

**An Issue of Urban/Rural Division? Examining Mongolian Language Education  
in the IMAR**

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of the increasing disparities in urban and rural areas in China nowadays, this qualitative study explores trilingual education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), with a focus on the Mongolian language programme. Through a field trip to five primary and secondary schools, interviews and class observations reveal that students are highly motivated in conducting their primary and lower secondary schooling through Mongolian, due to the high utilitarian value associated with Mongolian. Preferential policies make it possible to maximise the chance of academic advancement, career prospects and possible social upward mobility for learners of Mongolian. However, the dominant positions of Putonghua as the national common language, and English as a lingua franca in schools with admirable academic quality, restrict the ability to convert the linguistic capital of Mongolian into other forms of capital outside of Inner Mongolia. The study reveals that the problems and difficulties of Mongolian language education in compact ethnic minority regions tend to be the same as those faced by other Chinese rural schools. The marginalisation of a minority language is examined in relation to fast-paced urbanisation; changes would require institutional support to enhance the symbolic value of the ethnic minority language.

*Keywords:* ethnic minorities, language policy, Mongolian, trilingual education, urbanisation,

Trilingual education has been the de facto norm for ethnic minority schools in China since the 2002 introduction of English in Year 3 of the elementary curriculum (Feng & Adamson, 2018). Putonghua (the national common language, also known as Mandarin Chinese), the ethnic minority language, and English co-exist in the schooling system. In the case of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), the Mongolian language is offered together with Putonghua and English.

The IMAR is a long, narrow strip in the northwest of China. It shares borders with Russia and Mongolia (Dong et al., 2015). While Han is the dominant ethnicity in the region, the Mongols are the main ethnic minority. According to the 2010 national census (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012), in that year there were 19.65 million Han, an increase of 4.39% since 2000, and 4.22 million Mongols, with a similar increase of 4.89%. More than 70% of the total number of Mongols in the whole country (5.98 million; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011) reside in the IMAR.

Despite this population growth, there seems to be a decrease in the level of interest in the Mongolian language (Gao, 2011). Indeed, there is greater demand for Putonghua due to its being “the language of power and access to economic well-being” (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009, p. 550), as well as for English, owing to the forces of globalisation and future personal development (Yi & Adamson, 2017a). The Outline of Mid- and Long-term Educational Reforms and Developmental Plan for the IMAR (2010-2020) puts a joint emphasis on Mongolian and Putonghua, in order to achieve the goal of bilingualism (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2011). This study sought to investigate whether Mongolian can survive and thrive, bearing in mind the social and commercial advantages of Putonghua and English.

Against the backdrop of rapid economic development in China, there has also been fast-paced urbanisation, leading to widening gaps between the urban and rural, as well as between largely urbanised and less urbanised regions. The impact of regional economic disparities on trilingual education has been pointed out in previous research (Feng & Adamson, 2018; Gao, 2011; Zhang & Yang, 2017, 2018), which leads to the question of the role of these wide gaps in regional wealth in the implementation of trilingual education, especially for minority language education, which faces declining interest among younger generations. In these circumstances, the current study entailed visiting five schools in Inner Mongolia in order to gain an in-depth understanding of Mongolian language education against the backdrop of trilingual education policies and China’s urbanisation.

### **Trilingual Education Movements in Inner Mongolia**

Although Chinese official discourse in policies and documents still refers to bilingual education, Mongol students have access to three languages: Putonghua, Mongolian and English. Long before English was introduced to formal schooling in the early 2000s, Mongolian and Putonghua bilingualism was practised in Inner Mongolia. Ma and Pan (1988) conducted a survey of 2,089 households in 1985, involving both agricultural and pastoral regions in Chifeng, the area where the field trip for this study was carried out. Over 90% of Mongols spoke fluent Putonghua, while a substantial number of them no longer spoke Mongolian. By comparison, around 47% of Han Chinese spoke at least some Mongolian, and more than 70% of Mongols had mastered both languages (Ma & Pan, 1988).

The 1990s witnessed decreasing interest in Mongolian, particular in urban areas. The main reason was economic reform and nationwide marketisation, which contributed to the superior

status of Putonghua and English being overwhelmingly dominant in terms of social mobility (Burjgin & Bilik, 2015). Government financial support for Mongolian education was also gradually withdrawn, since the education sector was to be managed according to market forces (Bilik, 1998).

By 1995, the number of Mongolian primary schools had been reduced by 1,409 and the number of Mongolian secondary schools had been reduced by 142 (Jin & Chen, 2010). In 1996-1997, the number of primary school pupils instructed in Mongolian fell by 23,256 (Jin & Chen, 2010). This pattern of reduction extended from major cities and banners – an administrative unit in IMAR – to small towns and pastureland (Tan & Jin, 2017). Statistics published by the IMAR Education Bureau in 1997 show the decreasing number of Mongol students learning Mongolian (Su, 2005, see Figure 1).

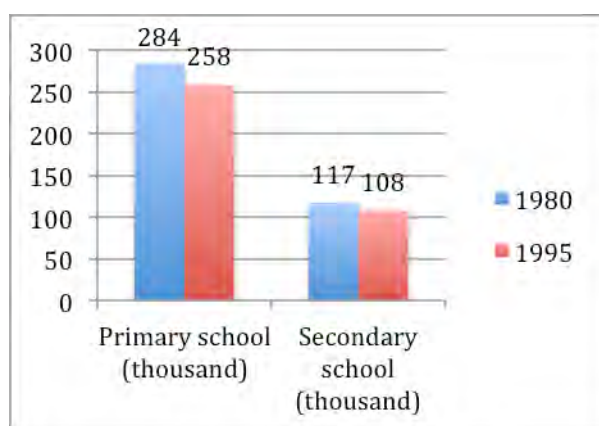


Figure 1: The decline in the number of Mongol students learning Mongolian

Moving into the 2000s, and according to a survey of three secondary schools in Hohhot, Chifeng and Tongliao, a large number of Mongol students reported code switching between Mongolian and Putonghua, even when communicating with family members and among themselves (Jin & Chen, 2010). A 2013 study confirmed that it was a common phenomenon for Mongol students not to study Mongolian (Jin, 2014). The marginalisation of Mongolian seemed to be underway across the IMAR (Yi & Adamson, 2017b).

Top-down measurements have been introduced to promote Putonghua and at the same time encourage the study of Mongolian. The principle of separate schooling for Han and Mongol children was adopted and promoted in the 1950s in order to allow Mongol students to benefit from learning both their own language and Putonghua (Su, 2005, pp. 92–93). These schools are named Mongolian National Schools (MNS).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the elementary school curriculum was changed to bring Putonghua education forward from Grade 5 to Grade 3 and increase teaching hours (Su, 2005, pp. 92–94). The Mode of Instruction (MoI) was also shifted from Mongolian to Putonghua from Year 3 of junior high school. Specifically, there were two modes of classes at elementary level and three modes at secondary level, according to the MoI they employed (*ibid.*, pp. 95; see Table 1).

Table 1: Different modes of teaching according to MoI in late 1950s – early 1960s  
(adapted from Su, 2005, p. 95)

	Mode A	Mode B	Mode C
Elementary schools	Mongolian as MoI with Putonghua as a subject	Putonghua as MoI with Mongolian as a subject	N/A
Secondary schools	Except Putonghua, all other subjects use Mongolian as MoI	Except Mongolian, all other subjects use Putonghua as MoI	Some subjects (e.g. Maths, Physics, Chemistry) use Putonghua as MoI, some (e.g. History, Geography, Biology) use Mongolian as MoI

Based on the modes of teaching in the 1950s, the Regulations of the IMAR for Ethnic Education (The IMAR News, 2016) outlines that there are two modes of bilingual education in the MNS nowadays. Mode A uses Mongolian as the MoI for all subjects, with Putonghua as a language subject from Grade 2 at elementary level. Mode B uses Putonghua as the MoI and delivers Mongolian as a language subject. Therefore, Mode B differs from other Han Chinese schools only in offering Mongolian as a subject. MNS usually adopt Mode A, while also offering classes in Mode B. Mode C in Table 1 is no longer in practice. Both modes introduce English from Grade 3, as suggested by the central government.

Interestingly, Mode A schools are almost all Mongolian ethnic students from remote areas who are boarders at the school, whereas Mode B schools are usually in cities and towns consisting of Mongol, Han Chinese and other ethnic students. The closer a school is to an urban city “where the geographical and living conditions are more influenced by the majority Chinese culture” (Dong et al., 2015), the more likely that Mongolian is in a deteriorating position. In other words, the urbanisation of a region seems to lead to the marginalisation of its ethnic language (Dong et al., 2015; Yi & Adamson, 2017a, 2017b).

The current study entailed a field trip to five MNS in May 2018. Of the five schools, one is a Mongolian ethnic primary school and one is a Mongolian secondary school. The other three are MNS with Grade 1-6 at the elementary level and Grade 7-9 at the junior secondary level. These schools offer nine different levels of teaching because of the nine years of compulsory education in China. They are also called “nine-year education” schools.

Interviews with teachers, school leaders and local government officials, as well as class observations, were carried out in the field study in order to scrutinise the motivations and difficulties faced by students in the Mongolian language programme, with reference to rural/urban division. The purpose of this data was to address the question as to whether Mongolian can survive and thrive in light of the social and commercial advantages of Putonghua and English and increased urbanisation.

### **Field Trip to Five Ethnic Minority Schools**

The field trip took place in Chifeng, where previous research had been conducted (Jin & Chen, 2010; Ma & Pan, 1988), in order to answer the research question regarding the implementation

and development Mongolian language education in IMAR against the backdrop of urbanisation. Chifeng is in the east of the IMAR, one of the twelve sub-divisions of the IMAR (see Figure 2). With an area of around 90 thousand square kilometres, Chifeng consists of three districts, seven banners and two towns (Chifeng Government website, 2018). It has the largest population of all cities and banners (*ibid.*). Of its approximately 4.64 million people, 940,000 are Mongols (Chifeng Government website, 2018).

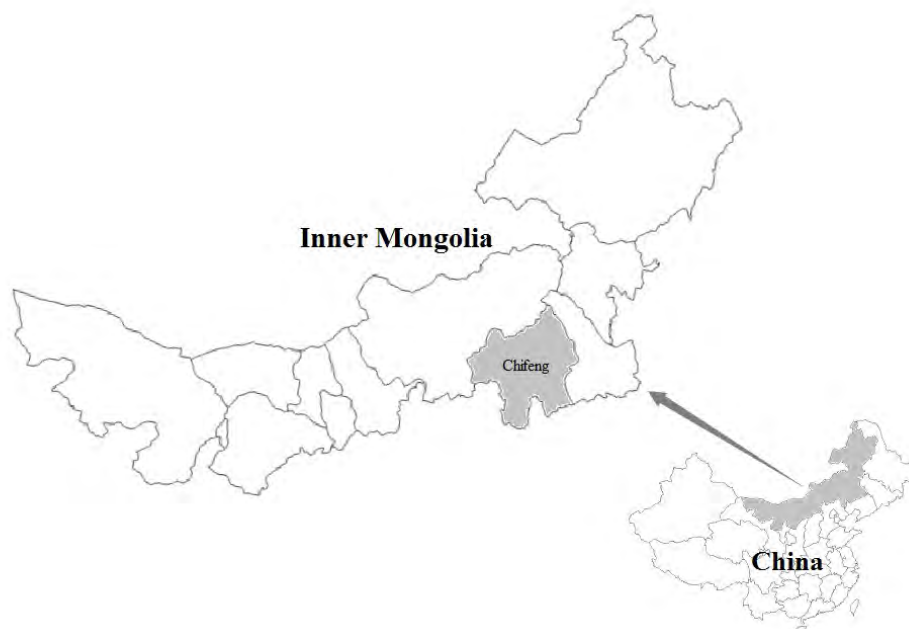


Figure 2: The location of Chifeng in the IMAR

The sheer size of Chifeng makes it impossible to visit all MNS. As a result, five Mongolian ethnic schools were selected, including both elementary and secondary levels. Two schools, Xianjin Primary and Secondary, are in developed urban areas, whereas the other three are in remote small towns or villages.

Table 2 below shows the number of interview participants in the current study. “School leaders” refers to staff who have a leading administrative role in a school, that is, headmaster. For the purpose of strict anonymity, the term “school leader” is used rather than the exact job title. All teachers interviewed are ethnic Mongols and native speakers of Mongolian. They were educated in Mongolian in Mode A or B in their childhood. They teach Mongolian, Putonghua or other subjects including English, Maths and Physics. Their teaching experience ranges from over four years to more than thirty years. Two officials from the local authorities were also invited for interviews, in order to gain an understanding of the development of bilingual education from a government perspective. Again, to protect anonymity, their job titles and departments are not specified.

Table 2: Study participants and manner of participation

School name	Participants	Number	Participation in the study	Observation
Xianjin Primary School	School leaders	1	Interview	
	School teachers	3	Interview and observation of teaching	Two classes (Mongolian in Mode A & B)
Xianjin Secondary School	School leaders	1	Interview	
	School teachers	2	Interview and observation of teaching	Two classes (Mongolian in Mode A & B)
Shengli Mongolian National School	School teachers	2	Interview and observation of teaching	One class (Mongolian in Mode B)
Hongqi Mongolian National School	School leaders	1	Interview	
	School teachers	6	Interview and observation of teaching	Two classes (Mongolian and English in Mode A)
Meihao Secondary School	School leaders	1	Interview	
	School teachers	6	Interview and observation of teaching	One class (Mongolian in Mode A)
Local government	Government officials	2	Interview	

Since MNS differ from Han Chinese schools in teaching and learning Mongolian, the teaching observations were mainly of Mongolian classes and an English class was observed in one Secondary School. The visit to each school was carried out in a similar format, starting with a general conversation with the school leader followed by class observations, and then conducting interviews with teachers, including those who had given classes earlier, followed by interviews with school leaders. This paper focuses on the results from the interviews, drawing information from in-class practice and language policies wherever necessary. Since all MNS implement bilingual education in two modes, classes in both Mode A and B were observed. The data below mainly present the common findings from both modes of class, with the differences between them highlighted later. In total, ten semi-structure interviews and five class observations were conducted. The average length of each interview is 113.6 minutes, which generates totally 135,921 words transcription. Each class lasted 40 minutes and therefore 200 minutes of classroom observations were also completed.

### Data Analysis

This study employs Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital to explicate the study of Mongolian in five MNS. As Bourdieu (1991) points out, linguistic utterances or expressions can possess a certain value which is endowed with the contexts or markets where these linguistic products are used. Moreover, the value associated with linguistic products varies (Bourdieu, 1991). A

person's linguistic capital refers to their practical competence and ability to produce linguistic expressions "which are highly valued on the markets concerned" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 18).

Linguistic capital is associated with, and can be converted to, other forms of capital, such as economic capital in the form of material wealth, cultural capital as exemplified by educational qualifications, and social capital as defined as the aggregate of an individual's group memberships and social connections (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Sunuodula & Cao, 2015). Finally, symbolic capital, as in accumulated prestige or honour, is a credit that derives from other forms of capital as long as they are perceived and recognised as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1989). Each form of capital has exchange value, and people may also participate in maintaining or altering the distribution of different forms in the market. For instance, the mastery of a language (linguistic capital) may mean a good education (cultural capital) that can generate a well-paid job (economic capital) and contribute to upward social mobility (social capital), in order to gain prestige in the long term (symbolic capital). The current study examines the linguistic capital associated with Mongolian, Putonghua and English. It probes the reasons for the falling interest in the minority language from the perspective of conversions of different forms of capital on the linguistic market.

Since Putonghua is the common language among all interviewees and researchers, it was employed for the interviews. However, one of the researchers is a native Mongolian speaker and can communicate fluently in Mongolian with interviewees. Greetings were usually in Mongolian and the Mongol researcher translated a few words and sentences for the research team when interviewees preferred to speak in their mother tongue.

The interviews were transcribed by one researcher and read in detail by two researchers independently, to identify general themes across an entire set of interviews. Two researchers later manually categorised and coded the interview transcriptions for thematic analysis. Instead of frequency of occurrence, the occurrence of common themes was outlined and the themes are discussed below. The quotations from interviewees presented were translated into English by one researcher and then back-translated into Chinese by the second researcher, in order to make sure the English translation accurately captures the meaning.

### **Academic advancement from learning Mongolian**

Contrary to the decreasing interest in learning Mongolian discussed earlier, primary and junior high school leaders and teachers said that parents liked their children to have Mongolian language education, for the pursuit of academic advancement.

*They [parents] are happy to send their children to our [MNS] school, since it will be easier to get into university in the future [compared to attending a Han school]. Every student receives 10 extra points if their ethnicity is recorded as Mongol. However, students [in Mode A and B] can enter a university with a lower mark [than Mongol students in Han schools with 10 extra points]. [Interviewee No. 7, female, age 39]*

This comment from a teacher exemplifies that students are apparently motivated to learn Mongolian in order to gain better access to higher education. In fact, all teachers from Shengli and Meihao schools sent their own children to attend an MSN, for this reason. There is a favourable admission policy for ethnic minorities, which entails adding 10 points to the overall university entry exam score. However, this policy is applicable to all Mongol students, regardless of whether they study through Mongolian or not. In contrast, lower entry mark



requirements and separate admission quotas are provided to students of Mongolian language (IMAR Government, 2016; IMAR Government Office, 2015). Each Chinese university has an admission plan assigning different quotas to different regions for various majors. A separate quota is usually set aside for students of Mongolian, making the university entry exam less competitive for these students and with lower entry requirements based on exam results. This means that an ethnic Mongol who studies through Mongolian can take advantage of both 10 extra points and lower entry point requirements.

*Our Mongolian class has better teaching quality. Because the school values Mongolian language education, very good and experienced teaching staff in various subjects, like Maths and English, are assigned to our class. In addition, the class size is relatively small, around 30 students compared to 40-plus students in a normal Mandarin class. So each student can be better attended to. All these contribute to an overall good learning ambience. [Interviewee No. 6, female, age 38]*

This teacher mentioned that they promote the Mongolian language programme by outlining these benefits to parents. In other words, aspirations for academic development through Mongolian language education are shown not only in the pursuit of a positive university entry exam outcome, but also in the pursuit of better teaching and learning quality. Mongol students and their parents are well aware of the conversion of linguistic capital into cultural capital in the pursuit of good educational qualifications. Academic prospects, through either the high university admission rate or the enhanced study experience, contribute to deciding between a Mongolian or a Putonghua education.

### **Enhanced Job Prospects**

Another main reason for learning through Mongolian that emerged in the interviews is employment opportunity. Teachers, school leaders and government officials all repeatedly mentioned one regulation – the IMAR government prescribes that 15% of staff must be bilingual in Mongolian and Putonghua, a quota which applies to all public sector posts (see also IMAR Government, 2016). Recruitment is not based merely on the ethnicity specified on an individual's official identity documents. There are written exams and oral interviews to ensure that an applicant is indeed a fluent speaker of Mongolian (IMAR Government Office, 2015). Interestingly, all the teachers we interviewed are beneficiaries of this policy.

*... the regulation in the IMAR is that the ratio of ethnic minority civil servants to Han civil servants should not fall below the overall ratio in the IMAR. Besides, there are written exams and oral interviews to ensure that an applicant is indeed a fluent speaker of Mongolian. In fact, IMAR government recruitment policies specify that at least 15% of vacancies during annual public sector recruitment should be reserved for university graduates taught through Mongolian. [Interviewee No. 20, male, age 42]*

Indeed, the 2010 census also shows that Mongols (N=4,933) ranked right below Han Chinese (N=1.21 million) as the second largest group of people with leading roles in the public sector, public institutions and enterprises, Communist Party organisations and other parties (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). To some extent, Mongolian language education guarantees job market value for graduates, demonstrating its social capital and the possibility of converting it into economic capital.

### **Difficulties of Mongolian Language Education**

The above two sections seem to draw a different picture to that of a declining interest in Mongolian. Therefore, questions were asked during interviews about the contradiction between the decline in the number of students learning Mongolian and the pragmatic motivations to study it. The two reasons typically given are exemplified below:

*When students progress to senior high school, they are assigned to different schools based on their exam results. Those with Mongolian language can enter prestigious schools if they perform well in the exam. These prestigious schools usually do not offer Mongolian. So a number of high-achieving students of Mongolian have to drop the language at senior high school level. [Interviewee No.4, female, age 48]*

*It is hard for Mongolian to compete with Putonghua and English, since parents and students see little pragmatic value in it. There has been always a need to learn Putonghua. Since English was introduced into Grade 3 at elementary level in 2003, English has received a lot of attention from parents and students. They tend to think Mongolian is of 'no use' to their future career. [Interviewee No. 5, male, age 54]*

There is an entry exam to progress to senior secondary school, at the end of Year 3 of junior secondary. Students are allocated to different schools according to their results. Obviously, high-achieving students are assigned to prestigious schools – usually Han Chinese schools not offering Mongolian language programme – with a much better university admission rate, excellent teaching quality and good facilities. Although the pragmatic aspect of Mongolian language education is employed to motivate language learning, it also affects the continuity of Mongolian language study. Students seem to have no hesitation about replacing Mongolian with other languages strongly associated with convertible capital.

Furthermore, when the study of Mongolian is driven by good chances for academic excellence, this also affects teaching content even if students stay in MNS. In order to lead to high achievement in the competitive university entry exam, class content tends to be exam-oriented, either focusing on the grammar and vocabulary needed in the exam, or on studying questions that have appeared on previous exam papers. Two of the classes we observed spent the entire class explaining one or two grammatical concepts on an exam paper from the previous year.

Another difficulty of Mongolian language education is in relation to the differences between Mode A and Mode B. A government official mentioned that there has been a decrease in the number of students enrolling in Mode B. As the following quote reveals, one of the main reasons for this may be the method of calculating the Mongolian language score on the university entry exam for Mode B (see also Table 3).

*The scores of Mongolian and English have been combined and recognised as the result of one subject in the university entry exam since English was introduced into the curriculum in 2003. The split between Mongolian and English was initially 8:2 and then 7:3. In 2007, the weighting of Mongolian was lowered further and the split became 5:5. The consequence is a significant drop in interest in Mongolian. In 2017, the proportion of Mongolian was brought up with a split of 7:3 [between Mongolian and English]. This may not be ideal, as we hope Mongolian can be recognised as a stand-alone subject in the university entry*

*exam. But hopefully the increased weighting of Mongolian will have a positive impact on student intake.* [Interviewee No. 20, male, age 42]

Consistent with the interview data, available official documents confirm that the weighting of Mongolian in the university exam has been changing since 2000 (IMAR Government, 2016; The IMAR Education Bureau, 2000).

Table 3: The changing weighting of Mongolian in the university entry exam

	2001-2004	2004-2005	2006-2007	2008-2016	2017-
Mode A	The higher score of the two	A combination of Mandarin and English			
		8:2	7:3	5:5	7:3
Mode B	The higher score of the two	A combination of Mongolian and English			
		8:2	7:3	5:5	7:3

Unlike Mode A, which combines two prestigious languages – Putonghua and English – students of Mode B study towards a subject combining two languages with significantly different linguistic capital. When the split was 5:5 between Mongolian and English in Mode B, students may have felt there was no need to work hard on Mongolian, as working hard on English instead compensated for this in terms of the overall result – and English is a language more useful for individual advancement, in terms of both academic performance at tertiary level and better employment opportunities. Comparing the benefits of learning English with the efforts made to study both English and Mongolian, it is not surprising that students prefer to devote their attention to English. In other words, minority language education seems to entail prudent planning by students and parents, aimed at maximising the ability to convert linguistic capital into other types of capital.

### Differences Between Urban and Rural MNS Schools

The contrasting information received from urban and rural schools highlights one aspect of this: access to and availability of teaching resources.

*There are a variety of training opportunities for us each year offered by the Education Bureau of the IMAR, Chifeng city or the county. The training involves class observations and reviews, studying the new curriculum standards, pedagogy, etc. We are also required to write a short essay of 400-500 words after a training session to reflect on what we have learned.*

Interviewee in an urban MNS [Interviewee No. 12, female, age 30]

*We look forward to training opportunities. There are indeed one or two chances [for training] each year provided by the IMAR or in Chifang city. However, there are around twenty teachers in our school. Each teacher is given a heavy teaching load and so we can only afford to send one teacher per year for training. You can imagine, it takes more than twenty years for a person to get his/her turn.*

Interviewee in a rural MNS [Interviewee No. 15, female, age 25]

Class observations indeed show that the teaching process is still predominantly the traditional “present, practise and produce”, which usually involves presenting a grammatical concept and showing its usage to students, before asking them to produce it on their own. Previous research

(Ma, 2009; Zhang & Yang, 2017) also finds poor training provision for rural schoolteachers as a result of the heavy workload. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, rural teachers have to take on a substantial amount of non-teaching duties, one of which is related to the large number of “left-behind” children and the poor regional economy in rural areas.

*There are a large number of left-behind children in our school. Their parents migrate to work in cities and so they are left behind. There are generally at least three to five children whose parents are not with them and so are looked after by grandparents [or other relatives]. If we count children with either their father or mother not with them, that would be countless [too many to know the exact number of children].* [Interviewee No. 13, male, age 36]

*The left-behind children need extra attention from our teachers. These children tend to have issues with academic study and in life, or even develop psychological problems. When a teacher notices something not right or not normal, we need to look into it.* [Interviewee No. 14, female, age 37]

These comments indicate both the profile of left-behind children and the concerns surrounding them. A few recent studies have revealed the problems resulting from children being left behind, and their well-being has become a pressing issue (Chang et al., 2017; Guo & Zhang, 2018; Huang et al., 2018). In these circumstances, a government document – “Opinions towards Strengthening the Care and Protection for the Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” – was issued in 2016 to emphasise the roles of different entities, including schools, in the service system providing care to left-behind children (State Council, 2016).

On the one hand, rural school teachers need to take on extra work in order to better observe the development of these children and offer help when needed. On the other hand, teacher recruitment for rural schools may not be easy, for two reasons. One reason, mentioned by school leaders and one government official, is the low quota for teaching staff, which is usually set by the IMAR Education Bureau according to the ratio of students to teachers. It is difficult to argue for a higher quota for teacher recruitment with the declining enrolment in Mongolian language programmes. The other reason is that rural regions – being economically backward – are not an attractive destination for university graduates in Mongolian. Nowadays, “*It is easy to lose the language in the rapid urbanisation,*” said one government official.

## Discussion

It is generally evident in other studies that the main reason students partake in minority language education is the “desire to maximise the benefits” they can gain from favourable policies such as high university admission rates and enhanced job prospects (Zhang, 2018, p. 10). In relation to ethnic minority students in rural regions, there is indeed a generally low university admission rate, as shown in the study of Huang (2018). In these circumstances, the possibility of enhanced academic experience and high academic achievement underpins the incentives for Mongolian language study. This also affects the approach to daily academic practices, such as the course content.

The pragmatically oriented value of the minority language programme is associated not only with academic advancement in the short term, but also with upward social mobility in the long term. Better access to higher education usually indicates better opportunities after graduation. Importantly, an annual quota of at least 15% of civil servant vacancies is available for

university graduates in Mongolian. This preferential employment policy in the IMAR is employed to encourage enrolment in Mongolian language education. Though not all learners of Mongolian will be willing to apply for a job in the public sector, or be successful in doing so, bilingual education in Putonghua and Mongolian certainly increases their life opportunities and provides a positive vision of a privileged position in society. This pragmatic aspect appears to outweigh the symbolic importance of the minority language.

Nevertheless, the high utilitarian value of the Mongolian language programme is a double-edged sword. Students seem to be motivated to study the Mongolian language when they are able to trade its linguistic capital for other forms of capital. As soon as there are other better opportunities for enhanced learning experiences and life opportunities, students do not hesitate to switch to the Putonghua programme or devalue the study of Mongolian. This can be seen in the loss of high-achieving students in MNS schools at senior secondary level and the Mode B drop-out rate. In other words, the pragmatic perception of Mongolian language education can be easily deconstructed.

Favourable university admission policies have been used as a bargaining tool by schoolteachers and leaders to encourage the study of Mongolian, and in this respect previous research has probed the low admission rate into top universities among minority schools in rural areas (Huang, 2018). The reasons for this include regional economic backwardness, shortage of teaching staff, loss of high-achieving students, outdated teaching pedagogy and school management, and poor quality of primary and junior secondary education.

In fact, these factors can be found in most rural schools, rather than specifically in rural minority schools. Therefore, the obstacles and problems that minority language education faces nowadays are de facto connected with the regional economy – a key contextual element influencing the implementation of bilingual education (Feng & Adamson, 2018) – and essentially lie in the linguistic capital associated with the minority language. With growing contact with Han Chinese and international society in real life and in the virtual world, Putonghua and English undoubtedly represent strong linguistic capital that can be converted into economic gain and/or symbolic power. There is also a diminishing need for the use of Mongolian in students' immediate milieu, especially with the “changes in the way of life of former nomadic herders” (Burjgin & Bilik, 2015) in the context of urbanisation. With the shrinking of rural or pastureland in the IMAR, the linguistic exchanges in Mongolian that can take place have been significantly restricted.

Furthermore, a 2001 government document – “Decisions Regarding Basic Education Reforms and Development” – proposed merging and reducing the number of rural schools (State Council, 2001), in order to “optimise education resources” in terms of “school building renovation, standardising the education system, urbanisation development, migration and relocation” (Article 13 of State Council, 2001, paras. 33–34). Between 2001 and 2010, approximately 220,000 rural schools in China were closed down, with the vast majority of their students enrolled in urban boarding schools instead, and the IMAR is no exception (Li, 2006; Yuan, 2014). Instead of sending urban children to pastureland for Mongolian language improvement, as suggested by Su (2005), Mongol children from pastureland and rural regions lost the opportunity to gain exposure to the ethnic language when they began attending urban boarding schools. As Yi and Adamson (2017b, 2017a) point out, Mongolian is slowly giving way to Putonghua and English, which may accelerate the pace of marginalisation.

Indeed, this study illustrates that favourable policies, including enhanced opportunities for

continued education and future career, make possible the conversion of Mongolian linguistic capital into economic, cultural or social capital, at least within the IMAR. In return, different types of capital transferred from the linguistic capital also stimulate minority language study. There seems to be an ecological flow back and forth between the study of the language and personal development, motivated by regional preferential policies. Nonetheless, closer examination reveals that this superficially healthy circulation in a restricted linguistic space cannot be translated into a larger society, a fact which to a large extent limits the ability of the language to “empower”.

As Wu and He (2018) state, two competing forces influence ethnic socio-economic disparities. One is state preferential treatment policies aimed at reducing the gap between ethnic minorities and Han Chinese; the other is that the market tends to enlarge this gap. Urbanisation can be perceived as “a manifestation of the capitalist mode of production in that cities are constructions of capital accumulation that exacerbate existing inequalities” (Iossifova et al., 2018, p. 2). Linguistic capital should not be excluded from the interpretation of capital accumulation and social disparities in the process of urbanisation. The urban/rural division results in, for instance, large-scale migration, which pushes people to carry out linguistic exchanges in a wider society and raises awareness of the poor economic significance of the minority language. That is to say, the lack of provision to convert the linguistic capital of the minority language into other forms of capital aggravates its marginal status.

In addition, the symbolic importance of Mongolian has not been fully exploited for the promotion of minority language education. In the battle of capital accumulation, the symbolic value of a language, or language variety or variation, competes with other forms of capital, and can quickly give way to economic gain. Yi and Adamson (2017a) indicated that a sense of pride in Mongolian ethnic identity should be nurtured and encouraged to be aligned with Chinese citizenship. This needs institutional support from “mass media, [... and] social, legal and administrative services in Mongolian” to “provide the language with status” (Yi & Adamson, 2017b, p. 161). However, the enrichment of the symbolic power of Mongolian should not be left only to teaching staff, who already have limited access to teaching resources and extra workload. There is certainly an opportunity here for top-down policies to support the spread of Mongolian traditions, culture, literature, history, etc., while maintaining a balance between ethnolinguistic vitality and national integration.

### **Conclusion**

The current study examines the development of trilingual education in the IMAR and reports on a field trip to five minority schools in the IMAR, highlighting the current practices of trilingual education and perceptions of the minority language programme in the region. Through data from interviews and class observation, this article reports on the motivations for learning Mongolian and the difficulties of student retention, as well as the impact of the urban/rural division on minority language education. In the context of fast-paced urbanisation, the linguistic capital associated with a language can be quickly realised, examined and exchanged in the linguistic market. Although the ethnic affirmative policies in the IMAR enhance the linguistic capital of Mongolian and highlight its pragmatic value, student interest in the minority language programme is still affected by the relatively poor provision for converting the linguistic capital of Mongolian into other forms of capital. Importantly, the lack of economic significance of Mongolian is market-operated and thus difficult to change, whereas the symbolic importance of the minority language can be underlined “through coordinated and coherent policies” (Yi & Adamson, 2017a, p. 334).

Instead of analysing minority language education on its own, the current study has situated this against the backdrop of urbanisation. This approach demonstrates that trilingual education in minority regions confronts the difficulties caused by urban/rural division, which may shed light on the development of language programmes in China in general. It should be pointed out that the current study entailed a field trip to five schools in the Chifeng area, just one of twelve regions within the IMAR. It is indeed difficult to travel to every part of Inner Mongolia, which is vast. It is recommended that future research expand the field trip area, in order to gain a better overview of trilingual education practice in the IMAR. In addition, the current study focuses primarily on the school context. It would be worthwhile for future studies to also examine the Mongolian language programme in higher education institutions in the IMAR, in relation to the career prospects of Mongolian language graduates.

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