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## Trilingual Education and Mongolian Ethnicity

**Abstract** Anxieties about Chinese-Mongolian-English trilingual program in Inner Mongolia reflect three linguistic ideologies, that is, the instrumental and the essentialist among Mongolian elites and the assimilationist among Han elites. Mongolian ethnicity is on trial in front of an upsurge of Chinese nationalism. Both pro and con trilingual education elites agree that the Mongolian language should be maintained, but they differ over the ways it is taught. In China, the nationwide drive to go back to “basics” has also encouraged national minorities to keep their traditional culture alive. Such surviving efforts demand a great measure of artful negotiating skills, necessary compromise, and strategic thinking. The trilingual education program in Inner Mongolia serves as a platform on which contending linguistic ideologies confront each other.

**Keywords** trilingual education, linguistic ideology, Mongolian ethnicity

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\* The authors conducted interviews and surveys on the subject of Inner Mongolian trilingual education in different areas and at multiple times. Prof. Naran Bilik did his surveys and interviews in the middle school attached to the Inner Mongolia Normal University in the summer of 1993, in the winter of 2001, and again in the summer of 2013. Dr. Has Erdene has participated in the China Ministry of Education Project of Humanities and Social Sciences, entitled “Theoretic Reflections on Minority Policies and Regulations in Social Transformations and Their Implementation: Inner Mongolian Case.” He went to the Xilinhot City of the Xilingol League of Inner Mongolia to conduct fieldwork in the Mongolian primary school in December 2011 and April 2012; he made a survey with questionnaires in the Manduh-bulag Primary School (the only primary school at the Somon level) in December 2012.

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## Introduction

In the early 1990s, Mongolian-Chinese-English trilingual education<sup>1</sup> was held up as an effective means to maintain the Mongolian language. After a decade, however, trilingual education is confronted by a new challenge, one not posed by the market economy but by linguistic anxieties resulting from it among Mongolians themselves (Bulag, 2003). Opponents blame the trilingual education program for playing a part in bringing about a mercy death to the Mongolian language in daily life and in schooling. Taking some of the time slots originally allocated to Mongolian classes and assigning them to Chinese and English classes has helped weaken the linguistic health of the Mongolian language.

The conflicting views on the trilingual education program in Inner Mongolia reflect three different linguistic ideologies:<sup>2</sup> instrumental, essentialist, and assimilationist. While the first and the second involve Mongolian elites, many Han elites share the assimilationist third ideology and it echoes an ongoing surge of mainstream nationalism. This assimilationist view accords with an ideal of nationalism that see it as “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner, 1983, p. 1). In their vision, minority language and culture should be assimilated into the Han Chinese as soon as possible for the sake of “security and stability of the nation” and “social and economic efficiency.” However, on the one hand, as a territorial

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<sup>1</sup> By trilingual education, as is in practice in Inner Mongolia, we mean the learning of Chinese and English in addition to Mongolian as well as teaching mainly in Mongolian and later also in Chinese in primary and middle schools. At present, trilingual education starts in primary school where Mongolian is taught at the first year, Chinese the second year, and English the third year. According to Dong et al. (2015) there are “four distinctive models, ranging from those that place a strong emphasis on Mongolian to those that neglect it”: Model I, schools are located in rural areas where pupils and staff are largely Mongolians whose first language is Mongolian; Model II, schools are located in cities where staff and students come from both Mongolians and Han Chinese or other national minorities, and teaching takes place in Mongolian and in Chinese (two systems); Model III, schools are located in cities where there is only one instruction system in Chinese rather than Mongolian, but the Mongolian language is taught as a major subject; Model IV, the “schools have no relation whatsoever to Mongolian nationality, except by virtue of their name.” See F. Dong, Narisu, Y. H. Gou, X. G. Wang, & J. Qiu (2015). Four models of Mongolian nationality schools in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. In A. W. Feng & B. Adamson (Eds.), *Trilingualism in education in China: Models and challenges* (pp. 25–45). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

<sup>2</sup> Linguistic ideology is a cultural system of “ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests.” See J. T. Irvine (1989). Talk isn’t cheap: Language and political economy. *American Ethnologist*, 16(2), 248–267. doi: 10.1525/ae.1989.16.2.02a00040, p. 255.

political unit the nation-state strives to become an ethnically homogenous by “either kills, or expels, or assimilates all non-nationals,” on the other hand, the unwillingness of those non-nationals “to suffer such fates may make the peaceful implementation of the nationalist principle difficult” (Gellner, 1983, p. 2).

Cornered by assimilation pressure on national minorities, Inner Mongolians find themselves in a dilemma: Give up their own language and culture completely or partially for the sake of advantages that assimilation may bring; or keep their language and culture at the cost of such advantages. The ongoing process of discursive conflict, negotiation, and compromise highlights the significance of trilingual education and Mongolian ethnicity in Inner Mongolia. The three linguistic ideologies of instrumentalism, essentialism, and assimilationism converge to a point from which we can form a clearer view of Mongolian ethnicity.

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## Background

In 2010, Mongolians numbered 4,226,093 of the 24,706,321-strong total population of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. Nationwide, the Mongolian population numbered 5,981,840 (DED-SEAC & DCSNE-SSB, 2013, p. 624). The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, founded on 1 May 1947, is the third largest region in China and covers an area of 1,183,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The climate of Inner Mongolia is harsh with frequent droughts and, in pastureland, heavy snows. The pastoral economy predominates in terms of land coverage (75 %). However all Mongolian herders are now settled. While 3 %–4 % of the land is cultivated, an increasing portion of land has been taken up by agriculture or semi-agricultural uses over the last century and a half. Much of this agriculture was first conducted by Han Chinese but now many Mongolians have moved into this activity (Iredale et al., 2001, p. 108). The Mongolian language in China, according to a prevailing view, has three dialects: Oirad in the west, Bargu-buriat in the northeast and Inner Mongolian in the center. The language is still in popular use among Mongolians at home, as well as in publishing, broadcasting, and education.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the government made and implemented national policies that promised to promote national minority education. Such policies were relevant to the results of the “National

Minority Category Confirmation” (*minzu queren*), which started life as the *minzu shibie* (National Minority Identification) and aimed to confirm or recover some of the names of China’s minorities. According to Qin (2013), the 56 national ethnicities (*minzu*) in China came about due to the combined results of self-identification of some minority elites and confirmation by the central government, and they were not “invented.” This work confirmed that China comprised of a total of 56 nationalities (*minzu*)<sup>3</sup>. Language<sup>4</sup> and history are important factors to be considered for such official confirmation although other “measurements” were also taken according to Stalin’s definition of the “four commons” criteria for a nation.<sup>5</sup> In the early years of the People’s Republic, the Communist Party designed a series of preferential policies to allow national minorities to maintain their language and culture. From 20 to 28 September 1951, the Ministry of Education held a national meeting on minority education. In his report to Session 112 of the Government Administration Council, Education Minister Ma Xulun stated that for nationalities such as Mongolians, Koreans, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Kazaks, it is a must that they use their own languages and writing in education, and that special funds should be set aside for developing national minority education. Session 112 passed four important plans, namely, Directives on Strengthening National Minority Education, Resolution on

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<sup>3</sup> In Chinese *minzu* has many English equivalents depending on contexts: nation, nationality, ethnicity, ethnic group, people, and national minority, and scholars in China differ over its English translation. Cf. X. F. Zhou (1999). “1998年‘民族’概念暨相关理论问题专题讨论会”综述 [The discussion of “minzu” conception and its relevant theoretic issues: An overview of the 1998 symposium]. 世界民族 [Journal of World Peoples Studies], (1), 78–81. In this article we use “ethnicity” as equivalent to *minzu*, which differs from “ethnic group” which refers to a special state-recognition status.

<sup>4</sup> China now has over 120 languages and 30 writing systems. Starting from 1950s, under government organization, linguists in China designed 14 writing systems for 10 national minorities.

<sup>5</sup> “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up” (Stalin, 1942, p. 12). Such “nation” is based on one important precondition, that is, the nation takes shape only at the prime stage of capitalism, which has created a huge army of proletariat, thus laying the class foundation for building a modern state. Those pre-capitalism people should better be called nationality or *narodnast’* according to the Soviet nationality theory. This identification project, however, does not always follow linguistic criterion, instead, it sometimes switches to other parameters, either in lump sum or individually, such as history, ethnic origin, or self-other identities. For example, the Zhuang and Buyei, which belong to the same language branch, were classified into separate ethnicities; the Western Yogur speaking a Turkic language, and the Eastern Yogur speaking a Mongolian language, were merged into one Yogur ethnicity. J. Stalin (1942). *Marxism and the national question: Selected writings and speeches*. New York, NY: International Publishers.

National Minority Educational Administrative Organs, Working Program on Training National Minority Teaching Staff, and Temporary Solution for Treatment of National Minority Students (Han, 1998, pp. 103–104, 109). By the time of the founding of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in May 1947, there were only six professional schools and 935 students, including 250 Mongolian students, in the region. By 1953, with full support from the central government, the number and variety of schools increased to include 1,140 primary schools with 3,387 teaching staff and 93,166 Mongolian pupils, five Mongolian middle schools and 22 Mongolian-Han polytechnic schools with 243 Mongolians teaching staff, and two colleges with 125 Mongolian students and 16 Mongolian teachers (Han, 1998, pp. 104, 107–108). Mongolian textbooks were also compiled and published, largely based on translations of Chinese textbooks and teaching materials adapted from the Mongolian Republic. By 1950, sixty Mongolian textbooks and reference books were published, and 573,150 copies made (Table 1).

**Table 1** Catalogue of Mongolian Textbooks for Primary and Middle Schools Published by the Culture & Education Department of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Government by 1950 (unit: copy)

	1st Edition	2nd Edition
Primary School: First–Third Year		
Mongolian, Book 1–8	172,500	88,000
Math, Book 1–8	124,500	50,100
Elementary Knowledge, Book 1–4	28,000	11,300
Primary School: Forth–Sixth Year		
Mongolian, Book 1–4	4,800	3,000
Math, Book 1–4	4,800	900
History, Book 1–4	4,800	1,500
Geography, Book 1–4	4,500	350
Basic Political Knowledge, Book 1–4	4,800	1,150
Nature, Book 1–4	4,650	800
Total:	353,350	157,100
Teaching Method for Math in Mongolian	1,000	
Mongolian Grammar	8,000	
Mongolian Teaching Guideline for Primary School: First–Third Year	1,500	

*(To be continued)*

	<i>(Continued)</i>	
	1st Edition	2nd Edition
Nomenclature for Primary School: First–Third Year	1,500	
Nomenclature for Primary School: Fourth–Sixth Year	200	
Generalization for Education	1,000	
Children’s Book 1–2	6,000	
Mongolian for Middle School, Book 1, 2, 4	1,000	
Textbook on Production	6,000	
Literacy Book	21,000	
Lunar Calendar	2,500	
Textbook for Winter	3,000	
Readings for the Masses	10,000	
Total:	62,700	
Total (1st and 2nd Edition): 60 in category	573,150	

Source: D. Han (Ed.). (1998). 中国少数民族教育史 [A history of national minority education], 第二卷 [Vol. II]. 昆明, 中国: 云南教育出版社; 南宁, 中国: 广西教育出版社; 广州, 中国: 广东教育出版社 [Kunming, China: Yunnan Education Publishing House; Nanning, China: Guangxi Education Publishing House; Guangzhou, China: Guangdong Education Publishing House], pp. 105–106.

For all these years, except during the period of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party has always honored its preferential treatment of national minorities. According to the newly revised 2001’s *Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy*: “Autonomous agencies in ethnic autonomous areas guarantee the freedom of the nationalities in these areas to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and their freedom to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs” (National People’s Congress, 2001, Chapter I, Art. 10).

Autonomous agencies of an ethnic autonomous area persuade and encourage cadres of the various nationalities to learn each other’s spoken and written languages. Cadres of Han nationality will learn the spoken and written languages of the local minority nationalities. While learning and using the spoken and written languages of their own nationalities, cadres of minority nationalities should also learn the spoken and written Chinese language commonly used throughout the country. (National People’s Congress, 2001, Chapter V, Art. 49)

On 6 June 1980, the Inner Mongolian autonomous government approved a

*Report on Suggestions about Restoration and Development of National Minority Education* by the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau. The *Report* reiterates the importance of teaching Mongolian children in Mongolian in cases where they know Mongolian, and teaching them Mongolian in addition in cases where they no longer know Mongolian. It requests that the supply of Mongolian textbooks be readily accessible, and that conditions are created under which classes that are taught in Mongolian should be opened at Inner Mongolia University, Inner Mongolia Agricultural and Animal Husbandry College, Inner Mongolia Forestry College, and that in professional schools courses in Mongolian should be provided on finance and trade, postal communications, health, animal husbandry, ranching, and hydraulic engineering. In 1988, the Planning Committee, the Finance Bureau and the Education Bureau of the autonomous government signed “goal management contracts” for implementing the *liangzhu yigong* guideline in the pasturelands, designating public national minority primary and middle schools that put the stress on boarding schools and scholarships. By 1988, there were 23 university majors taught in Mongolian (see Table 2):

**Table 2** Inner Mongolia University Majors Taught in Mongolian in 1988

Universities	Majors Taught
Inner Mongolia University	Mongolian Language and Literature, Journalism
Inner Mongolia Engineering College	Mechanics (Mongolian class teaching largely in Chinese)
Inner Mongolia Agriculture and Animal Husbandry College	Animal Husbandry, Veterinary Science, Ranching
Inner Mongolia Forestry College	Forestry
Inner Mongolia Mongolian Medicine College	Mongolian Medicine, Mongolian Pharmacy
Inner Mongolia Normal University	Political Education, History, Geography, Teaching Methods, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Physical Education, Music, Fine Arts, Mongolian Language and Literature
Inner Mongolia National Minority Normal College	Mongolian Language and Literature, Teaching Methods, Physics, Chemistry, Physical Education
Ju'ud Mongolian Normal School	Mongolian Language and Literature, Teaching Methods, Political Education
Hailar Normal School	Mongolian Language and Literature, Physics, Math, Political History
Inner Mongolia Finance College	Business, Finance
Inner Mongolia Mongolian Professional School	Translation, Journalism

Source: D. Han (Ed.). (1998). 中国少数民族教育史 [A history of national minority education], 第二卷 [Vol. II]. 昆明, 中国: 云南教育出版社, 南宁, 中国: 广西教育出版社, 广州, 中国: 广东教育出版社 [Kunming, China: Yunnan Education Publishing House, Nanning, China: Guangxi Education Publishing House, Guangzhou, China: Guangdong Education Publishing House], pp. 148–149.

By 1990, there were 153 national minority kindergartens (out of a total of 630), 3,027 national minority primary schools (out of 14,634), 422 standard national minority middle schools (out of 2,058) and 37 national minority professional schools (out of 347). In more than 30 professional schools (out of 81) and 10 universities and colleges (out of 19), courses and classes were taught in Mongolian. In 1991, enrolment of minority students at professional schools was 12,879 and at universities and colleges was 8,576 (Iredale et al., 2001, p. 114).

By 2010, there were 133 national minority kindergartens with 39,820 children; 423 national minority (largely Mongolian) primary schools with 182,489 students; 173 national minority lower middle schools with 103,582 students; 56 national minority higher middle schools with 71,332 students. However, a national minority school does not necessarily teach in a minority language. Out of 133 national minority kindergartens, 112 were taught in Mongolian involving a student population of 31,937; out of 423 national minority lower middle schools, 148 were taught in Mongolian involving a student population of 70,741; out of 56 national minority higher middle schools, 45 were taught in Mongolian involving 47,568 Mongolian students; and out of 37 universities and colleges, there were 17 where 101 majors were taught in Mongolian involving 24,968 Mongolian students.

It is important to note that there is a gap between what is stated on paper and what happens in practice. Although there are impressive numbers of Mongolian speakers in Inner Mongolia who attend Mongolian schools and universities, the general situation and direction of development are not optimistic. The symbolic as well as practical power of minorities' languages, including Mongolian, is under serious challenge. With widening marketization and weakening autonomy in Inner Mongolia, the Mongolian language is losing ground to Chinese in "capital." Most Mongolian residents in Hohhot, capital of Inner Mongolia, send their children to kindergarten, primary school, and middle schools, or classes therein, where teaching takes place in Chinese, not in Mongolian. A similar situation prevails in other cities and towns in Inner Mongolia where the major medium of communication is Chinese. Some Mongolian parents would first send their children to classes taught in Mongolian and then redirect them to those taught in Chinese, where students are prepared to go to better middle schools, colleges or even renowned universities outside the Autonomous Region. Again,



graduates from taught-in-Chinese schools have a better chance of finding a job or a good job. It is a well-known fact that Chinese as a nationwide, official language has gathered all possible “capital” for social promotion and economic advancement, which is easily explained partially by the large presence of the Han majority population in the Autonomous Region<sup>6</sup> and politico-economic advantages facilitated by the Chinese language.

According to an analysis of 282 interviews with migrant households in Hohhot, consisting of 133 minority (largely Mongolian) households and 149 Han Chinese households conducted by Iredale et al. (2001), 46.6 % of the minority (Mongolian) migrants had university or professional school level education, a much lower proportion of Han Chinese migrants, that is, 8.7 %, had these levels of education, and one quarter had only primary schooling or none at all. Prior to 2001, employment status shows that 83.9 % of Han Chinese migrants were employed compared with 48.9 % of minority migrants, though this indicates a high rate of selection of student minority migrant households (pp. 125–126). The language factor can explain such discrepancy partially or largely: In Hohhot where Han Chinese are in the majority, Chinese is the language for most professional positions. Though most Mongolians in Hohhot would prefer to send their children to Mongolian classes or schools, they actually send them to receive education in Chinese. The language hierarchy nationwide indicates that English or some other major foreign languages are at the top, Chinese is second—both being means for social promotion and economic gain—and Mongolian is at the bottom (Bilik, 1998, p. 73). Our new research in 2010 supports this finding. According to our statistics based on the employment rate of graduates in X university in 2007, involving the three majors of journalism, law, and English, the journalism graduates who took classes taught in Chinese had an employment rate of 68.33 % while their counterpart who took classes in Mongolian had an employment rate of 33.33 %; the law graduates who studied in Chinese had an employment rate of 72.64 % versus their counterpart of 59.62 %; the English graduates who studied in Chinese had an employment rate of 51.85 % versus their counterpart of 18.52 % (see Fig. 1).

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<sup>6</sup> The Mongolian-Han population ratio was 4,226,093: 19,650,687 in 2010, nearly 1:5.

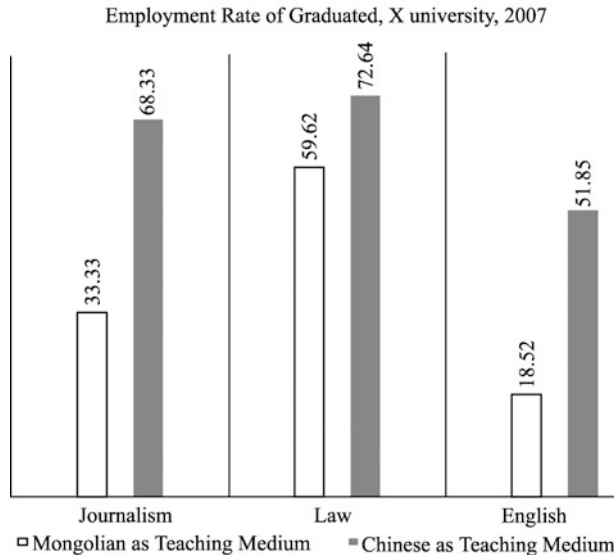


Fig. 1 Employment Rates of Graduates, X University in 2007

Source: G. H. Bao (2010). 阜新县蒙古族人的语言态度及其对语言能力和语言使用的影响 [Attitudes of the Mongolians in Fuxin Mongolian Autonomous County and their influence on linguistic competence and language use]. 考试周刊 [Examination Weekly], (39), 46–47.

The low rate of graduate employment is one of the major factors that discourages Mongolian students from taking up schooling in Mongolian. According to one study, out of 150,000 Mongolians in Fuxin Mongolian Autonomous County of Liaoning province, only 80,000 still use Mongolian; among the Mongolian speakers, those of 70 and above prefer Mongolian while those of 25 and below prefer Chinese, and those between 70 and 25 have no preference<sup>7</sup> (Bao, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> The Mongolian population takes up 20.5 % of the total population of which Han is the majority. The county has three Mongolian kindergartens, 87 Mongolian primary schools, 22 Mongolian “teaching localities,” nine 9-year compulsory Mongolian schools, and two high schools. There are 20,000 Mongolian students of which 3,530 received education in Mongolian, and the rest in Chinese. According to Bao (2010), who worked with 80 Mongolian respondents from a village, 58, mostly senior persons, think that Mongolian is nice to hear while 22 feel Chinese sound better, and again 31 think Mongolian is convenient to use while 49, mostly junior persons, think Chinese is more convenient. Interestingly, 72 respondents take Chinese to be more useful and only eight take Mongolian to be more useful. As for language prestige, 20, mostly senior persons, think that Mongolian has more prestige while 60 take Chinese to be more prestigious. Age-wise, more than 95 % senior persons think that Mongolian sounds nice, intimate, and convenient, while 100 % junior persons under age 25 think that Chinese sounds nice, intimate, and convenient.

Generally speaking, Mongolian-medium classes are decreasing in number, though there is some significant recovery in kindergartens since 2007, largely due to government efforts. For example, in 2001, Mongolian-medium primary graduates number 44,287 and primary freshmen number 35,326 region-wide; in 2008, Mongolian-medium primary graduates dropped to 16,943, and primary freshmen to 24,866 (see Table 3).

**Table 3** Statistics of Mongolian-Medium Primary Schools and Kindergartens (2001–2008)

Year	Primary School		Kindergarten	
	graduates	freshmen	graduates	freshmen
2001	44,287	35,326	23,101	27,527
2002	45,969	39,428	21,931	24,574
2003	43,637	38,853	22,371	22,472
2004	33,108	38,780	19,733	21,126
2005	29,162	25,780	18,208	18,838
2006	28,242	25,445	15,711	17,947
2007	27,264	25,362	16,720	18,113
2008	16,943	24,866	17,309	21,529

Source: 内蒙古自治区 2001–2009 学年初教育统计提要 [Start of school year educational statistics abstracts for Inner Mongolia 2001–2009]. 呼和浩特, 中国: 内蒙古自治区教育厅发展规划处 [Hohhot, China: Development Planning Department, Inner Mongolia Education Bureau].

### Trilingual Education in the Middle School Attached to the Inner Mongolia Normal University (MSAIMNU)

MSAIMNU is one of the key middle schools in the Autonomous Region and recruits both Mongolian and Han students. The school was established in 1954, over a half a century ago, and is famous for its teaching-in-Mongolian classes (*minzu ban*), for which it has thrice received honors from the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau. For well over 30 years, the school has run a Mongolian-taught-as-supplementary class for urban Mongolians (Mongolian-supplementary class),<sup>8</sup> Chinese-taught-as-supplementary class for urban

<sup>8</sup> That is class run for urban Mongolians where courses are taught in Chinese and Mongolian is added to the syllabus as supplementary.

Mongolians (Chinese-supplementary class),<sup>9</sup> and a taught-in-Mongolian class for students from the pasturelands (pastureland class)<sup>10</sup>. The pastureland class has always come out better than the others since starting in 1963 and has been doing even better since 1983. In 1984 the school had 48 teachers who taught Mongolian or in Mongolian. The six teachers who teach Chinese are all graduates from the Chinese Department of Inner Mongolia Normal University. The history of the school and its present structure of education in the Mongolian language have made it an ideal place to try out new methods that could point to a possible solution to the dilemma in which Mongolian language and education has found itself.

According to the school master Sechen Jorokt, due to historical, social, and environmental circumstances, national minority education in the Autonomous Region is underdeveloped. In response to the rapidly changing situation of marketization, Sechen Jorokt and his colleagues started to plan and open an experimental trilingual class in 1992 for the sake of “training a team of transnational professionals who master the most up-to-date technology” (personal communication, 1993, 2001). The trial program has received both support and protest from Mongolians. At that time, the Mongolian language has already felt the challenge of a market economy that favors world languages such as English and the national language of Chinese. To save Mongolian and also to enable or empower Mongolian youngsters in the job market after graduation, Sechen Jorokt, who was then headmaster of MSAIMNU in Hohhot, made a plan that would reinforce Chinese teaching, adding English class at the level of higher middle school at the cost of reducing Mongolian classes. It also meant that intensive Mongolian education would only be available at the lower middle school level and would give way to English and more Chinese at the higher middle level. This line of argument stands on the popular view that English is the carrier of global science and technology and so is Chinese at the national level.

According to the design, teachers of English will be Chinese speakers so that both English, the subject of teaching, and Chinese, the language in which the class is taught, will be built into the class environment and tutorial interaction.

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<sup>9</sup> That is class run for urban Mongolians where courses are taught in Mongolian and Chinese is added to the syllabus as supplementary.

<sup>10</sup> That is class for Mongolian students from the pasturelands who receive education in Mongolian, learning Chinese and English by choice.

However, the experiment has not gone ahead without dispute. The protesters argued that Sechen Jorokt was pushing the Mongolian language into secondary or tertiary status in violation of the Autonomous Law that stipulates clearly that the Autonomous Region has the power to develop education and ethnic culture, and the power to develop and employ local spoken and written languages. They emphasized that language is the essence of a culture and indispensable when people want to keep their identity and be included in the community. When one of the article's authors was in Hohhot conducting fieldwork in 1993, his former teacher Bator asked to accompany him to launch a protest against Sechen Jorokt on the grounds that he had degraded Mongolian to the level of lower middle school and had failed to make best use of the autonomous region's right.

Despite strong opposition, Sechen Jorokt won support from the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau that issued some important documents and directives to clear the way for the trilingual trial. Sechen Jorokt's proposal received a prompt reply from the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau in 1992: "In accordance with a demanding situation of reform and opening up, and in order to deepen reform of ethno-national education and to train ethno-national professionals of adaptability, we agree with your proposal on opening a pastureland-English experimental class recruiting from the 10th grade of the 1992 pastureland class provided that both parents and students so recruited be willing to come." It also stated: "This experiment is a great project on ethno-national education reform in the Autonomous Region" (Sechen Jorokt, 1998, p. 4). In 1996, built on its previous successful records, the trilingual class started to recruit students from 11 leagues and cities in the Autonomous Region with enrolment rates increasing from 100 to 135.

On 7 April 2000, the 15th Session of the Standing Committee of the 9th People's Congress of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region passed *Regulations on National Minority Education in Hohhot*. The regulations contain many important articles that guarantee ethno-national education both in its scale and quality.

Primary schools where courses are taught in minority languages should also teach Chinese; a foreign language course should be offered in middle schools while a foreign language course could be taught wherever possible. For ethno-national schools where courses are taught in Chinese, a minority language course and a foreign language course should be offered at the primary level and a supplementary minority language course can

also be offered at the middle school level when conditions permit. (Standing Committee, 2000, Art. 16)

The trilingual education class opens 12 courses that include Mongolian, math, politics, physics, chemistry, history, geography, biology, physical education, and manual skills, which are taught in Mongolian; Chinese and English are taught in Chinese by Han teachers. Chinese, Mongolian, and English are compulsory courses and university admission exams cover the six subjects of English, Chinese, Mongolian, math, physics, and chemistry. For English, students must learn in three years what Chinese classes learn in six years. The Education Bureau gave some preferential treatment to the experimental class: Students from such class do not have to attend any exams until the nationwide university entrance exams. Of the six subjects, math, physics, chemistry and English each count as 150 points and all go towards the overall score, while half of the sum of Mongolian (specially designed for trilingual class graduates) and Chinese points will count (the total for the two subjects will be 150). The six subjects will total 750 points in all (see Table 4 below for MSAIMNU school students entering universities).

**Table 4** MSAIMNU School Student Entering Universities (1995–2001)

Year	Students	Participants in University Entrance Exams	Successful Examinees	Examinees Entering National Key Universities
1995	37	33	28	11
1996	36	36	36	20
1997	34	33	32	10
1998	32	32	27	5
1999	83	82	73	26
2000	70	67	64	47
2001	70	70	65	41

By 2013, the trilingual program has been consolidated into the three departments of Chinese, Mongolian, and foreign languages with regard to teaching media. The Mongolian department has over 700 students in lower-middle and higher-middle school classes, 18 in all. In 2012, amongst the top 10 students who sat national entrance exams for science taught in Mongolian, MSAIMNU had eight; for liberal arts, it had four. The school now recruits

students from 12 leagues and cities in the autonomous region. Twenty two years have passed since the first experiment of trilingual education at MSAIMNU and the results are dramatic. In April 2013, the author paid a visit to Temurbagan, head of the registrar's office of MSAIMNU. He apparently has reservations about the trilingual education program, quite different from Sechen Jorokt, the retired ex-school master who were enthusiastic and confident about the program. The head of the registrar's office said that the case of MSAIMNU was an exception rather than the rule because it recruited the best students regionally and turned out the best results. The author tried to interview Sechen Jorokt, but he declined saying over the phone that he had nothing more to say. Apparently he was under tremendous pressure from his compatriots who, confronting a new wave of mainstream nationalism and cultural populism, turned against his earlier version of trilingual education program that had put more emphasis on English and science rather than Mongolian language, culture, and history. In 2014 we interviewed 10 Mongolians (one retired official and nine teachers/researchers, all fluent Mongolian speakers<sup>11</sup>) during our Spring Festival visit to Hohhot. They all worried about the future of the Mongolian language, and wondered if the trilingual education program could really help. It seems that it is a matter of Mongolian competency of the students. All the interviewees insist that Mongolian is identical to Mongolian-ness, a source of pride and dignity, and the learning of English should not compromise students' competency in Mongolian. How can a Mongolian be a Mongolian without knowing his or her mother tongue?

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## Discussion

The increasingly heated debate over the trilingual education program in Inner Mongolia took place at a time when nationalism replaced "class" in Russia, China, and other former socialist countries (Connor, 1984, 1994). All former socialist states are busy searching for old cultural symbols or inventing them when needed. Top Chinese leaders are determined to embrace traditional values of, for example, Confucianism, to boost national confidence. National minorities have to find their own solution by revival or recasting. Meanwhile, many

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<sup>11</sup> Mongolians who cannot speak Mongolian can have a different view, or at least can have divided opinions.

nationalistic Han elites have expressed the view, repeatedly, that the central government should nullify the system of Regional National Autonomy and Chinese should replace minority languages once and for all. Assimilating discourses are overwhelming, reinforced by the fear of minority nationalism that may lead to territorial secession and terrorism (Ma, 2007, 2012, pp. 192–253; Sun, 2011). This assimilationist approach has won support from most Han elites, intellectuals and officials alike. Foremost among assimilationists are Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, researchers at the Center for China Study at Tsinghua University, who called for moving from “interaction” (*jiaowang*) and “interchange” (*jiaoliu*) to “intermingling” (or integration, *jiaorong*). They recourse to the notion of the “melting pot,” which they have mistaken as the current and successful US policy towards its ethnic minorities (Hu & Hu, 2011).

The trilingual education debate among Mongolian elites reflects different linguistic ideologies. For instrumentalists, moral loading aside, the relationship between the Mongolian language and society in general should be reassessed according to a rational calculation of the present situation. In Inner Mongolia, the Han outnumber Mongolians by 5:1; the Mongolian way of life together with their language have been undergoing rapid transformations. The political topography is not in Mongolians’ favor, and economically they are vulnerable. Confronting waves of new challenges from a globalized market economy and a new surge of Chinese nationalism, Mongolian elites have to make an immediate decision: whether to switch to Chinese for smoother social mobility and economic advantages at the cost of Mongolian competence, or hang on to their mother tongue at the cost of better social and economic advancement. The instrumentalists chose to give up partial Mongolian competence in exchange for fuller participation in mainstream society. The pro-trilingual education elites argue that in face of the brutal fact of an unavoidable sinicization process, taking the line of least resistance will be of more help for Mongolian students many of whom cannot find a job in cities since they are neither fluent in Chinese nor in a major foreign language such as English. Knowing Mongolian (basic level), Chinese, and English will not only facilitate their social and economic advancement, but also help maintain some basic level of Mongolian.

Those elites who are against trilingual education argue that Mongolians will not be full members of society and will not have the dignity of a “normal person” without competence in their mother tongue. They do not accept the instrumentalist



approach, and take a strongly essentialized relativist position, arguing that language reflects human interests and imposes culturally specific order on sensible experience. It means that the Mongolian language orders sensible experiences, which are inscribed in the linguistic categories of the Mongolian community. This strikes a sympathetic cord with followers of German thinkers of the 19th century. Johann Herder believed language and culture are mutually dependent, and each language has “an irreducible spiritual individuality” (Foley, 1997, p. 193); Wilhelm von Humboldt asserted, “[A] nation’s and culture’s mental quality determines the sort of language its people have” (Foley, 1997, p. 194). According to Mongolian essentialists, the challenge to the Mongolian language corresponds to the challenge to Mongolian personality, worldview, symbolic universe, politico-economic positions, and practices.

Both pro and con trilingual education elites agree that the Mongolian language should be maintained, but they differ over the distribution of timeslots dedicated to teaching Mongolian, Chinese, and English. Those against trilingual education are not necessarily against the program per se; rather, they are more concerned with the decreasing competence of Mongolian students in their mother tongue because of reduced teaching hours of and in the Mongolian language. As long as the program guarantees an adequate level of Mongolian education and maintains the competence of students in Mongolian, they have no reason to oppose it. Indeed, some of them were activists in promoting the program until they then changed their minds.

For a long time to come, the mainstream assimilationist ideology, and the instrumentalist and essentialist ideologies among the Mongolian elites, will coexist in a relationship of “structural coupling”<sup>12</sup>. Conflict, negotiation, and

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<sup>12</sup> “We speak of structural coupling whenever there is a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between two (or more) systems.” H. R. Maturana & F. J. Varela (1992). *The tree of knowledge: Biological basis of human understanding* (Rev. ed.). Boston, MA: Shambhala, p. 75. “This means that two (or more) autopoietic unities can undergo coupled ontogenies when their interactions take on a *recurrent* or more stable nature. We have to keep this clearly in mind. Every ontogeny occurs within an environment; we, as observers, can describe both as having a particular structure such as diffusion, secretion, temperature. In describing autopoietic unity as having a particular structure, it will become clear to us that the interactions (as long as they are recurrent) between unity and environment will consist of reciprocal perturbations. In these interactions, the structure of the environment only *triggers* structural changes in the autopoietic unities (it does not specify or direct them), and vice versa for the environment. The result will be a history of mutual congruent structural changes as long as the autopoietic unity and its containing environment do not disintegrate: there will be a *structural coupling*” (p. 75).

compromise between these linguistic ideologies form “a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence” between them. Such structural coupling is not limited to thinking and theorizing; it builds itself in bodily memories and corporal practices. Linguistic ideologies configure the sensible world, which reproduces the corresponding ideologies in the process of configuration. The interacting parties readjust their own mental models while “triggering” structural changes outside it of which it is component. It reminds us of Giddens’s theory of structuration, which emphasizes the “duality of structure,” placing a unified stress on both agency and structure in an attempt to move beyond such dualism.<sup>13</sup> Ethno-national relations as reflected in language education in Inner Mongolia has three implications:

1. Interactive readjustments with the necessary of compromises and reconciliation, especially on the part of the minority;
2. History of recurrent interactions leading to structural congruence between different linguistic ideologies;
3. An ongoing process of embodied practice.

When ethno-national communities can meet their basic livelihood needs, cultural survival becomes the priority. In China, the nationwide drive to go back to “basics,” such as traditional family values and Confucianism, has also encouraged national minorities to respond in proportion by keeping their own endangered “basics” alive. However, such surviving efforts demand a great measure of artful negotiating skills, necessary compromise, and strategic thinking. The trilingual education program in Inner Mongolia is a balancing point where the three linguistic ideologies of assimilationism, instrumentalism, and essentialism converge.

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<sup>13</sup> “Giddens’s theoretical approach emphasizes that structures should be conceptualized as ‘rules and resources’: the application of rules which comprise structure may be regarded as generating differential access to social, economic, cultural, and political resources.” A. Elliott (2001). Anthony Giddens. In A. Elliott & B. S. Turner (Eds.), *Profiles in contemporary social theory* (pp. 292–303). London, England: Sage Publications, p. 295.

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