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'I might die or be murdered': The province fearing it will be wiped out by Beijing

By Eryk Bagshaw

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The Chinese government cracking down on culture, language and dissent in Inner Mongolia. ARESNA VILLANUEVA / SANGHEE LIU



Ulaanbaatar: Wolf pelts hang from the hooks. The faces of the slain wild dogs lie next to the jackets and scarves inside this Mongolian hut.

Balijinima Bai is ready for the coming winter, where temperatures will drop as low as -30 degrees. There is no running water in this shack on the outskirts of the Mongolian capital, so Bai and his family make tea from a bucket.

In his hometown in China, the 49-year-old taught traditional Mongolian language, the cursive script of Khans and poets, that once dominated an empire from the Sea of Japan to Eastern Europe.

Now he makes his living slaughtering horses, cows and sheep.

Bai is from Inner Mongolia, one of China's northernmost provinces, where activists say the Chinese government is systematically wiping out Mongolian culture and assimilating its shrinking population into the Han Chinese majority.

Beijing says it is lifting living and education standards across a region that has seen double-digit economic growth for most of the past two decades.

Bai, who left China for Mongolia in 2019 after being targeted for his language activism, says Inner Mongolia is the next Xinjiang, the north-western Chinese province that has seen Muslim Uighurs forced into re-education camps, restricted from using their own language and put under round-the-clock surveillance.

“I might die or be murdered tomorrow,” he says. “Please tell the world about our story.”

Bai has reason to be worried. In May, activists claim Chinese police arrested prominent Inner-Mongolian writer Lhamjab Borjigin, living in exile in Mongolia’s capital Ulaanbaatar, and deported him to China.

“My family members told me that an army of police and security personnel are visiting my family and pressuring them to bring me back,” Borjigin told the human rights group Southern Mongolia Watch a week before he disappeared. “They are claiming to come to Mongolia with my daughter and bring me back.”

Chinese authorities arrived at Bai’s mother’s home last year bearing gifts. They left with threats.

“State security visited her no less than 50 times,” he says. “Three months ago when I last contacted her, she told me, ‘Please don’t continue to do this.’”

Bai says he may never be able to talk to his elderly mother again, but he won’t stop speaking out.

“What will I say to future generations when they grow up and ask me, ‘what did you do to change this?’,” he says.

“War and killing is one thing, but losing one’s own identity, that’s worse.”



Bai outside his ger, or yurt, in Ulaanbaatar. SANGHEE LIU

The Chinese government has spent decades pursuing a unified Chinese identity by bulldozing mosques in Xinjiang, undermining religious leaders in Tibet, crushing the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and assimilating the herders of Inner Mongolia.

Beijing has accused the West of “nothing but disinformation and interfering in China’s internal affairs” as it attempts to bind more than 1.4 billion people of 56 different ethnicities to one goal – becoming the world’s most powerful economy, led by the Chinese Communist Party.

But that long-term aim has resulted in the destruction of local identities.

“Mongolians have long names,” says Zolzaya Nyamdorj, a coordinator at the Save the Mongolian Language movement, a non-government organisation in Ulaanbaatar. “Chinese officials don’t like the long names. They ask them to shorten them into Chinese names. If they have a long first name and surname, they just cut the surname.

“Now they think they are Chinese before they are Mongolian.”

The gradual administrative changes have been compounded by escalating restrictions on Mongolian language in schools. In 2020, the Chinese government ordered schools in the northern Chinese region to begin teaching in Mandarin instead of the region’s native script.

Students now only have one Mongolian-language class a week. The impact of the change has torn through the teaching profession in the province, with Mongolian-language teachers being replaced by Han Chinese, entrenching the cultural shift away from its historic roots.



Zolzaya Nyamdorj, a coordinator at Save the Mongolian Language movement, in front of a mural of scholar Renchin Byamba. SANGHEE LIU

Nomadic herders who once spread out across the Mongolian plateau in China are also being targeted. In June, herders in Zaruud region attempted to block the takeover of their pastures by a Chinese company. A bulldozer ploughed into them instead.

“Without our prior and informed consent, the breeding farm sold our land to a Chinese business at a price of 2 million yuan [\$400,000],” the herders said in a statement.

The Chinese government authorities in Zaruud said it was a private business dispute.

“The Chinese buyer is now bringing truckloads of cows and other animals to the land, attempting to graze them in disregard of our protest,” the herders said.

When a herdsman blocked a truck driving through his grassland to an oil field and was run over and killed in 2011, his family was offered 400,000 yuan (\$80,000) in compensation.

“The life of a Mongolian nomad now has a price,” says Ga Tsetsent, a former teacher who now lives in exile.



A Chinese flag stands in the breeze as a loader moves coal at a mine in Inner Mongolia. AP

Increasingly that price is access to their resource-rich landscape. In February, an open-pit coal mine collapsed in Inner Mongolia's Alxa League region, killing 53. Chinese President Xi Jinping demanded "all-out efforts in search and rescue of the missing and treatment of the injured".

But so far, the company has only been fined for previous infractions including insecure routes and unsafe storage of volatile materials. No compensation for families has been publicly released. [The official death toll was not reported until June.](#)

Inner Mongolians remain drawn to the mining industry because of the pay on offer. Combined with the economic centralisation of the province's largest city of Hohhot, Inner Mongolia has been left with fewer gers (traditional tents known in the West by their Turkic name, yurts) and nomadic families living in them.

These days the most visible examples are happy-camping Mongols who perform mostly for tourists. Like dancing Uighurs in Xinjiang, they are a useful image for Beijing as it pushes a PR campaign of ethnic inclusivity while chipping away at the foundations of ethnic identity.



A Mongolian horseman performs horse-taming for Chinese tourists on the Wulan Butong grasslands in Inner Mongolia. SANGHEE LIU

Tsetsent, the chairman of the organising committee of the Inner Mongolian People's Party, has seen the policy evolve over decades.

In the 1980s, while he was studying in Japan, he says he was approached by Chinese state security officials to spy on his fellow Inner Mongolians. He refused. By the 1990s he had a target on his back. When he returned to teach the Mongolian language, he was asked to write a "political report" detailing the relationships and activities of his principal. Again, he refused. Then his principal was asked to write one about him. In 1995, five days after his father's funeral, he knew he was no longer safe in China.

"What's the goal?" he says. "In the end, Mongolians will be assimilated into Chinese and disappear."

Japan, which has a highly restrictive immigration system and grants less than 1 per cent of refugees visas, gave Tsetsent asylum.

The 62-year-old now runs the Association for Supporting Mongolian Children, which pools resources from the diaspora to educate young Mongolians as Ulaanbaatar struggles to provide enough welfare to support its own, let alone refugees.



Mongolian language teacher Ga Tsetsent. SANGHEE LIU

For Mongolia, a developing nation dependent on China for trade, the crackdown on its southern relatives is a wicked problem.

“They struggle a lot to come here,” says Nyamdorj, the Mongolian language coordinator. “They trust that Mongolia will protect them, but actually, we can’t. We need countries like Australia to help provide safety to activists who are in danger.”

The situation is complicated by the Mongolian government’s decision to ditch Mongolian script for Russian Cyrillic in the 1940s, after it became a satellite state of the Soviet Union.

Thousands of years of nomadic living across Eurasia had also already fractured a cohesive pan-Mongolian identity.



Mongolian military guard the border with China in Zamiin-Uud. SANGHEE LIU

For decades Inner Mongolians were treated with suspicion by their Mongolian counterparts. They sounded different, ate different food, and struggled to get well-paying jobs north of the border.

“Mongolian unity is a problem,” says Tsetsent. “There’s not a unified Mongolian spirit.”

But as China’s crackdown has grown, so has Mongolian public solidarity with the Inner Mongolian cause. Now some are accusing the Mongolian government of standing by while Inner Mongolian activists are persecuted.

“It’s cowardly behaviour,” says Bai.

Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai describes “Inner Mongolians as brothers and sisters of Mongolia”.

“According to the UN charter and the principle of respect for territorial integrity, Mongolia does not comment on the internal affairs of other countries,” he says in an interview in his office in Ulaanbaatar.

“As a democratic nation, Mongolia has respect for human rights, and we will raise our voices.”



Diplomatic tightrope: Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai. SANGHEE LIU

Activists say despite the careful diplomatic tone, some voices have been threatened. In July last year, prominent Mongolian activist Munkhbayar Chuluundorj was sentenced to 10 years in jail after condemning his country's close ties with China.

The activist had protested on behalf of Inner Mongolians in Ulaanbaatar.

He was later charged with "collaborating with a foreign intelligence agency" after prosecutors claimed he had been collaborating with the Indian embassy to criticise his country's links with Beijing.

The case is part of a wider shadow war being waged by foreign governments over the narrative in the Mongolian capital.

The Chinese embassy is becoming increasingly active as it looks to shape public sentiment. In meetings between activists, the US embassy and the Democracy Education Centre, media companies have reported getting start-up financing, equipment and training from the Chinese embassy in exchange for favourable coverage.



Mongolian military check cars passing through the border with China in Zamiin-Uud. SANGHEE LIU

At the same time, links between the US embassy, Western organisations and activists are fuelling Beijing's perception that the protests against its actions are being fuelled by "hostile Western forces".

"The Chinese noticed that Westerners are interfering, and they are trying to support human rights in order to promote their impact on the country," says Nyamdorj.

With little support from Mongolian authorities, advocates have few other places to turn in a country that is dependent on 90 per cent of its exports going on one rail line to China.

"Mongolia's economy is controlled by China, basically," says Tsetsent.

Oyun-Erdene, the prime minister and a student of classical Mongolian literature, is determined to make his developing country more independent, but for now he is reluctant to criticise Beijing as he weans his country off its more volatile northern neighbour, Russia.

"There are no tensions between Mongolia and China in terms of our relations," he says. "For the past years, the Chinese side has always had respect and support for our development path."

Sensing the winds of opportunity, Ulaanbaatar's elite have started sending their kids to school in Beijing instead of England. But among average Mongolians, the public relations campaigns and investment flows have done little to shift hostility to Beijing.



Enkhjin Dorjbayar runs a dumpling store on the Mongolian-Chinese border. SANGHEE LIU

On the Chinese border in Zamiin-Uud, even those reliant on China for trade are reluctant to welcome more Chinese business.

Chinese containers and trucks pockmark the windswept desert town, where up to 400 Chinese trucks and 1000 people pass through a day, according to the Mongolian border guards stationed there.

“We are way too dependent on China,” says 20-year-old Enkhjin Dorjbayar, who runs a Mongolian fried dumpling store 500 metres from the border.

Inside, diners wait for their khuushuur (dumplings) while live-streaming a traditional wrestling match on their phones during the centuries-old Naadam festival.

“I think it’s going to be very difficult if there is more Chinese influence,” she says.



Bai was detained in Mongolia. SANGHEE LIU

Bai says he was detained for 32 days by Mongolian authorities last year. He suspects it was due to pressure from Chinese police, but cannot prove it.

UN documents show Bai has now been recognised internationally as a refugee for his teaching and advocacy work.

“I was taken to a detention house, my mobile phone and ID card were taken, and I could not speak to anyone,” he says.

“I asked them why did you arrest me - did I break any Chinese law, did I break any Mongolian law? They wouldn’t say.”

Bai was released without charge. “But it was a signal,” he says. “I just didn’t take it.”


In Ulaanbaatar, he says he is starting a new language school to teach children leaving their homeland Mongolian script.

The father of two knows it would have been impossible to do the same if he had stayed in China.

Bai says up to a dozen of his colleagues in Inner Mongolia who protested the changes to the school curriculum in 2020 have been arrested.

“They have been detained without going through any legal procedures,” he says. “Their fate is still unknown.”

With Anand Tumurtogoo

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