Profile

There are nearly 6 million Mongols in China, mainly concentrated in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) on China’s northern border with Mongolia and Russia. With only a few official crossing points, the border between IMAR and Mongolia has been the site of tensions as China has sought to enforce its policies abroad, such as in December 2016 when China temporarily closed a vital border crossing following a visit by the Dalai Lama to Mongolia.

The Mongolian language is part of the Mongolic language family, with the majority of speakers in China using the Chahar, Oyirad and Barghu-Buryat dialects. Mongolian written language was adopted some 800 years ago, under Genghis Khan. It is modeled on an older form of vertically written Uyghur script. Most Mongols are Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhists, though some also maintain shamanist practices. They tend to be concentrated in the northern and central parts of the IMAR, although there are also substantial numbers in Xinjiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Yimin provinces. State-sponsored or voluntary Han migration to the IMAR has long since made the Mongols a minority in their own land.

Many Mongols still have a close connection with the traditional pastoral nomadism and culture of their ancestors, though this has been weakened in many areas of China, where this lifestyle is under threat from environmental degradation, urbanization and forced urbanization or other governmental pressures. The IMAR is rich in natural resources and open land, which has fuelled successive waves of exploitative land and resource grabs sparking episodes of resistance from ethnic Mongolians and harsh responses from the State. Violence against protesting Mongolians, sometimes resulting in death, often proceeds with impunity.

Historical context

What is now known as the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was part of a border region often contested between the Chinese and Mongolian empires. After the collapse of the latter, it and many Mongols would firmly come under the sway of Chinese and Manchu rule early in the seventeenth century. The Mongols also began adopting Tibetan Buddhism in the sixteenth century, after the conversion of their ruler Altan Khan. It was Altan Khan who bestowed the title ‘Dalai Lama,’ which means ocean of wisdom, on Sonam Gyaltsen, who became the 3rd Dalai
Lama, the honorific being retroactively applied to his two former teachers. A firm link remains between Tibetan Buddhism and Mongol culture. Han historical narratives attempt to paint this incident as evidence of the subordination of the Dalai Lama to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), as part of its attempts to deny the history of a Tibet independent of Chinese authority.

During the period when the Kuomintang exercised control as the government of the Republic of China after 1912, there were efforts to boost the Han Chinese population of Inner Mongolia. This contributed to the emergence of a separatist movement among the Mongolian minority, which was able to take advantage of the Chinese Civil War and proclaim independence in 1935 as the short-lived Mongolian Federation. This was brought to an end with Japanese control of the whole region in 1937.

In 1947, the Chinese Communists established the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, though this only included at the time Mongols living in the Hulunbuir region. In 1949, there was a further attempt by Mongolian nationalists to set up an independent Inner Mongolian government, which failed. Over the next decade, the IMAR was expanded to include most, though not all, areas with a majority Mongolian population giving the region its present-day elongated shape.

The treatment of Mongols vacillated with the nationalities policies of the Chinese Communist Party after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. It was particularly brutal during the Cultural Revolution, with the IMAR itself being dismembered and distributed among surrounding provinces until 1979. As one of the largest minorities in the country, and as such one of the groups perceived as potentially susceptible to separatist or ‘splittist’ tendencies, the Mongols were perhaps specific targets from 1967 to 1977. Official figures show 16,222 Mongols were killed, but some Mongols assert that the number of ethnic Mongols killed was much higher, nearing 100,000 for the whole period. From this point onward, Chinese authorities reduced the use of the Mongolian language and adopted other measures that would lead to a gradual replacement of Mongolian cadres by Han Chinese officials. This and various other government policies gave rise to Mongolian protests in 1981, which led to further large-scale demonstrations until 1989, when the movement was crushed during the Tiananmen Square demonstration in Beijing.

Mongols today are a minority in their own region. This is the result of government policies from the beginning of the twentieth century (which became large scale from the 1950s), which encouraged Han transmigration. In 1949, Mongols were probably 20 per cent of the population, though about 50 per cent in the eastern part of the region. The majority of Mongols live in the IMAR, with additional populations residing in semi-autonomous prefectures such as in Qinghai and Xinjiang. The largest is the Bayingol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang. While in the 1950s Mongols comprised 35 per cent of the Prefecture’s population, by 2010 their proportion had fallen to just 3.4 per cent of the Prefecture population. In the IMAR, according to the 2010 Census, Mongols make up around 18 per cent of the population, although this number is actually likely lower due to the fact that Chinese soldiers and other Han migrants do not appear as part of the provincial population.
Han transmigration and its effects on the Mongolian minority must also be seen through the lens of other government policies, which have led to serious environmental destruction in Inner Mongolia, and directly impacted on the Mongols’ traditional nomadic culture. The massive conversion of grasslands to other agricultural uses considered more modern and efficient, overgrazing and industrializing activities have clearly contributed to an increased desertification process in the region.

**Current issues**

Mongols are on the verge of being completely overwhelmed in the IMAR by Han migrants and farmers, with the People’s Liberation Army also responsible for land expropriation, mainly as a result of various government policies, which directly or indirectly discriminate against Mongols. In many cases, China’s Mongols have struggled to preserve a sense of national identity given the overwhelming presence of Han Chinese. Mongolian efforts to raise grievances or conduct international advocacy are further complicated by the lack of a comparably organized political diaspora or representative organization similar to those which exist for Uyghur and Tibetan causes.

The rapid development of China’s economic boom means new demands for the IMAR’s energy resources, as well as for its livestock and animal products. IMAR is a major source of coal and rich in deposits of rare metals and natural gas.

One area of extreme concern in recent years is the result of a ‘recovering grassland ecosystem’ policy of Chinese authorities, by which hundreds of thousands of Mongolian herdsmen and their families are forcibly removed from their traditional pastoral lands. With farming practices (from mainly Han farmers) perhaps creating much of the environmental stresses which have led to increasingly barren fields, Chinese authorities have embarked on a population-transfer programme in which mainly Mongol herdsmen are removed from the arid regions of Inner Mongolia. These arid grasslands were the last bastions where ethnic Mongols constituted a local majority. Resettling them on the outskirts of predominantly Han cities and new townships usually results in them no longer having access to Mongol-language schools, as only Chinese-language schools are provided. Recent reports indicate that, as a result, many Mongolian elementary schools are being eliminated, and most Mongolian middle schools at the Sum administrative level are being merged into Han schools, where Mongolian students must learn in Mandarin rather than in their own language.

The Chinese-language domination in government, business and other fields of employment means that ethnic Mongols are often disadvantaged or excluded because they are less fluent in Mandarin. Employees heard speaking in Mongolian have been fired. Mongolian language websites are often targeted. In 2005 Chinese authorities also shut down two popular Mongolian-language websites for carrying ‘separatist content,’ and again in 2011, following demonstrations over the death of a Mongolian herder by a mining company truck, authorities locked down schools and shut down many Mongolian language websites. In 2016, parents in
one municipality launched a series of protests following the decision of newly appointed Han principals to ban the teaching of Mongolian language at the only two kindergartens in the municipality that previously offered Mongolian language education.

The denial of the rights of the Mongolian minority in relation to the use of their language at higher levels of education, and as a language of work and services within the IMAR administrative units, has visibly resulted in recent years in serious disadvantages that constitute discrimination.

Over the years, Mongolian land has been routinely seized to make way for military exercises by the People’s Liberation Army, and Mongolian herders have been forced off grazing land to make way for resource extraction projects. Efforts to exploit Inner Mongolia’s abundance of natural resources such as coal has perpetuated feelings of assault on traditional cultural practices of pastoral communities. Such perceptions of the loss of culture and economic livelihoods have continued to spark protest and police crackdowns.

The most well-known Mongol rights defender and prisoner of conscience is writer Hada. In 1989, Hada and his wife, Xinna, opened the Mongolian Academic Bookstore in the IMAR capital Hohhot and in the early 1990s founded a Mongolian rights-based political party, Southern Mongolian Democratic Alliance, as well as underground journal The Voice of Southern Mongolia. In 1996, for his outspoken support of Mongolian rights, Hada was convicted of ‘separatism’ and ‘espionage’ charges and made to serve 15 years in prison. His ongoing harassment at the time sparked condemnation from PEN International and Reporters Without Borders, among others. In 2011, Hada won the Human Rights Watch Hellman/Hammett Award. After his release from prison in 2010, Hada was subjected to secret detention in an unofficial ‘black jail’ until December 2014. In 2016, Hada launched an appeal with China’s Supreme Court over his torture in state custody during his 19 years of imprisonment and the ongoing harassment of his family.

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