

Imposed culture and Mongolia's democratic transition

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Despite being under Soviet control for longer than any other Soviet satellite, in 1990 Mongolia saw massive protests forcing its ruling party to embrace reform and democracy. It was one of the quickest and most bloodless democratic revolutions in the Soviet bloc, and over time it has proven to be one of the most enduring. How has Mongolia's democracy stayed intact while other former Soviet satellites and republics have been riven by factionalism or fallen back on authoritarianism? On the basis of recorded documents and interviews with protest leaders and participants, I find that Mongolia's mass protests were united less by a desire for democracy or capitalism, and more by a sense of long-suppressed nationalism and resentment about lost culture. In the hardship years of early post-communism, the government was able to reap some early rewards from the resurrection of lost cultural symbols and the erasure of Russian influence. Where such nationalistic moves would only invite civil war in the ethnically diverse countries of Eastern Europe, Mongolia's unified national identity enabled the government to rally people around these symbolic successes and sustained their patience as they waited for the more elusive economic recovery.

Introduction

Sandwiched between Russia and China (two states that together account for the lion's share of foreign policy articles in recent years), enjoying one of the most peaceful, rapid and lasting transitions to democracy of all that followed the collapse of the former Soviet bloc (an epoch-making event for the field of comparative politics), Mongolia is more than worthy of our attention as political scientists. Despite its fascinating - some might say unique - political history and geopolitical circumstances, there has been a shocking lack of scholarly attention paid to Mongolia's political development.

Comparativists seem to have given little thought even to which region Mongolia properly belongs to. When Mongolia is treated comparatively, it is usually placed alongside the "-stans" of Central Asia (Fish 2001). But most Central Asian area specialists leave Mongolia out in regional overviews (Mesbahi 1994); non-Islamic, ethnically homogenous, pluralistic and politically stable, it appears as an outlier in nearly every chart or graph on Central Asia that attempts to include it. Fish (2001) tellingly fails to justify his choice to compare Mongolia with Central Asia politics, and studiously avoids mentioning the Islamic elephant in the room. Historians are more likely to identify Mongolia as a peripheral player in the "Sinocentric order" of East Asia (Kang 2010), but few modern East Asian area specialists consider Mongolia part of their region (Chu et al 2010 is a notable exception). Comparative analyses of former Soviet satellite states focus almost exclusively on Eastern Europe, considering Mongolia to be too culturally and

economically different for meaningful comparison. Mongolia is far too interesting as a comparative political case study to be left in limbo between regions like this.

Despite existing under Soviet control for longer than any other Soviet satellite, in 1990 Mongolia's ruling Communist Party, the MPRP, peacefully agreed to hold multi-party elections in the wake of massive popular protests and strikes. Mongolia's democratic transition was achieved "without shattering a single window or shedding a single drop of blood,"¹ and its democratic institutions have stood the test of time better than most other former Soviet satellites. Today Mongolia's democracy is stable and pluralistic, with two dominant parties (the MPRP and the Democrats) peacefully alternating power several times in both the Parliamentary and the Presidency, an astounding proliferation of competing media options, and an active civil society whose regular protest actions go unmolested by the government. Yet Mongolia has received the least attention in the post-communist literature to date. The most high-impact books and articles on Communism's demise invariably draw their cases from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. A few (Fish 2001) have remarked on Mongolia's uncommonly peaceful transfer of power and stable economic growth, particularly in comparison to later developments in Central Asia and the Baltics, but most of these rely on institutional explanations or characteristics of individual leaders. Fish's analysis ignores the greatest strengths of Mongolia's democracy movement - cultural unity and hatred of Russian interference.

¹ President Elbegdorj's speech at Kim Il Sung University, Oct 31, 2013.

This paper explores the motives and extent of cultural transformation from the earliest days of Soviet influence in the nascent Mongolian state in 1924. Mongolia's cultural policies are depicted here in the context of broader Russian cultural hegemony throughout the USSR's many satellite states and internal soviet republics. The paper goes on to show how resentment of cultural repression remained a strong latent force in the Mongolian psyche and contributed to mobilizing the masses against the regime once protest became possible following *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. It further illustrates how cultural symbols were used by the new democratic government to establish legitimacy and consolidate its rule in the face of disheartening economic results, particularly in the early post-transition years.

Theories of soviet collapse and the missing cultural repression factor

Most assessments of the causes of failure in the Soviet bloc have focused on the economic strain of maintaining the behemoth central planning system (Kornai 1992, Solnick 1998, Brown 2001), the political strain of maintaining high levels of repression for extended periods (Tucker 1981, Saxonberg 2013), or the failure to adapt to changing circumstances due to institutional rigidity (White 2000, Dimitrov 2013). Although the Soviet bloc's overbearing policies of cultural repression are well-known to have caused considerable popular resentment, few analyses have considered repressed culture as a major cause of regime collapse in the Soviet bloc.

Much work has been done demonstrating the relationship between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of nationalist conflicts in former Soviet bloc states (Lampe 1996; Hroch 2000; Goldmann et al 2000). The general conclusion is that Soviet control

kept nationalist, segregationist and irredentist desires in check in the various satellites until the Soviet Union dissolved and these impulses were set free. However, surprisingly little scholarship attempts to switch the causal direction and assess just how much the pressures of repressed nationalism and forced cultural homogenization contributed to the demise of communism in the Soviet bloc in the first place. Furthermore, analyses of post-soviet political developments, typically focused on the ethnically diverse states of Eastern Europe, invariably consider rising nationalism and resurrection of traditional cultural elements, particularly language and religion, as antithetical to a stable transition and democratic consolidation.

Several key works on democratization theory produced following the Third Wave spoke of the necessity of establishing a unified consensus of statehood as a necessary condition for democratic consolidation. Most prominently, Dahl (1989) argued that collective agreement about stateness is logically prior to the achievement of a stable democracy. Linz & Stepan (1996), writing with the benefit of some hindsight upon the post-communist states, complained that existing theories of democracy too often ignore the problems of “stateness” that must be resolved before democracy can happen. To this end, they argue that “Nationalizing state policies aimed at increasing national homogeneity are fundamentally incompatible with democracy in multi-ethnic states” and “The greater the percentage of people in a given territory who feel that they do not want to be members of that territorial unit, the more difficult it will be to consolidate a single democracy within that unit.” By incorporating the elements of state-imposed cultural loss and recovery, this paper offers a more in-depth look at one of the specific mechanisms through which policies promoting a unified, nation-based sense of state-hood – the same

policies which demonstrably hinder democracy in multi-ethnic states – can help consolidate democracy in ethnically homogenous states emerging from multi-ethnic dictatorships. This paper also demonstrates the need for a more sequential, chronological view of this variable; nationalizing policies do not exist in a vacuum, but are perceived relative to the policies that came before, which impact the public's willingness to accept them and respond to them.

As the Mongolian case study will show, imposed cultural transformation and suppressed nationalism under communist rule were key enabling factors in mobilizing anti-communist sentiment during the transition period. Nationalist symbols and cultural memes were used by democracy activists to draw support across class lines, including masses of uneducated poor laborers, herdsmen and farm workers who had little notion of what democracy, civil rights and free markets were or how these things would improve their lives, but felt deep nostalgia for Mongolia's lost nomadic traditions.

One reason this variable may have been overlooked is that most existing comparative work focuses on the transitions in the Eastern European bloc and former Soviet republics. Because of Europe's historical migration patterns and the Soviets' penchant for arbitrarily drawn borders, few of these cases can boast the same level of cultural homogeneity and strongly unified sense of nationhood prior to the communist era as Mongolia has. 82% of Mongolia's population is of the Khalkha ethnicity, and the remaining minority groups share a sympathetic identification as "children of the Great Horde" whose cultures were equally repressed under communism. Ethnic homogeneity is important because it required the Soviets to impose much more severe anti-nationalist

policies at the outset, it prevented them from finding previously disenfranchised minority groups to co-opt, and it allowed the anti-regime groups that emerged later on to use cultural symbols in their protest movements without provoking a backlash from rival ethnic groups. In ethnically divided states undergoing post-communist transitions, the good, unifying aspects of nationalism are lost in the chaos of fragmentation along ethnic lines.

The following section reviews the historical circumstances of Stalin's cultural homogenization policies and in the process formulates a theoretical framework which connects both cultural loss and ideological ownership to the outcome of regime collapse or survival.

Soviet Cultural Repression in Mongolia and elsewhere

Soviet cultural policy in the satellite states and republics

One of the putative goals of Marxist-Leninist ideology was to build a global coalition of workers that would ultimately do away with nationalism, national consciousness and the nation-state itself (Janos 1996; White 2001; Saxonberg 2013). The original Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union called for a global worker's movement in which the state would eventually "wither away." (White 2001, 5) Under Stalin's direction the internationalist aspect of Marxist-Leninism was actively pursued through the formation of the communist states of Eastern Europe. The Soviet-run Cominform was charged with making central decisions about everything from five-year economic plans to education reform, and the various satellites were expected to uniformly carry out these directives.

The Soviets historically had complicated relationships with local nationalists. At times, in the process of early regime consolidation, nationalism had to be harnessed and even stimulated in order to rally a sufficiently large section of the population around the cause of “national liberation,” with the communists as the putative saviors liberating weaker nations² from the grip of global imperialism. But this term had a large class component to it; Soviet communists were not committed to protecting nations as entities discrete from workers worldwide. Lenin’s position was that nations have the right to self-determination, but only the proletariat has the right to decide, and if the proletariat is truly empowered it will always choose communism (Matlock 26). Throughout Eastern Europe communist parties enlisted the help of nationalist coalition partners to gain power, but then purged or co-opted them after cementing single-party rule (Gati 1990). Accordingly, nationalist sentiments and affinities for “bourgeois” culture soon became criminal offenses throughout the Soviet bloc.

Transforming culture to serve the needs of socialism was an early and important objective of the Soviet leadership:

The creative arts were also expected to perform an ideological purpose. Painting, for instance, was expected to be representational rather than abstract or allegorical; music was expected to have a recognizable tune; and novels were supposed to be optimistic in character, set ideally in a factory with an identifiable hero who should triumph in the end over the stubborn resistance of the class enemy. All of the arts were subject to the doctrine of “socialist realism”, first approved in 1934, in terms of which the “truthful, historically concrete presentation of reality in its revolutionary development” had to be combined with the “ideological remaking and education of toilers in the spirit of socialism.” (White p8)

² Throughout this paper the term “nation” is used in the sense of a self-identifying cohesive ethnic community, usually united by a shared history, language, etc. but not necessarily forming an independent state of its own. This includes the various nations subsumed within the USSR — Russian, Kazakh, Ukrainian, Buryat, Armenian, etc.

In Ukraine, Grigorenko recalls how cultural policy obliterated his nation's theatre tradition: "There were no more productions of Ukrainian classics; the stage was given over to Soviet propaganda playlets that depicted young people struggling against the kulaks (wealthy farmers), the White Guards, bandits, and the workers' lack of political consciousness." (Grigorenko 19)

The effect that these policies had on popular feelings in the satellite states has been vividly illustrated by the exiled Polish writer Czesław Miłosz:

Millions of human beings in the People's democracies must employ exceedingly ingenious means of masking themselves.... The surest safeguard is to manifest loudly one's awe at Russia's achievements in every field of endeavor, to carry Russian books under one's arm, to hum Russian songs, to applaud Russian actors and musicians enthusiastically, etc. (Miłosz 1996, 52)

Clearly, the tenure of the Soviets in various bloc countries was a constant balancing act between the top-down directive to build a truly international socialist movement and the ground-level need to accommodate nationalist sentiment among unruly populations. Gati describes how the Soviets solidified their control in Eastern Europe after WWII through the process of *Zhdanovshchina*, after the Soviet cultural minister Andrei Zhdanov. "The period marked the introduction of socialist realism and the Leninist notion of *partinost* or 'party-mindedness' in literature, music, and the arts." (Gati 1990, 21) The dramatic emotional impact of these changes on the Eastern European psyche is summed up by Milan Kundera: "[T]he countries in central Europe feel that the change in their destiny that occurred after 1945 is not merely a political catastrophe: it is also an attack on their civilization." (Kundera 1996, 218) From their perspective, the Soviet takeover represented not a new transnational phase of human existence, but the culmination of age-old Russian designs for European conquest. As a result, from the

beginning the Soviet-friendly regimes of Eastern Europe suffered a deficit of legitimacy among their own people.

Tucker describes Stalin's ideology as "Russian national socialism," through which the Communist revolution abroad was reconceived as a process of spreading out from a base in the USSR to neighboring countries, a revived "gathering of Russian lands."

(Tucker 1981) As Matlock writes, "[T]he Soviet empire appropriated the history of Russian imperial expansion as its own. It relied on the Russian language as a unifying factor, and the spread of Russian at the expense of other languages was for many indistinguishable from Russian national aggrandizement." (Matlock 23) In Eastern Europe, Soviet interference was viewed with great skepticism as a natural extension of previous Russian incursions through the centuries. In Mongolia, traditionally incursions came from Manchuria or Japan, not Russia; thus the historical association of Russia with conquest was much weaker, making the notion of a Russia-led global worker's movement initially easier to swallow. But with the wholesale slaughter of the Buddhist hierarchy and the transformation of the nomadic lifestyle wrought by collectivization, Mongolians too quickly learned the cultural consequences of Soviet state-building.

In short, the Soviet Union under Stalin committed itself to culturally transformative policies throughout its bloc despite the heavy toll such policies took on public support for the young satellite regimes. These policies were not a requisite element of the original Marxist ideology; rather, the internationalist component of Marxism was repurposed by Lenin as a justification for Russian cultural imperialism and later carried to new extremes by Stalin, who was eager to establish his ideological bona fides. Stalin's chauvinistic preferences were enabled and bolstered by Russian popular sentiment: "By the mid-

1930s, all these formative events of Stalinism were unfolding in an official atmosphere of resurgent nationalism and traditional values, including a selective rehabilitation of tsarism itself. Increasingly, the Stalinist leadership identified its revolution from above less with original Bolshevik ideas than with tsarist Russia's long history of state-building, struggle against backwardness, and aspirations to world power, which undoubtedly gained Stalinism still more popular support." (Cohen 1986, 68-69)

After Stalin's demise, some cultural transformation was reversed or at least halted in the satellite states, where for practical purposes Marxist internationalism had to be relaxed or set aside (Gati 1990; Tucker 1967; Bialer 1982, 207-). Different "paths to socialism" were grudgingly permitted in some satellite states. Purged artists, directors and musicians were released from prisons, surviving nationalist leaders were rehabilitated, and strictures against religion were relaxed. But by that point the damage was done: communism was mentally associated with transformation of language and the arts, veneration of Russian culture and heroes, vilification of other traditional cultures, and secularization.

The above history paints a picture of wildly unpopular policies of cultural transformation, essentially Russification, implemented throughout the Soviet bloc — policies which were shaped largely by the personal preferences of one man (Stalin) rationalized by Marxism's internationalist tenet and buttressed by the prevailing social attitudes of post-WWII Russians. Popular resentment of these policies remained a latent force among the non-Russian nations within the bloc throughout the Cold War. Ultimately, those nations that saw their native cultures most forcibly transformed were the ones that ended up succumbing most quickly to mass protest during the volatile 1989-

1993 period. By contrast, those nations that had experienced less interference in their traditional cultures (Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea) proved more willing to remain under single-party communist leadership despite various ordeals.

Mongolia under Soviet tutelage: Cultural chauvinism as policy

As a fragment of a once much larger and grander nation, outer Mongolia in the 1920s was primed for nationalist and irredentist impulses. When Mongolia declared its independence with the aid of its Bolshevik friends in 1921, it came on the heels of 200 years of terrible repression as a vassal state of the Qing dynasty. The Qing period is still remembered today with far more bitterness than the worst excesses of the Soviet era, and many Mongolians still regard the Bolshevik fighters as noble allies who helped Mongolia regain its independence from China and later helped protect it from Japanese invasion. The Russian Bolsheviks were the first foreign culture with a modern military that the Mongolians encountered in large numbers, and after observing how quickly they defeated their formerly all-powerful Qing overlords, they were eager to emulate them in matters large and small. Thus from the beginning the Soviets enjoyed considerable leeway in dictating the political and economic structure of the new Mongolian People's Republic.

Beginning with Sukhbaatar's Soviet-aided achievement of national independence in 1921-4, Mongolia constituted the Soviets' first experiment with state-building in a foreign satellite. From the bones of the old Qing order they built up a People's Republic modeled in large part after the USSR. Soviet advisors entered into Mongolia with near-complete ignorance about — and antipathy for — the local culture, history, values and traditional

practices. Even more than in Eastern Europe, the Soviets made elimination of “bourgeois” culture and “superstitious” religious beliefs an early ideological priority as they set up their first satellite state. The eradication of traditional culture was immediate and extensive, transforming religion, language, historical consciousness, the arts, and even traditional dress to be rebuilt in the Russian image.

The first and most urgent task of the Soviets was to crush the burgeoning Mongolian nationalism which had arisen as the country emerged from Qing dynasty control. Many of the early leaders of the MPR, including Choibalsan, were originally not communists but rather pan-Mongolist in ideology (Radchenko 2012). In the 1930s Mongolia’s party leaders, at the urging of their Soviet advisors, set about crushing all political threats to communism in the young state, chiefly the Buddhist hierarchy. A short-lived pan-Mongolia movement led by the Buryat Mongols was crushed by the early Bolshevik leadership, and nearly the entire adult male population of ethnic Mongols in the Buryat Republic was killed or imprisoned in the terror of 1929-31 (Becker 1993, 246).

Purges followed for both outer Mongolia and the Buryat republic: “In the late 1930s the purges saw the destruction of the entire Buryat intelligentsia and the Buddhist monasteries which were the traditional repository of art and literature and to which every family sent one son.” (Becker 1993, 246) In the MPR, purges of pan-Mongolian nationalists and Buddhist lamas conducted on Stalin’s orders targeted by some estimates killed over 100,000 people, possibly as much as 1/7th of the population. The temples had been the primary center for education and most Mongolian families sent at least one child to serve as an acolyte for some years; they posed the greatest ideological threat to the

MPRP and therefore Stalin decreed that they had to go. Indeed, so politically compromising was the task of liquidating the Buddhist lamas that the first two Mongolian prime ministers to receive Stalin's directive — Genden and Amor — refused to comply and were purged, before finally Stalin found a willing accomplice in Choibalsan.

Cultural loss extended to language. In the Soviet republic of Buryatia, "It was national policy to assimilate all minorities to create a new race, the Soviets, with one language, Russian, so there was no point even for serving or tolerating the existence of others." In both Mongolia and Buryatia, "the Mongolian-Uighur script had already been replaced by the latin alphabet in the 1930s, and this together with the destruction of the monastic libraries cut off the Buryats from their own literature, history and culture" (Becker 1993, 250). The arts were transformed as well. Mongolian theatre was "all but destroyed by the 1940s," its playwrights, directors and actors imprisoned. After the death of Stalin most of those surviving were released, and Mongolian theatre was revived "under the social realist traditions of Soviet drama." (Becker 1993, 105). Thus most of Mongolia's early cultural transformation was begun at the command of Stalin, but the task was later taken up with enthusiasm by the "Muscovites" (Russian-educated Mongolian cadres) who dominated the state bureaucracy. Muscovites often lacked sufficient skills in their native language, felt uncomfortable around those who could not speak Russian, and saw Russian-style civilization as the key to national salvation in the face of Chinese and Japanese encroachment.

[T]he MPRP leaders showed little interest in preserving those elements of Mongolia's cultural heritage which foreigners might regard as indicators of backwardness. For example, in 1959 the Hungarian ambassador reported that in the opinion of some Mongolian leaders, the inner cover of the *gers* should be made of plastic to be produced in Mongolia, rather than felt, the material traditionally used by nomadic herders. (Szalontai, 173)

Along the way to suppressing Mongolian nationalism and establishing ideological control, the Soviets also reformed Mongolian education and implemented a reevaluation of the historical role of Chinggis Khan and the Mongolian empire. “This new interpretation depicted the first unifier of the Mongolians as a rapacious plunderer who represented the feudal ruling classes and whose invasions retarded development of the territories he and his troops had subjugated. Mongolian portrayals of Chinggis as a national hero and deification of the founder of the Mongolian empire were condemned.” (Rossabi 2005: 197) There was a dramatic incident in the 1970s when an underground nationalist group tried to erect a statue of Ghengis in northern Mongolia; they were promptly imprisoned.³ Restoring Chinggis Khan’s place in history would later become a popular demand of the Mongolian pro-democracy movement.

Ironically, some stereotypical aspects of the Soviet police state have their origins in the Mongol empire. Becker writes that under Kubilai Khan’s rule in Yuan China, “Every householder had to hang outside his door a list of the inhabitants and inns had to report the arrival of all guests, specifying the day and hour. The Mongols also categorized the population according to their political reliability.” (Becker 1993, 6) It is intriguing to speculate that if the Soviets had merely acknowledged the Mongol origins of these practices, Mongols may have taken some pride in them, or at least not resented them so bitterly.

Architecture and iconography throughout the communist period reflected Russian cultural chauvinism and Mongolia’s complicated dependent status. The design of the central Sukhbaatar Square strictly followed the Soviet model, fronting the Hall of

³ Interview with Bum-Ochir, Sept 9, 2015.

Government and surrounded by the requisite state buildings such as the Hall of Culture and the Children's Palace. The centerpiece of the square was an iconic sculpture and mausoleum for the eponymous General Sukhbaatar, erected in 1946 at a time when the Soviet authorities decided to build a personality cult around the late hero of the independence struggle, known as 'Mongolia's Lenin.'

The equestrian statue and mausoleum of revolutionary leader Damdin Sükhbaatar constituted particularly conspicuous examples of the inflexible imitation of European models... Sükhbaatar Square, a location where Buddhist tsam ceremonies had once taken place, was to assume a social and political role akin to Moscow's Red Square – that is, a public space to hold military parades and state-controlled mass rallies...

[T]he statue also symbolically revealed that behind the façade of independence, Mongolia's development closely followed Soviet guidelines. Having been trained in the USSR, [sculptor] Choimbol depicted Sükhbaatar riding a horse whose impressive size and appearance had more in common with European cavalry horses than with the small, stocky, short-legged – but extremely sturdy – native horses of Mongolia... (Szalontai, 171-2)

Having perfected the personality cult in Stalin's later years, it seems the Soviet advisors returned to Mongolia and completed the unfinished business of establishing a grand mythical origin story for the MPR regime. This included the morbid but seemingly inescapable Soviet practice of permanently displaying the remains of great leaders:

Following the death of Choibalsan in 1952, his embalmed body and Sükhbaatar's remains were interred into a mausoleum built on Sükhbaatar Square, in obvious imitation of Lenin's Mausoleum in the Red Square... [I]n Mongolia the idea of such a public mausoleum stood in a stronger contrast with local customs of burial than in Russia... In traditional Mongol practices... corpses were usually left unburied, with no gravestone erected, and in those cases when the lamas did embalm the bodies of certain Buddhist dignitaries, the latter were buried in coffins, in a sitting position as if in prayer. (Szalontai, 172)

Choibalsan ruled until his death in 1952, when he was succeeded by Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal. Remembered today as an unimaginative bureaucrat who slavishly mimicked

Soviet directives, Tsedenbal allowed his Russian wife to preside over the wholesale transformation of the Mongolian fine arts; she took on a particularly domineering role in organizing a national ballet troupe in the Russian style. According to the former Russian translator Duger Yadam, Tsedenbal's wife never learned to speak Mongolian, and due to her peculiar interpretation of Marxism, she believed proletarians should have no culture.⁴

Mongolian theater, painting, and music were all reimagined in the style of social realism, and artists were oriented into state-sponsored collectives just like workers and herdsman. Mongolian painter Purev Dolgorjav, who studied art in Ulaanbaatar during the 1970s, recalled being assigned to work for the army painting military bases and political maps in factory-like conditions; his unit also designed many street posters. Purev had desired to work in the monumental sector, but was assigned elsewhere. In the 1980s, he became exposed to realism and abstract art through books smuggled back from Europe by friends, and was instinctively drawn to it. In 1988, he attended an international meeting of artists in Bulgaria, where he observed that the artists of Eastern Europe seemed much more free to explore different styles.⁵

Mongolian filmmaker Solongo Jambaa developed his interest in film as a boy in the 1970s, when the state would subsidize four films and ten documentaries every year. The country had ten theaters, one per province. The theaters showed exclusively Russian and Mongolian films, until finally in the 1980s they began introducing some ideologically uncomplicated Western films such as *Spartacus*. The son of a disgraced former finance minister, Solongo was not assigned to make films but managed to fight his way into the industry through talent and hard work. He applied to attend the Moscow Film

⁴ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 8, 2015.

⁵ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 10, 2015.

University's Institute of Cinematography but was rejected, despite finishing in the top twenty on the national exam, due to his class background. He was eventually able to obtain a visa to attend a smaller vocational school in Moscow and then to transfer to the Institute. The films he made under communism were strictly circumscribed; they had to deal with class struggle against feudalism. Every work was examined by the state propaganda office. Forbidden subjects included critiques of social realism and anything that might reawaken Mongolian view of history. Solongo recalled one poet, named Chenom, who was jailed for mentioning Chinggis Khan and died in prison.⁶

Cultural Revival as a Protest Meme

The fever for democratic reforms that swept across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s soon infected Mongolia as well. In late December 1989, a handful of Mongolian intellectuals, recently returned from study abroad in Moscow and inspired by the reforms and social movements they had observed there, launched their own small protest rally in Sukhbaatar Square on the occasion of International Human Rights Day. Their pro-democracy movement rapidly gained popularity among common people, factory workers and herdsman.

As in most soviet satellites, many of the early initiators of Mongolia's democratic protest movement were educated young people who had the opportunity to study in the USSR, where they experienced a more liberal political environment particularly after the social upheavals launched in the 1980s by the new policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. In 1976 the historian Boldbaatar went to Moscow to study history under Professor Yuri

⁶ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 6, 2015.

Nikolaevich Gavrilov, who was very progressive and critical of system. There for the first time Boldbaatar was able to read books only available in West, many of them copied by hand by Gavrilov's students, such as *The Great Terror* by Conquest and *Nomenclatura* by Michael Voslensky. In classes and late-night bull sessions the students discussed and criticized Stalin's teachings. After returning from Moscow, Boldbaatar worked as director of the Science Theory Department at the Higher Party School and wrote several articles about democracy in Mongolia '87- '88, including one tract in the dissident newspaper *Truth* entitled "No Need to be Afraid of Democracy," which produced much controversy at the time and was well received by Ulaanbaatar's young intellectual class.⁷

When Solongo Jambaa was a young film student in the Soviet Union, he learned of a West German punk band named "Genghis Khan." Solongo and his friends secretly copied this band's songs, and in 1983 the Mongolian students in Moscow organized a secret birthday party for Chinggis Khaan. Solongo provided the vinyl record player for this party. Such behavior was highly subversive in the eyes of the Soviet authorities. As a result of this incident, 28 students were deported back to Mongolia. Solongo would have been deported as well, if not for the intervention of his professor, Sergei Gerasimov. A dominant figure in Soviet cinema, Gerasimov warned the Mongolian embassy that if they deported Solongo, the Institute would not accept any more Mongolian students in the future. When the 1990 protests began, Solongo was in the square, filming. His is some of the only footage available from inside the protests. He also participated in the meeting of

⁷ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 5, 2015.

the Democratic Union, in which all writers, directors, painters and other artists met with the Political Committee to voice their demands for Mongolian independence in the arts.⁸

A challenge for these educated young dissidents was how to attract mass support from the wider Mongolian population, most of whom did not read political tracts or listen to foreign bands and had no experience of *glasnost*, political criticism or strike actions. They found their answer in the use of well-recognized cultural symbols. An illustrative example was the wearing of traditional dress at public protests. In Mongolia, the traditional dress, or *del*, was perceived as a nationalist symbol and outlawed throughout the communist era. It became a self-fulfilling prophesy of sorts: during the protests in 1990, democracy activists brought their *dels* out of mothballs and wore them to rallies in Sukhbaatar Square, so the *del* indeed became a symbol of resistance to communist rule, often worn by protesters at rallies. "On Wednesday, March 7, at 2:00 P.M., with the temperature at -15 degrees C., ten men, including the ubiquitous Bat-Uul, took their positions in Sukhbaatar Square to begin their fast. By wearing their *dels*, or traditional robes, they signaled a break with the values of the regime, which had denigrated the remnants of the feudal past." (Ackerman & Duvall 448) Additionally, the protesters performed traditional Mongolian songs and dances in the Square, helping them keep warm on the long winter days. Photos from the time reveal protestors holding up hand-printed signs bearing words like "justice" and "freedom" in traditional script, which most Mongolians by then could not read but nevertheless appreciated as an element of their stolen past.

⁸ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 6, 2015.

Restoration of traditional culture — and rejection of Soviet control — were so embedded into Mongolia's protest repertoires that it is difficult to imagine the pro-democracy movement gaining such broad grass-roots appeal without these elements. Alongside demands for greater government transparency, market reforms and a multi-party system, there were also voices calling for restoration of the Mongolian script and state support for rebuilding Buddhist monasteries. In the early transition period, officials even announced plans to restore the old Uighur script in place of Cyrillic, although for practical reasons this was never implemented (Rossabi 2005, 198).

Another way the Mongolian pro-democracy movement mobilized mass support was through demands for the restoration of historical narratives and heroes. Chinggis Khan in particular became a prominent, if unlikely, symbol of democracy during the transition period. At the first truly mass protest in Sukhbaatar Square, on January 21, 1990, a diverse group of intellectuals, workers and engineers rallied together by singing traditional folk melodies praising the legendary conqueror. (Rossabi 2005, 16) A leading pro-democracy activist rallied the crowd in Sukhbaatar Square by announcing the foundation of an “Association for Remembering and Respecting Chinggis Khan,” which would build monuments in his honor and advocate emulating his style of government with a council of advisors (Becker 1993, 48).

More recent nationalist heroes were also restored (or invented) through the pro-democracy movement, including the nationalist writer Tsendiin Damdinsüren, purged for resisting directives to convert Mongolian to Cyrillic script (Kaplonski 2013), and Genden, purged and killed for resisting Soviet orders to destroy the Buddhist monasteries. The protest narrative of a “foreign-imposed” regime is easier to construct

when there are historical individuals who were persecuted under communism for defending the nation's culture, distinctiveness and independence, who can then be resurrected as nationalist heroes. The political rehabilitation of such individuals is a concrete and simple demand the protest movement can make of the incumbent government; when such demands are accommodated, it demonstrates the power of the protest movement and gives the people a taste for political protest.

As old heroes were restored to glory, foreign-imposed heroes were brought low. The giant statue of Stalin in front of the State Library was one of the first to be dismantled by reformist elements: "They were horrified at the placement of an image of the dreaded Soviet dictator in front of one of the main treasuries of Mongolian culture. In their criticisms of the placement of the statue, reformers could harp on patriotism and anti-Russian sentiments. Having secured popular approval, they went to the State Library on the night of February 22 and dismantled Stalin's statue." (Rossabi 17-18) Removal of statues and other visible symbols was one way that reformist elements in the government could appease the protesters and demonstrate that their voices were being heard, in a way that was less complex and politically hazardous than pursuing immediate institutional reforms.

In the MPR, as in most of the Eastern European satellites, there was very little sense of national ownership of the ruling communist ideology. Because of the overbearing role of Soviet advisors and Muscovite cadres in the process of installing and sustaining single-party communist rule in Mongolia, the Mongolian people came to perceive the entire communist system, and the hardships that went along with it, as something that had been inflicted upon them by a foreign power in a time of weakness. The triumphant narrative

of the working class autonomously breaking free of bondage and overthrowing their capitalist oppressors was thus lost. The Mongolian proletariat had little sense of having seized ownership of their own base of production in a state where the most valuable resources were extracted and shipped to Russia at low fixed prices. This popular perception made it much easier for intellectuals to rapidly gather mass support for their movement among people who had little awareness of such complex concepts as “market economy,” “self-determination,” “majoritarian democracy,” “civil rights” etc.

One of Mongolians’ most widely remembered complaints about the old regime related to the extraordinary privileges enjoyed by Russians in the country. Russian shops had the most goods for sale, Russian security officers patrolled the streets each night in big Russian cars, and every office had a Russian “advisor” who did little but got paid twice as much as anyone else. These “advisors” had the last word in every major office decision, although many were “uneducated country bumpkins” with little practical knowledge of their assigned businesses.⁹ These Russian bureaucrats left when the Soviet Union collapsed and their funding was cut off. While outsiders described this exodus as leaving a serious technocratic void and inflicting a heavy blow to the Mongolian economy (Heaton 1992), Mongolians remember the matter today as a welcome cleansing of a wasteful bureaucracy.

By all indications Mongolian civil society rapidly expanded in membership across classes and regions through the transition period. A 2005 CSS poll indicated a post-1990 increase in the number of people who sign petitions (from 6% to 12.9%) and participate

⁹ Solongo Jambaa interview, Sept 6, 2015.

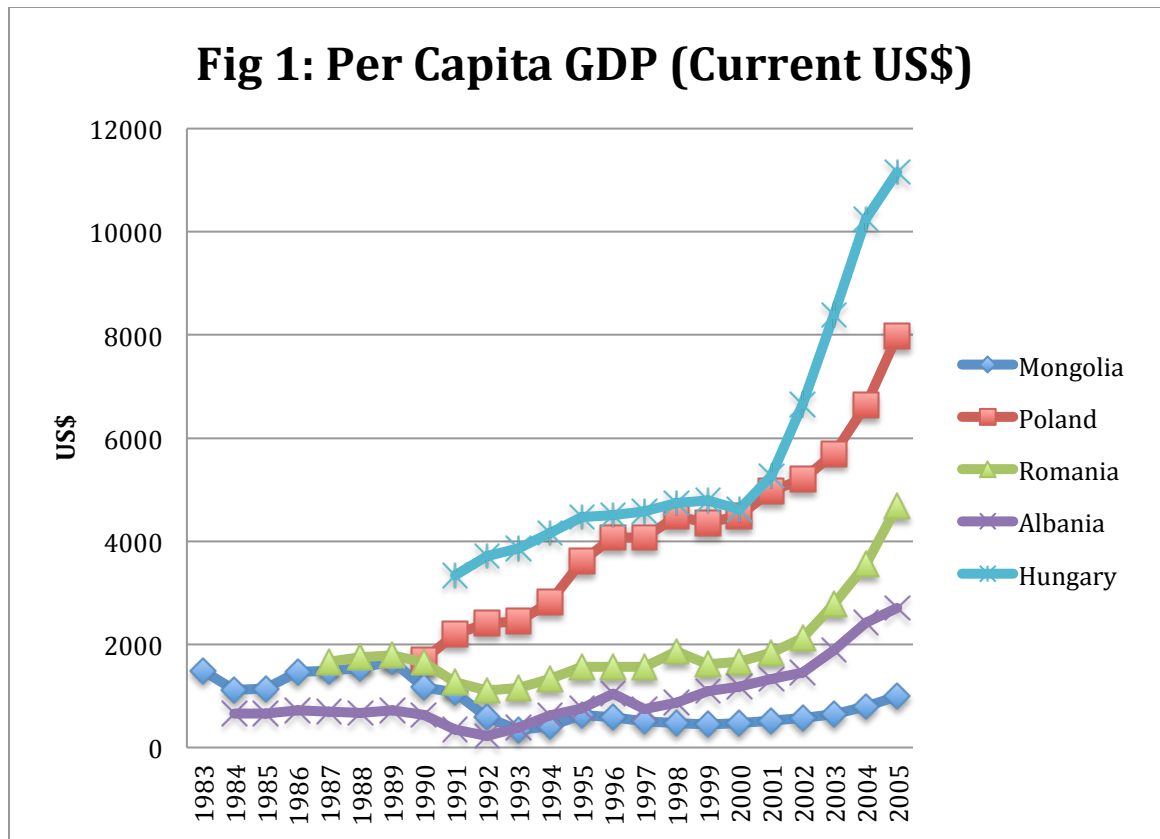
in public demonstrations (from 3.8% to 10%).¹⁰ Participation was particularly massive at the 1989-1990 mass protests for regime change. Since Mongolia's traditional way of life is so strongly tied to the natural environment, and since the environmental damage wreaked by communist economic policies has become widely known, environmental activism has also become closely associated with both traditional values and anti-communist protest. In April 2015 the first ever shamanic ritual protest was conducted in Sukhbaatar Square - 40-50 shamans gathered to protest environmental damages.¹¹

Democratic Consolidation through Cultural Policy

Mongolia's transition to a market economy was far from easy. In the post-transition year of 1991, the economy was described as being in "free-fall." Soviet aid, which had previously covered between a third and a half of the annual budget, was cut off. Foreign trade plummeted, and unemployment rose from 31,000 in February to over 80,000 in September; meat rationing had to be introduced in Ulaanbaatar for the first time in history (Heaton 1992, 52-3). Figure 1 shows Mongolia's per capita GDP alongside comparable Soviet satellite states in the years before and after transition. The data show post-communist Mongolia had a rockier start than even notorious basket-cases like Albania and Romania. Mongolians today still remember the first couple years after regime change as a time of great desperation and near starvation conditions in much of the country.

¹⁰ *Civil Society Index Report for Mongolia*, p40.

¹¹ Interview with Bum-Ochir.



Src: World Development Indicators

Thus, according to the “Relative Deprivation” model of contentious politics, Mongolia’s democratic consolidation should have faced some of the heaviest popular resistance. Yet while relatively well-off states like Poland, Hungary and the former GDR were awash with labor strikes and more impoverished states like Albania, Belarus and Romania were sliding back into quasi-dictatorships or rule by ex-communist *nomenklatura*, Mongolia emerged from this tumultuous period with a stable two-party system. The two major parties have peacefully alternated control of the presidency three times since 1992. Mongolians take pride in their ability to survive the roughest period despite relatively poorer circumstances, associating their success with their cultural norms of toughness, basic living, and communal support. The former repression victim Duger Yadam remarked that in Eastern

Europe “one in one thousand” people died in the tumult of the transition period, but “nobody died in Mongolia.”¹² The social anthropologist Bum-Ochir sees a cultural explanation for the lack of violence: “I can’t imagine Mongols fighting against Mongols; we don’t fight... We don’t have guns. We are a peaceful people.” As further evidence, Bum-Ochir also cites the public’s shocked reaction when five people were killed in unruly protests following the 2008 election.¹³

The government was able to achieve certain specific economic gains early on, which it trumpeted to great effect. One of the earliest transformations occurred when collectivized herds were broken up and private herding was brought back. When asked to name what they considered the most positive change brought by the fall of communism, multiple interviewees cited the same factoid: the total livestock count in the country increased from 25 million head in 1990 to over 75 million head today. This simple statistic seems to have become a well-known and frequently cited point of national pride. Although the livestock privatization did not translate immediately into higher per capita GDP, it did bring more intangible benefits to the struggling regime, chiefly the revival of a traditional way of life that had become nearly moribund under the Soviet system.

Culture was used often and with great effect by the young government as it sought to consolidate new democratic institutions in place of the communist bureaucracy. Some of the earliest laws debated in the reconstituted Mongolian legislature included motions to restore reverence for Genghis Khan, bring back traditional Uyghur script, and allocate government funds to support traditional

¹² Interview with Duger Yadam, Sept 8, 2015.

¹³ Interview with Bum-Ochir, Sept 9, 2015.

music and theater. In 1992 the government reestablished worship services at the Erdenezuu Monastery, a formerly vast complex of which only four buildings survived at the end of the communist period.¹⁴

A major step was taken when the Dalai Lama returned to Ulaanbaatar in August of 1995: "A crowd of 10,000 assembled in the sweltering heat to see the Dalai Lama, a gathering that would have been unthinkable prior to the Russian retreat. Soon, the searing heat turned into a torrential downpour that reduced the Gandan Monastery to a sea of thick, sticky mud. Many elderly, often unable to walk, were carried in by relatives to witness the Dalai Lama perform the Kalachakra initiation ceremony, a rite outlawed since 1937."¹⁵ Although today only a few monasteries are functioning and most monks are in their 70s, the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism have helped restore Mongolians' spiritual link to their past.

Throughout the democratic era, Mongolian politicians and opinion-leaders have scoured their history for elements of modernity and democratic principles that they can claim as Mongol inventions. In a 2015 interview with Charlie Rose, President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj claimed that the Mongolian empire in Persia created world's first observatory, as well as the first hospitals and universities.¹⁶ In a speech at North Korea's Kim Il Sung University, Elbegdorg boasted that the Mongolian empire created one of Asia's earliest written legal codes, respected freedom of faith and freedom to create, created true diplomatic immunity through

¹⁴ "Mongolia: The Bhudda and the Khan". Orient Magazine. Retrieved 2013-06-28. <http://wayback.archive.org/web/19980422190623/http://orientmag.com/8-30.htm>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Charlie Rose Show*, Oct. 13, 2015 (<https://charlierose.com/videos/23741>)

metallic plates carried by envoys guaranteeing their protection, and “never waged wars without a justifiable reason.”¹⁷ Sabloff (2013) lists several innovations from Genghis Khan’s time that (much later) came to be associated with Democracy: 1) decrees written down in the Ikh Yasa, constituting some rule of law; 2) participatory governance through Council of Wise Men; 3) guarantees of some personal freedoms 4) merit-based rank among soldiers; 5) encouragement of literacy. Since the more distinctly feudal institutions of serfdom and landed nobility emerged most prominently under Qing rule, these could be added to the laundry list of foreign-imposed tyrannies, leaving Mongolians free to fantasize that some sort of primitive quasi-democracy existed eight centuries ago under their Great Empire. This improbable connection enables Mongolians not only to take pride in their past but also to see their current system as a logical continuation of their ancient traditions and values.

In recent years Mongolian historians have confronted Russian historical narratives with increasing bluntness. At a 2008 conference organized by Dr. Boldbaatar, historian Choisambuu drew attention to Russia’s “new historical narrative” in relation to the Mongol conquest: “In recent years Russian researchers have begun to rewrite their history, often distorting facts. For example, they deny the existence of the Mongol nation, consider Genghis Khan and Batu Khan to be invented heroes, say that Batu Khan was in fact Alexander Nevsky, and claim that the Mongols never invaded Russian soil.” (Sanders 2010, 626) This continued revisionism of Mongolian history, even after the Soviet era, reflects ongoing crises in Russian politics

¹⁷ President Elbegdorj’s speech at Kim Il Sung University, Oct 29, 2013.

and society which would deserve an entirely separate chapter; but it suffices to point out that Mongolia's newfound ability to confront chauvinistic Russian narratives provides its democratic regime with yet more ammunition to support its popular legitimacy and superiority to the former Communist regime.

Statuary has become a recurring point of contention in post-transition Mongolia. After 1990, statues of Soviet leaders went down one by one and were replaced with prominent Mongolians. Purev, the painter, recalls feeling a sense of rightness when the statues of Lenin and Stalin came down; it inspired him to set aside his painting for a time and become more active in the revolution.¹⁸ While most of the new statues feature democracy activists or figures from the distant past, some Mongolian communist leaders escaped the bronze genocide. The revolutionary hero Sukhbaatar remains frozen astride his horse in mid-charge in of his namesake square in the center of the city, and Choibalsan stands proudly in Soviet military regalia in front of the National University, and even Tsedenbal appears seated on a throne-like chair outside the National Drama Theater. But the grandest statues in the country today are of Chinggis Khan, whose enormous likeness appears seated in front of the government house, flanked by his descendants Ögedei and Khubilai Khaan as well as two guards on horseback. Another Chinggis statue, this one on horseback and over 40 meters tall, was erected in 2008 on the vast plain east of the capital as a tourist attraction. Other recent statuary around the capital have depicted whirling dervishes, famous books in Mongolian script, rams, eagles and other symbols of the country's natural beauty. As recently as 2012, controversy surrounded the removal of the last statue of Lenin from the capital. It was a move

¹⁸ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 10, 2015.

promoted with much ceremony and fanfare by the Democratic Party, but opposed by its rival the Communist Party and a not-insignificant number of ordinary citizens. The opposition argued that the Communist system, despite its faults, was an important part of Mongolia's national history and its path to independence. Questioned about the motives for pushing ahead with the statue removal, Democratic Party official Ankhbayar remarked with a shrug that "we must get rid of the old."¹⁹

The other newly independent states and former soviet republics also took steps to reclaim their lost culture. But due to their cultural diversity, few were able to utilize these symbols effectively without creating a knock-on effect of ethnic strife. The resurgence of Serbian nationalism prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia is a demonstrative case. Ethnic tensions arose as ethnic majorities used their new democratic powers to enact culturally restorative policies that served as uncomfortable reminders to minority groups of the pre-communist past. In the republics of Central Asia, the public's sense of pre-soviet nationhood was apparently too hazy to withstand the long decades of cultural repression, making it difficult for the new democratic rulers to rally people around a unified vision of the pre-soviet culture (Schatz 2006, 270). In Kazakhstan, for example, "robbed of crucial markers of their identity such as religion and ethnicity, Kazakhs were not capable of engaging in any action aimed at recovering their cultural losses." (Rorlich 2009, 159) The result was the emergence of new autocrats who reinvented their own vision of traditional culture.

Today, Mongolian politics are a place of contention and compromise, with two dominant parties (the MPRP and the Democrats) that frequently alternate in power. The

¹⁹ Interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, Sept 9th, 2015.

government is frequently divided in a state of equilibrium, with the president and Parliamentary majority held by opposing parties (Ginsburg 1997). The MPRP has distanced itself from its communist past and now emphatically pursues social democratic principles, appealing to Mongolians' sense of collectivism and community welfare against the more individualistic, sometimes selfish nature of the new democratic society. But the MPRP never seems to hold on to the presidency for more than a single term, as Mongolian voters are generally pleased with the new regime and wary of return to the past. The Democratic Party makes the most strident claims to cultural fidelity, and most of the major policy moves to promote traditional culture have been passed in times of Democratic majority.

In recent years the Mongolian government has been burnishing its credentials as a standard-bearer for democracy in the region. The country hosted the seventh ministerial meeting of the Community of Democracies in 2013, with over 1200 participants from different countries.²⁰ Through their own initiative they have reached out to autocratic neighbors in Central Asia and even North Korea, offering a more moderate, Asian-oriented path to reform as an alternative to the overbearing demands from the West. The North Koreans seemed very favorable to this approach and developed quite warm relations with Mongolia, until President Elbegdorj visited Kim Il Sung University in 2013 and delivered a lecture entitled "No Dictatorship Lasts Forever." Through this and other actions Mongolia has proven to be something of a loose canon among the world's democracies, proud of its system

²⁰ Interview with Bum-Ochir, Sept 9, 2015.

and eager to promote it, but not slavishly following any particular Western form or conventional wisdom.

Conclusions

After the end of the Cold War, long-suppressed cultural and linguistic traditions were rapidly reclaimed throughout the Soviet bloc and nationalist tensions that had remained frozen for decades boiled over in Eastern Europe. The tremendous passions incited by these developments cannot be denied, raising the question of how much cultural repression helped to fuel the groundswell of popular support for those pro-democracy movements. We might reasonably ask: If Stalin had been a little less obsessed with total cultural and ideological control of bloc member states, if he had been content to simply influence their political and economic structures and ensure security alliances — and there is nothing to suggest that such an approach would have been politically infeasible — would communism still have been overthrown so rapidly and enthusiastically in those countries following *glasnost*? Would the common people of Eastern Europe and Mongolia have been motivated to take to the streets in such numbers for the abstract goals of a free-market economy and democratic institutions, without the added push of reclaiming lost cultural forms and values?

In political science, the success or failure of regime change is often measured in terms of the functionality of political institutions, economic indicators, or the degree of implementation of civil rights provisions. Yet ordinary citizens glean an extraordinary amount of utility from the recovery of national pride and independence. In a country with

very little material wealth or international status to take pride in, cultural uniqueness and independence become all the more important.

Whether autocratic or democratic, left or right, any new ideology will have a much harder time achieving popular acceptance if it is perceived to have been imported from outside — particularly if the receiving nation has suffered greatly under a foreign-imposed ideology or political order in the past. As Pipes notes, for “neo-Slavophiles like Alexander Solzhenitsyn... the whole problem in Russia lay in Marxism, which they saw as a virus brought from the West and lacking roots in Russia’s own past.” (Pipes 1996, 30) The flip side of this is that a people will endure greater hardship and stomach more hypocrisy in the name of achieving the ultimate victory of a “homegrown” ideology or political order rather than an imported one. Even in Russia, the heart of the Soviet empire, when things got really bad the people readily turned on their own ideology by emphasizing its foreign roots.

Cultural policies do not exist in a vacuum, but are perceived relative to the policies that came before, which impact the public’s willingness to accept them and respond to them. If the previous regime imposed overbearing internationalist, modernizing policies at the expense of national distinctiveness and cultural pride, as was the case in much of the Soviet bloc, then the new regime must take pains to restore what was lost or risk losing popular support and being overthrown in turn. If, however, a state has just come off of a long period of highly nationalistic, culturally conservative policies that have become directly associated with disastrous economic or military failures – Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany come to

mind – the people will be unmoved by cultural restoration policies and may even actively oppose them.

Mongolians did not invent democracy, but they have given it their own unique flavor, with a rich media environment and an inventive civil society. They found ways to trace elements of early democracy in the institutions of Genghis Khan's Great Horde. Their modern state and its institutions were not installed by an overbearing Western provisional government but rather were achieved through Mongolians' own struggles – through hunger strikes, mass rallies, long political meetings, and hard-won compromises. The two ruling parties trade power peaceably back and forth, and while they frequently disagree on many political and economic points, both are careful to pay due diligence to the preservation of Mongolia's cultural distinctiveness and traditional way of life. The results speak for themselves – one of the most stable polities among the Third Wave transition countries. Mongolians can and do participate in labor strikes and protest actions, but there are no serious demands for regime change; even the most politically disgruntled among them accept the democratic government system as “the only game in town.”

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Appendix I: Interview subjects

Solongo Jambaa: Filmmaker; graduate of Moscow Film University Institute of Cinematography; participant in 1990 protest movement; Founder and Chairman of the KUDS Mongolian Film Institute of cinematography; Director of the Mongol film state-owned factory.

Boldbaatar Jigidiin: Historian; "Honored Worker of Science" at the Academy of Sciences in Ulaanbaatar; PhD in History from Soviet Communist Party Central Committee Academy of Sciences 1991; wrote provocative tracts for dissident newspapers in 1980s; participated in *glasnost* movement as a student in USSR; author of "The Eight-hundredth Anniversary of Chinggis Khan: The Revival and Suppression of Mongolian National Consciousness."

Ankhubayar Dagdan: Was Party Secretary in the reform government; now heads the Policy Department for the Democratic Party.

Bum-Ochir Dulam: TV pundit and well-known professor of Social Anthropology at the National University of Mongolia; 2006 PhD from Cambridge.

Duger Yadam: A son of a well-off Mongolian herding family who were repressed as kulaks in the 1930s and sent to collective farm; worked as a translator and traveled to the USSR for university; participated in the 1990 protests; from 1990 was provincial Democratic Party leader; now works with the Democratic Party helping track down and record family histories of surviving victims of political repression.

Tamir Chultemsuren: Political sociologist at National University of Mongolia; consultant at Independent Research Institute of Mongolia; Author, "Mass demonstration and regime change in socialist Mongolia: Galactic policy against radial polity."

Tsendpurev Tsegmid: freelance artist and curator based in Ulaanbaatar; born 1980; PhD in contemporary art practice from Leeds; research focuses on modern Mongolian national identity and its artistic representation in UK, contests existing stereotypes of Mongolness.

Purev Dolgorjav: Soviet-trained painter, Vanjil Arts Centre; Born 1958.