

# Social Welfare Support for the Development of East Asian Ethnic Minorities: A Case Study of the Oroqen Ethnic Group

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the history and modern evolution of social welfare policy of Oroqen nationality in China. The study investigated the impact of various policy changes on the development and integration of Oroqen ethnic communities into modern society. By analyzing their policies for population welfare, education, employment, and cultural protection, this study highlights the challenges and opportunities facing the Oroqen people. The historical characteristics of the Oroqen range from the hunting ban of the Qing Dynasty to the forced settlement initiative of the Republic of China to the ethnic regional autonomy policy implemented by the People's Republic of China. This study highlights the need for targeted policies to meet the evolving needs of the Oroqen community and ensure their successful integration into modern Chinese society while preserving their unique cultural heritage.

## Keywords

Social welfare policies, Oroqen ethnic group, development trajectory.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and multicultural exchange, the social development of East Asian ethnic minorities has garnered significant attention. Striking a balance between cultural preservation and economic advancement is a crucial issue for these small minorities as they navigate the complexities of modern society. As an illustrative case in East Asia, the Oroqen ethnic group possesses a rich historical background and distinctive cultural heritage. This paper aims to utilize the Oroqen ethnic group as a case study to investigate its journey of social integration, accomplishments, challenges, and the role of policy support. Furthermore, it seeks to offer insights into the potential trajectory of their future social integration. By delving deep into the Oroqen ethnic group's experience, this study may provide valuable insights and lessons for the social integration of other small ethnic minorities.

## 2. Historical and Cultural Background of the Oroqen Ethnic Group

The name "Oroqen" signifies "people on the mountains" and "users of reindeer." As one of China's 28 smaller ethnic groups, the Oroqen mainly inhabit regions such as Oroqen Autonomous Banner in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and areas within Heilongjiang Province. [1]According to the seventh national population census of 2020, the Oroqen population totals 9,168 individuals.

### 2.1. Origin and Migration History

The Oroqen ethnic group traces its roots to the primeval forests of East Asia, where their livelihood relied predominantly on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Over time, their lifestyle transitioned from nomadism to agriculture and animal husbandry, leading to the formation of unique production methods and social structures. Throughout history, the Oroqen people

underwent multiple migrations, moving from northern forested regions to the south and northeast, engaging in interactions and exchanges with other ethnic groups. In the 1950s, with government assistance, the Oroqen people transitioned from their nomadic lifestyle to settled living.

## 2.2. Cultural Traditions and Characteristics

The Oroqen ethnic group possesses a diverse array of cultural traditions, including distinctive music, dances, paintings, and legends. Their reverence for nature is evident as they view the natural world as an integral part of their lives, expressing this through various cultural activities. Traditional attire, festivals, religious beliefs, and more serve as integral components of their cultural identity. Oroqen customs encompass clothing, food, shelter, and transportation, each bearing distinct characteristics. Traditional dwellings known as "Xianrenzhu," resembling half-open umbrellas, provide shelter during summer and winter months. In clothing, Oroqen women are known for their exquisite craftsmanship in creating "Mitahé" hats, fashioned from the heads of deer and used for hunting. Historically, the Oroqen people lived their lives in and with the forest—residing, traversing, nourishing, and adorning themselves with its resources.

## 2.3. Social Structure and Organizational Forms

The Oroqen society centers around the family unit, which plays a vital role in decision-making, production, and daily life. Traditionally, Oroqen society boasts relatively equal gender relations, with balanced roles for both men and women within the family and broader society. Moreover, the Oroqen maintain unique forms of social organization that actively contribute to cultural preservation and the safeguarding of their interests.

Recent demographic data indicates declining population figures, uneven distribution, improved gender balance in birth rates, accelerating aging trends, and coexistence with other ethnic groups among the Oroqen people.

## 3. Initial Social Development and Challenges of the Oroqen Ethnic Group

The Oroqen ethnic group stands as one of China's smaller ethnic groups, characterized by distinctive cultural traits. Residing in the northeastern frigid zones, they have long inhabited forested and ecologically diverse landscapes, leading a relatively dispersed and insulated social existence with limited interaction with other ethnic groups. Their primary means of subsistence revolves around hunting and gathering, resulting in gradual economic and social progress. Comprehensive factors such as nature, society, and history have led the Oroqen people to remain in an economically rudimentary and socially underdeveloped state throughout the 1950s. This section will delve into the early social development status of the Oroqen people, offering a thorough analysis of their education, employment, health, and more to provide a holistic view of their social conditions and developmental challenges since their settlement in 1953.

### 3.1. Educational Status and Challenges

For an extensive period, the Oroqen people lived amidst rugged mountains, contending with an underdeveloped economy and sparse population. During the intrusion of Tsarist Russia, they were subjected to political, economic, and cultural control, leading to a growing disconnect between the Oroqen people and the rest of China through the imposition of the Russian language. Recognizing the significance of education in fostering the identity of ethnic minorities in border areas, the Chinese government initiated school construction efforts between 1912 and 1922. Despite daunting conditions, Oroqen people began to receive modern cultural

education, raise their cultural literacy, enhance their national identity, and establish their grounding amidst historical transformations.

Due to historical and geographical factors, certain Oroqen regions grapple with limited educational resources, resulting in inadequate opportunities for some youth. This predicament has hampered knowledge acquisition and modern societal progress. Educational resources for Oroqen teachers often depend on county-level development, and since the Oroqen Autonomous Banner primarily engages in farming and secondary industries, economic foundations remain relatively fragile. Teacher salaries are linked to academic titles and degrees, with higher degrees or titles exerting minimal influence on salaries. Talent recruitment mainly relies on the "Three Supports and One Assistance" plan, but a lack of long-term and stable recruitment mechanisms exists. The remote and frigid climate of the Oroqen Autonomous Banner presents difficulties in attracting high-quality teaching resources, thus impacting educational quality. Overall, the Oroqen region faces multiple educational challenges, particularly in terms of attracting high-quality teachers and enhancing educational quality.

### **3.2. Employment Status and Economic Challenges**

The Oroqen people inhabit the Greater and Lesser Khingan Mountains in northeastern China, characterized by intricate topography and an average temperature around minus 20 degrees Celsius. The area constitutes one of China's two major mountain ranges in the Heilongjiang River Basin, enveloped by primeval forests and maintaining a distinct, stable ecological environment. The region is endowed with mineral resources such as gold, iron, and coal. Rivers meander through the landscape, hosting abundant aquatic life. Moreover, the region serves as a natural hunting ground for the Oroqen people, providing abundant hunting resources.

Employment presents a critical concern for the Oroqen people. Due to their remote locations, employment opportunities remain limited, prompting many to rely on traditional methods like hunting and fishing for sustenance. However, with the advent of modernization, their traditional lifestyle faces challenges, leading to employment difficulties and economic pressures.

### **3.3. Health Status and Social Service Challenges**

The Oroqen ethnic group faces challenges in terms of health and social services. Basic medical facilities in certain residential areas are relatively inadequate, making it difficult for them to access timely medical services. Moreover, changes in cultural traditions and shifts in lifestyles may impact their physical and mental well-being. Concurrently, a significant portion of Oroqen farmers fall into poverty due to illnesses. The historical reliance on hunting and certain unfavorable lifestyle habits has led to a notably high prevalence of tuberculosis, with some patients losing their ability to work or infecting their entire families. Tuberculosis has significantly affected the health and lives of the Oroqen population, plunging them into severe poverty.

### **3.4. Status and Challenges in Preserving Traditional Culture**

As one of China's few remaining hunting societies, the Oroqen people are hailed as a "living fossil" of hunting and fishing cultures in the Northern Hemisphere.[3] Their prolonged hunting lifestyle has cultivated a distinctive forest-oriented cultural heritage. However, since the comprehensive hunting ban and shift in production and lifestyle in 1996, the few inheritors of intangible cultural heritage and folk artists have aged significantly. Many young people exhibit indifference towards their ethnic culture, endangering the survival of many orally transmitted Oroqen cultural traditions. The urgent task lies in exploring and salvaging their traditional ethnic skills. Even within the regions where the Oroqen language is most widely spoken, there are currently only around 200 individuals who can communicate in their native tongue, six who

excel in Shaman dance performances, and twelve capable of accurately recounting ethnic stories.

During the process of social development, the Oroqen ethnic group faces the challenge of safeguarding their traditional culture. Their unique cultural heritage risks vanishing in modern society, hence striking a balance between integrating into the modern world while preserving and transmitting their culture presents a complex dilemma.

By deeply analyzing the current status and issues of social integration for the Oroqen ethnic group, we can gain a more profound understanding of their predicaments and needs. This can aid in identifying solutions, informing policy formulation, and facilitating social support to help the Oroqen people better integrate into contemporary society while preserving their personal development and ethnic cultural heritage.

#### **4. Historical Evolution and Current State of Social Welfare for the Oroqen Ethnic Group**

Historically, rulers made repeated attempts to promote the development of the Oroqen ethnic group by encouraging shifts in settlement locations and lifestyles. These occurred during the Qing Dynasty when, in order to maintain a steady source of soldiers, the ruling class prohibited the Oroqen from settling and mandated their engagement in hunting. The second instance took place during the era of the Republic of China, as the government attempted to strengthen the armed forces of the Oroqen people through forced settlement. However, this policy proved excessively radical, encountered resistance, and ultimately failed. The fundamental issue underlying these two conflicts was the inadequate consideration of the genuine wishes and traditional customs of the Oroqen people by the ruling authorities. These rulers perceived them solely as a national military force, rather than genuinely elevating their development and quality of life.

However, the transformative turning point was the establishment of the People's Republic of China, accompanied by the issuance of ethnic policies. Policies promoting ethnic regional autonomy established a foundation for Oroqen development. By gradually achieving ethnic settlement, encouraging agricultural production, and implementing cooperative reforms, the Oroqen people incrementally elevated their living standards while preserving their indigenous culture. This policy propelled the Oroqen ethnic group into a new historical era, fostering their robust development within a stable environment.

Ethnic policies stand as crucial external factors that shape the evolution of Oroqen development. Appropriate policy guidance contributes to the stability of the Oroqen ethnic group, providing conducive conditions for their political, economic, cultural, educational, and healthcare development, thereby promoting their growth and prosperity.

##### **Evolution and Current State of Social Welfare for the Oroqen Ethnic Group**

Throughout history, rulers have attempted multiple times to promote the development of the Oroqen ethnic group through changes in settlement locations and lifestyles. The first instance occurred during the Qing Dynasty, where the ruling class prohibited Oroqen people from settling and mandated their engagement in hunting to maintain a supply of soldiers. The second instance took place during the period of the Republic of China, where the government sought to enhance the armed forces of the Oroqen people through forced settlement. However, this policy was too radical, encountered resistance, and ultimately failed. The fundamental issue underlying these conflicts was the insufficient consideration of the genuine wishes and traditional customs of the Oroqen people by the ruling authorities. The authorities focused solely on their own interests, viewing them as a national armed force, without truly improving the Oroqen people's development and quality of life.

However, the truly transformative change occurred after the establishment of the People's Republic of China when ethnic policies were issued. Ethnic regional autonomy policies stabilized the development of the Oroqen people. By gradually achieving ethnic settlement, encouraging agricultural production, and implementing cooperative reforms, the Oroqen people gradually raised their living standards while preserving their native culture. This policy ushered the Oroqen ethnic group into a new historical period, allowing them to flourish within a stable environment.

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#### **4.1. Population Welfare and Birth Support**

Over the past decade, the population structure of Oroqen has displayed characteristics such as continuous population decline, uneven population distribution, a more balanced sex ratio at birth, accelerated aging of the population, and coexistence of multiple ethnicities, with the Han population being the majority. In order to promote the comprehensive development of the Oroqen ethnic population, corresponding regulations have been formulated in accordance with the "Regulations on Promoting the Development of the Oroqen Ethnic Population in Oroqen Autonomous Banner". These regulations apply to Oroqen families residing within the autonomous banner that meet the criteria stipulated in the "Regulations". The policy of promoting better birth and parenting requires Oroqen couples to actively participate in various examinations and early education activities at stages such as pre-marriage, pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, post-pregnancy, and childcare, under relevant guidance.

Funding for Oroqen ethnic population development is allocated in the annual budget by the financial department of the autonomous banner based on the economic development situation of the banner. Different departments assume varying responsibilities in relevant work. For instance, the Health and Family Planning Bureau is responsible for disbursing subsidy funds, the Public Security Bureau and the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau provide household registration information, the Financial Bureau implements and supervises subsidy funds, the Education and Technology Bureau compiles and audits student assistance, the Development and Reform Bureau formulates plans and seeks policy support, and the Statistics Bureau is responsible for data collection, among others.[4]

Furthermore, policies have been tailored to the fertility situation of Oroqen families. Based on economic circumstances, different birth subsidy standards are applied to Oroqen families with two or more children, and this subsidy is paid on a monthly basis. Meanwhile, Oroqen students, whether boarding or not, receive equal subsidy treatment during their middle and high school years. Oroqen students admitted to full-time colleges and universities also enjoy corresponding rewards and support policies.

Remarried Oroqen families and families with newborns also receive policy consideration, as well as support in areas such as employment, medical care, housing, and elderly care. Additionally, competitions and commendation activities are organized to reward units and individuals who have made contributions to population development. These policies and measures aim to provide robust support for the Oroqen ethnic population development and overall prosperity.

#### **4.2. Education Welfare and Promotion Support**

Since 1993, in order to elevate the academic level of the new generation of Oroqen, promote overall quality improvement and maturity, the Oroqen Autonomous Banner has established special funds to award master's and doctoral students, as well as provide tuition subsidies for

undergraduate and vocational school students. Moreover, rewards are provided for those who obtain professional technical titles. National education welfare policies include the following aspects:

Firstly, optimizing the training of ethnic education officials. Every year, the government plans to select outstanding talents among Oroqen ethnic teachers to supplement mid-level cadres in schools. They are organized to participate in on-the-job training and offered opportunities for temporary assignments in urban schools. Secondly, the implementation of score addition policies. During compulsory education, Oroqen and Daur ethnic students enjoy exemption from miscellaneous fees. For Oroqen candidates, key high schools and regular high schools in urban areas implement admission policies with lower entrance score requirements. Additionally, vocational and technical schools are open to Oroqen students without restrictions on enrollment quotas, and tuition fees are waived. Lastly, Oroqen students enjoy the right to choose schools. For admission to key high schools and regular high schools in urban areas, Oroqen candidates have the advantage of lower admission score requirements. In addition, vocational and technical schools are open to Oroqen students without restrictions on enrollment quotas, and tuition fees are fully waived. Oroqen students also have the right to independently choose schools; those intending to study in urban areas can directly choose better schools in the city.

In contemporary Oroqen society, research statistics indicate that between 2012 and 2019, with a yearly advantage of 10 points added to their scores, an average of 31 Oroqen candidates participated in the college entrance examination each year. On average, 16 students were admitted to undergraduate programs, 10 to associate degree programs, and 4 were not accepted. Over the past eight years, the overall admission rate for undergraduate programs (including preparatory classes) was 53.28%, and the admission rate for associate degree programs was 33.61%, with a non-admission rate of 13.11%.[5] In comparison with the national undergraduate admission rate of approximately 50.0% during the same period, this balanced data demonstrates the significant achievements made by the Oroqen ethnic group under the support of social educational welfare.

### **4.3. Employment Welfare and Economic Support**

From the late 1950s to 1996, the Oroqen ethnic group benefited from a series of ethnic economic policies that injected vitality into their development. These policies encompassed multifaceted support measures aimed at promoting economic prosperity for the Oroqen after their settlement.

Initially, during the early settlement period, substantive support measures were implemented by the government. To improve the quality of life for Oroqen people, each family was provided with furniture, and "big items" such as radios, sewing machines, and clocks, were granted to enhance their quality of life. Subsequently, the government actively facilitated the transfer of knowledge and technology. A group of Han ethnic farmers and skilled workers were introduced to teach agricultural production techniques to the Oroqen people, promoting the improvement of agricultural production and helping them gradually integrate into modern agricultural systems.

Furthermore, policies were formulated to address various stages of development. From the 1960s to the 1990s, development strategies evolved from a focus on forestry and hunting to a combination of agriculture and animal husbandry, the development of local industries, and communal enterprises. These policy changes continuously adapted to the development needs of the Oroqen ethnic group. Particularly noteworthy is the development stage after 1979. The government encouraged various forms of enterprise, especially after the implementation of the household contract responsibility system, which marked the diversification of the Oroqen economy. From cultivating greenhouse vegetables and edible wild vegetables to establishing

mushroom farms, raising cattle and horses, and even forming small family farms, the emergence of various economic activities provided diverse sources of income for the Oroqen people. In summary, these ethnic economic policies have continuously invigorated the development of the Oroqen ethnic group over nearly half a century, propelling them from a unique ecological environment towards a path of diversified economy.

#### 4.4. Traditional Culture Protection Policies

The "Regulations on the Protection of Traditional Folk Culture of the Oroqen Ethnic Group in Oroqen Autonomous Banner" were approved by the Eleventh Session of the Twelfth People's Congress Standing Committee of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. According to these regulations, funds for establishing a fund for the protection of traditional ethnic folk culture should be raised through means such as social organizations and individual donations. The banner government should establish a system for naming inheritors of traditional ethnic folk culture and units of inheritance. Ecological protection areas for traditional ethnic folk culture should be established in regions where Oroqen people are relatively concentrated and where original ecological culture is well preserved, and Oroqen's original hunting culture is expected to be more completely preserved. The regulations also stipulate that the education department of the autonomous banner should organize the compilation of textbooks on traditional ethnic folk culture, and schools should offer courses on traditional culture.

Guided by these policies, the Morigen Folk Art Troupe emerged in 2014 with the aim of preserving authentic Oroqen ethnic art and primitive dance forms. The troupe primarily showcases traditional Oroqen costumes, praises Oroqen hero Zanda Ren, and performs the "Bear Dance" and other programs to present ethnic culture to a broader audience. Troupe members learn and sing nearly twenty traditional ethnic songs, span a wide age range, and consist of over 20 members aged 12 to 68. Additionally, the Oroqen Autonomous Banner has begun to develop Oroqen language animations and reinstate shooting squads canceled for many years to inspire the younger generation's love for the ethnic language. The government also supports the production of traditional handicrafts by hunter-gatherers, providing them with more opportunities to protect and inherit their ethnic culture.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Oroqen people have traversed various shifts in social welfare and policy changes throughout their history. These transitions not only shaped their developmental trajectory but also reflect the societal contexts and political ideologies of different eras. From the hunting bans during the Qing Dynasty to forced settlement policies in the Republic of China era, and further to the ethnic policies implemented after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the evolution of social welfare policies for the Oroqen community bears witness to the impact of national policies on the development of ethnic minorities. Particularly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the implementation of ethnic regional autonomy policies enabled the Oroqen people to flourish within a relatively stable environment. This support extended to areas such as population welfare, education welfare, employment welfare, and the preservation of traditional culture. These policies have laid a strong foundation for their progress in political, economic, and cultural domains.

However, the Oroqen community still faces a range of challenges. Amid ongoing shifts in population dynamics, addressing issues related to aging demographics and uneven population distribution is a pressing concern. In terms of protecting and inheriting traditional culture, while policies have been established, more effective measures are needed to ensure the continued transmission and development of Oroqen's unique culture in the modern context. Additionally, elevating educational levels and improving employment opportunities remain crucial tasks for the Oroqen people.

In general, a comprehensive analysis of the Oroqen people's current integration status and challenges provides deeper insights into their difficulties and needs. In future development, policymakers should continue to focus on the Oroqen community's developmental requirements, crafting targeted policies to facilitate comprehensive growth in political, economic, and cultural aspects. Simultaneously, the Oroqen people themselves must continue their efforts to preserve their cultural heritage's distinctive allure while actively engaging with modern society to achieve both personal advancement and the propagation of their ethnic culture. These efforts will contribute to the Oroqen people's enhanced integration into contemporary society, thereby making a substantial contribution to the diversity and prosperity of the Chinese nation.

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