

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

Fang Dong, Narisu, Yanhui Gou, Xinggang Wang and Jia Qiu

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

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

## 1 Introduction

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

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A. Feng, B. Adamson (eds.), *Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and Challenges*,  
Multilingual Education 12, DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-9352-0\_2

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2 Literature Review

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

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

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

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

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

### 3 Mongolian Nationality Primary Schools in the IMAR

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

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

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

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

### 3.1 *The Study*

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

### 3.2 *Limitations of the Monolingual Mongolian System*

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

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

### ***3.3 Importance of Language Education***

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

## **4 Four Models of Mongolian Nationality School**

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

### ***4.1 Model 1***

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

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

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

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

## 4.2 *Model 2*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 4.3 *Model 3*

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

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

#### 4.4 *Model 4*

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

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

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

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

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

## 5 Discussion

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

Trilingualism in Education in China: Models and  
Challenges

Feng, A.; Adamson, B. (Eds.)

2015, XVII, 258 p. 16 illus., 5 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-017-9351-3