



# Mongolian Ethnicity and Linguistic Anxiety in China

**ABSTRACT** Language is one of the official criteria of defining a nationality in socialist China, but it simultaneously has been subjected to an "ideology of contempt" by the Chinese regime that builds nationality only to destroy it. This article examines the linguistic anxiety displayed by the Mongols and their controversial language revitalization efforts in a social environment in which they have become an absolute minority even while they have formal autonomy under their name. The tremendous cost—both emotional and economic—at which such language maintenance comes suggests that nationality in China may not be understood as primarily cultural but, instead, as political. As more Mongols lose their language, arguably the last bastion of their "nationality" status, they face the prospect of becoming a deinstitutionalized, depoliticized, and deterritorialized "ethnic group" in a racialized "Chinese Nation." [Keywords: language, nationality, ethnic group, Mongols, Chinese National Multiculturalism]

**F**OR MANY, THE NAME "Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region" (IMAR) conjures a romantic image of a steppe land filled with nomads. Nothing is more remote from today's reality: By the first half of the 20th century, there were already more Mongols engaged in agriculture than in herding, and Chinese settlers outnumbered the Mongols by five to one. Today, there are also more urban Mongols than herders. Yet for many Mongols, pastoralism and herding represent the spirit of "Mongolness," the embodiment of communitarian solidarity and democracy (cf. Khan 1996; see Østergård 1996 for a similar romanticization, in this case of peasantism by the Danish nationalist elite). Dwindling pastoral areas are now seen as the last bastion of Mongol culture in which Mongols speak "pure" Mongolian, and Mongol pastoral herders are imagined to be a reservoir from which agriculturalized and urbanized Mongols might tap their linguistic spirit.

But this reservoir is drying up. This language revitalization effort is occurring in a social environment in which Mongols have become an absolute minority in Inner Mongolia, despite their purported political and geographical "autonomy." This has resulted in what I call "linguistic anxiety," a deep unease about the increasing loss of the Mongolian language, which has arisen as Mongols have been successively nationalized, considered to comprise a "nationality," and denationalized—that is, categorized instead as an "ethnic group" (see below for elaboration), according to changing Chinese policies. I explore the consequences of these political and social oscillations for Mongols and the Mongolian language, and their relationship to the creation of linguistic anxiety. Drawing on per-

sonal experiences, ethnography, as well as documentary research, I shed light on the tremendous cost of maintaining the Mongolian language. I show that Mongolian linguistic anxiety is emblematic of the fact that "nationality" in China is not primarily cultural but, rather, requires political, social, and territorial reinforcement to be meaningful. As more Mongols lose their language, arguably the last stronghold of their "nationality" status, they are becoming a depoliticized and deterritorialized "ethnic group" in an increasingly primordial, multicultural "Chinese Nation."

## THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: LANGUAGE LOSS IN THE PASTORAL AREAS

I was born in the arid oasis grassland of Ordos, in southwestern Inner Mongolia. Unlike my parents and others of their generation who went to Mongolian schools in the fifties, many of us who were brought up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), even in the pastoral areas, received education in Chinese, as Mongol education programs were eliminated or reduced. In 1970–71, after a large-scale slaughter of Mongols subsided as the Cultural Revolution entered a period of consolidation, my elder sister and elder cousins went to Mongolian classes in a newly reopened school in Jira, our commune. However, in 1972, several cousins of my age and I had to go to Chinese class when no new Mongolian class was available.

In 1975, as the Cultural Revolution was drawing to a close and the situation improved for Mongols, my family moved to the prefectural center Dongsheng, an almost purely Chinese town, where my father was assigned as a doctor in the newly opened Mongolian medical department

in the prefecture hospital. There was no Mongolian primary school in the entire town then, which presented no problem for me but forced my sister to switch to a Chinese class. By then, after relentless practical jokes and malicious verbal abuse of being called "*Chou Meng Dazi*" ("stinking Mongol Tartar"), I was already internalizing the Chinese "ideology of contempt" toward the Mongolian language, to borrow an apt phrase from Ralph D. Grillo (1989; see also Dorian 1998). I thought my sister's clumsy Chinese was an embarrassment. For unlike the Jira primary school in which Mongols still comprised a substantial percentage of students and where discrimination from the Chinese pupils often met with Mongolian fists, in the Dongsheng No. 1 primary school my sister and I were the only Mongols in our class. After the Cultural Revolution, Mongol schools at various levels were set up, recruiting Mongols from both rural and urban areas. This nationality education (cf. Borchigud 1995) was generally successful if measured by the degree to which one received education in Mongolian. However, these positive programs soon produced their own problems. Above all, this Mongolizing project failed to prepare Mongol students to face the new challenges ahead. In other words, teaching Mongolian language instead of Chinese made students "dependent" on Chinese society more than ever; it made them largely "nonproductive," that is, economically, politically, and even socially incompetent citizens in a Chinese-dominated society that, from the 1980s onward, was increasingly market oriented. Rather than becoming a cultural and political elite in the multiethnic Inner Mongolian society as a whole, these newly urbanized Mongols educated in Mongol schools became elite *only vis-à-vis* Mongol pastoralists and peasant villagers.

Not surprisingly, it is the cultural "victims," or those who have received Chinese education, who have better adapted to the wider society, and some have become highly successful. Coming back to my personal example, I had much better career opportunities than my Mongolian language-educated sister and cousins. I attended university in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, and then Cambridge University to pursue anthropological study, hoping to better understand Inner Mongolia and the world beyond.

During my university years in 1982–86 in Hohhot, I was in the thick of the Mongol cultural movement unfolding at the time. The success I achieved through Chinese education haunted me, as it alienated me from my own cultural heritage. As Mongol culture started to revive and as I socialized more with Mongol students, I began to develop a "reverse" inferiority complex. As China's cultural nationalistic sentiment developed in opposition to communist control in a movement, dubbed "cultural fever," that actively questioned the reason for China's backwardness, Mongol intellectuals and students scrutinized their culture and survival conditions. One of my achievements at the time was to relearn myself the Mongolian language. This proved feasible in a short time: Thanks to my late "ur-

banization," I had retained my Mongolian conversational skills and the alphabetical nature of Mongolian facilitated my learning to read. It was this self-education during my university years that impelled me to pursue Mongolian studies and later to embark on an anthropological career.

While I was away studying in Britain, my sister sent her son to a Chinese kindergarten. Infuriated, I sent numerous letters, admonishing her to send my nephew to a Mongolian kindergarten. Marshalling theories from my anthropological readings on ethnicity and nationalism, I reasoned that in an overwhelmingly Chinese environment, it was essential to maintain one's cultural identity, one symbolized by the Mongolian language. My nephew would pick up Chinese anyway, not only from his peers in the neighborhood but also from a Mongolian primary school in which Chinese is now taught from the first grade as a second language. They gave in to my demand and sent their son to a Mongolian kindergarten. In 1993, during a triumphant visit home with a Ph.D. degree in hand, I learned to my horror that my sister and brother-in-law blamed me for ruining their son's intellectual capacity as well as his career prospects.

Unlike my sister, some of my cousins, regardless of their own Chinese or Mongolian educational background, sent their children to Chinese schools. For an "anthropologized" me, sensitive to "culture," it was painful to hear their children speak only Chinese, comprehending no Mongolian even as their parents and grandparents conversed in Mongolian in family gatherings. Their grandparents struggled to talk to them in a smattering of Chinese, but the little children's eyes emitted only incomprehension and annoyance. When I expressed shock to my cousins, they warned me not to interfere in their personal lives.

Those cousins who received Mongolian education now have bitter complaints about their poor Chinese. In Dongsheng, and even the banner centers (Mongol administrative units equivalent to counties), there are hardly any work units in which Mongolian language knowledge is required or even useful. Because almost all jobs are controlled by Chinese, university-level knowledge of Mongolian is no different from illiteracy. It is this bitter personal experience that compelled my cousins to make sure that their children never repeat their "tragedy."

Under this tremendous Chinese economic and political pressure, a pressure derived from the history of colonization and ethnic division of labor, one finds that many Mongol-speaking Mongols are forced to "collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression"—as Pierre Bourdieu (1991:7) has said in regards to the French peasants' willing abandonment of their dialects in favor of official language. Many newly urbanizing Mongols denounce my own steadfast counsel of linguistic resistance as idealist and impractical and sometimes hold it responsible for their further subordination under the Chinese. As many Mongols would now say, only by shedding the burden of Mongolian language and by mastering the language of the dominant is there a chance to survive in Inner

Mongolia. They have little patience for any argument favoring retention of the Mongolian language bilingually or trilingually along with Chinese plus a foreign language. Instead, they often advocate learning English to outperform the Chinese (cf. Naran Bilik 1998a, 1998b).

### CAN THE TUMED RE-MONGOLIZE THEMSELVES?

A paradox emerges from the above personal vignette. I yearned for the Mongolian language and displayed an enormous anxiety about my own economically secure identity, one that I established precisely through mastering the expressive instruments of the dominant group in China. In the absence of history, a postmodern diagnosis would probably suggest that my sentiment is a symptom of hybrid identity, created in a cosmopolitan condition. But the pathological pain that I constantly feel and cannot easily eradicate may be rooted in the consciousness of capitalized History, a realization of failing to fulfill the lineal development of the Mongolian nationality, the very entity to which I belong, voluntarily or involuntarily. To illustrate this point, I present another case of linguistic anxiety, this time at a communal scale, of the Tumed Mongols.

The Tumed are a Mongolian group in Inner Mongolia that enjoyed, in the second half of the 20th century, political leverage over both Chinese and other Mongol groups, thanks largely to the high-profile role played by Tumed Communists. The Tumed were Sinicized linguistically (i.e., they spoke Chinese) in the late 19th century, and by the early 20th century the Tumed had practically no Mongol speakers. Most also engage in sedentary agriculture, living in mixed communities in the suburbs of Hohhot. The discrimination they suffered under Chinese rule and the loss of their territory to Chinese colonization prior to the People's Republic produced a large number of Mongol nationalists-cum-communists. Their extensive revolutionary experience brought them immense success: Many of their leaders rose to the very top government, party, and military positions in the newly founded IMAR, and some attained leading national posts in Beijing and elsewhere. Their success depended on their mastery of Chinese, their communist conviction, and an ethnic consciousness that enabled them to build ties to other Mongols (Bulag 2002).

Undoubtedly, Tumed ethnic consciousness was shaped in part by the loss of the group's ability to speak the Mongolian language. After the 1920s, as the Tumed began to interact with other Mongols, they began to feel an acute sense of inadequacy regarding their Mongolian language skills (Huhehaote 2000). In the fifties, they set up many nationality (*minzu*) primary schools and middle schools that recruited only Mongol students. Where Mongol students were few, they made sure that a general school would have a "Mongolian student class" (*mengsheng ban*), separate from Chinese students. One of the aims for such "nationality" schools and classes was to facilitate the learning of Mongolian, not, however, to the exclusion of

Chinese. In these schools, Mongolian was taught as a subject, one considered of equal importance to Chinese, though all other subjects were taught in Chinese. During the Cultural Revolution years, 1966–76, Mongolian instruction was largely abolished. A new attempt to provide a Mongol education began in September 1979.

The Tumed banner education bureau then set up an experimental kindergarten at Nationality Primary School at Bagshi Commune, recruiting 59 six year olds who were taught everything from mathematics to history in Mongolian. Six Mongolian teachers were invited from the pastoral areas, so that the children could learn "pure" standard Mongolian. In order to create a good language environment, the kindergarten was located in a closed-off compound, where both children and teachers lived. It was complete immersion, with orders issued that conversations in everyday life as well as in the classroom be conducted in Mongolian. The following year, 50 children from the kindergarten entered first grade in primary school, to continue their education in Mongolian. Chinese students moved to a separate, newly built school. On this foundation, the banner built a "Mongolian Nationality Primary School" in October 1982 in the banner center. The school then had eight classes divided into three grades, with 201 boarding pupils, all taught in Mongolian. Interestingly, Chinese was taught only from grade 5 (Tumote 1987:634–659), the students were not allowed to leave the compound without permission, and, during vacations, they were often sent to the grassland to learn directly from pure Mongol-speaking herders, lest they be contaminated by their Chinese-speaking parents and relatives or Chinese neighbors. The project was somewhat similar to the North Korean communal education in Japan, which Sonia Ryang (1997) so vividly describes. Korean students lived in Japanese society, watched Japanese TV and films; Japanese was the first language most students used when they were outside of school and living in cities. However, ideologically committed to North Korea as their fatherland and loyal to Kim Il Sung and his son as their leaders, the Korean community built a niche with strict cultural boundaries, trying to build its own space for social reproduction.

Many other Mongols admired the Tumed Mongolizing project. In their eyes, it was remarkable that, having lost the Mongolian language for over a century, the Tumed were determined to reclaim their cultural heritage. Many used the Tumed case to warn the weak willed to hold the tiller fast, to sustain efforts to inculcate Mongolian language. But the project was already doomed before it became a success.

As a means to create a small utopian community cut off from the polluting social world, the Mongolizing educational enterprise of *fengbi shi jiaoyu* (closed-door education) has turned out many pure Mongol-speaking Tumed Mongols. But all of these Tumed emerged with inadequate Chinese language skills and were therefore deprived of the vital social ability they needed to succeed in the wider Inner

Mongolian society that is dominated by Chinese in all sectors. The difficulty these students face in obtaining employment contrasts sharply with that of their parents and grandparents who were successful in the regional political economy. Understandably, local Mongols sharply criticized such schemes as crippling the younger generations. Although these schools have lost students to Chinese schools in recent years, the project nevertheless continues to receive support from some Mongol intellectuals and cadres, "who supported the establishment of the school and invested much emotional capital with political metaphors" (Naran Bilik 1998b:72).

One could infer from this case that minority cadre/intellectuals might have objectified the very people for whom they claim to be struggling, and that objectification might have *disempowered*, not *empowered*, them. Indeed, this situation is reminiscent of the Breton in France studied by Maryon McDonald (1989). McDonald discusses the dilemma faced by Therese, a Breton peasant woman who was actively exploited by the intellectual militants for speaking good Breton, projected as a model for the revival of Breton language. For the Breton peasants, however, in the hierarchical world, French was the language of upward mobility to which they aspired: A responsible mother tried to ensure that her children would speak French, at least in addition to Breton.

However, rather than simplistically denouncing the nationalists and militants as McDonald did, we need to grasp the social context that impelled some Mongol intellectuals to strive to produce a "pure" Mongol. Intellectual aspiration, political pressure for representation, and individual survival strategy have all become intertwined, eventually producing this episode in contemporary Inner Mongolian history.

### THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF MONGOLIAN LANGUAGE LOSS

The linguistic anxiety displayed by Mongols occurred nowhere and at no time other than precisely after they had built an autonomous region, a political and territorial institution. The IMAR, founded in 1947, was to be an ethnic safe haven in which Mongols would no longer be subject to Chinese discrimination and persecution as they had been between 1912 and 1947. How did this "autonomy" fail to reproduce Mongols culturally or linguistically?

Some developments during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) did not prepare Inner Mongols well to cope with eventual Chinese colonization. Because the Qing court deliberately segregated Mongol tribal groups from each other as part of its divide-and-rule policy to prevent the emergence of a unified Mongol opposition, smaller groups became vulnerable linguistically when more Chinese settled among them. Mongols who settled, took up farming, and intermixed with Chinese settlers quickly lost their language and became Chinese speakers. The Tumed Mongols living in the trading town of Hohhot and its surrounding

fertile plain had almost completely lost their language by the early 20th century. The Horchin, numerically the largest Mongol group living in the eastern part of the region, took up farming and settled in villages. They developed pidgin Mongol with a heavy dose of Chinese vocabulary (cf. Khan 1996). Only the Mongols in the shrinking pastoral areas, where Chinese penetration was lacking, continued to speak pure Mongolian.

The Mongolian language loss was thus in large part a product of Chinese settler colonization. Inner Mongolian nationalism in the early 20th century developed in response to both this cultural loss and colonization. Thus, it was those groups which had lost the language that became the most ardent nationalists or communist-cum-nationalists. For instance, in 1925 the Harchin, a highly Sinicized Mongol group scattered in today's eastern Inner Mongolia and Liaoning province, founded and staffed the Inner Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, the first all-Inner Mongolian political party (cf. Atwood 2002). And Sinicized Tumed Mongols led the Inner Mongolian communist movement (Bulag 2002). Ulanhu, a Tumed, the paramount communist leader of Inner Mongolia who founded the Autonomous Region, could not even speak Mongolian, although he studied Russian in Moscow. The Horchin Mongols, the pidgin Mongol speakers, whose intellectuals were more fluent in Chinese than in Mongolian, became nationalists and nationalistic communists, aspiring for Mongolian independence/autonomy, and they now constitute the majority of the contemporary Mongolian leaders and intellectuals.

Here we have an interesting situation wherein largely Sinicized and half-Sinicized Mongols became ardent nationalists and communists and took up the historic task of liberating the Mongols from Chinese rule, or achieving autonomy from, and equality with, the Chinese. As nationalists, they desired to revive and develop their own language, Mongolian, perhaps precisely because they were themselves largely bereft of it, and they set out to do this in the IMAR, as part of their *nationality* building project. Many Mongol leaders marked the victory of 1947 by shedding their Chinese names for Mongolian names. For instance, most of the Horchin revolutionaries, such as Hafenga and Tömörbagan, were known by their Chinese names during the Republican and Manchukuo periods. It was only on May 1, 1947, with the birth of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Government, when Yun Ze, the Sinicized Mongolian Communist leader, renamed himself "Ulanhu," or "Red Son," a name with nationalist and communist tinges.

If the Inner Mongolian language was fragmented, Mongols had other cultural resources to tap. Mongols in China are not an internal minority, but a transnational one, betwixt and between China and Mongolia. Outer Mongolia, the other half of the Mongolian geobody, declared independence from the crumbling Qing dynasty as early as 1911, and the Republic of China formally recognized its independence in 1946. Mongols in Inner Mongolia

accepted autonomy in 1947 under the aegis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after a series of movements for unification and independence. The 15 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), during which Inner Mongolia exercised a reasonably high degree of autonomy, coincided with an international communist honeymoon involving China, the Soviet Union, and its ally the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), formerly Outer Mongolia. Mongols in these three states fell in the same ideological camp—divided only by international borders—all of whom enjoyed the euphoria of the postwar expansion of communist states in Eastern Europe and East Asia. Nonetheless, a fundamental question remained: Because the MPR was closer to the “communist” hearth, that is, the Soviet Union, should Inner Mongolia therefore look up primarily to the MPR, which was also closer in terms of kinship, or to the PRC?

The Soviet Union answered this question with its own divide-and-rule policy. In an effort to curb a pan-Mongolian sentiment, the Soviet Union resorted to nationality building among different Mongolian groups in the Soviet Union by Cyrillicizing their dialects, that is, forcing them to abandon the classical Mongolian orthography, which had the potential linguistic power to unify all the Mongols. The Kalmyks and Buryats were promoted as distinct nationalities with distinct characteristics including their separate “print languages.” Likewise, Mongols in the MPR were forced to adopt a Cyrillic script based on the dialect of the Halh, the numerically dominant Mongol group, in the 1940s. By the 1950s, only the Mongols in China still kept their classical script, although its use was as wide as hoped for. Communism meant fragmentation for the Mongol peoples.

Inner Mongols, however, saw the MPR as a strong magnet, and they looked to it for guidance in culture and language. The Halh-based Cyrillic script in the MPR was attractive, not just because it was easier to learn than Mongol classical script but also because of the implications for a strong pan-Mongolian sentiment. Those who wanted to enrich modern scientific Mongolian vocabulary in Inner Mongolia preferred to adopt Russian terminology, filtered through the MPR, rather than Chinese terminology. As Chingeltei, the top Inner Mongolian linguist, complained as early as 1953:

Some Mongolian language workers would go to the other extreme; they refuse to recognize the Mongolized Chinese vocabulary and are unwilling to write them so as to give them legitimacy. . . . But what is strange is that those comrades, who are not willing to use Mongolized Chinese words, generally like to use Russian words. [Chingeltei 1998a:7]

The Chinese government initially tolerated this sentiment because China was also ideologically subordinate to the Soviet Union, and the question of whether and how to Cyrillicize the Mongolian language remained open.

In spring 1957 the IMAR government dispatched a Mongolian language delegation to the MPR to discuss how

to coordinate linguistic unification. Ulanhu instructed the delegation leader Erdenitogtoh and Inner Mongolia's deputy propaganda chief Tögös that Inner Mongolian language and terminology should, wherever possible, follow the practices of the MPR. Ever politically astute, Ulanhu made the argument in China that Inner Mongolia should adopt MPR linguistic practices in order to use Inner Mongolian newspapers and books to propagate Mao Zedong Thought to the MPR. For this reason, Inner Mongolia need not insist on retaining distinctive Inner Mongolian language practices but should follow those of the MPR (Tumen and Zhu 1995:135). This “public transcript” ingeniously disguised an Inner Mongolian aspiration for cultural unification with the MPR.

An interesting episode illustrates how Mongols felt about their language at the time. On May 1, 1957, Ulanhu addressed the mass rally in Mongolian on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the IMAR, to which only the MPR sent a large official delegation. Many Mongols were moved to tears and could not forget his speech even after Ulanhu's death in late 1988. They interpreted his speech, delivered in Mongol, as defiance of the Chinese chauvinist onslaught against Mongol culture. It was sensational because Ulanhu could not speak Mongolian. He read his speech from a text written in Cyrillic that was translated from his original Chinese text (he spoke Russian fluently) (Bulag 2002:232–234).

However, no sooner was a joint MPR and Inner Mongolian language unification committee formed than the project was banned in China. With the passing of the Latin-based Chinese pinyin script scheme in early 1958, Chinese pinyin was also promoted as the “common basis” for creating and reforming minority languages, as the premier Zhou Enlai demanded: “Henceforth, all nationalities, in creating or reforming their written languages, should in principle take the pinyin as the basis, and, moreover, should conform to the Chinese pinyin scheme in the pronunciation and usage of the alphabets” (Zhou 1960: 90–91). The choice of Latin rather than Cyrillic was one sign of the deepening rift between China and the Soviet Union, but, above all, China was determined to domesticate its own minorities.

In Inner Mongolia, this “New Mongolian” was a non-starter. In 1958, during the anti-Rightist campaign, Mongol cultural expressions and aspirations for autonomy were suppressed as expressions of local nationalism. As a result, Mongols—instead of “propagating Mao Zedong Thought” (Tumen and Zhu 1995:135) to the MPR by adopting the new terminology coined in the MPR—began to be subjected to strong pressure to adopt more from the “advanced” language Chinese. Chingeltei, the same linguist who had admitted that adoption of Russian and Mongolian terminology used in the MPR had enriched Inner Mongolian vocabulary in his 1953 piece, gave Chinese virtually exclusive rights to influence the Mongolian language in China in 1961:

The other important spring for enriching the modern Mongolian language is the influence of other nationality languages, primarily that of the Chinese language. For the Mongolian nationality, much of the material wealth (means of production and means of subsistence) and much of the spiritual wealth (progressive thought and revolutionary truth) came from the Han Chinese nationality or through the Han Chinese nationality. As the Mongolian people and masses readily accept this material and spiritual wealth, sometimes they match Chinese expressions with Mongolian linguistic materials, and sometimes they directly borrow Chinese words. [Chingeltei 1998b:107–108]

The domestication of the Inner Mongolian language posed a new question: Where should the standard now be? With the Cyrillic script delegitimized, in 1962 two Inner Mongolian dialects, the Shuluun Höh banner dialect and the Bairen banner dialect, were chosen as the standards for western and eastern Mongolian groups, respectively. This could well be understood as the formal domestication of the Mongolian language in China. However, these dialects were chosen not just because they had the least dialectal characteristics, thereby being acceptable to all Mongol speech groups in Inner Mongolia, but also because they are closer than any other Inner Mongolian dialects to the Halh dialect spoken in the MPR. In 1980 the Shuluun Höh banner dialect, which is closest to the Halh dialect, was designated as the standard Inner Mongolian speech (see Huhbator 1999 for a different interpretation).

The conflict between the transnational Mongols and the loyalty-demanding, nationalizing communist state is plain in this engineering of the Mongolian language. But in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, the fact that the Mongolian language in Inner Mongolia began to be domesticated, thus cutting off the language from its cousin across the border, more Mongols started to lose their language and Mongol intellectuals stressed their language requirement even more. The quest for the standardization of Mongolian in Inner Mongolia was a product as much of a domestication of the Mongols in China as a protest against the imposition of Chinese as the national standard language to which all minority languages were forced to conform. This situation has a striking similarity to that in Francisco Franco's Spain, where the attempt to banish the Basque and Catalan languages in favor of Spanish as a unifying national language met only with defiance and led the speakers of minority languages to embrace and conserve their own languages even though that sometimes went against their own economic interests (cf. Ferguson and Heath 1981).

#### **IF ONLY THE CHINESE WOULD LEARN MONGOLIAN . . .**

Chinese communist nationality policy has a built-in contradiction: Its class-national approach impels it to take affirmative action toward minorities, but it simultaneously subscribes to an "ideology of contempt" for minority languages and cultures. An in-built majoritarian morality of communism enabled the Chinese leadership to make the

Chinese, by virtue of their numerical majority and also of their leadership of the revolution, the chosen "people," and their language the advanced language of destiny. By this logic, minority nationalities have been defined as "backward," meaning that their own salvation lies in being assimilated to the Chinese "people" (see Harrell 1995 for his description of the re-Confucianization of the Communist civilizing project). From this perspective, the initial "creation and reform" of minority languages, ostensibly presented to promote "nationality equality," had, in effect, put them in the lower rung of the Chinese communist ideological hierarchy of languages (cf. Dwyer 1998; Harrell 1993). Therefore, persistent clinging to one's nationality and language was prone to being seen as "reactionary," if not as deliberate sabotage of the socialist "cause."

Thus, the minority language right granted in the package of nationality autonomy had its own traps. Fully exercising this right risked provoking the wrath of the Chinese "people." The party might have tolerated the continued use of minority languages if it saw such tolerance as useful to enhance their communist consciousness, or, if conditions were not "ripe," that is, if not enough indigenous leaders had been trained as communists, as in the cases of Tibetans or Uighurs. But Mongols faced a different problem. The Inner Mongolian autonomous movement was carried out and led by Mongol communists, many of whom could neither speak nor read Mongolian. Thus, if the Mongol communists insisted on using Mongolian, not for officially sanctioned purposes of the Chinese state (such as luring back the MPR), but, rather, for expressing their identity and buttressing their autonomy, the Chinese state would grow suspicious.

Then how could Inner Mongolian communists promote their language, especially at a time when they had become an absolute minority even in their "autonomous region," and when nationality became less a merit for "proletarian internationalism" than a liability associated with "local nationalism"? Although Mongol communists dominated the highest levels of power in the Autonomous Region, they were also vastly outnumbered by Chinese communist cadres, some of them new arrivals. These communist cadres who came to Inner Mongolia ostensibly as "helpers" were now poised to become masters of Inner Mongolia. Some of them began to demonstrate renewed chauvinism, this time coupling traditional Chinese denigration of Mongols with the newly learned communist "ideology of contempt" toward minorities. Therefore, Inner Mongols, in order to continue to speak their own language, faced a double problem: their minority condition within the Autonomous Region and the chauvinist ideological onslaught from Chinese cadres. As early as 1953 Ulanhu reported that some Chinese cadres took offense to Mongols reading Mongolian: "If you read only Mongolian, you still haven't overcome your narrow nationalist thought. Proletarians are not divided by nationality." He cited another example. "In the Chahar League [prefecture], a

public security officer spoke in Chinese. When some people suggested he speak in Mongolian, another cadre shouted a slogan against this suggestion: 'Oppose narrow nationalism!' " (Ulanhu 1997:174).

The obstacles to Mongols using their own language in Inner Mongolia were formidable, although they continued to expand Mongolian education throughout the Autonomous Region, including the Tumed area, as described above. Realizing that inspiring Mongols to learn their own language required the creation of favorable conditions, the Inner Mongolian government launched a program in 1962 to reward financially government employees and party cadres who learned Mongolian and used it in their everyday work. This program was open not only to Mongols but also to Chinese and other nationalities in Inner Mongolia. In fact, a Chinese who demonstrated Mongolian language ability would be better rewarded than a Mongol (Nei Menggu Zizhiq 1962:40–43). However, unlike the province of Quebec in Canada where minority-language French is legally enforced, in Inner Mongolia, this meager material reward proved ineffective. In the nationalizing communist regime, bribing Chinese to learn "backward" Mongolian was liable to be viewed as an ideological offense. Mongols needed a far more sophisticated justification if they were to persuade or force the Chinese to learn Mongolian.

In a theoretical formulation designed to stave off the ever-mounting Chinese sentiment that all things Mongol are backward, if not reactionary, Ulanhu (1967)—during the socialist education (also known as Four Cleanups) movement of 1963–65—insisted on establishing political, economic, and cultural foundations so that China could be unified as a state with all of its nationalities living in harmony. To form a political foundation, Ulanhu insisted that since the Mongol cadres were communists, they were united with the Chinese politically; hence they should not be subject to political discrimination. To demonstrate an economic foundation, he argued that the Mongolian pastoral economy should not be a target for elimination in favor of agriculture. Because pastoral economy was part of the national economy of China, any effort to destroy it was tantamount to sabotaging the national economy.

More pertinent to this article is his articulation on the cultural foundation. Arguing against the view that the Mongolian language constituted backwardness and uselessness, Ulanhu maintained not only that Mongols should continue to speak and write Mongolian but also that Chinese living and working in Inner Mongolia, especially Chinese cadres, should learn and use it, too. His promotion of bilingualism among Chinese cadres had a clever class ring. He argued that Mongols in the countryside were the masses, hence it was the duty of the cadres to serve the masses. Having the duty to disseminate socialist ideas and Mao Zedong Thought, they do so in the best (or, for some, only) language understood by the Mongol masses. Ulanhu severely criticized a growing number of Mongol cadres who neglected studying Mongolian and at the same time

urged the Chinese to speak Mongolian. "I want to ask, are the Chinese cadres working in Inner Mongolia serving the Chinese or the Mongols? I say you should serve the Mongols, but if you can't speak the language, what can you do if you can't communicate feelings?" (1967:37). He especially emphasized the psychological effect the cadres' inability to speak Mongolian had on the Mongols, insisting that "Mongols recognize what language you speak, not who you are" (1967:37). If that psychological barrier were removed, he reasoned, socialist education would be very easy to achieve. It was therefore opportune for Chinese cadres to show their sincerity, thus differentiating themselves from the Chinese Nationalist chauvinists. He subsequently ordered that an ambitious Mongolian language learning program be implemented in Inner Mongolia. But it was doomed before it began, as Ulanhu was soon permanently removed from power, and Inner Mongolia was gripped in a genocidal campaign coinciding with the Cultural Revolution, in which, by official reckoning, over 16,000 Mongols were killed (Tumen and Zhu 1995).

Accompanying the ethnopolitical witch-hunt was a vigorous campaign to promote Chinese language throughout Inner Mongolia, including the countryside. Mongolian was practically banned; indeed, even bearing Mongol names was seen as an indication of betraying China. When I went to school in 1972, my parents gave me a Chinese name, which I used until 1975.

It was small wonder that immediately after the Cultural Revolution formally ended in 1976, strong resistance to learning Chinese emerged among Mongols. In 1981 Chuluun Bagan, a Mongol linguist, strongly argued in favor of conserving Mongolian, insisting that forcing Mongols to learn Chinese was no different from an assimilationism of the worst kind:

Since the Mongolian language is in a social environment in which Chinese occupies an absolutely advantageous position, it faces the danger of natural assimilation every minute and every second. However, under such circumstances, if you still subjectively adopt so-called "Mongolian-Chinese bilingualism," encouraging only Mongols to learn Chinese, but not Chinese to learn Mongolian, it is tantamount to using a covert administrative measure to restrict and limit the development of the Mongolian language, and it can only accelerate the process of the loss of Mongolian. [Chuluun Bagan 1981:122–123]

Promotion of Chinese, according to Shenamjil, a veteran Mongolian language worker writing in 1990, jeopardized minority intellectual development:

Encouraging those children who did not know Chinese to study Chinese directly resulted in a dismal situation in which they learned well neither Chinese nor their nationality language. This practice has wasted minority talents, adversely impacted the development of the intelligence of the people of minority nationalities, and negatively influenced the development of economy and culture of minority regions. [Shenamjil 1990:54]

This post-Cultural Revolution anti-Chinese language sentiment spurred enthusiasm throughout Inner Mongolia

to revive Mongolian language use in public and in private. Even some Sinicized Mongols set out to reclaim their linguistic heritage, as the Tumed case illustrates above, only to find that the social conditions for sustainable linguistic restoration have been irreparably damaged.

### MONGOLS DENATIONALIZED: THE RACIAL LOGIC OF THE CHINESE NATIONAL MULTICULTURALISM

By now it should be clear that I am not advocating the abandonment of Mongolian in Inner Mongolia, claiming that it is a language with little practical use, one that simply makes Mongols "feel good" about their heritage. Far from it. The tremendous linguistic anxiety shown by Mongols at the personal, communal (or tribal), and national levels and the seemingly quixotic linguistic resistance are the result of many paradoxes. Mongols are the titular nationality of the IMAR, but they constitute an absolute minority even there—to say nothing of China as a whole. As a minority, they are subjected to the hegemonies of both the dominant Chinese state and socialist moral and political constructions of ethnicity. Although socialism promised equality and national liberation, nationality was seen not as an end in itself but as a means toward achieving socialism, which in turn became indistinguishable from integration into the Chinese state. However, once acquiring regional nationality autonomy in the form of the IMAR, the Mongolian nationality turned itself into something akin to an "intentional community"—that is, one that was not to be assimilated or melted away, but, rather, one meant to reproduce itself in order to enjoy longevity (cf. Brown 2002). Put in this way, we can better appreciate the enormous tension between the minority Mongols and the majoritarian Chinese state, the former fighting for rightful existence against any attempt by the state to force assimilation. The debate on language rights in China is less a privileged domain of intellectual reasoning about universality or particularity as it is in the West (Paulston 1997) than a political battle determining the territorial and political rights of minorities. Because China is a nationalizing regime with a strong sense of History, it is bent on socially engineering its minorities to shed more of their particularistic cultural features and attain more of ethnic Chinese characteristics. Therefore, minorities are often forced to turn against their collective interest and pursue individual survival strategy, as this article has shown.

In this context, it is natural that some doctrines of socialist nationality collide: the doctrine of common language as one of the four criteria in defining nationality vis-à-vis the doctrine of "national in form, socialist in content." In other words, equality for minority nationalities was promoted through language rights and limited forms of local autonomy, and, yet, simultaneously a minority language was seen as simply an empty vessel that could be filled up with communist-cum-majoritarian Chinese content.

At a different level, Mongolian linguistic anxiety points to the disparity between functionalist and constructivist

understandings of nation/nationality. If we follow Benedict Anderson (1991), print capitalism or socialism in Inner Mongolia is sufficient to make Mongols "imagine" their ethnonational community. However, as Ernest Gellner (1983) points out, sustaining the imagined community requires a strong educational system. This suggests that boundary and content of a modern ethnonational community should be largely congruent. In this regard, Frederik Barth's (1969) suggestion that the principal task in studying ethnicity is the examination of boundaries but not content is misleading. His theory cannot appreciate the dialectical formula of "national in form, socialist in content" as applied in socialist multinational states. Because the socialist content is not always universalistic but is often imposed by dominant groups, the minority nationality or ethnic form is often undermined. The problem is especially acute in China where the content of a nationality determines the form, including even the classificatory name of a minority. To put it differently, if the content (such as distinct political and territorial institutions, language, economy, and so on) of a minority determined the *raison d'être* for political rights in the form of territorial autonomy in a socialist state, the loss of content could well lead to the demise of autonomy (see Bulag in press for this *fait accompli* in Inner Mongolia). Precisely for this reason, territory, economy, language, and culture—the four Stalinist criteria defining nationality that have been widely used in China—have been fields of "content-ion" between a nationalizing regime and its minority nationalities. Largely bereft of "common territory" and "common economy," as well as the "common psychological makeup," language is the last line of Mongols' defense of "nationality" against becoming a racialized "ethnic group," a constituent part of an "ethnicized" Chinese Nation, *Zhonghua Minzu*. Let me discuss this issue by way of conclusion.

I have so far used *nationality* to denote what is called "*minzu*" in China. *Minzu* is a term adopted by Chinese nationalists from the Japanese *minzoku* in the late 19th and early 20th century to conceptualize both the new "nation" of China (*Zhonghua Minzu*) and its five officially recognized "nationality" groups: Chinese (Han), Manchu, Mongol, Muslims, and Tibetan (Pan 2000:9). The Chinese communists inherited this term and simply endowed it with some Stalinist overtones, reserving it for minorities, while expunging *Zhonghua Minzu*, "Chinese Nation," from the Communist lexicon, replacing it with *Zhongguo Renmin*, meaning "Chinese people." In the last two decades, as China began to attract substantial overseas investment, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet and Yugoslavian collapse along "nationality" lines in the early 1990s, there has been a movement within Chinese academic and political circles to revive the notion of the long-expunged *Zhonghua Minzu*, "Chinese Nation" and call it "*zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti*," or a "multicultural unity of the Chinese Nation" (see Fei 1999). This is what I call "Chinese National Multiculturalism," which came into being in the



age of global capitalism and nationalism and demonstrates virulent racism to the external Other. And to the internal Other, or minorities, a Chinese National Multiculturalism patronizes, in the words of Slavoj Žižek “respect for local cultures without roots in one’s own particular culture” (1997:44). That is, “respect” for local cultures can come only from a rearrangement of group ranking: Minzu must be appropriated from a stigmatic term for minorities who were to be eventually assimilated into the “Chinese people,” to designate the “Chinese Nation,” which purportedly has 5,000 years’ glorious history of civilization and a permanent future, consisting of around fifty colorful cultural “ethnic groups.”

The extent to which “ethnicity” and its family of terms have proved attractive to the Chinese state apparatus charged with running minzu affairs can be gauged in the official retranslation of the English name of China’s flagship propaganda journal *Minzu Tuanjie* from *Nationality Unity* to *Ethnic Unity*, and “the State Nationality Affairs Commission” to “State Ethnic Affairs Commission” in 1995, as well as the subsequent retranslation of all the laws and regulations concerning minority nationalities, changing “nationality” to “ethnic group” (cf. State Ethnic Affairs Commission 2000). Although the government continues to use minzu to denote both “nationality” and “nation” in Chinese, the state language, and although Almaz Khan dismisses any possibility of challenging “the hegemony of the *minzu* discourse at all” (1999:40), Chinese scholars now routinely classify groups by making use of a clear terminological distinction between *zuqun*, which is used to denote “ethnic group,” and minzu or *guozu*, which are both reserved to denote “nation” (cf. Naran Bilik 2000). This distinction is a clear attempt to get out of an alleged confusion caused by the multivalence of the term referring to ethnic group, nationality, and nation. The Chinese quest for what I call “terminological inequality” has clearly been inspired both by the “international” standards or conventions that are now deemed more scientific and less ideological than the usages of minzu and nationality, and, more pertinently, by the nationalization of the Chinese communist regime.

It is clear that behind the rectification of names are questions of reconceptualizing the entire arena of China’s nationality issues, from the legal positions of the nationalities to their territorial and other rights associated with autonomy. At issue are questions of re-representation and recategorization of China’s minorities. As Nicholas Dirks has observed of British colonialism in India, “representation in the colonial context was violent; classification a totalizing form of control” (1992:5).

Western scholarship on ethnicity and nationalism in China has been overwhelmingly concerned with China’s identification and classification of minorities, how party policy has hardened the supposedly fluid boundaries between ethnic groups into ethnonationalism, and how classified minority nationalities on the ground continue to defy official pressures to Sinicize. Furthermore, a more ef-

fective vehicle for understanding ethnic processes is said to lie in the study of “ethnic relations” rather than “nationality questions,” now that nationality autonomy, the central praxis of the Chinese state through which minorities have been organized, is patently in disarray. Christopher Atwood (1994), in his study of the Mongolian term and translation of *minzu*, rightly criticized the scholarship that focuses on “nationality questions” for attributing too much power to the modern Chinese state for creating ethnic identities, and for completely omitting “the role of political concepts and corporate institutions in mediating between the ultimate sovereign power and the individual” (1994:71). The designation of Mongols, Tibetans, Muslims, Manchus, and Han Chinese as minzu since 1911 “represented the drastic delegitimation” of the Mongol national institutions, such as the banner system, Chingisid nobility, and the established Buddhist church found under the Qing dynasty (Atwood 1994:71–72).

One important point bears emphasis. The discussion of China’s key political concepts such as “minzu” (nation or nationality) and “zuqun” (ethnic group) should pay attention to history—or, rather, both History and histories—and the institutionalization—and de- or reinstitutionalization—in the process of rectifying key names. Let me make a quick excursion into history. The kind of reconceptualization and reclassification from *minzu* to *zuqun* is not a new phenomenon of the last two decades, the period of “globalization.” Already in the early 1920s, the Chinese Nationalist Party (GMD) began to develop misgivings about the foundational conception of the original Republic, that is, that China consisted of five minzu (Fitzgerald 1996). In the late 1920s the nationalist government established Chinese provinces and counties to replace non-Chinese territorial administrative units in the northern and western frontiers. In order to quell the burgeoning minority demand for independence or autonomy, it proceeded to promote the idea of the Chinese Nation (Zhonghua Minzu) based on Han Chinese hegemony and designated the four other minzu as the *buzu*, subordinate “tribes” or ethnic groups of the “Nation.” It was this institutionalization and rectification of classificatory names that legitimated the Republic of China’s agenda to assimilate all minority nationalities into the Chinese Nation, by means of military conquest and massive Chinese migration into non-Chinese areas.

In response to this Chinese onslaught, Inner Mongols rose up again in arms in the 1930s–40s to defend their homeland, as they had done in 1911–13. For its part, the CCP, then a minority party seeking to survive in the northern hinterlands by carving out revolutionary bases, began to see the Mongols as potential allies. The CCP criticized the GMD’s chauvinism and called for autonomy/national self-determination for non-Chinese minorities, especially Mongols (cf. Bulag 2002). The issues were made more complex by Japanese bids for Mongol support and the dynamics of GMD–CCP conflict and cooperation, leading to an often-troubled united front against Japan.

Although short of genuine autonomy, the territorial autonomy of Inner Mongolia, which was set up in May 1947 even before the establishment of the People's Republic (in October 1949), was a loud, though CCP-sanctioned, Mongol rebuke of Chinese nationalist erasure of Mongol identity. Territories and institutions were therefore central to Mongolian and other minority self-determination movements. And the subsequent adoption of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region as a model for a Communist solution to the "nationality question" was a concession. That is, it was neither a blessing nor a gift, nor was it an ideological blunder, on the part of the CCP. As a consequence, the PRC was established as a "state" with peoples of various nationalities, but not as a "Chinese Nation."

The central and most visible problem of *minzu* in China from that time forward has, however, centered on the conflict between the aspirations of large territorial nationalities such as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs to retain autonomy, and that of the nationalizing Chinese state to homogenize its diverse populations and integrate them with the Chinese. Equally important from the perspective of the peoples concerned has been issues of autonomy and cultural preservation of smaller and scattered nationalities. Indeed, throughout the 1950s, Chinese scholars continued to use *buzu* (tribe), a term Chinese nationalists used to designate four non-Chinese *minzus*, especially in their translation of *narodnost'* (a category between tribes and nations) in Lenin's and Stalin's works. They adopted *minzu* as a uniform term only in 1962 when they were prompted by strong minority criticisms (Ya and Sun 1985:61). And during the Cultural Revolution between 1966–76, attempts to assimilate minority nationalities were intensified. We may say that invocation of the term *Zhonghua Minzu*, revived from the dustbin of history and used since the 1980s—after a single post-Cultural Revolution decade of more favorable treatment of minority peoples—is as much an attempt to nationalize (i.e., Sinicize) the Chinese state as an effort to depoliticize, deinstitutionalize, and deterritorialize minority nationalities. Inasmuch as it is reminiscent of the first half of the 20th century, the current state of affairs shows that history repeats itself; however, the cultural, institutional, social, and territorial conditions for minority resistance have been fundamentally altered through four decades of socialist Chinese "nation-building."

The study of China's ethnicity requires that we pay attention to this "process" of moving from "nationality" to "ethnic group," and China's passage from a multinational "state" to a multiethnic "nation." This requires heightened awareness of the paradigmatic conception of hegemony at work. Jacob Levy (2000) has recently castigated contemporary normative theorists of nationalism and ethnicity for typically conceptualizing nationhood and ethnicity as primarily cultural, divorced from material life. He argues that they should be understood as political matters, and "nationalism and indigenous ethnic politics cannot be well understood without reference to at least one mate-

rial good: land" (Levy 2000:197). Without the awareness of the materiality of nationalism and ethnicity, as I have documented in this article, I would further argue, aside from displaying our own profound ignorance and incomprehension, we risk either blaming minorities for exhibiting ethnonationalism out of the blue or blaming the empire's redressive affirmative actions for promoting minority particularism, as many recent diagnostics of Soviet nationality policies have done (cf. Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994).

The story of Mongolian language revival and loss indicates that they are indeed rapidly losing their *minzu* characteristics and attaining those of an ethnic group. As they become increasingly urbanized, their homeland penetrated by Chinese, they have lost the vital conditions for developing as a full-fledged nationality with institutional and territorial integrity. Ironically, socialism and autonomy, both of which promised to deliver national salvation, became the very tomb in which were buried Mongolian aspirations for developing as a civic nationality. In this new multicultural Inner Mongolia of China, in which "Chinese National Multiculturalists" show "racism with a distance" (Žižek 1997:44), domesticated Mongols can now choose to sing and dance as they please, even speak their language if they care. But they have lost the economic, social, and cultural preconditions, as well as the political powers that can meaningfully define the purpose and quality of their native speech.

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**URADYN E. BULAG** Department of Anthropology, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY 10021

## NOTES

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