COMPETING FACTIONS AND ELITE POWER: 
POLITICAL CONFLICT IN INNER MONGOLIA

DAVID SNEATH

INTRODUCTION

Inner Mongolia has been represented as the site of ancient ethnic conflict between Mongols and Chinese. The New York based Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Centre, for example, refers to the region as ‘Southern Mongolia’ since it considers Inner Mongolia to be an integral part of the Mongolian nation. It views the Han Chinese presence as a military occupation, and describes the last sixty years as “the darkest era ever in Mongolian history.”1 Another US-based activist group, the Inner Mongolian Peoples Party, describes Chinese state action in Inner Mongolia as “the policy and practice of genocide”, writing:

Since the late 1940s, Inner Mongolia fell under Chinese communist rule backed by the People’s Liberation Army ... The Chinese government have moved in millions of Chinese to colonize Inner Mongolia and crushed ruthlessly any expressions of dissent among the Mongols. This brutal Chinese colonization of the Inner Mongols culminated in the death of fifty thousand Mongols and the imprisonment of six to seven hundred thousand more during the Cultural Revolution.2

There is no doubt as to the enormous scale of human suffering caused by the Cultural Revolution and associated period of Revolutionary Committee rule (1965–72). In 1979 the Inner Mongolia Communist Party Committee itself estimated that a campaign against suspected Mongolian separatists waged during this

---

2 The Declaration of Inner Mongolian People’s Party (23rd March 1997, New Jersey) [http://members.aol.com/imppsite/dcl.htm].
time killed over 16,000 people, crippled nearly 90,000 and effected over a million people in one way or another. Other estimates of casualties are higher, and begin to approach the figures given by the activist groups (Woody 1993: 30–31; Atwood 2004: 250; Sneath 2000: 115).

But there are other narratives of conflict, alongside those of Han-Mongol enmity. Within the region itself a common theme is the deep disunity of the Mongolians of the region—in particular the bitter rivalry between East (jegün) and West (baragun) Mongols. At first glance this might seem to fit a familiar narrative of colonial expansion—the political divisions of the region reflect the historical process of a colonising power encroaching upon the territories of indigenous nomads who are themselves plagued with a deep tribalism.

A more careful examination of the history of conflict in Inner Mongolia shows, however, that it cannot be explained simply in terms of ethnic or tribal tensions. Rather, patterns of conflict reflect the struggle for power between factions of the ruling elite—both Han and Mongol.

INNER MONGOLIA AS A ZONE OF ENCOUNTER

Inner Mongolia has long been seen as the encounter zone in which ‘nomadic’ Mongolian and agricultural Chinese cultures meet. The region of the Great Wall has been thought of as the northern frontier of Chinese political influence since the Han state faced its great steppe rival, the Xiongnu empire, in the third century BCE. A common view of this history casts the Chinese and steppe peoples as fundamentally distinct, natural rivals.3 The Great Wall of China has tended to be seen as a product of an ancient ethnic division between the Han and their enemies; the archetypal Chinese defensive line against the alien and predatory nomads of the wild steppes. But as

---

3 Thomas Barfield (1989) for example, treats the political division between China and the steppes as a sort of natural state. He describes the history of the region as a ‘political ecology’ in which cycles of growth and crisis are analogous to a forest ecosystem subject to periodic forest fires. So he argues that:

... The bipolar world of a unified China and a unified steppe which split the frontier between them was a stable climax state. No alternative political structure could emerge while they existed. (Barfield 1989: 10)