many pastures. They lived in yurts that can be easily installed and dismantled. Now most Mongolians have settled down in brick or earthen houses, and grasslands tourism has become a passion.

Nadam, in Mongolian, means amusement and games. Every July or August, a *Nadam* festival is held on grasslands as an age-old custom, a sporting competition to display wrestling, archery and horse-racing skills. These days, it has more contents and, in addition to a

The Lele cattle cart is regarded as "the ship on grassland," which perfectly fits local environments.





Easy to be carried along, put up and wind-proof, snow white yurts make ideal shelters for herdsmen on Hulun Buir Grasslands.

The yurt is bright and colorful inside.



celebration for a good harvest, the festival incorporates trade activities. Traditional wrestling, archery and horse racing are still considered three necessary skills for Mongolian men to possess.

Tall and strong,
Mongolian wrestlers
wear highly
characteristic clothes.

Wrestling is probably the most popular and most loved sport among Mongolian people. After Genghis Khan was made the leader of all Mongolians, he made wrestling a criterion of selecting army generals. Average people made wrestling an important event in their holidays. The outcome of a match does not depend on the wrestler's weight. In Mongolian style, one loses if three body parts above the knee touch the ground at the same time. Winners win titles, "giant" for one who beats all rivals for two years in a row, while "lion," "elephant" and "eagle" are rankings below. In history, wrestling was not only a competition, it was a method of choosing a son-in-law. To Mongolian people, wrestling is a contest of strength, courage and wisdom.

Wrestlers may travel a long distance to the *Nadam* Festival. The champion will win much respect from people and love from girls. The wrestling competition is



an elimination series with just one round between two wrestlers. Wrestlers wear high-top boots, leather vests with decorative metal spikes, very loose pants and red, yellow or blue silk ribbons around their necks. Upon thunderous applause from spectators, they stalk in “eagle steps” around the arena first, brimming with confidence and singing a war song. The winner receives a prize: a sheep, tea bricks or even a beautiful, outfitted stallion.

The horse races are equally compelling. The Mongolian people have a reputation of being “a nationality on horseback.” Horses, a fundamental part of their life, are indispensable in whatever they do, whether it’s battling, hunting, herding or doing trade. The Mongolians learn to ride horses at a very young age. A high level of riding skill makes life much easier. Through a thrilling horse race, they demonstrate the finest animals and exhibit marvelous riding skills. The two types of horse races are galloping and trotting. The latter is only for adults with sophisticated qualities—beautiful appearance, steady gait and faster gait than the others. Meanwhile, the galloping race may have several hundred juveniles in attendance. It’s simple: the first to finish the run will win the prize and praise.

Mongolian men are excellent archery for generations.

Bows and arrows in battling

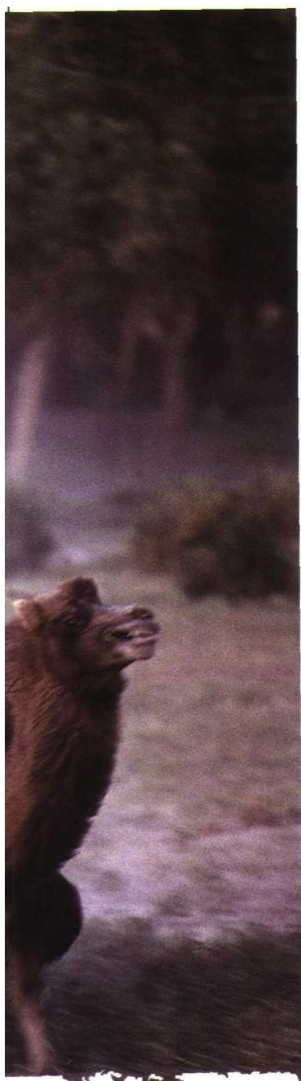
arrows, necessary and hunting, have been loved since





ancient times, and represented manhood. Archery, like horse racing, is also an important program at the *Nadam* Festival. The archery competition has two forms, still archery and archery on horseback; they differ in range, arrows and bows, their weight and length, and pulling force. Archery on horseback is done at a run. Brave Mongolian men, in tight-sleeved robes, bend their bows to shoot on galloping horses. Sometimes several bows may be shot at the same time. Excellent marksmen win resounding applause from spectators.

Journeying on camel.



The Mongolian people sing a unique tune called *Urtiin duu* (long-song), an age-old form characteristic of nomadic culture and local grassland custom. Each line in the tune has two parts, improvised by singers about life experience or feelings, sung at varied rhythms. Most of the lyrics involve the beauty of grasslands, fine horses, herds of camels, sheep or oxen, azure sky, white clouds, rivers and lakes. Generally, *Urtiin duu* is accompanied by a Mongolian stringed instrument called *ma tou qin* (horse-head violin). *Urtiin duu* has fewer lyrics but a drawn-out tune, which sounds very melodic and expressive. What's most special about it is that the singer can sing the high and low tones at the same time, a technique called *hu mai*. *Urtiin duu* is viewed as a living relic of Mongolian folk music.

For hundreds of years, the Mongolian people have sung *Urtiin duu* about life, Mother Nature and for a much-blessed future. When the soul of Mongolian music, the melodious and highly expressive *Urtiin duu* and *hu mai* singing are heard across the grasslands, the special charm of the grasslands is highlighted to its finest details.

Hezhen: Fisherman's Songs across the Wusuli River

- ◎ Fishing in All Seasons
- ◎ Fish-Skin Clothes and Birch-Bark Boats
- ◎ Merry Dog Sleds

In the lower reaches of the Heilongjiang, Songhua and Wusuli rivers live an ancient fishing and hunting ethnic minority, the Hezhen people. Hezhen means two things, people in the east and people living on riverside. Today, the Hezhen people, about 4,000, live in Heilongjiang Province.

Hezhen people make a living by fishing. When the Wusuli River is ice-bound, they use a special net to catch fish.





Every one of them is a master fisher.

In this area, mountains are tall and forests deep, rivers and lakes abundant; all provide favorable conditions for fishing and hunting. Up to and including the present, the Hezhen people living on riverbanks make a living by fishing. Almost everyone of them, old and young, men and women, are good fishers with skills inherited from their ancestors. Their simple tools are no more than forks, hooks and nets. The forks they fling never miss their targets. Their fishing skill on a frozen river is incredible; by just cutting a hole in the ice, they are ready to harvest not only fish but also much joy. In spring, they hunt for all kinds of fish. In summer, they repair fishing tools to get ready for autumn, a month-long golden harvest season. During this season, they fish dog salmon and sturgeon to their heart's content. In winter, they cut a hole to net fish on the frozen river. Fish permeates every part of their life. In the past, the Hezhen people calculated their ages by the number of times they had eaten dog salmon. Fish is





also important to children, whose traditional game is to imitate fishermen “forking” fish.

Dried fish is kept as food for future use.

The Hezhen people are excellent at cooking fish and baking or frying is traditional. They also have a unique practice when they receive guests: they fork up fish with a knife and present it to a guest’s mouth. If the guest does not hesitate to take it, he is considered a genuine friend and will be received warmly. Otherwise, he is simply refused entry into the house. Eating fish raw is also their custom. Raw fish meat is often served for guests or relatives, along with shredded potatoes, Chinese chives, pepper, vinegar and salt after being rinsed in boiling water.

Fish is not only their food, but, along with wild animals on land, their clothing material. The Hezhen men wear robes of roe deer hide, with two lines of fish-