CHAPTER 3

Exemplars and Heroes: the Individual and the Moral in the Mongolian Political Imagination[1]

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Socialist historiography was often hagiography. The world was populated with simplistic black-and-white figures – heroes and villains – and the heroes were to be admired and emulated. This was true in the Soviet Union as well as the then-Mongolian People's Republic. In the Soviet Union, heroes could be entire groups of people, such as the Stakhanovite shock workers, and individuals, such as Pavlik Morozov, the boy who is said to have turned in his own father for hoarding grain in the 1930s.

Such people were held up as exemplars – models of behaviour for people to emulate and aspire to. Whether in terms of physical labour, military valour, or devotion and sacrifice to the motherland and party (not necessarily in that order), citizens of the socialist state were presented with figures that those in charge hoped they would take to heart.

Exemplars were common in Mongolia throughout the socialist period. Sühbaatar (or Sükhbaatar), Mongolia's answer to Lenin, springs to mind, and serves in many ways as a better

[1] This chapter is much revised from the version read at the symposium on which this volume is based. I am indebted to the various participants who offered suggestions as well as Ellen McGill, Amy Mountcastle, David Sneath and Jack Weatherford who read and commented on various drafts. T. Bayartsetseg and Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn confirmed and corrected some of the less certain translations. Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn also continuously read and re-read the various drafts and made it much stronger than it would otherwise have been.

example of the socialist ideal than Lenin himself. There were others as well: the eighteenth-century rebels against Manchu rule, Amarsanaa and Chingünjav, and socialist heroes such as Khaatanbaatar Magsarjav, the military leader of the early twentieth century. These figures represented people who through actions, personal qualities or a combination of these, embodied ideals to aspire to.

The use and function of such figures in Mongolia, however, is much more complicated than a simple presentation of archetypes to be mimicked. Nor were exemplars to be found only in the socialist period, instead both predating it and outliving it. Exemplars had a variety of other, related roles, including the periodization of history and they served as loci for the construction of multiple forms of identity. To a large extent, they continue even today to be a structuring force, even if not always explicitly invoked.

Most importantly, exemplars have a strong moral element to them. This element ties together all the other roles and uses. It is this aspect of exemplars and their role in history *cum* politics that I address in this paper. I argue that history in and of itself is seen as a part of the moral sphere in Mongolia and that this is a result of its structuring around individuals rather than dates or events. This is radically different from the use of history or historical texts in arguing for a moral position. Such use of history is part and parcel of nationalist discourse, and occurs in Mongolia, as elsewhere. But what happens when history itself is seen as part of the moral world?

In this chapter, I explore these questions by looking at the way understandings and representations of specific exemplars have changed with shifts in ideologies and political systems. I examine a number of figures, tracing their shifting fortunes and resonances over time. Before turning to the specific exemplars, however, I first review the role of exemplars and morality in Mongolia more generally. I conclude this paper by briefly assessing the mutual implications that democracy and the exemplar model hold for

each other. In doing so, I not only expand our understanding of Mongolia, but also reconsider our views of the relationship between the moral, the individual and the political more broadly.

This paper draws on nearly four years of fieldwork in Mongolia carried out over the post-socialist period, from the early 1990s until the present. During this period, I carried out research not only through participant-observation, but also through extensive work in the archives and published textual sources. I worked with Mongolian intellectuals and politicians as they debated the roles of history and tradition in post-socialist Mongolia. I discussed politics and history over coffee and *airag* (fermented mare's milk) and waded through countless government resolutions in the chilly reading room of the archives. I closely tracked discussions in the political arena and everyday life as officials argued, scholars wrote and people talked.

Over the years, as I worked on other, related projects and reflected on my experiences, I became more and more intrigued by the interconnections between morality and history and what seemed to be the inescapable role of the individual in both. I turned my attention to untangling the threads that wove these seemingly disparate topics together. This chapter is a result of that untangling.

This research draws heavily upon the use of literary sources. Despite popular prejudices about Mongolians as 'simple' pastoral nomads, they possess a long literary history stretching back 800 years, to which they make regular and proud reference. It is impossible to fully understand and appreciate the debates over history, politics and identity that Mongolians engage in without at least a working knowledge of the texts in question. The oldest and most famous of the texts, known simply as the *Secret History* and usually dated to 1240 is contemporaneous with Chinggis Khan (1162–1227). Other epics and chronicles, such as the seventeenth century *Erdeni-yin Tobci* (Jewelled Summary) and *Altan Tobci* (Golden

Summary) largely draw upon the *Secret History* for the earliest sections, but add a particularly Buddhist slant, as well as continuing the chronology of the older work.[2] The *Secret History* itself was lost for hundreds of years, but the general outline of its contents was largely preserved in the later chronicles.

For reasons explored below, texts in Mongolia – particularly during the socialist era (1921–1990) – acquired a social life of their own, being interpreted and re-interpreted in light of political and other expediencies. Literature and other textual sources are not simply a useful supplement in studying history and identity in Mongolia. They are an influence that must be accounted for.

Although not all Mongolians are conversant in the wide range of historical texts and Buddhist chronicles, most intellectuals are at least aware of them, and they become at the very least implied reference points to discussions of tradition and identity. Later historical writings – especially those of the socialist period – took on similar importance, and became battlegrounds on which conflicting conceptions of identity and politics were fought over. Through such texts, and in turn, influencing their reception, the use and reception of exemplars have changed with the political climate as well.

Morality and Exemplars in Mongolia

As Signe Howell points out in her Introduction to *The ethnography of moralities*, the study of morality and moral codes has a long, if not always explicit, genealogy in anthropology (Howell 1997). This interest in morality has continued to the present. From classic works on religion and law to more contemporary research on colonialism, poverty and violence, moral issues lurk below the surface, or are raised

[2] I have adopted a slightly inconsistent transliteration for these two titles, to follow more closely the spellings they are best known by. On the whole, however, I have followed contemporary Cyrillic spellings for Mongolian words in this paper.

explicitly.

Anthropological approaches to the uses of history in particular also implicate issues of morality. Almost any work dealing with nationalism or identity has addressed, if no more than implicitly, the cooption of history as support for particular moral claims. The right to be recognized as a particular group of people, to rule or be ruled, is usually voiced in political terms. Ultimately, however, they are grounded in a moral or ethical stance: 'we rule ourselves because it is *right and proper* that we do so.'

Liisa Maalki in writing of the recounting of historical narratives in refugee camps describes them as 'like Bible stories – heavily moral stories' and also compares them to morality plays. She goes on to note: 'The narratives contained prescriptions for conduct and drew potent moral lessons' (Malkki 1995: 53, 54). This use of historical narratives for telling moral stories is one aspect of history in Mongolia as it is elsewhere, and one that I will consider in this paper. My main concern here, however, is with something fundamentally different. Not only are exemplars used for 'potent moral lessons', but through them, and because of them, history is seen as being moral at a more fundamental, almost ontological, level.[3] Later in this paper, I will also explore how this moral character of history 'spills over' into issues of governance and the realm of the explicitly political.

In Mongolia exemplars serve to structure much of moral thought. Rather than being based on abstract principles or rules, much of Mongolian morality is rooted in relationships between individuals. 'The concern here is with the cultivation of the self as a moral subject in relation to individually chosen ideas' (Humphrey 1997: 25). A student looks to a teacher, or a

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[3] Maurice Bloch intriguingly begins to hint at a similar idea in his 'Internal and External Memory' when he suggests that many 'folk theories' of memory take into account 'the place of the "person in history"' (1998: 70) and that such theories invariably take into account 'moral purposes' (pp. 69–70). He never fully develops these implications, however.

herder turns to Chinggis Khan for examples of correct behaviour and action. There are, of course, rules, but these are largely secondary to the understanding of 'a world inhabited by people 'good-in-themselves' (Humphrey 1997: 33). One's own house should be in order before turning to larger issues. Indeed, various sayings attributed to Chinggis Khan stress this very point.

There are parallels here with Tibetan Buddhist thought.[4] Rebecca French (2002: 75) writes: 'Inner morality and its outward manifestations were the core of both religion and law'. An important difference, however, must not be overlooked. Ideally, in Buddhist thought, there is ultimately but one exemplar – the Buddha himself. This links the exemplar to a particular set of teachings and beliefs, one that is the same for everybody. In Mongolia, *anyone* could be taken as an exemplar in any realm of life or thought.

Correct behaviour and action as evidenced by individuals in fact overlap with rules more than Humphrey's passage seems to indicate. In particular, at certain key points in Mongolian history, rules and laws are associated with a particular individual. In other words, some rules and regulations derive part of their ideological force from being associated with a particular exemplar. The individual and specific validates the general and abstract. The classical case is that of Chinggis Khan and the *Ih Zasag*, more popularly known as the *Great Yasa*, to which I return in greater detail below. To understand this link, it is necessary to step back for a moment and look at morality in Mongolian political history and theory. From there I move on to examine the implications of certain political terms in Mongolian before returning to specific exemplars.

There has long been a moral aspect in Mongolian political theory. The *Arvant Buyant Nomyn Tsagaan Tüükh*

[4] Buddhism in Mongolia is formally Tibetan Buddhism. Variations and regional innovations keep it from being a mere transplanting from Tibet.

(The White History of the Ten Virtuous Books), written during the reign (1260–1294) of Chinggis Khan's grandson, Qubilai Khan, codified the relationship between the throne and religion, known as The Two Principles. Rather than adopting a 'render unto Caesar' approach to religion and government, however, the Two Principles established a mutually supportive relationship, obligating the secular ruler – the Khan (Qaghan) – to certain moral principles and behaviours (see Lündendorj 2002). The impact of Buddhism – and by extension, The Two Principles – was minimal from the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368 (if not before) until Buddhism's reintroduction in the sixteenth century. Yet it clearly had some resonance, as within a few decades of its reintroduction, Zanabazar was recognized as the First Jebtsumdamba Qutugtu, a religious figure, but one with much political potential. The Two Principles briefly reached their zenith in recent historical times in the person of the Eighth Jebtsumdamba Qutugtu, the Bogd Khan of early twentieth-century theocratic Mongolia.[5]

The moral tone was picked up and carried on by the socialists, who, particularly through their use of language exhorting Mongolians to strive diligently and relentlessly to build a socialist future, cast past, present and future in moral terms.[6] The general outline of history was given a moral bent as well, as social development would lead eventually to equality and social justice for all the deserving.

Let me now turn to the identity-generating aspects of exemplars in Mongolia and their relation to conceptions of history. One of the particular strengths of the exemplar model

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[5] Although he encapsulated the political theory of the Two Principles in one person, it should be noted that sources almost universally agree his personal morality left more to be desired.

[6] The use of such moralistic language continues today. In teaching academic writing in Mongolia and editing and commenting on colleagues' papers, I realized that the socialist rhetoric remains alive and well, if put to other uses.

is its very basis in the relationship of and between individuals. While all symbols (and historical figures are nothing if not symbols) allow for personal interpretations, the very nature of exemplars rules out the need for any sort of public consensus, as is at least nominally expected of most political symbols. (For a classic formulation, see Ortner 1973.) Precisely because exemplars link individuals and can, in theory, bypass the larger social sphere, there need not be even a nominal consensus that a figure is important. Through various institutions and processes (education, influence of parents and peers, state propaganda), however, the figures here all have had some sort of public life as symbols. This individuation was a vital aspect of exemplars during the socialist period, as they provided anchor points for alternative constructions of history and identity much more readily than other symbols did.

I was told time and time again in the early 1990s that people had known the ‘truth’ about history during the decades of socialism. What they meant by this was not necessarily that they possessed knowledge that allowed them to reconstruct an objectively true model of Mongolian history. Rather, it translated into the fact that they were able to ‘remember’ a version of history and identity that contested the dominant, socialist model. Truth, in the 1990s, might have been presented as a correspondence with objective fact, but what it really meant was a worldview which contested the key elements of socialist ideology.

While a boon to individuals, this individualistic aspect of exemplars was a two-edged sword to the state. On the one hand, it meant that the state need not concern itself with large-scale public consensus in its drive to create a specific political identity. All people need to do is agree at some general level that a particular figure is important. On the other hand, there is almost no way to ensure that the exemplars put forward are being received as intended. Any claim of control of the interpretation is ceded to the individual. Exemplars are much akin to charismatic individuals in the Weberian sense. People

turn to them of their own volition and for personal reasons. Exemplars, much like charismatic figures, only have force as exemplars because people ‘allow’ them to. Charismatic figures, however, are inherently unstable and opposed to other forms of legitimation. Thus, by appealing to such a model for behaviour and action, authorities were not only playing with fire, but playing with it near a keg of gunpowder. Charismatic figures can threaten to undermine the order of state by providing loci around which people can – and did – construct competing identities, both with respect to who they were and what it meant to be a Mongol. These identities, in turn, are often linked to specific interpretations of history.

Mongolian socialist historiography was nothing if not moral and in being so, it echoed both understandings of government and the Buddhist-influenced epics of the seventeenth and later centuries, such as the *Erdeni-yin Tobci* and *Altan Tobci*. Rewriting early Mongolian history from a Buddhist point of view, the chronicles place Chinggis Khan in a direct line from earlier Buddhist kings. What is more, Chinggis is born at the command of the Buddha, and to end suffering: ‘[A]s twelve evil kings had been born, and were causing suffering to all living things, for the sake of suppressing them, an instruction was given by Buddha, and Chinggis Qaghan was born’ (Bawden 1955: 128). These epics provided the bulk of the historical framework prior to, and even in the early years of, the twentieth century. Amar’s *Brief History of Mongolia*, for example, cites the *Altan Tobci* as the ‘earliest, best and most true’ historical source for Chinggis Khan (1989: 101).[7] Through the *Altan Tobci* and others the moral aspect of history was reinforced.

During socialism, history continued to be inherently moral. Whether someone was a reactionary oppressor of the masses, or a patriot (*ekh oronch*) who struggled for his/her

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[7] At the time Amar was writing, the *Secret History*, which had been lost, had not yet been rediscovered.

nutag (homeland), in writing history judgment was being passed. Just as importantly, these evaluations were to be taken as indicators of the 'correct' socialist identity. Heroes and villains were painted in black and white, even if it meant shoe-horning history to fit the socialist ethos. The history lesson would take a back seat to the moral one. Individuals were not only presented as explicit exemplars (either positive or negative) in socialist historical writing, but the importance placed on such figures reinforced the role of the individual in a more general sense as well. This meshed with existing patterns from the Buddhist tradition that had many of the same concerns. Although the 'correct' goals that individuals should strive for had changed from those of the Buddhist texts, the importance of the individual in achieving those goals had not.

As a result, to the discerning eye, there is something fundamentally different in the way Mongolian history is written and thought about. At first glance, it appears to coincide with Marxist divisions or Western constructions of historical understandings that often revolve around key historical events, or perhaps similarities will be seen with the hoary old idea of Great Men individually shaping history.[8] To a certain degree Mongolian constructions of history do parallel these modes of thought, particularly in the twentieth century. A closer examination reveals that these models are more complex than they first appear. The figures chosen to illuminate specific periods of history 'are important not only for their historical deeds, but also as exemplars who give a moral overtone to history' (Kaplonski 2004: 120). The division of history is part of a larger 'complex' that includes identity construction and political legitimation or contestation. The Mongolian political framework in question interacts with a social memory model that also relies heavily upon the individual. In Mongolian

[8] And indeed, some Mongolians use these constructs in an apparently rather naïve manner – I think here of Urgunge Onon's classic *Mongolian Heroes of the Twentieth Century* (1976), where the label 'hero' is applied without further justification or explanation.

social memory and historiography, the historical role of the individual lies along a continuum that 'defines to what extent the actor or exemplar is seen as a "carrier" of the events with which he or she is associated' (Kaplonski 2004: 182). In other words, the individual is not always paramount in terms of causality, but remains at all times central to the understanding of history and identity.

The historical figures I have discussed elsewhere were linked to the *nutag*, the homeland (Kaplonski 2004). Through this they linked the historical to the political and the personal. They were and are evaluated largely on the basis of their contributions to the safeguarding and development of the homeland. The historical *is* the political, and through the emphasis on the individual we are reminded that we too can (and should) make a contribution.

Let me turn to some specific instances of exemplars from both the socialist period and the present to illustrate what I mean. I then want to explore some of the implications for the exemplar-model and the way it has been changing in the post-socialist period.

Resolutely Striving Forward: Exemplars under Socialism

The presentation of individuals as models for inspiration and behaviour during the socialist period was clear-cut. Figures were put forward as heroes to look up to and follow. Precisely because of this, however, it was less effective than might at first be thought, particularly in presenting the desired socialist identity. The socialist government, was, if anything, too formulaic in its portrayal of the socialist ideal for its chosen heroes to have as much resonance as it hoped. Anyone I talked to in Mongolia would tell me time and time again that they saw through attempts to portray history and individuals in a proper socialist light.[9] They would go along with such presentations

[9] Importantly, however, 'seeing through' socialist history was not a uniformly successful project. There were areas of history – such as the full extent of the repressions of the 1930s – that were new knowledge in the

for pragmatic reasons, but this did not translate into acceptance.

The clearest and simplest presentation of a person as a model of behaviour and action during the socialist period was Sühbaatar. Sühbaatar – Mongolia's Lenin – was presented as an ideal Mongolian in many ways, and at many levels. He was said to come from the 'proper' background and was early on made aware through personal experiences of the injustices of the old feudal system.[10] From humble beginnings he went on to the lead the Mongolian people down the glorious path to socialism. His dedication to the cause of the revolution was impossible to miss under socialist historiography. He was lauded as 'the founder of MAKhN [the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party] and the people's state, and the Mongolian People's Revolution's skillful leader' (Gongorjav 1984). He is also usually credited with establishing Mongolian-Soviet friendship and the Mongolian army, to name just a few of his accomplishments. In short, Sühbaatar was the ideal socialist man – hard-working, of humble background, and devoted to the cause of the party and country.

History books tended to talk about the revolution being carried out by either 'Sühbaatar and Choibalsan', or sometimes 'Sühbaatar, Choibalsan and other representatives of the people'.[11] In some texts, it seems Sühbaatar (with some help from his trusted lieutenant, Choibalsan) carried out the revolution single-handedly. For a particularly egregious example, see Erdembileg (1962). In the twelve or so pages covering the period from the formation of the first secret

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1990s.

[10] For a socialist account of Sühbaatar's life in English, see Onon's translation of one of the standard biographies (1976). Here Sühbaatar's background is described as being that of 'the poorest herdsmen' (p. 143).

[11] See any of the standard history books or textbooks, such as those published jointly by the Mongolian and Soviet Academies of Science (i.e. Mongolian and Soviet Academies of Science 1966). Choibalsan can be roughly glossed as 'Mongolia's Stalin'. He still has, for many reasons that can not be gone into here, a largely positive image in Mongolia.

revolutionary groups to the victory of the revolution and the formation of the People's government, no revolutionaries apart from Sühbaatar and Choibalsan are even mentioned until the fifth page.

Although portrayed by historians as leading a Marxist revolution, Sühbaatar, and Mongolian historiography more generally, were antithetical the to basic tenets of Marxism. Mongolian history is not the synthesis arising from the conflict of the thesis and antithesis, the inevitable progression of society and humanity as contradictions in one economic system lead inexorably to the next. Rather, Mongolian history is propelled by Sühbaatar, the revolutionary who smuggled a plea for help to Russia in the handle of his horse-whip.

Sühbaatar had other advantages that made him an ideal candidate for an exemplar, both official and private.

> Sühbaatar's physical appearance also helped in his positioning under socialism. Youthful, he was also a handsome man. He represented the ideal Mongol male, young, dedicated and hard-working. … Sühbaatar's youth represented the idealism of Mongolian socialism, and also its unrealized potential. While this…aspect was never a part of official iconography, it offered an anchor point for alternate interpretations of history (Kaplonski 2004: 16).

People did buy into these representations to a certain degree, but to what extent remains an open question. People I talked to knew the classic story of him meeting with Lenin, a meeting immortalized in socialist iconography, but they also (sometimes) doubted that he had been the sole driving force behind the revolution. To a certain extent, however, whether people subscribed to the official portrayal or not is not relevant. As the Bulgarian literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov has noted (1992: 54), 'the important thing is that the text be "receivable" by contemporaries, or that is has been regarded as such by its producer'. One does not usually present views that are expected to be universally ignored. That is, the authorities, in 'selling' such views of Sühbaatar wanted them to be viewed in

a certain way, and had expectations that they could be.

Throughout the 1990s, people would often tell me they had known the 'truth' about Sühbaatar. In other words, they knew the official presentations, but had also maintained competing views. His role as exemplar and moral force remained, but as the times and political currents changed, so did people's relationship with him. Unlike Lenin, his counterpart in the Soviet Union, Sühbaatar did not suffer a fall from grace after the democratic revolution. He was re-evaluated and reassessed, but not knocked off his pedestal. Others, like Bodoo and Danzan (see below), were now to be accorded a place alongside Sühbaatar, but he remained as an exemplar with potency, even though that potency has since been turned towards other purposes and inspirations. His youth and early death (Sühbaatar died just days after his 30th birthday) came to represent the unrealized potential of Mongolian socialism as a whole. Sühbaatar was no longer the lofty leader of the socialist period, but he still symbolized the early and heady dreams of the revolutionaries of the early 1920s.[12] Sühbaatar, particularly in the early 1990s, was no longer an exemplar of the socialist ideal but rather came to represent a lost period of optimism and hope. This became particularly relevant – if seldom explicitly so – as the 1990s progressed, and the infinite potentials that seemed present in the democratic revolution in 1990 gave way to harsh realities of economic collapse and political in-fighting. Sühbaatar served as a reminder that optimism and hope were possible.

Other figures perhaps worked better, at least from the state's point of view, during the socialist period. Further removed in time and insulated from recent memory, figures such as the mid eighteenth-century 'rebels' Amarsanaa and Chingünjav could be more effectively re-written to suit the state's goals.

Amarsanaa was an Oirad (Western Mongolian) leader

[12] See Kaplonski (2004: Ch. 7) for a fuller examination of this issue.

who had helped the Manchus subjugate his own people. Feeling slighted by the Manchu emperor after his campaigns, he rebelled against his new overlords. The rebellion was crushed, and Amarsanaa escaped to Siberia, eventually dying there. Chingünjav was a noble of the Hotgoid, a small group in north-western Mongolia. He was however ‘Khalkhified’: i.e. although from an ethnic minority group, like Amarsanaa, Chingünjav was linked to the majority Khalkh (Khalkha) in official histories, to encourage wider identity with his struggle and goals. His ‘rebellion’ seems to have been largely motivated by large debts owed to Chinese traders and generalized anti-Manchu sentiment more than any broader nationalist or anti-colonial concerns. He tried to get others to rise up with him, but was only moderately successful, although the rebellion lasted for several years. He was captured and taken to Beijing, where he was executed. Chingünjav, and to a lesser extent Amarsanaa, quickly passed into the realm of folklore, acquiring qualities far beyond those they actually possessed.

Now usually seen as leaders in an anti-colonial movement, Chingünjav and Amarsanaa are represented in socialist-era texts as precursors of Marxist class-struggle. The introduction to the second edition of the official *History of the Mongolian People’s Republic* describes the revolt as an ‘armed struggle for independence’ and argues it had the qualities of a ‘people’s liberation movement’ (Mongolian and Soviet Academies of Science 1966: 11). Erdembileg’s text (1962: 42) offers a similar reading, and when discussing the People’s Revolution, reminds us that the Mongolian people had waged many struggles over the centuries, and that Chingünjav’s rebellion was one such example.

Amarsanaa and Chingünjav were also invoked by various leaders of the Mongolian People's Republic at official celebrations, such as in 1951, when at the 30th anniversary of the People's Revolution, Marshal Choibalsan referred to the pair as ‘National Heroes’ (Ishjamts 1962: 12). A more explicit moral aspect was also present, as they not only strove

conscientiously against oppression (or so it was said) but ultimately gave their lives for the cause. '[T]hough the struggle in question was not crowned with success it occupies a prominent place in the history of the liberation struggle of the Mongolian people', an abstract of one of the books on the rebellion claims (Ishdorj and Dorj 1975: 84).

It is not clear to what extent 'lesser' exemplars, such as Chingünjav and Amarsanaa, were actively used by people. They were not particularly common or effective exemplars, especially after the 1950s and 1960s. Yet it is undeniable that the state wished them to be viewed as key historical figures, and to a certain extent it appears to have succeeded. In the introduction to his work on the rebellion, the historian Ishjamts lists at least seven pieces written about Chingünjav and Amarsanaa in the early to mid-twentieth century (Ishjamts 1962: 11–12). Such an emphasis should make us stop and think. At a talk I gave once on Chingünjav, someone in the audience remarked that the 1755–1757 rebellion of Amarsanaa and Chingünjav was one of the most over-emphasized events in Mongol history. This may well be true, but it should also lead us to ask why this should be so.

To a certain extent this emphasis on Amarsanaa and Chingünjav can be explained by purely pragmatic reasons. The 200th anniversary of the rebellion coincided with the renewed push for a stronger, recognizably socialist identity of the mid-1950s. The first official history that would survive the censors was being written, and the imminent creation of the *negdel*s (collective farms) would result in the successful collectivization of livestock.[13] Significantly, the second round of publications on the rebellion came in 1962, a low point in Sino-Soviet relations. One would have to be naïve not to suspect a correspondence between an emphasis on an anti-Qing rebellion and the increased official hostility towards China.

[13] There was the *Ardyn Unshih Bichig*, published in 1948, which included a history section, but this had a shelf-life of months, if not just weeks, before being condemned as not socialist enough.

But these are not the only reasons one would look to Chingünjav and Amarsanaa as official carriers of identity. Both of them already had resonance beyond academic texts. In the previous century, the Russian scholar G. N. Potanin (1883) had collected folktales of Shadar Van (Chingünjav). These tales often had an almost apocalyptic or messianic tint, the protagonist promising to return when his people were in need. The Mingat are said to have blue strips around the doors of their *ger*s so they can be more easily identified when Chingünjav returns. In other tales, he takes on a more explicitly Messianic aspect, being killed three times and being reincarnated. (For a fuller discussion of these tales in English, see Kaplonski 1993.)

The Ja Lama (Dambijantsen), one of the most colourful figures of early twentieth-century Mongolia, had invoked the memory of Amarsanaa during his escapades in the west of Mongolia, claiming first to be his grandson, and then his reincarnation. Clearly, if not already functioning as exemplars in the fullest sense, both were already mythic figures. To attempt to make use of them, then, was a politically astute move by the socialist government.

There was a certain amount of success in choosing these figures, as many people I talked to in the early 1990s recalled at least folkloric segments of the history of Chingünjav and Amarsanaa. Some 'knew' that he had died and been reincarnated. One high-ranking Party official in 1993, while knowing Chingünjav's historical role, knew more of tales of his suffering and sacrifice than the actual rebellion. Chingünjav, he told me, had been tortured by having bits of his flesh pulled through the holes in Chinese money.[14] And after Chingünjav was tortured and died, all the Mongolians could find of him was his thumb, the official continued, so that was brought back to Mongolia and buried. University students I

[14] Chinese money at the time had a square hole in the middle. It was said that this money was placed on Chingünjav's skin, and flesh was ripped out through the hole in the money with pincers.

talked to in 1993 also told me the same story.

Yet the heroes Chingünjav and Amarsanaa have largely fallen from common knowledge today. Very few, if any, people under the age of 35 or so that I have talked to in the later 1990s knew much about the two heroes, if they knew anything at all. Most recalled vaguely hearing the names, but could tell me nothing more. Obviously Amarsanaa and Chingünjav, if they ever fulfilled their obligations under the state plan to be exemplars, did so no longer. This is because the actions for which the state had proposed them as exemplars – selfless sacrifice for the common good and a struggle for independence, often presented in the context of socialism as also a class struggle – had lost all resonance in the post-socialist period.

Exemplifying Possible Pasts: the Post-socialist Period

There are two figures I wish to consider in the post-socialist period. The first is Chinggis Khan. The second is really a combined exemplar, consisting of S. Danzan and D. Bodoo, two key socialist revolutionaries who both met early and violent ends. I turn to Danzan and Bodoo first, as Chinggis raises several intriguing issues I wish to deal with at more length, and which will lead to the final points I want to make in this chapter. Both, however, show clearly the role of historical exemplars in the political imagination. They also illustrate what a Mongolian friend recently described to me as the Mongolian tendency to 'always praise and never criticize' people when writing history.

Danzan and Bodoo are interesting because they are now held up (somewhat interchangeably) as models of true Mongol patriotism, coupled with the now-understood-to-be-'correct' model of capitalist development. In other words, by looking to Danzan and Bodoo, one not only finds exemplars who act as guides to behaviour, but in doing so, repudiate the Soviet influence. Thus, as would be expected with such a function,

they have become less important over time, as the rethinking of socialist history became more established.

Bodoo was the founder of the Consular Hill group, one of the secret organizations formed in 1919 that would soon join with another such group, the East Hüree group, to create the Mongolian People's Party. He was also the Prime Minister of the first Mongolian People's government. Danzan was the founder of the East Hüree group, though during the socialist period this was credited to Sühbaatar. Both were among the 'First Seven' leaders of the revolution and both were killed in the 1920s. They were *personae non gratae* under socialism at various times. By the time of the third edition of the one-volume *History of the Mongolian People's Republic*, in 1984, both are mentioned, but only in passing. They are present, but not actually credited with doing much at all.

Their place during socialism was an almost direct inversion of Sühbaatar's. While he was built up and presented for emulation as the socialist ideal, they were written out of the history books for their insufficiently socialist outlook. As with other historical figures, most people I talked to about Danzan and Bodoo claimed to have known 'the truth' about them all along. Officially reactionaries, the two figures presented to people exemplars that allowed an alternate construction of history, one that also allowed a moral condemnation of the official line.

During the 1990 democratic revolution and the first years of the 1990s, the two figures were brought back from obscurity, to claim their place alongside Sühbaatar. They never fully displaced him, but rather are now given 'proper credit' for what they did. Danzan, who had been killed for his rightist-views, had been (it is now suggested) far-sighted enough to argue for the correct (non-socialist) road of development for the country, and is held up as a model of a truly patriotic Mongolian.

Although historical knowledge of what Bodoo and Danzan actually did still seems to be rather minimal, both have

come to have a place in distancing Mongolia from the socialism of the previous seventy years.[15] They function largely as 'exemplars by omission'. To a large degree, it isn't actually who they were or what they did that make Bodoo and Danzan important. Rather they are important for what they did not do – they did not take part in the worst excesses of socialism, and both were killed by the state. To claim them as 'true' Mongols therefore, is to repudiate the goals of Soviet socialism and in fact set it in opposition to the best interests of the country. This is further reinforced by the fact that Danzan was clearly a capitalist and thus to reclaim him is to legitimate the current direction and goals of the country. Like Sühbaatar's early death, the purging of Bodoo and Danzan now stand as indictments to the excesses of Soviet-installed socialism and the death (both figuratively and literally) of Mongolia's best hopes for the future.

Chinggis Khan is the best example of an exemplar in action, as we have already briefly seen. As with any historical figure, everyone has his or her own conception of Chinggis and their own understanding of his accomplishments. Given the prominence he has been accorded in post-socialist Mongolia, however, Chinggis Khan is a particularly powerful instance of an exemplar, as well as one with several unique characteristics. Whether as a moral leader, a putative democrat or a strong leader for a country lacking in direction, everyone seemed to claim Chinggis for him- or herself throughout the 1990s. He has also even been put forward as a moral exemplar in tales for children (Enhbat and Lhagvasüren 1992). '[E]very single Mongol, even before 1989, was proud of Chinggis Khan inside of themselves, and people were admiring him', one academic offered. 'I think the idea that Chinggis Khan was a person who really lived for Mongolia, and his nation, is very important for

[15] Danzan has achieved a particular fame among some for owning the first Harley-Davidson motorcycle in Mongolia.

the education of the current generation', she continued, summing up the prevalent attitudes in the 1990s and today.

Chinggis Khan also is the figure most clearly presented in Mongolian history as being an initiator of events, highlighting and reinforcing his role as exemplar. While others (such as Sühbaatar) are associated with historical events, and given credit for them, few are credited solely with creating the events they command, as Chinggis is. This makes him particularly efficacious as a model for action in a time of uncertainty and change. Rather than reacting to events, or working to shape larger forces, he caused events to happen. Chinggis Khan's creation of the Mongolian state in 1206 is the Genesis story of Mongolian politics.

Chinggis Khan also functioned as an exemplar during the socialist period but in different ways. Prior to the socialist period, he had been an ancestral figure, and was even worshipped (e.g. Serruys 1985). In the Buddhist epics, he had served a moral as well as historical purpose. In the *Altan Tobci*, for example, he is rebuked for spending three years in the country of Solonggha (Korea) and for deserting his own land and people (Bawden 1955: 133–34). He recognizes his mistake, however, and all is right in the end. In the *Erdeni-yin Tobci*, Chinggis transforms himself into an old man to teach two companions a lesson in humility (Kreuger 1967: 49–50).

During the socialist period, contrary to current mythology, Chinggis Khan was often written about (see Kaplonski forthcoming), but as socialism took stronger hold he was recast as a negative exemplar. (Official opinion about him enjoyed a brief thaw in the early 1960s, but this did not last long; see Boldbaatar 1999.) The very fact that he was written about, however, allowed him to serve as an anchor point for other interpretations of identity and history. As we have seen, people reported 'knowing the truth' and remaining proud of Chinggis during the socialist period. Publicly voiced opinions had to shift with the changing ideological winds, but the efficacy of Chinggis as an exemplar did not. Chinggis Khan

has particular resonance as an exemplar since he is seen as the founder of the Mongol state and the first giver of laws, and I turn to briefly consider this aspect of his representation.

A key term in understanding politics and governance in Mongolia is *zasag*. *Zasag*, 'government', 'rule' or 'political structure', is derived from *zasakh*, 'to repair', but as importantly, 'to correct' or 'to put right'.[16] In fact, the first definition Tsevel's Mongolian dictionary gives for *zasakh* draws upon terms that express 'correcting' in a sense of restoring harmony: 'to bring into accordance things that are unsuitable or faulty' (*niilemjgüi buyuu aldaa dutagdaltai züiliig zokhiruulakh*).[17] Although the derivation is not, I believe, widely recognized today (but see Bayarsaihan 2003: 98), it hints at a connection between governance and correctness and order.

This term, *zasag*, is the term found in *Ikh Zasag*, (known in popular sources as the 'Yasa', or the 'Great Yasa') the law promulgated by Chinggis Khan himself. There is much debate over exactly what the *Ikh Zasag* was. While many see it as a codified set of laws or regulations – legislation, in effect – the evidence for this is not completely compelling. In a passage in the *Secret History*, Chinggis Khan orders his adopted brother, Shigi-Qutuqu, to make a register of legal decisions (Onon 1990: 112). The earliest source we have seems to indicate that the *Ikh Zasag* was basically a set of precedents, not a thought-out piece of legislation. Igor De Rachewiltz argues that we should distinguish between Chinggis's *zasag* (*jasaq*), *zarlig* (*jarliq*) and *bilig* (Rachewiltz 1993), and these nuances are worth exploring. *Zasag* are rulings or decrees that Rachewiltz sees as encompassing principles. A *zarlig* is more

[16] Definitions are taken from both Lessing's and Bawden's Mongolian–English dictionaries.

[17] I have rendered the translation somewhat clumsily in an effort to convey more fully the underlying the sense of the terms used. Tsevel's dictionary is the only Mongolian equivalent to a dictionary such as Webster's, or the Oxford English Dictionary.

limited in scope than a *zasag* is: an order or decree.[18] Finally, *bilig* are ‘wise sayings’ or maxims. Rachewiltz is correct in arguing that the distinctions are important, but they are often elided in contemporary discussions of the *Ikh Zasag*. The explicitly moral and legal are intimately intertwined in discussions of Chinggis Khan’s law.

It is important that this is not an abstract law, as now understood in the phrase ‘the rule of law’. Rather, it is perceived as a *grounded* law. It has a specific context, and often a specific genesis. This parallels another observation of Caroline Humphrey’s about exemplars and ethical precepts: ‘in Mongolia, unlike in Europe, in practice almost no space is given to general ethical precepts as emanations of God or society. Rather, such precepts tend to be *authored*, and they then appear in relationships as tied to the personalities of both the mentor and the follower’ (1997: 33). Again, there is a link between the individual and the abstract by way of the moral.

This role of law-giver is a particularly interesting one for an exemplar, as it implies the beginning of a shift in how exemplars are used and thought about. If previous political changes had largely left the original exemplar intact, there are indications that this will not necessarily remain the case. The few conversations I have had explicitly on this topic indicate that although people still hold certain figures in high regard, they do not look to them as explicitly as models of behaviour. They are not individualized exemplars in the original sense we have been exploring. Rather, Chinggis Khan is in the process of becoming a ‘generalized exemplar’. This represents a trend that the socialist government attempted to instigate but which was relatively unsuccessful. This was due to the nature of socialist rule and the penetration into people’s daily lives, which had an isolating effect and thus reinforced the

[18] In contemporary Mongolian politics, for example, a *zarlig* is issued by the President when an official is confirmed in his or her post.

effectiveness of a (moral/political) identity model centred on the individual. When trust is given cautiously and the state is ever present, guidance must come, if not from the state, then from private sources. Since people did not see themselves as having a say in what happened to them, socialist control provided an additional impetus to turn to private views and reject those imposed by the state. Socialism then, if not intentionally, encouraged the survival and propagation of the exemplar model of morality-history-identity.

In the past decade to decade-and-a-half, however, there has been a shift to exemplars as more general models. The relationship with the exemplar is no longer a relationship between two individuals, albeit one often influenced by other factors. Rather, specific individuals are held up for public acclaim, much as they had been under socialism. But even with new-found religious freedom (or perhaps because of it) and room for open public debate and discussion, the drive to turn to specific, private exemplars has lessened. People still view historical figures as exemplars, but there is now, as it were, a pool of exemplars from which to choose. It is thus somewhat ironic that Chinggis is now looked to for his role in establishing a codified set of laws. In other words, he is an individual whose greatest achievement is now seen as propagating that which ultimately undermines his own exemplary power. This is reinforced by the common view of Chinggis Khan as a democrat, which reinforces and is reinforced by the concept of the rule of law, an abstraction devoid of the need for exemplars. Ultimately these developments lead us to ask what are the implications for exemplar-based morality and history? Can such models survive democracy and the rule of law?

A More Moral future?: the Exemplar Model and Democracy

Perhaps the most interesting thing to consider about the exemplar model is its future. I suggest it is fundamentally at odds with 'western' understandings and models of governance and democracy. It seems the two cannot be combined without undue violence being inflicted on one or the other.

The exemplar model is centred on the individual and relationships between individuals. In many ways, it bears similarities to older European models of rule, such as sovereignty, which is exercised over 'a territory and consequently on the subjects who inhabit it' (Foucault 1991: 93). Sovereignty is ultimately a relationship between individuals – the ruler and the ruled. Current western models of rule, in contrast, are predicated upon abstract principles and the 'rule of law'. Such modes of governance are ultimately antithetical to the individual as an organizing force. This is supposed to be precisely their strength. It is the codification of abstract principles, not specific individuals, that is supposed to decide how things are done. Individuals merely fill slots in the system.

While the socialist system was based on laws and abstract models, their arbitrariness undermined their abstract, impersonal nature and reinforced the importance of individuals. So did socialist historiography, at least in Mongolia. It did indeed matter who was running the Party or country, or who lead the Revolution. This is not the case with western constructions of democracy and bureaucracy.[19] Here the rule of law – an abstraction – is supreme. Mongolian conceptions of democracy, however, do not coincide with western constructs. When asked to give a definition of democracy, people will parrot back what they have read, heard or been taught: the

[19] The actuality, of course, may well differ. One may have a bureaucratic, rule-of-law based system under certain authoritarian regimes. But I restrict my discussion here to democracy, since this is the form of governance relevant to the discussion.

western models. However, this is not how democracy is actualized in Mongolia, especially among the non-politicians. The political structure may be based on western models, but the content is purely Mongolian.

Mongolians are, for the most part, constructing conceptions of democracy in two linked ways. One is democracy as 'anti-socialism'. Democracy is what socialism was not. While people will admit in conversation that the socialist state had many benefits – free education, health care, and so forth – what is *remembered* now is the obligations that people had to the state. There were quotas to fulfil, obligatory volunteerism and Party meetings on traditional holidays. In the context of democracy, the pre-1990 socialist state is portrayed as demanding and taking from the people, not providing for them.[20] With democracy being understood as 'anti-socialism', the expected relationship between the state and the individual is reversed. People now expect the state to provide for them and to protect their human rights.

The other tendency builds from the first one. This tendency is to see democracy as equated unequivocally with individual freedom. If socialism was restrictive and repressive, democracy is liberating. People have readily internalized the equation of democracy with freedom and are heartily encouraged and applauded by various international agencies and governments for doing so. But in doing so, they have not adopted a concept of obligations *to* the state or larger community. Indeed, democracy seems to mean freedom *from* any demands made upon the individual. Democracy is, in a sense, *anomie* codified. There has been a large-scale collapse of the sense of community in Mongolia that existed even in the early to mid-1990s. People are fragmented, but it has become

[20] This perception changes in other contexts. *Within* the democratic paradigm, or as a critique of certain political parties and their policies, the socialist state may be admired for providing health care, pensions, etc. But in the context of democracy as an abstraction, it is contrasted with the demanding features of the socialist state.

an outward, shoving, 'every person for themselves' rather than the inward-looking reference to private exemplars. Morality, so many of my friends complain to me on a regular basis, has ceased to have any meaning in Mongolia. Rather than seeing that one's house is in order before turning outward, my friends report – and personal experience seems to confirm – that the new attitude is to maximize one's own gain, without regard for others. From this perspective, the future seems bleak.

Yet this picture does not necessarily spell the end for all forms and influence of the exemplar. For within the western-patterned government and political system the individual once again assumes importance. There is in Mongolian politics what I have termed the 'cult of the individual', with a nod to the 'cult of personality'. Specific individuals take on an importance in Mongolian politics (and culture more generally) not found in most western political systems. One is reminded in some ways of Melanesian Big Man systems, where each person who wants to lead attempts to recruit their own followers as a charismatic leader. Compounded by the small size of the Mongolian intellectual and political community and the importance of personal networks, this has lead to certain centralizing tendencies, as the same handful of people not only serve in government, but also serve on any number of committees set up to commemorate events or carry out other undertakings.

The emphasis on the individual, however, also has centrifugal tendencies. To a large extent the proliferation of political parties in Mongolia can be attributed to the emphasis on the individual, rather than on substantive political or policy differences. Rather than choosing to work within a specific party for change or power, politicians simply leave and form their own party.[21] This emphasis on the individual in politics to

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[21] The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) is the notable exception to this, but with 70 years of experience of authoritarian rule to draw upon, one would expect them to be better at maintaining order. Nonetheless, even the MPRP is splintered into factions.

a large extent overlaps, reinforces and draws strength from the exemplar model. Both are intimately linked to the primacy of the individual. And, as noted earlier, this brings it into conflict with western conceptions of democracy as put forward by the international community. This conflict is more than theoretical. For all the debates on and explications of concepts such as Rousseau's social contract and various theories of democracy in Mongolian scholarly publications, very little of this seems to be actualized. The influence of the exemplar-based model of morality remains strong.

What does this mean for the future of the exemplar, morality and the individual in Mongolian politics? The exemplar has had a long history in Mongolian culture and politics and will continue to do so. It has played a key role in shaping understandings of history and contesting the socialist identity, and there are two reasons to believe it will continue to do so. First, the intertwining of the moral and the historical in the form of the exemplar is a particularly potent combination as it reaches realms far beyond the merely political. This ensures that it cannot easily be rooted out merely by changes in political structure or philosophy. Second, any system of thought and morality that survived seventy years of Soviet-style socialism must be robust indeed.