



Population in China:
 4,245 (1990)
 5,470 (2000)
 7,060 (2010)
Location: Heilongjiang
Religion: Shamanism
Christians: 100

Overview of the Hezhen

Countries: Russia, China

Pronunciation: “Her-jen”

Other Names: Hezhe, Nanai, Ulcha, Olcha, Hoche, Olchis, Olca, Goldi, Gold, Hol-Chih, Heche, Sushen, Juchen, Ulchi, Olchi, Mangun, Mangoon, Naani, Nanay, Nani, Hedjen, Fish Skin Tatars, Ulych

Population Source:
 4,245 (1990 census);
 1,476 (1982 census);
 718 (1964 census);
 300 (1949);
 12,000 in Russia (1993 United Bible Societies)

Location: NE Heilongjiang: Sanjiang River valley

Status:
 An official minority of China

Language: Altaic, Tungus, Southern Tungus, Southeast, Nanai

Literacy: 84%

Dialects (2): Hezhen, Qileng

Religion: Shamanism, Animism, No Religion, Ancestor Worship, Christianity

Christians: 100

Scripture: Portions 1884

Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: GLD00



Paul Hattaway

Location: Approximately 5,500 Hezhen live in the extreme northeast of China. More than 12,000 are also located across the border in Siberia, where they are known as *Nanai*. The Hezhen in China live at the juncture of the Heilong, Wusali, and Songhua rivers in Heilongjiang Province. The Hezhen population has fluctuated numerically in recent centuries. There were more than 12,000 in the mid-1600s.² In the 1930s the Japanese invaders drove the Hezhen into the forests and banned them from fishing, hunting, and farming. Because of the resulting starvation and disease, by 1949 the Hezhen were close to extinction, numbering only 300 people.³ They recovered to 700 by 1970 and numbered 1,476 in the 1982 census.

Identity: The Hezhen are the third smallest of China’s 55 official minority groups. Only about 1,000 Hezhen are still ethnically distinct from the Han Chinese. The name *Hezhen* reportedly means “people living in the east or the lower reaches of rivers.”⁴

Language: The Hezhen language is a part of the Tungus branch of Altaic languages making them distant relatives to the many small Siberian tribes and groups in China such as the Ewenki and Oroqen. The Hezhen teach their children history and

culture by singing rhymed ballads and telling folk tales.⁵ The Hezhen language is close to extinction. In 1987 it was reportedly spoken by only 40 elderly people.⁶ All Hezhen youth now speak Chinese as their mother tongue. In Russia, however, the situation is better: 6,600 of the 12,000 Hezhen in that country — where the Hezhen language has an orthography — can still speak their mother tongue.⁷

History: Hezhen history dates back to the Sushen, a tribe who occupied the region as far back as 700 bc. In 1663 the Qing Dynasty rulers gave the Hezhen their current name.

Customs: During the summer months the Hezhen’s beautiful homeland is flush with an abundance of deer, fish, bears, and pheasants. During the bleak

winters, temperatures plummet to as low as minus 40 degrees. In the past the Hezhen were known as the *Fish Skin Tatars*. Their coats, trousers, and even shoes were made of fish skin. When a Hezhen child dies, the corpse is wrapped in a birch bark, placed in a tree, and is allowed to decompose naturally.⁸

Religion: For centuries the Hezhen worshiped the spirits of the sky, earth, sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, and trees. In the late 1960s shamans were still active among the Hezhen, but since that time the traditional beliefs of the Hezhen have been rapidly eroded by atheism and secularism.

Christianity: Scripture portions were translated into the Hezhen language in Russia in 1884, but these have long been unavailable and obsolete. Until recently, the Hezhen in China had never had a known church in their midst. In 1996 Chinese believers from Tongjiang conducted outreach to the Hezhen in Jiejinkou County. More than 60 Hezhen believed and were baptized. Today there are three house fellowships full of the new believers, but there are no organized Hezhen churches or trained church leaders available to pastor the flock.⁹

