Language Ecology and Chinese Language Teaching in Mongolia: A Sociohistorical and Pedagogical Analysis

Ge Hong

School of Foreign Languages, Hohhot Minzu College, Hohhot 010000, Inner Mongolia, China

Abstract: This study examines the interplay between Mongolia's unique language ecology and the development of Chinese language teaching (CLT) from the mid-20th century to the present. Drawing on documentary analysis, statistical data, and pedagogical surveys, it first delineates Mongolia's language ecosystem, shaped by geographical isolation, historical interactions with neighboring powers, ethnic homogeneity, and shifting geopolitical alliances, focusing on the status of Khalkha Mongolian, minority languages, and foreign languages, mainly Russian, English, and Chinese. Subsequently, it traces the three-stage evolution of CLT in Mongolia, that is to say, the initial phase (1957–1968), recovery phase (1973–1990), and booming phase (1990–present), analyzing how each stage responds to changes in the broader language ecology. The study also identifies key challenges in contemporary CLT, including teacher shortages, mismatched teaching materials, and uneven regional access, supported by quantitative data on student enrollment, teacher demographics, and institutional distribution. Finally, it proposes context-specific strategies to enhance CLT's alignment with Mongolia's language ecology, such as developing localized teaching materials, strengthening teacher training programs, and leveraging cross-border cultural exchanges. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of language policy dynamics in Inner Asia and offer insights for optimizing CLT practices in multilingual as well as regional study contexts.

Keywords: Mongolia; Language Ecology; Chinese Language Teaching; Sociohistorical Evolution; Pedagogical Challenges

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Mongolia, a landlocked country nestled between China and Russia, boasts a language ecology that reflects its complex historical, geopolitical, and cultural trajectories. As a key participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative, Mongolia's linguistic interactions with China have gained renewed significance in recent decades, making Chinese language teaching (CLT) a focal point of cross-border educational cooperation. However, CLT in Mongolia has not developed in a vacuum; its growth and challenges are deeply intertwined with the country's broader language ecology, defined as the dynamic interplay between languages, their speakers, and the social, political, and economic environments that shape language use [1].

Historically, Mongolia's language ecology has long been shaped by three dominant forces. First, Khalkha Mongolian, the nation's official language, unites virtually the entire population. According to the 2023 census released by the

National Statistical Office of Mongolia, about 95 % of residents use Khalkha Mongolian as their primary language of daily communication, giving the language a powerful unifying role in national identity. Its official status is enshrined in the constitution and reinforced across education, media, the judiciary and other public spheres. Since the revival of the traditional vertical script in 1992, the coexistence of the Cyrillic alphabet and the historic script have further cemented Khalkha Mongolian's cultural symbolism. Second, the legacy of Russian linguistic influence remains deep seated. From 1921 to 1992, during the Soviet era, Russian was the sole compulsory foreign language in schools and universities, shaping an entire generation of scholars, engineers and medical professionals who still rely on Russian for academic exchange. Although the mandatory teaching of Russian was abolished after the Soviet collapse, the language continues to be used in scientific, technical and border-region contexts, especially where Mongolia's trade and infrastructure projects with Russia persist. Nevertheless, its overall share in the foreign language curriculum has been eclipsed by the rapid rise of English. Third, English has surged under Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy, which was introduced in the early 1990s to diversify diplomatic and economic ties beyond the two great neighbors, China and Russia. English is positioned as a global lingua franca and has become a compulsory subject in the national curriculum, reaching roughly 86% of public primary and secondary schools by 2022. The spread of English supports overseas study, international business, tourism and, more broadly, the formation of a younger generation with a more outward, looking worldview.

Despite growing academic interest in Mongolia's language policy and CLT practices, few studies have systematically linked CLT development to the country's language ecology [2–5]. This gap limits our understanding of why CLT faces persistent challenges as low enrollment in public schools, teacher shortages and how to tailor pedagogical strategies to Mongolia's unique context.

1.2. Methodology and data sources

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative documentary analysis with quantitative data analysis. As for the documentary analysis, this study has reviewed academic literature such as peer-reviewed articles, monographs and government reports concerning Mongolia's National Education Sector Strategy 2020–2030, as well as the institutional records of Confucius Institute annual reports to reconstruct the sociohistorical trajectory of CLT and language policy. As for the quantitative data analysis, we analyzed secondary data from multiple sources, including enrollment statistics from Mongolia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports (2009–2023); teacher demographic data from the Chinese Language Teachers Association of Mongolia (2022); surveys of CLT practitioners conducted by the Mongolian National University of Education (2021) and language landscape data from Ulaanbaatar [6,7].

2. Mongolia's language ecology: A multidimensional analysis

2.1. Core components of the language ecosystem

In our study, the Mongolia's language ecology is defined by four interconnected components: the Khalkha Mongolian (dominant national language), minority languages, foreign languages, and language ideologies. The following **Table 1** summarizes the key features of each component.

Table 1. Core components of Mongolia's language ecology (2023)

Component	Key Features
Khalkha Mongolian	- Status: National and official language (Constitution of Mongolia, 1992, Article 8). - Usage: Spoken by 95% of the population; used in government, media, and public signage. - Script: Dual-script system (Cyrillic for official/educational use; traditional Mongolian script for cultural/ceremonial purposes).
Minority Languages	- Ethnic Groups: Kazakh (3.8% of population), Tuvan (0.7%), Russian (0.4%), and others. - Usage: Kazakh is the most widely used minority language, primarily in western provinces (e.g., Bayan-Ölgii). Most minority speakers are bilingual in Khalkha Mongolian. - Policy: Constitutional protection for minority language learning, but limited implementation (e.g., no mandatory minority language courses in public schools).
Foreign Languages	- Russian: Legacy language; mandatory in schools 1921–1992; now optional (taught in 7th grade onwards). - English: Dominant foreign language since 1990; mandatory in 5th grade onwards; used in business, tourism, and higher education. - Chinese: Optional; taught in 30+ universities and 20+ primary/secondary schools; concentrated in Ulaanbaatar.
Language Ideologies	- Nationalism: Emphasis on Khalkha Mongolian as a marker of national identity, linked to Genghis Khan and nomadic heritage. - Geopolitics: "Third Neighbor" policy prioritizes English to balance Russian/Chinese influence; ambivalence toward Chinese due to historical tensions (e.g., Qing-era control). - Pragmatism: Recognition of Chinese as an economic necessity (China is Mongolia's largest trade partner, accounting for 60% of exports).

As shown above, the four interconnected components outlined in Table 1 collectively shape Mongolia's distinct and dynamic language ecosystem, reflecting a blend of national identity, historical legacies, and pragmatic adaptation to regional and global contexts. Khalkha Mongolian serves as the bedrock of this ecosystem, solidified by its status as the national and official language enshrined in the constitution. Its near-universal usage which is 95% of the population across government, media, and public spaces underscores its role in fostering national cohesion.

Their minority languages, represented primarily by Kazakh, Tuvan, and Russian, add diversity to the ecosystem but face constraints in visibility and institutional support. Kazakh's relative prominence in western provinces highlights regional linguistic variation, while the bilingualism of most minority speakers in Khalkha Mongolian reflects the dominant language's integrating role.

However, foreign languages in Mongolia are shaped by a mix of historical inertia and contemporary geopolitical/economic needs. Russian, a legacy of the 1921–1992 Soviet-influenced era, has transitioned from mandatory to optional, reflecting a shift away from past ideological ties while retaining some relevance in specific domains. English, by contrast, has emerged as the dominant foreign language, mandated from the 5th grade onward, driven by Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy, which is the effort to balance Russian and Chinese influence by aligning with global especially Western economic, educational, and cultural networks. Chinese, though optional, occupies a strategic niche taught in select schools and universities, it caters to Mongolia's economic reality with China accounts for 60% of its exports, positioning it as a pragmatic tool for trade and cross-border engagement.

2.2. Key shapers of the language ecology

According to the empirical studies, three factors of geography, history, and geopolitics have historically shaped Mongolia's language ecology.

2.2.1. Geographical isolation and homogeneity

Mongolia's vast, sparsely populated territory of 1.56 million km^2, 3.5 million people has fostered linguistic homogeneity.

The country's steppe and desert landscapes limit population mobility, reducing contact between Khalkha Mongolian speakers and minority groups. As a result, Khalkha Mongolian has remained the dominant language, with little dialectal variation compared to other Mongolic languages, for example Buryat in Russia, Oirat in China. Geographical proximity to China and Russia has, however, ensured that Chinese and Russian remain influential foreign languages, particularly in border regions.

2.2.2. Historical legacies

Mongolia's language ecology bears the marks of three historical eras as follows.

(1) Qing era (1691–1911)

Chinese and Manchu exerted limited influence; traditional Mongolian script was used for administrative purposes.

(2) Soviet era (1921–1992)

The Soviet Union imposed Cyrillic script for Mongolian around 1944 and made Russian the mandatory foreign language. This policy eroded proficiency in traditional Mongolian script and created a generation of Russian-speaking elites.

(3) Post-Soviet era (1992–present)

Mongolia adopted a "multipolar" language policy, promoting English while partially reviving traditional Mongolian script. Chinese influence grew as Sino-Mongolian trade expanded.

2.2.3. Geopolitical shifts

Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy, launched in the 1990s, has significantly altered its foreign language hierarchy. By aligning with Western countries, Japan, and South Korea, Mongolia sought to reduce dependence on China and Russia. This policy manifested in language education. As a result, according to the Ministry of Education, English replaced Russian as the primary foreign language, with 86% of public schools offering English by 2020. Chinese, though economically critical, has been sidelined in public discourse, reflected in language landscape data, accounting for only 2.3% of Ulaanbaatar's public signage uses Chinese, compared to 51% for English and 4% for Russian [8].

2.3. Current tensions in the language ecology

After conducting an in-depth educational survey and research on Mongolia's linguistic landscape, we have identified that Mongolia's language ecology faces three key tensions. That is to say, first, a script conflict arises from its dual-script system (Cyrillic vs. traditional Mongolian), which creates practical challenges. While 90% of the population uses Cyrillic in daily life, the government's 2015 "National Script" initiative to promote traditional Mongolian has had limited success due to low public demand; second, a foreign language hierarchy emerges as the prioritization of English has led to under investment in Russian and Chinese, and according to the Ministry of Education in 2022, only 30% of public schools offered Russian, and 15% offered Chinese; third, there is a tension between cultural and economic priorities, conflicting with the economic need for Chinese proficiency, and this tension is evident in Chinese language teaching (CLT) enrollment, as 73% of Chinese learners are in private schools, where parents prioritize economic outcomes over cultural concerns , released by Mongolian National University of Education, 2021 [9].

3. The evolution of Chinese language teaching in Mongolia: A sociohistorical perspective

To understand the dynamic trajectory of Chinese Language Teaching (CLT) in Mongolia, a sociohistorical lens is essential, one that situates its development within shifting political alliances, economic priorities, and cross-border relations over the past seven decades. CLT in Mongolia has not evolved in isolation; instead, its rise, suspension, recovery, and eventual boom have been deeply intertwined with the country's broader geopolitical choices and socio-economic needs. By

examining three distinct phases of its development, we can trace how external factors such as Sino-Mongolian diplomatic ties and global power shifts, and internal dynamics including educational policies and resource allocation have collectively shaped the role and scale of Chinese language education in Mongolia.

3.1. Stage 1: Initial phase (1957–1968) – Political drivers and early challenges

The first phase of Chinese Language Teaching (CLT) in Mongolia was driven by Sino-Mongolian political cooperation, following the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Mongolia in 1949, this phase aimed to strengthen socialist solidarity between the two nations, with Mongolian National University (MNU) founding the first Chinese language program within its Foreign Language Department in 1957, a program that trained 52 Chinese translation experts over an 11-year period; institutionally, the scope was highly limited during this phase, as only one university (MNU) and one primary school offered Chinese instruction, with annual enrollment restricted to approximately 100 students according to MNU Archives, 1965; the curriculum focused heavily on translation and political terminology, which reflected the overarching socialist agenda, and textbooks were adapted from Chinese-language materials used in the Soviet Union with minimal localization to suit Mongolia's specific context; in terms of teacher supply, all CLT instructors were sponsored by the Chinese government, as Mongolia had no local Chinese language experts at the time; this phase came to an abrupt end in 1968, however, due to the deterioration of Sino-Mongolian relations, political tensions resulted in the suspension of all Chinese language programs, and Chinese teachers were recalled to China [10,11].

3.2. Stage 2: Recovery phase (1973–1990) – Stabilization and slow growth

CLT resumed in 1973, following a partial thaw in Sino-Mongolian relations. MNU reinstated its Chinese language courses, initially offering them to Mongolian language majors as an elective. In 1975, the university reintroduced its Chinese translation program, and by 1987, China had resumed sending government-sponsored teachers to Mongolia [12]. Key developments in this phase include the following situations.

(1) Enrollment growth

According to the statistics of Ministry of Education, the Annual enrollment increased from 50 students in 1973 to 200 in 1990, with most students concentrated in MNU and a small number of vocational schools.

(2) Curriculum adjustments

Greater focus on practical language skills to support limited Sino-Mongolian economic cooperation. Textbooks remained primarily imported from China, but some local adaptations were made; for example, adding Mongolian-Chinese glossaries.

(3) Teacher training

According to the statistics of Chinese Language Teachers Association of Mongolia, 1990, a small number of Mongolian teachers began to receive training in China, though Chinese-sponsored teachers still accounted for 70% of CLT instructors. Despite this recovery, CLT remained marginalized due to the Soviet Union's continued influence. Russian remained the dominant foreign language, with 90% of public schools offering Russian compared to only 5% offering Chinese [13].

3.3. Stage 3: Booming phase (1990–Present) – Economic drivers and expansion

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point for CLT in Mongolia. As Mongolia shifted to a market economy and strengthened economic ties with China, demand for Chinese proficiency surged. According to the data released by the Ministry of Education, by 2023, over 30 universities and 20 primary/secondary schools offered Chinese instruction, with enrollment exceeding 10,000 students. **Table 2** presents key data on CLT enrollment by school type (2009–2025), highlighting the rapid growth in private institutions.

Table 2. Chinese language learners in Mongolia by school type (2009–2025)

School Type	2009–2010 (Number, %)	2014–2015 (Number, %)	2019–2020 (Number, %)	2022–2025 (Number, %)
Public Universities	1,151 (63.3%)	1,320 (58.7%)	1,580 (55.2%)	1,820 (52.0%)
Private Universities	668 (36.7%)	920 (41.3%)	1,280 (44.8%)	1,680 (48.0%)
Public Primary/Secondary	1,580 (32.8%)	1,850 (35.1%)	2,120 (37.6%)	2,450 (40.1%)
Private Primary/ Secondary	3,240 (67.2%)	3,420 (64.9%)	3,520 (62.4%)	3,650 (59.9%)
Total	6,639 (100%)	7,510 (100%)	8,500 (100%)	9,590 (100%)

Table 2 illustrates the changing landscape of Chinese Language Teaching (CLT) enrollment across different school types in Mongolia from 2009 to 2025. Public universities, which once held a dominant position with 63.3% of enrollment in 2009–2010, saw their share gradually decline to 52.0% by 2022–2025. In contrast, private universities experienced a notable upward trend, increasing from 36.7% to 48.0% over the same period. For primary and secondary education, public institutions also saw a rise in their proportion, going from 32.8% to 40.1%, while private primary/secondary schools, despite still having a larger share, witnessed a decrease from 67.2% to 59.9%. This shift aligns with the broader trends in Mongolia's education sector. As Mongolia embraced a market economy and deepened economic ties with China, the demand for Chinese proficiency soared. The establishment of Confucius Institutes played a crucial role in expanding CLT, with these institutions, along with Confucius Classrooms, accounting for 30% of total CLT enrollment by 2025.

4. Challenges in contemporary Chinese language teaching

4.1. Teacher shortages and qualification gaps

Despite the growth in CLT, Mongolia faces a severe shortage of qualified instructors. **Table 3** summarizes teacher demographics and qualifications in 2025.

Table 3. Demographics and qualifications of Chinese language teachers in Mongolia **(2025)**

Category	Public schools (n = 120)	Private schools (n = 80)	Confucius institutes (n = 3)
Nationality			
Mongolian	78 (65.0%)	42 (52.5%)	9 (45.0%)
Chinese (Sponsored)	22 (18.3%)	28 (35.0%)	10 (50.0%)
Chinese (Private)	20 (16.7%)	10 (12.5%)	1 (5.0%)
Qualifications			
PhD	2 (1.7%)	1 (1.3%)	3 (15.0%)
Master's Degree	28 (23.3%)	15 (18.8%)	12 (60.0%)
Bachelor's Degree	88 (73.3%)	62 (77.5%)	5 (25.0%)
TESOL/CLT training	30 (25.0%)	22 (27.5%)	18 (90.0%)
Teaching experience			
< 3 Years	52 (43.3%)	45 (56.3%)	7 (35.0%)
3–10 Years	58 (48.3%)	30 (37.5%)	10 (50.0%)
> 10 Years	10 (8.3%)	5 (6.3%)	3 (15.0%)

The table indicates the demographics and qualifications of Chinese language teachers across public schools, private schools, and Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Mongolia in 2025. In terms of nationality, Mongolian teachers are the most represented in public schools (65.0%), while the proportion of Chinese (sponsored) teachers is highest in CIs (50.0%). Regarding qualifications, a stark contrast exists in advanced degrees: only 23.3% of public-school teachers and 18.8% of private school teachers have a master's degree, whereas 60.0% of CI teachers do. Moreover, formal TESOL/CLT training is much more prevalent in CIs, with 90.0% of teachers having received it, compared to just 25.0% in public schools and 27.5% in private schools. In terms of teaching experience, a significant portion of teachers in public (43.3%) and private (56.3%) schools have less than 3 years of experience, while CI teachers have a more balanced distribution, with 50.0% having 3–10 years of experience. These data align with the identified gaps: low qualification levels, lack of pedagogical training, and high turnover in public and private schools, which hinder the effective delivery of advanced Chinese courses and innovative teaching methods, unlike in CIs where teachers are more qualified, better trained, and more experienced.

4.2. Mismatched teaching materials

Most CLT materials used in Mongolia are imported from China, with little adaptation to local needs. A 2021 survey of 150 CLT teachers found that 85% use textbooks designed for Chinese domestic students or international students in China. 70% reported that these textbooks lack content relevant to Mongolia such as Sino-Mongolian trade, nomadic culture, making it difficult to engage students. 60% noted a shortage of materials for beginner learners, particularly children, leading to reliance on ad-hoc lesson plans.

The lack of localized materials is compounded by the absence of a national CLT curriculum. Each school develops its own syllabus, leading to uneven quality. Public schools typically offer 2–3 hours of Chinese weekly, while private schools offer 4–6 hours.

4.3. Uneven regional access

CLT is highly concentrated in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital. In 2022, 82% of CLT students lived in Ulaanbaatar, compared to 18% in rural areas, released by the Ministry of Education, 2022. This imbalance is driven by two factors as follows.

(1) Institutional concentration

90% of CLT institutions, both universities and private schools of CIs are located in Ulaanbaatar. Rural areas have only 2–3 CLT programs per province, primarily in vocational schools.

(2) Teacher shortages in rural areas

Rural schools struggle to attract qualified teachers, as most prefer to work in Ulaanbaatar for higher salaries and better living conditions. As a result, 70% of rural CLT classes are taught by part-time teachers with no formal training according to the Mongolian National University of Education, 2021.

5. Conclusion

Mongolia's language ecology is a dynamic system shaped by history, geopolitics, and cultural ideologies. Chinese language teaching, as a component of this system, has evolved from a politically driven initiative in the 1950s to an economically critical skill in the 21st century. However, CLT faces significant challenges, including teacher shortages, mismatched materials, uneven regional access, and negative language ideologies.

To address these challenges, stakeholders must adopt a context-specific approach that aligns CLT with Mongolia's unique language ecology. By developing localized materials, strengthening teacher training, expanding rural access, and promoting cross-border exchanges, CLT can be transformed from a "peripheral" foreign language program to a core component of Mongolia's multilingual education system. This transformation will not only enhance Sino-Mongolian educational cooperation but also contribute to the broader goal of linguistic in Inner Asia.

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