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## **The geopolitics of indifference: Mongolia and the history of anthropology**

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"Outer Mongolia" is still a term invoked upon occasion to describe a world removed from all civilisation, a place literally on the other side of the world. It is meant to invoke a realm of vastness and mystery, devoid of any germane links to one's own existence. If it is possible for anything to be more remote metaphorically than Siberia, it is probably Outer Mongolia.

Many (if not most) Americans, it would probably be safe to say, are indifferent to the actually existing "Outer Mongolia." They would not be alone in this. Anglo-American anthropology also has been largely indifferent to Mongolia's existence. (Although the British slightly less so than the Americans.) In this paper, I examine the implications of this indifference in the history of anthropology, and in particular, models of nomadism. I link it not only to the location of Mongolia, but to American political and economic interests (or lack of) in the region.

There was some interest in Mongolia among Americans in the early years of the twentieth century, but it was relatively scant. Owen Lattimore, writing in 1934 noted that "the 'Manchurian question' is the new form symbolized by the state of Manchukuo is a completely senseless incident of violence unless it means the opening up of the far more comprehensive question of Mongolia" (1934: 15). Lattimore was talking about issues of international politics in Asia, yet his observations appear to have gone largely unheeded. Mongolia remained the great unknown.

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mongolia has been anything but a provincial backwater. What used to be called Outer Mongolia (now just Mongolia) lies squarely in

the heart of Inner Asia, center of a vast continent. South of Russia, north of China, and somewhat west of Japan, Mongolia, along with Manchuria, has long played a pivotal role in international politics. One should be made aware, at this point, that the boundary between Mongolia and Manchuria was in fact very fluid, and there was often no clear delineation of boundaries (Yakhontoff, 1936). The Manchu question to a degree was also the Mongolian question.

If we look more closely at the geopolitics of Inner Asia, two aspects immediately become apparent. The first is that Mongolia has long been a contested frontier of empires. The second is that at or near the vanguard of these interests have been explorers, or later, ethnographers.

This is not simply to repeat the mantra that anthropology has been the handmaiden of colonialism. While acknowledging Johannes Fabian's observation that "anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise" (1983: 17), we need to be aware that anthropologists often attempted to contest it. Indeed, Jack Goody has recently noted that while the "development of social anthropology in Britain obviously had much to do with the position of the country as a colonial power, as was the case in Russia, in the USA and in France," funds for research largely came from outside sources, and "[n]either the givers nor the bulk of the recipients were primarily interested in propping up colonial empires" (1995: 10). In other words, we need to complicate the received wisdom; to argue, at the very least, for a dualistic model. If anthropology, through its very models and presuppositions justified colonialism, the practitioners of anthropology were at times interested in *contesting*, not furthering it.

My current contribution to this complication of the relationship is to examine the linkage by looking at various histories of anthropology and the impact of frontier politics on the canon of anthropological thought. To do so, I first turn to the interests of Russia, China and Japan in the regions of Inner Asia.

Briefly put, over the last 100 or more years, the specific interests of the three main regional powers in Mongolia varied, although they were all strong. Since 1691, "Outer Mongolia" had been part of the Ching dynasty's empire, and served largely as a buffer state, or in Owen Lattimore's

conception, a reservoir from which military forces could be drawn. It was not until the Manchu's "New Policy" at the end of the nineteenth century that settlement of the steppe and extensive trading by Han Chinese first became possible. Similarly, Russia was interested in the same region also as a buffer zone, but one under Russian influence. Thus, while Mongolia was nominally a part of China, treaties from the late nineteenth century on detail expanding Russian interests, mercantile and otherwise in the region (ie, Carnegie Endowment 1921: 2). This interest was compounded with the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway at the end of the nineteenth century. The need for a stable border to the south of the railway become particularly acute after the Russo-Japanese war, which had helped to illustrate the relatively exposed nature of the railway (Black, et al. 1991: 55). Mongolia also presented a possible source of mineral wealth for the Russians (Yakhontoff 1936: 15). It is also worth nothing that it was the Mongols who presented the greatest resistance to Russian expansion into Siberia, and until the 1750s, remained a potent threat to both the Ching dynasty and Russian Empire in Central Asia. There were a number of reasons to be interested in the area.

Both of these countries also had a long history of scholarship and political assesments of the region. China's, of course, was in many ways an extension of their long-standing interests in the "barbarians" on their northern borders. This body of data was, over the centuries, probably the most extensive collected by any of the three. However, as far as I have been able to ascertain, little if any "fieldwork" was done in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the period of interest to us. Also, although my sources do not speak to this point, the influence of Marx and Engels (and through them, Morgan) on early twentieth century Chinese conceptions of history may well have helped turn the gaze of scholars northward, to find living examples of earlier stages of cultural evolution (see Dirlik 1978).

Russian explorers and ethnographers of the latter part of the nineteenth century such as Potanin, Pozdneyev and Prejevalsky also worked in the region. Indeed, their work, as well as that of succeeding Soviet scholars, is often still turned to today for ethnographic and historical details. In light of my current topic, I would point out the not insignificant fact that Prejevalsky's work was

sanctioned by the War Department of Tsarist Russia. The Russian government clearly knew the value of the research being done in Inner Asia.

Despite this, not all research was funded by the government, and it also needs to be acknowledged that, similar to the case Jack Goody makes, the uses to which the information gathered by these researchers was used was often at odds with the agendas of the researchers themselves, some of whom had a vested interest in furthering the cause of Siberian regionalism (Hundley, pers. comm.).

Later in the twentieth century such research was continued by the Soviets, who also launched a number of field expeditions, as well as continuing ethnographic fieldwork. (It appears, however, that the major expeditions had shifted to largely Mongolian ventures by the 1960s. See Rinchen 1979.)

Japan's interests were slightly different, and began slightly later than those of China and Russia. Japan's interest in the region was largely the result of their expansionistic intentions, best seen in the early twentieth century puppet state of Manchukuo, which provided both a foothold in the region, as well as a source of materials.

Even before the establishment of Manchukuo, however, researchers under the auspices of the Research Bureau of the South Manchurian Railway Company had been conducting ethnographic research in the region since the turn of the century. (Interest in the history of the region apparently began only after the Meiji restoration of the nineteenth century.) In addition to imperialistic aspirations, a number of Japanese were interested in the Mongols for reasons linked to a creation of a national past, and distancing themselves from China (see Tanaka 1993).

Such varied and competing interests in the region, were, of course, eventually to come to blows. During the Russian Revolution, the White Russians spilled into Mongolia in a last ditch effort to avoid defeat. As I already noted, the Japanese established Manchukuo as a puppet state in the region in 1932. In addition to the obvious and not-so-obvious implications for Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese relations, Manchukuo served as a launching point to attacks into Mongolia, which were beat back, most famously in 1939 at the battle of Halhyn Gol by combined Soviet and

Mongolian forces. The Soviet Union, of course, would eventually come to dominate Mongolia, although it was by no means a foregone conclusion at the time.

The Japanese were also involved in various plots to foster pan-Mongolism and establish their own sphere of influence in Mongolia. (Although the rumours seem to have outstripped reality.) China never officially recognized Mongolian independence until 1946, and then did so only as a result of the Yalta Agreement. To make a long story short, for Japan, Russia (later the Soviet Union), and China, Mongolia and Inner Asia more generally, demanded attention precisely because of its marginality on the borders of each of these countries. Being a frontier region, it commanded attention and resources not given to other, non-frontier regions. Frontiers need to be protected in ways that internal regions do not.

Let me turn to the influence of all these machinations on anthropology. Unfortunately, I can not speak much of the influence of these geopolitical interests on Japanese and Chinese anthropologies, in large part because most of the work remains untranslated. I can tell you, however, that Japan maintains a strong interest in Mongolia, and much research on Mongolia is still done there. Japanese anthropologists are consistently represented in *Mongolica*, an international journal of Mongolian studies, articles on Mongolia are fairly common in Japanese scholarly journals.

I would strongly suspect the case is similar in China, although here the focus would more likely be on the Mongols of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. In any event, the Mongols comprise one of the "five nationalities" in China, and thus receive a fair degree of attention, including by scholars at the Chinese Academy of Sciences as well as elsewhere.

In the context of this talk, it is worth relating an incident in that galvanized much of Mongolia in the spring of 1993, during the weeks preceeding their first democratic presidential elections. At this time, an anonymous book entitled *The inside story of Outer Mongolia independence* appeared in China (for a partial translation, see Bulag and Humphrey 1996). The book, in essence, deprived the Mongols of any agency in their efforts for independence, attributing it to the Japanese and Russians. At a press conference, the Mongolian Foreign Ministry noted that the book read like propaganda from

periods when Sino-Mongolian relations were much more tense. Although the book was later banned in China, popular sentiment in Mongolia seemed to believe that it was represented an unofficial government stance. The timing and the nature of the claims indicates that Chinese interests in Mongolia remain strong, and the Mongolians are very aware of this.

In Russian / Soviet anthropology, the mutual influence of politics and ethnography seems clearer. As I noted earlier, Russian explorers were active in Mongolia in the nineteenth century, often bringing to the West the first pieces of reliable data. (It is highly telling of the influence of the Russians to note that Prejevalsky's account was translated almost immediately into English.) The case for Mongolia often parallels that of Manchuria, also long an area of Russian operation, precisely because it bordered China (see Wolff 1995). In fact, it should be remembered, as I noted earlier, that what is often referred to as Manchuria usually included parts of what would now be considered Inner Mongolia. One also needs to keep in mind that during the second part of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, the "Great Game" between Russia and Britain was being played out just to the west of Mongolia, as Russia advanced into Central Asia. Mongolia itself was drawn in, however tangentially, by the Dalai Lama fleeing to Ih Hüre in 1904, following Younghusband's expedition to Lhasa.

The interest and influence of Inner Asia continues in Soviet and post-Soviet ethnography, attributable in part to what Meyer Fortes termed "the Soviet method of diachronic contextualisation" (Fortes 1980: xx). The nomads of Inner Asia, much like the indigenous peoples of Siberia, served as not only as a sort of "living relic" of earlier stages in a Marxist evolutionary scheme, but were also of interest because their "introduction into modernity meant the by-passing of the ... capitalist mode of [production]" (Grant 1995: 10). Indeed, in socialist Mongolian historiography (under which anthropology is usually subsumed, and which owes its present form to Soviet influence), much is made of Mongolia leaping over capitalism, or taking the non-capitalist road of development, or any number of similar phrases.

Pastoral nomadism has occupied a fairly prominent place in Soviet scholarship, so much so

that even Stalin himself felt obliged to weigh in with an opinion as early as 1921 (Gellner 1994: xvi). Part of its prominence has to do with how it is to fit into the Marxist evolutionary scheme. Vladimirtsov, studying the Mongols at the beginning of the twentieth century, determined that their social structure was feudal. But this threw Marxism into a something of a frenzy, for if the Asiatic Mode of Production was troubling to the Marxists (and it was) pastoral nomadism and its peculiarities sent them to the edge of despair. Part feudal and part patriarchal, one could almost argue that the nomads shouldn't exist. But not only did they exist, they had done successfully enough to rule Russia for several hundred years. The Mongols, and pastoral nomads more generally, although not a central focus of Russian / Soviet research, were always ready to make another appearance. (A fascinating outline of the intricacies of the whole debate may be found in Gellner's Foreward to Khazanov's work on pastoral nomadism (Gellner 1994).

In other words, to return to one of the themes of this paper, in the history, anthropology and politics of Russia and elsewhere, Mongolia has been anything but marginal. Its political importance coincided with and mutually reinforced its theoretical interest. Mongolia and its nomads has, and continues to play, if not a central role, at least one more prominent than it does elsewhere.

Let me now turn to someplace where it has been considered marginal, the US. Mongolia never has enjoyed anything approaching an anthropological spot-light in American (or British) anthropology. It remains best known to history buffs as the homeland of Chinggis Khaan, "Conqueror of all men."

Mongolian studies were almost non-existent in the US until after World War II, when they were founded at Johns Hopkins by Lattimore, with funding from the Defense Department. This was because the government had been forced to recognize their lack of knowledge of East Asian languages and cultures that Mongolian studies was established in the US (see Lattimore and Isono 1982). Even then, it remained largely in the context of international relations and politics. Although Lattimore travelled in, and wrote of, Mongol regions, he often wrote in the larger context of being a "China hand," at least originally. While some of his early publications were on the Mongols and

Mongolia (often Inner Mongolia), many concentrated instead on the "Manchurian question" and appeared in policy-oriented journals, such as *Pacific Affairs*, of which he was editor (ie, Lattimore 1932, 1934). More generally, the history of the study of Mongolia in the US more closely parallels the old-style "Kreminology" than anthropological research.

American Mongolists tended to take one of two career tracks. One was the political, the "Kreminology" approach. Scholars who took this path (perhaps most notably Robert Rupen, but others can still be found today) tended to end up in conservative research and policy institutes, such as the Hoover Institute at Stanford. I think it is not irrelevant to my present argument to note that many of these scholars appear to have had no knowledge of Mongolian, working instead from Russian sources and translations.

The other career track coincides more with Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Rather than focussing on anthropological or contemporary issues, scholars who chose this path focused on linguistics and the study of classical texts. Mongolia to them seems to have stopped existing sometime before the twentieth century.

Of course, much of this was due to problems of access, but even before access became a problem, cultural anthropology never had its equivalent of Roy Chapman Andrews (who, despite finding dinosaurs, had originally gone in search of human ancestors).

The point, I think, is abundantly clear. In the US at least (and to a lesser degree in Britain), anthropology has itself for the longest time marginalised Mongolia. This, I suggest, is due to their lack of a compelling interest in the region. The British historically have had a slightly better knowledge, and this is due, I think, a) to the Great Game, and b) in part perhaps to James Gilmour, a nineteenth century Scottish missionary who did much to popularize his work among the Mongolians (Bawden 1985). The Americans, in contrast, had no such interests in the region, and in fact did not even open an embassy until 1987.

I have already noted that even Owen Lattimore (the closest thing Mongolists have to a founding father) tended to focus at first on Manchuria, and most of his journal articles appeared in



journals like *Pacific Affairs*, *The Geographical Journal*, and *Foreign Affairs*. It was not until the Cold War that interest in the region grew, and then it was because of its location between two communist countries. An incident concerning Lattimore himself helps to highlight this aspect. Lattimore had travelled to the Mongolian People's Republic in 1961. When conservative factions in the government caught wind of this, it created an uproar. Lattimore's presence at the fortieth anniversary of the Mongolian socialist revolution was seen as a movement towards the official recognition of an independent Mongolia. This in turn seemed to imply a recognition of the People's Republic of China, for the Nationalist Government in Taiwan still claimed Mongolia as their own. To recognize the PRC would have been to admit the power and success of the Communists, which many in Washington were loathe to do (Newman 1992: 504-508).

What perhaps strikes a contemporary anthropologist about many (if not most) studies of Mongolian politics and history of the Cold War period is the utter lack of agency accorded to the Mongols themselves. They are often reduced to no more than pawns in a larger power game. One text illustrative of this approach to Mongolia, still occasionally cited today, was Rupen's *How Mongolia is really ruled* (1979). As the title suggests, the book argues that the Mongols really have no say in the running of their own country. It argues for a much stronger line than merely that Mongolia followed the winds that blew from Moscow. Extreme perhaps, but only in an ideal-typical fashion.

I want to offer now a few ideas on the impact this exclusion of Inner Asia has had on American anthropological theories. Most simply put, I want to suggest that current models of pastoral nomadism need to be rethought. Such models are based on African or Middle Eastern nomads. They tend to argue for a segmented lineage system, with the classic example of course being Evans-Pritchard's work among the Nuer. The various critiques and debates on pastoral nomadism all seem to always come back to segmented lineages, whether to argue they exist, or they don't, or they do, in some modified form (Barth 1992; Kuper 1982; Street 1992; Wright 1994). When anthropologists finally cast their gaze eastwards, they tend to bring their models with them, implying

as well the existence of segmented lineages.

I want to suggest that such models due an injustice to pastoral nomads. Based as they are largely on groups that have already been marginalised by other state systems, they presume such an organisational system as was found among the nomads must be near universal. The result, in the Inner Asian case, is a theory that holds that nomads are incapable of "generating" a centralised political system without impetus from one of the surrounding sedentary populations. In its own way, the Marxist / Soviet model, which holds that nomads can and do form state systems is nearer to the mark. One need not accept their argument -- I think they get the right answer for the wrong reason.

To look with fresh eyes at the Inner Asian cases would, I suggest, also enliven our models of nomads and state systems. This is not necessarily a new point. Rudi Paul Lindner has noted that "in our reconstructions of the internal workings of nomadic tribes of the past, we should give more emphasis to political factors and less to kinship models than ethnographers of modern tribes must" precisely because "the tribal emphasis on kinship and its terminology which modern field studies report is a result of the political weakness of the present-day nomad tribe" (Lindner 1982: 696-7). Other scholars of Mongolia have also noted the problems with segmented lineage theory, noting that political splits often paid no heed to lineages, maximal, minimal or otherwise (Szykiewicz 1975: 125). What is new, I think, is my attempt to contextualize this model in the histories of anthropology. Largely indifferent to Mongolia, mainstream Western anthropology never developed theories to account for what it would have found there, and it is the poorer for it. Elsewhere, Mongolia was of interest, and anthropological theory reflected the more complex picture.

In a completely different context, Marilyn Strathern has recently noted that "the concept of boundary is one of the least subtle in the social science repertoire" (1996: 520). I want to close by suggesting that a similar argument be made for marginality. Margins appear to be trendy these days -- witness any number of conferences on the topic. Yet however one approaches a margin, it must so remain. In keeping the margins marginal, we risk losing a fuller body of anthropological theory. I would suggest that perhaps the time has come to not merely centre the margins, but question their very

existence.

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