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### **Idly drinking and chatting: the Sovietization of the Mongolian countryside**

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Reading their reports, I sometimes picture them -- the purveyors and protectors of socialism in Mongolia -- as a particularly humorless brand of anthropologist. The reports, filed by members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, party functionaries, and others, seem to cover many of the topics traditionally of interest to anthropologists: wedding feasts (when the herders should have been working), everyday social interaction (when they should have been working), religious ceremonies (they *really* should have been working), and even more arcane topics like reading habits. (This last item itself was commendable, but not the fact that the person in question never returned the newspapers, like he said he would.)

I imagine the writers of these reports skulking about, taking their notes, and writing their indignant reports. Their attention to detail is of great use to the anthropologist who is now studying them, but I can't but help think they mustn't have been too much fun to be around. And, like anthropologists sometimes, I think they often misinterpreted their data.

This paper is part of an on-going research project. Many of my conclusions here are still tentative, and I hope to elicit some discussion on them. I have two main points to make here. The first is that the cases of non-compliance that these "anthropologists" interpreted as resistance was not always thought of as such by those who were actually not complying. "Resistance" in this case was often constructed by those responsible for reporting on it. Ranajit Guha once pointed out: "it is precisely by refusing to prove what appears as obvious that historians of peasant insurgency remain trapped - in the obvious."<sup>1</sup> I think this is well worth remembering. The second point is that we need to problematize the dominant groups much more than has been done. As will become clear during the course of this talk, the two categories - those who complied and those who didn't - were by no means sharply defined in socialist Mongolia.

The early 1950s are referred to in the official history texts as "the struggle to create the basis of socialism." This is the period I will concentrate on here. The second part of the 1950s is often billed as the "victory of socialist relations of production." Although collectivisation was pushed most heavily later in the decade, the shift to create a truly socialist society began in the late 1940s.

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<sup>1</sup> Guha 1988: 53.

The early 1950s, therefore, provide us a glimpse of the period when subtler methods of propaganda and persuasion were tried. If we can understand the issues at stake in the early 1950s, those of the later periods should be that much clearer.

In the case of the early 1950s, the word ‘struggle’ is a fairly accurate description, apart from its status as favourite term of the socialists. The process I refer to as “Sovietisation” - creating a socio-economic structure and ethic modeled after that in the Soviet Union - had in theory been going on for thirty years. Yet by the early 1950s while much had changed, much had not. There is not time to go into the previous thirty years of putative socialism in Mongolia, but let me note it included purges, the destruction of the Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy and temples, a civil war and the interruptions of World War II.

Let me return to our skulking “anthropologists” to give you a flavour of the reports on the issues under discussion. The first excerpt is from *Introductory memo number 89, about how many of this aimag's workers were involved with wedding celebrations* and was top-secret in 1951.

During the time of the important preparations for winter, many of the workers were recently involved in the holding of many wedding celebrations, which is a quite significant hindrance to work. I point out some evidence: ....

At the place in Bulgan *sum* called Hevtein Dov, the Gangan and Davaa households [lit: айл], with Ulaanbaatar driver Dugaragiin Sambuu, killed two cows and eight sheep, and had a feast with not less than 200 people which lasted for three days.<sup>2</sup>

The second is from a report on the condition of Övörhangai province’s “preparatory work” [for the winter] from 1953.

[The herders] let the peak of the hay-making season pass-by idly talking and drinking. To give an example, even the deputies, agitators and supervisors [хариуцлагатанууд] themselves were not working, but passing the time idly. ....

Some herders [ардууд] took 10 kg of hay, saying it was hay for one camel, but I know this is a lie. .... The report on animal husbandry is full of lies [маш худал].<sup>3</sup>

There are a few more serious topics covered in these reports, but in hindsight, one is struck by what seems to be the pettiness of so much of it. In a top-secret report on unauthorized vehicle usage from 1952 mileage is duly reported each time.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it is this very pettiness which is so intriguing and illuminating. Such pettiness is much more common than complaints about what might reasonably be considered more serious claims -

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<sup>2</sup> *Ulsyn Töv Tүүхийн Архив* (UTTA), F-1, T-5, H/N-124, pp. 36-37

<sup>3</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-483, pp. 259-266

<sup>4</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-343, pp. 10-13

active resistance, explicit anti-Party agitation, etc.<sup>5</sup> Further, the reports - almost without exception - were sent to the highest echelons -- the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (hereafter MAHN). Even such complaints as drinking and talking rather than working were apparently deemed worthy of the highest attention. These reports did receive such attention. Many of them have various sections and reported violations underlined in thick blue pencil (which the Council of Ministers was apparently fond of using). It was the consensus of various people I talked to that action was most likely taken. I hope to be able to pursue this further when I return to Mongolia next year.

The most basic, and I would argue important conclusion to draw from this is that good socialists were few and far between in 1950s Mongolia. Even the people in the *aimag* (district) party offices sat around reading "lectures about religion" [шашны тухай лэжц] rather than attending their duties.<sup>6</sup> The second item, and a point confirmed by various people I interviewed on the topic, is that active resistance was largely absent. (It would appear more frequently later in the decade.) Given the massive purges and executions of only fifteen years previous, this is not surprising. But the first point - that the socialists were few and far between *is* somewhat surprising. After all, I have already noted that Mongolia had been at least nominally socialist for about thirty years, and would claim overwhelming success in collectivising both animals and herders by the end of the decade. "By 1958-59, or the during the second year of the three year plan, the country's rural economy [хөдөө аж ахуй] had been organized into co-operatives."<sup>7</sup> This claim may well be true, since repressive taxation and other methods of "encouragement" were employed in the late 1950s. But this still does not tell us the whole story.

The official histories make this entire period seem quite straightforward -- people joined *negdels* (collectives) in ever greater numbers and so did their animals. Five year plans were implemented. Education advanced. Schools, movie theatres and red corners were built. Everyone was happy and life was good. Some herders, especially the poorer ones, apparently did welcome collectivisation. And indeed, some of these things did happen.

"Voluntary co-operatives" were established in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Schools and movies theatres were built. Propaganda was widespread, and starting in 1949, instilling socialist views of history became an ongoing concern.<sup>8</sup> But this alone does not tell us much. Numbers for

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<sup>5</sup> It is possible that more serious claims could be found in reports and documents in the Ministry of Internal Affairs archives, but at present, these are closed to foreigners.

<sup>6</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-214, pg. 3 These could, in theory, be anti-religious Party lectures, but the context appears to indicate otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> Bira et al 1984: 550.

<sup>8</sup> see the resolutions "Ardyn unshih bichgiin tuhai" and "BNMAU-yn tüüh ba utga zohiolgyg surguuliudad zaaj baigaa baidlyn tuhai" in Party History Institute 1967: 326-330.

the 1950s are not available to me, but in 1945, the main library in Ömnögov' *aimag* had 339 books, and was used by 77 people in half a year.<sup>9</sup> (A very rough estimate would put the aimag centre's population at 6,000 to 7,000 at the time.)<sup>10</sup> In another aimag, the "little building" used by the Party committee and which doubled as a meeting place was turned into a storeroom.<sup>11</sup> While schools were built and secondary education mandatory, in the early 1950s it was common for children be taken out of the system after their primary schooling, as they were needed to help with the herding.

In short, as usual, the official story and the unofficial one differ substantially. We have already seen some indication of what those in charge of monitoring the process thought. I want to take this a step further, and suggest that they saw what was happening in much the same way James Scott - and many of us - would. Scott includes under the label of "everyday forms of resistance" such actions as "foot dragging, dissimulation, [and] false compliance" (Scott 1985: 29). He goes on to note resistance to collectivization offers a "striking example" of this form of resistance (pg. 32). While such resistance doubtless took place in Mongolia, particularly with forced collectivisation in the late 1950s, it would be dangerous to see everything the reports talk about as everyday resistance. In other words, sometimes a wedding is just a big celebration where people eat and drink a lot. It may be seen by some as more than this, but I am not sure that it is always intended as such. August is traditionally a popular time for weddings in Mongolia. The spring lambing was safely over, the animals fattened, but winter had not yet arrived. *Tsagaan idee*, the traditional white foods (ie, dairy products) served at such ceremonies, were also plentiful in August. Perhaps what our "anthropologists" witnessed and reported on was not so much resistance as simple indifference.

In arguing that we should perhaps view some of these acts as acts of indifference rather than resistance, I note that even the agitators and propagandists - those charged with instilling socialism - did not carry out their tasks wholeheartedly. One might reasonably expect them to be the most dedicated of political workers. If they were, it is no wonder the country was still not fully socialist in content as well as form. According to one indignant "true party member for sixteen years," in a certain district in the southwest of the country in 1951, only 21% of the propagandists [ухуулагчид] subscribed to MAHN's newspaper, *Ünen*.<sup>12</sup> (And even these people were accused of not actually making use of the paper.) It is clear from the report filed by this disgruntled party member (he included his membership number, in case you wanted to check) that many of these

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<sup>9</sup> Davaasambuu 1975: 112.

<sup>10</sup> The population of Ömnögov' was about 20,000 in 1944 (Ginsburgs 1961: 493).

<sup>11</sup> Davaasambuu 1975: 113.

<sup>12</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-214, pg. 4

petty incidents were to be regarded as foot dragging and false compliance no matter what their intention:

The [district] party committee and its propaganda section generally do not consider changing [such problems], and are living like people condoning these shortcomings. Although evidence such as this is abundant, I am introducing to you the main [points], so that you may prepare to take measures.<sup>13</sup>

This appears to be fairly characteristic of the general situation in the countryside in the early 1950s. Our reporter continues such complaints over seven closely-typed pages. He includes one item that is particularly striking: the aiding and abetting of religious worship.

In Mandal sum's eighth district [*bag*] there are seven party members working, and in the seventh district, four are working. However, these two districts were dominated by the teachings of the head lama Gombo, and this incident had an influence on the party members of these districts. Making peace [Эвлэрч] with these districts' religious adherents the eighth district's head, party member Mönhochir and Buyandalai gave refuge to Gombo for 11 years on the land of these districts. Believing in this Gombo's Tibetan witchcraft [lit: эм], they not only asked him about the horoscope for the year, sought answers from oracles, and had him "cast out misfortune" but Mönhochir, Buyandalai and party member Namnan also were performing religious ceremonies and praying with this Gombo in a desolate wilderness [Эзэнгүй хээр] called Hairhan.<sup>14</sup>

I think this incident in particular highlights the key issues here. Although the party members doubtless knew what they were doing was wrong from a socialist point of view, I am far less sure that they envisioned their actions as resistance, as the "anthropologist" observing them doubtless did. Rather, I think it likely that they were largely indifferent to the apparent conflict between religious belief and holding a position in the socialist hierarchy. This would be particularly true in Mongolia, where many of the heroes of the socialist revolution had been active in the previous theocratic government of the Bogd Khaan. Some were even lamas themselves. To be both a socialist and a Buddhist was not without precedent in Mongolia.

Even the Ministry of Internal Affairs was not immune from the problems of the time. They may have been ruthlessly effective in carrying out the purges of the 1930s, but in the 1950s they were not always a smoothly functioning machine. Each aimag section did have its own letterhead (or at least stamp) for filing reports, but the reports were often written on typewriters that didn't contain all of the Mongolian letters, or were even written by hand. In a further injustice, some of the rooms

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<sup>13</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-214, pg. 3

<sup>14</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-214, pg. 2

in which the Ministry of Internal Affairs was supposed to carry out secret work lacked iron gratings on the windows. In the worst cases, they even lacked glass in the windows.<sup>15</sup> At other times, the Ministry was not consulted when various people such as local party secretaries were appointed. As a result, known criminals sometimes were given positions of power.<sup>16</sup> (But to be fair, it should be noted that several early Prime Ministers were also rumoured to have criminal pasts, including cattle rustling.)<sup>17</sup>

The point of all this is almost deceptively simple: the attempt to instill a socialist lifestyle and ethic in Mongolia was anything but a straightforward task. But I want to end by complicating this simple observation, and suggesting where this research may lead. It is not simply that one side pushed, and the other side tried not to be pushed. Rather non-compliance coupled with indifference was widespread, and occurred throughout the power hierarchy. Those at the very top may have believed in what they were doing, but despite their best efforts, it seems that many of the people working for them did not.

Let me be clear. Some of these people did view their actions as “everyday forms of resistance.” One elderly lady I know, whose first two husbands were purged, recalled with some glee daring the Ministry of Internal Affairs to arrest her, which they never did. She also would walk too close to official residences, she said, and then feign innocence when stopped by the guards. But by and large, this does not appear to have been a common occurrence.

It was not so much resistance to the process of Sovietization that was occurring and need to be guarded against, but simple indifference. The larger lesson to be learned here is that even indifference can be dangerous if it is misinterpreted by those observing and reporting on it. The herders and local party members may not have given much thought to what they did or didn’t do, but the people observing them did. And even if the observers “got it wrong,” their reports had consequences that could not be ignored.

Let me return to our “anthropologists” skulking about the Mongolian countryside one last time. In their eagerness to propagate socialism and find resistance, they found it were I do not believe it was intended. This was no doubt due in part to their own beliefs, and in part to the incentive system in place in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I think this should be a lesson to us modern-day anthropologists. My first reaction to these reports was to take them at face value, and assume the herders and even some party members were fully aware of what they were doing. And some may have been. But at this stage now I think it much more likely the

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<sup>15</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-124, pp. 125-127.

<sup>16</sup> UTTA F-1, T-5, H/N-124, pp. 114-116.

<sup>17</sup> Baabar 1996: XX.

case that many were simply indifferent on a day to day basis to the government's plans for them. In other words, not only should we as anthropologists be looking at issues of resistance, but we should be looking at those who are busily constructing such issues, both in 1950s Mongolia and here today.

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