

Linguistic purism as resistance to colonization

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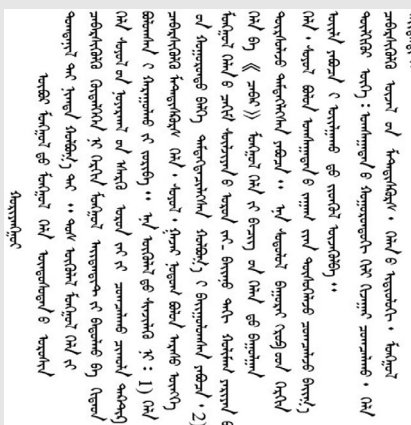
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Abstract

As the Mongolian language is equated with ethnic survival in Inner Mongolia, the metadiscourse of Mongolian linguistic purism has become a vital tactic for enacting Mongolian identity and creating a counterspace against Chinese linguistic and cultural hegemony. This paper analyses: (1) the process of establishing iconized links between language, culture, land and race on the second order of indexicalities; (2) the orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian and “pure” Mongolian in the Mongolian social media space *Bainu*. The study illuminates the interdiscursive processes of presuming and constructing linguistic, cultural, and ethnic boundaries by subaltern groups in an assimilationist nation state.

KEYWORDS

constructing ethnic boundaries, language ideology, metadiscourse of linguistic purism, Mongolian identity



1 | INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic and anthropological inquiries into linguistic purism have provided insights into how language purification campaigns and discourses are never simply “purely” linguistic (Abercrombie, 2018; Hill & Hill, 1980; Jernudd & Shapiro, 2011). Linguistic differentiation and purist discourses have always been ways of debating the historical, political, and cultural relationship between the dominated and the dominant (England, 2003; Roche, 2021; Wertheim, 2003). In contemporary Inner Mongolia—an ethnic minority region in northern China—linguistic purism discourses have begun to saturate Mongolian language media spaces in the past two to three decades as Mongols are increasingly marginalized in their homeland. One of the cartoons shared by Mongolian social media users, for instance, depicts how a lone traveler died from dehydration in the desert due to his Mongolian-Chinese-mixed prayer for a bottle of water, which God did not comprehend and hence failed to deliver a timely answer. In this study, we explore how such purism discourse is intertwined with and embedded in historical and ongoing sociopolitical and linguistic processes and developments experienced by the Mongols in China. The article is not concerned with Mongols’ actual linguistic practices. Rather, we focus on the *content* of purist ideology on a Mongolian social media platform, *Bainu*, (literally “hello” or “are you there”).

By drawing on what Silverstein (1979) dubbed as “metadiscourse,” which reflexively focuses on using language itself, we examine how the metalinguistic discourse of purism frequently takes “the explicit form of rationalizing explanation and presents invokable schemata in which to explain/interpret the meaningful flow of indexicals” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 129). In particular, we interrogate how and why the stigmatized *holimog hel* (“mixed Mongolian”) is construed as an emblem of losses and source of anxiety about ethnic extinction experienced by Mongols in the context of Chinese settler colonization. That the rationalizing schemata underlying metalinguistic terms are independent of epistemological concern with time, place, or other event-bound contingencies of the pragmatic practices of language has been amply demonstrated by the studies examining metalinguistic discourses about stigmatized migrant language (Stroud, 2004), “Japanese women’s language” (Inoue, 2004), and postcolonial “pure/hybrid” languages (Hill & Hill, 1980). Scholarship on purist discourses in language activism, likewise, shows how discourses surrounding “pure” or “impure” languages are haunted by images of exclusion/inclusion or self/other (Weinstein, 2011). As we show in this article, the schemata evoked in Mongolian metalinguistic discourses is undeniably shot through with the dichotomized opposition, where the *retranslation* of a system of social differences into a system of linguistic oppositions (Bourdieu, 1992; Gal & Irvine, 2000) is at its most exposed form. In other words, Mongolian purist discourses invoke historical experiences, reinscribe predrawn ethnolinguistic boundaries, and reveal the limit of state hegemony.

Understanding Mongolian purist discourse, as well as the anxiety and resistance underwriting it, requires attention not merely to how ideas about “pure/mixed” language mediate the relationship between linguistic form and the sociopolitical context as mentioned above. It also requires considering the very semiotic forms this mediation takes. Indeed, previous inquiries into linguistic purism have provided insight into the ideological functions of purist idioms (or metadiscourse of purism in our case) and resultant correction practices (Davies & Langer, 2005; Jernudd & Shapiro, 2011). The data we present in this study indicate, however, a need to attend to the ideologized orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian speech in the very process of purification. We underline how the orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian speech together with its “pure” counterpart and its source of “pollution” stigmatizes and banishes mixed Mongolian to the realm of nonlanguage. Jaffe and Walton (2000) point out that orthography represents stereotyped voices and nonstandard orthographies covertly attribute sociolinguistic stigma to those they represent (Jaffe & Walton, 2000). For instance, Fenigsen’s (1999) excellent study on the print representation of spoken creoles in postcolonial

Barbados shows how Bajan, a Barbadian creole, is enlisted in the service of print and exposed to the comparison with Standard English forms of writing. She argues that “[b]y forcing Bajan into a representational straightjacket . . . the newspaper representation of Bajan has long been constructing a fabricated yet powerful display of the language and its subordination to Standard English” (Fenigsen, 1999, p. 79). In critically discussing academics’ “faithful and innocent” written representation of their socially marginalized informants’ speech, Preston (1985, p. 329) argues “eye-dialect forms are well-known caricature forming devices.” It is exactly this caricature-forming device which is effectively utilized by Mongol purists to attribute stigma to mixed speech and the speaker persona it indexes. Specifically, the transcription of mixed Mongolian puts the “undesirable,” “disturbing” and double-voiced aspect of mixed Mongolian under a magnifying glass and banishes it to the place of nonlanguage. Such shaming is facilitated further by the vast distance between Mongolian and Chinese scripts as Mongolian script’s ultimate origins can be traced to the Syriac script used by early Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire, which was adopted by the Sogdians, an Iranian people, then by Turkic Uyghurs and Mongols (Henze, 1956).

Before unfolding the metadiscourse of Mongolian purism and the orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian speech we place them in the sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic context of Inner Mongolia, including vacillating Chinese minority language education policies as well as profound linguistic anxiety experienced by Mongols.

2 | INNER MONGOLIA AND SHIFTING LANGUAGE POLICIES

Inner Mongolia was an administrative unit created as a result of the Manchu conquest of the Mongols in the 17th century (Bulag, 2002). On the eve of the collapse of the Manchu Qing Empire (1644–1912), Outer Mongolia—the country today known as Mongolia—declared its independence in 1911. This left the status of the other part of the traditional Mongolian lands—Inner Mongolia—as an unresolved question till the late 1940s. During the first four decades of the 20th century, Inner Mongolia went through sociopolitical turbulence and intensified colonization under the rule of warlords (1911–1928), the Chinese Nationalist government (1928–1947), and Japanese colonial rule (1931–1945). In the meantime, the influx of Chinese settlers, which was set in motion by the Qing Empire’s introduction of the 1902 New Policy that opened Mongols’ lands to Chinese migration to raise funds to pay the Boxer Indemnity (Bulag, 2004b), provoked great anxiety for Mongols at the prospect of competing for life with the Chinese. Against this backdrop, Inner Mongolian nationalistic movements led predominantly by Mongol intellectuals fought for either autonomy or independence depending on what was feasible at the time (Atwood, 2002). Shortly after World War II, however, the Yalta Conference in 1945 doomed Mongol nationalists’ independence movements and determined Inner Mongolia’s integration into China. Yet, despite this failed political project, the cultural nationalism that once underpinned and energized flourishing secular Mongolian schools, translation programs, and print houses in the early 20th century (Narangoa, 2001), has lived on, in fact, until today.

In 1947, two years before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Inner Mongolia region was taken over by Chinese Communist forces and was established as the first non-Han-nationality autonomous government (Liu, 2006). In the time since, the initially promised autonomous rights of Mongols have been increasingly curtailed. Today Mongols as the titular nation in Inner Mongolia constitute a minority of around four million. They comprise around 17% of the population of Inner Mongolia, with the remainder being mainly made up of Han Chinese, who have increasingly settled there. In the second half of the 20th century, the founding of the PRC firmly established the status of Chinese as a powerful state language among the Inner Mongols. Accordingly, the imposition

of Chinese as the dominant code has given rise to a diglossic compartmentalization of domains of linguistic uses and values in Inner Mongolia. Despite the coofficial status of Mongolian with Chinese in the autonomous region, the public domains where Mongolian is used are restricted to Mongolian schools, media, publishing houses, and other Mongolian cultural entrepreneurial spaces. It is important to note that the PRC minority language and education policies oscillate as political moods in China shift and as the internal and external challenges faced by the Communist Party change.

In the early years of the People's Republic, Inner Mongolia exercised a reasonably high degree of autonomy (Bulag, 2003). With full support from the central government, two main types of bilingual schools were established: schools where all subjects were taught with Mongolian as a medium, and where a Chinese language course was added later as a separate subject (henceforth: Mongolian-medium schools/Mongolian schools); schools where all subjects were taught with Chinese as a medium and Mongolian language was offered as an optional subject (for other varieties see Wurlig, 1994). Apart from experiencing a massive hiatus during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Mongolian-medium education continued to develop in Inner Mongolia in the past four decades mostly thanks to the state's adoption of a *laissez-faire* stance towards Mongolian cultural expression (for details see Bilik & Erdene, 2016). However, this does not mean Mongolian education, one of the most important bases of Mongolian language maintenance and identity development, progressed without any impediments. The new era of reform and opening up of the 1980s, in particular, ushered in dominant neoliberal ideology in the language education policy and public discourses in China. The policy with its focus on national unity, economic development, and globalization, as Zhou (2012, p. 26) argues, “treats Mandarin as the superlanguage and reserves for it most public functions and political, legal, financial, and human resources while politically and functionally marginalizing minority languages.” Further, the neoliberal ideological rhetoric, which has been fused seamlessly with long-entrenched imperialistic Han Chinese-supremacy and racial ideology (Leibold, 2006), reproduces the indexical dichotomy of minority languages as traditional/backward/subordinated and Mandarin as modern/advanced/dominant in the PRC—part of the *doxa* in Bourdieusian terms (Grey & Baioud, 2021b).

More recently, the 2020 bilingual education reform in Inner Mongolia, wherein Mongolian as a medium of instruction has been replaced with Chinese in three core subjects (history, politics, and Chinese) across Mongolian schools, announced the arrival of assimilationist policy in the region. In fact, since the early 1990s, China's minority language education policy has gradually shifted from a pluralistic approach that emphasized linguistic and ethnocultural diversity to an integrationist approach that emphasizes assimilation and unity (Beckett & Postiglione, 2012). The assimilationist policy had already been enacted in different minority regions with different pace and intensity depending on state perceptions of each minority group (e.g. Baranovitch, 2020). A year later in August 2021, to speed up assimilation, mandatory Mandarin Chinese teaching was expanded to Mongolian kindergartens with the state's implementation of the “Children Speak in Unison” regulation (Grey & Baioud, 2021a). At the same time, a hierarchical raciolinguistic ideology as “a form of governmental racialization” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 623) has started to saturate official discourses in Inner Mongolia. The state's determination to build a nation essentially consisting of one people speaking one language (Mandarin Chinese) is ultimately linked with its ideological transformation from a state of many nationalities to a “singular unified community of the Chinese nation” (*zhonghua minzu gongtongti*) (Bulag, 2021).

3 | MONGOLIAN LINGUISTIC ANXIETY

In tandem with shifting national discourses and policies, Mongols' linguistic practices and sentiments changed significantly in the PRC. In the early years of the Chinese regime, it was a small community of

urban Mongol elites who became bilingual speakers and faced difficulty in transmitting Mongolian to their children. Young Mongols have faced language loss due to at least three factors: a lack of Mongolian ethnic enclaves in urban contexts (Bilik, 1998); urban Mongols' intermarriage with Han Chinese; and some Mongols parents' choice of mainstream Chinese schools instead of Mongolian schools propelled by an ideology wherein Chinese is associated with upward social mobility (Bulag, 2003). In particular, the last four decades' rampant marketization/urbanization and neoliberalist and racialized language policies, in concert with the weakened autonomy of Mongols, has exerted tremendous pressure on intergenerational Mongolian language transmission and has produced either monolingual Chinese speaking Mongols or semi-speakers of Mongolian not only in urban but also in rural Mongolian communities. However, in the meantime, it is noteworthy that a high degree of balanced bilingualism has also developed among several generations of Mongols (Puthuval, 2017), most of whom were educated in Mongolian-medium schools.¹ And it is this group of bilingual and biliterate Mongols who constitute the overwhelming majority in Mongolian language media spaces and it is this group that are targeted by the purist discourses in question. Needless to say, as Chinese spreads widely among almost all Mongols, frequent code-switching or mixing in everyday informal contexts has become the norm for this group of bilingual biliterate Mongols. Even among those standard Mongolian speakers—the dialect spoken by Chakhar Mongols in Shuluun Höh banner in central Inner Mongolia was designated as standard Mongolian in 1980 (Bulag, 2003)—language mixing in everyday interaction is ubiquitous (Schatz, 2012).

More important, the accelerated Mongolian language loss of the past few decades, and contact-induced linguistic syncretism of Mongols compounded by the Han-centric state building, reinforced the long-standing cultural nationalism of Mongol intellectuals and animated their deep-seated fear of imminent danger of ethnic extinction. As Atwood (2002, p. 178) notes, “From the 1920s, if not before, until the present, the Mongols have perennially exhibited anxiety about their very existence as a nationality in any time of political turmoil or change.” This anxiety about ethnic extinction and cultural loss has inevitably been fused with and transposed onto the discourse of language endangerment and revitalization in the latter part of 20th century (Bilik, 1998) and has produced Mongolian linguistic anxiety (Bulag, 2003). For linguistic anxiety, here we wish to underline its intersubjective and dialectic nature. By this we mean, despite its seemingly widespread and static nature, it is something to be called forth by an event, an interlocutor, or an imaginary scenario. Besides being intersubjective, anxiety affects different individuals to different degrees. For decades, the contexts that are suffused with linguistic anxieties include Mongolian public spaces such as magazines, classroom discussions, informal gatherings in tea houses, and others. Since the early 2000s, such Mongolian linguistic anxiety, mixed with intermittent surges of hope and despair, has also begun to saturate emerging mediatized spaces.

4 | *BAINU* AND ITS USERS

A number of Mongolian language media platforms, including blogging sites *qinggis.net* (“Chinggis net”) and *holvoo* (“Group or Connection”), and social media apps have been established since the early 2000s. *Bainu*, developed in 2015 by startup company, *Zuga*, quickly gained popularity and is claimed to be the most popular Mongolian social media app to date with its 400,000 registered Mongol users (Urna, 2020). Its success resides in at least two factors. First, the existing few Mongolian social media platforms did not fare well and disappeared one after another due to various technical, financial, or political issues. This left those Mongols who wish to chat online in Mongolian hungry for a Mongolian language social media platform. *Bainu*, precisely fills this void. Hübchin, one of the two founders of

the *Zuga* company, both of whom graduated from prestigious universities in Beijing and Shanghai, explained during an interview with Inner Mongolia Weekly, that,

When we first developed the Mongolian gaming app *Dabaa* (“Barrier”) the Mongol gamers there often send us messages and say: “it would be so nice if we gamers chat in Mongolian and become friends here.” Also, young people like us studying or working in Beijing for years often feel so distant from our fellow Mongols. So we have a strong need to meet our fellow Mongols online and chat and write in Mongolian. For a long while, WeChat is the only platform available one to Mongols, but it is a Chinese medium one (our translation, March 17, 2015, Inner Mongolia Weekly interview).

The popularity of *Bainu*, in addition, is inseparable from its easy-to-use vertical (classical) Mongolian script input method developed specifically for the site by the two founders because the existing vertical Mongolian Unicode had severe problems that hampered the widespread use of vertical Mongolian script online since the 1990s. The young entrepreneurs hence took great pride in promoting the vertical Mongolian script in a new media space. One of the reasons *Bainu* has been turned into a platform to express linguistic nationalism precisely lies in the hyperideologized nature of vertical Mongolian script among Mongols, which has been retained in Inner Mongolia while abandoned in Mongolia for the Cyrillic script in the 1940s. The phrase *bosoo Mongol bichig* literally meaning “Standing Tall Mongolian Script/Rising up Script” evokes strong nationalistic sentiments (Atwood, 2021). For instance, poems and rap songs circulated on Inner Mongolian university campuses in the early 2000s include lines rallying Mongols to stand up against oppression just like how the vertical Mongolian script is always standing tall and gloriously. Undeniably, in a Mongolian space such as *Bainu* where everything is written in the classical script, the simple act of writing itself falls on scrutinizing eyes. Misspellings, wrong translations, and poor use of language are instantly pointed out and corrected by some *Bainu* users. Thus, in this most populated and Mongolian script-based social media app, *Bainu*, linguistic forms and content simultaneously attract the attention of its users, and it has been rendered a major context for metalinguistic and metacultural discussions.

The second factor explaining why metalinguistic discussions proliferate on *Bainu* is that there is a porous boundary between *Bainu* and other discursive contexts saturated with purist ideologies including traditional rituals (Baïoud, 2021), cultural festivals, newsroom interviews, Mongolian speech contests, language classrooms, and other Mongolian digital media spaces. Folk linguists, including those purist stancetakers, move between various virtual and nonvirtual spaces freely, and surely *Bainu*, as the most popular Mongolian virtual space, naturally attracts them and serves as a convenient venue to disseminate purist discourses. Finally, the increasingly narrowed domains of Mongolian language use have rendered *Bainu*, to quote a user, “A pure white yurt’s golden *hoimor* (meaning the honorific zone of a yurt) where the Mongolian language is placed.” Most crucially, as the 2020 assimilatory language education policy triggered a series of lost battles for Mongolian language and threw Mongols into a deep despair, *Bainu*’s value as a refuge for Mongolian linguistic activities has only increased. “Speak Mongolian purely and write it correctly, this is the least we can do,” one *Bainu* user exhorted others. “Let’s teach our language to our children at home; let’s turn our homes into schools,” another rallied, reminiscent of how Basque speaking parents viewed teaching Basque to their children as cultural responsibility during the Franco regime (Urla, 1993). Such linguistic anxiety, conflated with the old fear of ethnic extinction, surely underwrite Mongolian purist discourse in *Bainu*.

Bainu users come from all walks of life, including herders, businessmen, teachers, journalists, musicians, university students, public servants, and others. But identity positions inhabited by these Mongols on *Bainu* are not uniform. Multiple position taking ranging from cultural nationalists to

multiculturalists to (more rarely) assimilationists exist on *Bainu*, depending on communicative contexts, as is often the case in many social contexts in Inner Mongolia (e.g., Jankowiak, 2013). In this study we interpret purist stance as indexing a persona who has a strong orientation to Mongolian linguistic and cultural nationalism and who views speaking purely as a commitment to Mongolian culture and language. In Mongolian, those who adopt a purist stance are described as *ünderstenii üjel tai hün* (a person who has strong ethnonationalist sentiments) or as *mongol soyol doon hairtai hün* (a person who has strong attachment to Mongolian culture). Let us be clear at this juncture that Mongol purist stancetakers on *Bainu* do not associate “pure” Mongolian with the pastoral herders of contemporary Inner Mongolia. Some scholars indeed have pointed out that while “pure” Mongolian is associated with pastoral Mongols (e.g., Bilik, 1998; Bulag, 2003), the main subjects who are prone to such imagination and idealization are urban elite Mongols living in cities for at least two to three generations, and some of their descendants who are already heavily sinicized. Surely, this class of urban Mongols is absent from *Bainu*. In other words, as a Mongolian-script based media space, *Bainu* excludes many Mongols who have lost Mongolian literacy. Hence, it is important to note that the bilingual and biliterate Mongols who play leading roles in *Bainu* are those who still retain strong physical and emotional connection with pastoral or semi-pastoral Mongols in the countryside and whose movement between urban and rural environs is still frequent. And the overwhelming majority is university-educated first-generation urban dwellers working in various sectors within or outside Inner Mongolia, whom we loosely define as (emergent) middle-class intellectual Mongols of *Bainu*.

Indeed, *Bainu* is a platform designed by and for the bilingual and biliterate Mongols who received Mongolian-medium education. To a large extent, the purist discourse under analysis in *Bainu* is self-directed. That is, it targets Mongols who are able to expertly switch between two codes in everyday communicative contexts and at the same time capable of producing unmixed literary Mongolian in formal contexts. Mongols who have limited proficiency in Mongolian, or those so-called sinicized Mongols, are not the target of purification and language shaming. Thus, the often-raised question of how semi-speakers of a minority language may face linguistic insecurity due to purist ideology is not relevant, at least for now.

Not only are the identity positions inhabited by Mongols on *Bainu* multiple, but the purist stancetakers also differ among themselves regarding the extent of taking such a stance. There are purist stancetakers in *Bainu* who may lapse into codemixing in their everyday life. This gap between ideology and practice can largely be explained by the fact that there is no widespread purist stance uptake in everyday life and that heteroglossic practices have long been part of lived sociolinguistic reality. This puts those who attempt to speak purely in everyday communication under the spotlight. In order to act “normally” and to effectively convey meanings without causing too much attention to their communicative forms many succumb to the established norm of conversational mixing. In addition, taking a purist stance for some *Bainu* users is merely an emotional act only feasible in a Mongolian space. It means that engaging in minority language debates is one way to achieve emotional and psychological balance for the minoritized groups. The Chinese ethnic minority’s individual interests, be they political or economic, do not sit easily with and even run contrary to one’s emotional and moral intuition, as for instance shown in the case of some Mongols parents’ choice of Chinese-medium schools over Mongolian ones. That is to say, there is a gap between emotion and practical pursuits for minority Mongols, which needs to be reconciled from time to time (Bilik, 1998). Purist stancetaking and projecting a persona committed to Mongolian culture in particular Mongolian spaces in one way or another constitute a way to tap into their suppressed emotion and ethnic sentiment.

But, more importantly, there are *Bainuers*, for whom purist stancetaking is not simply an emotive act only feasible in a delimited and politicized space. Rather, their ultimate purpose lies in normalizing a purist stance across all speech contexts and they are striving to speak purely in as many contexts as

possible despite the public pressure. The cartoonist, Sainjargal, whose work will be discussed below, is one of the few *Bainu* users who have successfully implemented pure language policy at home and among friends. Therefore, how far the purist stance is to be practiced differs among *Bainu* users: some only align with the emotional and political valance of the purist stance, others go beyond that, and yet others never take up such a stance in the first place in *Bainu* and act as silent spectators.

5 | DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The data examples used in this paper are derived from ethnographic research examining online Mongolian language practices, debates and cultural performances on *WeChat* (Baoud, 2020) and *Bainu*, conducted between January 2019 and July 2021. The methodology we have adopted is digital ethnography, which involves various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media (Coleman, 2010). We have been *Bainu* users since it was first launched in 2015, which has allowed us to observe “user-generated metalinguistic data” as Jones and Schieffelin (2009, p. 1062) put it, on *Bainu* over the last 6 years. As with many *Bainu* users, we went to Mongolian schools and we belong to the online/offline communities constituted by these bilingual biliterate Mongols. Since 2011, we have been contributors to Mongolian blogging sites such as *Holvoo* and *Chinggis net*. With regard to *Bainu*, over the last 6 years we did not join the language debates going on there as actively as some leading figures (some of whom we know through online or offline engagements), nor did we attract many followers. Notwithstanding our tangential participation in heated language debates, for both of us, *Bainu*, has been an important and now one of the few surviving virtual space that we have to feel close to our community from afar, and only much later has it become a site for us to collect data on purist discourses. We compiled our corpus from *Bainu*’s news feed, where *Bainu* users post, (re-)share and comment on each other’s posts. Social media feeds related to Mongolian language purism discourses, with various goals such as exhortations or rectifications, emerge on *Bainu* on a daily basis. Users can choose to either ignore or engage with them by sharing them further and adding their comments.

We have notified those who actively engaged in language debates on *Bainu* of our research and obtained their agreement to use their works such as cartoons in our corpus. We have compiled 59 original posts comprising poems (17), commentaries of differing length (20), cartoons (20), and memes (10) and categorized them into two classes: metalinguistic arguments about linguistic purism, and written representation of mixed language. Though in most posts these two mechanisms appear together, for analytical purposes we set the metalinguistic commentary on purism, where a series of iconized links are established through dyadic pairs, apart from the literal representation of mixed and “pure” Mongolian language. In the analysis we also draw on the further comments generated by these posts.

6 | METADISOURSE OF MONGOLIAN PURISM

The metadiscourse of Mongolian purism is saturated with essentialization and iconization of “untarnished and pure” Mongolian language as indexical of the Mongolian world view, Mongolian blood, unsullied grassland, the traditional pastoral lifeways, ancestors, and glorious history. In other words, purist ideology mediates “a dialectic process of indexicality in many orders of contextual abstraction and on many distinct planes of sociality and of social process” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 128). The sound of “pure Mongolian” is valued as musical and poetic, and the vertical form of the traditional Mongolian script is “upright” and “artistic.” By contrast, *holimog hel* (“mixed Mongolian”) is constructed as a nonlanguage which is a symptom of “muddled thinking”; a sign of symbolic domination by Chinese;



Illustrated by Sainjargal

FIGURE 1 A cartoon about mixed Mongolian and “pure” Mongolian

it is “*eremdeg*” (“unhealthy; disabled”) and “*saarmag*” (“denoting something in-between the masculine and feminine; hybrid”); it is uttered by a “swollen or twisted tongue.” The culprit code—Chinese is *hariin hel* (“other’s/foreign tongue”); it is a “poison” and “scabies” to be exterminated from mixed Mongolian to keep Mongolian “healthy.” We will show how these multiplex signs are organized on the second order of indexicality and permit speakers to move from one indexical plane to another by presupposing “a reality out there” through the following cartoon (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 is the third work in a series of twenty comic strips titled: *Mongolooroon cheverhen yari-jgayaa!* (“Let’s speak Mongolian in a pure way”). It was produced between August 2020 and Octo-

ber, 2021 by Sainjargal, who works in the branch office of an international firm retailing agricultural machineries in Hohhot and is originally from central Inner Mongolia. Sainjargal aims to purify mixed Mongolian speech by replacing the widely used Chinese loan words with Mongolian words through each of his works. He said: “*ene ganchhan ügeen öörchileed irchehbel eh hel min bagch gesen cheversheed irhen ter*” (“if we can replace this one single word, our mother tongue can at least be a bit purer” (personal communication). In the cartoon, the target of purification is *baba* (“father”) and *mama* (“mother”), words which derive from Chinese parental address terms bà bà (爸爸) and mā mā (妈妈). Sainjargal offers available Mongolian equivalents *aav* and *eej*. Notably, the purification discourse underpinning the cartoon maps a temporal discrepancy, that is between historical time and modern time, onto “desirable and correct” Mongolian parental address terms and these “undesirable and incorrect” Chinese loans. This discursive mapping is shown by the story depicted in the cartoon, where a khan orders one of his generals to submit a report on his descendants. Upon receiving this order, the general takes a tour among today’s Mongols and to his confusion he realizes they are chattering in an unknown language. Having understood nothing, the general reports back to the khan: “My lord, forgive me, they have all become people uttering *baba mama, fafa lala...*”. As you see in the bottom right picture, upon hearing this the khan covers his face, frustrated, and says “Oh my heavens!” Thus, by evoking the historical timeframe the cartoonist also weaves shame and degeneration into the current timeframe. A similar association of linguistic purity with the social forms of the past and language mixing with the social form of today is observed by Hill (1998) in her exploration of nostalgic discourse among Nahuatl. She argues “The discourse of nostalgia claims that Mexican dialogues are inextricably linked to a desirable social order of the past, and particularly to “respect”, and that disrespect, a key problem of today, is linked to the use of Spanish” (Hill, 1998, p. 72).

In addition to mapping the past time frames and the social order ruled by powerful Mongol khans onto untarnished Mongolian, Mongolian purism discourse also constructs an iconized linkage between unspoiled grassland versus destroyed grassland; pastoralism versus agriculturalism; pure Mongolian versus mixed Mongolian. Thereby, mixed Mongolian is rendered a conspicuous sign of the destruction of the natural environment and subsequently Mongols’ loss of the pastoral mode of life. Such is the case in the following two verses on *Bainu*.

My mother tongue that I learned since I was young,
it has become a mixed language for both the young and the old.
My homeland where I live eternally,
it is swept by gusty sandstorm day and night (February 21, 2019 post; our translation).

The verse juxtaposes the vicious sandstorm with mixed Mongolian. The former is the direct consequence of land degradation in Inner Mongolia due to various national development projects such as mining and land privatization (Williams, 2002). As such, the iconized links between spoiled land and mixed Mongolian interweave the above verse. At the same time, a veiled critique is directed toward the national policies that caused these social and ecological catastrophes in Inner Mongolia. Such counter discourse is expressed explicitly in the second verse by a *Bainuer*.

When will you be knocked out of your slumber?!
In seventy years since the founding of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region,
We cannot forget the “progress” we achieved.
We ruled “autonomously”,
Our face has become motley,
Our children are fewer,

Our wide and open land is diminishing,
 Our language is mixed,
 Our rich and fertile homeland is becoming impoverished
 ... (June 05, 2020 post; our translation).

In a similar move with the previous verse, yet in a more explicit manner, the author laments the losses of the Mongols while the authoritative discourse drapes the veil of progress and autonomy over them. In this verse, the oxymoron “autonomous region” refers to Mongols’ status of depoliticized and deterritorialized titular minority people on their own lands (Bulag, 2004). The “progress” paradoxically leads to the land degradation in Inner Mongolia and the inappropriate environmental protection policies which followed it, such as a grazing ban that “shook the life base of pastoralist Mongols and changed the way of pastoralism in Inner Mongolia” (Torgonshar, 2013, p. 52). In this counter-discourse, mixed Mongolian is undeniably linked with reduced autonomous rights, intermarriage (that supposedly resulted in motley faces of mixed-race children), poverty, and deteriorating land. Indeed, in the process of articulation “the sign itself becomes part of a (socially created) physical and material world” (Williams, 1977, p. 38). Therefore, by mobilizing the theoretical apparatus of an isomorphism of language, culture, and land, purist ideology rationalizes and naturalizes the metadiscourse of purism via establishing a chain of iconized linkages between language, ethnic rights, blood, grassland, and history on multiple indexical orders.

Once the primordial and dyadic opposition is set up through iconization, Mongol purists’ action against mixed Mongolian that falls in-between the established dichotomy commences, as we show in the next section.

7 | ORTHOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF MIXED MONGOLIAN AS A PURIFYING DEVICE

Through orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian, purists aim to weed out mixed Mongolian and they relegate it to the place of nonlanguage. In the representational field of purism, mixed Mongolian is always juxtaposed with its source of “pollution,” that is Chinese, on one hand and its remedy that is “pure” Mongolian on the other hand. Below in Figure 2, the mixed speech of everyday communication is represented in print and is closely followed by the “correct and pure” version in brackets underneath (see Figure 2). We have excerpted three pairs of sentences from this list (see Extract 1), which includes 12 pairs of sentences in total. Chinese borrowings are in bold, while the corresponding “pure” Mongolian is underlined. We italicized the corresponding English translations. In the original Mongolian scripts, the Chinese borrowings are underlined in red.

Extract 1

Dear sir/madam, whenever you open your mouth:

-mini **shüji**-nii **dian**-n düürchüü?

(mini gar utas-nii cheneg-n düürchihjüü?)

Has my *phone* been fully *charged*?

(line 1)

-*tergen-i* **yöküng** ne?

(*tergen-i* alas ejemshüür-nii?)

Where is the car’s *remote control*?

(line 5)

Despite the fact that Mongolian remains the matrix language and unaffected in actual communicative contexts and despite the fact that it is completely natural to mix and switch in everyday interaction, the polyvalency and hybridity of mixed Mongolian is exposed in print as “incorrect and tarnished” by purists. This stigmatizing effect is largely achieved via this literary representation of everyday mixed speech which lifts casually mixed speech out of its spoken context and juxtaposes it with standard written Mongolian. This representation, first, creates an unbridgeable gap between “impure” and “pure” Mongolian as ostensibly shown by the parallel representation of each “incorrect and impure” speech with its “correct and pure” version underneath in colons. Second, in the Bakhtinian notion of self-representational power of discourse (Bakhtin, 1981), the latter “ideal and pure” discourse comments on the former “impure and distorted” one derogatively from a safe distance without being implicated and tarnished by the former’s “impurity.”

[illegible]

FIGURE 2 An orthographic representation of Mixed Mongolian speech; September 06, 2019 post

That mixed Mongolian speech is stigmatized by purists via print representation is further demonstrated in the following case, where a dramatized picture of a Mongol policeman's mixed Mongolian speech is painted (see Figure 3). The policeman warned herders about rising Internet and phone scams about high interest loans in an about 1-min long video, which was faithfully transcribed by one *Bainu* user and went viral. In this representational field, Chinese characters are directly employed to transcribe Chinese lexicons and phrases that are intermingled with Mongolian. Even for those who read neither Chinese nor Mongolian the mixed nature or the overwhelming number of Chinese characters studded within Mongolian is obvious to see.

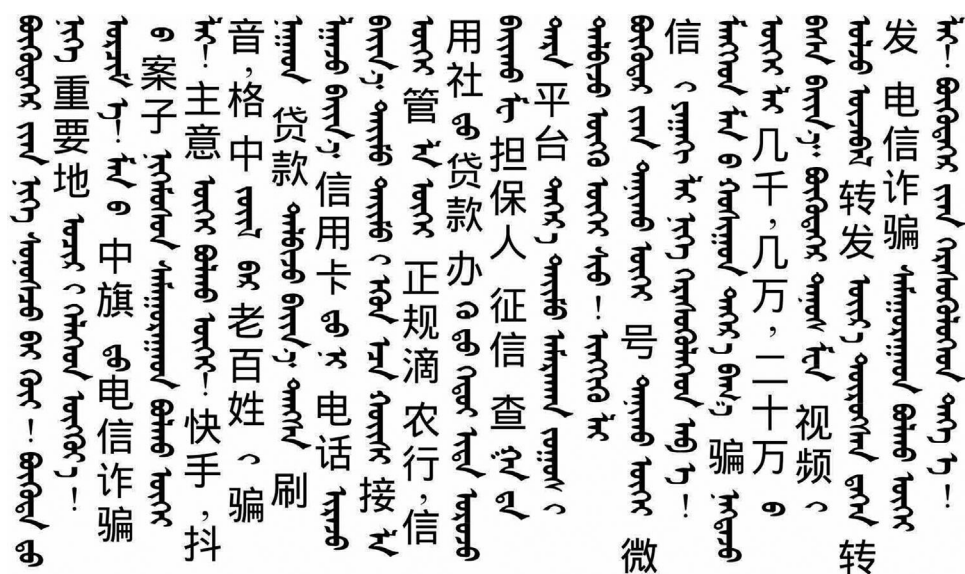


FIGURE 3 An orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian speech; June 20, 2021 post

In discussing the ideological power of orthography, Jaffe and Walton (2000, p. 582) point out that, “orthography stands for linguistic form, for regularity, for authority, for systematicity, for these reasons, it plays a major role in positioning the language it represents vis-à-vis ‘the standard’, both specific standard languages, and the very idea of ‘a standard’.” We push this argument further and argue that orthographic representation not only pitches nonstandard (spoken language) against the standard, it also permanently banishes the nonstandard to the realm of nonlanguage.

The literal representation of mixed Mongolian speech is not just limited to the easily detectable mixtures of Chinese with Mongolian, it also targets literal word-for-word Mongolian translations of Chinese expressions. Language activists coined a derogative term *modon hel* (“Wooden Mongolian”) to name those Mongolian expressions that are calqued from Chinese ones. One of the activists on *Bainu*, a Mongol based in the United States, defines Wooden Mongolian as:

The practice of blindly copying Chinese expressions and structures into Mongolian without any adjustment and innovation; such wooden language is a product of filling Mongolian segments into Chinese models just like filling in forms automatically. Conceptually, wooden language derives directly from a Chinese conceptual frame and it is deceitfully garbed with Mongolian (our translation; April 14, 2020 post).

有儿	ᠠᠶᠢᠨ ᠡᠷᠢ	ᠠᠶᠢᠨ ᠡᠷᠢ
法律	ᠯᠠᠭᠤᠯᠤᠰ	ᠯᠠᠭᠤᠯᠤᠰ
爱好	ᠠᠶᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠠᠶᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
搬家	ᠪᠠᠭᠠᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠪᠠᠭᠠᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
好你们	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
好新年	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
好早上	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
同学	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ
跳舞	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ	ᠬᠠᠭᠤᠨ ᠠᠶᠤᠨ

FIGURE 4 A list of Wooden Mongolian on Bainu; April, 04 2020 post

Thus, purists claim that the penetration of Chinese into Mongolian is much more stealthy and pernicious in the case of wooden Mongolian compared to its unwelcome presence in mixed Mongolian. Painstakingly, the author provides four pages of Wooden Mongolian examples that have “secretly infested” Mongolian language and Mongols’ minds. The representational pattern from the top to bottom in Figure 4, an extract of these four pages, is: Wooden Mongolian—its Chinese origin—‘pure’ Mongolian alternative.

In this list one of the most well-known Wooden Mongolian expressions is the first one in the list: *bujig üserh*, (literally “to dance dancing”), which is a word for word translation derived from Chinese expression: 跳舞 (the verb “跳” means “to jump or to dance”, the noun “舞” means “dancing”). Based on Mongolian verb formation rules this can be simply expressed as *büjigleh* (“to dance”), instead of adding a separate verb *üserh* (to jump) behind the noun *büjig* (dancing). In fact, sometimes purists’ choice of “pure” expressions such as *ajil buulaa* (“clock off work”) in the above Extract 1 undeniably falls into the category of Wooden Mongolian as it is similarly calqued from Chinese expression: xià bān. According to the purists such wooden Mongolian is an undeniable sign of Chinese influence on Mongols’ mindset and it is much more difficult to diagnose and correct.

More importantly, these controversial Wooden Mongolian have what Woolard (1998, p. 6) termed “bivalency,” which refers to a simultaneous membership of an element in more than one linguistic system. Catalan language activists’ fierce debates over bivalent Catalan vocabularies that are suspected of being calqued from Castilian led Woolard (1998, p. 14) to argue “it is useful to consider public occurrences of bivalency as strategic aspects of performance where oppositions are played upon, rather than as neutral sites.” Following this line of argument, we argue that the orthographic representation of bivalent Wooden Mongolian is inherently ideological and political as it exposes/awakens the two oppositional voices of Mongolian and Chinese subsumed with Wooden Mongolian.

Just as the bivalency-phobes in the Catalan case replaced the “dreadful” Castilian ending -an with -à, Inner Mongols looked to Mongolia to purify Wooden Mongolian. In our corpus, the most frequently cited candidate to replace Inner Mongols’ wooden Mongolian is Mongolian language as spoken in Mongolia, where the majority group are the Khalkha Mongols. In our data, the representational pattern adopted by purists is: Khalkha Mongols say it like this versus Inner Mongols say it like this, as exemplified in Extract 2. Thus, purists on Bainu rely on the long-held high status of the Khalkha Mongols of Mongolia as a point of linguistic and cultural reference (e.g., D’Evelyn, 2014). We will illustrate this with the third pair from the above list (see Extract 2, April 10, 2020 post), which includes seven pairs of sentences altogether.

Extract 2

Khalkha Mongols say: *hurdunii jam ruu oroloo*.

(I’m entering the highway.)

Inner Mongols say: *öndör hurdach tai jasmal jam deer garlaa*.

(I’m driving onto the high-speed paved road.)

Here, the targeted Wooden Mongolian is: *öndör hurdach tai jasmal jam* (“high-speed paved road”), which is another calque derived from a Chinese expression: 高速公路 (literally “high-speed public road”). Thus, by invoking the long-established association of Khalkha Mongols of Mongolia with the epitome of authenticity and purity, the Wooden Mongolian shot through with the “Chinese way of thinking” is delegitimized.

In addition to offering the Mongolian used by the Khalkha Mongols of Mongolia as a remedy to fix Wooden Mongolian of Inner Mongols, direct transliterations from English or French in the case of brand names are recommended as better options to replace Wooden Mongolian. The given argument is: “when there is a short-cut, why are we always taking a detour by using “second-hand” Chinese terms?” (March 07, 2021 post). Thus, global fast-food chains and brand names such as KFC, TOYOTA, CHANEL, LEXUS are recommended by purists to be called according to their original English, French, or Japanese pronunciation, instead of following Chinese filtered versions such as *kěn dé jī* (KFC), *fēng tián* (TOYOTA), *xiāng nài ěr* (CHANEL), *lái kē sà sī* (LEXUS). Here, again all these Chinese loans are transcribed and visually juxtaposed as deviant outliers. The underlying reasoning behind the purists’ preference for English/French/Japanese pronunciations of these brand names over their Chinese alterations is epitomized in the following comment,

Mongols are much better than Chinese in accepting new things and they are much more open to the outside worlds. This is our natural advantage. After all, Mongols have seen the world [during the Mongol Empire] ... [C]hinese language is a screen, which acts as a hindrance between us and the world. In such a situation, everything we absorb is filtered through this screen of Chinese ... [L]et’s keep our distance from Chinese, whose transliteration and translation of foreign terms are so weird and bizarre to many people around the world. By doing so, they are isolating themselves from the world (our translation; March 10, 2020post).

In these discourses, the Chinese adaptation of foreign brand names, which are portrayed as “incomprehensible” to “authentic” others, derives from Chinese culture’s tendency to isolate itself from others. By contrast, in these discourses, Mongols are portrayed as open-minded and endowed with a broad vision, which accordingly positions Mongols as people who directly and “authentically” follow foreign pronunciations when it comes to well-known brand names. Here the old tropes of Chinese people and

culture as “incomprehensible, recalcitrant and unmalleable” which have featured prominently in Sino-phobic discourse around the world for centuries (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2020; Steinmetz, 2007), in conjunction with a global linguistic hierarchy (Piller, 2016), mediate the Mongol purists’ justification of the direct import of global terms into Mongolian.

However, and in spite of their shared goal of minimizing Chinese influence on Mongolian language, purists diverge among themselves when it comes to the selection of the right candidates to replace the Chinese loans. Not all purists are willing to borrow Western terms nor are they happy with the ones that are used in Mongolia as shown by their debate on *Bainu* over how to translate the word *emoji* (posts between June 26 and 29, 2020). Mongols in their everyday interaction resort to *biaoching*—a Sinism derived from Chinese 表情 (pinyin: biǎo qíng; “facial expression”). To replace this Sinism, some staunch purists advocate for a native Mongolian word: *ayig*, which is a rarely used word and refers to animals’ instinct and dispositions. Others support *charaiin ilerel*, which is a word-for-word translation from Chinese: 表情 (pinyin: biǎo qíng; “facial expression”). Yet others have adopted a multicultural or internationalist stance and have chosen *emoji*, as it is used as a loanword in many countries including the nation of Mongolia. After 2 days’ raucous debate on *Bainu*, in the end a native Mongolian term *ayig* defeated all the other potential candidates, as declared by a high school teacher in central Inner Mongolia who initiated the debate in the first place! Despite its global appeal, “*emoji*” was brushed aside as equally alien as a Chinese term. However, our observation over this year (2021) is that *emoji*, instead of *ayig*, is adopted by many *Bainu* users.

Such debates about what are the “right” words to replace existing Chinese borrowings abound in Mongolian social media spaces. Since the *emoji* debate, the most recent debate centers on the translations of “selfie.” In these debates, most look to language used in Mongolia as a reference point, and others try to import foreign original terms without any changes and yet others strive to coin a term from native Mongolian words or rely on the word-for-word Mongolian translations of Chinese terms. Such divergences are not uncommon in language purification movements (Davies & Langer, 2005). However, in the case of Mongols in Inner Mongolia their disunity over lingua-cultural affiliation and their oscillation between the cultural centers of Mongolia and China mirror the story of the early 20th century’s Inner Mongolian nationalists, who incessantly changed their tactical and strategic alliances between the two state-building models, which were Mongolia’s revolution to the north and the Chinese revolution to the south (for further details see Atwood, 2002). To a certain extent the doubly peripheral, ambiguous, and betwixt and between geographical, cultural, and political position of Inner Mongols lies at the base of language activists’ divergence over language purification.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have shown how the metadiscourse of Mongolian linguistic purism in a delimited and ideologized social media space reinforces the ethnic boundary and resists the Chinese political-linguistic hegemony. The examination of meta-comments on language purity shows the process of reification and essentialization of Mongolian and Chinese languages and cultures. In a chain of iconization on multiple semiotic planes, mixed Mongolian indexes the losses experienced by today’s Mongols, including the loss of lands, culture, political rights, racial “purity,” and language. As shown in a plethora of studies on language purification and standardization, what fuels language purification efforts, or in Cameron’s term (1995) “verbal hygiene,” is what lies beyond language. Or as Inoue (2004, p. 49) aptly puts it, “social crisis is indexical crisis.” We particularly highlighted the parallel rhetoric and oppositional patterns that dominate and shape the metadiscourse of purism. If the metacommentary on Mongolian purism is built on a series of opposed dichotomies on the second order of indexicalities, the

orthographic representation of mixed Mongolian speech side by side with its source of “pollution” and its aspirational goal—“pure” Mongolian, is a purification mechanism and anatomical strategy to stigmatize visually and conceptually hybridized Mongolian. It is this latter aspect—the ideological power of orthographic representation of “deviant” speech forms—that has not been examined in previous sociolinguistic studies largely focusing on purist idioms and correction practices.

In addition, the metadiscourse about pure or mixed Mongolian constitutes conceptualization about Mongolian identity. To perform Mongolian identity is to engage in discourses surrounding the desinicization of Mongolian language. More important, the metadiscourse of Mongolian purism as a boundary-setting device challenges the hegemony of the Chinese state and the unequal political economy of Chinese and Mongolian languages in China. The content of purist ideology constitutes a veiled but powerful criticism of Chinese settler colonialism in the past few decades and of assimilationist language policies wherein the future of minorities is permanently denied. In a social Darwinist and developmentalist ideology upheld by the Chinese state, to borrow Povinelli’s (2011, p. 28) argument, “the futures of some, or the hopes that they have for their future, can never be a *future*, and they can only drag others into the past.” In particular, as China’s institutional form shifts from a “multinational state” to a “unified community of the Chinese nation” in the past two decades, purism discourse may constitute one of the last desperate attempts by bilingual Mongols to resist being assimilated into the “big family of the Chinese nation.”

In addition, such resistance attempts to rewrite the state-propagated raciolinguistic order of minority languages as traditional/backward/subordinated and Mandarin as modern/advanced/dominant in the PRC. In purists’ alternative ideological constructs, Mongolian language, far from being traditional or backward, is forward-looking and reaches out to the wider world beyond the limit set by the Chinese linguistic and cultural order, as shown by the *Bainu* debates on the translations of new terms such as *emoji*. Certainly, how these grassroot minority language media users strive to perpetuate their own linguistic authority to a large extent reflects the weak authority of the state-funded institutions such as the Committee of Mongolian Neologisms and Terms (in Mongolian known as: *mongol ner tomyonii komis*). The diffusion of linguistic authority itself deserves a separate study. More recently, a volunteer translation group, *Anabapa*, comprised of about 40 *Bainu* members, is translating terms related to makeup products, online banking, and home office products and so forth, to replace the conventional Chinese loans. However, the fact that purist discourses have generated limited impact on Mongol public’s everyday communicative practices in wider society, at least until now, means that they mainly act as a resistance mechanism and their major consequence is raising consciousness about ethnolinguistic boundaries for biliterate bilingual Mongols. Finally, the study also shows the significance of transnational ties for the Mongolian purism movement. Inner Mongols’ historical and cultural ties with Mongolia provide some purists with an alternative linguistic and cultural center. In other words, the transnational status of the Mongolian language, in particular the status of Mongolian as a powerful standardized national code in Mongolia, needs to be in the picture if we are to understand the Inner Mongol language activists’ linguistic evaluation and purge. In that sense *Bainu* is a counterspace where we witness the limit of and the fragmentation of Chinese cultural dominance over Mongols.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge feedback on previous versions of this manuscript provided by Ingrid Piller, Li Narangoa, Alexandra Grey, Hanna Torsh, Allie Severin, and the editors of the Journal of Sociolinguistics Monica Heller and Yoonhee Kang. Thanks too to Laura Smith-Khan for offering to edit and proofread the final version of the manuscript. Finally, we wish to thank the founders and users of *Bainu*, without whom this piece could not have been written.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ A little over 30% of Mongol parents send their children to Mongolian-medium schools as of 2010. An unofficial statistic shared by Mongols show that the number of Mongols who can speak and write their language is around 1.9 million to 2.1 million out of officially registered 4.1 million Mongols in Inner Mongolia.

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How to cite this article: Baioud, G., & Khuanuud, C. (2022). Linguistic purism as resistance to colonization. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 26, 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12548>