
Cultural Colonialization: The Displacement of Mongolians in Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: In this paper I analyze the emergence of Chinese Mongolians as displaced persons within Inner Mongolia due to planned urbanization by the Chinese government throughout the region. I explore how Mongolians are displaced from their traditional cultural space, the grasslands, to new urban centers and how that displacement creates “cultural colonization.” I also analyze how Mongolians now living in urban centers where Mandarin is widely spoken further undergo “cultural colonization” through the decrease use of the Mongolian language. I address the power dynamics between the (Han) Chinese government and ethnic Mongolians with the works of Foucault, Schmitt, and Agamben. I also draw from Said and Malkki’s work on refugees and subalternity and Gladney’s scholarship on minorities in China as subalterns to frame the Mongolians as subaltern subjects within the Chinese state.

I. Introduction

“Land grabbing by corrupt Chinese officials” has again prompted Mongolian herders to protest the colonization of their cultural space throughout Inner Mongolia.ⁱ Urbanization, what herders refer to as “land grabbing,” is part of a larger discourse of power, oppression, and displacement between the Mongolians of Inner Mongolia and the Chinese government. The displaced person narrative in the Chinese context recognizes the growing population of migrant workers that move from one location to the next building the infrastructure that has transformed villages into urban centers throughout the nation. However, due to urban growth in marginalized areas and the development throughout rural areas, the displaced persons narrative within China

needs to expand to include persons that have been displaced by factors not included in current definitions.

I arrived at this project through three different “experiences.” Firstly, I lived in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, for eight years and observed how rapid urbanization affected people. Secondly, that experience led me to my research interests which include how urbanization affects Mongolian spaces, culture, and memory and the hegemonic meanings embedded within the urbanization discourse. Finally, through my interaction with displaced persons literature, I positioned myself to ask how displacement effects people throughout Inner Mongolia. Specifically, I address the following questions: *How are Mongolians, who have undergone forced migration, displaced? From what are they displaced?* I answer these questions through the analyses of two types of displacement: “cultural displacement,” which is displacement from markers within a culture and “spacial displacement,” which is displacement from the cultural space.

Gramsci provides the definition and characteristics of this theory most akin to this project. He says: “it is necessary to study the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups.”ⁱⁱ Gramsci allows for the assertion that Mongolians are displaced from their cultural space and undergo what he calls “quantitative diffusion,” in which they, and the culture, are diffused in urban contexts. Gramsci also asserts that domination of one people over another happens in hegemonic discourses in such a way that permeation does not seem imposed.ⁱⁱⁱ To add to Gramsci, Guha provides a more specific definition of subalternity stating that subaltern is “the general attribute of subordination [...] whether this is expressed in term of class, caste, age,

gender and office in any other way.”^{iv} Furthermore, Edward Said says: [T]he work of Subaltern scholars can be seen as an analogue of all those recent attempts in the West and throughout the rest of the world to articulate the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups-- women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups, refugees, exiles, etc.”^v His inclusion of minorities further undergirds subalternity as a framework for this paper.

Dru C. Gladney explains how subalternity fits within minority studies in China and that indigenous subaltern scholarship within China “has not yet developed.” Like Gladney, I argue that more subaltern scholarship for the Chinese context is needed in order to include those who have independent cultures, histories, and memories and should be understood in their own terms rather than as peripheral people that can only be understood as compared to a majority population.

I analyze what Mongolians of Inner Mongolia are displaced from by first discussing how a displaced person is defined. Then I provide a brief discussion on the two parts of the Mongolian culture I analyze, language and space, in order to show how displacement is happening and the meanings embedded within the displacements. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on why the topic of displaced persons in China is relevant.

II. Context

Inner Mongolia, one of China’s five minority autonomous regions the third largest province, is located in Northern China just below the country of Mongolia. It is part of the Chinese state and does not have any official connection with the country of Mongolia. Hohhot, capital of Inner Mongolia, has an estimated population of 2.5 million and is the education, business, and government hub of the province.^{vi} The auto-ethnographic accounts I analyze in

this paper occurred in Hohhot. Mongolians are one of China's 56 recognized ethnic groups. Thus, this paper refers only to ethnic Mongolians in China.

III. Displaced Persons

Koser and Martin assert that "The traditional distinction between "voluntary" and "forced" migration or "economic" or "political" migration, for example, are increasingly out of touch with realities."^{vii} The "realities" they mention include urbanization and the creation of displaced persons as a result of rapid development. Further, they posit that not all displaced persons fit into the United Nations definition for refugees. As such, the definitions for displaced persons need to expand in order to include the increasing populations of persons that are continually displaced throughout the world.

Two organizations provide definitions of displaced persons that are relevant to this project. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees states:

Person's or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.^{viii}

The World Bank expands on this definition by addressing "involuntary displacement," which happens when: [i]nvoluntary displacement can be caused by environmental degradation, natural disasters, conflicts or development projects. It is associated with loss of housing, shelter, income, land, livelihoods, assets, access to resources and services, among others.^{ix}

Arendt's *refugee*, Said's *exile*, and Ahmed's *stranger* all combine to inform the plight of the Mongolian displaced person within the Chinese nation-state. Their exiled state has, as Said says, "happened to them," but they still have some agency over their lives.^x In new urban



centers Mongolian families live in their own homes, have jobs, and interact “freely” within the community. Despite this semblance of agency in their new lives, they are displaced. Unlike wars, famine, or environmental issues in other nations, urbanization throughout Inner Mongolia is one of the factors that is displacing them.

IV. Cultural Markers: Language and Space

Perry and Selden argue that an ethnicity is comprised of territory, language, economy, and psychological make-up (or culture).^{xi} I argue that the last category of culture is comprised of the other three. In other words, culture includes territory and language. This paper is not concerned with the economy as it is lived out within the Mongolian community because the topic is too large to address as only part of one paper. Thus, as mentioned before, for the purpose of this analysis I will focus on the Mongolian cultural markers of language and space.

The Mongolian language is one of the markers of culture within the Chinese nation-state for the Mongolian people. Like other minority languages throughout China, Mongolian has been challenged since the founding of current government in 1949, when Mao Zedong unified the nation by standardizing the Northern dialect of Mandarin throughout the nation. The government focused on a “mono-nation building drive” that suppressed minority languages because, as Jiang Zemin suggests, “there are too many languages in China.”^{xii} Unfortunately, that has led to the decrease in some minority languages throughout the country but in Inner Mongolia, which like other autonomous regions has two official languages, the Mongolian language has still been prominent in rural areas. However, in urban centers, which are increasingly Han-dominant, Mongolians find they must use Mandarin in order to function within the city.

Much of Mongolian identity is rooted in the grasslands and the pastoral lifestyle that has been part of the Mongolian community for generations. Mongolian scholar Uradyn Bulag writes, “The emotion that pastoralism conjures up for Mongols derives from its importance as the quintessential historical cultural marker of Mongol-ness.”^{xiii}

For Mongols, their pastoral lifestyle informs their morality and their identity. It connects them to their history, their culture, their memory, and their community. It is necessary to understand that pastoralism is different than an agricultural lifestyle. Takashi Fujitami asserts that for Mongolians pastoralism is a “material vehicle of meaning that helped a memory....or served as a symbolic marker” whereas “agriculture is a site for the Chinese.”^{xiv} Here Malkki helps frame the connection Mongolians have with pastoralism as part of their strong collective identity.^{xv} That is not to say that some Mongolians are not farmers and that some Han are not shepherds, but generally speaking, there is a binary distinction between the two as they relate to the different cultural identities.

Herders and the grasslands are primary cultural markers of Mongolian ethnic identity. The grasslands, both the bounded space and the imagined territory within the Mongolian mythico-history, represent the homeland of the Mongolian people and distinguish them from other ethnicities, namely the Han, within China.^{xvi} I borrow the term *mythico-history* from Malkki in order to explain how the grasslands fit into the collective identity Mongolians pass down from one generation to the next. Tales of how the Genghis Khan initiated the Mongolian Empire in the grasslands continue to inform Mongolians of their great heritage. Within their history, the grasslands are the setting of their rise as one of the world’s great empires.

The grasslands not only remind the Mongolians of their medieval global reign, but also of their current rhythm of life which includes *gers* (nomadic homes), herds, and the open

environment of the grasslands. Therefore, the displacement of Mongolians from their cultural spaces to urban centers where a career as a shepherd is not an option disrupts more than just their career path; it transforms a foundational part of Mongolian identity.

V. Dual Displacement

Krause and Williams argue that “Nationalism is considered a consequence of state (or elite) choices and needs in their struggle for survival,” and assert that there is a relationship between nationalism and war, which includes internal conflict and separatist movements.^{xvii} China recognizes the need to create, establish, and propagate a national identity in hopes to secure sense of nationalism and avoid the possibility of war.

After China emerged from the Cultural Revolution the nation again began to establish a unifying identity. By the late 1970s, the nation’s leadership recognized the need to redefine their politics, economy, and identity in order to rebuild all that was lost during the Cultural Revolution.^{xviii} The need to craft and control a national identity was recognized and developed by Mao as he established the current nation-state. He said, “China’s culture should have its own form, the national form.”^{xix} Thus, the formation of a national identity has been a thrust of the Chinese state since the current government was established. In order to develop a strong identity, and policies to enforce that identity, minority identities had be folded into the national identity.

Internal colonization is already recognized by critics of China’s domestic policies and the rewriting of history that asserts that “the Chinese civilization has lasted for 5,000 years without a break.”^{xx} However, “internal colonization” does not fully capture what is occurring in many minority areas where the control and colonization of populations also affects their culture.



nuanced methods. Whereas some governments may employ crushing methods through which they bring groups of people under their submission, Foucault maintains there are other methods of control through which the same result can be achieved. A power can govern a group of people in such a way that the group of people become subjugated to the power without the excess use of force. Power seeks to develop the *agency* through subtle methods to the point that new behavior emerges and becomes the *norm*. A decrease in the use of the Mongolian language within the city accompanied by an increase in the use of Mandarin is the nuanced power that the state exerts. Mongolians speaking Mandarin *instead* of Mongolian (rather than in addition to) is an example of the *norm* Foucault references and when that happens, the populations within the city will be viewed as part of the national identity the state wants to secure.

Another example of cultural colonization within the city is through symbolism. The image of a *ger* conjures up feelings of family, the grasslands, and prosperity for the Mongolian people. Additionally, blue is *the* Mongolian color. Hohhot means *blue city* in Mongolian. In the Mongolian culture, blue represents the skies (Inner Mongolia has some of the only blue skies left in China) and friendship. Red, on the other hand, is *the* Chinese color. China is still sometimes referred to as *Red China*. It remains symbolic of the nation (the collective group of people) and of the state (power). Thus, when Inner Mongolia University, a traditionally Mongolian Tibetan Buddhist University, was renovated, and a model *ger* was constructed on the top of the tallest building on campus to be visible to all, some assumed it was a reference to the Mongolian history of the campus. But, since it was painted red, rather than blue, the Mongolians received the clear message: any expression of Mongolian culture must be framed

to fit within the greater Chinese national identity. In this case, it was a coat of paint that framed the Mongolian culture for public consumption.

This example also highlights the subaltern position that Mongolians have within the Chinese state. Like Foucault, I argue that space can be used to express the power of the state and suppression of the subaltern subjects.^{xxiv} Additionally this example undergirds the notion that racial hierarchy is promoted by the ordering of various spaces. The racial tension between the Han and the Mongolians is already divisive and this example adds to the divisiveness as a way of communicating that the Chinese national identity is the framework in which all other cultures or identities may be expressed.

b. Displacement from Space

The grasslands have been disputed land for much of history dating back to the Khan takeover of the dynastic rule of China in the 13th century. It is still highly contested within the binary claims of the land that exist between the Mongolian people, who view the land as *their* cultural space, and the state that owns the land. Recently, as China has sought to “develop the west” (the western part of the country) and has focused on claiming its place in the international marketplace, there have been extreme transformations to the land and to the people inhabiting the land.^{xxv} The grasslands are representative of the Mongolian community and, in some ways, of their history as the Khan empire. Thus, leaving that space, as already mentioned, fractures the collective identity of the Mongolian people. Additionally, transforming that space to be used for industrial and commercial use further fractures that identity.

One example of the urbanization of space through urban development of the grasslands is the city of Erdos. This small town makes up part of what is referred to as the “Golden

Triangle” along with Baotou and Hohhot in Inner Mongolia. Erdos was once the cultural hub for Mongolians because of its proximity to the grasslands and the many Tibetan Buddhist temples. However, in less than a decade, this town, through urbanization and economic development by the national government, has emerged into a economic hot spot for Inner Mongolia and has a GDP that rivals Beijing.^{xxvi}

The loss of the cultural space is how Mongolians are displaced *from* the marked territory of land. However, the use or repurposing of the land by the state is another way Mongolians are displaced from their imagined connection *to* the land. Vast areas of the grasslands are now used for mining the natural resources like rare-earth, coal, natural gas and gold which has added to the already catastrophic environmental issues that plague Inner Mongolia like deforestation, desertification, and dust storms.^{xxvii} The development of industries surrounding the resources may benefit Mongolians so far as it benefits any Chinese citizen, but the financial benefits do not adequately make up for the cultural losses.

The state is repurposing the land in such a way that it will become, to invoke Foucault again, the *norm*. The power dynamics between the state and the Mongolian people are also a part of the urbanization discourse. The land that makes up the grasslands belongs to the state and as such, from the state’s perspective, there is nothing wrong with transforming it. However, the grasslands, as mentioned earlier, are a large part of the Mongolian cultural identity that ties them to that land. The destruction of the grasslands disrupts this mythico-history, distances them from the past, fractures their collective identity that is deeply connected to the land, and forces Mongolians to insert a new narrative of destruction.

There is also a notion of an “imagined geography” connection to the grasslands among urban Mongolians that may not have never lived in a rural setting. This population of people will

continue to increase as families migrate to the urban centers and have children that are urbanites rather than rural residents. That transition combined with the depletion of the grasslands will increase the imagined connection to the cultural space. In order for that connection to be maintained and brought into the present it must be cultivated in their imagination and validated in their history. Mongolians will continue to feel like they do not have a “home” within the Chinese nation-state. Said calls this phenomena a “generalized condition of homelessness” because globalization, of which urbanization is a part of, has led to the deterritorialization of cultural space.^{xxviii}

VI. Displacing Subaltern Separatists

Why is the recognition of the displacement of marginalized minorities within China relevant? The answer is connected to the larger hegemonic power discourse between China and the “rebel” minority groups. Only recently has there a shift in the national recognition of separatists. Policies to develop the western parts of the country and the increase in capitalism and globalization throughout the nation have led to both an increase in ethnic and national ideologies.

One Chinese scholar says:

Reform policies (in China) have led to the rise of ethnic consciousness and thus the emergence of ethnic nationalism as exemplified in Tibet....The aim of Chinese nationalism is to pursue national power and wealth through domestic development. As long as the leadership pursues its “interests,” its nationalistic “passion” can be constrained and remain rational.^{xxix}

Additionally, while many autonomous region leaders are asking the national government for true autonomy, communists leaders like Wang Lequan, Party Secretary for Xinjiang in 2002, says “There will be no compromise between us and the separatists.”^{xxx} His reward for his unwavering



position on separatist movements was a promotion within the government which shows the deep connection and ongoing interest that the national government has with separatists policies.

The shift in policies regarding separatists is connected to the hard line stance of maintaining a national identity which has become a “unifying ideology,” a term that is more palatable than communism and more manageable than capitalism.^{xxx} Displacement helps diminish strong identities that do not agree with the “party line.” However, the state recognizes that some separatists, especially extreme groups connected with international organizations or other foreign based advocates, are not going to easily give in to the demands of the national government. To this end, the state has found a way to promote any internal rifts amongst marginalized groups as evidence of the need for a national ideology. As a result, Mongolians find themselves in what Said refers to as “the interplay between nationalism and exile,” which is “like Hegel’s dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other.”^{xxxii} If Mongolians do not promote the national agenda, they will be labeled as rebels or separatists which will allow the state to continue to promote their own national agenda and frame it as a necessary for public safety.

Added to that agenda, the state has crafted a collective identity where they insert *all* subaltern separatists. Thus, Tibetans, Uyghers, and Mongolians, the three most marginalized minorities in the country, are all viewed by the state in the same way. Though they have separate histories, languages, customs, and geographic spaces, they are grouped together into the *role* of separatist. The presence of separatists reifies the need for a national identity and allows the state to justify the promotion of a national identity through cultural and spacial colonization and displacement. Further, the state keeps separatists outside of normal power

structures and further asserts the hierarchy of ethnicities within the national hegemonic structures. Subalterns are viewed only in light of their response to or opinions of national policies rather than as their own agents. If the nationalistic ideology prevails, subalterns will either continue to remain as such or they will be grafted into the nationalist identity at the cost of their own collective identities.

VII. Conclusion

Ongoing international wars and domestic conflicts continue to produce populations of displaced persons. However, global realities of natural disasters, environmental catastrophes, and planned development projects have also created a population of people that fit within the overarching displaced persons narrative even though they do not fit within the UNHCR's definition. Some definitions are general enough to make room for any displaced person but, at the same time, the general definitions gloss over specific situations that add dimension to the refugee discourse. I argue that urbanization will continue to create populations of displaced persons throughout the world. In China, urbanization is used to control and colonize minority populations. Two of the marginalized minorities that the Chinese state is most concerned with are Tibetans and Ughyers. This is due to the increase of riots among those populations since 2008 and the advocacy of the international community on their behalf through movements like "Free Tibet." Further, China's "floating population" that includes an estimated 140 million people are all put into one category that is comprised of migrant workers, street children, and abandoned elderly or disabled persons.^{xxxiii} The Chinese context gives further evidence of the ongoing research that is needed in order to accurately address the growing population of displaced persons.



“We take home and language for granted,” but Mongolian exiles do not.^{xxxiv} They grieve their lives, not looking back with Adorno’s “exile’s detachment,” but rather struggle to remember who they are.^{xxxv} One last auto ethnographic account best illustrates this struggle.

My last apartment in Hohhot was in a residential complex that had yards for the bottom floor apartments. Most families used the yards for their gardens, but my Mongolian neighbors, who recently moved from the grasslands, used their yard to keep their three sheep. I knew enough of the culture by this point to recognize that this was not just a cultural difference but that this family kept their sheep for deeper reasons than to provide the milk needed to produce the staples of their diet. Like Said’s exile, they had been “cut off from their roots, their land, their past” and had found that their “habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment.”^{xxxvi} Keeping their sheep was a reminder to them, and a message to others, that they are Mongolian and cannot be displaced from that identity.

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