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10. People of the Border: The Destiny of the Shenehen Buryats

Marina Baldano

The border between Russia and China is far more than simply a geopolitical boundary, a barrier, or a line of interaction and contact between two powerful nations. Its formation and the dynamics of its status represent complex sets of human relationships, networks, control mechanisms and economic, social and cultural practices. The border is not merely a dividing line between two states – it epitomises the interrelations between individuals, groups of people and states while encapsulating what people think about the border, and how they conceptualise it. Essentially, the border is at the crossroad of institutions, contacts, conflicts and interests.

Mongolian cultural and historical space was at one time united but later divided by the Sino-Russian border. As a result of the division, particular groups of people have emerged, whose lives continue to be defined by this barrier. The ethnocultural group of the Shenehen Buryats, for example, formed as a result of cross-border migration. The border became a decisive factor in this community's emergence, existence and everyday life for most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The group emerged through the migration of several thousand Buryats into China, who were fleeing the horrors of the civil war and the Soviet government's rule in Russia. The group was consolidated when the Iron Curtain closed the border behind them. They maintained a powerful sense of nostalgia and attraction for their native land, where the majority of Buryats still lived.

The border became a site of conflict, as Soviet troops invaded in 1929 and in the 1930s and 1940s. The group also found itself the hostage of the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1960. When the border opened and became a site of contact, this further changed the make-up of the group and the economic strategies of its members. The border created this community, demarcated its main parameters and defined the direction of its destiny. The Shenehen Buryats may be called “people of the border”, or a “border community”, and their case sheds light on the shifting role played by borders in other areas of the globe.

To some extent, the story of the Shenehen Buryats began in the 1680s when, on the vast expanses of Central Asia, two empires met, thereby creating an international border line of enormous scale, of a total length of more than ten thousand kilometres. Its formation was a natural process of boundary demarcation between two large states, defined through claims and cessions of territorial expanses on which lived less numerous groups who, for reasons of expedience or through coercion, came to be included within these world powers. However, long before that, a Mongolian historical and cultural commonality existed. Despite its heterogeneity, it was unified through a similarity in language, common culture and memory of a great past. While the boundary disrupted this commonality, this was not evident for the nomads who had their own conception of the phenomenon of the border.

Here, pastoral nomadism was not simply an economic model, but also a way of life. Under the pressure of economic expediency, borders were mobile and shifted dynamically in the nomads’ conceptualisations. Up to the 1920s, Buryats roamed with their cattle, frequently crossing Mongolian and Chinese borders when moving their encampments according to the seasons.

The 1910s saw the beginning of a process of national self-determination among the Mongols, leading to a change of status for certain territories that were included in the Qing Empire. This resulted in a change in the boundary line between China and Russia. The border was formed on adjacent territories (see Tsymburski 2000) inhabited by peoples “smaller in size and culturally lagging behind Russia and China” (2000: 56). This boundary, reflecting the strengthening of Russia and the weakening of China, has dramatically shifted to the south and west over the last 250 years, reducing the area under Chinese control. From the end of the 1920s, the boundary essentially stabilised. It did not change as a result of

Japanese aggression against China or of World War II. According to Yuri Galenovich, "in the 1920s our country was the only one to help China in its unification into one state. During World War II, our two countries were on the same side. In the 1950s the relations between the USSR and the PRC were officially relations between allies" (2001: 32).

The main movement of Buryats into China occurred between 1918–1922 and 1929–1931. Gasan Guseinov writes: "As internal axis and centre delineating the world and its periphery, the border is marked... in that region of personal experience that is most exposed to political changes" (2005: 11). Indeed, the causes that led the Buryats to seek refuge in neighbouring China were closely related to the policies pursued by the Soviet government against affluent segments of Buryat society and to the repression that ensued. Even before the Revolution, the elimination of "Steppe Dumas" ["local Dumas"] and the reorganisation of land ownership, as well as the colonisation of Eastern Siberia by peasants from the western regions of the empire, worsened the economic conditions of the Buryat and Evenki. Eastern Buryats were compelled to rent land from the Cossacks. The situation was worsened by further tax collection and the mobilisation of workers to the hinterland in the region of Arkhangelsk during World War I. Revolution, intervention, civil war and the cataclysms of the socialist transformation increased migration flows in border areas. Thus various groups left Siberia through the Chinese border: members and supporters of the defeated groups, people who strove to live in peace and security, who disagreed with the Soviet authorities, who were considered political enemies or who had become the object of revolutionary experiments. An especially powerful factor of outmigration was collectivisation.

Migrations of families with household goods and cattle were extremely arduous and many could not even make it to the border. Lhama-Tsyren of Baruun Somon, who spent seventy-five years in Shenehen, recalls:

In the winter of 1931, dozens of Buryat families established encampments in the Borzinsky steppe. Once, during a frosty night, a horseman came and announced that Russian soldiers had come from the north and that they were moving towards the Chinese border. To avoid them, it was necessary to cross the boundary line urgently. Hundreds of Buryats had already been arrested. Panic took over the camp. The cattle had to be urgently gathered and driven south. People were divided into two groups: one group rounded up the cattle and drove it south, the second group, composed mainly of women and children, collected belongings onto carts and followed the herds. On the second day, the first convoy crossed the Chinese border,

but the second group never made it. During the year, many Buryats came from the Russian side but our wives and children were not among them. It's only in the 1950s that we learnt how the convoy had been intercepted, everyone arrested, put on freight trains and deported first to Irkutsk, then to Kazakhstan, where, near Semipalatinsk, a camp had been established for women who had betrayed the motherland. Many died within the first few days. It is only in 1959, when the Chinese border was reopened, that we had the opportunity to meet with those who had survived ("Pamyati zhertv repressii": 1)

The group that had escaped from Russia was mostly made up of Agin Buryats (predominantly representatives of eight Khorin clans), but also included some Barguzin and Selenge Buryats, as well as some Evenki and Russians. Relocating with kin to a new site in another state, with cattle as the basis for economic activity, did lead, in spite of enormous difficulties, to the automatic reestablishment of sociality, to the transplantation into a new setting of traditional social structures, systems of power and other relationships, ways of life, property and economic structures. The territories that were allotted to Buryats were "unclaimed" lands unoccupied for about a century. To eliminate the consequences of anthrax, the refugees had to burn the pasture lands repeatedly. However, the proximity of the natural and geographical environment, and the similarity in economic and cultural terms, allowed them to carry out their usual activities.

By 1922, the initial phase of the territorial, administrative and legal registration by the Buryats was completed. The organisation of their local self-government was consistent with the administrative structure of Hulun Buir introduced as early as the Qing period. The ethnic space of Hulun Buir was a multicultural mosaic characterised by a rather complex ethnic and demographic makeup. According to Darima Boronoeva, "it is a place where ethnic and national differences are pronounced, a specificity which is apparently due, to a large extent, to an administrative and territorial organisation along ethnic lines" (2010: 280). The official language of the region was Manchu. Since Buryats were not conversant in that language, the authorities made an exception and gave them permission to use the Mongolian script in administrative documents. This was very important for the economic success of the group.

In Hulun Buir, Bargads, Dagurs, Evenkis, Khamnigans, Horchin Mongols, Russians and Chinese live in compact groups. Interrelationships between these groups are influenced by the duration and depth of contact, as well as by cultural differences. Buryats and Bargads have long been linked

through their common historical roots. In addition, the land on which the Buryats came to live was the territory of the Old and New Bargas. The linguistic and ethnocultural affinity between the Buryats and the Bargas continues to have an impact on the formation of a positive setting for ethnic and cultural interaction. The very process of Buryat relocation was seen by the Bargas as an attempt to reunite a single ethnic organism that had been artificially dissected. For this reason, in the first years following Buryat relocation, the Bargas offered them their full support.

The estimated number of Shenehen Buryats in this ethnic group ranges from 6,000 to 9,000 people. This data is so divergent because Buryats are not classified as a separate ethnic group and their numbers are not recorded separately by the authorities: officially they are subsumed under the Mongols of Inner Mongolia. According to the Shenehen chronicler Tsoktyn Zhamso, the number of Buryat people living in China today is about 6,500, and this figure has not changed for decades, although nearly 500 people have returned to Russia in recent years (Fieldwork notes, 7 August 2007).

The consolidation process of the Shenehen Buryats is reflected in their increasing ethnic awareness, the tendency to fuse into a cohesive ethnic group, the pursuit of relative isolation leading to a predominance of endogamous marriages within the ethnic community, and the preservation of their language as well as traditional and material culture. The very existence of the local ethnonym “Shenehen Buryats” bears testimony to the group members’ awareness of their special unity, the difference from their original ethnic group and the existence of an autonomous ethnolocal identity. The fact that the immigrant Buryats and the territorialised Shenehen Buryats lived in isolation from the main corpus of Buryats – and were surrounded by other ethnic groups – led to an us/them dichotomy, and an integration of the two groups. While a distinction between regional and local groups remained a characteristic of the mother ethnos, a feature that holds true to this day, for the Buryat ethnic groups of Inner Mongolia, sub-ethnic affiliation has become secondary, given that contradistinction is made, primarily, with non-Buryats.

The Shenehen Buryats are a structured community characterised by a strong internal organisation, a system of power, controls and sanctions with minimal openness to the host society. They remain self-sufficient in terms of economic specialisation, and culturally different from China on account of their Buryat language, their system of clanic ties, customs, holidays and traditions. Adherence to traditional forms of social and cultural ways of

life has made the ethnic component the principal vehicle of self-expression. The community is sufficiently large to maintain its social structures – from endogamous marriages to language, education and government. It has relied on the memory of the “historical homeland” – as well as on the notion of being a detached “fragment” of the Buryat people – as evidenced by their carefully preserved myths and folklore.

It is precisely because of these ties to their homeland that no declassification nor marginalisation was witnessed. They also did not merge into culturally-related groups in the host society. This is where the fundamental difference lies with respect to the classic image of the refugee. In the overall context of modernisation processes, all of this led to the formation of new types of sociality and new mechanisms of intergroup relations. We came to the conclusion that the Shenehen Buryats formed a new type of cross-border migration (Baldano and Dyatlov 2008: 171).

However, despite the closed nature of the group, the Shenehen Buryats and the Barga showed joint activism by participating in the creation and in the activities of the People’s Party of Inner Mongolia. The Mongolian People’s Revolution of 1921 resonated greatly with the group. At the head of the Barga intelligentsia were Merse and Fumintai, who along with the Buryat Tsyden-Eshe Tsydypov, organised a revolutionary circle. In Barga, all-Barga congresses were held annually. During one of them it was decided to organise a people’s cooperative in Hulun Buir. Shenehen *khoshuu*¹ had many old Buryat cooperative members from Tsugol *khoshun*: Ayusha Tugulturov, Shirnin Badmaev, Vanchik Munkuev, on the basis of which the cooperative was formed. In summer 1922 the first cooperative congress was hosted in Shenehen. The number of shareholders grew rapidly. The Chinese Eastern Railways (CER) and Barga princes, including the *amban*, were especially wealthy investors. The members of the cooperative were active in revolutionary agitation activities. During this period, contacts were made with the leaders of Mongolia, namely with Elbegdorj Rinchino. In summer 1923, the Barga Mongols Tsyden-Eshe Tsydypov and Fumintai were sent to Urga in order to establish friendly ties. The Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party asked them to form a branch of the party in Barga. Consequently the Barga People’s Party was born. The party included Shenehen Buryat members and maintained relations with Urga, the Soviet ambassador in Beijing, the Consulate of the USSR in Hailar and the leadership of the CER. The

1 A “banner”, an administrative unit in Inner Mongolia.

People's Revolutionary Party of Inner Mongolia, headed by Merse, also led an armed uprising even "as China was beginning to recover from internal crises and assert itself not only within its former borders, but also through a consolidation of centripetal forces" ("Escho pro Shenehen": 2).

Shenehen authors have noted that during the Socialist period the Shenehen Buryats survived the formation of collective farms, "the struggle with the old foundations", as a result of which "100% of the population became working people, and the best workers and activists became members of the party" (Tsyrenzhabai Abida 2005: 23). However, "on account of the 'left' deviations, the Cultural Revolution and the destruction wreaked by capitalists and Soviet, Mongolian and Japanese spies, many people suffered. Many continued to work, but some become unable to do so" (Tsyrenzhabai Abida 2005: 25).

Because of developments in the CER at the end of summer 1929, Soviet-Chinese relations became strained. Concentrated at the border from August to November, Chinese troops made repeated attacks, bombing Soviet territory and pursuing an aggressive repressive policy against immigrants from Russia living near the border, accusing them of spying and committing other counter-revolutionary activities. In addition, those immigrants who had fled dispossession, political purges and hardship – despite having crossed the Soviet-Chinese border – remained under Moscow's control, and so waves of punishment followed. Shenehen Buryats were in a no-win position – to the Chinese they were "Soviet spies" and to the Soviet Union they were "Chinese spies". The Chinese authorities not only allowed the police to beat and torture prisoners, but also held executions without trial or investigation. According to eyewitnesses, the representatives of the NKVD felt completely free on Chinese territory: they arrested and sent people to prisons and labour camps – first to Hailar and then to Chita, and still others to Leningrad. During the interrogations, torture and blackmail (threats of reprisals on close relatives) were widely used, and confessions of "anti-Soviet espionage and terrorist operations" were extracted through coercion.

From the early 1930s onwards, Manchuria became the object of Japanese aggression. The Japanese government, seeking to "legalise" its occupation of Manchuria, inspired the creation of the new state of Manchukuo. The period of occupation lasted from 1932 to 1945. During this time, substantial changes were made in the political and administrative structure of the region. During the Japanese period, the Buryat *khoshun*, until then an independent unit with the right to determine and regulate the main issues

of domestic life, was abolished and became part of Solon *khoshun*. One of the residents of Shenehen, Dambyn Dambi, said:

The Japanese were meticulous in giving their orders. Young people were supposed to serve in the Japanese army, and children had to be taught the Japanese language. We learnt it, though during the Manchu period we spoke exclusively in Buryat. Keeping a million-strong Kwantung Army ready for military action in Manchuria caused constant tension on the Soviet-Manchurian border (Fieldwork notes, 14 August 2008).

The policy of integration of all non-Han peoples of Northeast and Western China under the banner of the construction of "Greater East Asia", conducted by the Japanese during World War II, included the Shenehen Buryats. One of them, Urzhin Garmayev, later Colonel-General of the Kwantung Army, served in the government of Manchukuo. On account of his authority and capacity of organisation, he was entrusted with the formation and training of military units of Buryats and representatives of other Mongolian groups, even before the war officers were trained and a cavalry of over two thousand people was formed.

The main thrust of Tokyo's strategy focused on the ideological neutralisation of Inner Mongolia's local population in the event of an outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the USSR. Under the guise of helping the small nations of China, Japan started to recruit and train agents from the various ethnic communities. Not surprisingly, in August 1945, as the Soviet army advanced in China, Buryats were accused of "aiding the enemy". In 1945, several hundred Shenehen Buryats, mostly young men, were taken to the USSR where their traces are lost in prisons and camps (Bazarov 2001: 18).

From the beginning of World War II, the Shenehen Buryats, fearing a Soviet invasion, attempted to move away from the border. Up until 1947, the Buryat migration that occurred within Inner Mongolia, together with emigration, played a significant role in the dynamics of the localisation of the Buryat ethnic population in Shenehen. The life of Buryats in China was wholly determined by the border as people who attempted to move away from it ended up being returned.

The occupation of Manchuria by Soviet troops ended on 28 April 1946. Following liberation from Japanese occupation, the Hulun Buir Autonomous Region was created. After joining up the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in January 1948, it became the Hulun Buir *aimag*, and the Shenehen *somon* was established on the same date.² The modern

2 *Aimag* and *somon* are administrative units in Mongolia and Buryatia.

administrative and territorial structure of governance finds its origins in 1958 when, as a result of the reorganisation of the Shenehen Somon, the three *somons* of Baruun Shenehen, Shenehen Zuun and Mungen Shuluun were created and included within the Evenki *hoshun* of Hulun Buir *aimag*. However, following the liberation from Japanese occupation in China, a new war, this time a civil war, between the communists and the Kuomintang, broke out. Buryats had experienced the brunt of mass terror in 1929 during the events in connection with the CER and, in the 1930s and 1940s, they found themselves the object of counterespionage activities by the USSR and Japan.

The border had become more than simply a watershed between sovereign states. It also acted as a boundary between different societies; the idea of clear and immutable “borders under lock” was increasingly reinforced. In the years of Stalinism and the Iron Curtain, when having a relative abroad threatened one’s freedom and even life, numerous kinship ties were lost and severed. In the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet border was considered by China as “unfair”. In 1962–63, the Chinese government began to implement an elaborate system of constant and serious violations of the Soviet border. In 1963 there were more than 4,000 violations involving more than 100,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers (Borisov and Koloskov 1972: 229). This was an undeniable factor of stress for the Shenehen Buryats who lived in close proximity to the border. The prospect of such a confrontation between the two countries was simply incomprehensible to them.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69), the Shenehen Buryats, living as they did in close vicinity to the Soviet border, found themselves at the epicentre of anti-Soviet political campaigns. Provocations on the border became more frequent: “crowds of provocateurs dressed as soldiers and wielding clubs, axes, crowbars and rocks, not uncommonly attacked Soviet border posts. Violating the border, they refused to obey the orders by Soviet border guards to leave the territory of the USSR” (“Prozrachnye granitsy” 2002: 189). Many were arrested on charges of spying for the Soviet Union and Panmongolism. Both executive and rank and file Shenehen Buryats were subject to political repression. According to informants, “both in the USSR and at home, we were considered traitors and Japanese spies, and during the Cultural Revolution we were seen as Soviet spies and Panmongolists” (Fieldwork notes, 8 August 2007). The history of each Buryat family is an example of their desperate struggle for survival in an atmosphere of sweeping accusations, arrests and punishments.

From the 1980s, a new approach was taken in border negotiations. In 1995, the “Shanghai Five” was established, uniting Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As early as the time of Deng Xiaoping, the people who had been victims of repression were rehabilitated, reinstated to their posts and had their property restored. In the period of “socialist modernisation”, the Shenehen Buryats finally had the opportunity to return to their familiar way of life. Today they are a fairly prosperous group, with their main economy remaining tied to animal husbandry. In order to run individual farms, large tracts of land were taken on a 30-year lease, and it is possible for them to employ hired labour. Three Buryat schools are in operation and the *datsan* [Buddhist monastery in the Mongolian cultural region] that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution have been restored.

The border with Russia opened up, along with the opportunity to rebuild ties with the historic homeland: the early 1990s saw a process of repatriation of Shenehen Buryats, and about 300 people returned to Russia. Today their numbers have risen to almost 500, more than 350 of them in Buryatia, and a little less than 150 people in the Aga District. Motives for moving to Russia varied: they were nostalgic (it was still seen as the “birthplace of the ancestors”), economic (seeking new opportunities) and educational (they were offered preferential programs). According to informants in Shenehen, young people were also sent to broaden the range of marriage partners (as the small closed community needed “new blood”).

Today we are witnessing the rapid transformation of the border from a wall or barrier into a site of encounters, contacts and interactions. With the development of border trade, some Shenehen Buryats started to engage in service activities, working with the Buryats and Russians who came to Manchuria and Hailar in order to purchase cheap Chinese goods. Contacts with the Buryats of Siberia allowed many Shenehen Buryats to find their relatives who lived on the other side of the border. It was now possible to go and work in the Transbaikal region and in Buryatia. The Shenehen Buryats who had previously settled in the Transbaikal region could facilitate the organisation of such work. Many of them regularly visit relatives in Shenehen, which promotes the development of cross-border linkages.

Cross-border trade in the province reached its peak in the early 1990s, during the period of re-emigration of the Shenehen Buryats. However, from 1993 onwards, trade began to decline on account of a tightening of rules regulating barter and “shuttle trade” imposed by Russia, an increase in tariffs on food imports and the introduction of a mutual exchange visa regime.

At the same time, the reputation of Chinese products has been undermined by the large-scale penetration of substandard products on the Russian market. This has had an adverse affect on the Shenehen Buryats: some of those who had worked with the cross-border trade moved on to new activities, while others found themselves unemployed.

The links, contacts and cooperation established in the vicinity of the border have led to the formation of a complex set of interrelations between people, groups and states. In their own way, both Russia and China have used the border to develop the regions adjacent to it. As a result of an increase in cross-border trade in China, there was a rapid growth in commercial activity, along with a fast development in the infrastructure of border cities, and the construction of roads, hotels, shops and restaurants. In 1991, Russia carried out a key liberalisation of the foreign economic sphere, and, in the subsequent period, federal investments in border regions have been associated mainly with the establishment of checkpoints and transport links appropriate to the border. No special measures for boosting investment activities in border areas have been taken.

The 1991 Sino-Soviet Border Agreement was a treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union that set up demarcation work to resolve most of the border disputes between the two states. Initially signed by China and the Soviet Union, the terms of the agreement were resumed by Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The border was finally settled by Sino-Russian agreements in 2004. At the same time, the problems linked to contemporary border contact remain acute. Several years of uncontrolled cross-border trade have led to deeply-entrenched criminality. The Russian-Chinese border zone is characterised by problems such as large-scale smuggling and the importation of cheap Chinese products through the so-called "grey" customs clearance system. Therefore, in recent years, customs inspection of luggage was tightened considerably. Informants in Shenehen have observed that the border has always varied from year to year – sometimes constituting a wall behind which they managed to escape, sometimes an insurmountable obstacle, and at other times a source of danger, from which the Bolsheviks might come and subject them to reprisals. Today, when going over the border, although acting like good citizens Shenehen Buryats are made to feel like perpetrators and are subjected to strict checks.

The border allows the formation of a set of economic and everyday practices. The main activities of Shenehen Buryats in Russia revolve around their role as intermediaries, the use of border resources and living

experience in the two worlds (the Chinese language, connections in China, life and relationships in Buryatia, the Buryat language), traditional animal husbandry and traditional cuisine.

In the very beginning of the 1990s, when Shenehen Buryats began returning to the land of their ancestors, a trend of renewal of “cultural Panmongolism” was witnessed in Buryatia and Mongolia. This is a complex phenomenon with a long history. In its classic form, it emerged at the turn of twentieth century and its ideas were revived in the context of discussions within academic circles. The idea of unification of the Mongolian historical and cultural community played various functional roles, both as an immediate goal and an instrument of national consolidation. It is this organic “embeddedness” of irredentist ideas in the context of the objectively important task of nation-building, and in the processes of modernisation, which laid the foundations for its revival in the early post-Soviet years. Part of the discussion was devoted to the issue of cross-border integration of the Mongolian community with the full understanding that practical union was impossible. At times, this integration was perceived as a state association, an important part of which was the idea of “bringing compatriots together”. Diaspora groups – in this case the Shenehen Buryats – became, as vehicles of “ideal” and authentic national identity, a preferred object of alignment of ideological and political constructs.

The Congress of Buryat People proposed to create a Buryat refugee return fund, determine levels of compensation and facilitate allocation, and set up a special migration service to facilitate their return (Nimaev 2001: 126). The motivation for this was clearly and minutely grounded in the articles and policy statements of one of the founders and leaders of the Buryat-Mongolian National Party and the Movement for National Unity (“Negedel”), Vladimir Khamutaev. He wrote:

Fragments of all nations are going home. After two thousand years, Jews are returning to their historic homeland, after 200 years the Germans of Russia are returning to Germany. The Kazakhs of China and Mongolia are going to a homeland in which they’ve never lived. The Nazarbayev government has adopted a program to return the Kazakhs into the nation’s gene pool, through which measures have been allowed for to encourage return to the historical homeland, allocate land to returnees, providing them with compact settlements with their way of life... Weak nations that are not able to regroup around their particular ethnic and national values and interests, dissolve into others...” (2000: 177).

Return to the homeland was not considered a humanitarian issue, but rather a political one. It was part of the issue of “bringing the nation back

together", the path towards its consolidation, towards the preservation and development of its "gene pool". Repatriation acted here as a tool of nation building. It was therefore crucial that Shenehen Buryats:

"...had a traditional economy, that they study, sing, dance, get married. They kept all that was native Buryat: consciousness, language, games, traditions, clothing, ceremonies, the old Mongolian script, the 'Taban Khushun' – the traditional animal husbandry, etc. It was crucial to allocate land to the individual construction and compact – in one locality – resettlement of Shenehen returnees in order to preserve the established worldviews, order, tradition, way of life, economic forms, the traditional 'Taban Khushun', horticulture. The preservation of the established traditional way of life of a unique ethnic and cultural group is in the interest of the entire ethnic group" (Khamutaev 2000: 20).

Viewing the Shenehen Buryats as holders and custodians of ethnic traditions is also typical of China, where they enjoy a positive reputation for being original and traditional. This reputation is also maintained through the media, in particular the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and Inner Mongolia TV (NMTV). One report about the Mongols of Hulun Buir was "full of admiration for the well-preserved traditional way of life, the beauty of the Buryat national dress, and described poetically the Buryats as the most 'authentic steppe plains Mongols'" (Namsaraeva 2007: 252). If immigrants and their children adapt to their new surroundings, it provokes outrage:

Buryats come to the Republic from China, and their children, who know only their native tongue, are forced to acquire a foreign culture, language, morality, a loud way of expressing emotions, because they are scattered in different schools. With every day that goes by they lose all that is native to them, their ethnicity, their national essence developed over thousands of years, their manners and behaviour, turning more and more into noisy loudmouth Soviet *mankurts* [a term denoting an individual who has become acculturated, who has lost his or her roots] (Khamutaev 2000: 99).

All of this did not mean that the theme of Shenehen Buryats had been monopolised by the discourse of nation-building. This theme perhaps also began playing such a role in the politico-ideological practices that relied on a completely sincere and selfless public interest. A lot of individuals were simply interested in learning how "our people" lived and still live in a foreign country. The media were willing to address and capture the very nature of this interest. One merely needs to look at the headlines given in the newspapers *Inform Polis* (4 July 2004; 7 September 2005) and *Nomer Odin* (2 June 2004 and others): "Russian Buryat in China.

Shenehen – a small preserve of the Buryat spirit and culture”, “Chinese Buryats return home”, etc.

This may be somewhat reminiscent of a huge, if not exalted, interest in Russian post-revolutionary emigration in general. In one way or another, the authorities themselves could not remain uninvolved in this problem. Demonstrating an interest in this issue the local authorities showed readiness to enter into a dialogue with the public and give attention to its ethnic needs, without irritating the federal centre and its own opponents of Buryat nationalism. In addition, it represented a good opportunity to arrange working contacts with the authorities of border provinces in China, and to increase the status of an active foreign policy. It also deflected the issue away from the danger of ethno-politics onto the humanitarian and cultural sphere. And this was carried out in the “State National Policy Concept of the Republic of Buryatia” (Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Buryatia No. 336 September, 29, 1997), where the activity outside of Buryatia was considered as:

- help and support to people from Buryatia residing in other regions of Russia, the CIS and far abroad;
- conclusion of intergovernmental agreements with Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China regarding cultural and economic cooperation;
- support of public national and cultural associations of the Buryat diaspora and natives of the Republic of Buryatia in the various regions of Russia, far and near abroad, in their efforts to satisfy national-cultural needs, to preserve and develop their native tongue and national traditions, and strengthen their relations with Buryatia (State National Policy Concept of the Republic of Buryatia 1997: 3).

In the 2007 version of the State National Policy Concept, the issue of co-ethnics already sounds more restrained:

“In the international and regional sphere:

- public support for ethnic and cultural Buryat associations in various regions of Russia and abroad in their efforts to satisfy national-cultural needs, to preserve and develop their native tongue, strengthen their relations with Buryatia;
- development of relations with co-ethnics living abroad” (State National Policy Concept of the Republic of Buryatia 2007: 2).

The first returnees received assistance in terms of accommodation, job placement and temporary shelter from the All-Buryat Association for Cultural Development, the Buryat State University and the Buryat State Academy of Agriculture and Agricultural College, and were allocated quotas for the education of their children. But the republic's authorities were unable to do what was most important of all – to provide them with real assistance in obtaining Russian citizenship. Buryatia did not participate in the programme for the return of compatriots. Alexander Elaev, the then First Deputy Chairman of the Committee for International Relations of the Administration of President of Buryatia, emphasised:

Our compatriots who relocate here are competitors to our people. In other words, we also have a conflict of interest here. And we must consider, as a priority, the interests of Russian citizens. In addition to federal funds, funds from the republic are also necessary for the resettlement of those displaced. This means housing provision, job provision. And this can constitute a problem as people find themselves in limbo ("Chto meshaet vozvrashcheniyu Shenekshenskikh Buryat na istoricheskuyu rodinu?": 1).

Intense initial efforts in this direction changed the implementation of routine bureaucratic procedures. The treaties and agreements concluded in recent years between the governments of Inner Mongolia and Buryatia do not have an impact on the issue of Shenehen Buryats returnees. Overall, immigrants have been left to fend for themselves. They have been faced with a range of problems of adaptation that are typical for migrants. The issue of naturalisation has been and remains problematic, while the question of acculturation has been unexpectedly prominent. As it turned out, Buryat culture in Buryatia and Buryat culture in Shenehen differed radically, with almost a century of separate existence and development having left its mark. In practical terms, this was an interaction between two different Buryat cultures. A common ethnicity was not a guarantor of automatic and seamless integration. Behind a façade of a common ethnicity and common self-identification were hidden social and cultural worlds that diverged drastically.

The "era of national and cultural revival" of the 1990s has come to an end, and the numerous new problems and concerns faced by politicians and bureaucrats have, it seems, diminished the interest of the public toward the Shenehen Buryats. However, on 6 May 2010, Minister for the Economy of the Republic of Buryatia, Tatiana Dumnova, told the newspaper *Delovoi Mir Baikala* that the issue of resettlement in Buryatia of a further 500 former

compatriots from Inner Mongolia, China, had been worked out at the federal level. Tsydenzhap Batuev, a deputy in the People's Hural, supported an initiative by the Ministry for the Economy:

Before suggesting people should leave, you need to create optimum conditions and conduct outreach programmes for the residents of Tunka and Dzhida. Buryatia has had a similar experience, when settlers from abroad moved into the Mukhorshibir area and were faced with a lack of meadows and pastures. We can not cheat people twice, and punish them twice (*Delovoi Mir Baikala*, 6 May 2010).

Later in 2010, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Chepik also lamented the issue of Shenehen Buryats:

Unemployment is high, and they do not let us attract them. Yet they're herdsmen, they will have no effect on unemployment. On the contrary, they will create additional jobs in those vast areas of Siberia and Buryatia that have not been claimed (*Inform Polis*, 2 September 2010).

The history of the Shenehen Buryats demonstrates how the existence of a border can mould a group and define its basic parameters and key features. Changes brought to the status of the border led to changes in the group's position within the host society and transformed their relationship with their homeland. The Shenehen Buryats were and remain a people of the border whose life and everyday practices heavily depend on the situation on this strip of land. They do not merely live near the border, they find themselves on the cusp between two different worlds.