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Mongolian Interethnic Marriage, Ethnic Relations, and National Integration in the PRC

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Abstract: Interethnic marriage amongst China's ethnic population has not received the attention it deserves. This is partly due to the hesitation and resistance of the more prominent ethnic groups—Tibetans and Uyghurs—to enter an interethnic marriage. Still, it is less so for China's Mongols, who now have an interethnic marriage rate of almost 90 percent. The intermarriage pattern had previously involved urbanities, but over the last twenty years, it has included those living in townships and villages, suggesting that the integration of Mongols within the People's Republic's mainstream society was gradual and arose from shared cultural beliefs and practices among Mongols and Han Chinese. It further indicates that marital issues will be like those in non-ethnic marriages. The paper explores prevailing attitudes toward interethnic marriages of the 1980s and the 2000s. The analysis highlights commonalities and shifts in marital expectations initially grounded in ethnic reaffirmation that is motived more out of personal commonality, commitment, and affection, suggesting that the offspring from these unions have hybridized or mixed ethnic identities, whereby urban Mongols entertain two identities—one ethnic and the other national.

Keywords: China; Inner Mongolia; ethnic intermarriage

1. Introduction[1]

Ethnic membership requires the demarcation of social borders more than adherence to "cultural stuff" (Eriksen 2010, p. 42). Protecting or strengthening social borders requires a complex state to recognize an ethnic group's rights and privileges but not necessarily extend those privileges to other potentially rival ethnic groups. The effective restriction or advancement of an ethnic group's interests can quickly become a political problem as rival interest groups compete for social recognition and material support (Francis-Tan and Mu 2022; Herberer 1989).

Ethnic and national identification often intertwine with the virtues of loyalty, commitment, and political identification (Scupin 2020). Related discussions, debates, and the blending of ethnic and national identities contribute to the cultural intertwinement, which is related, albeit in a different way, to an often relentless, often unvoiced but noticed assimilation process.

Assimilation is a slow process that implies cultural absorption or social incorporation that converges individual and minority group characteristics into the broader mainstream culture (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 160; Ellinghaus 2006). For Alba and Nee (2003, p. 157), assimilation is a two-way process involving an interplay between cultural and social differences, which arise out of ordinary interactions that, over time, often influence the ethnic group and mainstream society. Because it is an "incremental and intergenerational process" (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 158), it seldom "precludes the continuation . . . of ethnic differences" (Tsuda 2016, p. 10) that often persist within the larger society, albeit in a modified form.

State incentives can influence the absorption process by channeling a person's life goals that may be independent of their ethnic group's collective interest (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 14). The ability to obtain tangible rewards makes adjusting, albeit with some reservation,

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to the mainstream society culturally attractive. At first, individuals' adjustments are external or material (e.g., clothing style, occupational deportment, and similar evidence of status accumulation). Over time, regardless of being from different ethnicities, men and women recognized their commonalities and became potential suitors.

It is in the absorption phase, or when a sub-group culture has forsaken most of its cultural distinctiveness, that interethnic marriage poses the most potent threat to an ethnic group's survival. Individuals allowed to pursue their desires can undermine social norms that had previously limited or restricted romantic interaction between different ethnicities. Once interethnic marriage becomes commonplace, it is accompanied by a reduction in the intensity of ethnic solidarity. In this setting, ethnic identity, previously the sole identity, gives way to a more hyphenated identity that may still hold ethnic identity as the primary self-reference that now can coexist alongside a newer, albeit for most, a secondary or national identity. In contemporary Scotland, it is not unusual to hear Scots claim they are "first Scots, second members of the UK". In Inner Mongolia, Mongols insisted they were Mongols and often reluctantly acknowledged they were also Chinese. For urban college-educated Mongols, ethnicity was their primary self-referential, while "citizens of China" was deemed a secondary self-reference, albeit more salient than they often prefer to acknowledge.

Ethnic research has found that when the absorption process is uninterrupted, ethnic identity is usually reconceptualized as a symbolic identity anchored in the now more significant national identity (Alba and Nee 2003). From an evolutionary perspective, the emotional closure accompanying an "us and them" or "in-groupness" orientation (Scupin 2020) gives way to an expanded, broader, more encompassing "us and them" orientation that now includes the nation-state.

The social psychological expansion of identities whereby members perceive their ethnicity as exclusively symbolic has yet to occur among China's more prominent ethnic groups (e.g., Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols). Overwhelmingly, researchers report that members of the above ethnic communities continue to emphasize ethnic identity over national identity. And yet, no one has commented on whether these ethnic communities are developing a nascent national identity used, on occasion, as a secondary self-reference. This domain remains unexplored. Chinese researchers interested in ethnic identity prefer to treat national identity as a potential entanglement best avoided.

In this paper, I want to explore how personal goals undermine support for unquestioningly embracing, in most circumstances, Mongol collective interests and, thus, upholding ethnic solidarity. The focus will be the courtship process and marriage (Wang 2015), an arena where the two competing values—self-interest and collective solidarity—are most vividly manifested. I will examine the 1980s and 2000s shifts in attitudes and martial expectations that Mongolian and Han men and women brought to sexual encounters and the ensuing interethnic marriage that has contributed, albeit indirectly, to national integration.

2. A Note on Methods

I researched Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, PRC, between 1981 and 1983, for two months in 1987, and almost every year between 2000 and 2018. I have been able to maintain contact over the years with 23 individuals whom I first met in 1981–1987 when I obtained their personal life goals (or what makes it worth living) and fertility data (how many children they had and with whom). During the 2018 field season, I expanded research to include Mongol female fertility data from forty-four Inner Mongolian college students about their future reproduction expectations.

Hohhot is ranked as a second-tier city with over two million residents. The best employment opportunities are in the education sector, with its public schools, seven public and private universities, the regional or local government, and the flourishing summer tourism industry. The ethnic composition of the city is 80 percent Han Chinese, with 20 percent minorities (Mongols and Hui being the two largest minority groups).

The study should be regarded as a *longitudinal* study covering thirty years, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the shifts in urban Mongol understanding of what constituted a "true" Mongol and their often-oscillating sense of belonging to a nation-state. To this end, my conversations were unstructured interviews with over fifty families throughout the 1980s and numerous return trips from 2000 to 2018, which included many individuals I first met in the 1980s and whom I have remained in contact with over the decades. Because I was also interested in what Mongols and Han thought made life worth living, I frequently discussed non-ethnic issues that enabled me to gain an appreciation of Mongolian daily interactions independent of our, at times, volatile discussions on ethnic identity. I found their values (e.g., especially within the domains of hierarchy, parenting, gender, courtship, and marriage) remarkably similar to urban Han with a similar social status.

It was relatively easy to listen to and record Mongols making strident political pronouncements, which researchers seem eager to record Mongolian political postures toward the "lost cause" or the Mongol's historical inability to form a more autonomous, if not independent, political sphere. At the same time, the same researchers preferred to ignore or seldom comment on behavior and verbal qualifications that soften or modify, at times, a more strident political position. In this and so many other ways, having grown old in two cultures has provided me with a window into my long-time friends and associates' lives and allowed me to appreciate the richness and complexity of their betwixt and between cultural identities.

3. Ethnic Identity: A Multilayered Phenomenon

Given that identity is a multilayered phenomenon, it is possible, as Dwyer (2005) and Jankowiak and Shirentan (2016) observe, to have a minority and national identity. Having two identity orientations does not necessarily entail developing an anti-majority sentiment. Mackerras (1995, 2004) made a similar observation based on his multi-site ethnic survey that found a remarkably high minority loyalty toward the Chinese state. To this end, the central government offered financial incentives in the late 2000s for Han and Uyghur to marry, hoping it would lead to offspring with dual loyalties that would dilute identification with Uyghur inclusiveness. It has not worked in Xinjiang, where social borders sustained through religious conviction remain firm. However, in Inner Mongolia, where Mongols have lost most of their customary cultural markers, it has resulted, especially among college-educated and ranking government officials, in their being open to crossing ethnic boundaries to find a mate.

Interethnic marriage presents groups that wish to remain separate with the problem of whether to tolerate, accept, endorse, and support marriage with someone from a different ethnicity. Because interethnic marriage has the potential to undermine cherished ethnic heritage, groups who want to retain that heritage often censure, restrict, and undermine members from interacting with each other and, thus, avoid interethnic romance. These relationships have the potential to produce hybrid offspring whose loyalty can, over time, dilute their commitment and involvement in defending, protecting, and advancing an ethnic group's interests. To this end, vibrant groups often strive for social closure, deemed necessary to prevent interethnic romantic relationships.

The success of a group's efforts in preventing interethnic marriages depends upon external restraints such as religious prohibition, language differences that prevent mutual exchanges, and striking social class differences. When these social restraints dissolve, it is difficult for groups to enforce social endogamy, especially concerning intermarriage. Individuals who are no longer socially compelled to place ethnic group solidarity above their interests can freely interact with everyone, which brings the potential to become attractive to someone from a different ethnicity (Kim 2010).

It is not unusual to find individuals veering sharply between a yearning for a closed ethnic community and a desire for a more open arena to pursue their self-interest. The variation in attitudes often manifests in internal debates over acceptable and unacceptable interactions. These discussions center on individuals' openness to cultural pluralism and

their conception of ethnic purity. How these internal dialogues are personally resolved will shape their life orientation and attitude toward being open or closed to interethnic intermarriage.

Below, I will explore the state of ethnic relations and their effect on interethnic marriage in two different eras—the 1980s and the 2000s—to understand how social events influence an individual's decision to marry or not marry outside one's ethnic group.

4. Hohhot: The Objectification of Ethnicity

Hohhot is a culturally diverse city with 34 different ethnic groups (Wang 2003, pp. 69–85). Because the city is the capital of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR), it is also the symbolic center of the state's commitment to protecting and promoting Mongolian cultural heritage. By the 2000s, it had formed part of the outer perimeter of the 500 km comfort zone for the four-hour excursions by Hohhotian or Beijing motorists (Economist 2012, pp. 1–3). Hohhot's urban elite, desiring national and international respect, transformed the city by constructing tall apartment complexes, upscale hotels, and expansive shopping centers, symbolizing progressive or "modern" development. Acutely aware of the importance of tourism, the government insisted on maintaining Mongolian pastoral imagery throughout the city. As such, the city continues to form a signifying system of pastoral Mongolian images (e.g., wrestlers, dancers, yurts, herding activities, galloping horses, and soaring eagles) that appear across the city's parks, theaters, public murals, government office buildings, and large department stores. Most major state buildings are designated with Mongolian and Han Chinese cultural motifs. These motifs and related symbols retain a mythological influence on Mongols while being regarded by non-Mongols with unattached sentiment as quaint historical symbols.

Further, all city street signs and government building names are in both languages. In the 1980s, most private cooperatives and entrepreneurs preferred having store signs written in both languages. In 2002, the government required every business to have signs written in both languages. In 2023, the government unofficially began to tolerate the establishment of the use of Chinese characters rather than writing from both languages. In almost every case, the Mandarin script is more prominent, reflecting that only some people speak or read Mongolian. The law requires signs in both languages to address claims of Mongolian status rather than business pragmatics. However, the desire to promote the city as the symbolic center of Mongolian cultural heritage is supported by the city's business community, who also favor consumer-oriented billboards that promote an upscale lifestyle.

Today, Hohhot is a premier tourist destination. Before the COVID-19 closure, over 6 million Chinese domestic and 100,000 international tourists visited the city annually. Although Mongols are a small minority of the city's overall population, it is to the government's interest and communities' benefit to promote grassland Mongolian motifs. Promoting Mongolian motifs also enhances the government's image as a protector of minority cultural traditions. In the 1980s, it was the preferred policy to insist that Mongolian students wear traditional herding costumes (a mode of dress seldom seen in the city) whenever a national or regional magazine decided to feature Hohhotian Mongols. The state used these publications to demonstrate to domestic and international audiences the success of its minority policy and its continuing commitment to protecting regional cultural autonomy. However, by the 21st century, the government was no longer interested in managing the symbolic presentation and representation of its minorities as timeless, unchangeable essences. In this new milieu, Mongolian students and staff often appear in photos wearing typical urban clothing. Mongolian traditional dress is occasionally seen on ceremonial or special days, where it is perceived, amongst some, as a fashionable statement of style and identity.

Despite considerable government support materially and symbolically, two policy events have undermined the Mongols' efforts at cultural transmission. First, reorganizing the workplace into a work enterprise system combines residence with place of employment. Typically, migrants attempted to "ruralize" urban areas by converting neighborhoods into a

re-creation of rural villages with their corresponding values and lifestyles (Jankowiak 1993). The 38,417 Hui, long-time Hohhotians, formed ethnic enclaves before Hohhot became the capital of Inner Mongolia in 1957. The Hui arrived before the work enterprise system was standardized, providing cultural insulation when the city expanded with the influx of Han Chinese.

In contrast, the Mongols returned to Hohhot after the city had been reorganized into a vast network of individual work units that linked one's home with the place of employment, effectively preventing Mongolian neighborhood enclaves. The restriction of the work-unit system and the growth of private industry enabled residents to move to new neighborhoods. For some, it has allowed the development of a Mongolian city street between the Inner Mongolian University and Normal University—it is only about two blocks long with a preponderance of Mongol shop owners, bookstores, and restaurants, which became the closest thing in the city to a Mongolian enclave. After 15 years, the ethnic enclave has proven to be economically but not culturally thriving. Today, most of the customers are Han Chinese students.

Second, Han settlement patterns in Inner Mongolia, both with and without government sanctions, contributed, as in the case of China's other autonomous regions, to the "filling up of Inner Mongolia" (Howe 1978, p. 186). In 1949, the ratio of Han to Mongols was four to one. By 1960, it was ten to one; during 1969–1979, the ratio jumped to twenty, due mainly to the merging of three traditional Inner Mongolian counties (*meng*). However, when the counties were restored in 1980, the ratio reverted to the pre-1969 level of ten to one. By 1984, the ratio of Han to Mongols throughout Inner Mongolia had fallen to eight to one. In Hohhot, however, the ratio is twelve to one. Today (2000 census), there are 2,681,000 (or 8.6 percent) Mongols compared to 20,914,152 (or 88.4 percent) Han living in Inner Mongolia (ca 2010). The massive and relentless internal migration of Han into an autonomous region has heightened and, in some cases, blurred ethnic solidarity.

The strength of Inner Mongolian ethnic solidarity has always been somewhat blurred. Mongols often distinguish western (e.g., Alanshan and Xilinggol mengs and larger western cities of Baotou and Hohhot) and eastern Mongols (e.g., Hinggan meng that includes the prominent cities Chifeng and Hulunbuir). For political and social reasons, when not trying to present a united ethnic front, Mongols often prefer to sort themselves out in social space via regional differences. The Western Mongols, compared to Eastern Mongols, believe they are "purer" Mongols and, thus, more representative of what I mean to be a "classic" Mongol due to their language dialect, values, demeanor, and life orientation. The western Mongols, amongst themselves, regard the eastern Mongols as the more "sinicized" or assimilated Mongols. However, ethnic intermarriage patterns between Mongols and Han, at least within the township and larger cities, are remarkably similar, suggesting the presence of greater cultural familiarity and openness to court and marry the opposite sex, regardless of ethnicity.

The Mongols, who arrived in Hohhot around 1957 when the capital moved from Zhangjiakou, did not enter the urban stratification at the lowest rungs. Because they brought "substantial educational credentials and political capital with them, they, unlike USA Irish, Italians, or Mexicans" (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 90), were not "stigmatized, exploited, or [until the Cultural Revolution] abused" (Weismantel 1998). Being members of the government class, they, along with other college-educated professionals working in education and entertainment work units, drew upon their considerable social and cultural capital to defend and advance their ethnic and personal interests.

In Inner Mongolia, especially in Hohhot, Mongols are resigned to being a minority population in their autonomous region. However, the resignation has not resulted in full-scale cultural absorption or complete assimilation (Jankowiak 2013a, pp. 53–63; Jankowiak and Shirentan 2016). Hohhot Mongols have adopted a pragmatic posture toward "things Mongolian". Mongolian men and women often make social and individual compromises toward what is in the best interest of themselves and their families. Most Mongols, except for the strident political idealists, are relatively comfortable living within the constraints

and opportunities of a vibrant national social economy that respects Mongolian heritage, social position, and personal identity.

5. Urbanization, the Lost Language, and Implications for Chinese Ethnicity

The Chinese policy for promoting social integration resembles the American and French cultural models. By valuing individual merit over ethnic privilege and seeking to incorporate individuals rather than groups or ethnic nationalities, China has successfully co-opted indigenous educated elites and stymied resistance movements in autonomous regions and prefectures, thereby making its citizens feel "Chinese".

There is a covert language policy that forms part of a larger "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995, 2001) and serves the goal of maintaining a unified Chinese state (Dwyer 2005, p. 59). This is due to simple pragmatics: Mandarin is the language of the majority spoken in every autonomous region capital. The ability to speak Mandarin helps one pass the desirable university entrance exam and more effectively prepare for coveted careers in government service or participating in the national market economy.

Language acquisition studies consistently reveal that children often refuse to learn a language they perceive as inferior or useless in daily interaction (Han 2011, p. 65; Schatz 2009). Given that herders and farmers are frequently perceived by Han Chinese (but not by Mongols) as "culturally backward", Han children refuse to learn a minority language, while their minority playmates, yearning to be accepted by their more numerous Han playmates, lose interest in learning their mother tongue. An unintended consequence of the urbanized-centered work unit policy was that it made it difficult for many Mongol families to transmit their language to their children (Schatz 2009). In response to language loss, some urban minorities stress the importance of their children becoming bilingual or trilingual: their native language, Mandarin, and English. Today, from primary to high school, only around 30% of Mongols attend Mongolian language instruction schools. However, most urban Mongols lost their ability to speak Mongolian in early childhood and found it easier to master Mandarin, often the preferred language of instruction and conversation.

The demographic immersion of Hohhotian Mongols significantly affected their children's sense of self and inhibited any inclination to speak Mongolian whenever they played with their more numerous Han age-mates. Jankowiak (1993) studied 123 Hohhotian Mongolian households and found that the children in 97 families, or almost 80 percent, were no longer fluent in Mongolian (Jankowiak 1993). Mongolian scholars have regularly pointed out a cultural renaissance or renewed interest in studying their native language in recent years. Twenty- and thirty-something parents are now sending their children to Mongolian and Mandarin language kindergartens. Moreover, middle school children sent to Mandarin-speaking schools now ask their parents why they were not sent to Mongolian language schools. Why is this so? I suspect cultural pride and the pragmatic realization that fluency in two languages may give their offspring better opportunities (Jankowiak 2013a, pp. 57–62).[2]

Randall Collins points out that "If the state attempts to impose cultural uniformity through the educational system, it can spark resentment by aggrieved ethnic groups" (Collins 2019, p. 97). Collins's observation accounts, in part, for Mongols' public protest over the recent change in government language policy that now insists that three subjects (e.g., Political Science (or Marxism), Language, and Literature), courses formerly taught in Mongolian, must be offered in Mandarin. Since urban Mongols overwhelmingly spoke both languages or only Mandarin, the government's shift in its minority instructional policy was regarded as unconstitutional, something of a snub, and evidence of the inability to distinguish between actual versus imaginary social threats.

For the state, the shift in language policy represents the departure from its former "idealized" multicultural model toward a more totalizing cultural unity or "civilization project" model (Harrell 1995), which is aptly expressed in the following contemporary slogan: Zhonghua minzu gongtongti (China's minorities share a unified common body) that is currently taught in schools, and signals an implicit endorsement of interethnic

marriage believed to promote unity, harmony, and social progress. The state's relentless encouragement of cultural assimilation has been aided by bottom-up cultural fusion in cuisine and music, which Han youth enjoy when combined with the diminished salience of the Mongolian language along with religious differences that had historically served as an effective cultural border, contribute to Mongols' more rapid incorporation into Chinese mainstream society.

6. Interethnic Marriage and Competing Notions of Ethnic Integrity

Intermarriage rates constitute a primary index in determining the degree of ethnic closure and, thus, the relative strength of cultural borders. Throughout China, interethnic marriage rates between minorities and the Han population vary by region. Among Turkish Muslims (e.g., Uyghur, Kazak), intermarriages between a Han (an unbeliever) and a Muslim remain a fundamental cultural taboo (Rudelson and Jankowiak 2004; Zang 2011, 2012). Unlike Buddhism, which is more tolerant of intermarriage between believers and non-believers, the Islamic religion is adamant in its insistence that marriage can only take place between believers. Given the Han reluctance to convert or in any way sensitize themselves to Uyghur cultural practices, the religious factor makes Islam an adequate border for the development and maintenance of a salient, ethnically charged consciousness. Because Mongolian identity is not based on ethnic purity, individuals regularly find mates from different ethnic groups. For example, in Hohhot, the interethnic marriage rate is enormous. In 1982, 15 percent of Mongolian marriages were mixed; in 1990, it rose to 40 percent; and in 2001, over 75 percent of Mongol marriages were Mongol–Han marriages (Burjgin and Bilik 2003, p. 61). In Hohhot, there is no gender bias—Mongol men and women are both oriented toward and have married a Han spouse. The high rate of interethnic marriage is not confined to IMAR's larger cities. A research report conducted in Alashan Meng found that smaller townships also had a high frequency of Mongol/Han marriages (Batu, research report). If this report's findings are representative, it suggests an expansive commonality or cultural blending has occurred across Inner Mongolian townships, which does not mean Mongol identity is less salient; it remains salient; what it does suggest is that, at least within the domain of ordinary interaction, there is an implicit cultural understanding that allows for more agreement and smoother exchange. It also suggests that the social distance between Mongols and Han is smaller and constitutes the viable tip of the denser mass of interethnic contacts in which individuals from "different ethnic backgrounds no longer perceive social and cultural difference significant enough to create barriers to long-term union" (Alba and Nee 2003, p. 90).

In the 1980s, there was an ongoing argument over what constituted ethnic purity: was it based on blood, language, or another notion of relatedness? Unlike in the 1980s, there was an occasional preference for one criterion over another, but overall, the issue was moot. For most, Mongolian identity is based on the belief that they are descendants of Chinggis Khan (Campi 2006; Mhunkh-Erdene 2006). In many, but not all, Hohhot homes, there are pictures and, often, a small shrine dedicated to the memory of Genghis Khan. In this way, most Mongols remain proud of their cultural heritage (Jankowiak 2013a).

Unlike the US government, which, in the nineteenth century, recognized hyphenated identity as part of its effort to be more inclusive and support cultural diversity (Fischer 2022), China does not. Thus, there cannot be a Han–Mongolian offspring—only a Han or a Mongolian offspring. Ordinary people readily make the distinction, but when asked about their ethnicity, individuals will only offer one: "I am Han, or I am Mongol".

There are "few states that openly embrace or codify a multicultural model" (Sciubba 2022, p. 144). China is one, albeit an often conflicted one. On the one hand, its constitution supports multiculturalism while adjusting and making ad hoc modifications over what it means and does not mean. In the Xi Jinping era (2013–present), Chinese officials have downplayed the multicultural model in favor of a more uniform nationalistic model.

In a multiethnic society, minorities are often torn between the conflicting expectations of class and ethnicity (Lu 2022). The stronger the cultural differences between ethnic groups,

Randall Collins observed, "the less likely there is interest in assimilation and the greater the likelihood of overt cultural antagonism" (Collins 2019, p. 130). The politically charged 1980s were a cauldron of ethnic positionality, with various positions taken over the government's newest application of its ever-shifting minority policies. In this cauldron, the issue of ethnic love affairs and the legitimacy of interethnic marriage became intertwined with minority policies. Yet, despite the earnest youthful struggles over national and regional issues, men and women throughout the 1980s and the 2000s were attracted to each other based on criteria independent of ethnicity.

7. Mongolian Woman: Hypernymy or Ethnic Authenticity

Issues of ethnic purity, integrity, career advancement, and individual authenticity often rival one another and affect Mongols who, in their way, must reconcile conflicting expectations. In this way, the issue of interethnic marriage cuts to the very core of a person's notion of ethnic purity and identity. Mongols, like other ethnic groups, often assess ethnic vitality and solidarity by the frequency with which men and women marry outside the Mongol community: the more marriages, the weaker or more diluted the solidarity. Hence, interethnic marriage is another way to assess the salience of ethnic closure or openness within Hohhot's Mongol community. It is also a way to understand the difficulties many Mongol women seeking to prosper in the new market economy encounter while simultaneously striving to preserve their ethnic integrity (Jankowiak 2013b; Jankowiak and Shirentan 2016).

In many cultures, women carry "the burden of representation as symbolic bearers of collective identity" (Kurien 2002, p. 75). This was readily apparent in Hohhot, where, throughout the 1980s, Mongol women were viewed as the "intergenerational reproducers" (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 67) of their culture. In Hohhot, Mongol women are caught between two different sets of expectations. The first imposes on them the guardianship of Mongol cultural integrity; the second demands they find a spouse within an urban milieu where Mongols are a minority population. Hohhot Mongol women, unlike women, in other Chinese ethnic communities (e.g., Miao Tapp 2002) or in its territorial borders (Barabantseva 2010) did not have to rely only upon their "erotic capital" (Hakim 2011) to marry a spouse from a similar or relatively higher social position, which made them socially desirable, albeit often intimidating, marital prospects.[3]

In the aftermath of the devastating Cultural Revolution's impact on Inner Mongolian Mongols, the entire community felt under threat, which made ethnicity what it was and was not a predominant topic of conversation and debate. In the 1980s, Mongols believed that a man did not have to marry within his ethnic group, but it was desirable. For a woman, it was necessary. Consequently, Mongolian men were less troubled and less conflicted by the prospect of interethnic marriage. For most, the issue is moot: their child will be raised as a proud Mongol. For Mongol women, however, the problem is more ambiguous and fraught with social and personal complications (Jankowiak 2013b; Jankowiak and Shirentan 2016).

In the 1980s, some Mongols, out of a desire for firmer ethnic solidarity, actively sought to discourage interethnic marriage by invoking a local folk maxim, which holds that the offspring of such marriages is usually born deformed and dumb. As one Mongol noted: "We try to hold on to them (Mongol women) to protect their children and thus future Mongols". College-educated Mongols do not adhere to this maxim but instead argue: "Genetically, it is perhaps better to marry someone from a different ethnic stock, but culturally, it is suicide and should be avoided". Regardless of the reasoning, in the 1980s, interethnic marriage was publicly discouraged (Jankowiak 1993).

Mongol women's difficulties are further compounded by Mongolian and Han men's distinct values and weighted preference for female physical attraction, independent of a woman's ethnicity (Jankowiak 1993, for the cross-cultural perspective of sex differences in mate preference, see Buss 2024), which can reduce a woman's pool of eligible mates. The marital calculus is more straightforward, if not just as brutal for men. Do they possess the social capital necessary to attract and hold a viable mate? Women, especially if they

have a high social position, which men may find intimidating, also compete for a mate via their relative attractiveness, placing them at a competitive disadvantage. This disjunction between societal norms and sex differences implicit within the sexual encounter pushes Mongol women to be equally open to marrying a Han man who is kind and relatively socially successful. The core difference is that the Mongolian culture emphasizes that women, not men, should marry within their ethnicity.

In the 1980s, Mongol women were quick to question this inequality in marriage options and ask why it is seemingly up to them alone to uphold Mongol cultural integrity. Women know that as they grow older, they may have less value in the Chinese marriage market, which pushes them to shift their marital options for interethnic marriage. Their problem is complicated by a propensity to seek hypergamous marriages (i.e., marrying a man with higher social status), which made Mongol males from a lower social position an undesirable spouse, which is the primary reason why Mongol women, mainly if they are college-educated or raised in upscale families, will reject Mongol workers', farmers', or herders' courting overtures and, instead, turn to the Han community for a desirable mate. A twenty-seven-year-old college educator who married a Mongol said, "It would be nice to marry a Mongol, but if I met a Han, I would like—well, that is OK too". After a long pause, she added a 1980s mantra: "The most important thing is to get married. After that, everything else will take care of itself". Another Mongol female who wanted desperately to marry another Mongol but was having difficulty finding one interested in her revealed:

"My parents want me to marry a Mongol, but finding an eligible Mongol in this city is challenging. Only four are in my department, and three are already married. My mother is worried that I will not find a husband. She thinks I'm too reserved around. They will not like me, and I quickly become shy and inarticulate. Maybe I will never marry". Her insecurity over her mate's viability is not unique; it is shared by women from either ethnicity. It may constitute another reason why Mongol and Han men and women are more open and willing to enter a courtship with someone from another ethnicity—they doubt whether they can attract a suitable mate.

Unsurprisingly, the strength of a Mongol woman's openness toward an interethnic marriage reflects her understanding of and commitment to upholding her idea of ethnic purity: what it is and what it is not. The issue is moot for traditionalists, mostly from herding backgrounds, many of whom returned to the grasslands to marry. For them, it is inconceivable to marry a Han. The following exchange summarizes this view. When one grassland Mongol woman was told that an urban Mongol had married a Han, she made a face and said (with disgust), "That is terrible". To which an urban Mongol replied, "But she loved him". The first woman responded, ", It does not matter. She should not marry him". In the 1980s, it was not uncommon to find both traditionalist and politically motivated urban Mongols warning their children, "If you marry a Han, you cannot return home again".

Nevertheless, this parental boundary is seen as senseless by the younger Mongols, who agree with the comments of a twenty-three-year-old woman: "What are they going to do?" She says about her unique situation, "You are their only child. They must take you back". In relating these remarks to one older Mongol male, he cynically, in 1983, noted, "Not only do our children no longer obey us, but the Party encourages it. That is why they built so many roads that we will meet and marry the Han quicker". (See Francis-Tan and Mu 2022 who elaborate upon the process of ethnic assimilation by which state incentives are independent of ethnic group interests).[4]

Throughout the 1980s, interethnic marriage remained volatile, which divided several households within the Hohhot Mongol community. The more cosmopolitan-oriented families, however, adopt a more moderate view that discourages but does not condemn ethnic intermarriage. My 1980s census of interethnic marriage rates by generation found that approximately 80 percent of the Mongols' senior generation who live (but were not born) in Hohhot married within their ethnic group. The remaining 20 percent took a Han or Muslim (Hui) wife.

Because the generation of Mongol leadership returned to Hohhot in 1957, after it was made the capital of IMAR, there was a shortage of professional Mongol women, which restricted their choice availability—they could only select a Han or Muslim spouse or not marry. Twenty years later, the disparity had been reversed. By the 1980s, more women than men had married Han spouses, with two-thirds of the Mongolian women coming from intellectual or governmental local families. In the 1980s, this trend did not mean that Mongol women were less concerned with ethnic solidarity or ethnic integrity and, thus, were more wholly and rapidly assimilating into mainstream society. Alba and Nee (2003) suggest that this trend should be understood in the context of the assimilation process. The de-escalation of ethnic politics is more situational and can quickly erupt under the right circumstances. As noted above, most urban Mongols have dual identities: their primary identity is Mongol, and their secondary identity is Chinese.

While in the 1980s, social position (class or education level) was and remains an essential consideration in influencing and guiding marital decisions, it would be wrong to infer that a person's life orientation did not affect their parenting ideas. For example, one twenty-seven-year-old Mongol woman acknowledged that Mongolian culture was vital to her and wanted her child "to know and appreciate that he was of Mongol stock". She then added, "That is why I picked my husband. Although her husband is a Han, he is kind and has agreed to my wishes". Another thirty-one-year-old woman noted that she was equally proud of being a Mongol and would raise her child to be proud". She added, "I also believe in love, which is why I married a Han. He has agreed with me to raise our child as a Mongol". Still, another Mongol woman, a thirty-three-year-old, noted, "My husband is a kind man who told me if I marry him, I could raise our child to be a Buddhist and teach him about Mongol History so that he would be proud".

Although Hohhotians are functionally bilateral (i.e., their descent is traced through both sides of the family), they still adhere, at least symbolically, to patrilineal ideals that dictate that the father, not the mother, determines the child's ethnicity. The government rejects patrilineality and has declared that a child's ethnicity is based on the parent's decision at the time of birth. Significantly, neither the government in its official capacity nor the Hohhotian themselves regard the child of mixed parentage as an ethnic hybrid; a child can be only one, a Mongol or a Han or a Hui; it cannot be both and, at birth, parents must designate their child's ethnicity. Given the material and political advantages granted to Hohhot's minority populations, it was not uncommon to find parents designating their only child a Mongol. While local census data on this point were unavailable, a sample of thirty-one interethnic households where women had a Han spouse indicates that, in all but seven cases, the child's ethnicity mirrored the mother's ethnicity (i.e., Mongol) (Jankowiak 1993). The Hohhot pattern of linking an offspring's ethnicity with the minority parent is consistent with Tan and Mu's study that found that "Children from interethnic marriages have nearly 2.1 times the odds of being identified as a minority" (Francis-Tan and Mu 2022, p. 15).

Because Chinese mainstream culture is organized around a social hierarchy anchored in a person's education level or social position, most Han men do not find their wives' ethnic interests or identification annoying, threatening, or disingenuous. The reluctance of Han husbands to pull their Mongol wives away from their ethnic roots is more the result of state policy that extends perks to minority offspring than out of a conviction to protect Mongols' cultural tradition. Han men who entered a marriage with a Mongol woman tended to be tolerant toward and respectful of their wives' family history and ethnicity, a social category they identified with, for no other reason than that having their offspring categorized as a Mongol would enhance their life opportunities.

The pragmatic posture toward the benefit of entering an interethnic marriage continued into the 2000s. One Han worker summarized the basis for this pattern by noting, I want my child to have many benefits". Another Han admitted, "Mongols have it easier to go to college, and I want my child to go too". This acceptance has enabled Mongol women, both before and during their marriage, to insist that their children be raised as proud Mon-

gols. Appropriately, their husbands seldom disagree. When they do, the Mongolian wives disregard them; this is due, in large part, to the socialist transformation of the household that has freed women from the proscription of their husband's male relatives and given them an independent source of income, which in turn, has fostered more significant equity in household politics (Jankowiak 1993; Jankowiak 2013a; Jankowiak and Shirentan 2016).

By the 2000s, the issue of what was or was not evidence of ethnic purity was moot. A young Mongol woman who could not speak Mongolian summed up the previous generation's attitude toward interethnic marriage and restricted mate choice by stressing that, for her, "It is not important. To marry a Mongol. Personal preference is essential". Another woman added, echoing the sentiment of the 1980s and 2000s: "If you believe in love, it is easy for a Han and a Mongol to fall in love".

Moreover, Mongolian women's attitude in the 2000s toward love and marriage resembles that of single-child Han women. Both wanted to find an established or ambitious man with a kind heart. The women I talked to thought it was essential to have developed unique feelings or love for anyone they wanted to marry. Unlike their parents' generation, where individuals fell in love *after* they had agreed to marry, everyone admitted it was necessary to "fall in love" *before* they married (Jankowiak 2013a). In the 2000s milieu, for most urbanities, ethnic considerations were not an essential factor or "deal breaker" in the courtship domain. A telling example of the shift in attitudes comes from a fiftyish Mongol man who, in the presence of Mongol friends, admitted in 2018, "All my male friends are Mongols, but my lovers are Han". When asked if he had ever considered marrying a Han woman, he replied sheepishly, "No". Then, he added, "Once, recently". I responded, "But you were (in the 1980s) fully committed to Mongolian marital purity. What changed?" He replied, "Divorce", adding, "Han women are more attractive (*meili*)".

Unlike in the 1980s, when there were more substantial ethnic tensions stemming from the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the government's changing minority policy, life primarily focused on ordinary interactions and personal preference. By the 2000s, the emphasis on upholding ethnic purity through marriage had remained a preference for a few Mongolian intellectuals, but it was no longer essential for everyone else.

8. Market Reforms and New Opportunities

Sociologists have long noted that "stratification can set up a tendency toward cultural assimilation" (Collins 2019, p. 95). When the stratification system is open to individuals regardless of ethnicity, it can encourage individuals from other ethnic groups to adopt, albeit with some detachment, the manners, and habits of the dominant ethnic group. In the process, ethnic borders are blurred, and cross-over in mixed ethnic friendship and mating occurs.

The Chinese market-driven economy remains interested in hiring talent, not someone from a particular ethnicity, which has enabled individuals to interact more readily with strangers, often resulting in interethnic marriages. The new employment opportunities, especially for college-educated Mongol women, provide more flexibility and opportunities to marry whomever they want. One thirty-eight-year-old woman admitted, "I am more interested in developing my career than a marriage. I think marriage would undermine that goal". She added, "I have Han and Mongol male suitors, but right now, it is a marriage that I want to avoid; ethnicity as a marriage criterion is irrelevant". Another younger Mongol woman acknowledged wanting to get married but was open to meeting anyone from any ethnicity, including a foreigner. She was adamant that a potential suitor must respect her right to develop a career, as working in a professional setting was important.

What struck me in the 2000s about Mongolian men and women's attitudes toward interethnic marriage was their openness. They focused on an individual's right to choose and the value they gave to establishing a personal connection. Many Mongols I chatted with remain interested in Mongolian culture and sustain close networks with fellow Mongols with a keen interest in local ethnic politics, but when it came to "matters of the heart", they were open to becoming involved with anyone from a different religion or ethnicity,

which also extended to foreigners, with a vital qualification their non-Mongol spouse had to support them and their offspring upholding their Mongol identity.

The high frequency of interethnic marriage, over 75 percent in Hohhot, suggests that most urban Mongols are well integrated into mainstream Chinese culture, which may account for Mongols being labeled a "Chinese Model Minority". However, it is challenging to sustain endogamous-oriented ethnic solidarity when spouses are from different ethnicities and their offspring share both parents' genetic and cultural traits.

In the 1980s and 1990s, an unintended consequence of the government's ethnic entitlement policy was to provide tangible benefits for officially identifying as a Mongol. However, the vast societal changes, accompanied by a shift in government ethnic policy, no longer provide similar benefits. By 2018, Han and Mongols were encouraged to have more than one child, and the college entrance exam's additional points had been substantially reduced. Government employment remains anchored in establishing good connections (*guanxi*) rather than being from a specific ethnicity, which raises a series of intriguing questions: will future generations, when there is no longer a tangible benefit to being labeled Mongolian, see a shift toward classifying their offspring as Han, or will the issue of official ethnic classification remain moot as everyone focuses on what remains most central to urban Han and Mongol professional families—getting their offspring into the best schools and obtaining a prestigious occupation?

9. Conclusions

Because marriage, especially in societies without arranged marriages, involves the sharing of values and sex role expectations, it can be used as a "yardstick to measure the degree of assimilation present in society" (Kurien 2002, p. 91). In Hohhot and in other small townships, the assimilation process via intermarriage is pervasive (Batu, email communication, 2023). Regardless of an individual's position toward ethnic issues, the fact remains that, within the sexual encounter, most Mongol men and women are less influenced or restricted by a potential romantic partner's ethnicity than they are by other non-ethnic qualities. Focusing on the prevalent cultural accounts and the other unvoiced motives for entering interethnic marriage reveals an interplay between broader structural factors and individuals' willingness to follow their "hearts", regardless of whether it upholds collective solidarity. In romance, individuals follow their inner promptings, more than unthinkingly following a cultural ideal.

In Hohhot, interethnic marriage is ubiquitous. It leads to mixed ethnicity, contributing to the rise of Mongol dual identities. However, it would be a mistake to think this is a recent phenomenon. The first-generation Mongols, who, overwhelmingly, were not from mixed ethnicity parentage, also had dual identities, although many Han, at the time, suspected otherwise (Cheng et al. 2023). My frequent visits and long-term stays to Hohhot (1981–2019) have found that most, but not all, Mongols entertain dual, albeit often dueling, identities: Mongol and an often unvoiced, secondary identity and a national identity associated with being a Chinese citizen. Maintaining dual identities is consistent with other researchers' observations when working in Inner Mongolia (Bulag 2002; Jankowiak 2013b; Jankowiak and Shirentan 2016; Khan 1996; Wang 2003) and in other minority communities (Baranovitch 2001; Shih 2002; Wu 1994; Zang 2007; Zhao 2004).[5]

Mongols continue to draw upon historical narratives and cultural rituals to create and sustain social boundaries (Avenarious 2008) and maintain their ethnic identity (Bulag 2002, 2010; Borchigud 1996; Wimmer 2013; Mylonas 2012). Their identity is anchored in belonging to a place and a community that serves as the fundamental reference of their identity (Baranovitch 2001). However, it was not the only loci: Being members of a developing and prospering nation-state contributes to their overall well-being. In this milieu, possessing dual identities does not eliminate the possibility of entering an interethnic marriage. It has also become probable, contributing to reduced interest and excitement for the emotional arousal long associated with the fevered commitment to ethnic nationalism (Jankowiak 2008).

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Notes

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[2] The section on Hohhot's background overview was published in 2013 in Urban Mongols: The Flourishing of Multiple Identities in a Vibrant Ethnic Community, *Chinese Sociological Review*, vol. 43: 53–73. I thank Sage Press for their permission to republish.

[3] I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight and suggestion.

[4] *An anonymous reviewer pointed out this pattern.*

[5] *Researchers have seldom commented upon how they assess national identity. For my research, I simply asked Mongols if they thought they were also Chinese (ni shi zhong hua ren). Most replied, I am Mongolian and Chinese, or a few insisted they were only Mongols and not Chinese. In this way, I determined which identities were primary and secondary, based entirely upon how they responded to the question. Significantly, no one said they were only Chinese (or zhonghua ren).*

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