



**History of the Russian Sanhe told by descendants of the Russian  
settlers**

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**Abstract**

The paper deals with the history of formation of the Russian community near the region of Three Rivers (Sanhe, the District of Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia, the People's Republic of China). To the middle of the 1950th Russians and their descendants constituted the majority this paper is based on the results of scientific expedition to the region of Three Rivers (Sanhe, the District of Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia, the People's Republic of China). The expedition took place in September, 2017. The main aim of expedition was to study life, language, traditions of descendants of the Russian settlers. Russian language used among the population of the Three Rivers region is analyzed in the paper.

*Keywords:* Sociolinguistics, Russian language abroad, China, The Three Rivers Region, Russian culture, the Russian Cossacks;

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**1. Introduction**

The region of Three Rivers (Sanhe Qu, the District of Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia, the People's Republic of China) is the place where Russians came after the October Revolution. This territory is of interest of many modern researchers (E.A. Oglezneva[8], A.A. Zabiyaiko[12], A.P. Zabiyaiko[12], Y.V. Zinenko[13], V.L. Klyaus[6], Liang Zhe[7] and others).

**2. Structure**

The region of Three Rivers is territory of three rivers' basins (the Habuer, the Derbu and the Gen rivers). It is located in the District of Hulunbuir. It is a place of old colonization. In the latter half of the 19th century Cossack trailed cattle there, built isolated farms, hunted, fished, and ploughed up the new soil. The first Russian settlements appeared in 1885 along the river Habuer. [11, p.41] After the October Revolution in Russia a lot of people moved there, among them were Cossacks, wealthy farmers, women who married Chinese and went together with them into China. Wealthy farmers were chased by the Russian authorities, as they had isolated farms there, that's why they decided to hide in this territory. In the 1930s there were 20 Russian villages in the region of Three Rivers. Before the Great Cultural Revolution in Sanhe Qu there were 9 Russian schools, 18 Orthodox churches and a cloister. The number of Orthodox believers was about 28 thousand people. [1, p.178]

Now Russian population settles in seven or eight villages. From 2500 Russians living in China 1700 people inhabit a nationality township (minzu xiang) Enhe.

It must be noted that they continue to speak Russian. Russians living there have different levels of language competence in Russian. Representatives of older generation, who represent the second generation of Russians, speak Russian, but as for their children and grandchildren, they speak Chinese, however, many of them understand the Russian language. Many descendants of Russians use the Chinese language in everyday life, but they endeavor to preserve Russian traditions, the Orthodox faith. The descendants of Russians in the region of Three Rivers are mainly metises who keep calendar and family rites [10]. They live in China where the main religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, despite this they celebrate Easter and Whit Sunday. Some of Russian descendants still live in izbas made in the traditional Russian style [10].

There are written memoirs of Russians who lived in the region of Three Rivers and then re-immigrated from China, these memoirs represent invaluable source on the history of Russian people in China. Pavel Shakhmatov is a former inhabitant of the region of Three Rivers, now resident of Australia, he wrote a book "The Three Rivers region. Memoirs." In this book he narrated that the Three Rivers region was the promised land for the Cossacks who came from the border Trans-Baikal villages. The Cossacks were allowed to mow the hay there under the contract with the local officials. The border was conditional, was not clear, that is why the Cossacks were free to cross it and hunted fur-bearing animals in Manzhouli. The border was guarded only by local people: Mongols, Tungus, and Manchurians. All of them were in good relations with Russians, the locals also crossed the border, traded with Russians. Some of the locals christened and attended church on the Russian side. In the early 20th century the guards on the Manchurian side maintain security carelessly and did not obstruct Russians who wanted to cross the border [11, p.42]. P. Shakhmatov mentioned that the Three Rivers region started to develop rapidly in those years. "There were no heavy taxes, people helped each other. In 5-10 years those who had 30 heads of cattle or horses were considered to be poor and set free from taxes. In the early 1930s merchants came to trade there, more than 20 dairy plants, 20 mills, distilleries, leather tanneries were built [11, p.51].

Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s the Three Rivers region was a kind of oasis where Russians lived on Chinese territory near the Russian border.

One of the sources on the history of Russian and Russian language in The Three Rivers region is records of Russian speech that we made during the scientific expedition in The Three Rivers region in October 2017, in the Labudalin and in the village Enhe. We talked with eight descendants of the Russian settlers.

### **3. Expedition conclusion**

Information that we received helped us to restore depiction of Russians' lives in The Three Rivers region. There are main themes in their memoirs.

The descendants of Russian immigrants recall about particularities of their immigration in Sanhe Qu: "Many Russians came to China, when the revolution took place in Russia. Those who were rich came also came to China, they were known as kulaks. They broke the law. Pursing Japanese military forces my family decided to stay here" [3].

Speaking about the way of life of Russians in Three Rivers region, Russian immigrants' descendants pointed at how they preserved Russian traditions and how they mixed Russian, Slavic cultures and Chinese, Eastern cultures, e.g. "My mother baked pies from milksop. Do you

know what it is? Delicious![3], "...my wife was a Mongolian, we cooked in Russian and in Chinese way."[5], "...House made of mud. We used clay."[2]

The most difficult time in lives of the habitants of The Three Rivers region was during Japanese occupation and during the Cultural Revolution. "Japanese came here in 1955. There were a lot of battles here. I remember that 1001 people died in Hailaer..." [5] During the Cultural Revolution metis were shackled. We were beaten. We were in prison for two years."[3]

Orthodox faith played an important role in the life of Russians and their descendants, Orthodox faith is a means of ethnical identification. "... We also celebrate holidays. We go to church. We pray to God. We have Easter cakes..." [4] "I am baptized. There was a church in the village."[3] "They baptized me in the church, named me Anna. Then gave me another name. [4]

Descendants of Russian immigrants preserved the language, but they understand that their language is not as fluent as those of native speakers. "...Many years ago old men, and old women talked and we were listening. We don't know a lot."[4] "Townsmen came here, after they said something we learn. We don't speak as they speak...If you tell me how to say in right way I learn it and won't forget it for a long time."[3]

They stayed in China, and it became a homeland for them, however, they understand their detachment from historical homeland, they understand a possibility to reunification with it due to their descendants – children and grandchildren: "Many Russians left for Kazakhstan, Russia, Australia, I have a son in Irkutsk."[5] "My elder son lives in Russia, he left to the Black sea 20 years ago."[3]

We made the records of Russian speech during the scientific expedition in The Three Rivers region, this recorded speech of Russian immigrants' descendants who lived the whole life in China and preserved the language, represents unique linguistic and historical source and is of interest for many modern researchers.

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