

Paper given at the conference: Greater Mongolia in the Twentieth Century, Princeton University, February 1995. Do not cite without author's written permission.

Legitimizing the Mongol State: Creating a Useable Past

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When browsing through the bookstores of Ulaanbaatar during fieldwork in 1993, I was struck by the number of books on history and related topics now being published.¹ In many ways, this was to be expected, given the substantial changes Mongolia has undergone since 1989. Indeed, I would have been surprised not to have encountered such books. Nonetheless, one aspect of the phenomenon in particular deserves closer attention, especially in regard to what it can tell us about attitudes toward the past. One subset of the books being published are the *tailbar tol'*, a term literally meaning an "explanatory dictionary".² The dictionaries I shall be concerned with all focus in one way or another on the past. The specific topics of these dictionaries range from Chinggis Khaan to traditional customs and taboos.

The publication of these books, along with their reception among the urban elite of Ulaanbaatar serve to highlight several aspects of contemporary Mongolia that I wish to explore in this paper.³ In the course of this paper, I shall interpret the category of *tailbar tol'* somewhat liberally. Some of the works I discuss do not fit the description exactly, but help shed light on the issue at hand.

One of the more interesting aspects of contemporary Mongolian society is the perceived need to reclaim (or construct) a past -- including its customs and traditions -- that is distinctly and wholly Mongolian. To be Mongolian in this context is to repudiate socialism. The socialist period is viewed largely as a period of foreign domination. Particular expressions of this view range from beliefs that Mongolia was overdependent on the Soviet Union and COMECON to assertions that there was no fundamental difference between the period of Soviet rule and Manchu domination.

This reclaiming of the past is linked to a desire to establish a new, non-socialist basis for Mongolian identity in the current cultural and political climate. As Caroline Humphrey writes of Mongolian history: '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' (Humphrey 1992: 376).

The *tailbar tol'* have a role to play in the building of a bridge to the past. They are both indications of, and contributors to, this linkage to the past. I suggest, based on the books themselves

¹ Research for this paper was supported in part by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the United States Information Agency, and the US Department of State. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

² The term is used in Mongolian to refer to dictionaries that give definitions of words (as opposed to a dictionary for translating). The English term 'encyclopedia' may better describe the books being discussed, although there is a separate term in Mongolian for them.

³ Among the urban elite I include politicians, members of the government, academics, and so forth.

and discussions with Mongolians, that what we are witnessing is in some ways equivalent to the creation of a unified past by newly emergent nations. In Mongolia, this creation is part of an attempt to establish a specific identity by claiming it has always existed, and merely needed to be 'awakened'. It is only by leaping over socialism that a past worthy of reawakening can be reached.

While in this paper I focus on the *tailbar tol*, I do not claim that they are the only mechanisms whereby this identity is being 'awakened'. They are indeed only part of a larger construction being carried on it books, newspapers, television programs, elsewhere.

The upheavals and uncertainty associated with national identity are fairly clear. The Culture Minister Enkhbayar noted: "A lot of Mongolians now think that the independence and survival of [our] country ... is a question of finding our identity. To be different from the Chinese, and at the same time to be different from the Russians."

Enkhbayar's linkage of identity and national survival calls to mind the aim of the Romantic nationalists. Compare his observation with Herder's comments on the need for Germans to reject the influences of the Enlightenment (and France): "The remains of all living folk (or national) thought are rolling with an accelerated final plunge into the abyss of oblivion. ... For half a century we have been ashamed of everything that has to do with the fatherland" (quoted in Wilson 1973: 830). Herder's sentiments were often echoed by Mongolians in conversations and survey responses. In this case, however, it was usually portrayed as the fault of the Soviets. Even if "Soviet ideology was taken up almost more sincerely, more naively, more brutally than in the USSR itself" (Humphrey 1992: 375) in Mongolia, this fact is downplayed. Whatever the true role of the Soviets, they make convenient scapegoats. A few people had also suggested that the Mongolian intelligentsia had forfeited their right to influence events in the country because they had 'betrayed everything in order to survive'. Interestingly enough, this comment was made by an intellectual. These suggestions, however, were in a minority.

The process by which nationalists (and other groups) use folklore and history to argue for a legitimacy to their particular project is well documented. Thirty years ago Dorson noted "the promoters of a national self-consciousness, whether in a republic, a monarchy, an empire, or a socialist state, clearly appear to have recognized the value and utility of folklore" (1966: 277). In this work he goes on to examine several cases, including that of the newly emergent United States. Oinas (1978) has demonstrated the often heavy-handed use of folk forms (tales, epics, etc.) by the Soviet Union in an attempt to foster its own legitimacy.

Olcott's study of the case of the Kazakhs (1980) illustrates a similar aim pursued by the Soviet government. She looks at the attempt to create a specific identity for the Kazakhs, one national in form and socialist in content. Her work is particularly relevant, for Olcott describes the process which the Mongolians are now attempting to undo. Olcott writes of the "politicization of myth" (1980: 193); Mongolians now talk of de-politicizing history. She suggests that the Soviets may "have been able to create a new political identity, ... they have not succeeded in manufacturing a new cultural identity or a new culture. ... [T]he Kazakh culture of today clearly represents the continuation of the cultural values of the Kazakh past" (1980:211). While a similar case could perhaps be argued for Mongolia, it is clearly not viewed that way by many Mongolians themselves.

While related to these studies, the present paper differs in certain key points. Among the Mongolians, there is no need to convince anyone that the past, or the nation, has always existed. (Although the latter, in its present form is a historically fairly recent construct.) Nor does it seem

overly necessary to convince people to look to the past. What is taking place is portrayed as a reclaiming or reawakening of national consciousness and traditions that had been forcefully suppressed. Rather than trying to show that the nation has always existed -- already taken for granted under socialism -- the issue is to show that this 'always existing' past is the 'true', and thus legitimate, past.

In the past ten years or so, the edited volume by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) has often come to be seen as the defining publication on the use of past for creating identities. The essays in their volume focus on "invented traditions":

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

In the strictest sense, what we are witnessing in Mongolia is not the invention of tradition. There are, however, certain parallels. Hobsbawm includes among the category of invented traditions the resurrection of those traditions which had not been practiced for awhile. "The very appearance of movements for the defense or revivals of tradition" must, by their explicitness, supplant or break with historical continuity (Hobsbawm 1983: 7-8). By being self-conscious, such movements belie their claim to be traditional. The defense and revival of tradition in such a manner is exactly what the Mongolians are undertaking, and by emphasizing the links of tradition to the pre-socialist past, they are denying the validity of the socialist era.

By creating such links to the non-socialist past by the *tailbar tol'* one is invoking a 'continuity with the past,' where none necessarily exist. To this extent, the Mongolians are recreating the program of the Romantic nationalists, who "have attempted not only to reconstruct the past, but also to revive it -- to make it the model for the development of their nations" (Wilson 1973: 833). Indeed, Mongolians will often be explicit about lessons that can be learned from their history. In general, said Dash-Yondon, the Secretary General of MAKhN, people now feel they should be "proud of their history, and learn lessons from their history."

As we shall see later, although presented as 'real' (as 'invented traditions' are), the past as received is not necessary the past as it was lived. It must also be remembered that like all histories (in both senses of the word: that which is written, and that which is written about), it is a selective past. It is highly relevant to note that with few exceptions, the socialist period is excluded from the *tailbar tol'*.⁴

Hobsbawm further suggests that the most prevalent type of invented tradition in the West since the industrial revolution has been 'those [invented traditions] establishing or symbolizing social cohesion of the membership of groups, real or artificial communities' (1983: 9). The *tailbar tol'* are a part of a large project with this goal, even if it is not an explicit one.

The general category of *tailbar tol'* can be subdivided into two main groupings. The first of

⁴ This is not to say the socialist period has been completely disregarded. It is the subject of newspaper articles. But while these are still seen as 'telling the truth' it is of a fundamentally different sort.

these deal with history *qua* history. The second concerns itself more with the concept and construction of "traditional culture". It is this second category that we shall be more concerned with.

The first category is identifiable with concerns over writing the "truth" about history. Although most intellectuals claim to have maintained an underground history during the socialist period, they still see these *tailbar tol'* and other history books as fulfilling a necessary function. Given the control of history writing by the government under socialism, much attention has been paid in the press to the clearing up of falsehoods or misconceptions about history. Many of these recent books thus are seen as 'setting the record straight'. All history books, however, are not necessarily seen as contributing to this. Some, I was often told, are simply written by people trying to make money.

The second group of *tailbar tol'* implies a perceived loss -- a forced forgetting by the old regime -- of a legitimate culture. The term *sergen mandal* (renaissance), with its emphasis on the past (*sergen* means to awaken or revive, while *mandal* is to flourish) is a particularly telling phrase for what is taking place. Whether or not this perceived loss and concomitant remembering is actually the case is open to debate. It is also a subject of some contention among academics and others in Mongolia. Nonetheless, the presence of books dealing with traditional culture, taboos, etc., hints at a belief in the loss of a distinctive culture, and with it an equally distinctive identity. While discussions on history books often raised the caveats mentioned above, discussions about books on traditions in general did not. This would seem to add credence to the idea that they are important in reclaiming tradition.

It should be noted that the category of *tailbar tol'* is not unique to the post-socialist era. Some, dealing with traditional customs and etiquette were in existence during the socialist period (Caroline Humphrey, personal communication). Other publications dealt with more historical topics (Myagmarsüren 1974; Pürev 1991).⁵ Yet there appears to have been a substantial increase in the number of such works published after 1989.

Additionally, the presentation, and undoubtedly the reception of the works has changed as well. Myagmarsüren's work was an update to a previously existing *tol'*, and both of these were based on historical documents in the archives. They were intended for use mainly by scholars. In contrast, the book by Av'yasüren, *et al.* (1992), for example, notes how "for many hundreds of years, Mongolians -- children, youths, the young and the old -- have all worshipped Chinggis Khaan" (1992: 3). This situating of the work within the context of national pride rather than dry historical information is a key characteristic of the new publications.

A third category of books, while not technically a form of the *tailbar tol'*, will also be considered. These are works that blur the edges of the two previous categories. I am referring to the collections of sayings often, but not only, those by Chinggis Khaan. They are similar to the second category of the *tol'* in that they function to establish a canon of 'traditional' wisdom. Yet they reference history more explicitly than these *tailbar tol'*, and are thus reminiscent of the first grouping.

I do not wish to spend too much time discussing the first group of *tailbar tol'*. These books purport to deal with history in a relatively straightforward manner, and form a part of the larger corpus of works dealing with Mongolian history that have been appearing since the democratic movement of 1989-90. The works are often focussed on Chinggis Khaan, but more general works were also in evidence.

⁵ Although the second of these has a post-1990 publication date, the content is still largely socialist in content. The included timeline stops in March 1989, with the establishment of diplomatic relations with Bolivia.

Chinggis Khaany tukhai tovch tailbar tol' (An explanatory dictionary about Chinggis Khaan), (Av'yasüren, et al. 1992) is typical of such works. It contains 138 entries, covering a variety of people and other topics linked to Chinggis Khaan. One thus finds not only entries on Belgütei and Khubilai, but also the weapons of the Chinggisid period, an entry on the *aimag*, and lists of Chinggis's ancestors and descendants. The entries range from a few paragraphs to a few pages in length.

Slightly different is T. Mandir's *Khorin Negen Khörög* (Twenty-one portraits), published in 1990. As the title suggests, it contains twenty-one short pieces, all of figures mentioned in the *Secret History*. The format itself, however, differs from many of the other *tol'*. Rather than being encyclopedic in nature, the book offers short stories, often two or three for each person, accompanied by historical summaries. Thus, for example, the section on Yesükhei baatar begins with a literary account of his poisoning by the Tatars. The *Secret History* simply says that he "met some Tatars" as he was returning from Dei-Sechen's (Onon 1990: 16). Mandir's account begins much more eloquently: "A man on a chestnut horse, tired from a long journey, drew his horse up as he was passing through a thick forest. Directly in front of him, in a wide grass clearing, there was a camp" (1990: 7). The rest of the story continues in a similarly dramatic vein. This retelling is then followed by an explanation of the event as recorded in the *Secret History*.

The editor's preface again places the work in the context of "the people's historical legacy" and the "reawakening of the national consciousness" (pg. 5). This emphasis on 'reawakening' indicates as suggested earlier, that the socialist period was a foreign imposition, something not 'truly' Mongolian in nature. Not only was historical accuracy subservient to the political requirements of the time, but what was truly Mongolian was overwhelmed by what was socialist -- as if the two have become mutually exclusive categories.

Although such publications obviously indicate a shift in official policy, and often talk about taking pride in history or rectifying the errors of the past, whether this accurately reflects a change in people's knowledge is another matter entirely.

Most of the urban elite I talked to indicated that for them, the various discussions about history were merely a new degree of openness, rather than truly new knowledge. One government official noted that during the socialist period, the historians just wrote "one cliché". Everyone knew it was one, but pretended to believe in it. Others would echo similar sentiments. They read one thing about Sükhbaatar and the People's Revolution, but also knew 'the truth' about people like Danzan and Bodo. They would often suggest that for people in the countryside and the workers, the case may well be different. I was unable to check on this.

It was also these sort of *tailbar tol'*, as well as history books more generally, that people seemed to think were being published in an attempt to make money. I would suggest that this idea is correlated to a degree with the belief that the truth about history was preserved at some level, if not that of public discourse. If, to the urban elite at least, the change in attitudes toward Mongolian history did not represent a substantial shift in content, then the works would seem to them as not as necessary or useful as books about traditional culture. While it is often portrayed as re-acknowledging the truth, what is taking place is often more in the sphere of interpretation rather than presentation of totally new source material.⁶ (It is of course, also possible that even if the books did represent new knowledge,

⁶ I do not mean to imply that interpretation of data is less important than, or can be totally divorced from, the data itself. Rather, I am suggesting that it is possible to some extent to publicly subscribe to one presentation of history, while privately maintaining another.

they just were not very accurate or well-written, as some suggested.)

The whole issue of history and its presentation is also complicated by the limited amounts of information about historical periods, especially those dealing with Chinggis Khaan and the Mongolian Empire. While writers on later periods may be able to draw upon previously unexploited archival sources, this is not possible for the earlier periods. Many of the same sources were used by the socialist period historians. (Or more accurately, the same historians writing according to socialist guidelines.)

A number of the works about Chinggis are merely rehashes of the *Secret History*, or tales culled from various other historical sources. Most works, if they cite sources, mention works familiar to scholars of the period: the *Secret History* itself, the *Altan Tovch*, the works of Juvaini and Rashid ad-Din, etc.

In ways, the second grouping of *tailbar tol'* is both more interesting and more informative than the first. The dictionaries in this category aim to provide information on customs, taboos, and lifestyles. In effect, they provide a guide on "how to be (or at least act like) a traditional (ie, 'real') Mongol". The foreword to *The great dictionary of Mongolian customs* (Av'yasüren and Nyambuu 1992) is exceedingly blunt on this point: "If you lose your customs, it gives rise to bad people. If you forget your rituals, you will lose your 'Mongol-ness' (*Mongol törkhöö*)" (pg. 3).

These types of *tol'*, which appeared to be the more common during my period of fieldwork, were accepted by most people unhesitatingly, who saw the books as providing a needed service. "Oh, they're great stuff!" said one government official when I asked him his opinion about them. He went on to say that he was glad people were publishing them, and he saw them as linked to a genuine revival of traditions. Traditions, he went on, were important, because they helped people deal with their everyday life. Enkhbayar had likened customs to a sort of spiritual immune system, which would keep the Mongolian identity distinct from that of the Russians and Chinese.

The *tailbar tol'* in this category are diverse. They range from the truly encyclopedic, the *Great dictionary of Mongolian customs* (Av'yasüren and Nyambuu 1992) to the more focussed *A short dictionary of the Mongolian traditional lifestyle* (Vanjil 1992).

The *Great dictionary* (of which shorter versions also exist) is broken up into numerous sections. These bear titles such as "Customs of the Mongolian people and ethnic groups", "Religious customs", and others that break down customs into time categories: "Political customs of Bogd Khaan Mongolia", and "Political customs of the period of the People's Revolution". Like in the historically oriented *tailbar tol'*, the individual entries range from a few lines to a few pages in length. In this book, one can find entries on such topics as palm-reading and fire-worship.

Within the *Short dictionary of the Mongolian traditional lifestyle*, one can read about the different parts of a ger, or the five traditional types of livestock. Another noteworthy *tol'* is the *Concise dictionary of taboos of the Mongolians* (Nyambuu and Natsagdorj 1993). The contents of this books are precisely what the title suggests, and covers such topics as taboos and etiquette regarding tea-making, daughters-in-law, and lamas.

The categorizations in the *Great dictionary* raise an important point, one that we shall come back to shortly. It is this: for the most part (and the exceptions prove the rule) the element of time has been removed from considerations of customs and rules. Thus, although political traditions are bracketed within a specific time, others are not.

The third category of books mentioned can also be subsumed under the present discussion, for

in the place they occupy they fulfill a role similar to that of the second type of *tailbar tol'*. A number of these focus exclusively upon the sayings and wisdom of Chinggis Khaan, as *Chinggis's teachings and testimony* (Nanzad 1991) does. Others, like *Mongol Aildal* (Gongorjav 1991), draw upon a broader base. This latter work includes quotes on a variety of topics (law, education, and courage among others) by nobles, statesmen, writers, as well as material from older Mongolian literature (the *Altan Tovch*).

Although arguably serving to simply present extracts from a now-permissible past, this is clearly not the case. The aim in both instances is the same -- to provide the present and future direction from the past. This didactic use of the past, as we saw earlier, was also recognized by the Mongolians. This is especially true in the case of Chinggis Khaan. His various sayings and maxims have obtained the status of gospel. Portrayed as the founders of the state and premier law-giver, and often pictured in Buddha-like poses, he is clearly an inspiration for the current times. More than once I was told that what Mongolia really needed was a good strong leader like Chinggis Khaan.

What is happening with these two groups of publications is an attempt at recreating, or codifying a body of knowledge and actions that had lain dormant. To some Mongolians, this is seen as necessary. An anthropologist at the Academy of Sciences noted:

Before the democratic changes, the culture and tradition were not prohibited, but limited in a sense that it became very narrow and socialist. So, most of the things were forgotten, and now there are attempts to recover some of our tradition and culture, but I don't think it's possible to recover everything. ... I think it is important to have these new books and give the proper information on our history.

Others, however, were less sure about what in fact constituted 'tradition'. Enkhbayar noted:

It's very difficult to say what was the real Mongolian tradition. Some people say the real Mongolian tradition was before Chinggis Khaan. ... Some people say no, the real Mongolian tradition was during the time of Chinggis Khaan, and when the Mongols came, they distorted it. So it is a very one-sided approach when we say the Mongolian tradition was before 1921. There are a lot of discussions and a lot of arguments about what is the Mongolian tradition like, and what can be considered the real Mongolian tradition.

Still others suggested that such traditions should not be revived at all. One elderly Sinologist at the Academy claimed: "What is called a revival of the Mongolian lifestyle and traditions is really a demand to revive the Manchu colonial period, to join with the Chinese. This is not a good thing. No, in general, it is better that the so-called traditions society follows are changing. During those 70 years [of socialism], we did not forget how to be real Mongols." Interestingly enough, in his own way, he is reaffirming the need for a distinctive Mongolian identity. He merely differs from many on what part of the past should be used as a template.

Despite these differences of opinion, a fairly unified, if atemporal, conception of tradition and the past seems to be emerging from the *tailbar tol'* and similar sources, and it is one that excludes the socialist era.

Humphrey has commented that "although very old people are privately consulted about

matters of ritual and so forth, on the whole they are not brought forward as arbiters and founts of knowledge. Perhaps it is felt that their knowledge is too idiosyncratic and possibly even too genuine and archaic to provide what is required today" (Humphrey 1992: 380). This, I would suggest, is another aspect of the phenomena we have been examining. As I noted above, with the exception of certain sections of the *Great dictionary of Mongolian customs*, time -- and by extension, change -- has been effectively removed from these accounts of past actions and beliefs. (Although in some cases dealing with historically specific terms, time is implicitly present.) Also missing is regional variation. It is not noted, for example, if certain taboos were restricted in time or geographical location.

What is being reconstructed in these books is not a living tradition in all its regional and temporal variations. Rather, the *tailbar tol'* are offering for consumption a homogenized past. Clearly, what is important for purposes of legitimation is not *the* historical past, but rather *a* historical past, and one that excludes socialism. A past as actually lived may be too real. A genuine past, with all its variations intact could potentially serve to splinter, rather than cohere, the nation. Only by ignoring the differences can tradition as presented in the *tailbar tol'* apply to all Mongolians.

Finally, it should be noted that such a past as is being re-presented is not without potential pitfalls. Borofsky's commentary on the role of the anthropologist strikes a familiar cord here: 'By recording traditions in books, we, as outside anthropologists, are helping to make the knowledge less fluid and diverse than it in fact is' (Borofsky 1987: 144). Although it remains to be seen, I would suggest that it is possible that through the *tailbar tol'*, the Mongolians are not only inventing a past, but perhaps irrevocably changing another in the process.

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