

Mongols

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Profile

There are somewhere in the vicinity of 5 million Mongols in China, mainly concentrated in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) on China's northern border with Mongolia and Russia. 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. 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 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 governmental pressures.

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 from the early seventeenth century, after the conversion of their ruler Altan Khan.

During the period where 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 2000 Census figure of 17 per cent gives an inflated percentage: Mongols are probably around 12 per cent of the population today, if one takes into account the presence of Chinese soldiers and some other Han workers who do not appear in official census figures.

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, mainly as a result of various government policies which directly or indirectly favour the latter. In many cases, China's Mongols have struggled to preserve a sense of national identity given the overwhelming presence of Han Chinese, suggesting that genuine autonomy is even less likely than it is for Uyghurs and Tibetans.

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. The region is rich in coal and deposits of rare metals, much of which is easily accessible.

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 herders 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 herders 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 in recent years, and in 2006 a government

campaign against pirate publications and CDs appeared to discriminate against Mongolian-language products, specifically targeting them. In 2005 Chinese authorities also shut down two popular Mongolian-language websites for carrying 'separatist content'.

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.

Mongolian rights activists also claimed that in the weeks before the 2008 Olympics, the government was quietly cracking down on the minority Mongol population of Inner Mongolia, including through arrest and increased surveillance of dissidents, as well as restrictions on travel by Mongols to Beijing.