

2 The Hezhe

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2.1 The People, The Environment

The Hezhe are one of China's seven small ethnic groups, alongside the Tatar, Gaoshan, Luoba, Dulong, Oroqen and Menba and they remain among the smallest officially recognised minorities in the country (Man 2023). The Hezhe (Hezhe: Nanai; Chinese: Hezhe; Manchu: Heje; Russian: Nanai, Goldi), were originally part of a single group with the Nanai to the north-east around Khabarovsk and now live in China's Heilongjiang province. As of 2010, the total Hezhe population in China and Russia was estimated at approximately 17,000. Of these, only 50 individuals reported speaking the Hezhe language, which is part of the southern branch of the Tungus language family and closely related to Manchu. In contrast, in Russia – where Hezhe is taught in some schools – more than 3,000 speakers were recorded. The language has no traditional written form. A written version was first developed in Russia during the nineteenth century, with the earliest vocabularies and dictionaries compiled by P. Protodjakonov¹ (Walravens 2022). Hezhe

1 In 1884, missionary Prokopy Protodyakonov published The Goldi alphabet for teaching Goldi and Gilyak children.

communities in China are concentrated in Heilongjiang Province, along the northern border with Russia (Guo et al. 2017). This ‘Three-River Basin’ area encompasses the northeastern Sanjiang Plain, formed by the confluence of the Heilongjiang (Amur), Songhuajiang (Sungari) and Wusulijiang (Ussuri) rivers, as well as the slopes of the Wanda Mountains. This region is renowned by its abundance of rivers, lakes and wetlands, which have provided the Hezhe with a livelihood shaped by the cyclical abundance of fish and game. Agriculture, including the cultivation of millet, barley and other crops, has a long history in the region, although fishing and hunting remained important economic activities. The landscape encompassing the Raohe, Hulin, Fuyuan and Tongjiang counties, marked by fertile soil and rich ecosystems, continues to support daily life offering nourishment and materials for clothing and tools (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009). The region’s interconnected waterways and mountainous terrain have defined Hezhe life for generations and remain integral to their historical presence in the area.



Figure 53 Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon D'Anville, map of China and Central Asia for du Halde's *Description géographique de la Chine*, the first geographic survey of the entire Chinese Empire by a team of French Jesuits. 1735. Leiden University Libraries Special Collections, Leiden, Netherlands

The earliest documented use of the term ‘Hezhe’ appears in a Qing dynasty edict from 1663 during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, which mentions a tribute of sable furs done by the Hezhe² (Zhang, Saengthong 2024). Historical records also refer to their ancestors under varying names depending on the period: Sushen or Jishen during the pre-Qin era, Yilou in the Han-Wei period, Wuji during the Northern and Southern dynasties and Mohe in the Sui-Tang period. Among the Mohe, the Heishui tribe, located furthest north,

2 Sable tribute at the Qing court marked political rank, making Indigenous hunting communities and their territories in the borderlands strategic to sustaining the hierarchy of the Manchu elite (Chia 2018).



Figure 54 V.V. Lanin, Shaved Hezhe. Album Amur and the Ussuri Region. Vol. 3. 1875-76.
Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg, Russia

is regarded as the direct ancestors of the Hezhe (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009).

Prior to the Tang and Song dynasties, Chinese sources referred to the Hezhe with the derogatory term *Yupi dazi*, meaning ‘fish skin Tartars’ (Yu 2021). This name was also used by Jesuit missionaries [fig. 53] sent to the lower Amur by the Peking court during the eighteenth century (Du Halde 1735). The naming and classification of related groups in the lower Amur region has long been shaped by the assumptions of outsiders recording the region and its peoples. Schrenck’s³ investigations and other early ethnographers described varying subgroups, some partially assimilated into Manchu society. Terms such as ‘Shaved Hejên’ [fig. 54] and ‘Unshaved Hejên’ referred to varying degrees of Manchurianisation and were applied differently across historical periods and sources. The term ‘Goldi’ itself was introduced by Western ethnographers, who had adopted it from northern neighbours of the group. Chinese sources, relying on self-designations, transliterated the name ‘Hejên’ into various forms, including *Hei-chin*, *Ho-chê* and *Ho-chên*. Japanese sources, encountering these groups primarily via Ainu intermediaries in southern Sakhalin, applied their own ethnonyms: the Goldis were referred to as *Korutkekke*, the Ulchi as *Santan* and the Gilyaks as *Sumarenkuru* (Wada 1938). These names were recorded by Rinzō Mamiya during his fieldwork in the lower Amur region and later published by Siebold (1833). They reflected cultural differences recognised in the region and closely resemble the classifications later adopted by Schrenck. These overlapping classifications obscure the Indigenous groups’ social realities, showcasing the geopolitical perspectives of those doing the naming. Ling Chunsheng⁴ publication *The Hezhe People of the Lower Reaches of the Songhua River* (Ling 1934) marked a shift in the academic recognition of the term ‘Hezhe’ to identify the communities inhabiting the Three-River Basin. The ethnic classification campaign launched in 1950 by the People’s Republic of China formally adopted ‘Hezhe’ as the official designation, interpreted as ‘people living in the east and lower river reaches’ (Zhang, Saengthong 2024).

Closely related groups including the Nanai, Ulchi, Orochi and Udege, inhabit the north-eastern Russian side of the lower Amur valley and the northern Maritime Region. Although today formally divided across national borders and into separate ethnic categories, their shared material practices, decorative motifs, religious and oral traditions link them across time and territory. Their cultural unity with the Pacific Northeast Asian peoples, especially the Ainu, indicates their ethnogenetic role in the cultural development of the region (Zgusta 2015). These indigenous groups interacted with each other through exchange networks stretching across Northeast Asia to present-day Sakhalin Island, Hokkaido and eventually Alaska (Pulford 2019).

³ Leopold von Schrenck (1826-1894), a German naturalist and ethnographer, led a major 1854-56 expedition to the Amur River and Sakhalin, producing multi-volume works on the region’s biodiversity, oceanography and Indigenous Peoples.

⁴ Ling Chunsheng’s 1930’s fieldwork in northeastern China, carried out under the Institute of Social Sciences, is regarded as China’s first formal ethnological investigation. His book about the Hezhe became the earliest scientific ethnography in China and shaped anthropological practice at Academia Sinica as a reference for scholars studying frontier ethnic groups.

Long before Russian and Chinese settlements expanded in the region, groups such as the Ulchi and Orochi hunted the surrounding forests, while the Nanai and Hezhe sustained themselves by fishing the rivers. These waterways were sources of subsistence and formed the basis of ritual and social life (Pulford 2019). The Hezhe of China and the Nanai of Russia, who once formed a unified group, have been divided by political borders. Their separation, determined by the demarcation of the border between China and Russia, is both geopolitical and material. Throughout the twentieth century, their relationship with state power was shaped by ongoing material exchange, ranging from imperial tribute and socialist redistribution to cross-border trade and incorporation into separate states (Pulford 2021). Prior to these divisions, the Hezhe and Nanai shared fluid movement along the Amur, Ussuri and Sungari rivers, speaking dialects of the same Tungus language. The gradual onset of Sino-Russian colonisation in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in the bifurcation of the group: the northern segment known as the Nanai became increasingly Russified, while the southern group, known as the Hezhe, was absorbed into the Chinese state (Pulford 2019).

The Hezhe's recorded history is linked with the expansion of larger powers in northeast Asia. Their lineage has been traced to the Sushen (or Jishen) regarded as predecessors of Tungus peoples. By the third century BCE, a broader Tungus tradition had begun to form through the amalgamation of groups including the Yilou, Wuji and Mohe, together with neighbouring Turkic and Mongol populations. During the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the region came under Chinese control with the establishment of the Heilong military outpost. At this time, the Hezhe were part of the Heishui Mohe federation, located along the Amur River (Schwarz 1984).

Hezhe oral tradition recalls an early settlement at Baicheng (白城) (White City), near present-day Harbin (哈尔滨). Following displacement by Chinese forces, they retreated to the Greater Xing'an range, adopting hunting and fishing before migrating by river to the Amur. There, they established settlements along its course. After conflict with the Nivkh, many were driven southwards and resettled along the Sungari River between Sanxing (三星) and the Amur (Schwarz 1984). Communities maintained a preference for the eastern banks, following older ecological and social patterns. To the east were similar riverine societies; to the west, they would have encountered forest-based nomadic groups (Lattimore 1964).

In the early seventeenth century, the Manchu consolidated power and established the Qing dynasty, which expanded to include Korea, Mongolia and China. The Hezhe came under Manchu control during this period (Olson 1998). Despite shared ancestry, they did not follow the same path of state formation. While the Manchu developed formal administrative and military structures, the Hezhe remained outside these institutions, although they were viewed as suitable recruits (Lattimore 1964). Military conscription began in the seventeenth century and by the eighteenth century, Hezhe men were engaged in river patrols and other auxiliary roles (Schwarz 1984).

During the seventeenth century, the Nanai and Hezhe entered tributary relations with both the Qing Empire and the Russian state. Cossack authorities collected *iasak*, a tribute in the form of sable furs, from Amur communities, including the ancestors of the Hezhe. This process served to legitimise Russian territorial claims and provided a source of revenue. Tribute functioned as ceremonial submission and a system of extractive governance. Both the Qing and Russian regimes sought similar goods and



Figure 55 Hezhe family in traditional costumes. Amur River basin.
Russian Ethnographical Museum. REM, St. Petersburg, Russia

connected tribute collection to regulated trade. In 1860, the Sino-Russian border was formally established. The trade routes linking the Amur basin, Sakhalin and East Asia were subsequently affected by the Sino-Russian Treaty of 1860 and the Russo-Japanese agreement of 1875. By the 1880s, the Qing tribute system had largely ceased to function (Pulford 2021).

Under Japanese occupation from 1931 to 1945, Hezhe communities [fig. 55] were forcibly relocated to work in mines and on railways. Concentration camps, food scarcity and opium use led to deaths on a large scale. By 1949, their population had declined to around 300, a near-collapse that threatened their recognition as a separate group (Fan et al. 1987). Soviet-style policies had already affected the Nanai on the Russian side. By the early twentieth century, alcohol dependence was widespread. Vodka was viewed locally as a ritual good and its sudden restriction during the First World War triggered a material and spiritual crisis (Shternberg 1933; Lopatin 1960; Pulford 2021).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, resettlement programmes were introduced to repair the effects of war and occupation (Sun 2020). Collectivisation followed, drawing the Hezhe into fishing cooperatives and replacing seasonal practice with state-directed extraction, which depleted stocks on both sides of the border (Pulford 2019).

Mid-century ethnic classification, shaped by Soviet models, designated the Hezhe as one of the PRC's fifty-five minority nationalities. As with the Nanai in the Soviet Union, formal recognition provided limited autonomy, and policies framed the Hezhe as in need of integration. Settlement schemes and administrative restructuring were introduced under similar logics in both states (Pulford 2019). Until the early twentieth century, Hezhe livelihoods focused on fishing. Abundant stocks encouraged commercial fishing, which replaced communal practices with private ownership of boats, nets and wage labour (Olson 1998). After 1945, the Hezhe came under Communist administration earlier than many groups (Schwarz 1984). Collectivisation expanded in the 1950s through multiethnic fishing cooperatives that brought Hezhe into shared work units with Han, Manchu and Korean settlers and increased intermarriage. These measures worked to dismantle autonomous Indigenous practices and incorporate the Hezhe into socialist structures (Olson 1998).

By 1967, the Jiejinkou Revolutionary Committee had abolished ethnically defined fishing teams and reorganised the population into mixed work units (Huang 2012). Anti-Soviet campaigns restricted contact with the Nanai in Russia, reinforcing their administrative separation. Mobility declined and industrialised fishing contributed to ecological damage (Pulford 2019; 2021). In both China and the Soviet Union, sedentarisation relocated communities into permanent villages and tied labour to fishing brigades, increasing pressure on forests and rivers (Pulford 2019). During the 1970s, industrial pollution further damaged the Amur watershed, reducing fish populations and undermining Hezhe livelihoods. Environmental decline, expanding infrastructure and intensified resource extraction prompted protest. Following China's economic reforms and the Soviet collapse in 1991, extraction accelerated as coal, gas, timber and mineral exports became state priorities, further limiting room for subsistence economies (Olson 1998).

Within China, Hezhe arts – birch bark, fish skin and fish bone work – were recast as national heritage. Museums collected works by makers such as You Wenfeng and Sun You (Huang, Huang 2009). Exhibitions framed pre-1949 Hezhe life as impoverished and contrasted it with post-1949 development. Displays presented fishing tools as steps toward economic progress and positioned the

Hezhe as revived by socialism, with little reference to Nanai history (Pulford 2019). Hezhe communities remain concentrated in Heilongjiang Province, where fishing continues under the constraints of state planning and long-term environmental degradation (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009).

2.2 Ethnographic Records

Drawing on Chinese, Russian (Pulford 2021) and Western sources (Schwarz 1984), this chapter traces how ethnographic records across dynasties consistently portrayed the lower Amur region as inhabited by peoples whose identity was shaped by their relationship to fish – both as food and as material resource. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* [fig. 56], also known as *Shanhai jing*⁵ refers to the ‘Black-legged People’ who wore garments made from fish skin, an early reference to groups later known as the ‘Fish Skin Tartars’ (Wada 1938). Fish skin also appears in the text in connection with sacrificial rites, indicating its role in early ritual practice (Pan 2021). Similar references in the *Dongyizhuan*⁶ describe winter hunting on wooden skis and clothing made of dog and fish skins. These records likely refer to Ainu and Hezhe groups living in the Amur estuary and Sakhalin, suggesting a broader early Pale-Asiatic presence (Wada 1938).



Figure 56 Guo Pu, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Vol. 5. A compilation of mythic geography detailing the unique flora, fauna and legendary creatures. National Library of China, Beijing, China

⁵ The *Shanhai jing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) is a compilation of early Chinese geographic knowledge, with its origins dating to the fourth century BCE. The text served administrative purposes in the Qin and Han periods, mapping resources and territorial affiliations through rituals at sacred sites.

⁶ The *Dongyizhuan* (*Records of the Eastern Barbarians*) compiled by court historians from the late third century onwards, it functioned as a handbook of intelligence on eastern non-Han groups, providing detailed accounts for use in foreign relations and territorial governance.

During the early Qing dynasty, Wu Zhenchen (1664), writing under the name Suhuan, included detailed observations of the Hezhe in Ningguta jilüe (1722) (Walravens 2022). Based on his time in Ningguta (modern Ning'an, Heilongjiang), Wu described the geography, climate, flora and fauna, population and Hezhe clothing practices, noting garments made from fish skin (Gao 1995). Compiled later in the Qing period, the Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*),⁷ includes hand-coloured illustrations of each ethnic group known in China at the time, showing one man and one woman, accompanied by brief captions in both Chinese and Manchu (Walravens 2022). The text describes the Hezhe, depicted in both text and illustration wearing fish skin and deer skin robes decorated with bells [fig. 57] (Xu 2022). The text reads:

By nature they are hard and violent and believe in demons and goblins. The men make hats from birch bark; in winter they wear sable hats and fox fur clothing. The hats of the women are similar to helmets; as for the clothes, they make them from fish skin and line them with coloured cloth. At the hem hang many little brass bells and they resemble chain shirts. For subsistence they catch fish and hunt animals. In summer they travel with large boats, in winter when the ice is solidly frozen, they travel in dog sleds [fig. 58]. Their native language is called the Heje-language. Every year, they pay tribute in the form of sable pelts. (Walravens 2022, 110)

Late Qing poets also expressed admiration for the visual and tactile qualities of fish skin, describing it as “as soft as that of any other animal” with colours that “reflect the magnificence of the sunlight.” Clothes and socks made from it were described as “the brocade bestowed on fishermen” (Xu 2022). The *Draft History of Qing* Qingshi gao⁸ summarises Hezhe subsistence through year-round hunting and fishing, with fish skin used for clothing, for warmth and as covers when travelling by sledge (Pan 2021). These texts, from the earliest classics to the Qing compilations, document the historical continuity of fish skin as a valuable material (Wada 1938).

Among the earliest European observers of the Nanai and Hezhe were French Jesuit missionaries dispatched by the Qing court in the early eighteenth century, whose mission in China included detailed map-making [fig. 53]. Drawing on European cartographic techniques, missionaries collaborated with Qing authorities to document frontier regions, recording local subsistence practices, spiritual customs and dress (Cams 2014). Jesuit Jean-Baptiste du Halde, although he never travelled to China himself, compiled these materials in his 1735 *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* – a four-volume encyclopaedic work based on reports from seventeen Jesuits active in the field. His account included detailed descriptions of the so-called Yupi dazi, or ‘fish skin Tartars’. Writing at a time shaped by the elaborate dress culture of Louis XIV’s court, du Halde

⁷ The Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*), compiled around 1769, functioned as an ethnographic record of Qing imperial authority. It catalogued the empire’s ‘tributary’ peoples through portraits focusing on their costumes and brief descriptions, serving to promote a vision of universal rule through artistic and ideological means.

⁸ The *Draft History of Qing*, Qingshi gao, compiled after the fall of the Qing dynasty documents its legacy during China’s political transition and the collapse of China as an Empire.



Figure 57 Portrait of the Qileng, located on the Amugun River wearing deer skin garments and fish skin leggings. Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*). 1769. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., USA

Figure 58 Portrait of a Hezhe couple with the woman wearing a fish skin garment on a sledge pulled by dogs. Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*). 1769. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., USA

described fish skin garments with particular attention to their refinement and craftsmanship. Jesuit missionaries travelling along the Ussuri and Amur rivers described Nanai and Hezhe settlements in fish-rich environments [fig. 59], where the resource served as a staple food and a primary material for clothing. Fish skin was described as processed with care – stitched finely enough to resemble silk – dyed in multiple colours and tailored with precision into garments worn by both men and women. Women's clothing was adorned with bells and small ornaments, while their hair was decorated with reflective trinkets, rings and beads. While similar to Manchu attire, these garments were distinguished by coloured borders and ornamental bells and were noted for their intricate construction (Du Halde 1735; Pulford 2019). Missionaries also observed sable furs being transported upriver to the Manchu administrative centre at Ningguta (modern Ning'an, Heilongjiang), a practice still recorded by Russian ethnographers over a century later (Arsenev 2004).

Earlier still, Jesuit Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1677) [fig. 60], presented a generalised view of the Tartar world, portraying it as spiritually isolated and framing missionary activity as a civilising project. Kircher described the region as vast, wild and poorly mapped, reinforcing European perceptions of its inhabitants as remote and in need of Christian instruction (Kircher 1677).

Although the lower Amur had long been described in Chinese historical records, detailed ethnographic studies of Indigenous communities following European scholarly conventions were not undertaken until the mid-nineteenth century, when Russia intensified its expansion into the Far East. One of the earliest Russian efforts came from Leopold von Schrenck, who travelled the Amur in 1850s. He recorded the geographic distribution of groups he classified as Orochi, a category that included the present-day Orochi, Udege and Tazy, distinguishing those less influenced by the Manchu, located along the upper Ussuri and Amur, from southerly groups near St Olga's Bay who had adopted Manchu customs and language. Schrenck described tribute relationships with the Qing authorities but noted that some Nanai and Hezhe groups retained autonomy (Schrenck 1881; Pulford 2021; Arsenev 2004).

Further study was conducted by Margaritoff in the 1880s, under the auspices of the Amur Province Scientific Exploration Society during which he travelled extensively in the Orochi region, collecting ethnographic objects, including shamanic regalia and clothing. Although his work contributed to early anthropology of the region, his methods reflected extractive practices (Fraser 1894). Scottish anthropologist James George Fraser,⁹ who translated early Russian ethnographies, including Margaritoff's volume on *The fish skin Tartars*, relied primarily on missionary correspondence and imperial reports (Fraser 1894). Around the same period, Veniukov, of the Russian Geographical Society, noted linguistic similarities between the Orochi and the Goldi (Nanai/Hezhe), suggesting close connections among Amur Tungus-speaking groups (Fraser 1894). The historical ethnographies

⁹ James George Fraser was best known for *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), in which he proposed a theory of cultural evolution progressing from magic to religion and finally to science. His work shaped early comparative mythology and anthropology. The *Golden Bough* has since faced criticism for its imperialist, classist and racist assumptions.



Figure 59 Du Halde, *Description de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*. 1735. Leiden University Libraries Special Collections, Leiden, Netherlands



Figure 60 Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata*. 1667. Leiden University Libraries Special Collections, Leiden, Netherlands

compiled by Julius von Klaproth¹⁰ in *Tableaux historiques de l'Asie* offer further detail on the populations inhabiting the mountainous regions of northeast Asia. In one passage, Klaproth refers to the Hezhe, noting that they withdrew into mountain caves during the harsh winters. Heavy snowfall made sleds necessary for mobility. Fishing remained their primary subsistence activity and garments were made from fish skin. Alongside this, the region supported a thriving trade in furs; sables and martens were plentiful, and hats were made from fox and badger pelts (Klaproth 1826). In the decades that followed, Ivan Lopatin's ethnographic writings documented similar Nanai/Hezhe funerary rites in the 1920s and 1930s, observing the blending of shamanic rituals with Chinese and Russian elements, including the use of printed paper, Chinese food offerings and Russian coffins and vodka (Lopatin 1922) as evidence of sustained politico-material entanglements (Pulford 2021). By the mid-twentieth century, scholars such as Shirokogorov acknowledged that Tungus ethnography remained underdeveloped due to limited Chinese records.

Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenev recorded his journey toward the shores of the Ussuri River combining diaries, maps and drawings of local costumes [fig. 61] made by Orochi, Udege, Nanai and Ulchi communities. His material enables readers to clearly trace the routes and sense the landscapes and conditions encountered (Arsenev 2004). His book *Dersu Uzala*¹¹ (1923) narrates his experience travelling with a Nanai hunter in the early twentieth century. He described the difficulties Tsarist officials faced in integrating Nanai/Hezhe communities who, while nominally under Russian administration, maintained tributary relations with the Qing in exchange for trade access (Arsenev 2004; Pulford 2021). In 1930, American sinologist Owen Lattimore travelled through Manchuria under the Social Science Research Council. He recorded observations of Hezhe communities near Tongjiang and Jiejinkou (Lattimore 1964; Pulford 2021). At that time, he encountered two other Chinese ethnographers Ling Chunsheng and Shang Zhangsun whom he referred to in his fieldwork. From the 1950s, Henry Schwarz began documenting ethnic minorities in northern China, with focus on Communist policies toward these groups. He lamented the continued lack of scholarly attention to such populations, both in China and abroad (Schwarz 1984).

Systematic study of Hezhe fish skin culture began in China during the 1920s, with Qing-era texts documenting Hezhe surnames, subsistence practices and material life. Fieldwork conducted by Ling Chunsheng¹² and Shang Zhangsun in 1934, covering the region from Yilan (依兰) to

¹⁰ Klaproth, a self-taught Sinologist and polyglot and cartographer – occasionally publishing under the pseudonym Louis de l'Or – joined a Russian embassy to China before undertaking an expedition to the Caucasus. He spent the final two decades of his life in Paris, supported by a sinecure professorship from Bonn and was a co-founder of the Société Asiatique de Paris.

¹¹ *Dersu Uzala* (1923) is a memoir by Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenyev recounting his expeditions through the Ussuri basin in the Russian Far East alongside the Nanai hunter Dersu Uzala who guided his surveying crew and saved them from starvation and cold. Arsenyev portrays him as an animist who sees animals and plants as equal to man.

¹² Ling Chunsheng after graduating from Dongnan University in 1923, studied in Paris under Marcel Mauss, professor of sociology at the Collège de France. With the support of Paul Rivet, director of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, he was invited by Cai Yuanpei to join the Department of Ethnology at Academia Sinica. Ling conducted fieldwork among the Hezhe in northeast China, marking the first scientific ethnographic research in the country. His monograph on the Hezhe established a model for ethnological fieldwork in China.

Fuyuan (抚远), was published in 1934 as *The Hezhe People of the Lower Reaches of the Songhua River* (Ling 1934). This early adoption of Western ethnographic methods drew national attention and framed Hezhe fishing-hunting culture as shaped by local ecology. Ling made racist statements on how areas closely to Chinese population were deemed artistically ‘advanced’, while more remote groups were seen as less refined (Ling 2012). During this same expedition, he reported the visible impact of alcoholism and opium in communities along the Amur and Sungari (Pulford 2021). Ling’s method, treating Indigenous cultures as living sources of ancient history was underpinned by nationalist ideology (Walravens 2022). In the late 1950s, state-led interest in ethnic minority heritage spurred research on fish skin craft, culminating in the Social Survey of the Hezhe Ethnic Group, which addressed earlier gaps and became a reference point for subsequent scholarship (Man 2023).

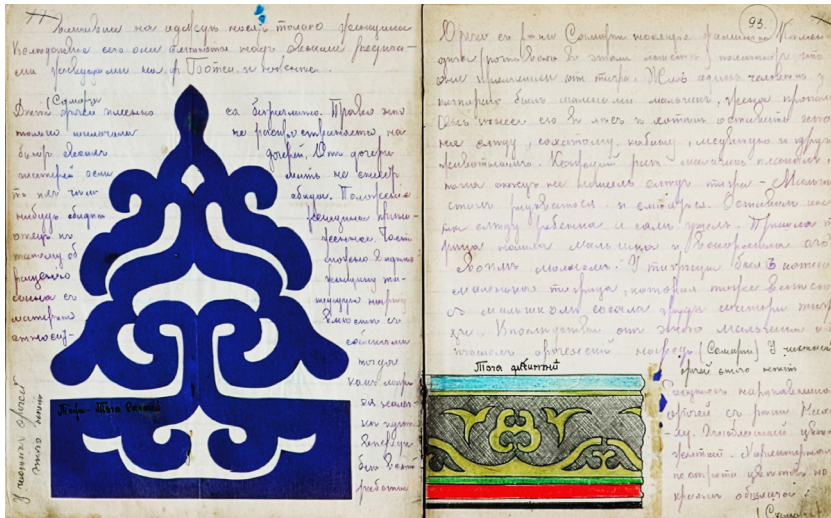


Figure 61 Vladimir Arsenyev, Nanai/Hezhe fish skin ornament from the travel diary toward the shores of the Ussuri River. 1908. Russian Geographical Society, Society for the Study of the Amur Territory, Vladivostok, Russia

Research into Hezhe culture continued through the work of Huang Renyuan, a former cultural cadre in Heilongjiang. His studies linked the group’s fishing-based economy to customs such as eating raw fish, fish skin garments and tree burials. He also documented how Hezhe were relocated from semi-subterranean wooden homes into Han-style rural dwellings during the Cultural Revolution (Huang 2012). Huang’s field access observed how borderland minorities were absorbed into the autarchic logic of their respective socialist states (Pulford 2021). Despite its long history, today fish skin culture remains poorly disseminated beyond Heilongjiang. While most research institutions and student projects are concentrated in the province, limited public engagement has constrained its national recognition (Man 2023).

2.3 The Fish

The Hezhe developed a riverine economy rooted in fishing, which continues to differentiate upstream and downstream communities along the Amur. Their fishing practices date back to the Neolithic (Man 2023) and, long before the arrival of Russian settlers or the Qing state, they fished these waters for subsistence and trade (Pulford 2019).

Du Halde describes the Hezhe as relying on fish for oil, daily food and winter provisions. In the absence of salt, fish was dried in the sun. Dogs pulled sledges across the frozen rivers and sturgeon, considered the most valuable catch, was eaten raw. He also describes another prized fish with red flesh, which he compares to tuna and notes that it was rarely seen. Boats were constructed from tree bark, tightly joined to keep out water (Du Halde 1736).

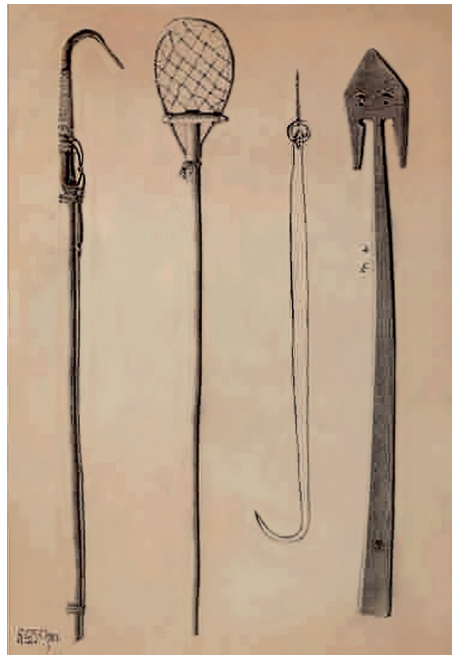


Figure 62 Leopold von Schrenck, Hezhe fishing implements. *Reisen und Forschungen im Amur Lande*. 1881. Leiden University Libraries Special Collections, Leiden, Netherlands

The Hezhe fished from both banks and boats, using nets, lines and harpoons [fig. 62]. Fishing followed a seasonal rhythm: small fish were caught in spring, nets and equipment were repaired during summer and autumn brought the main harvest – salmon, sturgeon and wolffish. The Hezhe lived in a region where the Amur remained frozen for over seven months, with ice reaching up to two metres thick (Chen 2012). Fishing methods responded to river conditions. In winter, they fished with dry hooks and long trawl nets set beneath the ice, harpooning fish at night by luring them with torchlight. During thaw, nets were drawn in semicircles from boats. Later in the year, Hezhe stake traps in Y-shaped formations were used. Nets varied in size according to depth and current. Larger fish were dragged ashore, while



Figure 63 Richard Maak, Album of Drawings from the Journey to the Amur, undertaken by the Siberian Department of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. 1859. General Research Division, The New York Public Library. Manguny. The New York Public Library Digital Collections, New York, USA

others were taken from conical nets that prevented their escape (Ling 2012). Sturgeon were caught from birch-bark canoes [fig. 63], with the harpoon head detaching to allow the fish to tow the canoe until it tired, after which it was struck again (Lattimore 1964).

Seasonal migrations of salmon shaped work rhythms. Chum salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*) and pink salmon (*Oncorhynchus gorbusha*), travelled upriver in three waves, each separated by short intervals. The first, starting around mid-June, remained close to the sea and produced the best-quality fish, fresh, firm and ideal for salting. The second wave, appearing in late July, travelled further upstream but showed signs of physical deterioration, with duller scales, discoloured gills and declining flesh quality. By late August, the third wave, larger but in poorer condition, pushed far upriver. These fish, visibly altered by the spawning process, were darker, misshapen and had tougher flesh that spoiled quickly in the sun (Fraser 1894).

Fishing and hunting formed the basis of daily life. Diets combined fish with deer, bear, wildfowl and other game. Meat and fish were boiled, roasted, or smoked and dried strips were stored for later use. Favoured foods included fish heads, deer tendon and squirrel brain (Ling 2012). Fish were stored in wicker cages placed at the river's edge, though this practice varied. Elevated drying racks and wooden storage huts protected food and tools and offered shelter in warm months. Drying racks were erected in spring and autumn when cooler winds protected the fish from insects. Large fish caught on set lines were hung beneath raised storehouses or eaves, left to age despite complaints from neighbouring Chinese communities about the smell (Lattimore 1964). Salmon and other lean species were cut and dried. *Yukola*, or cured fish, served a role comparable to bread in Russia (Fraser 1894). Some prepared it by chewing and mixing it with berries for guests. Raw fish dishes, made from sturgeon, carp, or whitefish, were prepared with local vegetables, berries, or later market spices (Huang, Huang 2009).

Dwellings ranged from temporary bark shelters used on hunting and fishing trips to permanent timber houses. The yurts, composed of a few poles, fish skin and birch-bark [fig. 64], gave protection from rain and snow, but not from cold and wind. Permanent houses followed Manchu designs with south-facing layouts and fish skin¹³ windowpanes (The Vanishing 'Golden Horde' 1944; Ling 2012).

13 The Hezhe took advantage of the windproof and translucent qualities of fish skin for the construction of windowpanes.



Figure 64 Kay Donner, Birch bark yurt. Kay Donner's Siberian expedition 1912. Accession no. K74. Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland

2.4 Gender and Making

Hezhe stories describe women as companions and, at times, as helpers in war. In daily life, men hunted and fished, while women maintained the household and worked alongside them within extended family settings (Sun 2020). Women cooked, gathered fuel, managed the home and joined fishing when required. Lattimore described Hezhe men of his time as largely idle, though he linked this to disrupted economic roles rather than inherited custom. Earlier generations had travelled widely for hunting, fishing and trade, leaving women responsible for all household and small-scale cultivation. With declining game and the growing presence of Chinese settlers, men lost much of their former work. Seasonal hunting persisted, yet commercial fishing no longer provided the same economic stability. Hezhe fishermen stopped once they had met their household needs, following a subsistence approach to river resources. Chinese competitors fished for the market, worked longer hours and sold the best part of their catch. This contrast between subsistence fishing and commercial extraction reduced the economic opportunities available to Hezhe men and left many without steady occupation, while domestic responsibilities remained largely with women (Lattimore 1964).

2.5 Tanning

Transforming fish skin into pliable, wearable material is a demanding, multi-stage process long- practised by Hezhe women along the Amur River. The stages include scaling, skinning, drying, tanning, hammering, softening, sewing and decoration. The practice, transmitted matrilineally, has been maintained for generations (Guo et al. 2017; Pan 2021).



Figure 65 Portrait of a Hezhe woman tanning fish skins, wearing a fish skin robe, surrounded by tanned skins.
Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*).
1769. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., USA



Figura 66 Hezhe woman tanning fish skins. Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, Nibutani, Hokkaido, Japan

This labour-intensive art is represented in Qing court imagery. In the Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (*Huang Qing zhigong tu*), a woodblock image shows a Hezhe woman, hatchet in hand, wearing a fish skin robe while surrounded by freshly tanned skins [fig. 65].

Preparation begins with removing the head, internal organs and tail. Once gutted, the fins are cut off as close as possible to minimise damage. The entire skin is then carefully separated from the flesh and bones using a bamboo blade, which protects the delicate membrane from tearing. Any residual flesh is scraped away with a birch knife to avoid rot. Depending on the intended use, scales may be retained or removed to produce different textures. The cleaned skins are nailed flat onto barn walls, stretched taut with straight grain alignment. The skin is then air-dried, stiffening it for the next step. Fish skin is particularly fragile and must be dried or lightly smoked soon after peeling to prevent damage. After two days of drying, they are removed, stacked in layers and pressed under weights before being air-dried once more (Palomino 2022).

At this stage, cornmeal is applied. Fine grains absorb oils, while coarse grains act as abrasives to mechanically soften the material. Cornmeal is rich in phospholipids, which not only aid tanning but also draw in additional fats necessary for preserving suppleness (Hurcombe 2014). The skins are layered flesh-to-flesh and scale-to-scale, with cornmeal scattered between each. Up to eight skins are rolled together, wrapped in cloth and softened using a wedge-shaped press. The device, known as *muhe* in Chinese and *gejikou* in Hezhe [fig. 66] resembles a large wooden scissor. The wrapped skins are repeatedly beaten with the wooden hoe while being turned to ensure even softening (Palomino 2022).

After unrolling, residual scales and tissue are then scraped away using smooth stones, clamshells, or dull metal blades. The skins are then kneaded, twisted and rubbed against each other with cornmeal [fig. 67] over two consecutive days, a step that whitens, stretches and further softens the material while removing any remaining flesh. Traditionally, Hezhe and Nanai tanners deodorised skins by rinsing them in ash water and wrapping them in fermented bark, which was then pounded to neutralise odour (Glebova 2010b). Artists such as You Wenfeng [fig. 69] have described how repeated application of cornmeal during softening gradually removed residual grease and reduced the persistent fish smell (Xu 2022). To replenish oils, fish roe or animal brains are crushed and massaged into the skin by hand (Glebova 2010b). Sandstone may also be used for additional smoothing and lightening (Palomino 2022).

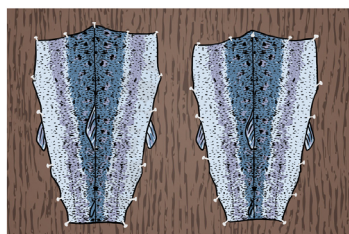
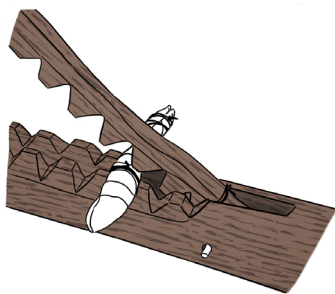
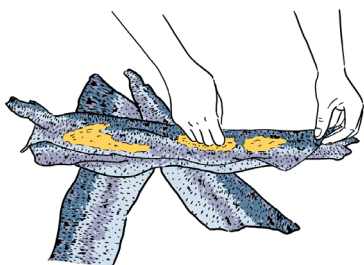
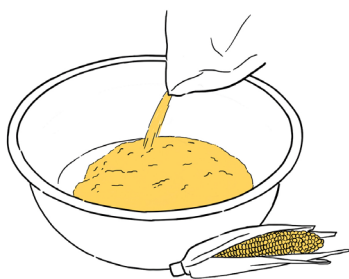
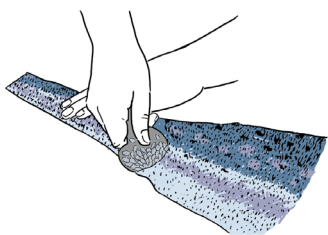
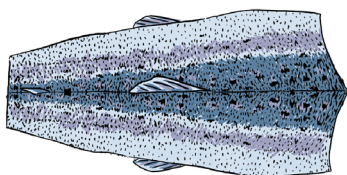
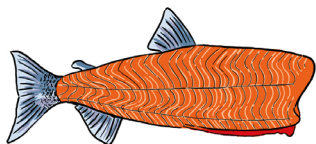
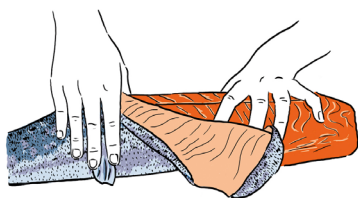
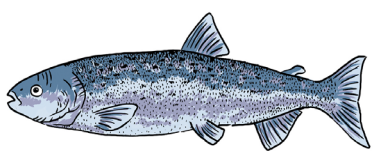


Figure 67 Hezhe cornmeal tanning. Illustration: Laura Fernández

2.6 Natural Dyes

Earlier Hezhe fish skin clothing shared design features with Nanai and Nivkh garments and displayed decorative coloured surfaces. More recent examples tend to remain undyed, relying on variations in the natural fish skin shades to create visual contrast [fig. 69]. Colour was applied selectively to garments according to age and gender, particularly on upper clothing, footwear and gloves. Shaman robes were dyed in red, black and blue (Pan 2021). Coloured motifs were used to create patterned effects, with red motifs used on bride's robes and blue on groom's garments. For elder men bark dyes created darker brown tones, while garments for elderly women used lighter brown shades. The dyeing process relied on locally available materials, including plant extracts, flowers, leaves, animal blood and charcoal to colour fish skin. Orchid grass produced blue hues, while rhododendron yielded red. The addition of alum fixed the colours, reducing fading (Man 2023).

2.7 Sewing Implements

Hezhe craft relied on a variety of bone and antler tools, including awls, scrapers, clamps and needle cases. These cases were carved from horn or hollowed wood, fitted with lids and small loops for hanging and decorated with incised patterns (Ling 2012). Eyed bone sewing needles were crafted from the bones of fur-bearing animals such as bears and wolves. The bones were first stripped of their outer layer, then carved to a fine point using knives and hatchets and finally sharpened into needles (Xu 2022). Women also used bones from tigers and large fish for this purpose [fig. 68].

Animal hides were sewn with sinew thread, while fish skin clothing was stitched using thread made from fish skin for added durability (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009). Threads were made from the skins of fatty fish such as silver carp (Ehrlich 2015). The preparation involved soaking the skin, scraping it clean, splitting it into strips and shaping one end into usable thread (Pan 2021). Buso sturgeon skins were also used, softened with liver oil, then folded and stretched into fine threads. Decorative elements were affixed using glue derived from sturgeon swim bladders (Jiao 2012). You Wenfeng's adhesive is made by scraping the gelatinous membrane from fish scales and roasting it over a charcoal fire until it forms a semi-melted substance. Once cooled, it solidifies and can be stored for future use as glue for assembling decorative elements (Xu 2022).

During the early Guangxu period, the Hezhe traded pelts, tendons and carp bones at Yilan Hala for millet, which was used as a type of porridge (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009). Today, cotton thread has largely replaced traditional fish skin threads and embroidery needles have supplanted bone needles.



Figure 68 Elisa Palomino, fish bones used for awls, scrapers, clamps and needle cases prepared by Sun Yulin. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China

2.8 Clothing Materials

The Hezhe inhabited an environment abundant in fish and fur-bearing animals, rich in salmon, sturgeon, sable, deer and crane (Zhang, Saengthong 2024). Hezhe folk artist Han Fude's 1960s poem celebrated Ussuri River Hezhe identity through a litany of leather garments – trousers, robes, girdle, hats – crafted from elk and deer hide and fish skin (Lin, Young Choi 2022). Along the Ussuri and Sungari Rivers, roe and deer hides predominated, while in the lower Heilongjiang, fish skin was the principal material (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009).

Fish skin garments were common in summer and animal skin in winter. Hunting provided skins for winter garments from otter, fox, squirrel, sable, roe deer and wild boar. Sable, valued for its pelt, was caught using a collapsible tubular net trap. Although sable was formerly used for hats, trade costs rendered it rare and deer fur predominated (Schrenck 1881). Roe deer were hunted year-round, with their pelts used to make fur socks and greatcoats. Although summer pelts were thinner, they were considered more durable. In addition, hides were tanned and sewn into robes, trousers and leggings. Reindeer were known to the Hezhe but were never domesticated;

instead, their hides entered regional trade networks, particularly in Fuchin (present-day Fujin, 富锦) and Harbin (哈尔滨), where boots with the hair side facing out were sold. Tiger hunting was rare and not accompanied by any specific ceremonies, though the animal occasionally featured in shamanic practice (Lattimore 1964).

Pelts and antlers were exchanged for tools and supplies. During the Ming period, Hezhe traded at horse markets. In the Qing Dynasty after fulfilling tribute duties, they bartered at locations like Sanxing (now Yilan 依兰), which became a stronghold and trade centre by the late Kangxi era (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009). Sable, fox, otter pelts and roe deer formed the basis of regional trade. Roe deer were captured using a noose trap rigged to a bent sapling that lifted the animal when triggered. Elk, deer, bear, wild boar and two types of seal were also hunted for fur and food. Sea lion hide was used for durable straps. The bear was regarded as dangerous, while the boar was prized as game. Dog skins were worn in winter, and many dogs were raised solely for this purpose (Fraser 1894).

Though bark was not used for Hezhe garments, it was fashioned into hats, especially from elm and birch, resembling animal skin. These trees were identified by feel and processing potential: pale, pliable, easily stripped and usable after dyeing. Bark was softened in fire or mud and pressed into shape, then stitched into accessories and tools. Shirokogorov noted its use among the Manchu-Tungus, who lacked textile weaving (Shirokogorov 1929). Bark was also used in shoes and fishing equipment and in children's garments worn during summer fishing. Bark clothing must be worn over an underlayer; it could not be worn directly on the skin. Thus, Hezhe people lined the inside of bark clothing with fish skin or soft plant fibres (Ling 2012).

Cotton cloth was also introduced through trade, along with other textiles and sewing implements like cotton thread and needles (Fraser 1894).

2.9 Clothing Technology

Fish species used by the Hezhe for clothing included salmon, pike, carp, sturgeon, catfish and taimen. Skins were selected according to toughness, thickness and flexibility. Male fish skins were used for durable garments such as trousers and boots suited to winter wear, while softer female skins were used for lighter garments such as summer jackets (Palomino 2022).

Smaller species with spotted patterns were suited to children's garments. Otter skin was also dyed and cut into decorative borders for garments (Ling 2012). The skin of the Kaluga, once reserved as imperial tribute, served both for clothing and for the production of adhesives. Its swim bladder produced glue used to attach appliqué elements. Stories of the Kaluga dragging boats underwater, gave rise to accounts describing fish capable of eating humans¹⁴ (Zhang et al. 2020).

¹⁴ The Kaluga, known as the river beluga, is a large predatory sturgeon native to the Amur River between Russia and China and waters near Hokkaido, Japan. Reaching 5.6 m in length and weighing up to 1,000 kg, it is among the largest sturgeon species. The species has been heavily exploited for its roe and has declined significantly in the wild. Accounts describe Kalugas overturning fishing boats and drowning fishermen, although there is no evidence that the species hunts humans.



Figure 69 Elisa Palomino, Hezhe fish skin artist You Wenfeng dressed in a fish skin jacket fished, tanned and sewn by herself. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China

Fish skin garments were worn throughout the year: cool in summer and warm in winter, they were lightweight, flexible, wind-resistant and thermally efficient, qualities well suited to extended fishing seasons and forest hunting in sub-zero temperatures (Xu 2022). However, they were considered unsuitable for summer fishing due to their insufficient water resistance. In colder months, they were worn beneath heavier animal skins as an insulating inner layer, allowing for greater ease during hunting expeditions (Fraser 1894).

The Hezhe wore fish skin garments as formal dress when receiving guests at home (Xu 2022). While both men and women used fish skin clothing, complete suits were worn primarily by women and children. Men made extensive use of fish skin for boots and leggings (Fraser 1894). The construction and shape of these garments also reveal changes in



Figure 70
Elisa Palomino, Hezhe fish
skin jacket made
by You Wenfeng, Jiamusi,
Heilongjiang, China

style through time. Some designs referenced nineteenth-century Manchu clothing, characterised by long bodies and short sleeves (Ling 2012). While drawing influence from Manchu and Han Chinese clothing styles, these garments remained materially and structurally grounded in local traditions (Malloy 2008). Fish skins were carefully selected to match pattern, texture and scale direction, to ensure an even and coordinated overall appearance (Pan 2021). The skins retain their natural colouring, white from the belly and dark from the dorsal side, which are deliberately arranged to create visual contrast [fig. 70]. This contrast defines the jacket's shape and surface design, with symmetrical joints and tonal balance achieved through precise placement of the fish skins. Matched skins were assembled and tailored to the wearer's body shape. Jackets were short, with diagonal plackets and standing collars (Ling 2012). Women's jackets opened at the side; men's opened at the front. Both wore trousers. Women's jacket had a standing collar, a diagonal placket extending from the collar to the right side of the waist and hem slits. It featured cloud [fig. 72] or nature motifs along the placket, collar and cuffs. The hems, cuffs and slit were finished with lighter-toned fish skin, such as pike, cut into decorative *découpé* motifs. Assembling each garment required careful hand-cutting, without rulers or standardised patterns. Stitching came only after matching colours and aligning the layout, and it was done with deer tendon or fish skin thread (Palomino 2022). Closures were secured using buttons made of brass or fish skin, as well as fish skin fastenings. Seams were trimmed with black-dyed deer skin (Ling 2012).



Figure 71 Elisa Palomino, Hezhe fish skins tanned by Sun Yulin. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China



Figure 72 Elisa Palomino, Hezhe carp skin jacket made by You Wenfeng.
Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, Nibutani, Hokkaido, Japan



Figure 73
Elisa Palomino, Hezhe salmon skin jacket made
by You Wenfeng, Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum,
Nibutani, Hokkaido, Japan

Large fish such as catfish and taimen, which may reach two metres in length, provided skins for trousers (Wertmann, Bai 2025). Trousers were also made from the skin of large male salmon,¹⁵ which at around 50 kilograms provided thicker, more durable skins. Male skins were preferred for their resistance to scratches and environmental wear. Tailoring differed by gender (Zhang et al. 2020). Men's trousers were wide, lined at the upper section and trimmed with black trim along the legs. They were especially suited for winter hunting, providing insulation and withstanding repeated kneeling. Yu Wengfen's women's trousers followed traditional female tailoring, with a central front seam and mirrored use of the dark dorsal skin [fig. 69]. A woman's full set of jacket and trousers required 50 fish; a man's, 56. Tailoring for children followed adult patterns with minor adjustments (Xu 2022). Funerary practices included burial in one's best fish skin attire, with hunting cuffs placed beside the deceased for use in the afterlife. Wedding garments made of fish skin were worn for three days during the marriage ceremony and then stored and preserved for burial (Heilongjiang 2019).

2.10 Embellishments

Hezhe embroidery, developed over long winter nights, featured geometric and nature-inspired motifs sewn onto clothing, shoes and pouches. Traditional decoration involved glue made from yellow croaker or Kaluga swim bladder to attach motifs, followed by stitching. Cuffs and lapels were edged with stylised animal or plant forms. Motifs, cut from fish skin [fig. 71], included stylised waves, mountains, clouds [fig. 72] and animals such as lizards, hedgehogs (Malloy 2008), dragons, birds and celestial bodies (Fraser 1894). Water lines reflected riverine life and spiral rows framed garment edges or appeared centrally (Yu 2021). Wedding attire featured embroidered motifs such as the soul bird, said to represent rebirth and the tree of life. These designs aligned with ancestral and fertility rites (Lin, Young Choi 2022; Feng 2024). Decorative elements were closely tied to material practice, regional style and familial transmission rather than abstract symbolism.

Decoration methods included edging, piping and applique [fig. 73]. Appliques were assembled from carefully selected pieces to maintain colour and scale symmetry (Yu 2021). Decorative elements included dyed collars and cuffs, edged with coloured cloth or animal skins such as otter. Women's garments were trimmed with dyed hide and shells at hems (Lattimore 1964). Buttons and loops were fashioned from fish skin but also catfish bone (Malloy 2008). You Wenfeng recalled strict instruction from her mother, who demanded precision: the first stitch had to angle correctly, and spacing had to be consistent. "Sewing fish skin can't be rushed", she was told. Learning to sew was treated with seriousness from a young age (Xu 2022). Stitching fish skin required restraint and regularity.

15 Skins from male salmon were particularly valued for their durability, as the physical stress of spawning migrations and competition with other males produced thicker and tougher skin.

2.11 Footwear

The Hezhe crafted winter footwear [fig. 74] from fish skins using pike, bream, trout, catfish and keta salmon. These boots were favoured for hunting and fishing due to their insulating properties (Xu 2022). The boots were structured with wide openings, secured by fish skin straps and designed to prevent slipping on snow or ice (Huang, Huang 2009; Ling 2012). Earlier forms included shoes shaped like Chinese cloth socks, made from a single piece of fish skin, folded and sewn into a boot form. Some incorporated vamps and reinforced heels, cut and assembled to match the contours of the foot (Ling 2012). Fish skin boots consisted of three parts: leg warmer, face and vamp. The front section was pleated into a semicircle and attached to a 30 cm-high upper, secured with rope or fish skin ties. Socks of elk skin were worn beneath stuffed with *wula* or sedge grass, followed by fish skin leg warmers. This layering kept snow out and prevented slipping. When made from sturgeon, the skin had to be softened with water before and after use (Huang, Huang 2009). The shape extended above the ankle and was either fully fish skin or made with a skin sole and cloth upper embroidered with floral designs. Soles could be cut from boar or fish skin. Fish skin remained preferred for its non-slip and watertight qualities, particularly in thaw conditions (Lattimore 1964). The making of *wula* shoes remains largely faithful to traditional methods. The process involves selecting suitable fish skins, softening them and cutting patterns by hand. Stitching is done with sinew, and the shoes are insulated with sedge grass (Wertmann, Bai 2025).



Figure 74 Patrick Wertmann, Hezhe fish skin shoes, Tongjiang Hezhe Minority Museum, Tongjiang, China

For added warmth, Hezhe hunters lined their footwear with bird down, which compressed with movement to create an insulating layer similar to



Figure 75

Elisa Palomino, Sun Yulin. Hezhe fish skin artist creating fish skin cut-outs or paintings. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China

cotton (Xu 2022). Socks made from deer pelt or from *Carex meyeriana*, a sedge species native to Siberia, were worn inside for additional insulation (Huang, Huang 2009; Man 2023). *Wula* grass, a marsh plant dried and beaten to a soft fluff, was considered warmer than fur and was packed into boots to create a nest-like lining. The term *wula*, used for both the grass and the shoe, derives from the Manchu word for 'river' (Lattimore 1964).

While such boots were highly effective in cold, wet terrain, they were vulnerable to heat, limiting their seasonal use. Contact with warm dog dung could also degrade the material (Huang, Huang 2009).

2.12 Leggings, Mittens and Hunting Belts

Among the Hezhe, functional garments such as leggings, mittens and hunting belts were designed to support winter mobility and endurance. Leggings, made from fish skin or roe deer hide with the fur turned outward, resembled chaps suspended from the belt. Unlike most fur garments which were worn with the hair facing inward for insulation, these reversed leggings allowed greater freedom of movement when stalking game in snow. Their design also enabled hunters to slide forward on their knees during hunts (Lattimore 1964).

Mittens were crafted from deer hide or fish skin. Domestic-use models were simply two stitched pieces with a mountain-shaped cuff and leather strap. Hunting gloves, slightly longer and unhemmed, featured an opening beneath the thumb for quick access to weapons. More ornate versions incorporated bands with wooden toggles or brass straps (Ling 2012).

Tobacco and flint pouches were worn at the waist. Fish skin pouches were sewn from sturgeon skins with fine seams, then tied with leather cords (Schwarz 1984). Flint pouches were constructed from soft hide, with carved decoration and looped for suspension. These contained flints, char and gunpowder. Fire was made using a wooden board grooved and oiled to catch sparks from iron striking flint. Some fire-starting sets were acquired through trade with Han populations, with imported iron flints carried in belt pouches. Hezhe fire-making practices were preserved in oral traditions. They recalled earlier methods involving bamboo drills or flint with tinder, storing live coals in birch bark to maintain flame. Tools included leather-wrapped fire knives of stone or iron, carried for convenience and totemic value. Pipes, also suspended from the belt, were constructed from wood and metal with horn or bone mouthpieces. Tobacco pouches housed small pipes, with a folding flap and carved toggle closures. Carved decoration had floral, geometric, or animal motifs (Ling 2012).

Headwear included round fur hats made of roe deer winter hide, worn with the hair turned in or double-layered. Borders, made from deer hide, could be pulled down over the ears during hunts (Lattimore 1964). Fish skin, deer hide, and other natural materials were used in accessory construction, from shoes to hunting gear, reflecting the adaptive and material practices of Hezhe subsistence life.



Figures 76-77 Elisa Palomino, Hezhe fish skin paintings by Sun Yulin. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China

2.13 Fish Skin Painting

Among the Hezhe, the use of fish skin extended beyond clothing into ceremonial and artistic practices. Cut-outs made from fish skin once decorated Hezhe homes during the Chinese New Year, substituting traditional paper with salmon, sturgeon, or pike skin to depict protective deities or motifs marking the winter fishing season (Zhang et al. 2020). These images, inspired by shamanic rites, included animal as totems and protectors of the clan such as salmon, bear and tiger, all associated with ritual apology to the animal after the hunt (Yu 2018). One custom involved hanging fish skin amulets beside a baby's cradle as protection from evil spirits (Zhang et al. 2020).

Fish skin paper cutting became a key visual tradition. Though in the rest of China such motifs were rendered in paper, the Hezhe applied these designs to fish skin, producing bird, serpent and water motifs through techniques developed by women using knives rather than scissors (Lin, Young Choi 2022). These early cut-outs originated as embroidery patterns and were not made as separate objects (Lin, Young Choi 2022). Since 2006, Hezhe fish skin painting has been recognised as a national intangible cultural heritage (Zhang 2011).

Collage work using fish skin became a major form of Hezhe art. Artists selected skins for their natural texture and tonal variation, to create depth and shading in compositions. Motifs included landscape scenes, wildlife, or shamanic icons. Fish skin paintings have continued to evolve. Contemporary practitioners like Sun Yulin [fig. 75], who began studying under his uncle in Jiejinkou after retiring from fishing in 2000, developed the method into a commercially viable practice. After drafting a design, he separates fish skins by colour, natural white, yellow, grey, black, before assembling collages into landscape or animal compositions. His recent works feature layered, three-dimensional designs. Selling fish skin pictures locally provides him with a stable income and supports the operation of his workshop in Jiejinkou, a Hezhe town that remains one of the community's few remaining centres. Tourism has brought renewed attention, but Sun Yulin insist that the craft remains grounded in local knowledge and familial transmission. Despite invitations to relocate to larger cities, he remains committed to practicing and teaching within his home region (Xu 2020).

Paintings draw on older visual grammars, spirals, water lines and animal forms, rooted in local shamanic iconography and earlier petroglyph traditions such as those from Sakachi-Aryan (Ling 2012). The spiral motifs in early rock art continue to influence the iconography of fish skin painting.

Animals such as bear, crane [fig. 76] and tiger [fig. 77] figure prominently in Hezhe art. Bears, called Mafa, symbolised protection from hunger and were shown on garments and paintings. Tigers, regarded as ancestral figures and protectors of the mountain, were depicted on ceremonial items. Fish remained a dominant theme, associated with survival, seasonal cycles and ritual life and served both decorative and spiritual functions. Patterns evoked abundance, regeneration, or clan affiliation (Feng 2024).

Fish bone painting [fig. 78], also known historically among the Hezhe and neighbouring groups, involves the pasting of cleaned and carved fish bones [fig. 68] to create protective images. Produced to ward off evil and promote household peace, they drew on totemic animals like salmon (Zhang et al. 2020). Modern iterations of this practice, advanced by artists such as Sun

Yulin, continue to integrate these motifs into contemporary heritage and tourist products (Palomino and Boon 2020).

2.14 Hezhe Shamanism

Among the Hezhe, shamanic practice structured the relationship between humans, nature and the unseen. Spirits inhabited the sky, rivers, trees, stars and mountains, with all living beings possessing immortal souls (Schwarz 1984). Shamans were capable of mediating between these forces and human concerns, resolving disturbances attributed to deities or spirits. There were four principal forms of shamanism: seasonal rites associated with spring and autumn festivals; ancestral veneration; rituals performed before hunts to control fortune and weather; and therapeutic rites addressing illness as a state of dissonance. Healing involved trance induction, both in the shaman and the patient, to facilitate a rebalancing with nature (Lattimore 1964).



Figure 78 Elisa Palomino, Fish Bone sculpture. Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, China

For the Hezhe each person was made of three souls: one perishes with the body; another reincarnates based on moral conduct; and the third travels to the land of the dead through funerary rites. This allowed for fluid boundaries between species. A soul might return as an animal, deer, or fish. This helped in hunting, fishing and daily life. A person could change form to confuse prey and catch it more easily or take on a new shape to pursue a specific aim. This allowed people different ways to reach their goals. The three

souls governed different aspects of existence, vitality, thought and rebirth, respectively. Upon death, the life-soul vanished, the thought-soul lingered near the body or home, and the reincarnating soul travelled through realms, passing through the seven heavens for men and the nine heavens for women.¹⁶ These movements were structured through mourning periods and rituals. Spirits would appear in dreams or as shadows in the days following death (Ling 2012). The Hezhe viewed misfortune, illness, poor harvests, or unfavourable weather, as the consequence of spiritual disharmony. Objects, animals and events were explained through the prism of spirit possession. Shamans acted as mediums to resolve these disturbances. The soul was in constant exchange with the spirit world, which permeated all aspects of existence (Shirokogorov 1929). The world was divided into upper, middle and lower realms, inhabited by gods, humans and spirits. Shamans served as intermediaries, executing rites to restore balance, following commands from the gods (Ling 2012).



Figure 79 Nicolaas Witsen, Shaman of the Tungus. Nord en Oost Tartarye. 1692. Leiden University Libraries Special Collections, Leiden, Netherlands

Becoming a shaman entailed rigorous initiation and extreme physical endurance and advancement could take decades. The shaman allowed possession by external powers. This discipline distinguished the shaman as a vessel through which divine forces operated, and the shaman's power was defined by the degree of self-erasure (Lattimore 1964). The trance rituals involved sensory deprivation, rhythmic drumming, chanting and physical self-punishment. Shamans entered violent ecstatic states, culminating in collapse, after which they were cared for and later consulted for messages from the divine. In some instances, shamans emerged from trance with altered states of mind or language loss (Fraser 1894). According to Hezhe

16 Hezhe accounts describe the soul travelling after death along a path, passing through seven heavens for men and nine for women before returning to the ancestral burial ground and re-entering the lineage through rebirth among descendants. The spirit may appear on the third or seventh day first unseen, later through dreams and finally as a faint shadow. See Ling 2012.

oral tradition, shamans were originally female, however, most contemporary practitioners are male (Schwarz 1984). Women entered shamanic practice later in life and were recognised as Elder wise women (Lattimore 1964).

2.14.1 Shamanic Costume

Shamans wore ceremonial clothing followed strict taboos regarding their sacred tools (Ling 2012). Ritual rank was shown through attire with horns or antlers [fig. 79] on headdresses indicating one seniority levels or tribe. While costumes changed depending on the occasion, some elements remained consistent. The drum, made from fish skin or roe deer hide stretched over an elmwood oval frame, was indispensable for inducing trance. The skin was soaked and scraped, then stretched tightly over a double-grooved frame. Lacking a handle, the drum was suspended by four strings converging on a central metal ring and held in the left hand. The drumstick, made of wood was covered with roe deer leg skin or the tail of an otter. Larger drums reached heights of over 80 cm, with decorative motifs of snakes and fish and bells affixed at the centre (Lattimore 1964). A specific Hezhe drum was made of salmon skin with drumstick covered in frog skin, birch handles and copper bells near the grip. High-ranking shamans used elaborately adorned versions with bronze and iron fittings. Female shamans used a drum with shell decorations, also indicating rank (Ling 2012). Consistent rhythm was created by muting each stroke with the wrist that altered the mood of both drummer and listeners. Before use, the drum was warmed to preserve its resonance (Lattimore 1964). Rattles were made from dried stomach lining and filled with stones or beads. These were painted, mounted on long handles and used by senior shamans in rituals for inviting spirits (Ling 2012).

The shaman's attire [fig. 80] included front and back aprons tied at the waist, made of fish skin or cotton and decorated with multicoloured strips and copper mirrors (Lattimore 1964). These were worn for bodily protection during ritual activity (Ling 2012). A leather girdle with heavy cone-shaped iron rattles was worn over the hips (Lattimore 1964). Belts formed a key part of ritual dress. Among the Hezhe, fish skin belts, linked to water realms, were worn by initiated shamans who guided the dead across the Black River and through multiple layers of heaven to reach their ancestors. These belts were decorated with bone, bells, fur strips and carved wooden figures. Others were made from deer hide and fitted with rows of iron or copper bells, contributing to the sound of performance (Ling 2012). Other type of aprons consisted of knee-length strips of mixed animal hides stitched with cotton and ornamented with bells, mirrors, snakes, turtles and talismans, with variation by rank (Huang, Huang 2009). During ritual dance, the shaman moved counterclockwise, shuffling the left foot, stamping the right and shaking the hips to sound the bells. Bronze mirrors, worn in sets of three on the chest and back, were intended to shield the shaman from interference during trance. Smaller mirrors were also attached to the costume (Lattimore 1964).

A ceremonial headdress, worn only on specific occasions, consisted of iron antlers mounted on a circlet. Silk strips hung from the tines, with bear skin and sturgeon skin fixed at the base. The headdress was used during the Elk Spirit Dance, to influence hunting fortune, though its materials suggest



Figure 80 Owen Lattimore, Hezhe shaman wearing headdress with a simulation of deer horns, holding large flat drum. Accession no. 2010.5.35763. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Massachusetts, USA

broader ritual applications¹⁷ (Lattimore 1964). A fully initiated shaman bore fifteen or more antler-shaped ornaments. Older ceremonial items were inherited across generations. In confrontational settings, shamans used headdresses and belts performatively, striking the air while chanting to display power and repel threats (Ling 2012).

Shamans maintained associations with specific animal realms, either aquatic, such as sturgeon and otter, or terrestrial, including weasels, squirrels and eagles. Although tigers and bears featured in certain 'great spirit' rites, they were rarely adopted as familiars (Lattimore 1964). Ritual garments made of fish skin, known as Xike in Hezhe, were crafted from overlapping strips to evoke the appearance of feathers. These garments, originally made from reptile skins, were later adapted using dyed deer skin and appliquéd reptile motifs. They represented the shaman's guiding spirits, birds and eagles for aerial travel, tigers and leopards for forest movement, aquatic animals for navigating water and lizards for speed. Each animal represented particular attributes of strength or agility, contributing to the efficacy of the ritual. Decoration conveyed the shaman's personal vision and protective spirit (Huang, Huang 2009).

Ceremonial pouches included leather bags for charms or bones were worn at the neck or waist. Fish skin bags were used during shamanic journeys to carry food or ritual items (Ling 2012). Ritual gloves were originally made from bird or animal skin and later from dyed deer or sheepskin with spiral embroidery. Each glove featured a copper bell and a snake motif (Huang, Huang 2009). Footwear was made from frog, deer, pig, cowhide or fish skin. Ritual shoes featured stitched decoration, thick leather soles and fur lining (Ling 2012). A bell was tied at the front and the socks were made of elk or deer hide, with turtle motifs stitched in black leather (Huang, Huang 2009). Hezhe necklaces signalled the shaman's training, role and divine lineage, combining ancestral bones, talismans and ceremonial tokens. Deer hoof necklaces indicated more than a decade of practice (Ling 2012).

2.15 Funeral Rituals

Prior to Chinese influence, Hezhe burial customs were structured around the mobility of the spirit. The deceased were buried in locations selected by shamans. Coffins, introduced later, replaced wooden troughs. Children, whose souls were thought too weak to escape the earth, were placed in trees. Their mothers left home temporarily to ensure the soul's release (Schwarz 1984). Other methods involved cremation with ashes placed in trees, to reinforce the close relationship between the body, nature and the nonhuman world (Wada 1938).

Rituals involving fish also featured in spiritual life. In some funerary rites, drowned individuals were pierced with fish forks and wrapped in seal skin, suggesting transformation or spiritual continuity through aquatic forms. Other records describe a fish air bladder used as a ceremonial vessel

17 On certain occasions, Hezhe shamans used an iron headdress shaped like antlers mounted on a circlet, decorated with silk streamers, bearskin and sturgeon skin, with a silk fringe mask covering the face. It was worn during the Elk Spirit dance, a ritual associated with elk hunting intended to encourage the presence of elk before a hunting expedition, although the materials suggest it may also have been used in other ceremonies. See Lattimore 1964.

for sharing ritual drink during communal gatherings where participants sat in a circle, sang and drank together (Wada 1938).

The Milky Way was described as the trail of the snowshoes of a mythical figure permitted by *Anduri*¹⁸ to search the heavens for his deceased parents, the origin of the separation between the living and the dead. The initial duties of the bereaved involved shaving the dead, covering the head and face with a dark blue kerchief and dressing the deceased in their finest clothing. Garments were then deliberately torn at the collar, knees and toes so that the dead will receive new attire upon arrival in *buni*, the unseen realm below. If the deceased had owned fine textiles such as silk or brocade, these were wrapped around the body. Regardless of status, all were encased in birch bark, in several layers, to shield the corpse from moisture. Birch bark was also placed beneath and around the body within the coffin. Alongside the body were placed personal possessions, including weapons, tools and furs, sable, otter, or fox skins, owned by the deceased. An axe and kettle were also included, with the kettle placed at the feet. Canoes, snowshoes, harpoons and similar equipment were arranged around the coffin. For shamans, the burial included their ritual equipment, though deliberately damaged before interment. Women were buried with sewing tools and personal belongings connected to their skills. The soul lingered near the home for a fortnight following death. During this period, none of the deceased's possessions were touched. Meals continued to be served in their usual place, with the individual's cup and platter filled and later taken into the forest as a libation (Fraser 1894).

2.16 Fish Skin Tradition Today

In 2006, Hezhe fish skin craft was included in the first batch of China's intangible cultural heritage listings (Xu 2020). This recognition followed a period when the tradition had nearly vanished. The decline was largely due to major shifts in Hezhe livelihoods during the twentieth century. By the 1960s, fabric had supplanted fish skin in daily clothing and fish skin garments were reserved for practical use in hunting or rituals (Jiao 2012). The arrival of cotton and commercial fabrics, introduced through trade and migration, further displaced skins. As dependence on fishing waned, the knowledge of working with fish skins faded (Hezhezu Jianshi Editorial Team 2009).

Government programmes launched after the Japanese occupation aimed to improve infrastructure in minority border regions. These included the encouragement of larger Hezhe families and access to minority education institutions (Malloy 2008). With tourism development in Heilongjiang from the 1990s, efforts to revive fish skin craft gained new momentum. Craft production became concentrated in areas such as Jiejinkou. There, local governments established folklore parks and booths to promote traditional culture. Government-backed initiatives in Tongjiang supported a tourist village and museum displaying Amur fishing tools, shamanic drums and fish skin garments, presenting them as markers of minority culture (Pulford

¹⁸ *Anduri* is described as the supreme spirit to whom prayers for food, guidance and visions are directed. The term corresponds to the Manchu Enduri and along the Amur and Ussuri rivers it denotes a supreme sky-dwelling spirit.

2020). Production shifted from daily utility to craft markets. Products were adapted for decorative or commercial use, including garments, accessories and fish skin paintings. Items were sold to museums and visitors, especially during the summer months when domestic tourism peaks (Pulford 2020). The provincial culture department also initiated protective measures between 2004 and 2005, including a specialised research group on fish skin techniques (Heilongjiang 2019).

The Hezhe fish skin tradition today depends on a small number of remaining practitioners. By the 1990s, You Cuiyu was the last known Hezhe person still producing fish skin clothing. In 1999, curator Yang Yuan from the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology visited Jiejinkou and commissioned a garment from her. It was the final piece Cuiyu made before her death. Her daughter, You Wenfeng, continued the practice and was later recognised as an official inheritor when the practice was listed as national intangible heritage in 2006 (Zhang et al. 2020). She had more than sixty years of experience, and her work is exhibited in museums in China, Japan, Switzerland and Canada. Her garments, made from Amur pike and chum salmon, were produced to order, with costs rising due to the scarcity of large fish and the increasing price of materials (Palomino 2022). With sturgeon now endangered, traditional threads and adhesives made from fish skin and bladder had been replaced with modern substitutes. You preserves a piece of bladder glue, but only as a relic of earlier techniques (Jiao 2012). In 2017, she taught a fish skin workshop for my University of the Arts Chinese students in Jiamusi, and our collaborations continued until her death in 2026, including a documentary on Hezhe fish skin craft that won the sustainability award at the Milano Fashion Film Festival.

With growing interest in heritage crafts, You Wenfeng began training others, including her children and daughters-in-law, who initially dismissed the craft as outdated. A turning point came when a single commission fetched RMB 5,000, prompting renewed interest within her family. She has produced garments for exhibitions, including a jacket made from over fifty chum salmon for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Each jacket requires weeks of sewing and precise sourcing of fish skins of suitable size (Jiao 2012). Despite these efforts, few young people have taken up the skill. Most practitioners are women over fifty and much of the knowledge remains confined to private households. Documentation and transmission are now a pressing concern (Xu 2022). The Hezhe fish skin craft exists today as a specialised practice shaped by tourism, state recognition and market adaptation. Although detached from daily wear, it retains social and historical weight. Contemporary production reflects earlier uses of fish for food, clothing and ritual, even as modernisation and ecological pressures reconfigure the landscape from which these garments emerged (Pulford 2021).

The state's role remains visible in places like Jiejinkou, where Communist Party offices and military presence sit atop former Hezhe fishing grounds, now reconfigured as tourist attractions (Pulford 2021). Broader shifts, such as declining fish stocks, inter-ethnic competition over resources and the expansion of aquaculture, further complicate the transmission of craft knowledge. Nonetheless, individuals such as the late You Wenfeng played a vital role in maintaining and adapting the practice within the constraints and possibilities of its current moment (Palomino and Boon 2020).

2.17 Conclusions

The decline of fish skin art in Hezhe daily life can be traced to a series of environmental, social and economic changes. Migration from the Lake Baikal and northern Heilongjiang regions to the Sanjiang basin led to new forms of subsistence. The shift from fishing and hunting to agriculture marked a broader disconnection from the ecological conditions that once sustained the practice.

Despite the natural abundance of the Sanjiang Plain, long winters, snow cover and the presence of predators challenged traditional livelihoods. Later, overfishing and pollution reduced fish populations and by the mid-twentieth century, many Hezhe turned to tourism for survival. As cotton and silk became more accessible and as younger people left to study or seek work, fewer remained to fish or learn the craft. Fish skin garment making, being both labour-intensive and technically demanding, became increasingly difficult to sustain. Salmon once provided the primary raw material, but its availability has sharply declined due to industrial waste and unsustainable fishing practices in the Amur, Sungari, and Ussuri Rivers. As income from fishing dropped, many Hezhe adapted by seeking alternatives. Tourism emerged as one such strategy, offering a platform to share ethnic crafts with a wider audience. Yet even with renewed visibility, the tradition remains under pressure.

The shift from subsistence to market economies has contributed to the marginal presence of fish skin work. Processes that once took weeks and required dozens of skins are no longer viewed as essential life skills. Until her recent death, You Wenfeng's role as an inheritor was vital. Despite criticism from some Hezhe community members, she chose to teach the technique to anyone willing to learn. Her stance, that secrecy leads to extinction, framed transmission as a form of collective responsibility. The Hezhe case reflects broader patterns. As ecological degradation alters material availability and as social values shift, traditional arts become harder to pass on. Even where awareness is growing, such as through national heritage recognition, structural and generational barriers remain. With older practitioners ageing and few successors, the survival of the fish skin tradition hangs in a delicate balance.

The material entanglements that have shaped Nanai and Hezhe lives under Chinese and Russian state projects and what appears as art survival is also a navigation of state policies, tourism economies and cultural classification regimes. The transformation of former fishing sites into heritage destinations reflects this negotiation, where continued cultural expression depends on government's expectations.



Figure 81

H.C. White Co, Ainu fishermen. Hokkaido, Japan.
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., USA