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Pastoralism and the State in China’s Inner Mongolia

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In 2020, late summer brought rare protests in China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). Ethnic Mongols were angered by reforms to the curriculum in Mongolian-language schools that would replace Mongolian with Chinese as the medium of instruction for three core subjects, to be taught via textbooks in use nationwide. Across the region, many Mongols responded by keeping their children away from school, and by circulating petitions calling on the government to uphold the guarantees of minority-language education that are written into China’s constitution. Several suicides in connection with the reforms were also reported. The school strike was broken after parents were threatened with dismissal from their jobs unless they sent their children back to school.

Unrest on this scale had not been seen in the IMAR since 2011, when large protests occurred following the death of a Mongol herder who was run over and killed by a Han Chinese truck driver working for a mine. If language was the focus of concern in 2020, these earlier protests spoke to the centrality of land use in the ethnic politics of the IMAR. In recent decades, the once-remote region has become a center of the Chinese mining industry, significantly contributing to the degradation of the grasslands that constitute the distinctive ecological feature of much of the region, and to the dispossession of the largely Mongol pastoralists who inhabit them.

Pastoralism is one of the key markers of Mongol identity. It distinguishes Mongols from the agrarian Han Chinese, whose large-scale settlement of

the region over the course of the twentieth century deprived Mongols of vast tracts of pastureland, while simultaneously ensuring that they would be an absolute minority even within their own autonomous region. (Mongols now account for less than 20 percent of the IMAR population.) As the Inner Mongolian scholar Uradyn Bulag has argued, pastoralism has served as “a barometer to measure the degree of autonomy Mongols could exercise in their autonomous region.”

If recent reforms suggest that autonomy is being curtailed in the sphere of education, in the context of an increasingly assimilationist state, what readings are now being given by this other barometer? Answering this question involves attending to the ways in which China’s governing of its ethnic minorities is today entangled with state environmentalism, since pastoralists themselves have come to be blamed for the degradation of the grasslands.

TERRITORY AND NATIONALITY

The term “Inner Mongolia” is a legacy of the different statuses of Mongolian regions within the Qing Empire. The princes of Outer Mongolia enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy, and the region remained largely insulated from Chinese settlement. Following the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, Outer Mongolia achieved *de facto* independence from China in 1921, and in 1924 the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) was established, with the support of the Soviet Union.

The MPR would go on to adopt the Cyrillic script, while the IMAR still uses the classical, vertical Mongolian script. Even as they face increasing assimilationist pressures within China, Inner Mongols today are proud to have avoided this Russification of their script.

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An earlier policy had sought to prevent Chinese from settling in Mongolian regions, but by the time of its collapse the Qing had abandoned such restrictions, and large numbers of Chinese settlers poured into Inner Mongolia from neighboring provinces. They rented land to farm from Mongol nobles, decreasing the land available to Mongol commoners, who had enjoyed customary use rights to pastureland in their respective “banners,” the administrative units into which Inner Mongolia was divided. As the Qing fell, the territory administered by banners was reduced; Chinese counties were set up to govern the increasing population of Chinese settlers.

The defense of Mongol autonomy in early-twentieth-century China was distinctive in its concern with the preservation of the banner as an administrative unit. Today, the IMAR is the only part of China where an alternative, ethnically marked system of subregional administrative units exists. (Above the banner is the “league,” equivalent to the prefecture or municipality in other parts of China.) But success in this respect has been only partial; the territory of the IMAR is now a patchwork of ostensibly Mongol banners (most of which in fact have Chinese majorities) and Chinese-dominated counties. Several leagues have also been “upgraded” to the status of municipalities in recent years.

Another legacy of Chinese settlement and the concomitant decrease in available pastureland is the fact that a large population of agricultural Mongols exists in eastern Inner Mongolia. This region contains the highest concentration of Mongols anywhere in the world, and it has produced generations of Mongol revolutionaries, intellectuals, and officials. Despite this, the agricultural Mongols are largely ignored in representations of Mongolian culture and identity, such is the overwhelming focus on pastoralism. The standard dialect of the Mongolian language in Inner Mongolia, taught in schools across the region and used in broadcasting, comes not from this region but from the pastoral area of Shiliingol to the west.

In the course of the Republican era that followed the collapse of the Qing, Inner Mongolia itself was wiped from the map. Its western areas were subsumed into Chinese provinces, while the east became part of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. The IMAR was established by the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1947, two years *before* the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The CCP succeeded in co-opting a separate Mongol nationalist movement in eastern Inner Mongolia, which had leaned toward unification with the MPR, thanks in part to the political skills of a senior Mongol cadre, Ulanhu, who was to become China’s highest-ranking ethnic minority official. The Sino-Soviet treaty of 1945 had already foreclosed the possibility of Inner Mongolian accession to the MPR, as did China’s formal recognition of the latter’s independence.

The CCP promised to unify historically Mongolian territories that had been parcelled out among Chinese provinces following the collapse of the Qing. Yet this apparent concession to Inner Mongolian nationalism had the effect of reducing the political power of the Mongols, since they were significantly outnumbered by Chinese settlers in the expanded IMAR. This disparity would only increase as Chinese workers were brought in to develop the mines at Bayan Obo (the world’s largest deposit of rare earth metals) and the steelworks at Baotou. At the end of the 1950s, refugees fleeing the famine in neighboring provinces precipitated by Mao’s Great Leap Forward further reduced the proportion of Mongols within their own autonomous region.

The CCP’s policies toward minority “nationalities” (*minzu*) drew on Soviet models, but also reflected the importance of Inner Asian peoples and their territories to CCP strategy in the Chinese Civil War. These policies initially included the right to secession, though it was later withdrawn. A 1938 speech by Mao, declaring that minorities should not be forced to learn Chinese, and should be allowed to use and develop their own languages and scripts, was often cited on Inner Mongolian social media following the announcement of the educational reforms in the summer of 2020.

These nationality policies are now giving way to a more aggressively unitary nation-building project, which has intensified under the presidency of Xi Jinping. Prominent Chinese intellectuals in recent years have been calling for a “second generation” of nationality policies, which would involve an emphasis on self-ascribed, “depoliticized” ethnicity over the concept of nationality. This “depoliticization” would involve the disappearance of territorial autonomy and other privileges

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granted by the state (including extra points for minorities on university entrance exams, for example), thereby making China correspond more closely, so these intellectuals believe, to the “melting pot” model that they regard as a particular strength of the United States. Recent events in China suggest that these “second generation” proposals now exercise considerable influence over policymakers.

THE PASTORAL EXCEPTION

The first test of Inner Mongolian autonomy was the CCP policy of land reform. In agrarian regions of China, this policy had proved instrumental in winning peasants over to the CCP cause. In the IMAR, however, differences of class, as identified by CCP cadres, were cross-cut by those of nationality. In agricultural areas, “landlords” were often Mongols, while the “poor peasants” were Chinese settlers. As a result, class struggle took the form of ethnic conflict.

In pastoral regions, land reform involved the division of herds among numerous households, reducing the ability of herds to reproduce themselves. In many cases, herders slaughtered their animals to prevent them from being confiscated. The result of this was the rapid immiseration of pastoral regions.

In response, Ulanhu managed to create a kind of pastoral exception to CCP policies formulated for agricultural regions of China, which also helped to consolidate pastoralism as a key signifier of the Mongol nationality. There would be no property distribution, no class labeling, and no class struggle in pastoral regions of the IMAR. This exception would come to serve as a model for other pastoral regions of China.

Ulanhu argued against a mode of evolutionist thinking, common among Chinese officials, that viewed pastoralism as a “backward” mode of production in comparison with agriculture. He resisted the state-led reclamation of pastureland for agriculture (and Chinese settlement), a strategy through which Chinese states had long sought to control their Inner Asian frontiers. After Mao in 1964 selected the farming village of Dazhai in Shanxi province as a model for the rest of the country to follow, Ulanhu chose the district of Uushin Juu in western Inner Mongolia to be a “pastoral Dazhai,” thereby again marking off pastoralism as requiring separate treatment, while simultaneously expressing formal fidelity to Maoist models.

As the 1960s progressed, however, the pastoral exception that Ulanhu had carved out for the IMAR was eclipsed by the violent persecution of Mongols. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, the cultural and linguistic ties between Mongols in the IMAR and those in the independent, Soviet-aligned MPR came to be framed in a dangerously political light. During the Cultural Revolution, thousands of Mongols were killed and many more injured, often falsely accused of belonging to a separatist “Inner Mongolian People’s Party.” Red Guards roamed the countryside, destroying Mongolian Buddhist monasteries and other religious sites. In 1969, large parts of the IMAR were lopped off and granted to neighboring Chinese provinces, as a way of reducing the perceived power of the Mongols.

In a climate of paranoid emphasis on “self-reliance,” Mongol pastoralists again found themselves ideologically exposed. They were chastised for consuming grain that they did not produce themselves, which was known as “grain of bad conscience.” Officials in pastoral regions were forced to reclaim pastureland for agriculture, thereby contributing to the degradation of the grasslands. It is this degradation that Chinese state environmentalism is today supposed to combat, though once more it is pastoralists who find themselves on the wrong end of state policy.

‘RETIRE LIVESTOCK, RESTORE GRASSLANDS’

The introduction of market reforms in these parts of China in the 1980s broke up the large collectives through which the pastoral economy had been managed since 1958. Herds were divided up among individual households, and this was gradually followed by collective pastureland being contracted out on long leases to individual households. This policy in pastoral regions mirrored what was being done in agricultural parts of China, but some Mongol officials hoped that the fragmentation of land use rights would help secure Mongol autonomy, since it might make the large-scale dispossession of Mongol herders more difficult.

Yet this form of privatization had heavy ecological costs. Herders were now limited in their ability to relieve pressure on pastures through the strategies of mobility that had long been important to animal husbandry on the Mongolian plateau. Although the term “nomad” conjures up an image of ceaseless, directionless wandering, “mobile pastoralists” in the region in fact tended to practice a kind of regularized seasonal transhumance

between pastures, supplemented at times of localized drought by more long-distance migration. In the collective era, such migrations had been coordinated by the various local governments. Numerous scholars now suggest that mobility on the part of herders on the Mongolian plateau is a sophisticated way of dealing with the nonequilibrium ecology of these arid grasslands.

Drawing on theories of desertification that had first been formulated in colonial Africa, however, the Chinese state blamed the degradation of the grasslands not on the barbed-wire fences that now transected them, but instead on overstocking by herders, and their alleged mismanagement of the pastures that had been leased to individual households. This attribution of responsibility is inflected by a long-standing stigmatization of pastoralism as a “backward” form of land use. In the wake of an increasing number of sandstorms that menaced northern China in the 1990s, a policy known as “retire livestock, restore grasslands” was adopted. It was implemented as part of China’s Great Western Development Strategy at the turn of the millennium.

In the IMAR, the “retire livestock, restore grasslands” policy involves bans on grazing in some areas, and the introduction of stocking limits in others. Herders then receive payments that are correlated

to reduction in herd size. In some cases, herders have also been given money to relocate to urban areas, sometimes on the condition that their houses on the grasslands are razed to the ground, making return impossible. Herders who remain on the grasslands are encouraged to raise their animals in barns with fodder, rather than grazing the rangeland, thereby increasing their dependence on the market.

In certain areas, herders receive subsidies if they fence off some or all of their pastureland and plant trees and shrubs, as part of a plan to turn Inner Mongolia into a giant shelterbelt protecting Beijing. Other tracts of rangeland have been declared “public benefit forests” and fenced off to prevent grazing. But monocultural afforestation projects, of the kind that are springing up in many parts of Inner Mongolia, can in fact deplete underground water and increase desertification.

While some commentators in the West have been impressed with the ambitiousness of China’s environmental policies, scholars Yifei Li and

Judith Shapiro have recently criticized what they regard as its “coercive environmentalism.” One example they mention is the forced resettlement of herders across China’s western regions, a policy known as “ecological migration.” However, a focus on such techniques, characteristic of what the political scientist James Scott has called “high modernist” states, can obscure some of the more subtle ways in which state environmentalism works, through a complex system of sticks and carrots that induces herders to move off the grasslands and into towns and cities.

For many herders, this is felt as the narrowing of options: fencing, stocking limits, afforestation projects, mining operations, the closure of rural schools, drought, and subsidized urban housing combine to make rural life unviable, until “voluntary” resettlement in the city becomes inevitable. The payments they receive for stock reduction are not enough to live on in the city, so they must seek low-status employment, often in restaurants or as taxi drivers. Others prefer to try their luck with small-scale trading—some deal in pre-

precious stones from remote parts of the Gobi—though they complain that they lack the business acumen and connections of Han Chinese in the region. But an older neighbor, without school-age children, might decide that

life on the grasslands, even with a much-reduced herd, is still preferable to the precariousness of urban life without employment prospects.

Even within a single banner, these environmental policies often are not implemented in a uniform manner. Some districts adopted them earlier than others, and the severity with which they are enforced can also differ. One unintentional effect of this uneven implementation is that herders facing strict stocking limits can lend some of their livestock to herders in another district who are not subject to the same limits, in return for a certain amount of money or meat. Such arrangements also allow them to imagine that they might one day be able to return to the grasslands. Others find ways around the policies—by herding animals at night, for example, or by moving their herds to inaccessible mountains or deserts.

The variegated nature of these grassland management policies, the fact that their implementation has by and large been delegated to local governments, and the different ways in which

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individual herding households engage with them all serve to reduce the scope for the kind of collective protest, or “mass incident,” that the state fears. Nonetheless, many Mongols still perceive in these environmental policies an attack on a distinctively Mongolian way of life. They point to the fact that as the policies were being implemented, the IMAR was witnessing the proliferation of mining operations far more environmentally destructive than extensive animal husbandry. Many see the policies as a thinly disguised form of land grabbing, as pastureland vacated by herders is turned over to large-scale intensive agriculture or feedlots, mining concerns, military bases, or highly polluting factories unable to operate in more densely populated parts of China.

Following the 2011 events, protests over land have been more localized. Small groups of herders from certain districts have traveled to larger administrative centers, including even Beijing, to protest the confiscation of their pastureland by local officials. Such incidents tend to occur when officials overplay their hand and target large tracts of land, affecting multiple households simultaneously, without offering adequate compensation.

In such cases, protesters often downplay the ethnic aspect of their grievances, instead arguing that their legal rights to land (as individuals or as villagers with collective land rights), or to proper compensation, are being infringed. In keeping with a time-honored, institutionalized form of redress-seeking in China, they petition higher powers to intervene on their behalf as law-abiding Chinese citizens. The localized nature of these protests is partly a testament to the uneven implementation of the “retire livestock, restore grasslands” policies across the IMAR.

PASTORALISM AS CONSERVATION

A focus on sporadic forms of open protest can obscure the ways in which Mongol officials and intellectuals, working within the state and with its discourses, have continued to engage in the politics of pastoral exception, albeit while lacking the kind of influence once enjoyed by Ulanhu. In some instances, they have made connections with Chinese ecologists, inviting them to conduct research in pastoral regions. There now exists an extensive literature in Chinese which is critical of both the ecological and the social effects of these policies, and which argues that mobile pastoralism can in fact be beneficial to the ecology of the grasslands.

Whereas Ulanhu once defended pastoralism as a mode of production, some Mongol officials and intellectuals today in parts of the IMAR have come to champion it as a mode of conservation. The state's attempts to “modernize” livestock production in the region have involved the introduction of exotic breeds, which are often unable to tolerate the harsh environment of the Mongolian plateau and must be raised indoors. In recent years, Mongol officials and scientists have argued for the importance of maintaining populations of native breeds, especially of camels and horses. These animals were victims of the reform era, when they were replaced with more lucrative species, particularly cashmere goats. Herding native breeds also became impractical, since pastureland privatization reduced the land available for them.

In several parts of the IMAR, retired Mongol officials have established small organizations dedicated to the conservation of these native species and breeds. Globally circulating ideas of biodiversity conservation, particularly the concept of “animal genetic resources,” have made it possible to argue that these animals are vital to food security, and are key to enabling livestock production to adapt to future environmental change and shifts in market demand.

In some parts of the IMAR, certain native breeds have been granted exemptions from stocking limits and grazing bans. Their suitability to extensive modes of animal husbandry has afforded their advocates another means of criticizing the proliferation of fencing and stall-based modes of livestock production: they claim that the grazing of these native breeds, rather than destroying the grassland, is vital to its health. Growing demand for organic food in China, following high-profile food safety scandals, suggests potential new markets. Several Mongol scientists working in life sciences departments at Inner Mongolian universities have also sought to emphasize the potential utility of these genetic resources to biotechnology development, now a key focus of Chinese policy.

THE EROSION OF NATIONALITY

While it represents a new articulation of the pastoral exception, this refiguring of pastoralism as conservation also contributes to the gradual erosion of the salience of “nationality” within official discourse in China. Native livestock breeds are registered as part of China's “national genetic resources,” a form of biological nation-building that works to efface their associations with a particular

minority nationality. At the same time, these breeds, and the conservation politics that coalesce around them, often emphasize particular banner identities and accompany the promotion (or invention) of local place-based cultures.

Officials are keen to promote local distinctiveness at the league or banner level to catch the eye of tourists and investors, and culture at the scale of nationality is increasingly deemphasized in official discourse. So, for example, Uushin Banner, once the location of the model “pastoral Dazhai,” now brands itself as the home of the Uushin breed of horse, and the local government promotes what it calls “Uushin horse culture.” Nearby Alasha has earned the official title of “China’s Camel Country,” while to the east, Ujumchin Right Banner styles itself “China’s White Horse Country,” after a distinctive local variety of the Mongolian horse. Such appellations serve to tie together locality and nation-state, while transcending the IMAR and its titular nationality.

Rather than preserving a timeless Mongolian nomadic culture, these conservation initiatives are bound up with novel conceptions of value stemming from global biodiversity discourse, and they instantiate new kinds of place-based culture. Here it is worth noting the difference between approaches to language and land use in relation to the concept of nationality. Mongolian-language education has been a project of standardization and nationality-building, teaching students across the IMAR a singular version of the language, one which is also used in broadcasting and print media. By contrast, where pastoralism is still possible in the IMAR, it increasingly takes the form of what might be called an officially approved local dialect, emphasizing both the animal-genetic and the cultural distinctiveness of particular localities, such that culture and nationality are no longer isomorphic.

If language and land use have been the two pillars of Mongol autonomy within the PRC, both are now targeted by an increasingly assimilationist state willing to override the very limited forms of autonomy still enjoyed by minority nationalities. The downgrading of minority languages has already been pursued in the Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous regions. In the latter particularly,

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these language reforms have only been the thin end of the assimilationist wedge. Since 2017, a network of extrajudicial detention centers has been established in Xinjiang, where around one million members of Muslim minorities, predominantly the Uyghur, have been detained for “re-education.”

But grasping how pastoralism in the IMAR is being transformed by state policies requires moving beyond traditional narratives of “nomad sedentarization,” through which the relationship between modern states and pastoralists is often understood. While the Chinese state does continue to use the large-scale forced resettlement of peoples as a means of controlling its peripheries, state environmentalism also works at a different scale and pace in the IMAR, gradually making extensive animal husbandry unviable, while incentivizing herders to move to urban centers and embrace their “civilizing” influences.

The state’s conservationist discourse has also allowed some Mongols to articulate forms of pastoral exception, centered on particular breeds and localities. These exceptions are fragile, dependent

on the ability of their advocates to counter dominant representations of pastoralism as “backward,” and on the abiding attraction of local officials to more intensive forms of land use. The government of the IMAR in recent

years has begun to curtail some of the resource extraction for which the region had become notorious, seeking to transform it into China’s “Northern Ecological Security Shield.” Small-scale mines have been closed, and in the spring of 2021 this extended to shutting down energy-intensive cryptocurrency mining projects that had proliferated in the region.

State environmentalism, which has done so much to make pastoralism unviable in recent decades, might paradoxically enable its revival at least in a few parts of Inner Mongolia as a mode of conservation, in the wake of the abandonment of more environmentally destructive modes of land use. This, at least, is the hope against hope of those Mongols who have defended pastoralism from within the state. They must do so, however, in the context of an aggressive nation-building project—one in which the concept of “nationality” appears to have an ever-smaller place. ■