

Four Models of Mongolian Nationality Schools in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region

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Abstract Mongolian is one of the more powerful ethnic minority languages in the PRC and, as elsewhere in the country, schools in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) are expected to offer students a trilingual education, with standard Chinese and English being taught in addition to Mongolian. Drawing on research that covered schools across the IMAR, this chapter shows that there are considerable differences in the implementation of trilingual education. It identifies four distinctive models, ranging from those that place a strong emphasis on Mongolian to those that neglect it. The chapter discusses the various historical, demographic, sociolinguistic and other contextual factors that influence the choice of models. It concludes with a discussion of some implications of current trends in trilingualism in education in the IMAR for the future of the Mongolian language.

Keywords Trilingualism · Language policy · China · Inner Mongolia · Chinese · English · Mongolian

1 Introduction

Inner Mongolia forms a long and narrow strip in the north of China, with an extensive border with the nation, Mongolia. It is one of the PRC's four autonomous regions, together with Ningxia, Xinjiang and Tibet. Mongol power has declined since the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), which was established by the great Mongolian

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ruler Kublai Khan in Beijing. During the Qing dynasty, for instance, agricultural settlement by the Han people reduced the concentration of Mongolians and had deleterious effects on the local nomadic, pastoral lifestyle (Burjgin and Bilik 2003). While the Han came to constitute the largest group in Inner Mongolia, Mongolians have striven to preserve recognition of their identity within the Chinese state and achieved the establishment of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Government (later renamed Region) in 1947 (Bulag 2002).

Mongolians make up the sixth-largest ethnic group in the PRC: the population has grown from 888,000 in the first census in 1953 to 4,240,000 in 2007. Almost 70% of Mongolians in the PRC live in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), with the rest distributed across Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces. As noted in Chap. 1, the equality of ethnic groups in the PRC is enshrined in law and protected by state institutions. The emphasis on the equality of citizens and their right to education and to use or study their ethnic language are assured by legislation. Like the majority Han and other minorities, Mongolian citizens “must receive 9 years of compulsory education free of charge”, and the Constitution of the PRC states that, “Each nation has the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written language”. Mongolian people enjoy a number of privileges: they have the option to establish educational systems in Chinese or Mongolian and to receive education in their mother tongue, Mongolian. They have the right to receive higher education in two language systems, Chinese or Mongolian. In entrance examinations, students in the Mongolian system are offered proportionally more chances of higher education with a separate acceptance rate. In the Chinese system, Mongolian students receive 10 bonus points in entrance examinations.

Mongolian is the dominant ethnic minority group in the IMAR. The Mongolian language still predominates in most rural areas, and is an official language alongside Chinese, which is the main language used in the cities. The Mongolian language, oral and written, has been used for more than 800 years (Caodaobateer 2004). Mongolian culture is found throughout the region, in the names of cities, districts, roads and streets, many of which are transliterations from Mongolian into Chinese. With the development of the tourism industry, Mongolian food culture has become a part of mainstream society and Mongolian restaurants are ubiquitous. There are Mongolian language television stations all over the IMAR, with Inner Mongolian TV broadcasting 24 h a day and its satellite broadcasts can be picked up across the whole country (Inner Mongolian TV 2014). Modern technology makes it possible for drivers to listen to Mongolian programmes on FM radio. Mongolian music and songs are popular with many citizens in Mongolia, regardless of their ethnicity. The hundreds of thousands of calls made every day to China Mobile’s Mongolian language service 10086 (China Mobile Group and Inner Mongolia 2014) are an indicator of the vitality of the Mongolian language.

The strength of the Mongolian language is enhanced by its economic capital. Across the border lies Mongolia, which formerly belonged to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The opportunity for trade with this country, however, is hampered by differences between the two forms of the Mongolian language. Across

the border, the written form uses Cyrillic letters, while the spoken form reflects the Khalkha dialect. In the IMAR, the written language uses the traditional vertical script, ordered from left to right, and the spoken form is dialectically diverse. Recent efforts in the IMAR to bridge this linguistic gap by transforming the traditional script to Cyrillic have failed to gain popularity. Nonetheless, Mongolian remains one of the more powerful ethnic minority languages in the PRC on the basis of its ethnolinguistic vitality. Across the IMAR, the language is taught in the majority of schools at both primary and secondary levels. As elsewhere in the country, such schools are expected to offer students a trilingual education, with standard Chinese (usually from Primary 1) and English (at least from Primary 3). Some schools, known as Mongolian Nationality Schools (MNS), claim to use Mongolian as the medium of instruction. However, research for this project found considerable differences in the models of trilingual education within this category of schools. In this chapter, four distinctive models are identified and discussed.

Mongolians in MNS speak Mongolian as their first language and Chinese as their second language, with English becoming their third language to be learned for the future. Although the term “trilingual education”, (ethnic language, Chinese and English) is not yet overtly referred to in official state policies and rhetoric, it increasingly receives widespread attention among ethnic groups (Zhao 2010). Mongolians are being educated trilingually; that is, three languages are taught at school for different purposes. The past two decades have witnessed growing proficiency from bilingualism to trilingualism among the Mongolian ethnic group. Primary school education is essential for language education. Primary and secondary schools offering Mongolian instruction exist throughout the region. Some universities within the IMAR offer higher education in Mongolian for Mongolian students. Recently, students educated in the Mongolian language system have blended into the mainstream educational system at the college level. Mongolian and Chinese are compulsory subjects at all levels of education, even at college. English is becoming a compulsory subject in a rapidly increasing number of primary schools, as opposed to just a few selected ones several years ago. This chapter discusses the four models of MNS and the trilingual education offered in such schools, focusing on the three languages in the curricula of Mongolian Nationality Primary Schools (MNPS).

2 Literature Review

A considerable amount of ethnic-group education research is conducted within China, such as the studies of ethnic languages in Yunnan. Although it is rare to find theses or articles on Mongolians or the Mongolian language, there has been some research on Mongolian students learning English (Bao and Jin 2010; Bai and Li 2006), on strategies for teaching Mongolians English starting at college level (An and Zhou 2009), and on the quality of teachers in primary or secondary schools (Zhou 2003; Lu 2010). The development and trends in Mongolian education have also been the subjects of numerous studies. It is claimed that the number of students

in the Mongolian language educational system will decline if Mongolians are able to choose freely between the Mongolian and the Chinese educational systems (Su 2009). Discussing language patterns and education policy, Iredale et al. (2001, p. 114) state:

In terms of social use and importance, the Mongolian language is no match for Chinese and English. Both reality and popular thinking hold that Mongolian is for local and family use while Chinese and English are used elsewhere. Many Han people, as well as some Mongolian cadres and educators, argue that the teaching of Mongolian should be replaced by Chinese in higher middle schools. These groups maintain that Chinese is a key medium of the state and has a dominant status in political promotion, economic betterment and other social achievements.

In a case study (Zhao 2010:77) of 12 Mongolian graduates of the Mongolian Experimental School, where students receive trilingual education from primary to high school, the author concluded that:

Trilingual Mongol students face fewer obstacles than those from Mongolian-Chinese bilingual streams for the reason that ethnic minority languages possess the least linguistic capital (compared with national and international languages), acquisition of an international dominant language seems to be able to balance their accumulation of human capital in interethnic competition and endow minority students with power in social relations

3 Mongolian Nationality Primary Schools in the IMAR

Mongolian, like Uyghur in Xinjiang or Tibetan in Tibet, is the dominant nationality in the IMAR. There is no doubt that ethnic education in the region has significantly improved since the 1960s, when primary schools on the grassland were called “primary schools on horseback”, chiefly because the system of education tended to move with parents who took care of their flocks, with no permanent places for schooling. Now, however, almost every place with a Mongol population has an MNS that offers Mongolian instruction education from primary to junior secondary and even high school. These schools are run separately and are comparatively distinct from the Chinese educational system. The number of MNS at different levels and the number of students enrolled in them are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the total number of MNS as 2,188 and the pupil enrolment as 447,000, and these figures suggest that Mongolian education even today demonstrates dynamism and vigour. Young Mongolian children begin their schooling in a MNPS, in which teaching is organised and the courses are introduced in Mongolian. A completely Mongolian educational system in the IMAR makes it theoretically possible for Mongolians to complete their entire education from primary school through to higher education in Mongolian, because there are 13 universities and colleges with over 30 programmes and projects where the medium of instruction is Mongolian. This system enables a Mongol to complete his or her education, even if he or she is completely monolingual. It is not unusual to meet Mongolians with a Master’s or even a doctoral degree. As of 2009, 413 monolingual Mongolians held a Doctorate or a Master’s degree.

Table 1 Mongolian Nationality Schools in the IMAR. (Source: Inner Mongolian News 12 October 2009)

	Number of schools	Number of students
Primary school	2,188	447,000
Secondary school	262	248,900
General high school	66	31,100
Vocational secondary schools	50	22,300
Colleges with Mongolian System	13	11,800
Programmes in the Mongolian System	Over 30	
Doctorate and Master's Degree		413

3.1 *The Study*

Young Mongolians in MNS are increasingly being educated trilingually. To get a more coherent picture of the current situation in such schools, the data presented in this chapter were collected from different areas of the IMAR: from north-western Alashan Meng to the north-eastern Xilingguole Meng (the proper names are a transliteration from Mongolian into *Hanyu Pinyin*). In each Meng, which is a unique sub-administrative division in the IMAR, at least two MNS were chosen for data collection. Data collection was mostly bottom-up—it focused more on policy implementation in primary schools than on official documents. It covered all regions of the IMAR and data collection methods consisted of questionnaires, interviews with pupils, teachers, parents and principals, and analyses of school curricula and other school documents. Thirty-two schools were selected for the study. The size of the schools varied from more than 2,400 to less than 70 students, and the number of staff ranged from around 300 to 10. Some of the selected schools were visited by the project team members, while others were investigated by junior Mongolian students at the Inner Mongolia Agricultural University, who took the questionnaire back to their hometowns to be completed by their families or neighbours. The remainder of the schools were investigated by sending and receiving questionnaires by email.

3.2 *Limitations of the Monolingual Mongolian System*

Although the extent, the quality and the level of education have all increased dramatically in recent years, and Mongolian children theoretically have the choice to receive education in either the Mongolian or the Chinese systems, in practice, the choices for those whose first language is Mongolian and who live in more remote places are limited. When applying to a university, Mongolian students may appear to be at a disadvantage, because most Chinese universities offer only Chinese language study programmes and English is required for graduation. The Chinese, after all, are the majority, and consequently, there are few worksites or colleges which actually require Mongolian monolinguals. Even in the IMAR, as Table 1 clearly

indicates, there are only 13 universities or colleges offering Mongolian language educational programmes. Consequently, a large number of young Mongolians face a language barrier when taking the entrance examination and their educational options are markedly constrained on account of this barrier (Ma 2007).

3.3 Importance of Language Education

A primary concern is the extent to which languages in MNPS in the IMAR are increasingly affected. One of the chief reasons is that language education at school is considered very indispensable, and has the ability to make a difference to the quality of life a person will ultimately live. Another concern would be the fact that out of the different stages of schooling, language education in primary school is considered to be the most vital and important stage for language development. In addition, when compared with the number of junior secondary schools at 262, senior secondary schools at 66, plus 50 vocational secondary schools in Table 1, the number 2,188 of primary schools indicates that the distribution of Mongolian language schools is pyramid-shaped, that is to say, in the IMAR, MNPS are much more scattered. Varieties in schooling must necessarily be present. Consequently, the project research revealed that schools referred to as MNS can be classified into four models: Mongolian-dominant, bilingual Mongolian and Chinese, and Chinese-dominant with Mongolian class taught as a subject, and Chinese only (like mainstream Han schools).

4 Four Models of Mongolian Nationality School

The data from various schools in two large cities, Huhhot and Baotou, and across all Mongs in the IMAR, suggest that although schools under the label of MNS are in some ways quite distinctive, they can be roughly categorised into four models.

4.1 Model 1

In this model of schools, pupils and staff are almost all Mongolian nationals whose first language is Mongolian. The students come from remote areas and thus have to remain in residence during school days. Some schools are combined primary and secondary schools, called Mongolian Nationality Schools. For example, one MNS in Damaoqi, approximately 200 km *north-west* of Huhhot, had four teachers and 50 students when it first opened in 1950. Today, the school has 115 staff members and 900 pupils. Apart from one English teacher who is Chinese Han, the other teachers are all Mongolian nationals, whose first language is Mongolian. There are

10 primary classes and 16 secondary school classes, unlike other schools in the Mongolian system, in which primary and secondary schools are invariably separate. The overall population of Damaoqi is around 120,400, of which approximately 102,100 are Han, 17,300 are Mongolian, and 1000 are from other ethnic groups, like Hui and Man. Some Mongolian schoolchildren come from remote places around Damaoqi. Children attend school from primary school Grade One to junior secondary school Grade Three, thus most of them receive 9 years of compulsory education.

Within the school, Mongolian is used for all kinds of communication, from notices on the walls, to an introduction to the school in the hall of the main building. On the wall of the principal's office, there is a prominently placed portrait of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Yuan Destiny. The staff members communicated in Mongolian when they met in the principal's office, where the interviews took place. When asked for a copy of the curriculum, a computer printout of the whole school curriculum from 2009 to 2010 was swiftly presented to us. But when a copy of the curriculum in Chinese was requested, the answer was that the school did not have a Chinese curriculum, even in their computer documents.

When two principals—who were in charge of two English teaching groups, one a primary and the other a secondary school group—were interviewed, they spoke fluent Chinese and claimed to be bilingual. As to their English background, they both said they had graduated from the Mongolian Teacher Institute with social degrees, having studied at college for less than 4 years, before proceeding to complete their undergraduate courses before 2005. They were both qualified teachers. One of the teachers mentioned that a group of teachers was conducting research on trilingualism, funded by the school. When we enquired if they had email addresses, one of them promptly wrote down her address and signed her name for us, in beautiful Chinese characters. What was particularly impressive was that most of the classrooms were equipped with multimedia equipment, networking and spacious areas for different activities. There were computer rooms, newly painted dormitory buildings and a plastic-surfaced playground, which is rarely seen, even in schools in Huhhot. When we probed about whether these changes had taken place recently, the principal proudly replied, “Of course, you can see it”. He then proceeded to provide us with some colourful drawings of school buildings, and pointed out that the buildings would be completed during the summer vacation. “If you come again next summer, you will see the final results of the changes. What is shown in the photos will become a reality. The funds are already in place”, the principal informed us very confidently.

4.2 *Model 2*

The second model of MNS differs from Model 1. The first distinction is that the staff and students are not only Mongolians but also Han Chinese or other ethnic groups. Although the Han Chinese staff comprise no more than 50% of the total staff strength, the influence of mainstream culture is more evident in this school.

These schools have two instruction systems, Mongolian and Chinese. Although Mongolian students continue to be educated in Mongolian, the schools tend to be located in cities and towns where the geographical and living conditions are more influenced by the majority Chinese culture. The students are bilingual in and out of school, rather than monolingual like students in Model 1 schools.

One of the MNPS in Jining City, the main city in Wulanchabu Meng with a population of 272,000, is an example of this model. The school was founded in 1952, the student enrolment is 402 (60% Han) and the number of faculty is 65 (33% Han). Over half of the Mongolian students in the Mongolian system are from Wumeng (Wulanchabu Meng) District, and most of the remaining students are from the northeast, with a small number from Xilingguole Meng. Many of the children are boarders at the school. There are two classes with about 20 pupils in each grade. In contrast to the Mongolian system, although there is only one class in each grade in the Chinese system (which is attended by students from the suburbs surrounding Jining City or from families without citizenship in the city), these classes have more than 40 pupils. Nevertheless, compared with class sizes of over 60 in other local schools, a class size of 40 is still deemed to be comparatively small. This is one of the reasons why some parents are willing to send their children to MNPS, as they believe children will receive greater attention and therefore learn better in smaller classes. About a third of the pupils in the Chinese system are Mongolian by nationality but cannot speak Mongolian. When exploring the reasons for the smaller size of Mongolian classes, one principal explained that “There are not so many parents who would like to send their children to be educated here”. He also informed us that his only son attended another local school in the Chinese-only system, although he had a strong Mongolian background. The principal and his wife both graduated from the Ethnic Teacher Institute in the Mongolian instruction system, majoring in mathematics. With an occasionally recognisable Mongolian accent, he spoke fluent Chinese, and yet he evaluated his Chinese speaking skills to be ‘not good’.

“It was difficult deciding whether to send him to my school or another Chinese system school. If he came here, he would know almost everybody, and my colleagues would give him too much attention. He is naughty. It wouldn’t be good for him. Instead, I consulted some of my friends and considered his future. Chinese will be more use than Mongolian when he grows up”.

The principal shook his head when asked about his son’s Mongolian language skills at present. Although he deliberately spoke to his son in Mongolian, his son replied in Chinese. When questioned whether he wanted his son to learn Mongolian, his answer was, “No. As a pupil in China, he is busy enough. He has no time to learn Mongolian. He probably won’t have chance to visit my home town”.

After the interview, the researchers were taken on a tour of the campus. They noticed that the administrative office was completely disorganised, with computers, documents and papers strewn everywhere. One staff member explained the chaos by clarifying that the school had only recently moved to the site, which previously belonged to the Mongolian Nationality Secondary School, which in turn had moved

to a new zone under the policy of developing the western region. One significant detail that caught the researchers' attention was that the curricula for all grades in both the Chinese and the Mongolian systems were in Chinese.

4.3 *Model 3*

The distinguishing characteristic of Model 3 schools is that there is only one instruction system in such schools, but it is Chinese rather than Mongolian. However, the Mongolian language is taught as a major subject in such schools. For example, in one MNPS in Guyang County, about 40 km from Baotou City, although all pupils are educated in the Chinese instruction system, nonetheless, they all learnt Mongolian, regardless of their nationality, from Grade One to Six. Among the eight Mongolian staff, there are only two whose first language is Mongolian: these two teach Mongolian. There is only one lesson for each class every week from Grade One to Grade Six. The research team observed a Mongolian lesson in a Grade Three class. The class period was 40 min. The topic of the lesson was transportation, and the teacher wrote words such as *plane*, *ship*, *train* and *bus* in both Chinese and Mongolian on the blackboard, before organising some activities to practise them. During the break, when asked if they liked learning the Mongolian language, the pupils replied, "Yes." In a Grade Six English lesson that was observed, one girl was outstandingly active. After class, she said she had an extra English class during the weekends, and explained the reasons: "My mum told me that if I want to enter a good college, my English must be good." Four other pupils claimed that they learnt "London English" at the weekend and three boys explained that they went to extra Mathematics classes at a tutorial school named "Olympic". The English teacher concluded that an increasing number of parents sent their children to learn English at private tutorial institutions. "They pay serious attention to English", she revealed to us. The vice-principal claimed that, from 2011, English has been taught from Grade One rather than Grade Three.

It was late afternoon by the time the secretary, an important official in the school, was interviewed. She was of Mongolian nationality, but could not speak the language at all. She was in charge of taking the pupils in Grades Four and Five to another school for lessons because their classroom building was being rebuilt. "Look, the playground is like a workshop! What a mess! But we need a new building with better conditions, more spacious classrooms and laboratories. It is expected to be finished next year". She informed us that the number of staff increased from 90 to 160 last year because the schools in different *Xiangs*, the administrative divisions in the countryside, were closing down and the teachers from those schools were incorporated into schools in the town, along with the pupils. "The pupils from far away can go to boarding schools", she commented. As to the teachers from *Xiangs*, she evaluated them as being in an "older age range and lower quality, that is, from a poor educational background."

4.4 *Model 4*

The distinctive feature of MNS in Model 4 is that these schools have no relation whatsoever to Mongolian nationality, except by virtue of their name. A typical example is an Ethnic Primary School in Liang City, with over 80,000 official inhabitants, a few of whom are from minority ethnic groups such as Mongolians, Manchus and so on. Most of the pupils at the school are Han Chinese and they are educated in the Chinese instruction system, much like other local primary schools. One teacher was selected for an interview as she was a Mongolian national. She introduced herself as a native speaker of Chinese and confessed that she could not speak any Mongolian whatsoever. She also revealed an interesting fact, that a few Mongolian nationality pupils could neither speak nor understand Mongolian.

In fact, although our school is called an ethnic primary school, the pupils we accept are the bottom students in our town. If they are not accepted by the First School or the Second School, we do that job, so actually it's an ethnic primary school in name only. The Mongolians in our area have already been assimilated by the Han. They are not different at all, nor are their classes.

As to the importance of languages, she expressed this view:

It depends. For the Mongolians in this area who don't speak Mongolian, the answer is clear, Chinese is the most important. No matter how important the native languages are, they have to use Chinese in their daily lives.

Among the 32 schools, 17 were classified as Model 1 and 13 as Model 2 schools. Models-3 and 4 were each represented by only one school.

5 Discussion

Historically, MNS have existed in all parts of Inner Mongolia since 1949. It is not unusual for children to board at such schools, even in primary schools, although this is rare in mainstream Han schools. This only appears to be a conspicuous factor in Model 1 schools. When exploring the current state of affairs within schools in the IMAR, in terms of the composition of enrolment and other conditions, four models emerged under the name of "Mongolian Nationality Schools". Model 1 schools, which comprise more than half of the 32 sample schools, are like a Mongolian island society, in which almost all pupils, faculty and staff are Mongolian. Some schools (8 schools out of 32) are combined primary and secondary schools. Due to the policy of "giving priority to the development of ethnic education", these schools generally have superior conditions and facilities, when compared to the local Han schools. The children are immersed in their inherited Mongolian culture, conventions and customs. The views of the interviewees were supported by what we observed in the sample schools. A particular case in point is the MNS in Damaoqi, where all of the school buildings were in a Mongolian architectural style and with school notices, decorations and directions in Mongolian. A strong sense of Mongo-

lian ethnic identity was perceived and was very apparent in our communication and interactions with principals and teachers during the course of our interviews.

Model 2 schools differ from Model 1 schools in a numerous ways: firstly, they are located in more densely populated areas; secondly, they offer two language instruction systems, Mongolian and Chinese; and thirdly, these schools do not have a high percentage of Mongolian staff and students. In two of the sample schools, Mongolian, Han Chinese and other ethnic groups each comprised around a third of the pupils. Keeping in mind their geographical locations and the composition of their staff and students, these schools offer a more bilingual environment than Model 1 schools. For instance, when we visited the MNPS in Jining, the teachers and students communicated amongst themselves in both Mongolian and Han. The curricula for all grades, posted on the walls of the office, was in Chinese, as were the signs and directions around campus; whereas in Model 1 schools, the teachers would speak Chinese merely when talking to non-Mongolian speakers and the schedules were all in Mongolian. In the sample school in Jining, an additional unexpected detail was the fact that pupils in the Chinese system learned Mongolian by engaging in conversation and with self-produced textbooks.

The other so-called MNS, a Model 3 school, used the Chinese, rather than the Mongolian instruction system. However, in this school, Mongolian was taught as a major subject from Grade One to Six, regardless of pupils' nationalities. Finally, the last model of school appeared to be no different from local Han schools, but was "the alternative school for pupils with poor academic records", as one interviewee succinctly termed it.

From the survey of these 32 sample schools, the changes are apparent and very obvious; from Mongolian-dominant in Model 1 schools to bilingual in Model 2, then to Chinese-dominant in Model 3, then to completely Chinese in Model 4, with merely the name being associated with MNS. The situation prevalent in these four models of schools, presents a vivid picture of the process of language assimilation, with a shift from Mongolian to Chinese, as more people choose the mainstream Chinese system rather than the Mongolian system, or as the decline in demand for the Mongolian education system forces some schools to switch from Model 1 or Model 2 to Model 3 or Model 4. As China becomes an increasingly industrialised, developed and modern nation, the language, cultural practices and traditional religions of ethnic minorities, including the Mongolians, are currently in serious decline. Although some measures have been put into place to help them survive, this is the steep price of modernisation and urbanisation. What is so obviously discernible in urban areas now is definitely setting the precedent for what will happen in the future. A case in point is Huhhot, the capital of the IMAR, where there is a Model 1 school with a Mongolian language instruction system. It is reasonable to expect Mongolian pupils to go to such schools, yet very few parents actually decide to send their children to the Mongolian school, when compared with the high Mongolian population in the urban area. Of the 2,400 pupils at the MNS in Huhhot, 1,400 are boarders, thus more than half of the pupils live far away from Huhhot. Another example is the interviewee in Jining MNPS, who sent his only son to a Han school because he and his wife thought it would improve his prospects in the future, even

though the parents were both native Mongolian speakers. They desired that their children be immersed into mainstream schools and have the same education as Han Chinese children, right from the initial stage of their education. A majority of the new generation of Mongolians living in urban areas are fast losing their ethnic language roots, and are either monolingual in Chinese or “semi-lingual”, and are not regarded as sufficiently competent in their ethnic language (Baker 2006).

The models of education offered by schools appear to be based upon a few factors. Firstly, MNS are strongly supported by government policies and are distributed throughout the administrative divisions across the region. In Huhhot, there are Model 1 and Model 2 schools. Parents possess the option to decide whether their children will be educated in an MNS, no matter where they live, whether in a city or the remote countryside. Despite the decline in the number of pupils in the Mongolian system, the other three models of MNS continue to struggle for survival. Secondly, in areas with enhanced facilities for transportation and telecommunications, schools are required to choose whether to convert to a Model 2 or Model 3 school, in order to survive. Thirdly, the geographical location of a school also determines its model. All of the four models outlined above exist around Huhhot, where there are satisfactory Model 1 and Model 2 schools, whereas in the more Chinese-dominant areas, over 150 miles from the capital, Model 3 schools also work as effectively as the others. Fourthly, in areas where few parents choose to educate their children in the Mongolian system, Model 4 schools are a frequent feature, although it will not be long before they change their structure from being MNS to becoming general Han schools.

Currently, some Mongolian parents may attempt and engage in serious efforts to be members of an ethnic minority, in order to assist their children to get admission into better schools as well as obtain other privileges. In urban areas, many people prefer simply to retain their minority status, rather than to foster their culture and language. The evidence suggests that it is difficult to find part-time bilingual education classes, even in the regional capital. Issues relating to minority identity or cultural heritage are not important and have little or no influence on their lives, and parents are more likely to send their children to English classes in their spare time, rather than to Mongolian classes. As a result, people tend to use two different phrases to indicate their Mongolian status. If someone tells a person that he belongs to a Mongolian minority, the emphasis is on the status of the person, without any implications as to their language or culture. However, if someone claims he is a Mongolian, or a Mongolian student, that statement involves both status and language information and implies that he speaks Mongolian as his first language and has completed his schooling in Mongolian. What emphasises the difference is the critical point that most Mongolian parents focus on: there are bonus scores for Mongolian students not only when entering college, but for going to secondary even primary schools, and subsequently, being able to gain priority admission to schools with higher standards, superior educational settings and favourable reputations.

In accordance with the implementation of the urbanisation strategy in the *Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the*

Long-Term Programme through to 2020, some remote districts, in which Mongol groups are isolated by poor transport facilities must be merged into urban areas within 5 years. What is happening in Gu Yang, where primary schools at the county level have been moved into towns, is a typical example. As more districts are urbanised, the chances of the Mongolian education system surviving are in decline. Once Mongolians have the freedom to choose, Mongolian will inevitably become the second choice of language and increasingly larger numbers of children will be amalgamated into the mainstream educational system. More schools will inevitably have to convert from being Model 1 or Model 2 schools to becoming Model 3 or Model 4 schools.

The critical issue for the Mongolian Nationality Schools (MNS) is how to maintain an equal balance between fostering the Mongolian language, which is strongly related to retaining their Mongolian identity and cultural characteristics, while at the same time developing competence in Chinese and meeting the challenges of mastering English. Developing these skills to meet the demands of modern society has become a critical issue. It is imperative that Mongolians are given the same rights and opportunities as the Han, whilst retaining their Mongolian identity.

6 Trilingual Education in the MNPS Curriculum

Although the development of the four models of MNPS was confirmed after analysing the collected data, the inclusion of three languages in the curriculum has at all times been the central focus of the project.

6.1 Trilingual Curriculum in the Four Models of Schools

With China's reforms and opening to the outside world since the late 1970s, language education in MNS has faced increasing competition from both Chinese and English. The acquisition of national and international languages such as Chinese and English has been strongly embraced to facilitate modernisation and economic development. Although the term "trilingual education" (Mongolian, Chinese and English) is not yet overtly mentioned in official state policies and rhetoric, the term increasingly receives widespread attention among ethnic groups (Zhao 2010). Apart from Chinese, which is the national and second language, English has been promoted to a significant position as an international language. With the addition of English, language learning at schools has progressed, and subsequently, language learning is now trilingual. Language proficiency and capability are closely related to education, and the arrangement of the curriculum and the subjects included in a course of study can have a substantial effect on language acquisition and learning. Therefore, data on the curricula from Grades Three to Five were collected from the 32 sample schools.

Generally speaking, we can say that trilingual education and trilingualism constitute important features of MNS. The curriculum in MNS generally includes the ethnic language Mongolian, the mainstream language Chinese, and the foreign language English. However, this is not necessarily true for all four models of MNS. In Model 1 or Model 2 schools that essentially use the Mongolian instruction system, Mongolian is the first language to be learned, as Chinese is in mainstream schools, while in Model 3 schools, it is just one of the main subjects in the curriculum, and in Model 4 schools, there is no instruction at all in Mongolian. Chinese was a part of the curriculum of all of our 32 sample schools. Although the age at which Chinese teaching is introduced may vary from Grade One to Grade Two or three, and the amount of time spent on language teaching varies among schools, it is nevertheless safe to state that all Mongolian pupils learn Chinese during their primary school years. As for English, five of the sample schools did not offer any English classes.

In Model 1 and Model 2 schools that use the Mongolian instruction system, Mongolian is traditionally on the curriculum and learned as the first language from Grade One, and sometime even from pre-school and kindergarten or nursery. Classes last around 40–45 min per class and are scheduled five to ten times a week. Mongolian pupils in these particular schools begin Chinese classes in either Grade One or Grade Two, with the classes ranging from three to seven classes a week, and with only one school starting at Grade Three. Most of the schools introduce English classes at Grade Two or Three; six sample schools began English classes at Grade One, while, as noted above, five of the schools did not offer any English classes. The number of classes was most commonly three or four, although the number also ranged from two to five a week. In Model 3 schools, which use the Chinese instruction system, teaching of all three languages, Mongolian, Chinese and English, commenced in Grade One. There were between three and four classes a week for language teaching, depending on the grade in Model 3 schools. The Model 4 school offered neither Mongolian instruction, nor Mongolian classes.

All MNS begin teaching Chinese during the early years. Half of the sample schools introduced Chinese to the curriculum in Grade One and the other half in Grade Two, with only one delaying Chinese instruction until Grade Three. The majority of schools scheduled Chinese classes five times a week, thus most children were invariably taught Chinese every day at school. Four of the sample schools offered between three and seven Chinese classes a week. More than a third of the schools scheduled equal amounts of time for both Mongolian and Chinese classes. Yet others devoted more time to Mongolian classes than Chinese, which appeared to occupy a secondary status on the schedule.

Of the 27 out of 32 schools offering English, 15 introduced English classes at Grade Three, 7 at Grade Two and 5 at Grade One, with an average of three or four classes per week.

The Mongolian language clearly plays an important role in education for young Mongolians in Model 1, 2 and 3 schools, precisely in the same manner as the Chinese language does in mainstream schools. Primary school children in Mongolian schools have at least one Mongolian class on every school day and use Mongolian

language for communication and instruction. In more than half of the MNS, where almost 100% of the staff and students are Mongolians, Mongolian culture and language are well evolved and developed. To cite an example, when visiting Damaoqi, we observed that Mongolian was used for communication both within and outside of the school. In terms of food culture, the school lunch consisted of lamb, mutton chop, broth, sausage or kebab. When we requested rice with our meal, it was served in a mutton broth. From this action, we determined that Mongolians consume meat as their main course, whereas the Chinese prefer grain.

The question, ‘In which grade do you begin to learn Mongolian?’, revealed an unforeseen fact that pupils from 10 schools claimed to have started learning Mongolian during preschool or kindergarten, and pupils from five schools claimed they learned not only Mongolian but also Chinese before commencing primary school. Children who start to learn a second language during nursery or kindergarten are able to acquire that language without formal instruction (Baker and Jones 1998; Thompson 2000). This would support the development of early ethnic education in the IMAR. Many other studies confirm that language acquisition before the age of nine is undoubtedly so important that it can make a vital difference to whether a person becomes monolingual, bilingual or multilingual (Baker 2006). Thus, educators and parents should focus on language education at the kindergarten stage, so as to ensure that larger numbers of children grow up to be bilingual or even trilingual.

For historical and geographical reasons, the relevance and influence of neighbouring Mongolia are unlikely to decline. In the MNPS in Baotou, there have been two classes of pupils from Mongolia in each grade since 2003, and in turn, there are also some Mongolian students from the IMAR studying in Mongolia. The written form of Mongolian, one of the rare languages read from left to right and in a vertical rather than horizontal line, is challenged by the reform of the writing system across the border in Mongolia from “Mongolian” to “New Mongolian”. The new form of the language uses letters very similar to Russian letters, and ultimately Latin ones. Although both Mongolian and New Mongolian are both forms of alphabetic writing, they are from two distinctive systems. Some Mongolian advocators in the IMAR continue to campaign for “New Mongolian” education, to keep pace with the reform of the writing system in Mongolia, which is consanguineously linked in culture. It seems necessary for pupils in Mongolian schools to learn the Mongolian language, employing two systems of writing. Additionally, the Chinese education system also requires pupils to master two different written forms, namely characters and *Hanyu Pinyin*, which is the Romanised version of Chinese characters. Pupils would unquestionably expend greater time and efforts in learning the language, to become familiar with the different forms or to interchange from one to another.

In all the questionnaires gathered from the sample schools, the replies were written in Mongolian or Chinese, and the response to the item, “New Mongolian” was “not required”, making it evident that New Mongolian has yet to become a dominant language. However, the question arises as to what will happen in the future? The future will be dependent on the development and expansion of Mongolia over the border. With its rich resources, the possibility exists that Mongolia will grow

and evolve to become a powerful country. Regardless of the currently prevalent situation in schools, there is apprehension over the prospect of “New Mongolian” taking over from “Mongolian”, at some time in the near future.

Language is defined not simply as a medium of communication but also reflects power relations (Glastra and Schedler 2004). Within the PRC, the dominant position occupied by the Chinese language is self-evident. For Mongolians, knowledge of the majority language leads to an accumulation of human capital, or in other words, better socioeconomic status in mainstream society (Pendakur and Pendakur 2002). The point of ensuring access to equivalent educational resources and ensuring equal rights and opportunities to receive education, is more about acknowledging and endorsing mainstream education, whilst simultaneously preserving Mongolian characteristics, rather than about developing a separate Mongolian language education system. The concrete purpose of teaching Chinese as a second language for Mongolians is to allow them equal access to college education, which therefore conforms to the concept of spending more time on learning Chinese. The aim of bilingual education is to promote the two languages in a relatively monolingual educational environment for language minority children, so that both languages progressively reach the same position in the curriculum, shifting the children from the home minority language to the dominant language (Baker 2006). The collected data provided evidence that all 32 sample schools have introduced Chinese in their curricula, and more than half of these schools have even arranged for the same period of time (three or four classes) to learn the two languages. This data demonstrated that children are presumed to achieve equal linguistic competence in Mongolian and Chinese from the primary school stage itself.

English is a foreign language for Mongolian pupils, but, with the dramatic development of communication technology, national boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred and replaced by the global sharing of information. For Mongolians at school today, the data confirm that less than 20% of students learn English for more than 3 years before they enter college (Dong 2003). However, the situation appears to be fast changing. Firstly, more and more schools are introducing English as a compulsory course, rather than only a few selected schools, as was the case a few years ago. Secondly, in over half the schools, the introduction of English has shifted from Grade One in junior secondary school to Grade Three in primary school. An identical shift is occurring in mainstream schools. Four of the sample schools started teaching English at Grade Two, and three schools actually commenced English classes at Grade One. Thirdly, the number of English classes offered in schools ranged from five to a mere two classes per week, and even no classes at all in five of the sample schools, although these were all small schools, located in remote areas; for instance, sample school 4 had only 87 pupils. Classes consisted of pupils from different grades, and the teacher would lecture one grade of pupils, while the other pupils completed their English language schoolwork tasks and activities. Nevertheless, there are still a number of pupils who only begin to learn English at junior secondary school.

The evidence from the data is predictable to a certain degree. On the one hand, as China becomes an industrialised, developed and modern nation, increasingly

involved in globalisation, international languages become increasingly important. Mongolian schools face growing challenges from both Chinese and English. The acquisition of national and international languages has been strongly embraced by the state government to facilitate modernisation and economic development. The requirements for Mongolians have increased from bilingual Mongolian and Chinese, to trilingual Mongolian, Chinese and a foreign language. Over time, the foreign languages learned in schools have gone from English, Japanese, and Russian, to exclusively English. Moreover, the global use of telecommunications technology makes international communications increasingly uncomplicated and effortless. The awareness and significance of English as an international language should serve an impetus to encourage English education in the IMAR.

On the other hand, the training of teachers does not keep pace with these expanding requirements. The lack of qualified English teachers is one of the key issues encountered in imparting English education in the IMAR. The data from three schools, where the pupils began learning English in Grade One, with the lesson time increasing every week, reflects the growing demand for English. However, some schools had neither the facilities nor the staff to offer English instruction. Even in schools with enhanced facilities and resources, there persists a shortage of qualified teachers. A case in point is the MNPS in Damaoqi. When the head teacher was probed on whether the school experienced any problems with teaching English, she replied that they would require more English teachers, as the teachers with the school at present were “not permanent” teaching staff. She further explained that her group itself comprised of two temporary English teachers.

6.2 Challenges and Ways Forward

Since parents, ethnic intellectuals and local government officials worry that a lack of international languages may exacerbate the educational inequalities between the majority and minority groups (Beckett and MacPherson 2005), attempts have been made to implement trilingual courses in primary and secondary schools, previously termed as “experimental trilingual classes” (Zhao 2010). However, from the data we observe that the “experimental” model has now been extended to almost all Mongolian schools. Three languages play an essential role in the curricula of the sample primary schools.

It is encouraging that the younger generation of Mongolians are growing up to be trilingual and are improving and constantly cultivating their competency in three languages, Mongolian, Chinese and English. Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable to plan for more lessons and therefore devote more time for languages in the curriculum. However, it is vital that the younger generation learn Mongolian as their mother tongue in order to retain their identity, study Chinese to enter mainstream society, and finally, acquire English to meet the challenges and needs of globalisation. The critical argument is that they have a heavier educational burden and responsibility than the Han. When observing a sample school curriculum at random,

it was noted that there were 5 h devoted for teaching Mongolian, 5 h for learning Chinese, and 4 h for imparting English language education, a total of 14 h per week for languages. What is impressive is that when a pupil was questioned about the number of hours he studied languages, he replied with a scowl, "I don't remember exactly, but the schedule is full, too full!" A further problem for Mongolian pupils is the confusion arising from the fact that English and *Hanyu Pinyin* both use the same alphabet, but some of the letters have different pronunciations. Fortunately, "New Mongolian" is not yet required. How difficult would it be for students to learn, if there was one phonetic system for three respective languages? What would be a logical, rational and sensible schedule for learning three languages? How can students develop competence in three languages and how can we set up a scientifically designed curriculum to balance the needs of our modern society? These are crucial issues for ethnic educators, intellectuals, local officials, teachers and even parents to address. Developing a schedule based on evidence from scientific experiments and statistics, rather than what is perceived to be effective and efficient, is a critical topic to be tackled.

In America or Europe, there are two main models of bilingual education; one is the transitional model and the other is the maintenance model. The former aims to shift the child from the home minority language to the dominant, majority language, whereas the latter attempts to foster the minority language, thereby affirming the rights of an ethnic minority group in a nation (Baker 2006). In China, there is an independent system for minority languages for ethnic group students at different levels of education; the case in point being the IMAR. There is a relatively complete Mongolian language system, from primary to higher education. Mongolian children, in most rural areas, finish their education from primary school to college, even if they are totally Mongolian monolinguals. Compared with the bilingual educational systems in America and Europe, it is clear that the Mongolian system is more a maintenance, rather than a transitional system. Perhaps the aim should be to develop a transitional system, to assist and aid children to shift from Mongolian to Chinese, during their compulsory education and ultimately, to merge into the mainstream during their college career.

There are several reasons for ensuring that children develop competence in Chinese before college. First, learning a language is an extended process. Research has proved that it takes 3–5 h for children to develop competence for daily life in the second language (L2), and more notably, it takes a further 2 to 3 years before L2 can be used for academic learning. This is because the language used for acquiring knowledge of Mathematics, Social Studies or Science is relatively different from the language utilised for daily life activities; it is often quite abstract, and there may be fewer concrete visual clues to support meaning (Gibbons 1998).

Currently, in the IMAR, the growing numbers of students in the Mongolian language instruction system are merging into the Chinese mainstream at college level, with 1 year of "pre-college" study to help them keep up with the programmes in the Chinese system. Although signs of inflexibility and maladjustment are undeniably present, the mere fact that most of the students are willing to continue to study in the mainstream, where they are evaluated by similar standards as Chinese students, thus

Table 2 Number of Mongolian students in the mainstream and Mongolian systems

Number	Year			
	2006	2007	2008	2009
Students merging into mainstream system	73	251	408	424
Students remaining in Mongolian system	2008	2820	2877	2985
Total	2081	3071	3285	3409

putting them at risk of comparatively low marks or even failure, is evidence enough that this situation is still worthwhile. As the final point of access for bilingual or trilingual Mongolian students in the Mongolian language system, college education has evolved to meet various transformations over the past several years.

Table 2 indicates that the number of Mongolian students in the Mongolian language system increased from 2,081 in 2006 to 3,409 in 2009. The number of students in “pre-college” increased rapidly from 73 (0.35%) in 2006 to 424 (14.24%) in 2009. From these figures, it is safe to conclude that the number of MNS students blending into mainstream education at the college level demonstrates an increasing trend and therefore, the development of bilingual education has been a positive success.

For students who merge into the mainstream, language plays such an indispensable role that it often proves to be the main barrier for many students and failure at college is almost always due to language difficulties. The purpose of college is to study academically and to nurture the ability to work in a scientific field, rather than to learn languages. However, many students often find themselves struggling to learn new words, inferring translations instead of understanding and summarising what is taught in class, and making notes that omit vital details. Language is crucial for their learning of other subjects. But, their main efforts should be to remain focused and concentrate on their academic fields, rather than on language learning and mastery. Improvement in language learning is so critical that this skill accounts for the difference between success and failure in academic fields.

It is an undeniable fact that there should be more effective and efficient solutions for imparting language training to Mongolian students, such as the 1 year preparation for college. During that year, languages and other courses would be taught by teachers who possess greater sensitivity and understanding of the reasons why language is essential for a well-grounded education, and who, moreover, understand the concept of “language across the curriculum” (James and Garrett 1992). With teachers who are knowledgeable and self-aware, the language strategies used in lectures or classes, facilitate effective and efficient understanding in students. Another practical solution is that other subjects, rather than just language classes, could be taught in Mongolian or Chinese. Bilingual or trilingual education is comparable to acquiring a skill, rather than mere lecturing in class.

When students enter college at ages ranging from 17 to 19, they have already exceeded by a large margin the ideal age (7–11), for acquiring languages naturally. Developing language competence in primary and secondary education appears to be the inevitable solution, as students would have very limited and inadequate time to improve their language abilities in a college curriculum.

Although politically, Mongolian is said to be an official language in the IMAR, it is clear that Mongolian is rarely used in urban centres. Maintaining equilibrium between the majority Chinese language and the minority Mongolian language—or how to educate Mongolians through language instruction into becoming truly bilingual—is an issue that is closely connected to the development and progress of ethnic groups. In the long run, the method adopted to manage this issue will ensure the improvement of the complete minority educational system in the IMAR. The most critical topic in the IMAR is political, which is a major difference from the situation prevalent in Europe. Take the Galician education system as an example. Galicia is one of the 17 autonomous communities that make up the Kingdom of Spain (Lasagabaster and Huguet 2007), and the level of priority given to the minority and majority languages is regulated by Law 3/1983. When completing their statutory education, pupils must be able to speak and write to the same level in Galician as in Spanish (Lasagabaster and Huguet 2007). In China, the teaching of Mongolian is regulated by law, but schooling in the majority language, Chinese, is not. This actually may be the fundamental difference: bilingual language competence should be regulated by law.

With China's dramatic progress toward modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation over the past two decades, the requirements for language education have changed from monolingual to bilingual to trilingual. To meet this need, the Mongolian educational system has also moved forward. Traditional Mongolian Nationality Schools (MNS) have become differentiated and can be classified into four different models. Model 1 schools are Mongolian-dominated and almost all of the pupils and staff are Mongolian. Model 2 schools have two language instruction systems, Mongolian and Chinese, and a more bilingual environment. Model 3 schools use the Chinese instruction system, with the Mongolian language taught as a core subject regardless of pupils' nationality. Model 4 schools differ from the first three models as they only employ the Chinese teaching system.

Regarding the teaching of the three languages—Mongolian, Chinese and English—in MNS, Mongolian is learned as the first language in Model 1 and 2 schools, occupying a principal position in the curriculum and with more than one class imparting Mongolian language training per day. More than half of the sample schools timetabled the same amount of time for teaching Chinese and Mongolian, reflecting the requirement for a new generation of Mongolians to be educated bilingually, with equal competence in both languages. The maximum modification in school curriculums is witnessed in English language instruction. The teaching of English at the primary level first changed from selective to compulsory. Then, in the majority of sampled schools, the grade for introduction of English lessons was amended from junior secondary school grade a few years ago, to primary school Grade Three today. Finally, although some of the smaller sample schools are yet to offer English education, some schools have commenced English classes from primary school Grade One, or even from pre-school. To conclude, a growing number of students from the Mongolian instruction system have merged into the mainstream education system at the beginning of their college careers.

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