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# From Diversity to Homogeneity

## *Vacillating Signifieds in Propaganda Texts in Inner Mongolia*

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### Abstract

This article explores the shifting connotations of two key terms in propaganda texts on bilingual education policy in Inner Mongolia. The two terms are *dumdadu-yin ündüsten* (Ch.: *Zhonghua minzu*, Chinese nation) and *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel* (Ch.: *guojia tongyong yuyan*, national common language). I examine how the meanings of these key terms have begun to shift as China strives to shed its multinational character and build a linguistically homogenous Chinese nation-state. The new prominence given to the term *dumdadu-yin ündüsten* (Chinese nation) and the gradual substitution of the terms *neitelig hel* (Ch.: *putonghua*) and *khitad hel* (Han language) with the term *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel* (national common language) in propaganda texts in Inner Mongolia reflect and shape China's changing policies on its borderlands. In this brief exploratory article, I underline how the Mongolian terms referring to the Chinese nation and national common language undergo shifts in their meanings as what sits at the very core of these terms – the Han – irrepressibly exposes itself and subsumes other meaning potentials.

### Keywords

ethnic policy – digital propaganda – assimilation – bilingual education reform – Inner Mongolia – China

The Mongolian counterpart of the Chinese term *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation) is *dumdadu-yin ündüsten* (lit. 'middle nation'). It is not as widely used

or accepted by Mongols as is the case with the term *dumdad ulus* (*Zhongguo*, literally ‘middle country’, meaning China as a state). And there is a separate Mongolian term – *khitad* – for the ethnonym ‘Han Chinese’. The idea of Mongols making up China (*dumdadu ulus*, middle country), together with the Han Chinese (*khitad*), the Manchus, the Tibetans and the Muslims, began to be accepted by Mongols in China after the 1911 Chinese Revolution (Atwood 1994). In the second half of the twentieth century, the CCP’s nationality policy further consolidated the (self-)positioning of Mongols as one of the 56 nationalities (in Mongolian: *ündiüsten*, nationality; Ch.: *minzu*) making up multi-ethnic China. In other words, the conceptual dissociation of an overarching China (*dumdadu ulus*, middle country) from any nationality (*minzu*, ethnicity), including the dominant Han, made it possible for the Mongol nationality (ethnicity) to visualise themselves as one part of the multi-ethnic *dumdadu ulus* and opened up a space for their nested loyalties and multi-layered identities (Atwood 1994). However, the term *dumdadu-yin ündiüsten* (*Zhonghua minzu*) defies such possibility. The difficulty for Mongols to come to terms with this terminology, apart from the strong Han (*hua*) connotation carried by the original Chinese wording *Zhonghua*, also resides in the meaning of *ündiüsten* (*minzu*, ethnicity, nationality). In the Mongolian language used in China since the mid twentieth century, *ündiüsten* began to take on the meaning of ethnicity with a clear connotation of a common ancestry, customs and language. Although, in the case of *dumdadu-yin ündiüsten* (*Zhonghua minzu*), the word *ündiüsten* (*minzu*) is claimed to be or meant to stand for a supra-ethnic nation, its strong association with a particular ethnic ancestry is not easy to sever. As I will show below, Han ethnonationalism suffuses the term *Zhonghua minzu* (*dumdadu-yin ündiüsten*) and eventually destabilises the meaning of the Mongolian descriptor *dumdadu* (middle).

The texts that form the focus of this study were disseminated by the CCP in the Inner Mongolian region following Mongolian protests against the 2020 bilingual education reform, which promulgated Chinese as the teaching medium for three subjects in Mongolian-medium schools: Chinese language; morality and law (i.e. politics and ideology); and history. I have collected 117 posts from the official WeChat accounts of the Inner Mongolia Education Department and of the *Inner Mongolia Daily* (Mongolian edition) between 1 September 2020 and 28 February 2021. These propaganda posts included commentary articles by leading cadres, reports, posters and personal stories of development and success shared by people from all walks of life. These posts have been analysed in my previous work (see further Baioud & Khuanuud 2022), where we mainly explored how the ideology of assimilation and development underpins the propaganda texts. However, in this piece I focus

on the shifting connotation of keywords and the implications of such shifts for Mongols.

The exact time when *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation) was translated into *dumdadu-yin ündüsten* in Mongolian texts is unclear. The emergence of the term *Zhonghua minzu* itself can be traced back to the first decade of the twentieth century; the term was first coined and promoted by late Qing reformers and revolutionaries, such as Liang Qichao and Zhang Taiyan, around 1902, as the disintegration of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Qing empire became imminent (Crossley 1990; Kaske 2004). Despite the early Han nationalists' narrow and racial definition of *Zhonghua minzu* as solely referring to a pure Han race, the meaning of the term quickly expanded, due to the geopolitical situation in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The re-described *Zhonghua minzu* not only includes the Han Chinese, but also Mongols, Tibetans, Muslims and Manchus residing in the former Qing territory. Since then, much ink has been spilt by Chinese scholars in the Republican and Communist eras on constructing and defining the *Zhonghua minzu* as a composite of peoples who either share the same ancestor (e.g. the Yellow Emperor, Peking Man) or have been living in a perpetual state of 'contact, exchange and intermingling' for thousands of years (Leibold 2006). Although these racial and cultural formulations taking place since the early twentieth century were set firmly within the teleology of a Han-dominated Chinese nation (Leibold 2006), the seemingly neutral Mongolian adjective *dumdadu* (middle) prefixing either *ulus* or *ündüsten* is seldom explicitly equated with the Han (*khitad*) in official discourses. Yet the connotation of neutrality and unmarkedness implied by the Mongolian descriptor *dumdadu* has begun to be overwhelmed by Han particularism and assimilationist ideology in propaganda texts, as I will show below.

In one of the posters distributed by the *Inner Mongolia Daily* through its WeChat account, Qin Shihuang, who first materialised the unification of China proper in 221 BCE, was praised as the figure who spearheaded the great fusion of the Chinese nation (*dumdadu-yin ündüsten*) and made an enduring contribution to Chinese civilisation (*dumdadu-yin bolbason*) (see the last sentence of Figure 1). Two points are noteworthy. Previously, Chinese scholars in their narrative of national formation have argued that it was the Qin dynasty's unification of 221 BCE that first produced the Han nationality (*minzu*, ethnicity) (e.g. Xu 2012). However, in this poster the Qin dynasty that unified China proper (the Central Plains of China) and supposedly first produced the Han nationality (*minzu*, ethnicity) is represented as the founder of Chinese nation (*dumdadu-yin ündüsten*). By doing so, the poster in question conflates the Han nationality, the formation of which has been associated with the Qin dynasty

unification in Chinese scholarly narratives, with the Chinese nation. In other words, the Qin dynasty – China proper – the Han nationality – the Chinese nation are rendered coterminous with each other in the representational order. Furthermore, that Han-ness is coterminous with the Chinese nation is delivered nowhere clearer than in the choice of an overbearing image of a Qin dynasty warrior as the appropriate representative of the Chinese nation in the poster. Overall, the salience given to the Han nationality in this poster potentially destabilises the semantic content and narrows the range of references of a neutral Mongolian word, *dumdadu* (the middle) and by extension conceptually relinks the word *ündüsten* (*minzu*) with a particular ethnicity rather than associating it with a supra-ethnic nation, as is claimed by proponents of the concept of *Zhonghua minzu*.

The shift in the signified of *dumdadu* is further shown in the following text from the *Inner Mongolia Daily*, where the assimilationist ideology concealed beneath it surfaces through the metaphor of *dumdadu-yin ündüsten* as a roaring river with minority nationalities as little streams:

Chinese culture (*dumdadu-yin soyol*) comprises cultures of each and every nationality (ethnicity) of China. In the meantime, it is the spiritual homeland of the Chinese people (*dumdadu-yin arad tümen*) and the spiritual link of a unified Chinese nation (*dumdadu-yin ündüsten*). The culture of each and every nationality is an inseparable part of Chinese culture (*dumdad-in soyol*). The cultures of each of the nationalities are like little streams converging into the roaring waves of the great river of Chinese culture (*dumdadu-yin soyol*). (*Inner Mongolia Daily*, WeChat post, 17 September 2020; author's translation.)

In the above cases, the explicitness in articulating that what sits at the very centre of *Zhonghua minzu* is Han and that the relation between the *Zhonghua minzu* and the nationalities (ethnicities) of China is one of assimilation and absorption harks back to some degree to the assimilatory discourses and Han nationalism widely circulated during the late Qing and Republican times by Han revolutionists. As the propaganda texts smack of the same Han-centrism and assimilationist flavour, the range of meanings signified by the neutral Mongolian descriptor *dumdadu-yin* (the middle's) qualifying either *ulus* (country) or *ündüsten* (meaning a supra-ethnic nation in the case of *dumdadu-yin ündüsten*) has begun to fluctuate and at times exclusively takes on a Han ethnic tinge. This in turn poses a problem for Mongols, who in their translation

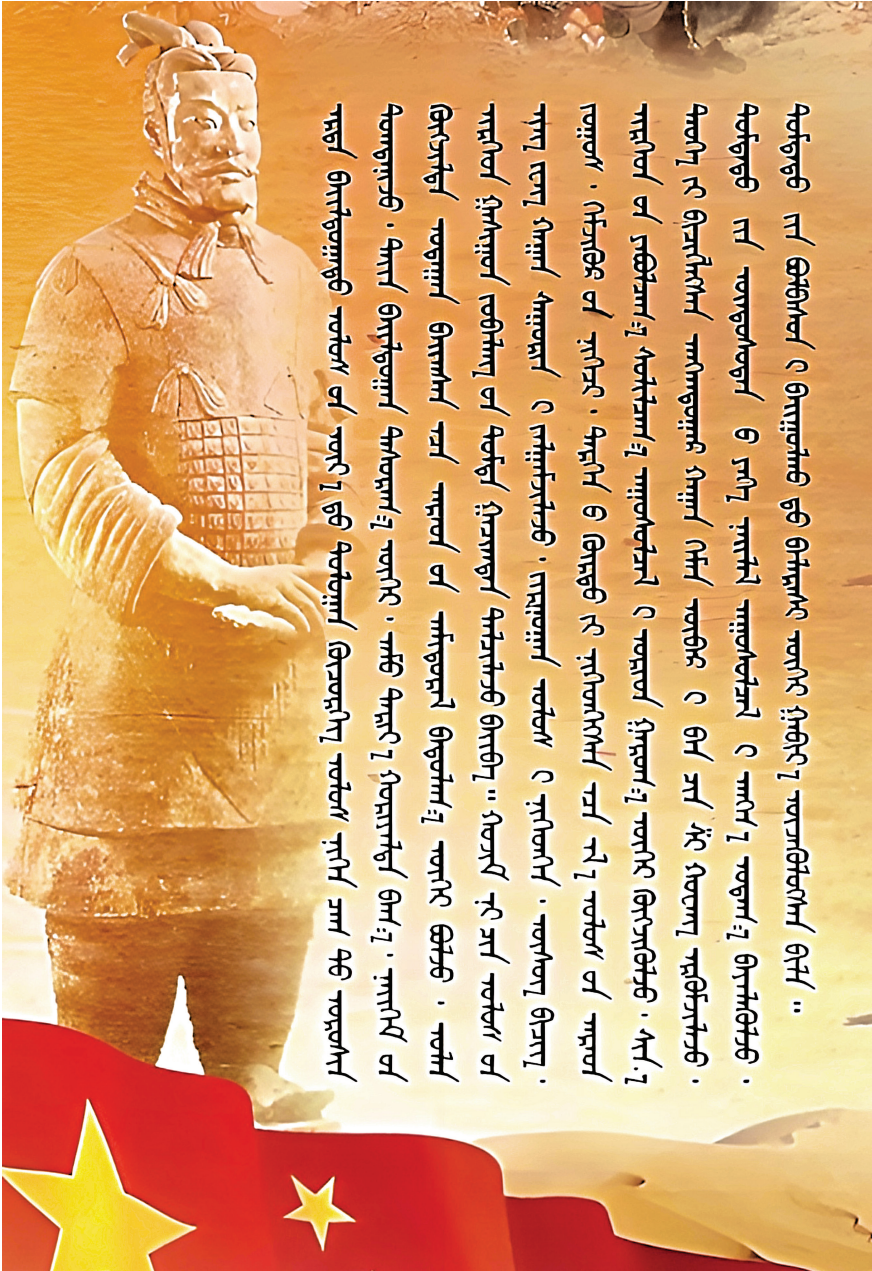


FIGURE 1 A poster illustrating the Terracotta Warrior from Qin Shihuang's mausoleum  
INNER MONGOLIA DAILY 13 JANUARY 2021



of *Zhonghua minzu*, through a sleight of hand only translated *Zhong* (middle) and left out the ethnic signifier *hua*, that is, Han. However, such partial translation and the detachment of Han from *Zhonghua minzu* are mostly futile in that *Zhonghua minzu* (*dumdadu-yin ündüsten*) is so fully drenched with Han-ness and assimilatory ideology in the propaganda texts that the recruited Mongolian neutral word *dumdadu* itself is destabilised. Ultimately, the shift in the signified of *dumdadu* in discursive space is interrelated with China's embrace of a Han ethnonationalist state form, which has left Mongols no alternative except that of being assimilated into the *Zhonghua minzu*, which is essentially Han.

How the shift in the signified of key words reflects and shapes China's adoption of a Han-centric national form is further shown in its effort to transform Han language into a transcendental language – a national common language.

The Chinese term *guoyu* (national language) referred to different languages in different periods: 'Inner Asian peoples who established states (*guo*) ruling over part or the whole of China – Kitans (Liao, 907–1125), Jurchens (Jin, 1115–1234), Tanguts (Xixia, 1038–1227), Mongols (Yuan, 1271–1368), and Manchus (Qing, 1636–1912) – named their respective languages *guoyu*' (Bulag 2022: 191). For instance, during the rule of the Qing, *guoyu* exclusively referred to the Manchu language, at least until 1910 (He 2018). On the cusp of the Qing breakdown, Mandarin Chinese (modern standard Chinese) replaced Manchu language as the *guoyu* (Kaske 2004). The social and political history of the creation and promulgation of Mandarin Chinese in early Republican China as well as in Communist China has already been discussed extensively (Weng 2018). What is noteworthy is that the promotion of Mandarin Chinese as the national language has continued well into the present. As pointed out by Bulag (2022: 188), 'Mandarin-as-National-Language remains a political project, rather than a *fait accompli*.' And the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual borderlands where the tension between national language and minority language is still felt strongly constitute an ideal site to explore China's ongoing struggle to construct the national language, which includes reshaping terminology.

In 2000, the 'Law of the PRC on the Nationally-used Common Language and Script'<sup>1</sup> enshrined into law what was already developing in practice in the late twentieth century: the usage of *putonghua* across the nation as the *lingua franca* (Grey 2021). It is there that the Chinese term *guojia tongyong yuyan* [national common language] was first used officially. As Zhou (2015: 66) argues, this change in the discourse on language 'represents the state's prioritisation of the linguistic dimension of PRC citizenship'. For Mongols, the widely

1 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi* 中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字.

accepted term for standard Chinese is *Khitad hel* (Ch.: *Hanyu*, Han language). But during the 2020 bilingual education reform and the ensuing propaganda campaigns, *guojia tongyong yuyan*, as well as its Mongolian equivalent *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel*, achieved a new prominence in Inner Mongolia that it had never enjoyed in the previous two decades. In the propaganda posts disseminated by the *Inner Mongolia Daily* (in Mongolian language) and the Inner Mongolia Education Department (in Chinese language) over a period of six months, the sweeping use of *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel* and *guojia tongyong yuyan* subsumes other ways of referring to the Han Chinese language. There, the new term is used by teachers, students, government officials and farmers, whose voices are seamlessly woven into the official propaganda. Only occasionally we glimpse the alternative, *Khitad hel* (*Hanyu*, Han language). In many personal success stories related by individuals in the propaganda materials, the national common language is represented as a language of 'salvation and promise' and as 'the soul of the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation'. In personal success stories, for instance, the term *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel* is chosen over *Khitad hel* in relating moments of achievement and excitement and declaring loyalty, whereas the commentaries penned by government officials or intellectuals often strive to anonymise *guojia tongyong yuyan* (in Chinese-language posts) or *ulus-un neidem hereglehü üge hel* (in Mongolian-language posts), rendering it into the 'voice from nowhere' (Gal & Woolard 2001: 12). For example, in the Inner Mongolia Education Department's Chinese-language posts about the national common language, it is stated that:

In the long process of interaction, interchange, and intermingling among the many nationalities (*minzu*, ethnicities) the national common language (*guojia tongyong yuyan*) has *absorbed* and *referenced* various nationalities' languages and *gradually developed into* a language shared by all nationalities, thereby acquiring the dominant status as the national common language. Since the national common language results from linguistic interaction, interchange and intermingling, it is also an important component of the Chinese nation's culture. Two misconceptions are prevalent in national common language promotion and education in ethnic regions. First, people misunderstand and parochially perceive learning Han Chinese language (*Hanyu xuexi*) as equal to learning the language and culture of the Han nationality (*Hanzu*, the Han ethnic group). Second, people misconstrue quickening the spread of the national common language as detrimental to the preservation and transmission of the languages of the minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*). We should treat the national common language as a commonly shared language of various

nationalities, a common language of the members in the big family of Chinese nation, and an important constituent of Chinese national culture. It is a tie facilitating the interaction, interchange and intermingling of various nationalities. It transcends the boundary of [any] one particular nationality (*minzu*) in both its scope of usage and function, and it is an important carrier (*zaiti*) of Chinese national culture (*Zhonghua minzu wenhua*) and a communication tool. (Inner Mongolia Education WeChat channel, 15 May 2021; emphases added)<sup>2</sup>

At one stroke, Han Chinese language (*Hanyu*) is repackaged and presented as a language that has slowly evolved in the process of prolonged ‘contact, intermingling and fusion’ with the languages of various nationalities. The reconstructed Han Chinese language is an omnipotent and overarching indigenised hybrid that contains in itself the images and souls of all languages spoken by peoples residing within the territorial boundaries of China. Hence, the Han Chinese language itself, after going through the process of construction that is the mechanism of ‘ethnic interaction, interchange and intermingling’, emerged as an omnipotent and anonymised language overcoming linguistic and ethnic boundaries as well as temporal and spatial gaps. That is, through this constructionist move the Han Chinese language sheds its Han characteristic and establishes itself as a universal tongue – a national common language owned by and imposed upon the multinational people of China. The state’s strategic deployment of the constructionist approach to universalise/anonymise the dominance of the Han nationality’s language – Han Chinese – can be illustrated by this formula:

Han Chinese language is constructed → deconstruct it → reconstruct it = the national common language

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- 2 国家通用语言文字在多民族长期交往交流交融的过程中，吸收和借鉴了各民族的语言，逐渐发展成为各民族共同使用的语言，具有国家通用语言的主体地位。国家通用语言文字是语言交流交往交融的结果，本身也是中华民族文化的重要组成部分。民族地区推广普及国家通用语言文字教育的过程中，存在着两种片面的认识。一是把汉语学习狭隘地理解为是对‘汉族语言’和‘汉族文化’的学习；二是认为加快国家通用语言文字教育会削弱少数民族语言文化的保护和传承。我们应该把国家通用语言文字理解为我国各民族共享的语言，是中华民族大家庭成员共同的语言，是中华民族文化的重要组成部分，是各民族交往交流交融的纽带。国家通用语言文字无论使用范围和功能，已经超越特定的民族，成为中华民族文化的重要载体和传承交流的工具。



To sum up, the changing signification of key terms is interrelated with and constitutes the transformation of China from a multinational country to a Han-centric nation state. Despite the state's effort to redescribe Mandarin Chinese language rhetorically as an anonymous and neutral national common language, in essence 'China's Mandarin-as-National-Language project is premised on Han Chinese supremacy and a sense of anxiety and urgency that, unless minorities begin to speak Mandarin, the Chinese nation is under perpetual threat' (Bulag 2022: 190). Just as the new drape of 'national common language' anxiously cast over Mandarin Chinese is too thin to cover the Han-ness of the language, the Mongolian neutral word *dumdadu* fails to contain the Han-ness suffusing the term *dumdadu-yin ündüsten*, otherwise *Zhonghua minzu*. As such, the descriptor *dumdadu* is emptied of its neutrality and inclusiveness and filled with Han supremacy. This shift in the meaning of *dumdadu* and the repackaging and imposition of Mandarin Chinese as the national common language left Mongols few alternatives except being assimilated into the Han and subjected to a new criterion of Han Chinese linguistic citizenship. Hence, the conceptual change not only revises the state's range of policies on borderlands, as has already materialised in waves of assimilationist policies carried out in various borderland regions in the last few years, but also flattens layers of identities of multilingual minorities and renders their nested loyalties to the country and their own nationality or ethnicity impossible.

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