

# Lingering Nomad Ideology in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mongolia

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**Abstract** A specific economic and social realignment can be observed in Mongolia nowadays. Due to the rapid transformation in the last two and a half decades, the mentality and way of life of Mongolian people have also changed to a great degree and a specific national or nomadic ideology has appeared and gradually strengthened, which has become one of the pillar of national identity. This ideology is shared in many respects by Mongolians, living not only in Mongolia, but China and Inner Asia too.

In the economic environment the Mongolian society is changing at an accelerated speed. The urban population is getting far from the nomadic way of life and has started to follow behavioural models that are very different from the traditional patterns. With the regression of nomadism one of the fundamental constituents of the Mongolian culture seems to disappear. Although in the last 25 years Mongolians have increasingly adapted to the globalized culture, the tradition of Genghis has not totally vanished, what is more, nowadays it revives. The need for independent cultural identity is getting stronger. It plays a role in elaborating economic strategies that are adaptable to the changed environment. It can be observed, for example, in turnout of shamans in the towns, in the changes of the Buddhist Church's social functions or in the "pretended" nomadic lifestyle around the main destination of tourism.

**Keywords:** Mongolia, nomad traditions, social changes in Mongolia, national traditions, national and/or nomadic ideology

A unique economic and social realignment can be observed in Mongolia today as a result of the rapid changes occurring in the course of the two decades following the political transition, leading to a significant transformation in both the mentality and lifestyle of its people. In parallel, a characteristic nomad ideology has also gradually emerged, and while this has grown to become a strong pillar of Mongol national identity, it has also divided the Mongol population into distinct groups – not only within the present borders of Mongolia, but also in the surrounding territories of Central Asia.

Opportunities for Mongolia are greatly inhibited due to its geographical circumstances. Wedged between two much larger neighbours – Russia and China – both of which are notably stronger nations in terms of their economic power and populations, Mongolia

has significantly less economic and, to a certain extent, political mobility, which has also been reflected in Mongolian history until now. In a political sense, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition taking place during the 1990s as well as the normalization of relations with China have created a new environment. Economic growth in China since the end of the 1980s has been both a blessing and a curse for Mongolia, meaning that in spite of important structural changes its previous economic dependence on COMECON has partially remained, albeit shifting in the direction of China.

Mongolian political life over the last 25 years has seen changes that cannot be experienced in any other post-Socialist or ex-Soviet satellite nation in Asia. Even by European standards, Mongolia today is a working democracy that has undergone a spectacular economic and social transformation. Consequently, it can surely no longer be regarded as a country where there is any validity to the image that the lifestyle of its people has remained unchanged since the time of Genghis Khan. Nevertheless, the most significant changes have taken place over the last quarter of a century. Social, economic and political processes in Mongolia during various periods since the 17<sup>th</sup> century have been greatly influenced by its two neighbours, beginning with the Qing Dynasty, which lasted for more than 250 years, followed by Russian (Soviet) influence throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, frequently in keeping with prevalent relations between the two larger powers. No significant social transformation occurred in the country from the 13<sup>th</sup> century up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>, and in this sense no decisive change can be attributed to the Soviet period after 1921 either.

It is undoubtedly a fact that Mongolian nomadism today partly continues to follow centuries-old traditions, making Mongolia one of last countries – if not the only one – where traditional nomadic pastoralism is still practiced in its original form. At the same time, this lifestyle is rapidly being supplanted, to the extent that the economic stability of the country has come under a certain threat while the nation is simultaneously facing new economic and social challenges brought on by its rapidly growing urban population. This process is not limited merely to economic consequences, however. Apparently, the disappearance of the nomadic lifestyle also means that a traditional pillar of Mongolian cultural tradition is disappearing as well. In contrast, even though Mongolians have over the past twenty years increasingly adapted to the influence of “Western” consumer society – often indirectly conveyed to them through the “Oriental” filter of Korea, Japan and Manchu-Chinese traditions have not completely vanished and are in fact currently experiencing a kind of renaissance.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought sweeping changes in global politics, and thus in Mongolia as well, enabling the country to open towards the world after more than seventy years of political isolation. The borders of Mongolia were opened at a time when the growing effects of globalization were gradually beginning to transform the entire world. The internet revolution and a new market environment were also having a strong impact on other countries and societies, but the transformation in Mongolia was particularly explosive. Due to its political environment and closed borders, the country had previously experienced very little change and at an extremely slow pace.

A certain modernization did exist, strictly controlled from above, but its impact was only felt by a narrow layer of society – and was therefore largely unsuccessful. For this reason, the nomadic pastoralism and livestock herding typical of the region for centuries remained in a significant portion of the country in spite of decisive, ideologically-based governmental attempts at cultural transformation. The latter had already begun during the 1930s in keeping with the government's anti-religious ideology (TELEKI 2011:32–33), but its true cultural impact could not be discerned until the middle of the century. Although the forced overshadowing of national traditions in Mongolia was not initiated with methods as drastic as those used in China during the period from 1966–76,<sup>1</sup> the prevalent government ideology and system of political alliances dictated that Mongolians be integrated within a foreign regime via the repression of national traits.

These efforts, however, have merely resulted in a situation where post-transition Mongolian society is having to face the challenges of globalization while reconfiguring its basic cultural traditions. Moreover, this must now be accomplished in a period of extremely intensive economic and social transformation. In the new economic and social environment of the post-Soviet period, the mention and revival of Mongolian, or “nomadic” traditions not only entails the reconstruction of Mongolian culture, but may also present a unique economic solution to current challenges. Hereafter, I will examine individual aspects of this social and economic transformation as well as the role of religion in Mongolian society.

While the structures of the traditional nomadic lifestyle are apparently disintegrating under the effects of the new political and economic environment, two distinct social groups have gradually emerged. In Mongolian cities – and primarily in the capital – one group is living an entirely settled lifestyle adapted to urban economic circumstances, including those who increasingly see living abroad (not necessarily in an “urban” setting) as a means to achieve their existential goals. Their aim is to settle and work in Asian countries with better economic conditions – mainly South Korea and Japan. China is a less attractive destination, partly due to prejudices arising from misinterpreted national consciousness, historical tradition and nationalism – mostly in Chinese cities – despite the fact that a significant Mongolian minority can be found living in the territories bordering Mongolia. I will return to this special issue later in this study.

An outstanding number of young people living in cities are following a new trajectory completely divergent from the traditional Mongolian model. For them, the fashion, music and lifestyle dictated by the global culture of the United States or major economic centres in Asia are the example of choice. They are gradually losing their connection with Mongolian traditions, rejecting the example represented in the way of life their parents and grandparents followed. As a consequence, migration is a growing tendency, primarily among young urbanites moving abroad to study or work, and who are being replaced by new arrivals from rural communities. The depopulation of rural

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<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Revolution was introduced by events in the fall of 1965 – the ousting of the minister of culture and his undersecretary – but the movement took hold in the summer of 1966. Minor intervals notwithstanding, it lasted for a decade until the death of Mao Tse-tung and resulted in a severe political and social crisis. According to individual sources, more than 36,000,000 people were put on trial and 750,000 – 1,000,000 among them were murdered (GERNET 2001:501–503; MACFARQUHAR – SCHOENHALS 2006:262).

areas and the disappearance of traditional lifestyle can largely be attributed to this trend. Half of Mongolian society today lives in cities, with the population of Ulaanbaatar drastically increasing over the last decade. Residents of the Mongolian capital during the 1990s numbered around 700,000. By 2010 the registered population had increased to over one million (SZILÁGYI 2010a) and has steadily continued to grow since then.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon has been clearly visible from year to year in the growth of *ger* (yurt) districts built by settlers on the hillsides surrounding the city, which have continued to expand and are now extending to the far side of the hills in the area to the north of the capital.<sup>3</sup> Over the past few decades, it has become a common habit among local urban dwellers to maintain smaller rural homes near the city, usually in the form of yurts, where they live from spring to autumn, only returning to their city residences during the extremely cold winter months. This acquisition of space has been simplified by zoning laws stipulating that all Mongolian citizens have the right to fence off a specified area for their own use, which has led to the development of a special system of “summer homes” or yurts in the outlying areas beyond the residential districts surrounding Ulaanbaatar.<sup>4</sup>

This situation has radically changed in the years following the transition, especially in the last decade and a half, which has seen the number of new settlers increase far more rapidly than the number newly constructed flats – which those moving in from rural areas were often unable to afford.<sup>5</sup> Taking advantage of the aforementioned regulations, many people have simply chosen to fence off an area of a few hundred square meters as a mode of settlement in the capital. As a consequence, the vicinity of Ulaanbaatar has been populated by yurts and wooden cottages standing on plots surrounded by wood fencing. These settlements are provided with electricity, but running water and sewers are often lacking, making it impossible to provide residents with appropriate hygienic conditions. Due to the inherent features of the territory, it is especially difficult to establish a suitable infrastructure as there are no designs guaranteeing the establishment of an appropriate street grid. Many yurts have been washed away by heavy summer rains in recent years, and these catastrophes have claimed the lives of numerous residents, which means that first generation settlers have by no means found the living circumstances that prompted them to leave their rural homes (JANZEN – BAT-OCHIR 2011).

At the same time, it is also important to mention additional pressing factors. Unfortunately, Mongolia today still lacks suitable veterinary treatment for the livestock that provide a living for the rural population, which means that in some cases a significant portion of these animals are vulnerable to extinction. Furthermore, as there is no established feeding system, and given the fact that open-air grazing can only ensure the circumstances necessary for survival and reproduction under certain environmental conditions, mass death among livestock during the winter continues to occur.

<sup>2</sup> According to the latest data from the Ulaanbaatar Bureau of Statistics, the registered population of the capital in 2011 was 1,206,000. <http://www.ubstat.mn/> (accessed January 16, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Data from 2013 indicates that the population in the capital had reached 1,226,991. <http://www.infomongolia.com/ct/ci/208/137/Ulaanbaatar%20General%20Information> (accessed April 28, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> In addition to establishing temporary homes and “summer residences”, many have also used this opportunity to build storage facilities and wholesale warehouses connected to their businesses.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates by the Asian Development Bank suggest that the annual number of new arrivals to Ulaanbaatar is up to 40,000. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/dafcdcc6-9bfc-11e4-a6b6-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed April 13, 2015)

This often leads to complete financial disability for some families, who are then forced to leave their pastures behind.<sup>6</sup>

While suitable work opportunities for large numbers of first generation urban dwellers have been scarce for years, the pace of migration to cities has continued to increase up to the present day. Rising unemployment has also led to significant social tension, a fact made clearly evident by the riots that took place in the summer of 2008 (SZILÁGYI 2010a) – and the simultaneous depopulation of rural areas may also mean the end of traditional Mongolian nomadic pastoralism. It is no accident that there is now growing discourse regarding ways to integrate the nomadic lifestyle within a 21<sup>st</sup> century economic environment. This issue gives rise to numerous problems (CAMPI 2011). Some are already envisioning the “end” of nomadism (HUMPHREY – SNEATH 1999) while others have described nomads as a gradually marginalizing group (DYER 2001). Nomadic conditions cannot provide an appropriate standard of education, which can only be achieved in cities, and this in turn reinforces migration. It is only in the rarest of cases that young people who have moved to cities from rural environments in order to study in secondary schools or universities return to their original communities, which is the second major reason for the rapid growth of urban populations and the depopulation of rural areas. Limited opportunities for education also call attention to another fundamental problem. In the decades prior to the political transition, it was common for nomads to send their children to boarding schools located in rural municipalities in order to obtain basic schooling. Secondary and higher education were a narrow privilege financed by the state. Although education is available to a much broader strata today, noteworthy institutions of higher education are only located in the capital city and in one or two rural centres – for example Khowd or Darkhan. Without the availability of major scholarships, university education requires significant financial sacrifices from nomadic peoples, who often do not possess large amounts of money. A nomadic lifestyle can ensure a living for large families comprising up to three generations, yet rarely provides a sizable income for the families involved. More precisely, the infrastructural and market conditions necessary for generating financial income from the sale of goods produced in the context of a nomadic lifestyle are at present still not accessible to every nomad. Consequently, it is only the members of a relatively narrow strata who are able to have their children educated in cities.

## NEW ECONOMIC MODELS

The growing demand for financial income in rural areas has also resulted in the appearance of new strategies, manifest in the emergence of new enterprises, such as goat breeding in Kashmir, for which there is an increasing demand, and the wholesale purchase of other animal products. The latter does not necessarily entail an environmental burden, and so can easily be combined with a nomadic lifestyle. The former, on the other hand, is already

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<sup>6</sup> Such mass extinction took place in the winter of 2001–2002 and more recently in 2010. Reports on the latter indicated that more than two million animals had died, with the complete destruction of entire livestock herds in some territories. “Severe winter kills two million livestock.” Montsame News Agency, Ulaanbaatar, February 11, 2010. [http://www.montsame.mn/index.php?option=com\\_news&mt=normal\\_news&tab=201002&task=news\\_detail&ne=799](http://www.montsame.mn/index.php?option=com_news&mt=normal_news&tab=201002&task=news_detail&ne=799) (accessed January 16, 2012)

having a significant visible impact on territories in southern Mongolia. The number of goats in the northern area of the Gobi Desert has grown to a point where desertification has accelerated and traditional nomadic livestock husbandry is no longer viable.

Strategies for obtaining direct financial income have primarily developed near major centres of tourism, where nomads have established small “open-air museums” for visiting tourists. While these families are ostensibly conducting their traditional way of life, their primary source of income is the money they earn by providing tourists with photo-ops and other services. One of the most visited tourist destinations in Mongolia is Lake Khöwsgöl (Khalkha: Xöwsgöl nuur), the shores of which are populated – in the spring and summer months – by the aforementioned nomad families, who “control” specific territories among themselves. There is frequent “cartel activity”: guests regularly hosted in yurts built by certain entrepreneurs, or specific families offering photo opportunities to foreign tourists who are always transported by chauffeurs familiar with the territory. Families providing such tourist spectacles have seemingly not rejected their nomadic lifestyle – grazing their animals in their winter abode and then moving to their “summer residence” by the lake. Their main source of direct income, however, is the photo-ops they sell to both Mongolian and foreign visitors for pre-negotiated fees, allowing visitors to take pictures with them or with their animals. On such occasions, friction between locals and other Mongolians who have arrived at the lake as tourists is not uncommon. Rural travel destinations are popular among urban Mongols nowadays, but while such trips may seem to be simple excursions, they are often infused with a special emotional content, and their aim is not only to provide “settled” Mongolians with an opportunity to relax outside of the city or to visit their nomad relatives in the countryside. The Mongolian plains and the traditional Mongolian way of life today are prominent elements of Mongolian national identity, and so Mongolians living in urban environments show far greater pride and enthusiasm in visiting the rural territories of their country than can be observed among city dwellers in other nations. For such urban visitors, paying fees to be photographed with families camped by Lake Khöwsgöl constitutes a decidedly negative experience, even if they are being photographed with reindeer or horses. Comments like the following can be frequently heard: “It’s my country. Why should I have to pay for it?”

Such environments have also given rise to the appearance of self-entitled “business shamans” who no longer play the traditional role of shamans in their communities and who have not become sacred leaders in the traditional way. Such individuals have merely recognized “market opportunities” and perform various rituals for travelling visitors – often based on information they have learned from books or by word of mouth.<sup>7</sup> If they do these activities well, it is often difficult to distinguish them from authentic shamans, which means they are even able to provide their audiences with a sacred experience. In local communities, however, self-proclaimed shamans fulfill an entirely different role than their authentic counterparts who achieved their status in accordance with sacred traditions. In fact, it can be said that they play no important role at all and do not even attempt to do so. They have simply taken advantage of developed stereotypes in connection with nomads and conduct shamanistic activities merely as a source of income.

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<sup>7</sup> A similar theme is addressed by anthropologist Laetitia Merli in the documentary film *Shaman tour*, which premiered on October 7, 2011 at the 10<sup>th</sup> annual ISSR conference in Warsaw.

This process correlates with a phenomenon that has also been observed outside of Mongolia in certain territories of China and Siberia. The general demand for sacred fulfilment in the post-Soviet age of free religious practice has seen an increase in the number of fake shamans working to satisfy this demand, in connection with whom adherence to tradition would be difficult to verify. Although researchers claim that it is also possible to find shamans who can be regarded as authentic, it is likely that many individuals are performing rituals that they have reconstructed based on the accounts published by these same researchers. Whether taking place in cities or in rural settings, this phenomenon raises many new questions. In the period of revival arising as a result of free religious practice over the last two and a half decades, followers of both Buddhism and shamanistic tradition have been attempting to reconstruct and reassert the role of Mongolian traditions forced into the background or eliminated during the time before the political transition. This is an easier process in the case of Buddhism thanks to written source material and religious centres abroad, where a young generation of Lamas have now for several decades been able to train themselves in keeping with Mongolian Buddhist traditions originating from Tibet. In addition, it has taken nearly two decades to re-launch religious education in Mongolia, which has now developed education centres that are also able to provide suitable training for monks.

With regards to shamanism, which lacks written traditions, the same process has proven to be far more complex. On one hand, Buddhism has significantly limited shaman activity since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – especially in central territories – which means that shamanistic traditions only survived among Mongolian groups living in peripheral regions, including Darkhats, Buryats and western Mongols. The impact of anti-religious movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was far more drastic in these territories, leaving very little or practically no basis for the reconstruction of traditions. The lack of written sources had two consequences. Firstly, it was only possible to reconfigure the role and function of shamans in a traditional way in areas where shamans or shaman families had survived the more than 70 years of socialist rule preceding the political transition. Secondly, an increasing number of “self-proclaimed” shamans riding the tide of “neo-paganism” familiar to western societies as well began to engage in shamanistic practices for financial gain, often using the earlier work of researchers to establish their own systems. As was typical of the new socio-economic circumstances, they often moved to cities, where there was a concentrated demand for their services. In contrast to earlier times, it is not uncommon today for individual shamans to practice in shamanistic centres, attracting potential clients before setting out to establish private practices. Given this unique market environment, some shamans engage in a form of self-promotion, publishing books about their own activities or about shamanism *in general* – thereby creating an illusion of academic credibility and making sure to emphasise that they are also practitioners. In this way, audiences intrigued by shamanism and shamanistic traditions, who obviously have a sensitive commitment to the topic, often help to increase the clientele of the given authors.

While sacred traditions, especially Buddhism, have become a pillar of Mongolian national identity, financial considerations were not ignored among representatives of dogmatic religious circles either. In the wake of the recent Buddhist revival in Mongolia, there are obviously many who have taken on a monastic way of life based on personal conviction, but in an urban environment fraught with unemployment there are also

individuals who merely view joining a monastery as a means to ensure a livelihood. The gradual reconstruction of the religious education system over the past twenty years has led to partial success in alleviating this problem, but it is doubtful that it can be fully eliminated (SZILÁGYI 2010b).<sup>8</sup> Even so, a certain restructuring can also be observed in recent years. While the first decade after the political transition showed a gradual increase in the number of lamas and monasteries, currently there is an apparent decrease in the number of monks, and so it is likely that those who are choosing this way of life today are only doing so out of personal commitment.

Simultaneously, the economic conditions created by the introduction of a market economy have enabled a small strata of Mongolians to accumulate a vast amount of wealth. Typically consisting of individuals living in urban centres, this strata has not generated income via traditional economic means and has primarily acquired its wealth through the private bank sector established following the transition, through privatized commercial networks and the developing mining sector, the latter of which has only emerged over the last twenty years and which has never been characteristic of historical Mongolian economic perspective.<sup>9</sup> The Mongolian language has already formed a new expression in reference to members of the ultra-rich strata who flaunt their wealth. They are called *Shin Mongol* (Khalkha: *šine Mongol*), meaning “New Mongolians” – a term which carries an obvious pejorative connotation in a Mongolian society struggling with vast social inequality. The expression denotes those who mimic foreign behaviour, forsaking respect for Mongolian traditions, and in light of opinions voiced in everyday public discourse, the term has in fact become synonymous with a social group prone to corruption and responsible for the deterioration of Mongol society.<sup>10</sup>

The Mongolian language reacts very quickly to such changes in public thinking. While an increasingly strong emphasis on Mongolian national traditions as an answer to socio-cultural crises is clearly observable, the emergence of social groups who are sceptical of the former can also be discerned. There are communities, primarily consisting of young people, who consciously mock Mongolian traditions and do not adhere to accepted forms of social communication e.g. they fail to show appropriate respect for elders, which constitutes a fundamental breach of traditional Mongolian social norms. They are referred to by the term “rural Indian” (Khalkha: *nutgiin indian*),<sup>11</sup> which clearly has a negative content. This group is straining the framework of the traditional rural nomadic lifestyle while offering no clear alternative for the acquisition of income. It remains to be seen

<sup>8</sup> During the religious revival after the political transition, one of the biggest problems facing the Buddhist church was that religious education had been dismantled in the period of religious persecution. As a consequence, underqualified lamas were put in charge of many monasteries, which often resulted in the degradation of these institutions. In the course of reconstructing the education system over the last twenty years, this problem has been considerably alleviated through assistance from education centres, which are often operated by Tibetan emigrants.

<sup>9</sup> According to Mongolian Head of State C. Elbegdorj, 90% of Mongolian GDP today is produced by the private sector. [http://www.jst.go.jp/astf/document2/en\\_33doc.pdf](http://www.jst.go.jp/astf/document2/en_33doc.pdf) (accessed April 23, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Ádám Halász is currently conducting research on related themes under the guidance of the author in the context of graduate work in the Mongolian Studies Program of the Central Asian Faculty at the Eötvös Loránt University (ELTE) in Budapest.

<sup>11</sup> Ádám Halász has not published on the basis of his fieldwork in 2006. I thank him for his consent to allow use of his data.

whether this is merely rebellion against tradition for its own sake or the development of a fundamentally new social group conducting a non-urban way of life.

In contrast to these negative social phenomena, a new concept has gradually emerged which views the preservation of Mongolian tradition as a means to reinforce the economic and cultural development of the country, an idea which arose practically in conjunction with the political transition.

## NATIONAL TRADITION

It is peculiar that after the political transition it was not the opposition, but the political offshoot of the governing party that managed to build the newly resurfaced symbols of Mongolian nationalism into its rhetoric. This launched a conscious traditionalism that has been adopted by practically all players in Mongolian public life today, which means that Mongol traditions and national symbols have now become constant tools of political discourse. It is characteristic that the preservation of national heritage as the basic foundation for a stronger Mongolia was a central theme in the opening speech given by current Mongol President Ts. Elbegdorj (Khalkha: C. Elbegdorj) in 2011 at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Mongolists.

The Mongolian population today is not uniform with regards to either its ethnic or its linguistic composition. Numerous theories have been developed in connection with the formation of the Mongolian language (RAMSTEDT 1912; POPPE 1960), none of which will be dealt with in detail here, but it can be ascertained that among the population living in Mongolia today the Khazak, Khoton, Tuvan and Catani ethnic groups (SOMFAI 1998) belong to the Turkish branch of the Altaic language family while a larger portion of the population speak languages belonging to the Mongolian branch. This can be further broken down into dialects spoken by western, central and eastern groups (TUMEN 2004).

Linguistic diversity notwithstanding, and in light of our present theme, it is more interesting to focus on examining the ethnic composition of Mongolians. The earliest known source on this subject is the 13<sup>th</sup> century literary work *The Secret History of The Mongols* (LIGETI 1962), which chronicles the heritage of Genghis Kahn and provides the basis for the present day sense of Mongol identity. Numerous articles have analysed the language and culture of Mongolian ethnic groups (NACAGDORJ 1963; BADAMXATAN 1965; 1987; 1996; OKADA 1987). Based on these, it is possible to claim that Mongolians today can also be grouped on the basis of ethnicity into one of the three large linguistic categories listed above – western, or Oirats, central (Khalkha) and eastern. It is important to emphasise linguistic and, in a certain sense, ethnic diversity here because it is in this context that nomadic and Genghisid tradition are a unifying factor.

State ideology prior to the political transition did not benefit the independent manifestation of different ethnic groups. As the consequence of a process lasting since around the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this continued to reinforce the predominance of the Khalkha peoples, which also resulted in the development of the literary Mongol language based on the Khalkha dialect. The political transition therefore created a new situation in this sense as well. While Mongols had previously taken into account ethnic origin in the course of personal communication, during the reorganization of administrative procedures it was suggested that ethnic origin should also be registered on personal

documents. Although this procedure was not introduced, it can be recalled that when attempts were made to do so during the 1990s, there was a sudden increase in the number of people who declared themselves to be of Borjigid descent, directly placing their origin in the Genghisid tradition. It should also be mentioned that around the same time it was not uncommon for young people in urban environments to proudly use the term “pure Khalkha” (Khalkha: *jinxene xalx*) when asked about their origins. While this could certainly be a natural answer, the inherent pride suggests a possibility that for young urbanized Mongols the expression also symbolizes a connection with urban life and modernity as a value.

In accordance with the ideology of the Soviet period, mention of the great Mongol Empire, or Genghis Khan – as a symbol of the Mongol state, independence and power – was not acceptable in the prevalent political environment. The historical role of Genghis Khan was blurred more as a result of suppression than falsification of history. It is no accident that when Mongolian independence was declared, the founder of the Mongol state became one of the most important themes in Mongolian culture, public discourse and historical research. Innumerable books have been published dealing with the Great Khan’s life and his role in history, making him the symbol of Mongolia, although his personality has been somewhat degraded as a result. Genghis Khan’s name has also become a well-known commercial trademark outside the borders of Mongolia. A wide variety of products have been named after him, ranging from beer and vodka to travel agencies. His portrait adorned Mongol banknotes issued after the political transition, and the international airport in Ulaanbaatar is also carries his name today. Moreover, his personality enjoys a unique respect outside of today’s Mongolia as well.<sup>12</sup> A sacred Genghis Khan cult has existed in Inner-Mongolia in the Ordos region since the 13<sup>th</sup> century (BIRTALAN 2001), and legend holds that he was buried here. It is interesting to note that Genghis Khan has also been elevated to the pantheon of Chinese emperors as the founder of the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, although Genghis Khan never intended to establish a dynasty. He wanted to rule China as a conqueror rather than sitting on the Chinese throne. The latter was achieved by his grandson, Kublai Khan, who did so in the face of growing hostility among the contemporary Mongol aristocracy. Naturally, Kublai is remembered today as one of the greatest rulers in Mongolian history – his statue stands beside that of the great founder in front of the Mongolian Parliament – but judgement by his contemporaries was by no means uniformly positive.

It is intriguing that increased attention to the preservation of Mongolian national traditions today in the territories of Inner Mongolia – naturally due to favourable political changes – has unfortunately not brought Mongolian peoples living on opposite sides of the border closer to one another.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the reverse is true. Recent years have indicated a peculiar kind of opposition, which is rarely voiced, but which is nevertheless present in public thinking. Nowadays, a portion of the Mongolian population, typically the urban

<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, one of the reasons for the relative urgency of re-christening the airport in Ulaanbaatar is that Kazakhstan was also planning to name one of its airports after the Great Khan, which Mongolia naturally could not allow to happen.

<sup>13</sup> This is also evident in the maintenance of the Genghis shrine, a gigantic Inner Mongolian museum built in 2008 in Hohhot (“Blue City”, the royal seat founded in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Tumen Mongol Altan Khan, today the centre of the Chinese Autonomous Province of Inner Mongolia).

segment, is especially hostile towards those in Inner Mongolia. China can be regarded as the most significant commercial and investment partner in Mongolia today, and nearly 5.6 million Mongol speakers – almost double the population of Mongolia – are currently living within her borders.<sup>14</sup> To an outsider, this fact would constitute an opportunity to expand economic cooperation, but in everyday life it has actually not strengthened relations between the two countries. The anti-Chinese sentiment that can be observed today in Mongolia – which is clearly visible in the communication taking place between young people bickering with each other on social network sites – also presents Inner Mongolians in a negative light. I have heard more than once in Ulaanbaatar that Mongol people living south of the Gobi Desert cannot even be considered Mongolian because they are “Chinese”. At the same time, when travelling in Inner Mongolia, on several occasions I experienced locals qualifying Ulaanbaatar “city Mongols” with a simple dismissive wave of the hand, designating an extremely negative critique. When I asked about the reason for this opinion, I was told that “those are not real Mongols anymore”: they live in the city, they engage in commerce, they imitate the West, and so cannot be considered the true heirs of Mongol tradition – rural Mongolians perhaps, but definitely not those in Ulaanbaatar.

To the outside observer, it would seem that a certain rivalry has developed between the two groups, based on the preservation of Mongol and nomadic traditions. Both sides are driven by a uniquely interpreted national consciousness, which is understandable when we examine the circumstances. Preserving and practicing their cultural traditions is imperative for Mongolian people living in China as it is the only way for them to preserve their identity within the overwhelmingly Han Chinese majority.<sup>15</sup> For the inhabitants of The Republic of Mongolia, it is the reinforcement of national identity and the preservation of traditions that bring a guarantee of social stability, and it is here that we return to the unequal socio-economic circumstances mentioned at the beginning of this study.

In recent years, several publications have addressed the issue of whether a nomadic way of life can be integrated into the circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (BOLD 2001; ENKHTUVSHIN 2011). The answer is not obvious and also raises numerous economic issues that cannot be analysed here. Even so, there is an obvious government intention to keep the issue of national identity at the highest level of discourse. In addition to the aforementioned presidential speech, the opening of the 2011 International Congress of Mongolists contributed other interesting information as well. The event was not only dedicated to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the theocratic Mongol State, but also to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. From an ideological point of view, the latter does not correlate with the political course today, but Mongolians mark this event as the beginning of their separation from China, even if it cannot be dated as such

<sup>14</sup> The territory of Inner Mongolia comprises 1,200,000 square kilometres. Based on the census in 2000, only 17.13% of those living here, approximately four million people, referred to themselves as Mongolian. Mongols can also be found living in Northeast China, in Qinghai, Gansu and Xinjiang.

<sup>15</sup> A smaller factor contributing to this may be that according to current Chinese law minorities receive certain benefits in connection with childbirth, which are well known to be limited among Han inhabitants.

in legal terms.<sup>16</sup> The two anniversaries and the date can be easily explained, but the fact that the event was timed to coincide with the 2220<sup>th</sup> anniversary of nomadic statehood demands further explanation. The fact that Mongolians link Mongol statehood to the establishment of the Asian Hun (Xiongnu) state<sup>17</sup> (VÁSÁRY 2003:35–38) proves that a conscious – and newly intensified – traditionalist concept exists at a governmental level, one in which the appearance of the nomadic state as first documented in Chinese sources as well as Mongol traditions are mentioned within a comprehensive system. It might be worth noting here that experts and spokesmen on the topic make a unique argument to the effect that the appearance of Mongols in the Xiongnu Empire itself proves that there is no obvious counter-argument. We know that the first nomadic state and the ones that followed were – in a modern sense – a nomadic empire based on a loosely configured system of multinational tribal alliances. Therefore, it is quite possible that those living under Xiongnu authority included peoples who spoke an early form of the Mongolian language. Based on Chinese sources, some researchers have dated their appearance as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., in the event that they spoke the Topak Mongol language used by the Sienpi (Xianbei) tribes that defeated the Xiongnu Empire and established the Wei Dynasty in North China between 386 and 538 B.C. (VÁSÁRY 2003:46).

Within this system of rhetoric, the founding of the nomadic state (Xiongnu) and the appearance of nomadic traditions in the earliest written sources are gradually becoming a part of Mongol historical tradition. Since a significant part of the Xiongnu state lies in the territory of today's Mongolia, this concept can easily be integrated in the viewpoint clearly illustrated by the following phrase: “The history of Mongolia, the history of the Mongol land” – which is a commonly used expression today.

A similar argument can be heard in connection with Mongolian cultural tradition and the history of the Buddhist religion, which constitutes another important pillar of Mongol national identity. In keeping with the accepted consensus among the academic community dealing with the topic, two Mongol Buddhist conversions are usually mentioned in relation to the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia – one in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and another from the 16–17<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years, however, “newer” conversions are said to have been discovered which characteristically seem to date farther and farther back in time. In this context, there is talk today of a Buddhist tradition that appeared in the territory of present day Mongolia from the 6–8<sup>th</sup> century, the Buddhism of the Kitan, who can indeed partially be traced to the territory of Mongolia today, but cannot be considered predecessors of Mongol Buddhism as there is a significant difference between speaking about Mongol Buddhism and the Buddhism which appeared later in Mongol territories. Nevertheless, the aim in both examples is the same: to project religious and historical traditions as important elements of national identity as far into the past as possible.

We do not intend to deal with the validity of the theory in connection with Xiongnu here (PELLIOT 1912; LIGETI 1970). At present, it is perhaps more interesting to mention that it is not only the Mongolian government who uses the possibility of Xiongnu origin

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<sup>16</sup> Republican Chinese troops were in fact exiled from Ulaanbaatar by Mongolians in 1921 with the help of the Soviet Red Army, but in a legal sense China did not officially recognize Mongolian independence until January 5, 1946.

<sup>17</sup> The Xiongnu state was established by Tuoman and his son Maotun (Modu) at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, in the year 209 B.C.

at a political level. Many researchers in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia are showing serious interest in this issue. The subject is experiencing a kind of renaissance today, and yet, surprisingly, it is not serving as a means to bring Mongols living on the two sides of the Gobi Desert together either. Government rhetoric on both sides incorporates the idea that nomadic peoples appearing in the region in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. established the first nomadic state and that the nomadic people who Chinese sources first described in detail can be regarded as cultural predecessors of Mongolians. In spite of this, nothing is said about how Mongol peoples on either side of the border are related to one another. At the moment, it seems that distrust is only the observable arch spanning across the border.

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