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Language as Control: A Postcolonial Critique of Inner Mongolia's Education Policies

by

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the recent educational language policy changes implemented by the Chinese government in Inner Mongolia, where ethnic Mongolians have historically maintained their distinct language and cultural heritage. Specifically, it examines the significant 2020 policy shift from Mongolian-medium instruction to Mandarin in core subjects. Using Postcolonial Theory as the central analytical framework, this research explores how such policies contribute to language loss, cultural assimilation, and the marginalization of Mongolian minority communities. The study highlights how Mandarin, while not historically a colonial language, operates similarly as a tool of linguistic imperialism, reflecting broader patterns of cultural hegemony. Drawing upon comparative insights from Canada's Indigenous language revitalization initiatives, the paper argues that successful language preservation requires community-driven bilingual education models, intergenerational transmission strategies, technological support, and robust legal frameworks for minority language protection.

Keywords: Language policy ,Linguistic imperialism, Cultural assimilation, Language revitalization, Minority language rights

Content

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Introduction

Language is more than a tool for communication. It is a living, dynamic practice shaped by its speaker and their culture. As Iseke (2013) highlighted language is influenced by factors like multilingualism, language interactions, and the power imbalances caused by colonization and globalization. Among them, the impact of language policy is far-reaching. Language policies are powerful instruments of nation-building, influencing identity formation, cultural continuity, and intergenerational transmission of heritage. In Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in northern China, recent educational reforms have sparked significant controversy and concern regarding the preservation of Mongolian linguistic and cultural identity. This paper explores the recent language policy implemented by the Chinese government in Inner Mongolia, specifically examining how the replacement of Mongolian with Mandarin as the medium of instruction in key subjects contributes to language loss among Mongolian minority students.

Background and historical context

Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in northern China, is home to the Mongolian ethnic minority. Inner Mongolian's cultural identity is deeply tied to nomadic traditions, pastoralism, and the preservation of Mongolian language and customs (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2023).

Historically, Inner Mongolia faced a complex trajectory shaped by colonialism, migration and assimilation policies. Before the Manchu (Qing Dynasty from 1644 - 1912) took over Beijing, they controlled southern Mongolia firstly and made it as a part of their military reserve to help dominate China. This led to the creation of the term *Inner Mongolia* as an administrative region. The Manchu took nearly a century to conquer northern Mongolia, or *Outer Mongolia*.

And Inner Mongolia was much closer to China. In 1912, after the Qing emperor abdicated, the Republic of China was established. In the same year, Russia signed a treaty with the Inner Mongolia government at that time (Bogd Khan's government) to recognize Mongolia. However, their interpretation is different. Monliga saw itself as independent, while Russia viewed it as *autonomous*. Later in 1913 China and Russia declared Mongolia still under China control. As a result, Bogd Khan's government failed, and Mongolia officially placed Mongolia under Chinese suzerainty. Throughout the 20th century, as many scholars note, this cultural landscape has undergone dramatic shifts due to colonialism, migration, and state-led assimilation policies. Inner Mongolia experienced not only waves of Han migration and internal colonization under warlords but also the Nationalist government, and Japanese occupation. All of this significantly altered Inner Mongolian demographic composition. By the establishment of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947**,** Mongols had already become a numerical minority within their own homeland, constituting only 17% of the regional population today, with Han Chinese making up the majority (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2023; Bulag, 2000; Rossabi, 2004).

Statement of the Purpose

Despite the promises of ethnic autonomy under the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mongolian identity has been increasingly subordinated to the state's nation-building project. Initially, bilingual education policies allowed Mongolian-medium instruction. However, since the 1980s and especially in the 2000s, as Bulag (2023) notes, state policies have shifted from a pluralistic approach toward an assimilationist model, emphasizing Mandarin as the national language. In Recent years, China's language policy has undergone many changes. In 2020, this culminated by Mongolian was replaced by Mandarin as the medium of instruction for key subjects such as history, politics, and literature. This policy was announced by the Inner

Mongolia Education Department. It was framed as part of a national effort to standardize education, improve curriculum quality, and enhance Mongolian students' proficiency in Mandarin (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2023; Bulag, 2023). This policy sparked protests among Mongolian communities. Educators, parents and students fear the reform will accelerate language loss and erode their cultural identity. Critics argue that the policy reflects state attempts to cultural assimilation, similar to those implemented in the Tibetan and Uyghur region (Bulag, 2023; Roche et al., 2023). The purpose of this capping project is to explore how the recent policy in China banning the teaching of the Mongolian language in schools contributes to language loss among Mongolian minority students? In particular, I will examine the broader implications of language policies on cultural identity and intergenerational transmission of language of Inner Mongolia.

Positioning

As a Mongolian person growing up in China, I have personally experienced the shifts in language policy and their impact on identity and cultural continuity. Tracing back to my grandparents, who grew up in a rural environment where Mongolian was the primary language, they often spoke to each other in fluent Mongolian. Their conversations would flow effortlessly. When I listen to them, sometimes I can sense the depth of meaning. But sometimes I couldn't fully understand. To my mom's generation, while she can speak Mongolian, mandarin became dominant in education and public life. Her efforts to pass down Mongolian to me were limited by the realities of a Mandarin-dominated environment. This generational disconnect has affected how I relate to my family. The main reasoning is that my education was primarily conducted in Mandarin. The lack of formal schooling made it difficult for me to develop fluency Mongolian. My inability to speak Mongolian fluently is not just a language issue; it reflects a deeper loss of

connection to culture the language carries. Gradually, Mongolian in my life is only used symbolically in several festivals instead of daily life. It was only after living in Canada that I realized my identity issues were also worth deep reflection. When I tell people in Canada that I come from Inner Mongolia, their first reaction is often one of surprise: "Oh, you're from Mongolia? That's rare!" I find myself repeatedly explaining that Inner Mongolia is a province in China, distinct from the independent country of Mongolia. This confusion highlights a broader issue—globally, few people even realize that Mongolians exist as a minority group in China. The need to clarify my identity has made me more conscious of the ways in which Mongolian culture and history are often overlooked or misunderstood on the global stage. It has also deepened my awareness of the gradual erosion of language and cultural identity within my own community. Living and studying in Canada has given me the space to critically reflect on these experiences and recognize that my struggles with language and identity are not just personal but part of a larger narrative of cultural negotiation and survival.

Purpose and Goals of the Paper

This paper is not just an academic inquiry but a reflection on the personal and collective struggles of Mongolian people in Inner Mongolia. And this paper will examine how China's recent education policy banning the Mongolian language teaching in schools contributes to language loss. The gradual erasure of Mongolian in education has led to an increasing disconnect between younger generations and their cultural roots. This study is grounded in a critical review of pertinent literature. Through a postcolonial lens, it examines how state-driven language policy functions as a form of power that reinforces national identity at the expense of minority language and cultural expression.

Theoretical framework

I will use Postcolonial Theory as a critical lens for understanding how colonial legacies persist in cultural hegemony, linguistic imperialism, and language loss, particularly through language policies. The discussion is structured into three parts: (1) postcolonial theory as an analytical Framework, (2) cultural hegemony and language policy, and (3) language loss in the postcolonial condition. Different scholars have used postcolonialism to examine linguistic imperialism in various ways. In this section, I will apply their perspectives to the case of Inner Mongolia. And in this situation, Mandarin is imposed as the dominant language to assimilate ethnic Mongolians into a monolingual national identity.

Postcolonial Theory and Language Policy

Postcolonial Theory provides us a lens for understanding how colonial legacies persist in cultural, political, and economic structures, particularly through language policies. Postcolonial theorists argue that colonial power continues to manifest through cultural hegemony, linguistic dominance, and the suppression of indigenous knowledge systems (Said, 1977). Within this framework (as Pennycook (2004) named *Postmodernism*), language is not merely a means of communication but a mechanism of power which is used to control, assimilate, and marginalize minority communities (Pennycook, 2004). Language policy is one key area in which postcolonial power manifests. Shin and Kubota (2008) apply postcolonial theory to the dominance of English in global education. They argue that English has been constructed as the *language of progress*, however indigenous and minority languages are devalued. In their study, English is seen as a postcolonial tool of control, in which former colonies prioritize the colonizers' language under economic and political pressure. This perspective is directly applicable to China's bilingual education reforms in Inner Mongolia. Although Mandarin is not

the language of a Western colonial power, it functions similarly as a hegemonic language that marginalizes minority linguistic identities. Just as English has been framed globally as necessary for modernity. The framing of Mandarin as the language of economic mobility and national unity mirrors how English has been positioned as the global language of modernity (Shin & Kubota, 2008). Thus, postcolonial theory helps us to understand how Mandarin is deployed as an instrument of cultural assimilation and hegemony.

Postcolonial Theory is also useful for analyzing how modern nation-states continue colonial patterns of governance through language planning. Makoni et al. (2023) extend this point by examining the role of language policy in reinforcing the colonial foundations of the modern nation-state. Their analysis of Sudan illustrates how post-independence governments continued British colonial language policies by prioritizing Arabic over indigenous languages. Arabic was promoted as the language of national unity, while local languages were systematically excluded from education and governance. The authors argue that postcolonial states often inherit and maintain the colonial logic of linguistic standardization, suppressing multilingualism in favor of a single national language. This analysis is highly relevant to China's language policy in Inner Mongolia, where Mandarin is similarly imposed as the national linguistic standard. Just as Sudanese elites framed Arabic as a unifying force for nation-building, the Chinese government justifies its bilingual education reforms by presenting Mandarin as a necessary language for modernization and economic development. In both cases, language planning serves not only as a policy tool but as a means of consolidating state power and cultural hegemony.

Cultural Hegemony and Language Policy

In this section, I will use Lears (1985), who analyzed Antonio Gramsci's concept of culture hegemony, to illustrate how China's bilingual education reform functions as an instrument of power within a postcolonial framework. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony provides deeper insights into how language policies operate as a mechanism of power. Cultural hegemony refers to how dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion but also through ideological control, shaping norms, beliefs, and practices (Lears, 1985). According to Lears, this occurs through education, media, and official narratives. All of these present the dominance of certain languages of cultural practices as *common sense*.

China's bilingual education policy in Inner Mongolia follows this hegemonic pattern. Officially, the policy put Mandarin as essential for educational advancement, economic success, and national integration. However, in practice, this policy compels Mongolian students into a Mandarin-dominated educational system, which reinforces a Mandarin superior cultural hierarchy. The case of Hong Kong's language transition analyzed by Bolton (2023) highlights how postcolonial language policy shifted Hong Kong from English under British rule to Mandarin under Chinese governance. Under British colonial rule, English dominated education, administration, and economic life, while Cantonese had no official status until 1974. After the 1997 handover, language policy shifted, and Mandarin was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools, reflecting China's broader efforts to assimilate Hong Kong linguistically and culturally. Despite the official framework of *one country, two systems*, the gradual expansion of Mandarin in education has signaled a move toward linguistic unification under Chinese governance. This transition in Hong Kong's language policy parallels the shift in Inner Mongolia, where Mandarin is replacing Mongolian in key subjects under the justification of

national integration. Both cases demonstrate how postcolonial language policies do not necessarily reverse colonial-era linguistic hierarchies but instead replace one form of linguistic dominance with another.

Language Loss in the Postcolonial Condition

Language loss refers to a societal or individual decline in the ability to use a language, typically resulting from its replacement by another language (Huss, 2017). Huss explains language loss often occurs due to 'subtractive bilingualism', where learning a dominant language replaces one's mother tongue. It can also result from societal pressure to abandon minority languages for better economic opportunities. Huss also questions whether such language shifts represent truly free choices, which highlights unequal power relationships between linguistic groups (Huss, 2017). Similarly, Canagarajah and Ben-Said (2011) argue that linguistic imperialism manifests when the dominant language marginalizes minority languages through institutional policies. And these policies were justified by narratives of modernization, national benefit or economic mobility. This logic is evident in China's bilingual education reforms, where Mandarin is framed as essential for upward mobility, while Mongolian is subtly relegated to a secondary, less valuable status. As Sato (2022) explains, the official rhetoric portrays Mandarin as the *language of success*, suggesting that fluency in it is crucial for minority students to access better career opportunities and integrate into mainstream Chinese society. And economic development is also an "excuse" for promoting Mandarin, like Bulag (2002) describes how language policies in Inner Mongolia have evolved alongside the region's economic transformation, particularly in urban areas like Ordos, where Mandarin fluency has become a prerequisite for participation in the region's booming resource economy.

By applying Postcolonial Theory to China's bilingual education reforms in Inner Mongolia, it becomes clear that language policy is not simply about education but a tool of political control and cultural assimilation.

Policy Analysis

From Bilingualism to Linguistic Assimilation

Li et al., (2016) outline the evolution of China's translation and language policies through three key phases: First, the period of Early multilingualism (1949–1957) supported minority languages like Mongolian through bilingual education, translation and multilingual governance. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Tibetan, Uighur, and other minority languages are also in the same situation. During this time, Mongolian had a relatively strong institutional presence, with government regulations mandating Mongolian translations for official documents (Li et al., 2016).

The second phase: the shift toward monolingualism (1958–1977). It involved a drastic shift toward monolingualism and linguistic assimilation. During the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the government shifted to a more assimilationist model, restricting the use of minority languages and enforcing Mandarin as the dominant language in administration and education. This period saw widespread restrictions on Mongolian and other minority languages, particularly in translation practices. Li et al. (2016) argue that this period set the precedent for modern language policies that prioritize Mandarin while maintaining a symbolic presence of minority languages.

After the Cultural Revolution, a third phase: the return to bilingualism and controlled multilingualism (1978–present). The government reintroduced bilingual policies that permitted the use of Mongolian in education and public services. However, during this period, Mandarin

was increasingly promoted as the language of economic opportunity, integration and national identity with minority regions. Thus, although bilingualism was officially supported, Mandarin gradually assumed dominance. (Li et al., 2016; Roche et al., 2023).

This historical progression provides the context for the 2020 policy change. And the 2020 policy marked a significant turning point. It speeds up linguistic assimilation by replacing Mongolian with Mandarin. In Inner Mongolia, key subjects such as history, politics, and literature must be taught in Mandarin instead of Mongolian. (Roche et al., 2023). The Chinese government officially justified it's necessary to integrate the economy and modernize. And as Bulag (2020) and Baioud and Khuanuud (2023) noted, this policy prompted widespread community protests and concerns about culture assimilation.

Transforming the Mongolian Educational Landscape

The 2020 policy change has fundamentally altered how Mongolian is taught in schools and shifted it from a language of instruction to a secondary, non-essential subject. This policy marginalized Mongolian instruction. Before 2020, Mongolian was used to teach core subjects, particularly in ethnic Mongolian schools. However, after the 2020 policy, as Sato (2022) describs, Mandarin became the compulsory medium of instruction for all major subjects. And at the same time, Mongolian was relegated to an elective language course. Also, there is a decline in Mongolian-language textbooks and materials. Bulag (2020) observes that the introduction of Mandarin-language textbooks in Inner Mongolian schools further undermines Mongolian as an academic language, reducing the production and distribution of Mongolian-language educational materials. Further, as Yang (cited in Sato (2022) states, historical books about Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire have also disappeared from bookstores in Hohhot (the capital of Inner Mongolia). Another consequence worth mentioning is the retraining of teachers and exclusion of

Mongolian educators. According to a recent report published by Radio Free Asia by Lang (2024) , authorities have actively recruited Mandarin-speaking teachers from other parts of China to fill teaching positions in Inner Mongolia, offering attractive relocation incentives and resettlement allowances. An April 2024 recruitment ad in Otog Front Banner, a county near Ordos City (a west city in Inner Mongolia), sought 40 high school teachers and 30 primary school teachers, specifically prioritizing native Mandarin speakers. Similar recruitment drives have been reported across Shilingol Banner and other Mongolian-populated areas. All of these policies reinforced concerns that the shift to Mandarin is also a means of demographic reshaping in the region. The expectation that Mongolian-trained teachers would be able to quickly transition to Mandarin instruction has been described as "tantamount to forced layoffs" by Professor Yang Haiying from Japan's Shizuoka University. He noted that many teachers were being set up for failure, as the government knew full well that most Mongolian speakers would not be able to suddenly teach subjects like physics and chemistry in Mandarin. As a result, many Mongolian educators have left their jobs, contributing to a wider transformation of Inner Mongolia's teaching workforce. According to a February 21, 2024 report by Enghebatu Togochog, head of the New York-based Southern Mongolia Human Rights and Information Center, authorities merged Chinese- and Mongolian-medium schools, forcing about 1 million ethnic Mongolian children from rural areas into over 2,000 boarding schools. (Radio Free Asia (2024)).

All shifts not only restrict access to Mongolian-language education for students but also effectively removes Mongolian-speaking professionals from the workforce, further accelerating the erosion of Mongolian language and identity in the region.

Government's Rationale

The Chinese government has justified the shift from Mongolian-medium education to Mandarin as a means of fostering national unity, enhancing standardized education, and ensuring economic integration. Official rhetoric presents the transition as necessary for the modernization of Inner Mongolia, echoing previous policies aimed at assimilating ethnic minorities through language standardization (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2023).

One of the primary justifications given by the government is the necessity of Mandarin for economic development. Chinese authorities argue that proficiency in Mandarin opens doors for ethnic Mongolians to compete in China's increasingly integrated economy. As Baioud and Khuanuud (2023) highlight, the narrative surrounding bilingual education reform has been framed as a necessary step toward greater economic participation and national integration. This perspective aligns with past state discourses on language and development, which have systematically equated Mandarin with economic progress and opportunity (Zhou, 2012).

The policy is also framed to ensure equal access to high-quality, standardized education. The government claims that a nationalized curriculum benefits ethnic minorities by providing better resources and equal opportunities in exams, university admissions, and jobs. This justification mirrors global trends in multilingual societies, where state policies often promote a dominant national language under the pretense of educational equity (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014).

Another key rationale behind the reform is national unity. The Chinese Communist Party has increasingly emphasized the idea of a singular Chinese identity (Zhonghua minzu), shifting away from earlier ethnic policies that promoted regional autonomy and linguistic pluralism (Baioud & Khuanuud,2022; Bulag, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2022; Li et al., 2016; Roche & Suzuki, 2018; Sautman,1998; Zhou,2009, 2012;).

Language Loss and Educational Impact

The cultural and linguistic consequences of language loss

The loss of Mongolian as a medium of instruction in schools has profound consequences for students' cultural identity and their ability to connect with their heritage. Research on linguistic assimilation has demonstrated that language is not only a communicative tool but also a carrier of historical memory, traditions, and communal bonds (Bulag, 2022). The shift away from Mongolian-medium education is, therefore, not just a linguistic change but a fundamental restructuring of Mongolian identity within the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Grey & Baioud, 2021). The increasing dominance of Mandarin in Inner Mongolia follows a long trajectory of linguistic assimilation policies justified under the pretext of economic modernization and national unity. However, studies indicate that the disappearance of minority languages leads to a loss of historical consciousness and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2023). In Inner Mongolia, this process has been accelerated by parents enrolling their children in Mandarin-medium schools to increase their economic opportunities, a phenomenon also observed in other regions with language displacement policies (Bulag, 2022). This shift aligns with broader postcolonial trends where minority languages are systematically erased in favor of national unity narratives (Phillipson, 1992). Also, this enforced shift aligns with broader patterns of linguistic imperialism, wherein state policies promote a dominant language to consolidate national identity (Canagarajah & Ben-Said, 2011). Families like mine have experienced a situation where the state has placed more emphasis on promoting Mandarin. My grandmother was very keen to preserve our traditional Mongolian culture, so she was very sad about these changes. She often mentioned that these policies not only make it difficult to use Mongolian, but also affect the inheritance of culture

because the language carries stories, rituals and traditions. Scholars argue that these policies follow a national strategy to unify language and culture. I still remember learning Mongolian children's songs and dances in kindergarten and primary school. However, as I grew older, I had to shift my focus to Mandarin-taught subjects to prepare for mainstream exams. Gradually, over time, this shift became so complete that today, while I can still recall a few lines from those Mongolian songs, they have become nothing more than faint, distant memories. As Fishman (1996) said these systemic pressures lead to "language shift," where languages fade as younger generations adopt dominant ones.

Educational and Psychological Consequences

Linguistic Anxiety and Identity Crisis

In addition, psychological impact cannot be ignored. Bulag (2003) identifies linguistic anxiety as a condition experienced by minority language speakers when they are forced to abandon their linguistic identity in favor of a state-imposed language. This phenomenon is evident in Inner Mongolia, where Mongolian-speaking students are now required to navigate an education system dominated by Mandarin. The psychological toll of this transition is considerable. The concept of linguistic anxiety in Inner Mongolia is deeply tied to the politicization of nationality and the erosion of Mongolian autonomy. Bulag (2003) argues that the Mongols' anxiety is not just about language loss but about being stripped of their nationality status and reclassified as an ethnic minority within the Chinese nation. Historically, Mongolian identity was constructed around its distinct linguistic and territorial autonomy. However, as Mongolian language use declines, Mongols risk becoming a 'deinstitutionalized, depoliticized, and deterritorialized' ethnic group (Bulag, 2003). Bulag (2003) shares a personal anecdote about how he, as a Mongolian child, internalized negative stereotypes about Mongolian speakers,

considering his sister's Mongolian-accented Chinese as embarrassing. This kind of internalized language anxiety is common among minority students, leading to voluntary abandonment of their mother tongue in favor of linguistic assimilation.

Educational Disparities and Socioeconomic Marginalization

Second, the shift in Mandarin-medium education exacerbates existing educational disparities. Research on linguistic imperialism has shown that minority students forced to learn in a second language often experience lower academic performance and reduced educational opportunities (Phillipson, 1992). As Canagarajah and Ben-Said (2011) observed that the suppression of Mongolian in schools not only marginalizes students linguistically but also restricts their access to higher education and career opportunities, reinforcing socioeconomic disadvantages. One of the key issues is that minority-language students are required to master Mandarin before they can effectively engage with subject content, which delays their academic development and reduces their performance in core subjects. Tollefson and Tsui (2014) highlight similar trends in other multilingual contexts, where students forced into dominant-language instruction face significant educational setbacks. Furthermore, the increased reliance on Mandarin as the instructional language means that Mongolian students struggle with comprehension, leading to higher dropout rates.

Educational language policies not only shape access to schooling but also determine long-term economic outcomes. As Brock-Utne (2006) noted, students educated in their mother tongue perform better in primary and secondary education, allowing them to compete more effectively for higher education and skilled jobs. Tollefson and Tsui (2014) argue that maintaining social and economic stratification is also a pattern in postcolonial education systems.

In Inner Mongolia, the policy shift limits social mobility for Mongolian-speaking communities, keeping them economically marginalized.

 Language Loss as a Tool of State Control

In summary, the loss of Mongolian as a language of instruction has far-reaching implications beyond the classroom. It threatens the cultural survival of Mongolian communities, exacerbates educational inequities, and contributes to a broader project of linguistic imperialism. As Bulag (2003) and Phillipson (1992) emphasize, language is deeply intertwined with power, identity, and social justice. The case of Inner Mongolia exemplifies how language policies serve as mechanisms of state control, shaping not only linguistic landscapes but also the futures of minority populations.

Global Perspectives on Language Policies

Reflecting on the erosion of Mongolian language and culture has deepened my understanding of identity. My family's experiences are part of a larger narrative of cultural survival, which includes my grandparents' connection to a vibrant Mongolian heritage, my mother's attempts to pass down the language, and my own struggles to reconcile these efforts with systemic barriers. Living in Canada has shown me that it is possible for language revitalization, but it requires both grassroots advocacy and institutional support. In Canada, Indigenous language policies and community-driven revitalization initiatives have sought to reclaim linguistic sovereignty and resist the effects of colonial language suppression (McIvor & Ball, 2019). In this section, I will discuss several successful cases of revitalizing indigenous in Canada and draw some lessons from it.

One of the most significant strategies in Canada is the promotion of language immersion programs, modeled after Māori and Hawaiian revitalization efforts, which have shown success in

reversing language loss (McIvor & Ball, 2019). Programs such as the Nêhiyawak Language Experience and Mi'kmaq immersion schools integrate Indigenous language instruction with cultural knowledge, fostering a deep connection to heritage while improving language proficiency among young learners (McIvor & Ball, 2019).

Community engagement is another crucial factor in Indigenous language preservation. In many First Nations communities, elders play a central role in language learning, ensuring that young generations gain linguistic and cultural knowledge directly from fluent speakers. Patrick et al. (2018) emphasize that such intergenerational transmission is a fundamental pillar of successful language revitalization efforts. This approach contrasts sharply with China's policies in Inner Mongolia, where Mongolian-speaking teachers are being replaced with Mandarin-speaking educators (Radio Free Asia, 2024), disrupting the natural process of language transmission.

The use of digital technology has also been instrumental in Indigenous language preservation. Digital tools such as FirstVoices provide interactive platforms where Indigenous languages can be taught through online dictionaries, text prediction tools, and media archives (Meighan, 2021). Remote First Nations communities have leveraged digital platforms to create accessible learning materials, bridging geographical and infrastructural challenges (Beaton & Carpenter, 2016). In contrast, Inner Mongolia's shift toward Mandarin-medium education has largely overlooked technological solutions that could support bilingual learning rather than replacing Mongolian instruction outright.

Systemic advocacy and policy reforms have also played a significant role in Canada's Indigenous language efforts. Despite historical suppression, grassroots advocacy has led to the passage of the Indigenous Languages Act in 2019, which formally recognizes Indigenous

languages as an essential part of Canada's national identity and provides government funding for revitalization programs (McIvor & Ball, 2019). By contrast, language advocacy in Inner Mongolia has been met with state suppression, limiting the ability of Mongolian communities to contest the policy through official channels.

Lessons for Inner Mongolia

Learning Canada's Indigenous language revival reveals key takeaways that could approach language revitalization in China. First, bilingual and immersion education models demonstrate that linguistic diversity can be preserved without compromising national integration. Instead of enforcing Mandarin as the sole medium of instruction, a dual-language system that supports both Mongolian and Mandarin could enable educational equity while maintaining cultural identity. Second, community-driven language programs that involve elders and fluent speakers are crucial for effective language preservation. In Canada, intergenerational learning initiatives have strengthened Indigenous language use, counteracting the effects of past assimilation policies (Patrick et al., 2018). A similar approach in Inner Mongolia could ensure that Mongolian remains actively spoken within communities, even as Mandarin proficiency is promoted. Third, technology-driven solutions provide accessible and innovative ways to preserve endangered languages. The success of digital platforms such as FirstVoices in Canada has demonstrated that digital resources can play a vital role in sustaining linguistic diversity while adapting to modern educational trends (McIvor, 2019). These platforms provide interactive dictionaries, online learning modules, and text prediction tools that empower Indigenous communities to reclaim their languages despite historical suppression (Bird, 2018). Encouragingly, a similar trend is emerging in Inner Mongolia, where the social media platform Bainu has provided Mongolian speakers with a space for linguistic and cultural exchange. As

Baioud and Khuanuud (2022) highlight, Bainu has become a counter-hegemonic digital space, allowing Mongolian speakers to communicate in their native language, discuss linguistic purism, and resist the encroachment of Mandarin in digital and social domains. While the broader educational policies threaten Mongolian language use, the emergence of community-driven digital spaces like Bainu reflects a grassroots effort to maintain linguistic resilience.

Finally, legal protections and advocacy mechanisms are vital for sustaining language preservation efforts. The recognition of Indigenous languages in Canada's legal framework has provided a foundation for long-term revitalization strategies. If China were to adopt similar measures—such as granting stronger legal protections for Mongolian-language education—it could create a more balanced linguistic policy that aligns national interests with cultural preservation.

Discussion

Systemic Challenges in Inner Mongolia: The Limits of Autonomy

Kormondy (2002) identifies the history of Inner Mongolia and the prior relationship with Mongolia. Inner Mongolia was once a part of Mongolia and went through years of internal strife. In 1947, Inner Mongolia was recognized by the Chinese government as a part of China, remaining an autonomous region after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Bulag (2003) describes historically, Inner Mongolia's political status has been shaped by the broader framework of China's ethnic policy, which grants certain administrative privileges to ethnic minorities while simultaneously reinforcing Han-centric governance structures. An example is since the establishment of the autonomous region, every leadership team has been appointed by Beijing (Bulag, 2003). As a consequence, despite its formal designation as an autonomous region within the People's Republic of China, Inner Mongolia's

autonomy remains significantly constrained by centralized governance. As Bulag (2003) notes, in a policy-oriented publication, Beijing-based sociologist Ma Rong and anthropologist Zhou Xin explicitly redefined the relationship between autonomous regions and the state. There are two key points. First, ethnic autonomy does not mean autonomy for a single ethnic group, which means that the ethnic group can exercise its own rights. Second, ethnic autonomy must be carried out within the framework of the state, and this cannot be changed. And ethnic autonomy does not mean allowing ethnic minorities to develop their own economy and politics (Ma, Zhou, cited by Bulag, 2003). The increasing majoritarian governance structure undermines the initial intent behind ethnic autonomy, making Inner Mongolia's designation as an autonomous region increasingly symbolic rather than substantive.

Resistance and Adaptation

The 2020 protests in Inner Mongolia marked one of the most significant acts of resistance against language policies in China's recent history. The introduction of *nationally compiled* Mandarin-language textbooks in key subjects effectively signaled the removal of Mongolian as a core medium of instruction (Bulag, 2020). These reforms were framed by the government as a necessary step to improve Mongolian students' Mandarin proficiency for better economic prospects, encapsulated in the term *zouchuqu* , meaning to "go out" into the Chinese world (Bulag, 2020). Bulag (2020) noted that parents, students, and educators organized mass school boycotts, with students walking out of classrooms in defiance of government orders. Local authorities responded with force, deploying riot police to detain protesting students and suppress dissent. In such a situation, the government did more than just make arrests—Mongolian officials who supported the protests were fired. And thousands of protesting parents were tracked down. Their photos were shared publicly to help authorities catch them (Bulag, 2020). Even

more tragic is that at least eight Mongols took their own lives in response to the language policy. Those who died included a government official, a primary school principal, teachers, parents, and a student. Their suicides reflected the extreme emotional and political stakes of the mother tongue issue, as the community viewed the removal of Mongolian instruction as the last vestige of their cultural identity being stripped away (Bulag, 2020). The authorities tightened their control, insisting that Mongols had a political duty to be a "model minority" by accepting government decisions. Teachers and public officials were forced to accept the new education policies or be punished as *nationalists* or *separatists* (Bulag, 2020).

Future Directions and Policy Recommendations

Pessimistically speaking, there may not be much room for improving the current situation in the future. But there is still some way to go to mitigate its negative effect as I have seen in Canada with their revival of Indigenous languages. First, developing technology for language sustainability plays an essential role. Given the role of online resources in Indigenous language revitalization, expanding Mongolian-language apps, digital dictionaries, and online education programs could help sustain Mongolian literacy among younger generations. As I mentioned before, the success of Bainu as a counter-hegemonic digital space suggests that Inner Mongolia can draw lessons from global Indigenous language revitalization efforts. The Bainu example, thus, contributes to broader discussions on the role of technology in minority language survival within postcolonial contexts (Meighan, 2021). Second, sustaining the Mongolian language is through community-led initiatives. Drawing from global examples such as Indigenous language immersion programs in Canada and New Zealand, Mongolian parents, educators, and cultural organizations could develop informal language schools, cultural centers, and digital platforms

that provide Mongolian-language instruction outside the formal education system (McIvor & Ball, 2019).

Conclusion

Examining the language policy shifts in Inner Mongolia through the lens of Postcolonial theory clearly illustrates that language policies extend far beyond education concerns. It is clear that language policy is not merely a matter of education but a mechanism of state power, cultural hegemony, and national identity construction. Language loss in Inner Mongolia is not an isolated incident but a part of broader historical processes in which dominant languages marginalized minority linguistic communities. Also, this case of Inner Mongolia highlights how language loss is intertwined with larger struggles of autonomy, cultural survival, and identity, just as postcolonial scholars have examined linguistic imperialism in former colonies (Pennycook, 2004; Phillipson, 1992; Said, 1978).

The reality for Mongolian communities is far more complex. The removal of Mongolian as a medium of instruction has not only exacerbated educational inequities, but also marginalized Mongolian-speaking people. These policies do not merely alter classroom instruction, they significantly impact cultural identity, community cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. And what I can resonate with is that the loss of language proficiency among my generation disrupts deeper cultural and family connections.

Nevertheless, despite state-driven assimilation. There are signs of resistance and rebellion in Mongolian community. The emergence of digital platforms like Bainu offers a glimmer of hope. It tells us Mongolians are not passive recipients of state policies, but active agents fighting for the survival of their linguistic and cultural heritage (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2022). Informal education programs and community initiatives also indicate ongoing grassroots efforts to sustain linguistic traditions.

Moreover, global Indigenous language revitalization movements offer valuable lessons. Canada's experience provides a practical and hopeful modal, Their efforts with bilingual and immersion education programs, digital learning platform, intergenerational transmission initiative, and legislative framework shows that language revitalization is possible when both grassroots advocacy and institutional support align (McIvor & Ball, 2019; Meighan, 202; Patrick et al., 2018). These examples underline that successful language revitalization hinges on the integration of community-driven advocacy, even under challenging political climates. While Inner Mongolia faces a more repressive political climate compared to Canada's relatively supportive context, these examples demonstrate essential strategies that can inspire Mongolian language preservation efforts. On a personal level, my experiences as a Mongolian individual growing up in China, later witnessing Indigenous language revitalization efforts in Canada, have deepened my understanding of both the fragility and resilience of linguistic heritage. Looking forward, it is crucial to continue advocating for Mongolian language preservation, through education, policy recommendations, or community-driven efforts. Ultimately, language is not lost overnight, nor is it lost without struggle—and as long as resistance continues, the story of Mongolian language and identity is still being written.

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