

Location: The 1982 China census numbered 166,000 Oirat in Qinghai, Xinjiang, and Gansu provinces. Of this number, 106,000 belong to the Torgut ethnic group, which have been profiled separately in this book. Although the Torgut and Oirat are closely related and speak the same language, they view themselves as distinct tribes. Most Oirat live in the remote mountains and verdant grasslands of northern Qinghai Province. Others live in Subei and Aksay counties in southwest Gansu Province.

Identity: The Oirat were acknowledged separately in the 1982 Chinese census, before being officially included under the Mongolian nationality. One expert described the Oirat as “physically smaller, more garrulous, friendlier and more inquisitive than [other Mongols].”¹ In Xinjiang the Torgut, Olot, Korbet, and Hoshut peoples are known as the “Four Tribes of Oirat.”²

Language: Oirat has its own script — called *Tod* — which is different from the traditional Mongolian downward script. Although Oirat and Torgut can communicate easily, linguists have labeled the Oirat spoken in Qinghai and Gansu the *Kok Nur* vernacular of the Oirat language group.³

History: The Oirat have had a terrible history.⁴ From 1755–57 the Qing armies crushed the Oirat, forcing the survivors to flee to the northern Caucasus Mountains in present-day Russia. There, oppression forced

most of them to flee back into China in 1771. Only a few Oirat survived the long journey back to Xinjiang. “The rest died from famine or fell victim to the hostile raids of neighboring tribes.”⁵ Those who stayed behind on the Russian side of the border are called *Kalmyk* which means “to remain or stay behind.”⁶

Customs: The Oirat “burial in the fields” is unique in all of China. The corpse is placed on a wooden cart which is pulled furiously by a horse until the body falls from the back of the cart. Wherever it falls it is left to be devoured by beasts and birds of prey.⁷ The Oirat have been described as “a squalid race, reputed never to change their clothes or wash. When one coat wears out, a new one is put over it and not until it rots off do they discard a garment.”⁸

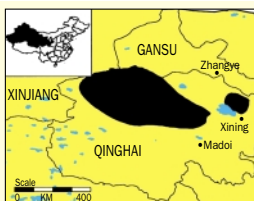
Religion: The majority of Oirat are followers of Tibetan Buddhism. Shamans are still used to perform many rituals and ceremonies. Some Oirat practice a crude form of black magic under the veneer of Buddhism. Every New Year the Oirat devote their prayers to Okeen Tenger, their female protector. She is believed to have



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saved the world from evil by bearing and later killing the offspring of the Lord of Evil, Erlik Khan.

Christianity: Few Christians have ever reached out to the Oirat with the gospel. Today there are no known believers, nor has there ever been a Christian fellowship among the Oirat in China. Percy Mather in 1914 was the first missionary to specifically target the Oirat. Mather, who was “widely regarded”⁹ by the Oirat, compiled an Oirat dictionary. In 1922 the China Consultation Committee lamented, “There are no definite plans for reaching the [Oirat].... No missionaries as yet are planning to learn the dialect of the aborigines.”¹⁰ The Scriptures are presently being translated into Oirat.



Population in China:
60,000 (1982)
91,300 (2000)
117,800 (2010)

Location:

Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu
Religion: Tibetan Buddhism
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Oirat

Countries: Mongolia, Russia, China, Germany, Taiwan, USA

Pronunciation: “Ooi-rut”

Other Names: Kalmyk-Oirat, Xinjiang Mongol, Western Mongol, Weilate

Population Source: 166,000 (1982 census) including 106,000 Torgut;¹¹

Out of a total Mongol population of 4,806,849 (1990 census); 205,000 in Mongolia; 174,000 Kalmyk in Russia (1993 UBS); Also in Germany, Taiwan, USA

Location:

Qinghai: Haixi Prefecture; *SW Gansu:* Aksay and Subei counties; Parts of *SE Xinjiang*

Status: Officially included under Mongolian

Language: Altaic, Mongolian, Eastern Mongolian, Oirat-Khalkha, Oirat-Kalmyk-Darkhat

Dialects (4): Jakhachin, Bayit, Mingat, Khoshut

Religion: Tibetan Buddhism, Shamanism, Islam

Christians: None known

Scripture: New Testament 1827 (out of print); Work in progress

Jesus film: None¹²

Gospel Recordings: Kalmyk #03205 (possibly in Russian dialect)

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: KGZ00

