

## **The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia**

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There are likely to be some peculiar problems when people look for moral authority in the distant past. What happens when one's own recent past and the times of one's parents and grandparents are generally seen as bankrupt and permeated with injustice and cruelty? Many, perhaps most, Mongols wish to break with the structures of the socialist period, yet they do not look to any external contemporary society for inspiration. Both of their immediate neighbours, China and Russia, are regarded with apprehensive aversion. Capitalist societies, though widely regarded as having the secret of some magically successful economic mechanism, are distant and foreign. The Mongols are now in the process of rethinking their 'deep past', not only because this is for once their own, but because historical origin in Mongolian culture is the source of moral authority in the present. Thus the 'deep past' is being called upon to provide inspiration for a discontinuity with the immediate past. I shall suggest that there are two kinds of iterative enactment by which this is being done. Although the specifics of this are Mongolian, the types I shall later describe may have analogies in other societies emerging from state socialism.

In Mongolia a new term has been coined for this process in general: *sergen mandal*, which is translated as 'renaissance'. *Sergen mandal* literally means 'awaken flourish', but its interpretation by Mongols today looks not to the future but to past glories. To quote from a recent interview with a leader of the National Renaissance Movement,

*Sergen mandal* is to be understood as linked with independence. . . It is the awakening of the spiritual wisdom of the people. . . It is freedom from the imposition of foreign tyranny which is a pressure on the purity of intellect of every person. From the historical point of view, we take the origin of the Mongolian people's renaissance back to the third century BC. . . In 1911, throwing out the Manchu usurpers, and again in 1921, the Mongol people gained independence and freed their spirit from pressure.<sup>1</sup>

Mongolia's socialist revolution in 1921, much aided by the Red Army, was the first outside the Soviet Union. In the following decades Soviet ideology was taken up almost more sincerely, more naively, more brutally than in the USSR itself. In the 1930s the Mongolian government destroyed every single one of the 700 Buddhist monasteries in the country and killed tens of thousands of people, annihilating all that was best and most sophisticated about native Mongolian culture, philosophy and art.<sup>2</sup> This was truly a kind of auto-destruction. A feudal society permeated with religion at all levels was abruptly replaced by a European, atheist ideology, predicated not on a model of the past but on the modernist development of the present. The moral authority of the socialist period was based on a vision of a future society, which was to be egalitarian, industrialised and single-minded. This ideology was imple-

mented by Soviet advisers stationed in every public institution, and it was reinforced by the presence of Red Army garrisons and planned economic dependency on the USSR.

Since 1989 Mongolians have turned again to the past. But demography presents a situation which makes Mongolia unlike the countries of Eastern Europe and more similar to the Central Asian countries which were inside the USSR. Today Mongolia has one of the youngest populations in the world. Well over 50 per cent of the people are aged 25 or under. Ministers, party leaders and members of parliament are predominantly in their thirties and forties. This means that the country is ruled by people who do not personally remember the tragic period of the the 1930s, let alone the revolution or times before it. There is a huge gap, a period filled only with the white noise of socialist construction, which must somehow be both negotiated and bridged in order to reach a time which is regarded as truly Mongolian.

For this generation now in power, I shall suggest, any time before the socialist period belongs to another world. Things in that world are both ancestral and little known.<sup>3</sup> The eradication of recent prerevolutionary political morality was so effective that for people today it is not better known and has no greater legitimacy than more ancient models of Mongolian statehood. Thus the dual sovereignty of the Buddhist religion and the state, which was embodied between 1911 and 1921 in a single person, the Bogd Khaan, who was both ruler and head lama, has no greater salience than the virtually entirely secular and much earlier model of the imperial military ruler, Chinggis Khaan. In fact, people were taught during the socialist period to be ashamed of both the 'feudal-religious' and the 'militarist' versions of Mongolian history, without being told much about them at all. The only object to be admired was the mysterious appearance of the 'masses', surfacing now and again from one or another type of oppression from the the twelfth century to the twentieth. In fact, Mongolia's adoption of socialism was difficult for Marxist theorists to account for, since the country arrived at its revolution without having undergone the due stages of social evolution. The theory developed to explain this, known as 'bypassing capitalism', necessarily had to abandon standard evolutionism. Thus the socialist ideology of history taught in Mongolia fudged both social evolution and chronological causation. It is for these reasons, I suggest, that the prerevolutionary past appears to ordinary people as something like a single other world, a pool from which images can be picked almost at random. All such history is equally distant, seen across the repressive system which people know, within which they were brought up and with which they are still struggling. What I have called the 'deep past' is reached across the chasm of Stalinism. This was such a total displacement of society and culture that it established *any* earlier past as a different era from today, a time of 'long ago' whenever it may have happened.

If the years from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s can be regarded in many respects as a 'period' (the socialist period), it would be incorrect to advance some idea of 'today' simply as a level platform. Since mid-1989 and the great public demonstrations and hunger strikes against the government, there have been a series of events which have constituted radical breaks with socialism. This has been history speeded up, as it were, throwing up new leaders, political parties, legal rights and economic measures almost by the month. According to a leading US adviser, privatisation has gone further in Mongolia than in any other reforming socialist country.<sup>4</sup> Since 1989 a multitude of new laws have been introduced. In January 1992 a new democratic constitution was adopted, though it is in conflict with some of the laws passed only a few months earlier. Mongolia has been lurching from crisis to crisis in its economy,

from the Russian 'loss' by Mongolia. It is thus difficult to return to the past. What would it be, in other words, if not another way,

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Ortner formulation'.<sup>8</sup> She emphasizing in the public culture as in general symphony transformation the present criticism or enactments similar to an or allows the return through time. In countries this case past of Mongolia is now done in actions.

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from the Russian decision to cut off electric power from its Siberian grid to the recent 'loss' by Mongolian financiers of millions of dollars in international money markets. It is thus difficult to talk of 'a situation' from which Mongols view the authority of the past. What we have, rather, is a number of uncontrollable predicaments, or, to put it another way, a present that is an era in the way that a roller-coaster is a place.

Yet all political groups without exception, including the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (i.e. the communist party), are concerned with national identity, with creating a 'truly Mongolian' moral society. This double movement, of the rejection of Soviet-type socialism by the very party which had implemented it and the welcoming of the traditional past, was exemplified at the 1991 celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the revolution. The marches of previous years with their grim cheerfulness were abandoned. Instead, a monument was founded to the victims of the purges of the 1930s, and there was a ceremony of raising the nine white standards, that is horse-hair battle-standards of a type said to have been used by Chinggis Khaan and to represent the spirit of the nation. An official account of the occasion stated that 'the most important task today is to revive traditions'.<sup>5</sup>

Anthropological monographs generally used to have as their essential object the form or order of a system. Such an ahistorical approach focuses on the coherence or reproduction of culture and society 'out of time', and it leaves 'history' as an unstructured, incoherent residue. Nicholas Thomas in his recent book has pointed out that attempts to incorporate history as an addition of something which anthropology used to omit are flawed, because certain historical perspectives 'cannot simply be added to others, since their objects are incompatible, demanding disjunct exclusions'.<sup>6</sup> Sherry Ortner has suggested that the way forward, in the context of this opposition between 'external' events and a coherent cultural system, is 'practice theory', which she describes as a matter of translation between an objective world and a subjective one.<sup>7</sup> Ortner's own theory of 'cultural schemas' provides one such case of a mediating practice which allowed Nepalese Sherpas to domesticate or translate the world, such that they could, for example, culturally incorporate new external economic opportunities in India. Such a structuralist analysis of history says something about how schemes of meaning incorporate events, but these 'events' (or 'real history' as Thomas puts it) are still seen as generated from outside.

Ortner formulates the notion of practice as 'inextricably tied to a notion of structure'.<sup>8</sup> She emphasises that structure in such a view must now itself be seen as appearing in forms that contain a dynamic assumption, and that it consists both of a public culture and of embodied dispositions that are 'stamped on actors' beings.' I am in general sympathy with this approach, which can go a long way towards explaining transformations generated within the system of culture itself. However, I think that the present critical juncture in countries like Mongolia requires an analysis of events or enactments rather than of structures. The 'cultural schema' is a complex structure similar to an oft-repeated story, by which external events are translated and which allows the reenactment of characteristic scenarios in a continuous, seamless stream through time. But in Mongolia and other formerly socialist and socialist-dominated countries this continuity was broken and cultural scenarios were obliterated. The deep past of Mongolian culture has to be reached across a chasm of foreignness, and this is now done not by structures but by means of singular, diverse and individualised actions.

I propose here to define two specific types of enactment which people delineate by reference to the past, yet which are also essentially innovative. Considered individually these actions are 'iterative' (i.e. they have some quality of sameness with the

