Xi Jinping and the party Center in Beijing are in the midst of a far-reaching rectification campaign in Inner Mongolia. The introduction of new textbooks and putonghua-medium education in Mongolian schools led to widespread civil disobedience in September 2020. Order was quickly restored, and international media attention turned elsewhere. But what followed was a systematic campaign to strengthen central party controls and Han-defined cultural and ideological norms. In this article, I unpack Beijing’s toolkits of control and transformation in Inner Mongolia, and foreground both the regional variation yet also the steady path toward Xi Jinping’s dream of a new Han colonial empire.

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) more than two years prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1947. Premier Zhou Enlai declared it a “model autonomous region” (模范自治区), and its status as the first frontier region to join the PRC was celebrated by Deng Xiaoping and subsequent Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping.1

Yet party leaders in Beijing have also been quick to castigate the region when deemed to fall short of expectations, such as in the late 1960s when its first chairman Ulanhu (乌兰夫) was accused of setting up an “independent kingdom” before being purged in a bloody pogrom.2 A new deposition is underway in the IMAR, albeit a largely bloodless coup, as Xi Jinping pushes forward with his agenda of settler colonialism, cultural homogenization, and ideological purification across China’s vast frontier regions.

During an April 2021 inspection tour, Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Yang spoke of “deep-seated problems in the ethnic sphere” and the urgent need for “a correct understanding and handling of the relationship between commonality and diversity” in Inner Mongolia.3

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“All ethnic autonomous regions are under the leadership of the party and these areas collectively belong to the people of all ethnic groups,” he warned local officials while urging them to “take good care to uphold the lofty honor of a ‘model autonomous region,’” and to “ensure implementation of the national constitution, laws, and government orders.” In private, party officials like Wang criticized local cadres for dragging their heels and lagging behind Xinjiang and Tibet on language and other national reforms.

Following a major reset of ethnic policies under Xi and previous crackdowns in Tibet and Xinjiang, the party Center set its target on the IMAR after a popular protest movement in late 2020. When Beijing insisted ethnic schools adopt putonghua-medium instruction and a standard set of textbooks, Mongol students and parents took to the streets in defense of their language, culture, and autonomous rights as enshrined in the PRC Constitution.

Inner Mongolia was the first frontier region Xi Jinping visited as general secretary, and it is the only frontier region he has visited twice (2014 and 2019), suggesting a level of concern and possible frustration with the consolidation of his power in this strategic and resource-rich region. The IMAR is home to a powerful group of Mongolian officials, many of whom are

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
directly or indirectly linked to Ulanhu and his large extended family, as well as deep patronage networks closely associated with former general secretaries Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin.

During his nearly decade in power, Xi Jinping has steadily employed personnel reshuffles and central disciplinary mechanisms to curb territorial cliques and the subnationalism posed by native leaders and organizations in regions like Inner Mongolia. The appointment of Shi Taifeng as party secretary of the IMAR in October 2019 was widely seen as a move to rein in and further strengthen Beijing’s control over the frontier region. Shi had served as Xi Jinping’s deputy at the Central Party School from 2007 to 2010, and he had successfully implemented Xi’s call for expunging overt symbols of Islam, retarding “religious extremism,” and “sinicizing” religion as the party secretary of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region from 2017 to 2019.

In short, Xi Jinping’s ongoing crackdown in the Mongolian borderlands goes well beyond language reform. As discussed below, Xi and the party Center are using a well-hewn toolkit of coercion, thought control, personnel sackings, and rule by law to slowly tame and remake the region, bring it more firmly in line with his vision for a Han-centric China.

Education Reforms


In July 2017, the Ministry of Education in Beijing set up a new national textbook committee, which mandated a uniform set of textbooks in the Chinese language for compulsory literature, politics, and history subjects, and called for a staged roll-out across primary and elementary schools. Efforts to promote these textbooks and *putonghua*-medium education in Mongolian schools had been stymied by local officials in the past even though they were implemented in Xinjiang and Tibetan schools starting in 2017.

In contrast, Mongolian-medium education remained relatively strong in the IMAR and was rebounding in some quarters, due in part to a dedicated funding stream with a yearly budget allocation of 60 million RMB (USD 9.4 million) for ethnic education between 2003 and 2013. According to a 2017 Xinhua article, roughly 15 percent of primary- and middle-school-age students were studying in the region’s 520 ethnic schools, including 55 schools that offered nine years of compulsory education entirely in the Mongolian language, such as the widely celebrated Tongliao Mongol School (通辽市蒙古族学校).

In December 2019, the textbook committee issued a new implementation plan, what it referred to as a “soul-casting engineering project” (铸魂工程), aimed at achieving complete coverage of *putonghua*-medium education in the three subjects using unified textbooks by 2025. Seeking to turn up the heat and overcome disinclination, Shi Taifeng and the IMAR Party Committee called on local officials to uphold the “two maintenances” (两个维护) – the leadership of the party Central Committee in Beijing and its core Xi Jinping – and dare to

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“speak up and brandish the swords (发声亮剑), a phrase first used in Xinjiang to demand absolute loyalty to the party Center. In the lead up to a new school year, the Ministry of Education dispatched officials to the region, where they spoke frankly about “deficiencies in putonghua universalization.”

Despite rumors of impending changes, the introduction of new Chinese-medium classes and textbooks – starting in grades one and four – were announced only several weeks prior to the start of school in September 2020. The indigenous community’s expostulation was widespread, with street protests, school boycotts, and clashes with uniformed police across the IMAR.

In response, the region’s chairwoman Bu Xiaolin (布小林), the lauded Mongolian granddaughter of Ulanhu, issued a “five no changes” pledge – no further changes to the curriculum; textbooks; hours of Mongolian-language instruction; and the current model of bilingual education. This slogan was unceremoniously discarded several months later as part of the crackdown, with a January 2021 internal party document stating: “This formulation does not accord with the party Center’s demands; it is not accurate and should no longer be used.” Beijing was now dictating policy, and Bu Xiaolin and other Mongolian officials who failed to fall in line were placed under intense scrutiny.

Control and Transformation


26 “民族语言授课学校小学一年级和初中一年级使用国家统编《语文》教材‘五个不变’——4位教育工作者解读相关政策,” 内蒙古教育厅, September 4, 2020, at https://archive.md/2YSAw, accessed November 4, 2021. In his excellent exposition of the language protest movement, Chris Atwood asserts the “five no changes” slogan was issued by state-owned media in the name of Party Secretary Shi Taifeng on August 30, 2020. I have found no evidence directly linking Shi with this slogan; although it is possible that evidence was subsequently scrubbed. See Atwood, “Bilingual Education in Inner Mongolia: An Explaner.”


28 内蒙古自治区教育厅, 筑牢中华民族共同体意识推进国家统编教材使用和国家通用语言文字教育宣传手册, 内部资料 (January 2021), p. 25.
During the subsequent year, Beijing quickly restored order across Inner Mongolia and then gradually asserted its authority over the region through a familiar toolkit of repression, one it has employed in other frontier regions but also other areas of resistance such as Hong Kong. Regional variation, however, remains important, as Xi Jinping’s empire-building mission is not uniformly implemented at present, with some regions possessing more agency and wiggle-room to protect local interests.

1. Snuffing out the protests

In the face of widespread civil disobedience in August and September 2020, local officials employed their usual carrot-and-stick repertoire to cajole Mongolian parents, students, and ordinary citizens into submission.

Police in some urban areas issued name-lists and even photos of “troublemakers,” drawing on the now ubiquitous security cameras, especially in hot spots like Tongliao city and the Shilingol League. Police in the Khorchin district of central Tongliao – home of numerous Mongolian schools and students – issued hundreds of surveillance photos of those purportedly “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (寻衅滋事) in early September and offered a 1000 RMB (USD 157) reward for help in dobbing them into the authorities.30

In other parts of the region, authorities initially tried to bribe students into returning to school, giving them “large gift packages” (worth 200 RMB or USD 31) in the Ongnuud banner for each classmate they lured back to school – with no limits on the number of gifts a student could collect.31 As opposition lingered, authorities turned to more blunt tactics, including the expulsion of students and dismissal from state employment, mandatory legal training, blacklisting, and the severing of social benefits for parents and guardians, or even detention and formal arrest should persuasion fail.32


Beijing dispatched Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi to the region, where he called for a “deepening of the struggle against separatism, and strict implementation of anti-terrorism and anti-terrorist measures” in Inner Mongolia, according to a September 2 Xinhua readout.\(^{33}\) He also warned local officials they must “do a solid job in maintaining stability in the ethnic and religious sphere and advancing national unity work.”\(^{34}\) By the end of month, order was restored. With children back in the classroom, the re-education campaign began.

2. Re-educating society

The IMAR Party Committee acknowledged “deep-seated problems” in ethnic work at a November 6, 2020 meeting and called for urgent remedial and rectification work.\(^{35}\) During an inspection tour the following week, Party Secretary Shi Taifeng berated local officials in Shilingol League and Tongliao city for their poor handing of education reforms, claiming officials had “deviated from the guiding ideology of ethnic work” and failed to forge a strong sense of the “communal consciousness of the Chinese nation-race” (中华民族共同体意识).\(^{36}\)

Re-education work formally got underway on December 6, 2020, when the IMAR launched a three-phase “special training program for forging the collective consciousness of the Chinese nation-race across the educational system.”\(^{37}\) The aims of the campaign, as outlined by new IMAR education party boss Huang Yali (黄雅丽), included “purifying the political environment of the education system.”\(^{38}\) Through a series of training workshops across

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34 Ibid.


schools and universities, government departments, and party committees, Inner Mongolians were made to study Xi Jinping Thought on nation-building work in order to “further clarify vague understandings, correct misunderstandings, and unify ideological thinking.”

To guide re-education work, the IMAR’s Education Department issued a confidential propaganda pamphlet in January 2021, which was subsequently leaked to the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center. It is filled with quotations from Xi Jinping, passages from national laws and regulations, and explanatory notes outlining the party Center’s requirements for educators and students in the region. When it comes to balancing unity with autonomy, the document asserts, unity is the presupposition and foundation of autonomy, and no autonomous region belongs to a single ethnic group.

In the Tongliao Mongol School, staff and students were subjected to systematic reprogramming over the course of 2021 following their participation in the protest movement. Faculty members attended three training sessions (in January, February, and April) during which they studied Xi Jinping Thought and key legal documents, and they reflected on their past errors. During an interview on March 8, 2021, the school’s Mongolian party secretary and principal Ma Bagan (马巴根) clarified the new policies and stressed the school’s mission to ensure that national unity “enters the minds and hearts” of all students and “national unity education begins from infancy.”

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40 内蒙古自治区教育厅, 筑牢中华民族共同体意识推进国家统编教材使用和国家通用语言文字教育宣传手册, 内部资料 (January 2021).

41 Ibid., pp. 10–11.


Throughout the school year, Mongolian students were subjected to a barrage of propaganda, including lectures on how the Chinese nation-race is a single family,\textsuperscript{45} patriotic activities to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP,\textsuperscript{46} flag-raising ceremonies to assist with the “spiritual transmission of patriotic power,”\textsuperscript{47} movie nights to watch “red films,”\textsuperscript{48} art classes to “enhance students’ understanding of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation-race,”\textsuperscript{49} and even a series of anti-terror, anti-riot drills simulating an attack by an armed “gangster.”\textsuperscript{50}

To celebrate national \textit{putonghua} promotion week, students created a chalkboard display in Chinese and dressed up in Han clothing to appreciate, according to the School’s \textit{weixin} channel, how “every standard Han character is a microcosm of Chinese cultural history,” and the importance of promoting use of the national common language to forge the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation-race.\textsuperscript{51} As the new Chinese-language textbooks were being rolled out, heretical texts that placed too much emphasis on ethnic identity and consciousness – like those of Mongolian identity – were mothballed for insufficiently promoting “collective [national] consciousness.”\textsuperscript{52}

At the start of the 2021 school year, the Ministry of Education in Beijing issued new guidelines for students to learn Xi Jinping Thought in order to “strengthen resolve in listening and following the party” and “cultivate patriotic feelings.”\textsuperscript{53} Across Inner Mongolia more

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than 30,000 teachers received training on how to use new “readers” (读本) on Xi Jinping Thought.\textsuperscript{54} The Ministry also announced that all kindergartens throughout China must now use putonghua to achieve Xi Jinping’s directive of “starting from infancy” in the promotion of the national language.\textsuperscript{55} In October, tiny pre-schoolers at the Tongliao Mongol Kindergarten chanted in putonghua as they took part in a week-long “little soilder training camp” (小小兵训练营) conducted by tactical police officers, instilling discipline and patriotism in the students while earning the school a plaque as an “exemplary counterterrorism unit.”\textsuperscript{56}

3. Purging resistance

Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign has seen hundreds of party and government officials removed from their posts in Inner Mongolia, including an ongoing investigation into corruption in the coal sector and the political and legal affairs system.\textsuperscript{57}

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\textsuperscript{54} “我区 3 万余名教师参加《习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学生读本》线上培训,” 内蒙古自治区教育厅, August 22, 2021, at \url{https://archive.md/PX4mG}, accessed November 3, 2021. These readers are officially known as “Student Readers for Xi Jinping Thought for Socialism in the New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色主义思想学生读本). Pdfs of these readers can be download at \url{https://mega.nz/folder/GXR3iKAK#N_rDSWAVX-QcgxYlhNZN2g}, accessed November 3, 2021.


\textsuperscript{57} During a meeting with the Inner Mongolian delegation to the National People’s Congress in March 2021, Xi Jinping made some strongly worded remarks about corruption in the region, and under the leadership of the party Center, the IMAR launched a “twenty-year backwards investigation” in the coal sector. See “内蒙煤炭反腐翻查 20 年 习近平：这个帐总要算,” 星岛日报, March 7, 2021, at \url{https://archive.md/1rNeN}, accessed November 3, 2021. In April 2021, as part of a national rectification campaign, the IMAR had its own “education and rectification” campaign throughout the party’s political and legal affairs system, where it promised to “eliminate black sheep and rectify chronic diseases.” See “全区政法队伍教育整顿警示教育大会召开,” 内蒙古自治区人民政府, April 16, 2021, at \url{https://archive.md/OWIWy}, accessed November 3, 2021.
or resisted the education reform agenda or who had failed to zealously fall in line with Xi’s vision of a Han-centric China. During his September 2020 inspection tour, Zhao Kezhi called on officials to “keep the knife pointed inward and scrape the bones to remove the poison.”

To assist with this excavation work, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) dispatched a team to conduct a “routine inspection” of the IMAR from October 10 to December 20, 2020. When it finally announced the results of the inspection in October 2021, the IMAR Party Committee admitted serious political and ideological deviation from Xi Jinping’s central party line – especially in ethnic work – and committed itself to rectifying (整改) past mistakes and purifying (净化) the political ecology of the region.

In the immediate aftermath of the protest movement, local officials were blamed for poor communication and ineffective implementation, with the biggest scalps being the head of the IMAR Education Department Hou Yuan (候元) and the secretary-general of the regional government Bao Zhenyu (包振玉), who were removed from their posts on November 26, 2020 without reason. Before completing its inspection, the CCDI issued a notice about “corruption and unhealthy practices in the education system” in Inner Mongolia and announced that 1,182 people had been investigated and punished for violations of discipline since the 19th Party Congress, and 35 cases had been referred to the courts for prosecution.

Many of the purged officials were at the forefront of efforts to preserve Mongolian culture and language. In the Plain and Bordered White Banner (正镶白旗) in Shilingol League, for example, the Mongolian head of the education office Chingelt (青格勒图) and head of the

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60 Ibid.


ethnic affairs office Jorigt (照日格图)\(^64\) were removed and charged with disciplinary violations following widespread teacher and student boycotts in the banner.\(^65\)

In Tongliao city, celebrated Mongolian educator and party secretary of the Education Bureau, Goa (高娃), was charged and later convicted of bribery charges.\(^66\) As former principal of the Tongliao Mongol School, Ms Goa had overseen a fivefold increase in student numbers during the early 2000s and helped grow the school into the region’s largest and most lauded Mongolian school, earning herself a state award as a hero of national unity in 2007.\(^67\)

On August 5, 2021, the regional government announced it had accepted the resignation of IMAR Chairwoman Bu Xiaolin.\(^58\) A cloud of suspicion surrounded her after she largely disappeared from public in the wake of the protest movement. When she reappeared to deliver the work report at the IMAR’s People’s Congress in January 2021, she dramatically collapsed on stage before being carried away and once again disappearing from public sight.\(^69\)

No reason was given for Bu’s removal, but her obvious demotion comes after two former Mongolian chairmen of the region, Yang Jing (杨晶) and Baatar (巴特尔), were dismissed from office.\(^70\) There is speculation that Baatar was removed as head of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission in December 2020 due to his sympathy for the language protest movement in his native Inner Mongolia.\(^71\) Yang Jing, who at the time was China’s most


senior cabinet minister and non-Han party official, was removed from office in February 2018 and confessed to corruption. Bu Xiaolin was replaced by Wang Lixia (王莉霞), a Mongolian official who had spent most of her career outside the region, suggesting a concerted effort to weaken the links between Mongolian officials and the autonomous region, with loyalty emerging as the key determinant of promotion in Xi’s China.

4. Weaponizing the law

The shift toward putonghua-medium education and cultural assimilation contradicted existing IMAR and national laws, and thus required retrospective changes and reinterpretations to shore up the legality of the party Center’s reforms in Inner Mongolia. Under Xi Jinping, the law is frequently “weaponized” in support of the party’s will.

The Regulations on Mongolian Written and Spoken Language Work in the IMAR, which were enacted in May 2005, stipulate written and spoken Mongolian as the “lingua franca” across the IMAR and “an important tool for exercising autonomy.” They require all government and civil organs to use Mongolian alongside putonghua as well as dedicated support for promotion of the language. Despite some opposition at the time of its passage, the 2016 Regulations on Ethnic Education in the IMAR codified strong administrative and financial incentives to support Mongolian-medium education, affirming the region would “prioritize the development of and provide targeted support for ethnic education,” while also outlining sanctions on those who violate or obstruct ethnic education.

head of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission by Chen Xiaojian (陈小江), the first time since 1954 that a Han official rather than an ethnic minority headed the commission.


In its January 2021 internal propaganda pamphlet, the IMAR Education Department stressed the legal requirement that all Chinese citizens study the national spoken and written language under Article 19 of the PRC Constitution, and other national laws, while stating the above IMAR regulations were inappropriate and would need to be “revised and perfected.” And sure enough, the Legislative Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee issued a ruling later that month stating that local regulations requiring ethnic schools to use their own written and spoken languages are inconsistent with Article 19 of the Constitution.

In August 2021, the IMAR government issued two new draft regulations on education and the promotion of putonghua for public consultation. Schools in the region, the new education regulations mandate, must cultivate the correct view of the country, history, nation, culture, and religion, and promote the national common language as the “foundation” (基础) of the regional education system. The second set of regulations make explicit the need to maintain the “dominant position” (主体地位) of putonghua and its central role in forging the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation-race. These regulations, when they come into force on 1 January, 2022, will nullify and replace the 2005 regulations on the Mongolian language and the 2016 regulations on ethnic education in the IMAR, therefore marking the death knell for the Mongolian language and identity in the region.

Unlike Xinjiang and Tibet, the IMAR lacked a set of regulations explicitly promoting national unity. This changed with passage of the Regulations on Accelerating Progress on National Unity in the IMAR on January 30, 2021, with Article 71 outlining the responsibilities of residents to uphold national unity and social stability while avoiding any violent terrorist, ethnic, separatist, or religious extremist activities. The regulations, an explanatory text and graph illustrates, “entirely embody the important proclamations of General Secretary Xi Jinping on nation-building work and the party Center’s major policy decisions on ethnic work.”

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(文明行为), which outlaw everything from spitting and defecating in public to failing to walk one’s dog on a leash, also require a “firm footing” (牢固树立) in the “communal consciousness of the Chinese nation-race,” and, in theory, punishments for those who do not abide.\(^8^3\)

Finally, in September 2021, the IMAR Education Department announced plans to follow suit with other provinces and autonomous regions in gradually scaling back and eventually eliminating altogether ethnic-based “extra points” (加分) on the university entrance exam.\(^8^4\) To “integrate ethnic factors with regional factors,” students (regardless of ethnicity) living in remote regions in the IMAR would retain 5 extra points, and beginning in 2026, Mongolian students in urban areas who used to receive upward of 30 bonus points would not receive any preferential treatment.\(^8^5\)

**Implications**

The Chinese Communist Party has long used a carrot-and-stick approach to ethnic governance. Under Xi Jinping’s new era of cultural nationalism,\(^8^6\) the party Center is turning to more coercive methods of control and homogenization as its tolerance for diversity wanes. The emphasis is on standardizing and normalizing Beijing’s directives throughout the nation, while also creating a uniform set of ethnocultural norms in frontier regions such as Inner Mongolia.

As a result, Mongolian identity – like that of other non-Han communities in China – is slowly being hollowed out. This sort of “slow violence” is chiefly structural and not defined by any single event or policy action; but rather represents the steady – yet at times obscure – altering of what it means to be a citizen of China and the norms that define that identity.\(^8^7\)

Ritualized performances of exotic otherness remain, often through fetishized costume, song and dance ensembles performed for the voyeuristic pleasure of visiting Han officials and foreign tourists. Meanwhile, on the main stage, Mongols and other indigenous communities

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\(^8^6\) Leibold, “Planting the Seed.”

are being taught to dress, act, and speak in accordance with Xi Jinping Thought in state schools, where children as young as six years of age learn: “We are all Chinese; we all deeply love our motherland, as Grandpa Xi Jinping says, ‘Love for one’s motherland is the deepest and most enduring sentiment in the world; the source for achieving individual virtue and the foundation for rendering meritorious service’.”

Yet Inner Mongolia is not Tibet nor Xinjiang. Regional variations remain as do forms of local resistance. Xi Jinping’s mandate for cultural nationalism and ethnic assimilation has been rolled out at varying paces and under different local circumstances. Inner Mongolia has exercised – at least until recently – a higher degree of autonomy than those restive regions where national security fears have propelled a more heavy-handed and securitized approach to stability maintenance and nation-building. The party’s methods in Inner Mongolia are more subtle and less visible, arguably making them more insidious to China’s ethnocultural diversity over the long term.

**About the Author**

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