11. Cultural Survival and National Identity in Contemporary Mongolia

Mei-hua Lan

Abstract: Mongolia adopted many Russian and Soviet cultural elements during the twentieth century. When Mongolia recovered its de facto independence in the 1990s, it began to emphasize Mongol ethnic and cultural identity. Cultural revival became an important task because it brought a sense of cultural security to Mongolia. Besides China and Russia, Mongolia has also absorbed cultural elements from existing developed countries. This is due not only to the effects of globalization but also to those of Mongolia's foreign policy of "the third neighbor," applied to secure its independence. This policy allows Mongolia to participate in a broader global network while creating a new identity. This chapter discusses the shifts of contested Mongolian identity and cultural security in the era after Mongolia adopted its new constitution in 1992.

Keywords: Mongolia, national identity, cultural revival, globalization, third neighbor policy

Living at a crossroads of cultures, Mongols have been receptive to new knowledge and innovations since ancient times. After the abolition of the one-party dictatorship in 1990, the Mongolian government quickly introduced the political and economic system of developed countries. The Mongolians also display an open attitude towards different cultures and innovations. Through a large number of real and virtual interactions, they have quickly learned many new things from what they consider developed and progressive societies. Riding the tide of globalization, Mongolia has reconstructed the recognition of Mongolian tradition on the one hand and the new face of diversity and innovation on the other. Traditional cultures are important for reviving the Mongolian ethnic identity and strengthening

Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš (eds), *Cultural Security in Contemporary China and Mongolia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
DOI: 10.5117/9789463722889_CH11

cultural security, but various global influences voluntarily accepted by the Mongolians also have impacts on their identity. The country can be simultaneously nationalist and internationalist. Such a combination of identities does not affect Mongolia's sense of cultural security as long as it retains the right to choose.

According to the classic definition of Edward B. Tylor (1920, 1), culture or civilization is "a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Mongolian culture is certainly such a complex whole, with pastoral nomadism as the core and the results of interaction with neighboring cultures as its inseparable parts. As underlined in the introductory chapter to this volume, culture is a set of markers descriptive of a certain group. These markers are the core of the group's cultural identity that helps to establish a sense of common affiliation and also boundaries with the cultural "Other." Cultures and cultural identifiers are under constant external influence and are also continually being adjusted and prone to incessant transformation. In their day-to-day form, cultures are better described as "ultimately hybrid" constructs.

Mongolian culture was greatly influenced by the Turks, Tibetans, Chinese, and Russians. Turkic nomadic culture was easily absorbed by the Mongols, who appeared later in history, due to their similar economic system and lifestyle as well as their historical and geographical closeness. Tibetan influence came to Mongolia mainly after the Mongols accepted Tibetan Buddhism as their major religion. Chinese influence was a natural historical product of interactions between Mongols and Chinese over the course of centuries. While the influence of the Turks, Tibetans, and Chinese was absorbed by the Mongols after centuries of interaction, Russian influence came mostly with political supremacy and accelerated its impact in a relatively short period. Mongolian culture has thus been shaped by multiple elements. In modern times, China and Russia have had a great impact on Mongolia, which was once part of China and later under Russian and Soviet dominance. Mongolia adopted many Russian and Soviet cultural elements in the twentieth century. When Mongolia recovered its de facto independence in the early 1990s, it began to emphasize Mongolian ethnic and cultural identity. Cultural revival became an important task.

This chapter discusses the shifting of contested Mongolian identity and cultural security in the era after Mongolia adopted its new constitution in 1992. It pinpoints that cultural revival and transformation promoted top-down by the Mongolian authorities or bottom-up by the Mongolian people have helped the Mongolians to build their national identity and cultural security, and thus their self-confidence.

Cultural Changes during the Soviet Period

In his book regarding Sinophobia in Mongolia, Franck Billé (2015, 121–50) expounds the influence of the Soviet Union on Mongolian thought and the modernization of Mongolia in all aspects of architecture, health, education, customs, medical treatment, and gender roles. While Russia represented a condensed form of a broader concept of Europe and modernity, Soviet forms of education and curricula, cemeteries and funeral rituals, hygienic concepts and facilities, and hospitals and medical technologies were introduced to Mongolia after its independence in 1921. Soviet concepts and manifestations were also present in the design and planning of Ulaanbaatar and other cities as well as in the encouragement of women to accept education and gain employment as professional and technical personnel.

The many elements of so-called modernization or Westernization introduced to Mongolia by the Soviet Union simultaneously changed many of the country's traditional cultural elements strongly identified with the Mongols, i.e., "Mongolness," Mongol ethnic identity, and their cultural security. The most significant cultural changes during the Soviet period were the reinterpretation of Mongolian history, especially the role of Chinggis Khan, the replacement of the traditional script with the Cyrillic alphabet, the prohibition of religious practices and the weakening of Mongol ethnic identity. All these changes were related to the Sovietization of Mongolia, an inevitable trend under the guidance and control of the Soviet Union. After Mongolia regained its status as an independent state at the beginning of the 1990s, it did not hesitate to revive or reuse these important symbols of Mongol identity.

Cultural Policies after Mongolia Regained Its Independence

In Mongolia's constitution of 1992, Article 7 of chapter one on the sovereignty of the state stipulates that "the historical, cultural, scientific, and intellectual heritage of the Mongolian people is under the protection of the state" (The Constitution of Mongolia 1992). The first Law on Culture after Mongolian democratization approved in 1996 states that "Mongolian culture is the guarantee of the country's independence and security, the national pride of the Mongolian people, the foundation of national unity and the foundation for development" (Gombo 2016). The fourth item of Article 4 states that a citizen of Mongolia shall have the cultural right to inherit and develop their mother tongue, literacy, customs, history, and cultural traditions. Article 5 on

civic duties on culture in the Law on Culture as amended in 2002 stipulates that a citizen of Mongolia shall have the following obligations regarding culture: (1) to protect and develop historical and cultural traditions; (2) to study, inherit and pass on the mother tongue and literacy; (3) to respect and develop family culture and a traditional Mongolian upbringing, to know one's ancestry and to keep genealogies; (4) to protect cultural values from any kind of attack (Soëlyn tukhai khuuli 2020; Soëlyn tukhai 2020).

Besides the Constitution and the Law on Culture, Mongolia also passed related laws regarding culture. Legislation was tightened and national cultural security was guaranteed in accordance with the law. Since the 1990s, due to the great internal and external changes in the country, Mongolia has updated key laws and regulations that are important for the country's general security. Many of these laws relate to the protection of national culture. After the adoption of the new constitution in 1992, the State Great Khural (Parliament) published documents such as the Law on State-Church Relations in 1993, the National Security Concept of Mongolia in 1994, and the Foreign Policy Concept of Mongolia in 1996. Many documents have been approved, such as "Mongolia's National Development Concept," "Mongolia's Cultural Policy," and "Mongolia's Ecological Policy." Thus, the country's cultural security is legally protected (Gombo 2016). All these were done top-down by the Mongolian authorities. The process was little contested because Moscow was busy dealing with its own troubles, and Ulaanbaatar tried to distance Mongolia from its Soviet past.

In the document titled "Approval of the State Policy on Culture" adopted by the State Great Khural in 2012, the opening words indicate that "The government values the preservation and protection of traditional culture, which is a source of intellectual development and well-being of the Mongolians, a guarantee of the existence, security, development and progress of the Mongolian nation, and ensures sustainable development." The third part of the fourth section regarding the main directions of cultural policy and its implementation measures concerns the preservation, inheritance, and enrichment of the cultural heritage of Mongolia. The law mandates the state to protect ancient and modern Mongolian and Mongolia's minorities' cultural heritage, history, and customs as a national treasure, to safeguard the legal environment for studying, training, preserving and developing the mother tongue, script and history, and to guarantee the position and inviolability of the mother tongue in state and civil relations and make it a component of education at all levels (Töröös soëlyn talaar barimtlakh bodlogo 2020). The document connects traditional culture to the security of the Mongolian nation and points out the importance of mother tongue, script, and history.

During the Soviet period, the Russian language was learned in schools, the traditional script was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet, and history was written according to socialist historiography. All this was significant for building the ethnic identity and cultural security of the Mongolians.

The Return of Mongolian Script

After the 1921 revolution, the Mongolian script (*Hudum Mongol bichig*) was used until 1941, when an adapted (thirty-five-letter) Cyrillic alphabet was adopted, helping to almost eliminate illiteracy by the end of the 1950s (Buyanjargal 2017). In the 1990s, Mongolia was transformed into a democratic system. People regained their appreciation for tradition and cultural renaissance was in the air. A new movement to abolish the Cyrillic alphabet and restore the Mongolian script arose. There were many comments and initiatives to make the national script of Mongolia the official script. In May 1991, the Mongolian parliament issued a resolution to resume the use of Mongolian script from 1994. However, the decision was not implemented due to insufficient funding and other factors (Gombo 2016). In September 1992, education in Mongolian script from the first year of primary school was launched. Unfortunately, when these children reached the third grade, Cyrillic was adopted once again. In the face of harsh economic reality, the budget could not stretch to train teachers and educate students in the vertical Mongolian script (Moon 2013).

In 1995, the parliament and the government approved the "National Program for Mongolian script" and a ten-year program for the restoration of Mongolian script, reviewing the reasons for the failure to restore it. Although the program expired in 2005, the goal of reviving the Mongolian script throughout the country was not achieved, and it remained only a symbol of Mongolian culture. At that time, the Mongolian script was used only for the seals and symbols of government ministries and agencies (Gombo 2016).

There were also Mongolians who asked for the Latin alphabet to be used throughout the country. Supporters of Romanization, citing the worldwide use of English, called for the adoption of several different Latin alphabets to transliterate the modified Cyrillic script in current use. In June 2003, the Mongolian parliament approved the National Latin Script Program for Romanization of Mongolian Cyrillic. A "state standard" for this was drawn up, and a timetable for its introduction was published. However, serious disagreements emerged over the transliteration key and spelling reform, and the standard was abandoned (Sanders 2010, 640). The National

Standardization Council adopted a new Romanization standard in February 2012, but the revised standard was hardly remarked upon and certainly not enforced (Sanders 2017, 747). On March 1, 2005, the newspaper *Khumuun Bichig* (The Human Script), printed in Mongolian script, campaigned against the use of the Latin alphabet for business names and signs. The appeal was intended to be a part of "Traditional Mongolian Script Day" on May 1 (*The UB Post* 2005).

In the new millennium, Mongolia attempted to revive the Mongolian script once again. On June 25, 2003, the Mongolian president N. Bagabandi issued a decree to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the use of the Mongolian script in 2004. In accordance with the decree and to honor the mother tongue and promote the national script, a National Literacy Festival is organized annually (Tuguldur 2018). In 2004, the president decreed that, for the first time in Mongolia, an event would be organized to mark the 800th anniversary of the use of Mongolian script. The purpose of this event was to introduce the cultural history of Mongolia to the world, to revive the national consciousness and pride of the people, and to revive the Mongolian script. In 2004, the government decided to keep a copy of all the presidential decrees since 2001 in Mongolian script, leaving it as a cultural heritage for future generations (Gombo 2016). All these efforts were considered legitimate and broadly accepted.

On July 6, 2010, President Ts. Elbegdorj issued a decree to increase the official use of Mongolian script, coming into effect from July 1, 2011. According to the presidential decree, official documents and letters of the president, prime minister, chairman of parliament, and members of parliament sent to foreign high officials would be written in Mongolian script with a translation attached in the current language or in one of the UN's official languages. ID, passports, birth and marriage certificates, documentation, and diplomas from educational and training organizations and centers would all be written both in Mongolian and Cyrillic script (Official Documents to be in Mongolian Script). At the opening of the National Literacy Festival in 2017, Minister of Education, Culture, Science and Sports J. Batsuuri remarked during the opening ceremony that Mongolia had set a goal to convert to a dual-script system of Mongolian script and Cyrillic script by 2025 (Aminaa 2017). According to *Montsame*, the state news agency of Mongolia, Mongolian script has been taught in schools since the 1990s, and now nearly half of all Mongolians can read and write it (Buyanjargal 2017). However, more than twenty years after democratization, the Cyrillic alphabet is still used as the national script in Mongolia. The use of Mongolian script has been increasing and it is taught in secondary school, but there is little opportunity to use

it. In the bookstores of Ulaanbaatar, there are still few books written in Mongolian script. Whether the goal of converting to a dual-script system by 2025 can be achieved remains uncertain.

The Rehabilitation of Chinggis Khan

As a communist country from 1924 to 1990, Mongolia was under overwhelming Soviet influence in all areas, including historiography. Historical materialism was the norm, certain research topics and interpretations were censored, and independent historiography hardly existed. Since democratization, intellectual discourses have boomed and topics that were previously prohibited have been open for discussion. The collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged the growth of Mongolian nationalism. Historiography in Mongolia after 1990 obviously reflects this new trend. The publications in post-communist Mongolia offer new interpretations of Mongolian history. Discussion of the most prominent Mongolian national hero and cultural icon, Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227), which had been censored in the socialist period, is now omnipresent and has become the core of Mongol identity. The Mongolian independence movement of 1911 is now considered the first modern nationalist revolution of Mongolia. Different topics, aspects, methods, and interpretations have won their space to develop. New trends in historiography bring new meanings for Mongolian historians and their fellow Mongolians.

The past prohibition of the worship of Chinggis Khan is a good example of how the Soviet-era modernization simultaneously led to the suppression of some aspects of traditional Mongolian culture. The Mongolian communist government, under the influence of Moscow, forbade anyone from even mentioning the name of Chinggis Khan, who had subordinated Russia under the "Mongol yoke" and was considered a mass murderer by the Russians. The celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of Chinggis Khan in 1962 seemed an excellent chance for the Mongols to revive their national consciousness. Mongolian scholars and intellectuals were ready to organize a celebration after the proposal was approved by the leadership of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP). The date of the anniversary was set for June 10, 1962, and a monument was erected in the birthplace of Chinggis Khan. Other activities included a scientific conference, the issue of a special series of postage stamps and the printing of books and articles. However, due to the conflict between Mongolian nationalism and the chief principles of proletarian internationalism challenged by heightening

East–West tensions over Southeast Asia, Berlin, and Cuba, by August 1962, the Mongolian government began to take firm steps to forestall the nationalist movement. Later the major organizers of the Chinggis anniversary were forced to make self-criticisms of their actions. In the end, the energy and effort put into the anniversary were squandered. The historian J. Boldbaatar (1999, 237–46) points out that the communist leader Yu. Tsedenbal (1952–84) used the struggle between nationalism and internationalism to increase his own power. By the mid-1960s, he had overpowered his opposition and put himself firmly in charge of the Mongolian government.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was an economic crisis in all the former parts of the Soviet Union, as well as in Mongolia. At that time, the Mongolians were desperately searching for a redeeming figure who would remind them of their old greatness, someone who they could rally behind. The most preferred choice was certainly Chinggis Khan, who was credited as the world conqueror. Chinggis Khan is now a ubiquitous hero in Mongolia and a recurring motif in Mongolian culture. You can find his image on everything: postage stamps, beer bottles, hotels, and even banknotes. He is the subject of numerous films, television series, poems, novels, short stories, songs, and video games. There is even an opera in his name at Ulaanbaatar's famed Mongolian Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet. Chinggis Khan is almost a cult in Mongolia (Discover Mongolia 2015). Even some Mongolian scholars do not accept this kind of excessive praise. Although they agree with the heroic role of Chinggis Khan in history and in the national identity of present-day Mongolia, they suggest that objective evaluation based on historical documents is a more appropriate approach.

Research and propaganda regarding Chinggis Khan are being intensified. According to the new interpretation, Chinggis Khan is a famous historical figure and a world-renowned great man of the millennium. He not only united the Mongolian steppe, but also created the Mongol nation and had a great influence on many Eurasian nations and peoples. He also played an unprecedented role in East–West cultural exchanges, political changes, and the development of world history.

Chinggis Khan returned as a hero of the Mongolian nation, and Mongolia has been intensifying archaeological research and advocacy to prove that it is the successor to the Great Mongol Empire founded by Chinggis Khan. Mongolians do not agree with the common Chinese scholarly narrative that "Chinggis Khan is one of the ancestors of the Chinese nation" and "Chinggis Khan is a hero not only of the Mongolian nation but also of the Chinese nation." From the perspective of the Mongolian scholars, China was only a part of the Great Mongol Empire. Since 1990, Mongolia has collaborated with

Japan, the United States, South Korea, Turkey, and Russia in archaeological endeavors to locate Chinggis Khan's gravesite. The aim is to prove that Chinggis Khan was not only born in Mongolia but was also a Mongolian sovereign worshipped there. In 2004, the President and Prime Minister of Mongolia signed a decree to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Great Mongol State in 2006. In December 2005, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, the "Greater Mongolia 800 Fund" was established, and the funds for the 2006 commemorative event were collected by the foreign and domestic branches of enterprises and by individuals. Its purpose is to sever cultural ties with China (Gombo 2016). With the return of the cult of Chinggis Khan, the Mongolians have pursued and consolidated their new national identity related to their lasting struggle to establish an independent country of their own.

The Rewriting of History

As the Mongolian democracy movement got into full swing in the 1990s, history became one of the political battlegrounds. Protesters put forward a history and historical figures that were different from the official versions. Mongolian society urgently pursued "true history," which often referred at that time only to "history" that was different from the official version of the late socialist period and met the people's subjective expectations. A history of Mongolia in five volumes, *Mongol Ulsyn Tüükh*, was published in December 2003. It is a monumental work with an editorial team that reads like a who's who of Mongolian historiography: A. Ochir, Ch. Dalai, N. Ishjamts, Sh. Natsagdorj, B. Shirendev, J. Bolbaatar, L. Jamsran, Ts. Ishdorj, D. Tseveendorj. The five volumes cover Mongolian history from the earliest antiquity to the end of 2000. This is one of the most important official historical works since the democratic transition and provides different viewpoints concerning the history of the thirteenth century and modern times.

Unlike previously published history books, this five-volume work was written by Mongolian scholars on their own independently from Soviet oversight. It also has a great deal of new content. First, according to the results of archaeological research, the history of human habitation in Mongolia goes back 750,000 years, 450,000 years earlier than previously thought. Mongolia is considered one of the first places in the world where people lived and where animal husbandry was developed. Second, it rewrites and evaluates Chinggis Khan's contribution to Mongolia and the history of

the world from different angles. Chinggis Khan was the founder of today's globalization, the founder of Mongolia, a great leader, a Mongolian national hero, and a great man. The book argues that the ancestors of the Mongols had their own territory from ancient times and established their own country 2,000 years ago; that the present Mongolian state is the heir to the Hunnu and the great Mongolian empire; that Chinggis Khan was the founder of the Mongolian empire; that the 1911 and 1921 movements are the "National Revolution" and the "National Democratic Revolution." It suggests that the Manchus were invaders and that the Qing emperors were colonial rulers. Mongolia has been relentlessly reinterpreting its history and trying to deny its ties to China. The intention is to strengthen Mongolian cultural security and to establish a clear "boundary" that distinguishes it from neighboring countries in terms of culture and history (Gombo 2016).

The changes to ancient history are focused on the abolition of the historical materialism of the socialist period and the re-evaluation of historical figures (especially Chinggis Khan). The writing of modern and contemporary history has changed greatly, and the opinions and evaluation are more objective. When discussing the politicians of the twentieth century, there are more objective evaluations of the three heads of socialist Mongolia (Kh. Choibalsan, Yu. Tsedenbal and J. Batmonh), and figures who have been deliberately ignored by previous historiography, such as D. Bodoo and S. Danzan, the real leaders of Mongolia's independence movement of 1921. However, Buryat figures such as E. Rinchino, who, as a Russian citizen and a Communist International representative, played a leading role in Mongolia in the 1920s, are still ignored because of Mongolia's desire to maintain friendly relations with Buryatia, historically a part of Mongolia and later a region of Russia, where Rinchino is now considered a hero. In addition, the great purges of the 1930s, the independence movement of 1911, the Sino-Russo-Mongolian Treaty of 1915, the relations between the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party and the Soviet Union and the Commintern, and relations with China are focuses of discussion with new viewpoints. Even though Sh. Bira, the famous Mongolian historian and academician, remarked once at an academic conference that this *History of Mongolia* was still not new and progressive enough, the content of the five-volume history offers more objective facts than the various versions of the socialist period. This rewriting of Mongolian history is surely significant, but it certainly has the smell of Mongolian nationalism revived after 1990.

The Mongolist Christopher Kaplonski studies the interaction of truth, history, and politics in post-socialist Mongolia through the discussion of

three historical heroes, Chinggis Khan, G. Zanabazar, and D. Sukhbaatar. He compares the interpretation and evaluation of their roles in Mongolian society during two different periods of socialism and democratic transition, and then extends the discussions to social memory (Kaplonski 2004). He points out that the official, approved narratives of history in the socialist era somehow help propagate and preserve unofficial histories (Kaplonski 2004, 11). For example, although Chinggis Khan was criticized during the socialist period for his wars of domination against other lands that created significant obstacles to future development, the fact that he united the scattered tribes, established a new regime, and stimulated Mongolia's economy and cultural development was also mentioned. The positive image of Chinggis Khan before the socialist period was reaffirmed even more pronouncedly after 1990 (Kaplonski 2004, 108–9, 131–32).

The communist revolutionary Sukhbaatar, a founding member of the Mongolian People's Party (MPP, later the MPRP) and leader of the Mongolian partisan army, was a hero in socialist times and was called the "Lenin of Mongolia." However, Mongolian people in the 1990s knew that he was not the most important figure for the success of the independence movement in 1921. S. Danzan and D. Bodoo were the real leaders at that time. Danzan and Bodoo were also founding members of the MPP. Danzan later served as chairman of the Party Central Committee and Bodoo became the country's first prime minister. Both of their roles were masked or distorted in the history of the socialist period because they were from the noble class and later lost their lives in political purges. Sukhbaatar was promoted as the most revered figure in the socialist period because he came from a commoner family, in line with the socialist respect for the proletariat, and he died early, without getting caught up in later power struggles. Although there was a re-evaluation of Sukhbaatar's deeds in the 1990s, his image in the history of the new period remains positive. After all, his contribution at that time should not be extinguished. Kaplonski indicates that Sukhbaatar is still seen as having played a key role in Mongolian history, but his links to the socialist period were largely ignored. Despite his role as the "Lenin of Mongolia," the Mongolians attribute the evils of socialism not to him but to the Soviet Union, especially to E. Rinchino, the Buryat Mongol influential in the early days of the revolution (Kaplonski 2004, 163).

The rewriting of history and the re-evaluation of historical figures demonstrate a new interpretation of Mongolian history. The tracing of the country's history back to the Hunnu Empire, the Great Mongol Empire and Chinggis Khan reminds the Mongolians of their long tradition and past

glory. The redefinition of the 1911 and 1921 movements as the "National Revolution" and the "National Democratic Revolution" decorates Mongolia with nationalism and democracy. The reintroduction or reinterpretation of annihilated or masked figures signifies the rehabilitation of history. All these factors were important as Mongolia sought for its national identity after the democratic transition.

The Changing Landscape of Ulaanbaatar

Ulaanbaatar's central square was originally named in honor of Sukhbaatar. The Ulaanbaatar city council made an abrupt decision on July 15, 2013 to rename the square after Chinggis Khan. This decision was strongly opposed by the Mongolian People's Party (formerly MPRP), as well as the descendants of Sukhbaatar. The issue went to court in 2014. However, the Administrative Cases Court did not make a final ruling to overturn the 2013 resolution until mid-August 2016, shortly after the MPP rose to power. The city council made the decision to change the name back to Sukhbaatar Square on September 15 (Bayarsaikhan 2016; Amarsaikhan 2016). The decision to change Sukhbaatar Square's name was not only an attempt to signal ideological departure from socialist Mongolia but also an effort to erase the memory associated with it and to instill a new memory. However, many of the locals did not support the new name (Myadar 2019, 67). After the name had been officially changed, the decision was not popular, and most of the inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar continued to use the original name of Sukhbaatar Square (Dillon 2020, 186). Although Chinggis Khan returned as the founder of the Great Mongol State, Sukhbaatar remains a nationalist hero.

However, the grand mausoleum of Sukhbaatar and Choibalsan was demolished, and in its place there now stands a massive statue of Chinggis Khan erected in 2006 in commemoration of the 800th anniversary of the establishment of the Great Mongol State and the enthronement of Chinggis Khan. The statue is not seen as a mere architectural ornament, but rather treated as the undeniable symbol of the state. Besides, the statue of Lenin, which had stood near the center of Ulaanbaatar for several decades, was also erased from Ulaanbaatar's symbolic landscape in 2012. It became a victim of the state's efforts to cleanse the city landscape of the remnants of the socialist period. The material expressions of socialist ideology are fading in post-socialist Mongolia (Myadar 2016). The statue of Marco Polo, a long-time trusted envoy of Khubilai Khan, designed by architect B. Denzen, was unveiled in 2011. Marco Polo remains a symbol of the global reach of

the Mongol Empire and the historical ties connecting the East and the West under Mongolian hegemony.[1]

The National Museum of Mongolian History was established after the merger of the historical, archaeological, and ethnographical departments of the State Central Museum and the Museum of the Revolution in 1991. It was elevated in status to National Museum of Mongolia in 2008. The present building of the museum was built in 1971, when it was constructed as the Museum of Revolution. Exhibits of the museum show the history and culture of the Mongols from as early as the Stone Age up to the present day (The National Museum of Mongolia). From my personal experience, the routine exhibitions of this museum have changed several times since its establishment. The most striking change for me is the large increase in the number of modern historical objects, photographs, and documents, especially those concerning democratization.

Religious Revival

In addition to the reinterpretation of Mongolian history, the revival of shamanism and Buddhism is important for the consolidation of Mongolia's national identity. The Mongols were well known for their religious tolerance in the thirteenth century. The practice of religious tolerance was not only a demonstration of the self-confidence of Mongolian leaders like Chinggis Khan, but also a positive factor that helped them create the Mongol world empire. Besides shamanism and Buddhism, Islamism and Christianity were also practiced among the people within the Mongol empire. With the return of Buddhism, the Mongols became devoted Buddhists from the sixteenth century.

When the Mongols entered the Soviet era in the 1920s, Russian atheism and materialism had a profound effect on Mongolia. Religious practice gradually became taboo, resulting in a decline in the people's commitment to Buddhism. However, Buddhism was not gone. With the democratization of the 1990s, Mongolian traditional culture began to regain its importance. The revitalization of Buddhism and shamanism is part of this process. The Mongolian government makes use of some traditional metaphors to

1 Khubilai Khan (in power 1264–94) was one of the great khans of the Mongolian empire. He founded the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which ruled all of China and had its capital in modern-day Beijing, established under the Mongol name Khanbaliq (Ch. Dadu). Marco Polo traveled to the city and other regions of China, but not to present-day Mongolia.

emphasize Mongolia's genuine independence, and common people likely embrace Mongolian Buddhist heritage to help themselves cope with the difficulties that followed the enormous change in the early 1990s.

In the period of transition, Mongolia began to support Buddhism and pursue a religious policy based on this religion. In addition to the rapid recovery of traditional religions in Mongolia, many new denominations were emerging. Buddhism, which entered Mongolia from Tibet and became popular from the sixteenth century onwards, has played an important role in Mongolian history. Faced with the coexistence of many religions, Mongolia passed the Law on State-Church Relations in 1993, which states that "the Government of Mongolia shall respect the dominant position of Buddhism in Mongolia in order to protect the life and cultural traditions of its people. It does not prevent people from practicing other religions" (Tör, süm khiidiin khariltsaany tukhai 2020). In order to maintain the primary position of Buddhism, the government funded the reconstruction of the statue of Avalokiteśvara in Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar in 1996, and heads of state and government go there every Mongolian New Year for worship (Gombo 2016).

The 14th Dalai Lama has been allowed to visit Mongolia several times since 1990, promoting Mongolia as a Buddhist country. The government has supported invitations to monks from India, where the Dalai Lama lives in exile, and from other countries. It also works closely with many Tibetan Buddhist sects and Buddhists in other countries, as well as with international peace organizations. In September 2003, a Buddhist television channel was launched (Gombo 2016). Buddhist temples were under construction and reconstruction. While visiting Amarbayasgalant Monastery in northern Mongolia in the 1990s, I was told that Taiwanese Buddhists had made donations towards the reconstruction of temples there.

After the mass destruction of Buddhism in the 1930s, only Gandan Monastery was allowed to function as a token homage to traditional Mongolian culture and religion. According to the Mongolian Statistical Yearbook of 2017, there were 136 Buddhist temples (forty-three of them in Ulaanbaatar), 2,091 temple employees (1,051 of them in Ulaanbaatar), 1,303 monks (610 of them in Ulaanbaatar), and 143 students studying in Buddhist schools and colleges (sixty-six of them in Ulaanbaatar). Compared with the 2005 statistics, these figures are declining year by year (Mongolian Registration and Statistics Office 2017, 201–5). Although the numbers of temples and lamas are far lower than before the mass destruction in the Soviet era, the revival of Buddhism has been obvious in Mongolia, especially in the early years after the democratization.

Democratization also opened a door for Christianity to enter Mongolia. According to the international Christian organization Serving in Mission, Christian radio programs originally opened Mongolia up to Christianity. Some Mongolians become Christians because they accept the teaching of God, but some do so because they want to build a connection to the outside world, especially with the West (Lan 2006, 109–11). In the official census in 2010, 53 percent of individuals aged fifteen and above self-identified as Buddhist, 3 percent as Muslim, 2.9 percent as Shamanist, and 2.1 percent as Christian. Another 38.6 percent stated they had no religious identity. The ethnic Kazakh community, located primarily in the northwest, is majority Muslim (U.S. Department of State 2016). Although shamanism is obviously less supported by the government, its re-emergence as a part of Mongolian cultural heritage is apparent. Many individuals practice elements of shamanism in combination with other religions, particularly Buddhism. Mongolia is again a country of religious tolerance. Buddhism has regained its status as the most important religion in Mongolia, and it serves as an element of "Mongolness," though perhaps a historical one.

Mongol Nationalism, Music, and Rituals

The Mongolian cultural revival and national identity discussed above have also contributed to changes of mentality and normative behavior. Many Mongolians are nationalistic, with a feeling of pride in their country and traditional culture. Traditional Mongols were nomads living close to nature, the land, and livestock. Today's Mongolian people define "Mongolness" partially based on such an existence. They think that the Mongols should live in Mongolia, breathe Mongolian air, and eat Mongolian food. Once they are uncomfortable or sick, they will get better after returning to the land of their birth. Although many Mongolians live in cities and have lost their traditional knowledge, they still consider themselves a nation on horseback, defining "Mongolness" through nomadic tradition and the steppe lifestyle. The Mongolians in the city have contradictory views about the countryside, feeling that it represents the true Mongolia, but at the same time, they see it as dirty and uncivilized. After going to the countryside for a few days, they return to the city, feeling relaxed. Although the Mongolians embrace both urbanity and internationality, they try to maintain their unique and traditional culture that is deeply rooted in symbiosis with nature (Billé 2015, 98, 106–7, 115–17). The tremendous change from socialist internationalism back to Mongolian nationalism in the global present has had a strong impact

on Mongolians' mentality and behavior, encouraging them to choose to be Mongols.

The ethnomusicologist Peter K. Marsh pointed out that in the mid-1980s, the popular singer D. Jargalsaikhan broke the Soviet taboo and praised Chinggis Khan with his own songs. In the street demonstrations from 1989 to 1990, the pop-duo Khonkh (Bell) also used their self-created songs to oppose and satirize the government and officials under one-party rule. After the democratization of Mongolia, music was no longer regulated by the government and could be freely created. In the 1990s, many pop singers and groups appeared. They were greatly influenced by popular music in the West (especially the United States), but they also used traditional elements of Mongolian music to gain more acceptance. They developed their own unique musical and presentational styles. Most said that their audiences preferred more "Mongolian" sounding versions of them. This meant finding a compromise between Western and traditional folk music. The members of the rock band Hurd (Speed) explained that when they performed for audiences of non-Mongolians or older generations of Mongolians, they tended to perform heavy metal songs with a "more traditional" sound to them, for example by using folk musical instruments or folk song techniques. The popular music market has gradually expanded, singers and groups have received sponsorship from companies, and some have established close relationships with politicians and even participated in election campaigns. Hip-hop or rap music was not accepted by the Mongolians at first, and it was not until the early 2000s that it received acclamation from the audience (Marsh 2010, 346–50, 355). After democratization, Mongolian pop music found its own voice. Its techniques and content also fully expressed Mongolia's change and identity in the post-socialist period.

Yi-fan Hsiao believes that in the cases of Altan Urag (Golden Family) and other Mongolian pop bands, the music that flaunts Mongolia is presented as a mixture of tradition and modernity. This phenomenon shows the impact of globalization and modernization on Mongolian music and exemplifies the imagination of a new Mongolia. On the one hand, under the cultural and economic influence of Europe, the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea, the Mongolians have been trying to improve their position in order to counter these external influences. On the other, from the development of popular music, the music that the Mongolians recognize and feel proud of is no longer confined to the pursuit of pure traditions. While being able to claim Mongol roots and present their integration with the world and innovation, the Mongolians have found the "Pan-Mongolia" pursued by the post-Soviet generation (Hsiao 2013, 13, 39, 69).

Mongolian pop music has incorporated Western music and European and American pop music and blended them with what is considered to be Mongolian, such as traditional musical instruments, long songs, lyrics and content regarding nature, parents, history, love and affection, stage ornaments taken from natural landscapes, animals, yurts, and Mongolian costumes. It is loved and recognized by Mongolian locals and makes a splash in the international arena. Hsiao points out that whether it is in the context of Asia or the world, Mongolia is a country with cultural self-creation and its own voice, and cannot be underestimated (Hsiao 2013, 31–32, 93, 96).

Mongolia has also been reviving traditional customs and intensifying research on traditional culture. In the socialist period, some traditional Mongolian ceremonies and rituals were abandoned or forgotten. Since the 1990s, Mongolia has done much to revive its culture and customs through intensifying research. The Mongolians celebrate the New Year (*Tsagaan Sar*) according to the Mongolian calendar. Government officials wear national costumes for major celebrations, such as the Mongolian New Year and the anniversary of the victory of the People's Revolution, offer snuff from small bottles to greet each other, and raise a silver cup of milk. During inauguration or handover ceremonies, the seals are put on the *khadag* (traditional ceremonial scarf) and handed over between the heads of state and government.

The President of Mongolia personally participates in mountain rituals. The worship of the traditional black *suld* (banner) in the army and the white *suld* of the state and government has been revived. Mongolia has established ritual halls for military units and allowed them to invite Buddhist monks to chant sutras. The traditional customs of the people have been gradually revived and the government has paid great attention to national cultural heritage, successfully organizing the registration of *morin khuur* (the horsehead fiddle) and *urtiin duu* (long song) as examples of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage and investing in preserving the craftsmanship of artisans (Gombo 2016). All these actions show the significance of cultural revival and its impacts on the construction of the national identity of Mongolia.

Voluntary Acceptance of Foreign Influences under Democratization and Globalization

A language is not only a crucial component of cultural security and a system for communication or a culture carrier but also a symbol of power. Knowledge of English has become a necessity mainly because the United States is the most powerful country in the world. In order to detach from

the Russia-China context, derived from the geographic location of Mongolia, and find an adequate position in the new capitalistic and global era, the Mongolians are trying hard to learn other foreign languages. This is not a new phenomenon. Many of their ancestors in medieval Inner Asia used other languages besides their mother tongue. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols interacted regularly with Turkic and Iranian peoples, and thus different languages were spoken to meet the needs of communication. Although the Mongolians are still interested in learning foreign languages after democratization, they do so voluntarily. It is different from the enforced use of the Cyrillic alphabet and the Russian language in the socialist era. Foreign influence is welcome as long as it is not coercive. Coercion or compulsion brings no sense of cultural security.

Since the democratic transition in Mongolia and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the official policy of using Russian as a second language has been abandoned. English has replaced Russian and is taught at the elementary school level. English is also popular outside of school. As a result, and following socio-political changes, Mongolian has borrowed various words from English, some of which have gradually evolved as official terms: *menejment* (management), *computer*, *fail* (file), *marketing*, *kredit* (credit), *onlain* (online), *mesej* (message). Although this is a product of globalization and has helped Mongolia take part in global networks, it is also clear evidence of Mongolia's choice to distance itself from Russia. It is related to Mongolia's "third neighbor" policy, through which Mongolia has been trying to find partners to balance the impacts of China and Russia, which are still its major foreign partners. This was an active choice of Mongolia but may destroy local cultural elements as the impact of globalization on Mongolia increases.

The "third neighbor" partnership seeking to balance China and Russia aims at expanding cooperation with the United States, Japan, the European Union, India, South Korea, Turkey, and other countries and alliances. The "third neighbor" policy also helps Mongolia create a new identity, which is not only nationalist but also global and international. Such an identity is similar to that of the Mongols of the Great Mongol State in medieval times. Therefore, this is not totally new but traditional in some way.

According to my experience of watching movies in Ulaanbaatar in the early 1990s, the cinema was simple and crude, and the American movies shown were very old. The Mongolian dubbing of a film was done in an outdated way by only one male and one female. The audience knew only the content and none of the artistic aspects of the film. At that time, they played more Indian movies, likely due to the lower cost. Nowadays, the cinema in Ulaanbaatar today is up to date, playing new Hollywood films,

and the original sound of the movies is preserved with Mongolian subtitles. The theatre also sells popcorn, snacks, and drinks, just like theatres in the United States. Some Mongolian friends told me that they had never watched any Hollywood movies in the socialist period. However, like young people in other countries, Mongolian young people enjoy Hollywood movies and are greatly influenced by them.

Besides Hollywood movies, Western fast food and American NBA games are accepted by Mongolians. Fast-food restaurants, with burgers, fried chicken, and fizzy drinks, have opened in Ulaanbaatar. There are also chain restaurants selling dumplings, buns, pies, pasta, set meals, and soups. In recent years, Western fast-food restaurants such as Burger King, Pizza Hut, and KFC have finally opened stores in Ulaanbaatar. Although the price is quite high compared to the average Mongolian salary, there are many customers, especially young people. Basketball is not a traditional Mongolian sport and was not popular during the socialist period. Even today, Mongolians are not good at playing basketball. However, with the commercial marketing of NBA games across the globe, Mongolian young people have become passionate about basketball.

In addition to the strong influence of Western cultures, the products and cultures of Japan and South Korea are also popular in Mongolia, with the "Korean wave" in particular proving influential in recent years. Japan has a lasting and strong interest in Mongolia and is committed to expanding its influence there. It sponsors Mongolian students to study in Japan and provides long-term economic support for Mongolia. Most Mongolians have a good impression of Japan. The four "Asian tigers" (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) are also regarded by Mongolia as progressive East Asian countries from which it could learn. Although Mongolia remains a member of the nomadic culture of Inner Asia and maintains traditional friendship and cooperation with Turkey and Central Asian countries, it also hopes to bond with East Asia because of the region's progressiveness and likely future prospects. Mongolia wants to play a role in East Asia to demonstrate that it is on the road towards democracy and progress.

Conclusion

Since its democratic transition in the 1990s, Mongolia has faced increasing transculturality (see also the chapter in this volume by Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš), accepting various cultural elements such as sumo wrestling from Japan, kimchi from Korea, Bollywood from India, and popular music

and public ideas from American and European countries. While embracing globalization, the Mongolians have simultaneously tried to revive some aspects of their traditional culture, such as the Mongolian script or the cult of Chinggis Khan, in order to secure their cultural identity. Strengthening the "Mongol" consciousness seems to be at odds with Mongolia's embrace of various cultural elements from foreign countries besides Russia and China. On the contrary, voluntary acceptance of outside cultural influences can lead to cultural development, without endangering the chosen cultural identity of the Mongolians. It is now Mongolia which formulates its own ethnic and cultural policies. Neither Russia, China, nor any "third neighbor" can force it to be a cultural satellite.

Mongolia's foreign policy of the third neighbor can actually help to balance Russian and Chinese political and cultural influence and provide more choices and confidence for Mongolia. Some ways of approximation are more pragmatic, such as increasing interest in learning Chinese caused due to the growing economic influence of China, although part of the Mongolians rather dislike the Chinese. The vitality of a culture comes from new elements introduced or generated by interactions with other cultures. When new elements are used for a long time, they become part of a tradition. Cultural rejuvenation and innovation are actually two sides of the same coin, contributing both to the survival and the revival of the country and the nation.

References

Amarsaikhan, B. 2016. "Central Square Renamed after D. Sukhbaatar." *Montsame*. https://montsame.mn/en/read/127025.

Aminaa, Kh. 2017. "National Language and Script Day Observed." *Montsame*. http://montsame.mn/en/read/129927.

Bayarsaikhan, Dulguun. 2016. "Chinggis Square to Become Sukhbaatar Square Once More." *The UB Post*. http://theubpost.mn/2016/08/18/chinggis-square-to-become-sukhbaatar-square-once-more/.

Billé, Franck. 2015. *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Boldbaatar, Jigjidiin. 1999. "The Eight-Hundredth Anniversary of Chinggis Khan: The Revival and Suppression of Mongolian National Consciousness." In *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan*, edited by Stephen Kotkin and Bruce A. Elleman, 237–46. Armonk, NY, and London: M. E. Sharpe.

Buyanjargal. 2017. *Montsame*. https://montsame.mn/en/read/129468.

"Chingis Khaany iggeesen mongol töriin bichig khereglesnii 800 zhuliin oig temdeglekh tukhai" [On the celebration of the 800th Anniversary of the use of the Mongolian state script by Chinggis Khan]. 2020. Mongol Ulsyn Erönkhiilögchiin Zarlig, Erkh Züin Medelliin Negdsen Sistem. https://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/810.

"The Constitution of Mongolia." 1992. https://www.conscourt.gov.mn/?page_id=842&lang=en.

Dillon, Michael. 2020. *Mongolia: A Political History of the Land and Its People*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Discover Mongolia. 2015. "The Worship of Genghis Khan," December 28. https://www.discovermongolia.mn/blogs/the-worship-of-genghis-khan

Gombo, G. 2016. "Shilzhiltiin üeiin Mongol & ündesnii üzel (tsuvral 2)" [Mongolia and Nationalism in Transition (Series 2)]. *Ikon—Next Horizon*. https://ikon.mn/n/ryg.

Hsiao, Yi-fan. 2013. "The Re-imagination and Pride Construction of 'Golden Lineage': Folk-rock Band Altan Urag and Mongol Identity." Master's Thesis, National Taiwan University.

Kaplonski, Christopher. 2004. *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memory of Heroes*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

Lan, Mei-hua. 2006. "Globalization in Mongolia: Cultural Evidence from the UB Post." In *Mongolian Culture and Society in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Henry G. Schwarz, 100–126. Bellingham: Center for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University.

Marsh, Peter K. 2010. "Our Generation is Opening Its Eyes: Hip-hop and Youth Identity in Contemporary Mongolia." *Central Asian Survey* 29(3): 345–58.

Mongol ulsyn shinzhlekh ukhaany akademi tüükhiin khüreelen, ed. 2003. *Mongol Ulsyn Tüükh* [History of Mongolia]. Ulaanbaatar: Admon.

Mongolian Registration and Statistics Office. 2017. *Mongolian Statistical Yearbook 2017*. http://1212.mn/BookLibraryDownload.ashx?url=YEARBOOK.2017.last.pdf&ln=En.

Moon, Rona. 2013. "Why Reading Their Own Language Gives Mongolians a Headache." *Sora News 24*. https://en.rocketnews24.com/2013/09/27/why-reading-their-own-language-gives-mongolians-a-headache/.

Myadar, Orhon. 2016. "City and Ideology: Politics of Urbanscape in Post-Socialist Mongolia." *The Newsletter* 74. International Institute for Asian Studies. https://iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/city-ideology-politics-urbanscape-post-socialist-mongolia.

Myadar, Orhon. 2019. "The City, Memory, and Ideology in Ulaanbaatar: Inscribing Memory and Ideology in Postsocialist Mongolia." In *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place and National Identity*, edited by Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

The National Museum of Mongolia. n.d. "Google Arts and Culture." https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/the-national-museum-of-mongolia.

Sanders, Alan. 2010. *Historical Dictionary of Mongolia*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
Sanders, Alan. 2017. *Historical Dictionary of Mongolia*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
Soëlyn tukhai [On culture]. 2020. "Mongol Ulsyn Khuuli, Erkh Züin Medelliin Negdsen Sistem." https://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/454?lawid=454.
Soëlyn tukhai khuuli [Law on culture]. 2020. "Zasgiin Gazryn Khelegzhüülegch Agentlag, Soël, Urlagiin Gazar." https://culture.gov.mn/p/r?id=10.
Tör, süm khiidiin khariltsaany tukhai [On the relationship between the state and the church]. 2020. "Mongol Ulsyn Khuuli, Erkh Züin Medelliin Negdsen Sistem." https://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/485.
Töröös soëlyn talaar barimtlakh bodlogo [State policy on culture]. 2020. "Mongol Ulsyn Zasgiin Gazar, Bolovsrol, Soël, Shinzhlekh Ukhaan, Sportyn Yaam." https://mecss.gov.mn/law/272/.
Tuguldur, G. 2018. "National Literacy Festival to Be Celebrated." *Montsame*. https://www.montsame.mn/en/read/134707.
Tylor, Edward B. 1920. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* Vol. 1. London: John Murray.
The UB Post. 2005. "Appeal against Latin Alphabet." March 3.
The UB Post. 2011. "Official Documents to Be in Mongolian Script." https://web.archive.org/web/20111101013639/http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6478&Itemid=36.
U.S. Department of State. 2016. "Mongolia." In *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper.

About the Author

Mei-hua Lan received her PhD degree from Harvard University, majoring in Mongolian Studies, especially the modern history of Mongolia. She is currently Associate Professor of the Department of Ethnology, National Chengchi University, Taiwan, offering courses on Mongolian society and culture, Mongolian reading, ethnic issues, visual anthropology, and introduction to Inner Eurasia. In addition to the Mongolian independence movement of 1911 and relations between Mongolia and China under Tsedenbal's rule, her research subjects include Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, nationalism, ethnic relations, and ethnic policies. Now she also works on Buryatia. She helped create the Taiwan Society for Inner Eurasian Studies in 2018 and served as its president from 2020 to 2024.
Email: mhlan@nccu.edu.tw