

As part of the carve-up of the world that followed the end of the Second World War, the Chinese were able to bring under their sphere of influence an area to the south of Mongolia, which they called Inner Mongolia. Although today the region formally remains autonomous, the Chinese effectively control it. Two Mongolians – Dorj Borjigin and Yangjain Tegusbagar – talked to GRAIN about the problems they face in their country, which they call Southern Mongolia.

# Mongolian herders demand their rights

GRAIN WITH DORJ BORJIGIN AND YANGJAIN TEGUSBAGAR

Over the last 50 years the situation in our country has gone from bad to worse. Before the Communists took over in China, we enjoyed relative independence. But after that the situation deteriorated. The period of the Cultural Revolution in China after 1966 was terrible for us. There was a real massacre. First, they

targeted intellectuals and then herders, anyone at all. It was a kind of ethnic cleansing. We don't even know how many people suffered. According to official figures from the Chinese government, 370,000 Mongols were imprisoned and 16,222 were killed, but we know that the true figures are much, much higher.

Since then, a lot of Chinese have moved into our region. There are now only 4 million Mongolians in the country, compared with 18 million Chinese. We have become a small minority within our own country. At least three-quarters of Mongolians still live as nomadic herders – or, to be more precise, semi-nomadic herders, as it has become almost impossible to remain truly nomadic. In the old days we moved three times a year, from our winter camp to a spring camp and then from there to an autumn camp and then back to the winter camp. Many communities saw the winter camp as their true home. Some of the older people used to stay there the whole year.

Life was good then. Families helped each other. We had the *el amak* concept, which broadly means “one big family”. Everyone supported each other. We had five types of animals – cattle, goats, horses, sheep and camels. They roamed freely. If animals belonging to one family strayed away from the herd and got lost, another family would look after them and eventually return them to their rightful owners. No one ever stole animals. There were no



*Dorj Borjigin*



clear boundaries between one family's land and another's, but we didn't squabble over it.

Today this is all changing. On the surface, it may look as if things are improving, but really they are getting worse. Since the 1960s, the Chinese have started to farm our grasslands intensively. They sent in army officers as part of a so-called "development army". They were mostly retired officers from the People's Liberation Army. These officers have ploughed up wetlands and planted crops – wheat, maize, rice, vegetables. They have destroyed the most beautiful of our wetlands. For example Ulgai, the most beautiful wetland located in Shiliin-gol League, has almost been destroyed by the intensive farming practice of the Chinese. And, along with the farmers, mining companies have moved in. For our land unfortunately is rich in natural resources – liquid coal, silver, copper, and so on.

The mining and the intensive farming are ruining the land, but the Chinese are blaming us for the degradation. They say that we are "overgrazing". It's strange, isn't it, how people talk of "overgrazing" but never of "overcultivating". So now the Chinese are aggressively imposing two policies which are harming us a lot. The first is the so-called "ecological migration policy". The Chinese say that, as our nomadic herding is degrading the land, we must be moved off. They say they are going to manage the land scientifically and that, once the land has been recuperated, we will be able to move back on to it. It sounds good. It is all being done in the name of protecting the ecosystem. But in practice it doesn't work out like that. If the land is fairly fertile, the Chinese plant crops on it. If it is not suited to arable farming, they plant trees. They are setting up big plantations, which they call green belts. In either case, we are never allowed back. The second policy – and it's linked to the first – is the decision, announced in 2006, that all livestock must be fenced. Since then, people have had to pay heavy fines to get their animals back if they are found roaming freely. These policies are enforced brutally by armed policemen.

These policies are destroying our animals. Even before the decision about fencing, we were suffering. Our horses don't get enough exercise in confined conditions. They must roam freely so that they can gallop. The Chinese don't understand this. They think that any animal that is roaming freely doesn't have an owner and can be caught and sold. We, the Mongolians, are called horseback people, but today our horses have almost disappeared. And it's not just horses. Most of our animals are disappearing. Way back in 1940, the Japanese



*Yangjain Tegusbagar*

began to bring in new breeds, but they didn't do it aggressively. People didn't like the new breeds so they didn't spread. The Chinese are different. They are bringing in sheep from the Xinjiang region of north-west China and the Mermos breed from Russia. We don't like them. Our local breeds have long tails and a lot of fat on them so they can survive the harsh winters. The new breeds, which we call "dog tail", are not suited to our environment. They aren't hardy enough. Many of their lambs die soon after they're born in the spring, because they aren't tough enough. And they get more diseases. But it's not just that: even if they were as good as our breeds, we wouldn't want them. We want our own breeds. But the Chinese are imposing the new breeds, and they are forcing us to use artificial insemination on them. Our farmers just refuse to do this, so the Chinese are forcing our womenfolk to carry it out.

What we are defending are our herders' rights. And the main one is access to the land. That's what we need more than anything else. If not, we have no choice but to migrate to the cities. We become double losers – we lose our land and then we lose in the cities, because we never make a go of it there. We don't have the contacts or the knowledge for life in the city. We end up homeless or working on construction sites. And what life is that? We are not against development. We want clean water. We want modern transport. But we want these things on our own terms: to improve our lives, not to destroy them.

