

# Development and Suggestions of Oroqen Ethnic Education in China: Based on the Current Situation of Oroqen Language Ecology

Xinyun Cao<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Korea University, 02841145, Anam-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul, Korea

**Abstract.** The dilemma encountered in the development of the Oroqen language and culture is typical. The Oroqen language contains nomenclature terms and forms of expression for natural landscapes, natural phenomena, grasses, flowers and fruits, wild animals, etc. in the cold-temperate forest zone of northern China. The Oroqen language is the living corpus, thought bank and life bank of Greater & Lesser Khingan Mountains and Stanovoy Range in China. However, in the course of modernisation and the impact of powerful modern Chinese language, Oroqen language is seriously endangered. Therefore, it is crucial to establish scientific and effective conservation measures and development systems based on this situation. Based on the current situation and dilemmas of Oroqen language development and ethnic education in northern China, this paper focuses on the influencing factors and makes recommendations for school and government policies to promote Oroqen education and culture.

## 1 Introduction

The Chinese Oroqen language, belonging to the Tungus branch of the Manchu-Tungus language family of the Altaic language family, is one of the most dynamic and well-preserved languages of the Manchu-Tungus language group in China. We all know that before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Oroqen people in China were primitive fishermen and hunters, and were the least developed, least populated. However, in the decades after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Oroqen people not only have a thriving population, but also their language, customs and other traditional cultures have been well preserved. In today's global economic integration, many marginalised languages and cultures in the world are dying out at an alarming rate, while the Oroqen language in China has not only not disappeared, but has been well preserved and developed, which cannot be considered as a miracle. Modern education for the Oroqen people in northern China has progressed by leaps and bounds with the support of minority welfare policies provided by the China government, but this has not been able to resist the impact of modern development on their ethnic education, and the loss of students, the lack of teachers and the popularity of the Chinese language have made the development of Oroqen ethnic education difficult. In order to get rid of these difficulties, it is necessary to improve the quality of ethnic education, to attract better teachers to help the development of ethnic education, and to give full play to the important role of schools in the transmission of ethnic culture. In this paper, we analyse the current situation and academic value of the Oroqen

population and its unique language in northern China, and propose suggestions for the development and innovation of Oroqen ethnic education based on the current situation and difficulties, in order to promote Oroqen ethnic education and culture.

## 2 A Survey of Ethnic Education Policies in Mainland China and the Level of Education of the Oroqen People in China

Ethnic education is an important indicator of the level of economic development and cultural development of a multi-ethnic country. It is not only an effective way to improve the quality of the nation, but also a prerequisite for the economic development of ethnic minorities and ethnic regions.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the development of education in these ethnic minority areas, and the reform of the school curriculum has been underway since the early days of China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. From 2006 to 2010, the Chinese central government provided a total of approximately US\$16 million in subsidies to minority families with small populations [1]. In 2011, the Chinese central government allocated approximately US\$1.4 billion in education funding, with a focus on supporting education in China's ethnic minority and border regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet [2].

With the Chinese government's strong support for ethnic education, the Oroqen Ethnic's overall level of

\* Corresponding author: [congbenyunyu@korea.ac.kr](mailto:congbenyunyu@korea.ac.kr)

educational development has increased rapidly. The data from the 4th National Regional Census of the People's Republic of China in 1990 and the 5th National Regional Census of the People's Republic of China in 2000 are used as a comparative object. There has been a gradual increase in the educational attainment of the people in the main Oroqen Ethnic concentrations in China (northeastern mainland China) in recent years. By 2010, 109 Oroqen Ethnic people had not attended school; 1,407 had attended primary school; 3,017 had a middle school education; 1,511 had a high school education; 1,011 had a university degree; 764 had a bachelor's degree; and 65 had a master's degree [3]. There is a strong link between this development and the Chinese government's decades-long policy of ethnic education and welfare.

It can be seen that since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and especially since China began its reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese governments at all levels have done a great deal to promote the equitable development of ethnic education, and have achieved significant results [4]. However, to date, there is still a large gap between the teaching conditions and the quality of teachers in the areas where the Oroqen Ethnic people gather in China and the average level of China's educational development. With the rapid development of the Chinese economy, the education of Oroqen Ethnic people as an ethnic minority in China has also been greatly affected by the modernisation process [5]. Although welfare policies have provided Oroqen youth with greater access to education, the problems in practice continue to be a bottleneck in the development of education in the region.

### **3 Demographic and Linguistic Status of the Oroqen Ethnic in China**

#### **3.1 Population Status of Oroqen Ethnic in China**

According to the fifth national census of China in 2020, the Oroqen Ethnic population of mainland China is approximately 8,196. It is mainly distributed in the two provinces of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang Province on the mainland. Of these, 3,573 are located in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The rest are scattered throughout the country [6]. The rest are scattered throughout the country [6]. According to historical documents, the population of the Oroqen people was 180 according to the Qing government in 1895 [7]. In the following 50 to 60 years, the Oroqen Ethnic population declined sharply due to the cruel persecution of the Qing government and the infectious diseases that affected the ethnic areas. By the 1915 census, the population had fallen to 41 [8]. By the first census after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1953, only 256 people were left [9]. In the 38 years between 1915 and 1953, the population was reduced by almost half, and the whole ethnic group was on the verge of extinction.

The Oroqen Ethnic population in China took a turn for the worse after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The life of the Oroqen Ethnic people has changed dramatically. Not only did their economic

standard of living improve considerably, but so did their health, culture and education. As a result, the population has been growing. By 2020, the population will have increased by 3.2 times compared to 1953, when it was first settled, and the population will be thriving and prosperous [10].

#### **3.2 Regional Distribution and Usage of Oroqen Language**

The distribution of the Oroqen language in China is much the same as the distribution of the ethnic population, which is characterised by large mixed and small settlements in the mountains and valleys of the Great and Small Xing'an Mountains. At present, the Oroqen Ethnic group in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is mainly concentrated in five settled villages in the Oroqen Autonomous Region. The Oroqen Ethnic population of Heilongjiang Province is mainly concentrated in six settlement villages, which account for about 50% of the total population [11]. The rest of the population is scattered throughout the two provinces and the country.

Before settlement, the Oroqen Ethnic group had little contact with the outside world, so the Oroqen language was mainly spoken within the group, with a few speaking both Chinese and Manchurian. After settlement, the Oroqen Ethnic group spoke Chinese as a result of their extensive contact with the Han, Mongolian and Daur ethnic groups and their intermingling with them. The Oroqen Ethnic group in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China also speaks Mongolian and Daur [12]. In recent years, the Oroqen Ethnic community has undergone rapid socio-economic development, with the exception of a small number of people who are engaged in seasonal hunting activities, the majority of them are engaged in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and commerce, etc. The Oroqen's production methods and living environment have undergone fundamental changes. As a result, the Oroqen language is being used less and less in their social, economic and cultural activities. Secondly, as the Oroqen Ethnic people have only a language but no script, the Oroqen Ethnic schools in the settlements can only teach in Chinese. As a result, the younger generation of Oroqen people have become more proficient in Chinese, which has had an impact on the inheritance and development of the Oroqen language.

With the extensive contact between the Oroqen Ethnic people and other ethnic groups, there are more and more mixed families. According to a recent survey, there are 464 Oroqen Ethnic households in Inner Mongolia's Oroqen Autonomous Region, where there is a relative concentration of Oroqen Ethnic people, of which only 131 are made up of both men and women of Oroqen Ethnic origin, accounting for only 28% of the total number of households. The rest of the families are ethnically mixed, and their children are not entirely Oroqen, even though they are described as Oroqen Ethnic in the census [13]. This is also true of the other Oroqen Ethnic areas. For these three reasons, by the 1980s, in some of the Oroqen Ethnic areas, young people in their twenties could understand but not speak or speak Oroqen well, and

children in their teens had a rudimentary understanding of Oroqen or no understanding at all [14]. In the late 1980s, the shrinking of the Oroqen language drew the attention of academics and Oroqen Ethnic leaders, who began to discuss and call for the rescue of the language on a large scale in mainland China.

### **3.3 Characteristics and Value of Oroqen Language**

Oroqen language is one of the most dynamic of the Manchu-Tungus languages in China and has not only retained the basic features of its language group but has also developed its own distinctive features over its long history.

Firstly, Oroqen language is a typical adherent language. In the Oroqen vocabulary, there are several lexemes that stick to the root of the word, in addition to the root element. These lexemes are relatively independent and are grouped together in blocks to form a complete word that can express multiple layers of meaning [15]. This is a common feature of the Manchu-Tungus languages, but is more typical of Oroqen language.

Secondly, Oroqen language has a distinct vowel harmony. Vowel harmony is a selective feature of vowels. For example, if there are several syllables in a word, only a certain number of vowels can occur in each syllable, so that the vowels can be harmoniously matched [16]. This vowel harmony is more evident in the Oroqen language. Not only does it sound catchy, but it also has a pleasant effect on the ear.

Thirdly, the Oroqen language is extremely rich in word-formation add-ons. Derivatives of the Oroqen language are new words created by attaching various word-formation add-ons while leaving the roots unchanged [17]. They are also used in different word classes to form new words. There are additions that are used to derive nouns and verbs, and additions that are used to derive adjectives, orientations, numerals, etc. The vocabulary of the Oroqen language is thus not only rich, but also variable.

Fourthly, the Oroqen Ethnic community has a distinctive vocabulary due to its long history of productive fishing and hunting activities, and there are many words in the Oroqen language relating to hunting, fishing, gathering and other aspects of the natural world such as birds and animals, mountains and rivers, trees and grasses [18]. There is a wide range of names and distinctions. The vocabulary of modern society, economy and culture is less frequent and is mostly borrowed from Chinese, Manchu and Russian nationalities. This is closely related to the fact that the Oroqen Ethnic people have long been engaged in fishing and hunting activities and that their social development has been severely delayed.

Finally, the Oroqen language is distinctive in its tone and expression, and the Oroqen people use gestures and figurative tones to communicate and tell stories in the Oroqen language [19]. In particular, adjectives and gerunds are used when telling an event or story. This is also rare among the Manchu-Tungus languages.

The Oroqen language, as one of the oldest and most expressive languages, should be preserved and exist. First of all, the Manchu-Tungus languages are not only Oroqen languages, but also Ewenki, Hezhe, Xibe and Manchu languages. The languages of the ancient peoples such as the Jurchen and Khitan also belong to this language, and all have a common origin [20]. The preservation and development of the Oroqen language is therefore of great value to the Manchu-Tungus languages and to the inheritance, development and study of the excellent traditional culture of the ethnic minorities.

Secondly, due to historical reasons, Manchu and other languages have been influenced by Chinese and Tibetan, some important linguistic phenomena and language rules have undergone certain changes, and thus there is a considerable difference in morphology from their original languages. The grammar and morphology of the language has shown a tendency to develop from simple to complex, from ancient to modern. In this sense, the Oroqen language represents an earlier form of the Manchu-Tungus language group [21]. Therefore, the rescue and preservation of the Oroqen language is of great academic value to the study of the formation and development of the Manchu-Tungus language group and its early language forms.

As a language it certainly emerged in the early days of mankind as different human groups arose and developed with them. Likewise, the Oroqen language is the product of a long and productive life shared by an early human group that has existed for thousands, if not tens of thousands, of years. It has a long history. Language is an important characteristic and spirit of a people. If a nation loses its language, it has essentially lost its identity and spirit. It can be said that the preservation and existence of a people's language is a matter of life and death for that people, and is of great practical and historical importance.

## **4 Exploration of Oroqen Ethnic Education for Oroqen Language Preservation**

The Oroqen Ethnic culture, with its unique form and rich connotation, has been attracting the attention and favour of experts and scholars in anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, ethnology, folklore, religion and literature from all over the world. In China, since the 1950s, experts and scholars have been investigating and collating the language and culture of the Oroqen Ethnic region, and have achieved certain results. After the 1980s, experts and scholars began to study the Oroqen language in China, and experts from the United States, Japan and Korea have visited the Oroqen Ethnic areas on several occasions. From 1995 to 2005, experts from the University of California, including Fengxiang Li and Sai Lin, travelled to all Oroqen Ethnic areas in the Greater and Lesser Xing'an Mountains. Professor Fengxiang Li says that the Oroqen language is the richest and most beautiful language in the world and that it would be a tragedy for human linguistics if this language were to disappear. This is why it is so important to preserve the Oroqen language.

The preservation and transmission of languages cannot be achieved without the involvement of the government, and the support of national and local governments is an important guarantee for the development of ethnic languages. In the Oroqen Ethnic Region in eastern Inner Mongolia, for example, the main measures for the preservation and transmission of the Oroqen language include the following.

The first is the full implementation of the "Ethnic Education Ordinance". After several amendments and additions, "the Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region Education Regulations" were adopted by the local government on 6 March 2002 and promulgated on 1 July of that year. "The promulgation of "the Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region Education Regulations" marked a new stage in the development of ethno-linguistic education in the Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region, with the introduction of legal guarantees for the development of ethno-linguistic education [22]. On 1 August 2015, "the Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region Education Regulations Specific Explanation" came into force. In 2015, the Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region established the Oroqen Language Development Foundation, which aims to conduct research on the preservation of the Oroqen language, including the development of an Oroqen language dictionary, the teaching of the Oroqen language, the production of Oroqen language cartoons and the development of Oroqen language folk songs. The Oroqen Language Development Foundation was set up to research the preservation of the Oroqen language, including the development of an Oroqen language dictionary, the teaching of the Oroqen language, the production of Oroqen language animated films and support for an Oroqen language folk song and story competition.

The second is the comprehensive launch of "Implementation Plan for Carrying out Education on the Inheritance of National Excellent Traditional Culture in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens in Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region". In March 2016, the Autonomous Region developed the "Implementation Plan for Carrying out Education on the Inheritance of National Excellent Traditional Culture in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens in Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region", which requires primary and secondary schools and kindergartens in the Autonomous Region to offer Oroqen Ethnic Culture in accordance with the actual school situation [22]. The aim is to develop the Oroqen Ethnic Speciality Curriculum in schools and kindergartens in the Autonomous Region in accordance with the actual situation of the schools, to formulate feasible implementation plans, to set up a leading group for education on the transmission of ethnic culture, to develop a diversified ethnic speciality curriculum, to give full play to the important role of the school campus as the main venue for the transmission of ethnic culture, and to gradually form a standardised and normalised teaching model for ethnic education and teaching. Taking the ethnic languages as a starting point, Oroqen Ethnic Autonomous Region is comprehensively promoting education on ethnic characteristics in primary and

secondary schools and kindergartens in the autonomous regions.

At present, there are more than 20 endangered languages in China, of which 15 are spoken by less than a thousand people, and it is expected that 20% of them will cease to exist in the next few decades. There are only 8,000 Oroqen people, so how many of them speak their own language? If no one under the age of 20 speaks it, the Oroqen language may be extinct in a few years. So how can the Oroqen Ethnic language be preserved and passed on?

1. It is imperative to strengthen and encourage the use of endangered languages, to expand their range of use, to fully reflect their functions and to enhance the vitality of the Oroqen language. It is important to create an environment in which the Oroqen language is used, not only in schools but also in families and society. It is recommended that conditions be created for the development of a group of children who understand the Oroqen language, and that they be sponsored to learn, use and pass on the language, so as to prolong the life and influence of the Oroqen language.

2. The Oroqen language should be protected through the development and implementation of legislation, the establishment of a database of endangered languages, and the use of foreign experience to improve the effectiveness of endangered languages. The Oroqen language platform is currently being used as an online learning platform to increase the vocabulary, especially the amount of conversation. At present, the Oroqen online language platform has 3,000 words, and there are unlimited words related to hunting, fishing, nature and other productive aspects of life that need to be added. The Oroqen language platform has 3,000 words, and there is still an infinite number of words related to hunting, fishing and nature. At present, Heilongjiang University and Qiqihar University have created a database of the Oroqen language in China mainland, but the number of words is small, only 3000.

3. The establishment of a "model area for the protection of endangered languages" should encourage the use of the mother tongue, and the relevant authorities can also collect songs and stories related to the ethnic language or local dialect from the society and compile them into a book to encourage people to sing or recite them. In the areas where the Oroqen people are most concentrated, one or several Oroqen language cultural preservation areas or Oroqen language preservation model villages and communities can be established. An Oroqen language observatory can also be set up to keep track of the dynamics of the language and to predict the future trends of the language.

4. The development of a phonetic alphabet or a set of symbols to be used by interested intellectuals as a tool for recording and preserving the language, in order to slow down the decline of the endangered language to a certain extent and to improve the vitality of the Oroqen language. The role of linguists must be brought into play. It is recommended that linguists be organised as soon as possible to create a phonetic alphabet for the Oroqen language, that linguistic experts be organised to study the characteristics and patterns of language decline, that ways

be found to slow down the trend of language endangerment, and that textual material in endangered languages be actively rescued and recorded.

5. The Oroqen language will be re-categorised using the WeChat and TikTok platform and at least 10,000 words and phrases will be popularised. Folk songs and short stories are disseminated through the WeChat and TikTok platform and language competitions are held regularly. The Oroqen language should be promoted and passed on. It is suggested that the government should allocate funds to adopt strategies to deal with the endangerment of the Oroqen language, set up a website on the Chinese Oroqen language, hold regular academic conferences, establish a fund for the protection of the endangered language and produce short films on the Oroqen language.

6. The development of teaching materials and the provision of courses in the Oroqen languages. In the Oroqen Ethnic primary schools, teachers with knowledge of the national language are available to speak the Oroqen language and teach the Oroqen language textbook.

7. To enhance language innovation. The Oroqen Ethnic group has long been engaged in hunting and production activities, so the Oroqen language has more words for hunting, fishing, gathering, production and the natural world, but fewer words for modern production and social activities, such as computer, information and mobile phone. New terms such as computer, information, mobile phone, etc. are not found in the traditional Oroqen Ethnic language. If the Oroqen language does not innovate, it will not be viable, it will not adapt to contemporary society and it will gradually lose its communicative function. The aim of innovation is to revitalise and improve the function of the traditional language.

## 5 Conclusion

The Oroqen language is a civilized achievement created and accumulated by the Oroqen people in their long-term production and life, containing valuable traditional culture and spiritual wealth of the Oroqen people. While striving to develop and accelerate economic construction, learning and absorbing the excellent cultures of other ethnic groups, it is necessary to fully understand the cultural value of the Oroqen ethnic language, seek effective protective measures with a positive attitude, and create a path of language development with national characteristics in inheritance.

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