

### Marginalisation at China's Multi-Ethnic Frontier: The Mongols of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County in Qinghai Province

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# Marginalisation at China's Multi-Ethnic Frontier: The Mongols of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County in Qinghai Province

Ute WALLENBÖCK

**Abstract:** China consists of a mosaic of many territorial ethnic groups whose historic homelands have been incorporated into the modern Chinese state, a process by which the respective populations transformed from a “sovereign or semi-sovereign people” (Bulag 2002: 9) on China’s periphery into “minority nationalities” (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*). In 1950 Mao Zedong initiated the “Ethnic Classification Project” whose effect has been the marginalisation of the minority nationalities. In this paper, I explore the marginalisation of the Mongol population of contemporary Henan Mongolian Autonomous County within the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in southeastern Qinghai Province. By seeking to understand how Henan Mongols deal with their socio-political and demographic marginal status, the aim of this article is to shed light on how they utilise their marginal position, and how they centralise themselves as an independent party interacting with the civilising missions of China and Tibet.

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**Keywords:** China, Qinghai Province, frontier, Ethnic Classification Project, *minzu*, marginalisation

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## Introduction

Contemporary Henan Mongolian Autonomous County belongs to the Tibetan cultural area of Amdo, which is currently divided among the three administrative provinces of Gansu, Sichuan, and Qinghai, and which historically can be seen as the periphery of the ancient Tibetan empire. In recent years, the Tibetan cultural area of Amdo, a region with distinctive political and religious heritage, has received considerable attention from Western scholars (Gruschke 2001; Huber 2002; Karmay 1998; Makley 2008; Nietupski 1999, 2013a, 2013b), as well as from Tibetan scholars. Sumpa Khanpo's (Sum pa khan po ye shes dpal'byor) historical work *mTsho sngon gyi lo rgyus sogs bkod pa'i tshangs glu gzar snyan zhes bya ba bzhuḡs so* (*Annals of Kokonor*, translated by Ho-Chin Yang) provides a good insight into Amdo's history. This work was followed by Brakgonpa's (Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas) *Deb ther rgya mtsho* (*The Ocean Annals*), better known under the name *mDo smad chos 'byung* (*Political and Religious History of Amdo*). In addition, Hortsang Jigme (Hor gtsang 'Jigs med), a Tibetan scholar living in India, has published six volumes entitled *mDo smad lo rgyus chen mo* (*The Greater History of Amdo*), which cover the whole history of the Amdo region from the first appearance of inhabitants up to the 1950s.

Due to its peripheral location within Greater Tibet, Amdo is marginal to Tibet as it is a part of the cultural area of Eastern Tibet, which fell outside the administration and governance of Lhasa in the 1720s. The distinctive characteristic of Amdo is its high linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity (see Janhunen, Ha, and Tshe dpag rnam rgyal 2007). In fact, “for centuries, the margins of the Tibetan Plateau have been sites of cultural interactions” (Kolas 2005: 3). As Gruschke (2001: 107) explains, “Amdo is home to a variety of ancient civilizations and historical kingdoms from a number of different ethnic populations.” But by referring to the historical perception, Paul Nietupski (2013a: 81) states that “Amdo was a place inhabited by uncivilized bandits, where the state and civilizations were not governed.”

Considering the historical and contemporary situation, I would designate present-day Henan County as a frontier region, relying on Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of frontier as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner 1893). Throughout Chinese history, non-Han peoples were considered to be culturally

inferior to the Han and were generally referred to as “the barbarians” (e.g. 蛮, *man*, 夷, *yi*, 番, *fan*). Even during the Qing dynasty, Qing officials used to characterise the area around Kokonor (Qinghai Lake) – in today’s Qinghai province – as a dangerous place inhabited by “barbarians” (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 142). Therefore, Turner’s definition can be supported by Owen Lattimore’s definition of frontier as a territory where peoples meet, such as the indigenous and the invaders. Referring to Crossley, Siu, and Sutton (2006: 3), the concept of the “frontier” includes “social, economic, or cultural fissures internal to a political order.” But, in fact, China represents itself as homogeneous nation-state even though it is an ethnically, geographically, and culturally heterogeneous space that is centrally controlled. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the dominant Han – motivated by their political power, their economic status, and their social positioning – have defined the minority nationalities as “others.” Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Klotzbücher argue that even in China-related political sciences, the minority nationalities are mentioned only peripherally within the political system and are ultimately referred to as “backward” (落后, *luohou*) (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Klotzbücher 2014: 118). The centralised political system shows bias not only in political and economic patterns, but also in cultural and linguistic ones, which leads to interethnic inequality between the Han and the minority nationalities and, consequently, to social exclusion. Therefore, a dichotomy between centre and periphery can be determined, and the theoretical framework of marginality can be applied. Hereby, I make use of Gurung and Kollmair’s definition of marginality, which says it is

generally used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access (societal and spatial) to resources, and full participation in social life. (Gurung and Kollmair 2005: 10)

It has been mainly social and cultural anthropologists, such as Gladney (2004) and Bulag (2002), who have drawn attention to the marginalisation of China’s minority nationalities in a political context. A detailed discussion of the relationship between China’s mainstream society and the minority nationalities, with a particular focus on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, can be found in Beth (2012), Dai (2009), Kolas (2005), Tenzin Jinba (2014), and Weiner (2012).

According to the centrally directed strategists, pastoralist minority nationalities, such as Mongols, Tibetans, and Kazakhs, live a

“backward” life, which has to be homogenised in terms of education and way of life (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Klotzbücher 2014: 129). In fact, in relation to China’s other regions, pastoral areas are sparsely inhabited and less developed, which leads to a greater degree of dependence on Han-dominated state power. Consequently, the dependence on the central government leads to political disadvantages as well as to an economically marginal status within society, which causes inequality in distribution of power (see Fischer 2014). Since the pastoralists have little to no say in the state-driven decision-making process in regard to the political system of the PRC, they are disempowered within, or marginalised by, such a system. In fact, pastoralists are only as marginalised as nearly everyone else in China, since anyone who is not a party member is excluded from the political process. In terms of cultural and linguistic features, pastoralist minority nationalities experience poor-quality education, and the use of minority languages contributes to further social exclusion within the PRC due to Putonghua being the main language of government, media, communication, and education. As a result, their lack of fluency and literacy in Standard Chinese excludes minority nationalities from equal access to work and higher education (see Kolas 2005).

This paper explores Henan Mongols’ marginality and their differences and uniqueness vis-à-vis both the Han and the Tibetans, and consequently demonstrates their authenticity in certain circumstances. Tenzin Jinba has argued that

marginality should not be looked at as merely a constraint that circumscribes actors’ choices. Marginality can also be an opportunity to act as agents. (Tenzin Jinba 2014: 6)

Along this vein, I seek to understand how Henan Mongols utilise their marginal position and centralise themselves as an independent party in their interactions with the civilising missions of China and Tibet. And, furthermore, I examine from an ethno-cultural and historical perspective how Henan Mongols appropriate their ethnic marginality in order to construct an image of their distinctiveness.

Having spent many years among the Tibeto-Mongolians of Henan County, I am well acquainted with the region and its people, and I have accumulated a great deal of textual and ethnographic material that provides the basis of this work: Between 1995 and 1999, I conducted several field trips to Labrang (夏河, Xiahe) and adjacent regions in the course of preparing my master’s thesis. During the fol-

lowing three years, I was mainly based in Labrang and improved my understanding of the local Chinese dialect and gained fluency in the local Amdo Tibetan dialect. From 2004 until 2010, I lived and worked in Xining, where I gained knowledge of Tibetan-Mongolian issues from several fields. Through these experiences I managed to build an extensive local network and have maintained the close ties to locals that I have been cultivating since my very first field trip. During my most recent one-month field trips in 2011 and in 2014, my methods included narrative interviews and intimate discussions with local women and men, illiterate and literate, with and without ties to the government. All interviews were conducted in Amdo Tibetan. My research procedure entailed recording, keeping minutes of, and transcribing the interviews; later on in the process, relevant sections were translated and subdivided into topical clusters. All relevant interview data were processed first on an issue-related and then on a theory-related level. I then supplemented the interview data by cross-checking printed sources, such as local history materials and intra-party materials. The findings of my research are reported and discussed in this article.

The article is organised as follows: Beginning the paper with an outline of my theoretical framework on marginalisation, I then give some demographic background information on Henan Mongolian Autonomous County, focusing on its marginal status at the Sino-Tibetan border. Next, I outline the history of the Henan grasslands, emphasising the Mongols' efforts to maintain their "Mongolness" vis-à-vis the Tibetans (as a part of strategic self-marginalisation) and to break away from the Han Chinese throughout history. Later in the article, I reflect on the impact of the Chinese Ethnic Classification Project on Henan Mongols, paying particular attention to how they sometimes profit from their marginalised position. My aim here is to elucidate how Henan Mongols have used China's "civilising" project to display their distinctiveness from Tibetans and from Han. The article concludes with a discussion on the dimensions of marginalisation. Overall, this article provides an empirical basis for a better understanding of the interaction between the centre and the periphery in the PRC, and the contention between state policy and ethno-nationalism.

## Demographic Information on Henan Mongolian Autonomous County

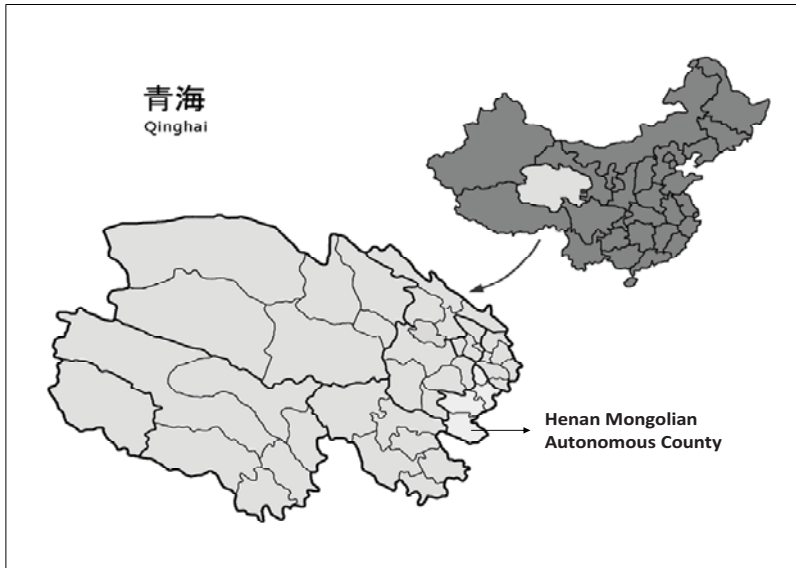
Henan Mongols live in a marginalised position among the surrounding Amdo Tibetans. Henan County is located within the territory of the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (黄南藏族自治州, *Huangnan Zangzu Zizhizhou*) in the southeastern part of Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China (PRC), at an average altitude of approximately 3,650 metres. Henan County is also known as “Malho” (Tib. *rMa lbo*, “South of the Yellow River”), “Mengqi” (蒙旗, Mongol banners), or “Sogpo” – in this context, meaning “Western Mongols” (*Nag-dBan Blo-bZan rGya-mTSHo*, translated by Zahiruddin 2008: 151). Henan County covers an area of 6,250 square kilometres. The county is embedded within the contemporary Tibetan autonomous prefectures of western Gansu and eastern Qinghai. Today's Henan County shares its eastern border with Xiahe County and Luqu County and its southeastern border with Maqu County, all within the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province. To the west, Henan County borders Maqin County, the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and Tongde County in Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai. In the north it borders Zeku County in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Referring to official statistics, in the surrounding areas 80 per cent of the population is Tibetan. Therefore, present-day Henan County can be seen as a “contact zone” (Pratt 1991) between Tibetan areas.

In regard to the county's population, according to several official Chinese sources on Henan County such as 河南蒙古族自治县志 (*Henan Mengguzu zizhixian zhi*, *The Annals of Henan County*), 黄河南蒙古志 (*Huang Nan He Menggu zhi*, *The Annals of Henan Mongols*), and 河南蒙古族自治县概况 (*Henan Mengguzu zizhixian gaikuang*, *A Survey of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County*), the majority population in the Henan grasslands was classified as Mongol in the course of the first census in 1954. Since the level of autonomy depends on the population and the geographical size of a given region, many local Tibetans, such as the A rig (阿柔), agreed to be classified as Mongols, as, according to my informants, the Mongol population of the Henan grasslands needed to reach about 90 per cent in order to obtain status as a “Mongol Autonomous Region.” Thus, this census created their classification, and many Tibetans became Mongolians (蒙古族, *Meng-*



*guzu*) in a process Mullaney (2011: 101) calls “participant transformation” with the meaning of “setting the conditions under which these candidates came to ‘realize’ (seemingly on their own) the bonds they share with each other” (Mullaney 2011: 12). As a matter of fact, according to the first census conducted in 1954, 97.55 per cent of the Henan grasslands’ population was categorised as Mongol and only 0.15 per cent as Tibetan.

Figure 1. Henan Mongolian Autonomous County



Source: Wikimedia 2007.

Note: Light grey: Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

Especially since the 1950s, the Mongol inhabitants of Henan County have faced not only Tibetan influence but also Han Chinese dominance. These two groups have had considerable effects on the local Mongols: Tibetans in terms of cultural, linguistic, social, and religious matters throughout history, and the Han Chinese through state power. The Chinese government, which controls economic and military patterns, education, and communication, and furthermore, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), can be seen as the central force.

As I will show, Henan Mongols are neither “mainstream” Tibetans nor “mainstream” Mongols; they are marginalised Mongols. Henan Mongols’ perception of marginality is both real and imagined, and they have learned how to take advantage of their marginalised position.

Due to their isolation from their historical kin, throughout history it has been almost impossible for Henan Mongols to maintain cultural ties to other Mongol areas. As a result, the Mongolic groups in the Henan grasslands became isolated from other Mongolic groups (as a strategic choice) and due to the geographical proximity to Tibetan areas, these groups in the Henan grasslands became “tibetanised.” Reports on the precarious situation of the tibetanised Mongols living in Henan County, including the difficult multilingual situation, can be found in Ai Liman (2011), Hildegard Diemberger (2007), Li Anzhai (1994), Paul Nietupski (2013b), and Joseph Rock (1956). Nevertheless, it is unknown when the majority of Mongols in Henan lost their language and began speaking Tibetan. According to *Henan Mengguzu zizhixian zhi* (Editorial Board of the Committee of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County 1996, Vol. 1: 906, 909), Tibetan seems to have been spoken in the Henan grasslands since 1745, but no mention is made of when the Mongol language began to dwindle. At present, only a small population still speaks Oirad Mongolian or Sog skad (Birtalan 2003). Nevertheless, Henan Mongols still refer to their kinship pattern, their “descendant group” or land, as well as to their organisation with the group.

## Historical Overview

Since the sense of an independent history still plays a major part in sentiments of “Mongolness” in contemporary Henan County, it is necessary to outline the historical ethnic relations between Mongols, Tibetans, and Chinese in that area, which is important especially in determining cultural and ethnic meanings. Common useful information about the history of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County is provided by *Henan Mengguzu zizhixian zhi* (*The Annals of Henan County*), *Huang He Nan Menggu zhi* (*The Annals of Henan Mongols*) and *Henan Mengguzu zizhixian gaikuang* (*A Survey of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County*); its history has also been dealt with elsewhere (Diemberger

2007; Dkon mchog skyabs 2009; Kesang Dargay 2007; Lce nag tshang Hum chen 2007; Shinjilt 2007; Dhondup 2002; Mi 1993).

The first Mongol presence in present-day Henan County is attested as early as the thirteenth century, although it left hardly any evident cultural traces. In fact, the origin of the Mongol inhabitants of Henan County can be traced back to Gushri Khan (1582–1655), leader of the Khoshut Mongols, one of the four major tribes of Oirads (Western Mongols), who settled down among local Tibetans in the region during the seventeenth century. To maintain their autonomy, it can be stated that throughout their history Henan Mongols have tried to maintain a distance from their Tibetan surroundings and performed counter-actions, as the Qing administrative structures existed side by side with, and independent from, the Mongol banners (Khan 1996: 130). Gushri Khan set up a “buffer zone” between the civilising missions from China and those from Tibet. Since he received recognition from the Qing and the right to offer tribute, it can be stated that Gushri Khan and his localised political power – despite the hegemony of the Khoshut Mongols across the northern Tibetan plateau from 1637 until 1723 (Uyungbilig Borjigidai 2002) – already supported the recognition of China’s centrality. During that period of time, the Mongolic groups of the Henan grasslands lived at the margins of both the Tibetan empire and the Qing empire, separated from other Mongolic groups of Inner and Central Asia while maintaining strong contact with the Dzungars (Perdue 2005). In fact, the Khoshut realm was the passage linking China to Tibet where external and internal actors interacted and mixed and were separated and divided.

After Lobjang Danjin’s Rebellion in 1723 (Kato 1993, 2004, 2013; Soloshcheva 2014), the Mongolic groups of the Henan grasslands were officially integrated into the Qing empire, and administrative power and succession were managed locally due to the geographical remoteness of the area. Moreover, the pasturelands and the people were subdivided into administrative units according to a hierarchical system, and the banner system (旗, *qi*) was established with a *qinwang* (亲王), Prince of the First Order, as its ruler. The *qinwang* were a political authority in that area, and through processes of standardisation they likely had a profound impact on local cultural patterns. They undoubtedly brought the Oirad language, yurts, and distinctive dress styles into the Henan grasslands. Concurrently, Mongol culture was being confronted with and integrated into the dominant Tibetan cul-

ture. And furthermore, Tibetans and Mongols became mixed. After 1723, during the reign of the first *Henan Mengqi qinwang* (河南蒙旗亲王), Prince of Henan Mongol Banners, Cahan Danjin (察罕丹津, Tshe dbang bstan 'dzin) (1670–1735), who ruled the four banners of the Henan grasslands, elements of Oirad culture started to influence the grasslands. Additionally, Mongol power became more significant throughout all of Amdo; as early as 1709, Prince Cahan Danjin offered his land to Jamyang Shapa (Jam dbyangs shad pa) to build the Gelug Buddhist monastery in Labrang (拉卜楞寺, Labuleng Si, bLa brang bkra shis 'khyil) in what is now Gansu Province. From that time on, the Mongols, especially the Henan princes, supported local Gelukpa monastic institutions and the Gelukpa became the standardised cultural line for Henan Mongols. Ai Liman (2009: 5) argues that the close connection of the Henan grasslands to the Labrang monastery played a major role in the “tibetanisation” of Mongols – initially in terms of the Tibetan language due to monastic education as well as the adoption of Tibetan cultural traits including diet and clothing. Furthermore, the adoption of Buddhism was not an effort directed by the central Qing authority but rather a strong ideological force and an action of local nobles engaged in collaborative formation at the margins of the Qing empire. In fact, monks appointed the headmen of local tribes (Pirie 2005). The Henan *qinwang* continued to appoint the headmen of the Mongol tribes, and at the same time he was the chief lay patron of the Labrang monastery. The Oirad Mongols were constructing a cultural identity, asserting key values, defining new relationships, and building new cultural boundaries. In this context, their self-marginalisation can be seen as a way they have maintained their autonomy.

As a matter of fact, after the rebellion in 1723 the mobility of the Tibetan and Mongolian pastoralists was reduced, and with the subsequent emergence of territorial boundaries and administrative units, both the Tibetan and the Mongol patriarchal clans “officially” disappeared as a political entity (even though they are still present today). In regard to the Henan grasslands, Mongol and Tibetan pastoralists had to decide whether to migrate or to remain and accept the new structures, not as a unified ethnicity but unified politically at the margins of the Qing (Manchu) empire.

According to my local informants, “outside” cultures and ethnicities strengthened the sense of “Mongolness” among the Henan

grasslands' population. With the fall of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, the Muslim Ma warlords (Lipman 1984, 1997) gained power in that region. The Henan grasslands were a relatively independent political entity since the Mongol *qinwang* and other tribal leaders were powerful players in mobilising economic and military resources. In the course of that, the Henan *qinwang* maintained Henan's autonomy against the Ma warlords, but at the same time the *qinwang* exercised political alliances with the Chinese, the Muslims, and the Tibetan chieftains (土司, *tusi*) of Labrang (see Herman 2006). Samuel (1993: 96) suggests that power in the region was exercised through a series of alliances and overlapping spheres of military power and religious and political influence. After the Guomindang (国民党, Kuomintang, KMT) gained power in 1928, Qinghai Province was incorporated into the Republic of China. After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, only some borders shifted slightly, and the Henan grasslands came under the control of the CCP.

The last *qinwang*, Tashi Tsering (bKra shis Tshe ring, 扎喜才让 or 扎西才让), also called the "Mongol Queen," who ascended the throne as the tenth *qinwang* in 1940, welcomed the CCP as a representative of the traditional local elite (regarding this topic, see Weiner 2012). Under her leadership, the "Mongolian kingdom" was transformed into the Henan Mongolian Autonomous Region (河南蒙古族自治区, *Henan Mengguzū Zizhìqū*) in 1954. Since the CCP policy promoted differentiated political treatment of the main minority nationalities (Manchu, Mongolian, Muslim, Tibetan), the CCP actually allowed a certain degree of autonomy and postponed socialist reforms in the areas inhabited by these minority nationalities (Dhondup 2002: 228). Furthermore, the CCP approved local autonomy with the aim of uniting all peoples within the Communist regime, since the party initially relied on the traditional leadership, though it vested those traditional leaders with very little decision-making power. At that time, Tashi Tsering was positioned as a symbol of her nationality with the framework of the Chinese state (Dhondup and Diemberger 2002: 197). But in fact, administrative and religious systems were overthrown; secular leaders lost their authority as the formally formed, nomadic pastoralists' segmentary tribal groups and the local structures were replaced by the collective or the cadres. Former local leaders were excluded from political participation, and they were unable

to exercise any significant legislative or administrative powers, despite the fact that the protection of political, economic, and social elements existed, and still exists, in domestic PRC law, though its implementation is a different matter. The initial period of CCP control involved considerable efforts to empower local populations to be “masters in their own homes” (rather than to marginalise them). Despite her region having autonomous status, Tashi Tsering was not able to exercise significant self-governance due to China’s centrality, though the Chinese state tried to incorporate pastoral peripheries into the state’s political, educational, economic, and welfare systems (Klotzbücher et al. 2012). With the lack of participation in decision-making politics, the marginalisation of Henan Mongols began around 1958. The Chinese government sought to control and develop its pastoral peripheries, because the CCP claimed the pastoralist lifestyle was inadequately equipped for modernisation or “civilisation” since pastoralists were characterised as economically “backward” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Klotzbücher 2014). Consequently, in order to integrate those pastoralists at the periphery into the state, the Chinese state has caused the peoples at the peripheries to settle (Scott 2009).

In 1964, the Henan Mongolian Autonomous Region was transformed into Henan Mongolian Autonomous County (河南蒙古族自治县, *Henan Mengguzu Zizhixian*). The creation of autonomous regions is one of the results of the “civilising projects” to bring the peripheral leaders into the party-state apparatus (Harrell 1995). By that time, the territories of the local six tribes (部落, *buluo*) were transformed into the six communities (乡, *xiang*) of contemporary Henan County, which reflect the ancient administrative structure: Be si che chung (外斯, *Wai si*) became Khu sin (呵生乡, *Kesheng xiang*); gTsang A rig (藏阿柔, *Zang A rou*) became Nyin mtha (宁木特乡, *Ningmute xiang*); Su rug che chung (斯柔琼哇, *Si rou qiong wa*) became Brag dmar (优干宁镇, *Youganing zhen*); Kha gsum tsho hor (卡松木, *Ka song mu*) became mTho yul ma (托叶玛乡, *Tuoyema xiang*); mDa’ tshan Ho zhod (达参, *Da can*) became gSer lung (赛尔龙乡, *Sai’erlong xiang*); and Thu med thor gud (土默特, *Tu mo te*) became mDo gsum (多松乡, *Duosong xiang*).

In the course of several further reforms, there were some clashes between the Mongols and the CCP. In fact, those revolts were mainly led by the chieftains of the former four banners. Henan Mongols positioned themselves against the state but also against the Tibetans

in order to emphasise and retain their Mongolian identity. In the course of recent history, the last “Mongol Queen,” Tashi Tsering, has even become the local “ethnic hero” of Henan Mongols, and the presentation of her ethnic identity can be interpreted as her political positioning. Her imprints can still be found all over the Henan grasslands and Labrang: her “royal palace” in Labrang, her picture on the walls of many households, and her biography in bookshelves. During her reign, she herself shared her values with the Mongol ethnic group and represented her nationality vis-à-vis the Chinese state. At least at the beginning she was respected, and used, by the Communists. But in 1966, in the course of the Cultural Revolution, Tashi Tsering became a target as the representative of the “old four.” After her death in 1966, the circumstances around which are still unclear, her family fled to a nomadic lifestyle in order to escape the state. Hence, in this context I apply Jean Michaud’s (2006: 180) definition of nomadism as “an escape or survival strategy,” related to James Scott’s (2009) framework on borderlands, sites of escape and flight from the state. I argue that Henan Mongols have been more or less able to position themselves outside the decision-making power of the Chinese state and still maintain their traditional local decision-making power, at least in regard to local nomadic pastoralist issues, since the tribal leaders and lamas have the power to enforce peaceful behaviour within the local groups. In fact, pastoralists use the power of the government for their own purposes: they take advantage of their specific societal framework, they differentiate between their relation to the tribe and to the state, and they even shift their ethnic identity according to their needs and convenience. Henan grassland pastoralists are loyal to their tribe and demonstrate respect for lamas, spiritual leaders seen as religious authorities.

Alongside Tashi Tsering, the monasteries, the tribal leaders, and the village leaders still enjoy high prestige among Henan Mongols. In regard to fights over pasturelands, for instance, the government rarely interferes; instead, dispute resolution is left to tribal leaders and the monastery (Pirie 2005; Shinjilt 2007) as there has been violence concerning pasture claims since well before the CCP’s arrival in the 1950s. It must be mentioned that it is absolutely essential for the former tribe leaders to officially join the Party before they can become township or village chiefs. Pirie (2005: 23) describes pastoralists’ complaints to her that the authorities could and should do more



to control violence, but at the same time they view the Chinese system of criminal punishment as inadequate for settling disputes. Consequently, pastoralists reject the legitimacy of the government's punishments since, in their view, these punishments contravene minority rights regarding the preservation of traditional communal life. During my stays and visits in the field, several pastoralists told me that the government does not dare to interfere since government officials are afraid of the “wild pastoralists” and because they also strive to avoid political (ethnic) conflicts in those areas. Therefore, the government prefers to stay out of “smaller” issues such as fights over pasturelands. Most importantly, locals heed religious and tribal leaders' rulings over governmental decisions; overall, pasture used to be interpreted as “non-state space” by pastoralists.

## The Ethnic Classification Project (1950–1980)

It is fairly difficult to distinguish between Mongol and Tibetan pastoralists. Throughout history, various Mongolic groups immigrated to the Tibetan plateau; the Henan grasslands saw the arrival of the Torgud, Coros, and Khoid during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), followed by the Ordos, Dörvöd, and Tümed during the sixteenth century, and the Khoshut in the seventeenth century. In the course of their migration, the various Mongolic groups were socialised by the Tibetan environment due to their geographical isolation from their historical kin. Hildegard Diemberger (2002: 173) states that “Tibetan and Mongol ethnicity is clearly rather a recent construct,” which Toni Huber supports with his finding that “it is now difficult to discern their original non-Tibetan ethnicity” (2002: XV).

The Republican concept of *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族, “Chinese nation” or “Chinese people”) – actually a mosaic of distinct *minzu* (民族) – was advocated by Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) after the Chinese revolution of 1911. The term “*minzu*” is taken from the Japanese term *minzoku* (民族), which means “ethnic group,” “nation,” “race,” or even any combination of these. Hence, *minzu* indicates both nationalities and the nation as such – though, in this research context, the term *minzu* is translated as either “nationality” or “ethnic group,” depending on its socio-political context. People who lived on Chinese territory in 1911 became a part of the Chinese people: aside from the “Five Peoples of China” (五族共和, *wuzu gonghe*) – Han (汉), Man (满,



Manchu), Meng (蒙, Mongols), Zang (藏, Tibetans), and Hui (回, including all Muslims in China) (Mullaney 2011: 25) – other groups existed outside that classification; these groups were simply called “tribes.” However, even during the Republican Era, Tibetans and Mongols explicitly distinguished themselves from each other – though, in terms of the various Mongolic groups, Khan states that

there is no such [...] category as the Mongol community or nation, but rather various local groups, whom the Chinese conveniently referred to as Mongols. (Khan 1995: 251)

After the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong initiated the “Ethnic Classification Project” (民族识别工作, *minzu shibie gongzuo*) (1950–1980), which Stevan Harrell (1995) refers to as the Communists’ “civilising project” among its frontier minorities, who were actually marginalised as backward minorities (Giersch 2006). However, official *minzu* were created by the central government to shape the structure of society and identity within the PRC (Mullaney 2011) before the state integrated these various peoples within the Chinese political system on the principle of “unity in diversity” (多元一体, *duoyuan yiti*). The classification itself was a uniquely PRC enterprise based on the Stalinist concept of *natsia* – the Soviet definition of nationality. China's various ethnic groups were classified as *minzu*, according to a common language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common physiological make-up, later known as common “culture” (Mackerras 1990: 141). In 1987 the central authorities announced the end of the national ethnic classification project, thereby indicating that out of the preliminary 400 registered ethnic groups, the figure of 56 *minzu* was henceforth definitive and non-modifiable (38 *minzu* had been recognised by 1953; by 1964 this number had risen to 53). The 56 *minzu* were fixed in 1980, and the “unidentified” ones were placed under the umbrella of other ethnic groups. Some *minzu* are scattered all over China, some are qualified for non-Chinese identity by virtue of distinct historical and cultural features (Bulag 2002: 19). The various “unified” *minzu* were created by China's central government. As a matter of fact, Han became the official majority, whereas the other 55 ethnic groups were the “minority nationalities” or, as Mullaney (2011: 1) claims, “ethno-national groups.” The Han had reached an advanced position and the minority nationalities were located at backward stages of social devel-

opment compared to the superiority of “Chinese” culture; consequently, they face social and economic exclusion as a fact of daily life.

China is a multi-ethnic society, but not a state of multiple nations. As a result of the Ethnic Classification Project, a person’s classification has been marked on their personal identification card (身份证, *shenfen zheng*) as well as displayed on all official documents (Gladney 2004) since the 1980s. This project has caused conflicts with the ethnic groups’ self-perception since individuals have had to identify themselves as members of one particular group. Hence, many people are still negotiating their classification (the new law “Measures for the Administration of the Ethnic Composition Registration of Chinese Citizens” (中国公民民族成份登记管理办法, *Zhongguo gongmin minzu chengfen dengji guanli banfa*), which says that citizens have the opportunity for the first and only time in their lives to reclassify themselves within two years of their eighteenth birthday, was implemented as of 1 January 2016). It should be explicitly mentioned that among the same (ethnic) group, not all people hold the same view of their identity. Henan Mongols were willing to go along with the classification provided by the state, although among themselves they are aware of how they differ from each other and in what ways they are similar to other Mongols or Tibetans. But especially in the Tibetan and Mongolian context, ethnicity is more salient than it is among “better-integrated” minority nationalities such as the Zhuang. Especially in terms of Henan Mongols, according to my informants, group membership plays an important role, alongside their ethnic consciousness, due to their loyalty to the tribal leaders or lamas. But as a matter of fact, this kind of group membership is not displayed on any official documents.

The Ethnic Classification Project presented a chance for Henan Mongols – and other ethnic groups – to break away from the Hans (and from the Tibetans). Through their classification as Mongols within the Tibetan cultural area of Amdo, they use their ethnic marginality to construct distinctiveness. The inhabitants of Henan County have been classified based on their historical records and their genealogy – though the historical kinship might have been overvalued, but not according to the Soviet model. According to my informants, most members of Henan’s Mongolic groups state that according to their “bones” (Tib. *rus*) they might be Mongols, but according to the language they are Tibetans; it is most important for them to not

be seen or classified as “Han Chinese.” Since the 1980s, the local government of Henan County has supported locals registering themselves and their descendants as Mongols to sustain their particular status as a “Mongol Autonomous County” among surrounding Tibetan areas. Yet at the same time, being classified as Mongol in the Henan grasslands means being a minority within the Tibetan cultural area of Amdo. In fact, in the course of history, Henan Mongolic groups have been largely assimilated and integrated into their Tibetan “host” culture.

The pastoralists of the Henan grasslands have been called “Mongols” by others, which may also explain the willingness among the Mongolic and Tibetan populations to accept the Mongol label in the course of the classification process. At least in the beginning, for most people, their official *minzu* status according to their identity cards had hardly any meaning due to their lack of knowledge of the state’s conceptualisation of the term “ethnic classification.” Some of my older informants stated that they learned about the concept of *minzu* in school textbooks, but that it has no relevance in their everyday lives. In fact, before the Communist “liberation,” the inhabitants of contemporary Henan County – as I mentioned before – identified themselves according to kinship, tribal affiliation, locality, and religious grouping. As a collective, they all belong to the “Mongol banners,” and neither a “pure” consanguinity nor knowledge of the Mongolian language is an absolute requirement for being Mongol. As Almaz Khan (1995: 269) argued, “the general ideas of being a Mongol have moved from the physical to the ideational and imaginative.” In fact, the family genealogies cannot always be traced back, and therefore the classification is contextualised by needs and interests. Dhondup and Diemberger (2002: 116) explain the seeming arbitrariness of ethnic classification by demonstrating how Tashi Tsering represented “Mongolness” though she never spoke Mongolian and she was half-Tibetan. Since her husband was Tibetan, two of their children are now officially registered as Tibetans and the other two children are officially registered as Mongols. Hence, the children show their loyalty to Mongols as well to Tibetans. Another family story I came across during one of my numerous stays in Henan County told of a family with eight descendants, some of whose identity cards said “Tibetan” and some “Mongol.” Now, they say they are better able to take advantage of their classifications, though none of

them could (or wanted to) tell me why they classified themselves as Tibetan or Mongol. In the course of several conversations with them since the late 1990s, the only story they all revealed to me was that their father's family originally came from what is now the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan and later moved to Henan County, the place where their mother was born. In fact, this is just one case of intermarriage and the mixing of ethnic groups in Henan County. The seeming arbitrariness of ethnic classification was explained to me based on the example of two brothers: In the 1980s, one brother went to school in Rebkong (同仁, Tongren), the capital of Huangnan Prefecture, and because of his place of residence he was classified as Tibetan; whereas his second eldest brother, who at that time was studying at the Northwest Nationality College in Lanzhou, was classified as Mongol because of his birthplace in Henan County. In the course of economic development, being categorised as a minority nationality nowadays seems advantageous in terms of economic and financial prospects: for example, the youngest of the eight descendants from the story above received a prestigious governmental job in Henan County due to his "Mongolness." Aside from getting governmental jobs, another advantage of being classified as Mongol is the higher chance of getting a passport, which has become a nearly impossible undertaking for Tibetans recently (especially since 2008).

According to one of my informants in 2014, only since the Tibetan uprisings of 2008 and the self-immolations by Tibetans since February 2009 have "mongolised" Tibetans been eager to strengthen their awareness of their Tibetan origins. My informant expressly declared that in times such as today, Mongols and Tibetans need to be aware of the two cultures' distinctive identities: Tibetan activists postulate that the self-immolations not only show growing desperation over what the protesters see as the marginalisation of Tibetan culture and religion under Chinese rule, but can also be interpreted as identity-based movements. They demand the opportunity to practise their religion and to learn their own history. Tibetans are known for their uncompromising desire for autonomy, a major source of tension between Tibetans and Mongols. At the same time, some of my Henan Mongol informants complained about Tibetan "ingratitude" towards the state. Furthermore, I was told that Tibetans were less "loyal" than Mongols. In fact, Henan Mongols consciously place themselves at the margins to achieve political and economic benefits.

The Mongolic groups of the Henan grasslands are faced with patterns of representation, production, and history. As Yangdon Dhondup (2002: 226) states, the “Mongolian ethnic group [in Henan County] became assimilated into Tibetan culture, and they later re-defined and/or re-invented themselves through state-sponsored policies as Mongolians.”

## “Civilising Projects”

Since Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “opening up,” the Mongols of Henan County have benefitted from a certain degree of liberalisation on cultural and economic levels due to their “gratefulness” towards the centralised state. And at the same time, the state found its way into local, everyday life.

During the reforms under Deng Xiaoping, local traditions and customs were revived, and the re-definition of ethnic identity through state-sponsored policies has been propagated by the state since the 1980s. Furthermore, successive Chinese governments have sought to “civilise” China’s ethnic minorities. The effect of this “civilising project” (Harrell 1995) was to develop, sharpen, and heighten the consciousness of the peripheral people as an ethnic group. In the course of that project, “the consciousness that a people exists as an entity that differs from surrounding peoples” (Harrell 1995: 7) was developed. The first step was the reconstruction of local histories in the mid-1980s to show the connection to the state apparatus, followed by the promotion of ethnic-minority cultures (Mackerras 1990: 25–28), such as through the revival of traditional festivals.

Henan Mongols’ marginality is used to attract the attention of “outsiders,” especially to promote the development of tourism in that area: a civilising project as a form of de-marginalisation. In the course of this “Ethnic Revival Propaganda,” the traditional Naadam (那达慕) Festival (three-day Mongol sports festival) was – according to several of my informants – re-implemented in 1984 (though Diemberger [2007] shows that it had previously never been held in this region). Much to my surprise, it is regulated to take place every year starting on 1 August, the anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army. According to my sources, this specific date was chosen so that the Naadam Festival would fit into the Chinese state’s celebration calendar. Referring to some of my informants, such a

festival did exist before the Communist era, though not under the Mongolian name “Naadam”; according to one of my informants, it was known as “*dga’ ston*” (?), whereas Diemberger’s (2007: 118) informants said that the festival used to be called *shenlong* (Tib. *shing long*). Some aspects of local culture have not completely been “mongolised” by the Chinese government but revived. “Ethnic” festivals can be used for political meetings as well as for political propaganda, and can be commodified more easily than any other aspect of Mongol culture for tourism. Moreover, this officially propagated opening-up policy leads towards assimilation into the mainstream modern culture. In Mongolia, the festival is carried out by the government to promote national pride and self-confidence; in regard to Henan County, it might be to celebrate Mongolian cultural identity within the surrounding Tibetan areas, and to officially acknowledge their Mongolian roots, thereby reaffirming the state category of “Mongolness.” The distinctive features between Henan’s Naadam and Mongolia’s Naadam are the use of three traditional Mongolian sport disciplines which formed the pastoralists’ life: wrestling, archery, and horse racing, whereby archery has been replaced in Henan by weightlifting, since in the Amdo area archery competitions can only be found in farming areas but not in pastoralist areas. However, Naadam is a political statement that not only shows Henan Mongols’ incorporation into the central government’s administration, but also advocates their “Mongolness” and their distinction from their Tibetan neighbours. The reforming and reviving of ethnic tradition is an integral part of China’s “ethnic revival propaganda” and a construct of the imagination of national identity in terms of the Chinese nation.

Another state-sponsored project has long been education, especially minority-language education, even though access to quality education is still unequal at present. Henan County is a pastoralist area, and children are required to help at home. But since in remote areas children have to stay in residential schools, many pastoralist families cannot meet their basic survival needs. Consequently, pastoralists are dissuaded from participating in education. According to the records (*Henanxian zhi*, 河南县志), 90 per cent of the population of the Henan grasslands was illiterate before the Communist “liberation,” because there were no schools (according to several informants, home-schooling used to exist, as did education for men in the monasteries).

With the arrival of the CCP in the Henan grasslands, education was used as an important vehicle for conveying the values and beliefs of the new system. In the early years, Tibetan was the medium language, and Chinese was taught as the second language. The language shift to Tibetan started in 1949 when, as Dkon mchog skyabs describes, as quoted in Roche (2015),

the village of Chu kha ma, in rNga ba, fled from a dispute with the dMe king [of rNga ba] and settled in Be si che Village, where they mixed with local people and began influencing them to speak Tibetan. (Dkon mchog skyabs 2009: 29)

As a follow-up to that quotation, Roche writes,

This language shift was accelerated from 1958 on, when the use of Oirad (Mongol) was forbidden: locals were forced to speak Tibetan, and Oirad-speaking communities were broken up and their populations scattered throughout Henan. (Roche 2015: 5–6)

With the state-sponsored revival of Mongol identity in the 1980s, the first Mongolian-medium school (蒙文学校, *Mengwen xuexiao*) was opened in 1985 as an attempt to use education to transmit traditional Mongolian culture more efficiently. Furthermore, by highlighting the significance of ethnic-minority languages, the state and the local governments were striving for national ethnic integration. In the public education sector, the Chinese curriculum is followed, with Chinese textbooks simply being translated into the minority language (Ma 2007; Kolas 2005), but specific ethnic and cultural or even intercultural features are not included.

Henan County invited Mongolian-language teachers from Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture as a preliminary measure to ensure all teachers in every primary school were fluent in the medium language. Later on, in January 1990, a new law stipulated that Mongolian be taught not only in primary school but also in high schools; in July of the same year, the first primary school students graduated from the Mongolian-language class (蒙文班, *Mengwen ban*) and continued their studies in the Mongolian-medium high school, from which 19 graduated in 1993 (Ai 2011; Sarena 2013). From local discourse, the majority of students who graduated from the Mongolian-medium programme faced difficulties in finding jobs later on in their “tibetanised” community or in other places within the PRC. Another difficulty of the minority-language education was the



limited range of higher-education opportunities, since the Chinese language became the lingua franca (同用语言, *tongyong yuyan*) as well as the interethnic common language (族际共同语, *zujì gongtong yu*) within the PRC.

According to Sarena (2013), the last five students of the Mongolian-medium programme graduated in 2002, and given the problems with the practical value of the language, Mongolian-medium classes were discontinued. Those educated in Mongolian were socially excluded, since Chinese and Tibetan were, and still are, the dominant languages in Henan County, and Mongolian was and is still rarely used in local society. Regarding their choice of school, although students take into consideration their cultural and ancestral background, they tend to give priority to the school that will ensure the best economic and job prospects down the line. In regard to the education system, due to China's civilising mission in minority areas, intercultural understanding is neglected: Chinese language and Chinese culture are promoted despite the fact that according to the law, bilingual education and minority languages should be promoted. Simultaneously, people who lack fluency in Chinese experience higher levels of job discrimination, which in turn leads to social and economic exclusion within the state. Therefore, according to my informants, most parents send their children to the Chinese school, since they do not want their children to be socially and economically excluded. In regard to education in a minority language – whether Tibetan or Mongolian – employment possibilities are limited. Subsequently, the lack of access to work following minority-language education leads to impoverishment.

Officially, to prevent impoverishment, to develop Henan County's economy, and in the name of national unity (民族团结, *minzu tuanjie*), *Tianjin Binghai jucheng touzi gongsi* (天津滨海聚成投资公司), a Chinese mineral water company from Tianjin opened a branch in mTho yul ma (Tuoyema xiang) in 2011. Its business idea complies with the objectives of the Western Development Programme (西部大开发, *xibu dakaiifa*) of bringing social progress, economic growth, and prosperity to the people in the “backward” region by using local resources such as the spring water from the plateau (see <[www.jingduwater.com](http://www.jingduwater.com)>). The mineral water produced is not sold locally but in big Chinese cities since locally there is no ready market due its relatively high price. The company's employees at the management level



are Han Chinese from Chinese coastal cities, whereas the workers are young local pastoralists. At the very beginning of their employment, the locals are required to attend company-internal courses allegedly because, according to one of my Han informants, “locals have no culture and need to become civilised”. The first thing the courses require is the knowledge of Chinese, as it is the working language of the company. Aside from Chinese-language classes, the courses within the scope of this “civilising mission” cover political education, national unity, hygiene, and nutrition – a process whereby the local employees become “Chinese” in a cultural and political sense.

In order to pursue a better cultural and economic life and to prevent the impoverishment of illiterates, two local women’s organisations for the manufacturing of traditional Mongolian and Tibetan handicrafts were established during the last two years, even though minority nationalities have limited input in the state-driven development model. The two institutions are *Lelema zangmeng tese shougong zhipin kaifa youxian gongsi* (乐乐玛蒙藏特色手工制品开发有限公司, Handmade Mongolian and Tibetan Traditional Handicraft Corporation) and *Henan Xian Anjiang Zang Meng fuzhuang zhizuo gongsi* (河南县安江藏蒙服装制作公司, Henan County Anjiang Tibetan Mongolian Clothing Company). Both companies produce and sell traditional Mongol clothing and a variety of products made of felt; this gives the sedentarised, illiterate, local pastoralist women a job opportunity, and it also helps to bring traditional handicraft back into use. The pastoralist women perceive this as a sign of the revival of women’s power among marginalised settled pastoralists.

Aside from festivals and language, other cultural aspects have received attention due to the impact of globalisation, larger communication networks, and tourism. Slowly but steadily, Henan Mongols are rediscovering an affinity with their cultural roots as a way to show the distinction between Mongols and Tibetans. To develop Mongol culture and to transmit the knowledge of their own culture and tradition, in the last few years the Association for the Rescue of Henan’s Mongol Culture and History (黄河南蒙古历史文化抢救传承协会, Huanghenan Mengu lishi wenhua qiangjiu zhuan Cheng Xiehui; Tib. *rMa lho sog po’i skad yig myur skyob mthun tshogs*) was founded by locals. Members of this association are laypeople and monks, pastoralists and academics, men and women. Some of my informants are members of this association, and they told me independently of each

other than that the language is the “soul” (Tib. *bla*) of their ethnic identity, their spiritual heritage (see Gayley 2011). Seeing the preservation of their Mongol (Oirad) language as their duty, they frequently organise Mongolian language competitions (河南蒙旗母语口语比赛, *Henan Mengqi muyu kouyu bisai*); for example, they held a three-day language competition for all of Henan County in January 2015, another one in May, and another in September, for which any local interested in Mongolian language was invited to register. The fourth language competition (考试比赛, *kaoshi bisai*) took place on 13 December 2015. Information on these competitions is mainly disseminated through WeChat (微信), a Chinese social media network.

Their distinctiveness from Tibetans has turned into business ideas for Mongols. Three Mongol culture shops in Brag dmar (Youganning Township) have opened, selling traditional Mongol costumes, shoes, and housewares made in Inner Mongolia. The first shop was opened in 2009 by a Mongolian from Haixi Prefecture. Spurred by newly established consumer practices and tourism, a Mongolian family from Khu sin (Kesheng xiang) opened another shop in 2012. Banking on good business for the 60th anniversary of the founding of Henan Autonomous County, in early 2014 a third Mongol shop was opened by a local family. Being Mongol was and still is associated with high prestige, due to their ancestral hero Genghis Khan, portraits of whom are displayed throughout the shops. In Henan County, Genghis Khan serves as a “specific symbol of ethnic/cultural survival [...] in relation to the overwhelmingly dominant Chinese state and society” (Khan 1995: 248) as well as in relation to the dominant Tibetan culture. It may represent the attempt to construct a new Mongol identity based on state-sponsored historical narratives.

The most visible state-sponsored “civilising” project (in terms of cultural standardisation) was the renovation of the township for the 60th anniversary of the founding of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County in August 2014: the main street of Brag dmar (Youganning Township) received a complete makeover in “mongolesque” style (Roche and Lha mo sgröl ma 2014: 39) with its extensive use of the colour blue. For Mongols, the traditional colour blue represents the sky and signifies eternity. The roofs of most buildings on the main street now resemble the Mongol yurt; a traditional Mongol pastoralist lifestyle has been adapted to a Chinese sedentary lifestyle. Furthermore, most of the streets of the township, which is the county seat,

were given names that were then displayed on quadrilingual street signs in Mongolian, Tibetan, Chinese, and English. All street names refer to the Henan grasslands' Mongol history, such as Khoshut Road, Tumed Road, and Cahan Danjin Road. Yet, when one asks locals about street names, nobody knows them. Streets and street names as well as the settlements are the result of China's civilising project.

While the Chinese state seeks to control and develop the pastoral periphery of the Henan grasslands, the Henan Mongols, at the same time, are using the "civilising" projects as well as the "mongolisation" schemes towards their own ends. At least to some extent, these various projects have contributed to the revival of ethnic consciousness among Mongols, especially in terms of their differentiating themselves from the surrounding Tibetans. Actually, as the cultural, religious, and linguistic values of Henan Mongols are similar to Tibetan values, the main divergence is the Mongols' belief in their "mythologised Mongol conqueror" (Khan 2005: 248): Genghis Khan, who is also seen as a "national hero" for China since, according to new narratives, Genghis Khan was also Chinese.

## Conclusion

The various ways in which Henan Mongols are marginalised can be traced back to their topological, demographic, ecologic, cultural, and linguistic conditions. Contemporary Henan Mongolian Autonomous County is situated at the periphery of both Greater Tibet and the Chinese state – that is to say, at the Sino-Tibetan borderland, more specifically at the margins of the Qinghai–Tibet plateau. Since the Henan grasslands are located within Qinghai Province, one of the most "backward" (*luobou*) regions in the PRC, the area can be considered as economically marginalised, especially in view of the state's concept of "modernity," even though the state has tried to improve the socio-economic situation at the periphery. Moreover, the Henan grasslands are a sparsely inhabited pastoral area that has been a place of cultural interaction for centuries, and moreover an area where cultural hybridisation has emerged, which has led back to marginalisation. The exceptional history of present-day Henan Mongolian Autonomous County has been shaped by a number of encounters: an ethno-cultural and religious affinity with Tibet, an entanglement with

Mongol groups, a relationship with the Qing court through the administration system, and social and economic contact with the Muslim and Han populations. Furthermore, there is broad diversity in terms of languages (Janhunen, Ha, and Tshe dpag rnam rgyal 2007), political systems, culture, and religion at the Sino-Tibetan borderland. Throughout history, Mongols and Tibetans have had a sense of solidarity and peaceful co-existence, and due to intermarriages they can be viewed as mixed. The Tibeto-Mongol population of the Henan grasslands “belonged to a unique cultural area, the limits of which were set by the jurisdiction of the Henan princes and tribal leaders” (Roche 2015: 12) centuries ago and later on by the CCP.

After the founding of the PRC and the incorporation of the Henan grasslands into the Chinese state, one of the CCP’s strategies after the 1950s was to “civilise” its peoples. One tactic was the Ethnic Classification Project (1950–1980), which contributed to the marginalisation of China’s minority nationalities. Most of China’s minority nationalities reside at the margins, and because of their segregation from the Han, this ethnic segregation puts them at a disadvantage. For example, Mongols and Tibetans were portrayed by the state as “exotic” and “backward,” emphasising the sense of superiority of Han Chinese culture and the distinction between Han and minority nationalities. In terms of Henan Mongols, they are worse off relative to the Tibetan population as a minority within a minority area. But at the same time, as a result of the classification, by being classified as Mongol within a largely Tibetan area, the Henan grasslands were granted the status of a Mongol Autonomous County within Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It was strategic statement of Henan Mongols to display their “otherness” within a Tibetan surrounding. Henan Mongols are proud Mongols and “comfortable” citizens of China at the same time.

Alongside the Ethnic Classification Project, the right to develop minority-language education was another project intended to “civilise” people in minority areas. Public education facilities implementing the CCP’s strategies sprung up, and bilingual education (Chinese and minority-language education) was put into place. But due to a limited range of higher-education opportunities as well as to often insufficient opportunities on the job market, minority-language education once again led to marginalisation. In terms of Henan County, the language situation is even more complicated: using Mongolian as

the local common language is not realistic in Henan County because of the county's linguistic "tibetanisation." Mongolian speakers are often even socially excluded, because their employment opportunities are even worse in their Tibetan-speaking (and Chinese-speaking) surroundings. Nevertheless, to strengthen their awareness of being Mongol, Mongolian-language education in the private rather than the public education sector has been recently revived: this language-related marginalisation is used by Henan Mongols as a strategy to distinguish themselves from the "others."

To conclude, Henan Mongols are beneficiaries of the party-state's civilising projects. As a result of these projects, Henan Mongols are able to resist assimilation and to retain their distinct identity by re-inventing their "Mongolness." But in reality, Henan Mongols' close interaction with their Tibetan neighbours puts the authenticity of their Mongolness into question in the eyes of both other Mongols and Tibetans. The state has supported the hybridity and "otherness" of Henan Mongols in the interest of developing contemporary Henan County into a buffer zone. Dhondup (2002: 229) argues that the CCP may even have hoped that the Mongol Autonomous County would serve to diminish Tibetan influence in that area. Hence, to preserve this buffer zone, the state supports their re-definition as Mongolians through state-sponsored projects, mainly in the areas of culture, tradition, and language. In present-day Henan County, there is no (obvious) dissonance between Mongols and Tibetans in terms of education, socio-economics, or religious belief, but there is some slight divergence in cultural habits and cultural markers. They see themselves as one solidary community within the Chinese nation, especially since the Mongolic groups have been separated from their historical kin over the course of history. However, Henan Mongols have adapted to and complied with national policies and, moreover, they are producing their own self-representation despite being influenced by the state-sponsored projects.

Hence, it can be stated that Henan's Mongols are performing a balancing act, shifting their identity according to their needs and convenience. In the context of the Chinese nation-state, Henan Mongols distance themselves from the "Chinese" by referring to their Mongol "nationality" or to their affiliation with the Tibetan cultural area of Amdo; whereas in the context of Amdo, they differentiate themselves from Tibetans through their "Mongolness." Henan Mongols claim to

be Mongol, and therefore they accept their marginalisation within the Han-dominated state and subsequently the selling of their culture as an “exotic” attraction. At the same time, they distinguish and distance themselves from the surrounding Tibetans. Due both to the acceptance of their marginalisation and to their own self-marginalisation, they are strengthening their Mongol identity. In fact, the balancing act of this minority nationality can be interpreted as an act of marginalisation as well as an act of self-marginalisation.

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