

Introduction: Mongolians After Socialism

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Contemporary Mongolia is certainly a cauldron of dynamic development. Skyrocketing economic growth supports eye-popping new affluence while the rate of grinding poverty stays stubbornly high. Profits from mineral extraction provide booming infrastructure while traffic snarls the capital city and huge nomadic expanses continue to make Mongolia the least densely populated country in the world. In winter, the pristine “land of the eternal blue sky” abuts choking air pollution in urban areas while in the countryside harsh weather threatens large losses of livestock and endangers pastoral livelihoods. Environmental degradation is a constant threat. Yet, what stands out is the pride, energy, and resilience of the Mongolian people, even as their future is not entirely clear.

Politically and culturally as well, the Mongolian cauldron churns. A vigorously booming and free-wheeling open-market democracy of just three million people, Mongolia is sandwiched in a land-locked vice between autocratic super-giants: Russia to the north and China to the south. During the 20th century, seven decades of domination by the U.S.S.R. included brutal Stalinist purges and systematic obliteration of Mongolian Buddhist religion and culture. Now fully emerged as a free post-socialist nation, Mongolians are a vivacious, successful, and forward-looking people while also being deeply stamped by their immediate and longer history – including nationalist pride that reaches back 800 years and beyond, per the Mongol Empire forged by Chinggis Khan.

How are Mongolians discovering, recasting, and recreating themselves and their country – socially, economically, politically, culturally, and religiously? Though highly complex,

this issue is key not just for Mongolians but for understanding dynamic human development across a contemporary world.

Typically, the factors that inform this question get separated and segmented, both as points of view and topics of understanding. Policy reports, journalist reporting, and strategic analysis diverge from academic and scholarly understanding. Issues of “politics” get separated from those of “economics,” on the one hand, and, even more, from those of “culture” or “religion,” on the other. So, too, the push to understand the burgeoning dynamics of the fast-moving present get separated or divorced from the study of history. And this history is itself layered – the deeper history and present reconstruction of “Mongolian” national identity, the strong and now sensitive legacy of seven decades of overwhelming Soviet influence in all aspects of life, and now the recent but growing history of open capitalist development on a regional and even a world stage that was undreamed of for Mongolia just a few years ago. How to take stock of these dynamics without attempting or claiming too much, or cutting them up into separate rather than interconnected pieces?

The present volume makes a small but we hope important attempt to address these questions. Moving widely across the canvas of Mongolian economics, politics, culture, religion, history, and projected future development, this book portrays a dynamic whole that is more than the sum of its divisible parts. It combines Western-derived perspectives and analyses with Mongolian ones. It also combines different kinds of professional authorship. When was the last time you read a book that combines poignant first-hand presentations written by high national government officials, an American ambassador, Buddhist lamas and monks, a shaman, a Christian pastor, and Mongolian and Western paragons of academic scholarship? The result, we hope, is significantly more interesting than a disparate pastiche. Each account seriously

addresses interconnected questions of Mongolian identity and the priorities, challenges, and opportunities of capitalist commercialism, and legacies of proximate and deeper national and Buddhist history.

In important ways, the various accounts herein speak to each other – just as the participants themselves did at the original conference upon which this book is based. It is hard to convey the palpable dynamism that was evident among participants in highly animated discussion following individual presentations and in the linkages across participants during the conference as a whole. The head lama of Mongolia talks appreciatively and at length with a leading Mongolian social scientist, a former post doctoral fellow from Stanford, who is a strong proponent of secularism. The director of the national Mongolian planning commission comes back for a conference dinner to talk at length with academics and civil society leaders. Debates about Mongolian history and culture expose points of view – and factual details – that are just now emerging from the shadows of Soviet propaganda and oppression.

Organization of the book

To help introduce these various perspectives, this book is organized into four sections. Following this Introduction is an analytic overview of Mongolia since it was a “state at risk” in the wake of Soviet socialism during the early 1990s. This contribution delineates specific opportunities and challenges of current Mongolian political, economic, and cultural development. The practical assessments of the analysis include significant recommendations for Mongolian social policy and sustainable political development.

Part One of the volume, “Challenges of Governance, Economy, and Wealth Disparity,” includes contributions by the U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia, the head of the national

Mongolian Planning Commission, the National Security Advisor to the Mongolian President, a leading Mongolian social scientist, and an American-trained anthropologist who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a remote pastoral area of Mongolia. These contributions triangulate the great opportunities and deep challenges that confront contemporary Mongolia in the context of economic growth, burgeoning political democracy, and enormous and growing wealth disparity within the country. These are crucial issues that have a strong if not determining impact on the future of Mongolia as a thriving, independent, and sustainable country.

The next section of the volume addresses “Challenges of Contemporary Religion.” Here are included the diverse perspectives of a royal Mongolian shaman, a Christian pastor, a top international scholar of Mongolian Buddhism, one of the highest and most revered lamas of Mongolia (now based in the U.S.), a highly trained monk who is helping spearhead an enormous Buddhist monument and spiritual-commercial complex outside the capital, and a lama who has had a keen role helping rebuild some of the more than 1,000 Mongolian Buddhist monasteries and temples (almost all of those then-existing) that were destroyed by the Soviets. It becomes quickly evident that religion and spirituality link directly to national identity and national social and cultural priorities – just as issues of politics and economics, discussed in the first part of the volume, beg cultural and human values that underlie and underscore national socioeconomic priorities.

The third section of the volume, “Constructions of Society and Culture,” focuses on the historical construction and present rediscovery and reconstruction of Mongolian identity. Included here are the perspectives of a preeminent international scholar of Mongolian history and culture (presently at Cambridge University), Director of the Family Studies Center of Ulaanbaatar University, Chair of a major

Mongolian NGO and author of 20 books, and the Head of the Labor Relations Division of the Employer Association of Mongolia. Importantly, the institutions, organizations, and identities of contemporary Mongolians – as was also true in the past – are no less significant or “real” for being products of motivated construction and continual reformulation.

The volumes’ final section, on “Legacies of Buddhism and Cultural History,” focuses on key issues of Mongolian religious and cultural history that inform the present and emerging trajectory of Mongolia. Contributors include one of the world’s leading scholars of Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism, a historian of Mongolia from the US, two doctoral research fellows – one from Budapest, the other from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences – who have studied aspects of Mongolian religion and culture as remembered from the Soviet period, plus two scholars of Russian and Mongolian history – a senior researcher of Buddhism in Buryatia from Moscow State University, and the Professor and Head of the International Studies Institute at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Given the propaganda and tailored history of Mongolia that was taught under Soviet control, new views of Mongolian history, culture, and religion are particularly important to Mongolians as they forge their contemporary and future national identity.

To aid the reader in engaging the volumes various vantage points, the text of each chapter is preceded by editor’s “headnotes.” These introduce the contribution and place it in larger perspective. As such, the headnotes are intended to orient readers to the chapters before each is engaged more deeply and substantively.

Background and comparative significance

As previously mentioned, this volume is based on the intellectual and practical fruits of a major conference of the

same name, “Mongolians after Socialism,” that was held at the Open Society Forum in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia on June 27-29, 2011. The conference, like this volume, was a joint effort across productively different points of view. The underlying idea and the bulk of support for the conference was provided by the States at Regional Risk Project (SARR), which I direct at Emory University in Atlanta. This multi-year project, which is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, brings together policy makers, civil society leaders, and in-region and international scholarly experts concerning countries and larger world areas that have undergone significant sociopolitical threat and transition.

Some of the SARR project world area components, including those in West Africa and East Africa, have engaged regions and nations that have been at pains to recover from prolonged periods of civil war, political strife, and sociocultural trauma. (Details are available on the SARR project website at <www.sarr.emory.edu>.) In Mongolia, by contrast, the social and political traumas of the recent past – including heavy Soviet domination and then a wrenching transition to free market capitalism – have given way to strong development both economically and in terms of democratic state government. In a sense, Mongolia is a positive case example of a country that endured violent social, political, and economic upheaval but which has recovered and developed successfully in comparative terms – despite being surrounded by autocratic and aggressive superpowers.

Though the continuation of its hopeful development cannot be guaranteed, Mongolia exemplifies a nation that has improved markedly across a range of indicators in the aftermath of socioeconomic and political turmoil. This fact is thrown into relief when Mongolia is compared and contrasted to significant other countries and areas of central Asia as well as parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

Though Mongolia has the benefit of possessing large and lucrative mineral deposits to fuel its growth, this fact itself cannot explain its distinctive path of recovery and development. As is well known from countries ranging from Nigeria to the Congo (DRC), Sierra Leone, Iraq, and Afghanistan, abundance of natural resources does not ensure socioeconomic and political development. Indeed, a windfall of natural endowments can become a “resource curse” that is easily associated with political autocracy, corruption, stratified wealth inequality, and civil war or social strife – as has persisted for decades in mineral rich areas of East Congo. (These have also been a site of SARR project work).

The insufficiency of resource profits as an explanation of recovery following sociopolitical trauma begs the key and important role not just of social institutions but of collective identities informed by values – in a word, by culture. Cultural orientations, as difficult as they may be to measure or delineate with empirical firmness, and despite their reformulation over time, provide a key undergirding element that interacts with organizational orientations, institutional possibilities, political histories, and economic potentials to inform a country’s development over time. This crucial fact is often underemphasized or neglected in existing understandings of national and regional development. As noted above, these often bifurcate into separate strands of economic versus political versus social or historical analysis.

To confront this issue, our Mongolians after Socialism project embraced from the start the importance of considering these interrelated features not just in conceptual or topical combination but through complementary perspectives or “subject positions” of knowledge and understanding. A Western-derived scholarly or academic understanding can hardly plumb the intricacies of contemporary Mongolian disposition; this arises from the perspectives of Mongolians

themselves. These include the viewpoints of accomplished Mongolian professionals and also those of civil society members and leaders outside standard professional fields.

Organizational context and acknowledgements

During a project trip to Mongolia in 2010, I was highly fortunate to receive perceptive guidance and advice concerning the above issues from a range of Mongolian organizations and individuals, including national government officials, the Asia Foundation, the American Center for Mongolian Studies, the American Embassy, faculty and administrators from the National University of Mongolia, the Customs University, the Mongolian University of Science and Technology, and a range of leaders from Buddhist religious and civil society organizations. All of these individuals and organizations deserve heartfelt thanks. Particularly important was my contact with Gerelmaa Amgaabazar, Manager of Social Policy and Education Programs at the Open Society Forum (OSF) in Ulaanbaatar.

OSF was especially interested in our SARR project and its interrelation of viewpoints across scholarly, civic, and policy perspectives, including with respect to democratic governance, socioeconomic development, education, and environmental concerns. Both highly connected and highly respected in the networks of Mongolian institutions and leaders, OSF became a prime linkage point for our SARR project in Mongolia. Paralleling the perspectives we were attempting to bridge and combine, the applied focus of OSF was informed by research and empirical and strategic analysis in ways that linked effectively with practical and policy implications. In short order, OSF in Ulaanbaatar became our organizational partner, provided the logistical organization for the conference in Ulaanbaatar, and also provided the venue for the three-day

conference, which was held at their OSF headquarters. For this and much more, Gerelmaa Amgaabazar deserves special thanks and credit.

We were particularly fortunate, with OSF facilitation, to have had simultaneous translation between Mongolian, English, and some Russian during all three days of the conference, including the substantial periods of lively discussion following presentations. Simultaneous translation was crucial to even out the linguistic and communicational playing field among diverse participants and to encourage open conversation across differences of national background and of civil, professional, and educational training. We are pleased at the resulting transparency of communication and the fact that presentations effectively crossed lines of language. This has also allowed the present volume to be translated and published in both a Mongolian language edition and an English language one – with all contributions included in both editions.

The final crucial part of our organizational and conceptual initiative for this project was wonderfully supplied by Dr. Richard Taupier of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Being both a senior university administrator and a historical scholar of Mongolia, with deep interest in Buddhism, Dr. Taupier frontally engaged and expanded the cultural, religious, and historical purview of the conference and integrally collaborated in all aspects of its conceptualization and organization. Along with the assistance and contacts of eminent scholar of Buddhism Glenn H. Mullin, he also enabled senior religious Mongolian leaders and other religious and historical scholars to be present as full presenters and participants. To this end, Dr. Taupier secured additional funding for the conference from the Rubin Foundation of New York, which we gratefully acknowledge. Dr. Taupier's sensibilities and guidance have been critical in this project, of which he is co-organizer as well as co-editor of the present volume.

A special thanks for consistent professionalism, acumen, and efficiency is also due the managing editor for both the English and Mongolian versions of this volume in Ulaanbaatar, Lkham Purejav. Ms. Purejav is a graduate researcher in the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Institute of History in the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Without Lkham Purejav's assiduous and consistent efforts, the production of these volumes would simply not have been possible. At Emory University in Atlanta, Helen Simmons, the Program Associate of SARR, played a similarly indispensable role, including concerning the overall logistical management of this project.

We are particularly pleased that this book is co-published by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (MAS), the National University of Mongolia (NUM), and the Open Society Forum of Mongolia (OSF). Co-publication is supported at MAS by the Institute of History, Director, Dr. Chuluun Sampildondov, and by the Institute of International Studies, Director, Dr. Luvsan Khaisandai. The President of NUM, Dr. S. Tumur-Ochir, helped introduce our SARR conference, and co-publication is supported by the NUM Department of Anthropology, Chaired by Dr. Bum-Ochir Dulam.

The SARR conference in Ulaanbaatar was also introduced by Dr. Damdinsuren Bayanduuren, President of the Mongolian University of Science and Technology, and by the Head Lama of Mongolia, The Venerable Khamba Lama Gabju Choijamts, to whom we are most grateful. Thanks also go to the various conference section Chairs and Moderators and to Professor Bulgan Janchivdorj, former Head Professor at the Customs University of Mongolia, who was most helpful assisting us in establishing professional contacts and connections. Several conference participants were not able to supply papers that could be included in this collection, but their contributions were very useful at the conference, and

Ms. Enkhtuya Oidov, Director of the Mongolian Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Open Society Forum (OSF) Board Member, provided important feedback at our post-conference retreat in Terej Valley, along with Dr. Richard Taupier, Dr. Daniel J. Murphy, and Gerelmaa Amgaabazar of OSF. OSF was instrumental in our project in innumerable ways, and we are glad this volume finds a place among its own substantial publications and reports.

The U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, under the direction of the Hon. Jonathan Addleton, Ambassador, was also most helpful in guidance. Ambassador Addleton not only helped introduce the conference but presented a significant conference paper, a version of which is included in this volume. We are also grateful for the generous reception for conference participants that the Ambassador hosted at his residence on the evening of June 27, 2011.

The thirty-four invited participants to the original conference included the Mongolian National Security Advisor, the head of the Mongolian Planning Commission, a senior advisor to the Mongolian President, a member of the Mongolian Parliament, the US Ambassador to Mongolia, the Presidents of two leading Mongolian universities, the head Buddhist Lama of Mongolia, five further Buddhist and Christian leaders, four leading figures of Mongolian civil society organizations, five major Mongolian academics, and nine international scholars of Mongolia. Participants came from eight countries and included spokespersons concerning Mongolians in regional contexts outside Mongolia per se. In facilitating conversation, expanded dialogue, and practical understanding across important networks of policy makers, civil society leaders and scholars, the conference was highly productive, including in the regional context of Inner Asia.

We are especially pleased that every one of the above persons not only attended the conference as a presenter or

session chair but stayed for one or more of the conference discussion sessions. This high level of interest and commitment were reflected in the fact that the Royal Shaman Tuvshintugs, who at the time was in the hospital with an acute medical condition, provided a handwritten version of a full presentation that was transcribed at his bedside, delivered by a spokesman at the conference itself, and subsequently translated for inclusion in the English as well as the Mongolian version of this volume. Engagement, critical discussion, and broadening of perspectives across governmental, civil society, academic, and religious points of view was in many ways frankly breathtaking.

During the completion of most edited volume publications, the extraction and editing of papers from constituent contributors is a labor-intensive task. The present case, however, provides an exception. Contributors exhibited high commitment to provide effective and timely textual renditions of their presentations across their different points of view. This high level of interest informs the diversity and, we hope, the larger value of this volume.

Conclusions

It is common in introductions and prefaces to books to separate the conceptual and organizational features of a project from its historical context and acknowledgments. In the present case, however, these are integrally connected; the process and medium whereby this volume has emerged is both integral to its theme and itself part of its message. In the same way that topical issues, alternative perspectives, subject positions, and organizational contexts beg to be bridged, so, too, it is important not to siphon off the practical dynamics that enable these connections as if they were “separate” from the “substance” of the work.

As an anthropologist with an interest in the relation between cultural, social, and politico-economic development within and across world areas, I am concerned to combine an ethnographic sensibility that takes seriously the viewpoints of diverse others with an analytic perspective that can inform larger understandings. This connection is at once strategic, scholarly, and practical; it draws on complementary aspects of understanding that enlarge and enrich rather than compromise or constrain each other. Facilitating this connection in organic terms through both the content and the social production of useful and critical knowledge is a significant objective of the present work. In my own field, this process entails what is sometimes called “engaged anthropology.” Engaged anthropology connects scholarly and practical or applied aspects of knowledge not just as objects of understanding but as key objectives of conducting one’s work, if not one’s life.

The larger fruit of this project is the insights by, for, and about Mongolians themselves, including their rich and vibrant country, the strong opportunities it faces, and the great challenges that confront it. Mongolians after Socialism are grappling actively with their present in relation to their cultural and sociopolitical past and the trajectories of their envisaged future. If this volume has some small impact in reflecting, communicating, and progressively facilitating this process, it will have accomplished its purpose.

Postscript

To facilitate wider dissemination of the material and perspectives presented in this book, its full contents are available as PDF files in both English and Mongolian on the SARR project website. See www.sarr.emory.edu/MAS.

Comments and reactions concerning this publication are welcome. Please send email communications to Bruce Knauft (bruce.knauft@emory.edu), Richard Taupier (taupier@research@umass.edu), and/or Gerelmaa Amgaabazar (gerelmaa@forum.mn).