Creating national identity in socialist Mongolia*

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Introduction

In July 1921, a band of partisans of the Mongolian People’s Party succeeded in driving the brutal Baron von Ungern-Sternberg and his White Russian army out of Nisilel Hirée, the capital of autonomous Mongolia. The Baron had, in turn, driven out the Chinese and restored the theocratic government of the Bogd Khaan, which had been established with the proclamation of independence from the Manchu dynasty in 1911. Although the country was not to become a People’s Republic until the death of its Holy Emperor three years later, July 1921 is usually taken to mark the birth of socialist Mongolia (as it is in Mongolia itself).

In later histories, the ‘Rightist Deviation’ that took place in the mid-1920s, only a few years after the partisans’ victory, was portrayed as a nationalist (and therefore reactionary) act. This classification is worthy of note, because nationalist sentiment was a relatively recent newcomer to Mongolia. Although its origins can be traced to the end of the 19th century, national identity on a broader scale became important only with the establishment of the socialist regime in the 1920s. This, I suggest, is because the socialists had inherited a state that was of relatively recent origin, and was not clearly identifiable with any existing form of collective identity.

It was, therefore, I argue in this paper, largely the socialist government itself that was responsible for creating and propagating an identity based on the concept of ‘nation’ in Mongolia. In doing so, they turned in part to the well-recognized tactic of an appeal to, and concomitant rewriting of, history. Written history shifted from being about rulers and people to being about a people—the Mongols.

Such a tactic, I argue, was a particularly efficacious approach under socialism

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in Mongolia. This was due in large part to the lack of a tradition of historiographical criticism, the lack of widespread secular education, and the Buddhist tradition which gave the written word additional authority.

In this paper, then, I focus on the shifting representations of historical figures and events in Mongolian texts to illuminate the creation of a national identity in socialist Mongolia. In the course of examining these shifts and their meanings, I also call into question the distinction, standard in many works on nationalism, between ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ forms of nationalism.

While my argument may appear to parallel Gellner’s assertion that ‘it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round’ (1983, p 55) I suggest a slightly more complex picture. I do not deny the existence of nationalist sentiments and intentions among the intellectual vanguard of early 20th-century Mongolia (cf. Jagchid, 1988), but this did not lead directly to the creation of a national identity. Rather, I suggest, the creation of a national identity on a broader scale did not occur until later, and largely as a result of socialist efforts to do so. Nationalist sentiment, in other words, was mediated through socialism and their efforts at education, breaking the power of the Lamaist Church, and political legitimation.

My point should also not be confused with Hobsbawm’s observation that in certain countries there were ‘initially socialist parties which were or became the main vehicles of their people’s national movement’ (Hobsbawm 1990, p 125; his emphasis). Hobsbawm is arguing that socialism was often co-opted by nationalists. This may have been the case with the Mongolian People’s Party in its early years, although I doubt such a neat distinction can be drawn between the two camps. Even if we allow Hobsbawm’s argument, however, the national movement was quite small in scope—the original secret organizations that led to the founding of the Mongolian People’s Party had only a few dozen members. I am interested instead in the more widespread inculcation of a national identity; the allegiance of many people in Mongolia to an abstract concept, to an ‘imagined community’.

Defining national identity

In this essay, I have elected to take as my baseline Liah Greenfeld’s definition of national identity as deriving from ‘membership in a people’ in which each member ‘partakes in its superior, elite quality’ with a resulting perceived homogeneity within the group (Greenfeld, 1992, p 7). Greenfeld further notes that ‘in consequence … a stratified national population is perceived as essentially homogeneous, and the lines of status and class as superficial’ (ibid). This latter aspect is particularly important in the Mongolian case, where until well into the 20th-century class divisions between high-ranking lamas and nobles on the one hand, and commoners and lamas of lower rank on the other, were of major importance, and ethnicity was often nebulous at best. To create a national identity in Mongolia required the ‘erasure’ of these pre-existing distinctions.

By using Greenfeld’s definition, I also attempt to elide somewhat the common
distinction between ethnic and civic forms (or roots) of nationalism. To argue, however implicitly, that these forms are and must be kept separate is to do a grave injustice to the complexities of the real world. Greenfeld’s definition of national identity is particularly useful in this regard, for she imputes neither a political agenda nor an ethnic base as the basis of the identity itself, while in turn precluding neither. Although Greenfeld does fall back on these distinctions, this does not diminish the usefulness here of her initial definition.

Many other definitions of nationalism, in contrast, seek to collapse the two distinctions, but only by arguing that they are inseparable. Gellner’s classic definition of nationalism, for example, argues for the perceived necessary congruence of ethnic and political boundaries (Gellner, 1983, p 1). In assuming an ethnic basis for nationalism, Gellner has also presumed an ethnic basis to national identity, one that eventually comes to correspond with a civic basis. This is not my argument. Rather, I suggest that national identity (and by implication nationalism) in Mongolia is much more ‘messy’ than such neat models would suggest.2

This connection between the cultural and the political is central to the argument I am advancing, for it was by recourse to history and culture that the newly established political system of socialist Mongolia furthered its own legitimacy while at the same time instilling a sense of membership in a ‘people’ among the masses.

It should further be made clear that what I am talking about in the Mongolian case is not what Katherine Verdery has termed ‘socialist paternalism’ (Verdery, 1996, p 63). I am concerned not with allegiance to a given political system, however it legitimated itself. Rather, I am concerned with the construction of a national identity in the sense of ‘the production of the ideologies of peoplehood, that is, ideologies of common (“national”) culture’ (Fox, 1990, p 3). This ‘ideology of peoplehood’ involved, as we shall see, the erasure of certain forms of political legitimation in exchange for a more homogeneous self-conception. It was linked to a particular form of political legitimation, but was not itself one.

Pre-national identity in Mongolia

Before we can discuss the development of national identity, however, it is necessary to outline what it was that Mongolian identity was shifting from.

Identity in Mongolia prior to the 20th century was based largely on a limited locality. The major focus was on what we can loosely refer to as tribal or ethnic groups or, even more restrictively, a specific geographical location.3 Aimag (administrative provinces) or other regions were often identified according to the dominant group residing in the area. These groups, however, did not necessarily subscribe to some pan-Mongol ideal. Autonomous Mongolia prior to socialism—often taken to be a nationalist creation—was in fact beset with the separatist tendencies of a number of the western groups. Even the administration was not unified, as the (unknown) author of Mongolia, Yesterday and Today, noted in 1924: ‘At present Kobdo [Hovd] is the administrative centre of the
Kobdo district, formally depending from Urga [Ih Hüree], but in fact semi-independent’ (Anonymous, 1924, p 12).  
Documents from the early 20th century do not make exclusive use of the term ‘Outer Mongolia’ or similarly inclusive labels, but rather often refer to a number of different administrative units, usually enumerated separately. Thus, for example, a history of the autonomous period (1911–1921) written in the 1920s, the early socialist period, refers to the Five Aimag's of the Halh—four territorial, and one ecclesiastical—rather than a single unified Mongolia (Bawden, 1970). This distinction deserves a few comments. First, throughout the text, even the Halh, a definite candidate for classification as an ‘ethnic group’ (as they are today) are referred to in terms of aimag (administrative units). Second, it should be emphasized that the central group under discussion in the text is the Halh, although they were not the only group involved. If a larger, national sentiment existed at the time of writing, we might fairly expect the text to portray a greater sense of Mongol unity. In this regard, one passage from the history is worth citing at some length.

[T]he Holy Javzandamba Lama issued secret instructions to the following effect: ‘Now the days of the Manchu Dynasty are numbered, and the time has come for its power to decay, and our various Mongol aimag ought to unite their minds and strength, and conforming with the nature of the time, establish an independent state. (Bawden, 1970; p 7)

This is a particularly revealing passage. The Javzandamba, who was to become the Bogd Khaan, ruler of Autonomous Mongolia, does not predicate his call for unification on nationalism. Rather, citing the ‘nature of the time’, he calls for an independent state. While one can argue that this is an implicitly nationalistic stance, the important point is that it is not an explicit one. It should also be noted that the term in the original Mongolian, ulus tör, translated by Bawden as ‘state’, does not have any nationalist implications (see Government Archives, 1992, p 6).

Additionally, although I am wary of relying too heavily on such evidence, a plea from the Mongolian socialists to the Soviets in 1920 noted that the ‘development of national self-awareness of the ard [commoners]’ is still in the future (Daniels, 1994, p 38). Although this may be socialist rhetoric, in the Mongolian case I think it also reflects a wider reality, namely that the Mongols did not think of themselves in a collective, national sense.

Other data from the same time period supports this argument. Urgunge Onon, recalling his childhood in Inner Mongolia, noted that the people of his village saw themselves ‘primarily in non-ethnic terms, as bannermen (hereditary soldiers) of the Manchus’ (Humphrey with Onon, 1996, p 12). While not dealing directly with the geographical area under question, this observation is still germane. It is widely accepted that what nationalist sentiments there were among the Mongols were first noticeable in Inner Mongolia. Clearly this statement indicates that even here, such sentiments were highly restricted, being totally absent in the more remote, rural areas.

Owen Lattimore, giving a contemporary analysis of events in Inner Asia noted
that there was ‘no convincing reason why one of [the ruling Mongol princes] should be made supreme over the others ... the heir of the Manchu line is still regarded by conservative Mongols as the natural Emperor of the Mongols’ (1934, p 25). In other words, politics was not seen by all members of the upper strata in strictly ethnic-nationalist terms. Surely then, the herders, more concerned with livestock and taxes, did not think in such terms.

Finally, Christopher Atwood (1994), in tracing out the shifting meanings of certain Mongolian terms, provides further evidence to support the current argument. Although he tends to see a greater congruence between pre-national and national identity, his data seems to support the thesis that thinking about identity in terms of nations was not widespread in the first quarter or so of the 20th century. Arguing for a collapsed identification of ‘geographic, civic, ethnographic, and political categories’, Atwood writes, ‘the idea of a nationality as opposed to a country or state remained virtually invisible in the early years of independent Mongolia, even among intellectuals acquainted with some aspects of Western political theory’ (1994, p 58).

Although largely an argument from absence (and thus somewhat risky), the point outlined above seems clear. Although a collective identity may have existed in Mongolia at the beginning of the 20th century, it was not national in form.

The role of Chinggis Khaan

To the extent that collective identity based on something larger than an immediate locale or kinship existed among the bulk of the populace, it was based on linguistic and cultural similarities, as well as some links to the memory of Chinggis Khaan. Even these, it should be noted, were cultural, rather than national in their implications.

If we look at Chinggis Khaan in tales and epics prior to socialism, he is clearly portrayed as a sort of ancestral figure. Numerous traditions and rituals are attributed to him (as they still are today). This, however, does not justify us in viewing him as a national figure without further evidence. The distance between admitting a common ancestor and seeing oneself as belonging to a nation is immeasurable.

It is rather the case that prior to the 20th century Chinggis Khaan was seen as ‘a symbol of exclusive prestige and imperial political legitimacy [rather] than of unity among various tribes’ (Khan, 1995, p 258). Individuals claimed a right to rule based on their status as descendants of Chinggis Khaan. But this legitimacy extended only to their right to rule, and did not have wider implications for identity or unity. In this respect, it is highly significant that the ruler of autonomous Mongolia at the beginning of the 20th century was chosen based on the unifying force of Buddhism, rather than descent from Chinggis Khaan. (It should be remembered that the Bogd Khaan was himself Tibetan. Indeed, Owen Lattimore and Fujiko Isono write that ‘his Tibetan origin gave him
a neutral position in relation to the Khans of Khalkh. This prevented rivalries among secular claimants to the throne” (Lattimore & Isono, 1982, p 71, n. 9).7

Although political legitimacy stemmed from Chinggis Khaan, he was not otherwise viewed as a potential political rallying point, at least not by the Mongols themselves. Significantly, this political use of Chinggis Khaan was pointed out by Jamsaran, an observer from a group familiar with nationalism—the Buryats in the Soviet Union. Jamsaran was amazed that Chinggis was not being used as a symbol of Mongol unity. In a letter to Kotwich (a Polish Mongolist sympathetic to the independence movement), Jamsaran, writing of the current (1912) situation in Mongolia, noted:

One circumstance has struck me, namely the absence of a Chingis tradition; so that when I spoke to Hand [Handdor—Minister of Foreign Affairs] Van about the Har Süld [Black Flat (sic: Flag)] of Chingis and the grave in Ordos, and advised him to try and use these holy relics to unite the Mongols, he was taken aback. ‘Really? Oh-oh! We will certainly do as you advise’. (Onon & Pritchatt, 1989, p 99)

Such a view (or lack thereof) of Chinggis was to be found in early socialist era writings as well. Amar, one-time leader of socialist Mongolia, who was purged in 1939, had written A Short History of Mongolia a few years before his death. In it we find a still largely non-nationalist view of Chinggis Khaan. He is referred to as having united the Mongolian nation (Mongol ündestniig negeti), but not as having created the Mongolian state (as later socialist and post-socialist histories have it) (Amar, 1989, p 124). The difference is a subtle one, but one that is important. The emphasis on Chinggis’s deeds is not yet political—particularly since the word I have translated here as ‘nation’ can also be translated as ‘race’. A nationalist reading seems unwarranted in this instance.

Amar’s view is in fact closer to the view espoused in earlier chronicles, such as The Secret History of the Mongols, which saw Chinggis as unifying ‘the people of the felt-walled tents’ (Onon, 1990, p 110). This set-phrase indicates a classification (and by extension, identity) based on lifestyle and subsistence rather than national feeling, particularly if we remember Greenfeld’s distinction of national identity cross-cutting intra-group boundaries.

Returning to Amar’s history, we find further evidence for the lack of a national identity only a few lines down. Amar, when talking about the area ruled by Temüjin (Chinggis Khaan) at this time refers to the ‘unified rule’ over the Mongolian nation rather than simply ruling the Mongolian nation (Amar, 1989, p 24). Similarly, Amar notes that an earlier figure had ruled over the ‘many Mongols’ (olon Mongolchuud) (1989, p 97). These rather awkward constructions are informative. Amar is making explicit for us, intentionally or not, the fact he did not view the Mongols as comprising a single national identity, waiting to be formed. In other words, Amar does not appear to subscribe to the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ theory of national identity for the early Mongols, as later (socialist) writers were to. He does not subscribe to this theory, I argue, because it was not yet widespread. Even its penetration into the ruling elite was obviously limited.
We should, at this point, take a step back and look at the issue from another perspective. Histories of Mongolia were being written in the 1920s and 1930s (such as Dindub’s [1920], in addition to Amar’s). The fact that they were written at all would seem to indicate a burgeoning sense of national self-awareness, or at least an attempt to instil one. Histories had indeed been written before in Mongolia, but not quite like this. Most are perhaps more accurately labelled ‘chronicles’ or ‘epics’. They deal with topics of history, but not in the same way that the histories of the 1920s and 1930s do. This is a telling difference. Todorov, writing of the Spanish conquest chronicles, has noted ‘the important thing is that the text be “receivable” by contemporaries, or that it has been regarded as such by its producer’ (1992, p 54). The point I am making is that such histories, which imply the recognition of at least something akin to a nation or people in their approach, would most likely not have been written had the authors not been intending them to be understood in a similar manner. Yet the fact that the language of these histories is not couched in explicitly national terms suggests that this national sentiment was not deep-rooted, even among the intellectuals who were doing the writing.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Chinggis has clearly become a political (and national) actor. No longer unifying the Mongol race/nation, he had instead created the first ‘Mongol State’ (Mongol uls). Here we can also translate the term ‘state’ as ‘nation,’ for the concept includes an implication of people, rather than simply a political organization. Yet, unlike Amar’s terminology, the idea is stronger than an ethnic group or ‘tribe’ and does imply a political aspect.

The multivolume History of the Mongolian People’s Republic notes that in 1206 ‘the establishment of a new Mongolian regime was officially proclaimed’ (History Institute, 1966, p 214). Significantly, this was not a regime ruling over the united Mongolian ‘race/nation’ (indesten), but rather one over the uls of many Mongolian ‘tribes’ (olon Mongol aimag ulsyg negtgen zahirsan) (ibid). We also find references in this work, as in others of the period, to the united Mongol state (negdsen uls) (p 215).

An earlier work, published in English, offers a similar view: ‘the founding of a feudal state by the Mongols [in 1206] accelerated their development into a nation’ (Committee of Sciences, 1956, p 30). That is, a political act led to the advancement or creation of national identity.

In other words, there has been a distinct shift from the concept of a ‘race/nation’ to a ‘political nation’, although the difference is never fully entrenched. This shift parallels the development of a national identity in the writers of these histories. Rather than simply uniting a group of people, Chinggis Khaan has founded the Mongolian state. The phrasing often used in the history books tends to imply that such a unification was a desirable act in that it furthered the development and welfare of the Mongol populace. (One of the key charges levelled against Chinggis under socialism was that as a feudal oppressor, he retarded the formation of the nation.) A socialist goal indeed, but also a nationalist one. This view of things, however, forgets to point out that such unification was in fact a result of conquest, and in several cases (for example,
the Tatars; see the Secret History, sec. 154 (Onon, 1990, pp 67–68)), the extermination of a group.

To reiterate, during the socialist period, portrayals of Chinggis Khaan shifted from a ruler and ancestral figure to a ruler who was also a key figure in awakening the Mongol nation to self-awareness by his very act of giving them a separate political system. Although this only speaks for the envisioning of a national identity among the writers of such accounts, keeping in mind Todorov's observation, we can conclude that such an interpretation would have had some resonance with its readers.

**From autonomy to freedom**

We find the same general patterns we have been discussing in tracing chronologically accounts of the events of 1911. In effect, as we have witnessed in writings about Chinggis Khaan, there is a transformation from a rather ‘bland’ recitation of events to a couching of the narration in clearly national terms.

Let us return to the account of the autonomous period written in the 1920s. In Bawden’s translation, a discussion between Mongol and Manchu officials runs, in part: ‘Again, since our Mongol aimags have decided to secede from the Manchu state and establish a separate state …’ (Bawden, 1970, p 13). The Mongolian text in fact uses tusgaar uls tör for ‘separate state’ (Government Archives, 1992, p 14), clearly referring to a political structure or government, rather than anything that could be glossed as ‘nation’. In other words, there is no nationalist intent apparent in this account. The Mongols, it seems, merely seized an opportunity to establish a new government. Nor is this wording fortuitous. An early passage of the same history notes ‘they inaugurated Mongolia’s new government, and created an independent state’ (Government Archives, 1992, p 9). Again, the emphasis is political, rather than national. The text talks of establishing governments, not uniting or freeing a people. Even if these accounts are not accurate portrayals of what happened, the vocabulary in which they are presented supports the argument I am making.

The proclamation of independence is also informative in its wording. The term ündeslen does not appear in it. Rather, it is simply noted that Mongolia was once a ‘separate state’ (tusgai negen uls), and was going to re-establish a ‘separate state’ (övsiiyen [sic] uls’ based on old rules (juram), with a new government (tör) (History Institute, 1968, p 420). This passage is free of any explicit moral imputations to the deed at hand. Later texts would write of the ‘national liberation movement’ (ündesnii erh čüöööni höööööör), but documents from the time in question do not show this approach.

Let us briefly leap forward to the 1950s. I pause here only to note that Natsagdorj’s work on this period represents something of a curiosity. The text itself talks of the ‘people’s (ard tümen) liberation movement’ (Natsagdorj, 1956, p 55). Yet the title of the work itself is strangely absent on the issue, being called merely The people’s movement in Northern Mongolia. Perhaps such ambiguity can be read as indicating a shift in how Mongolians thought of themselves.
Any such ambiguity is long gone by the early 1990s. In the foreword to the 1992 edition of the history of the autonomous period discussed above, the events of 1911 are no longer the establishment of a new state, or even a liberation movement. They have, rather, become a ‘national revolution’ (iinedsii huv'gal) (Government Archives, 1992, p 4). The term ‘revolution’ is unusual, as ‘movement’ is the standard term used here, but not the general sentiment. Late socialist texts portray the events of 1911 as a liberation or independence movement, or a struggle against encroaching imperialism (Bira & Bat-Ochir, 1987, p 134–135). The movement also becomes a ‘struggle’ (temsel). These passages can all be given nationalist as well as socialist interpretations.

Some readers may wonder at an apparent contradiction in my arguments. When talking about Chinggis Khaan, I emphasized the shift to the political as indicative of a reading reflecting national identity. Yet when discussing the events of 1911, I argue that an apparently straightforward political reading is in fact not nationalist. In reality, there is no contradiction. In looking at the deeds of Chinggis Khaan, the important point for our current purposes was that the interpretation shifted from that of cultural ancestor figure to a political actor. This shift indicates the growing identification of the Mongols with a specific political unit in a specific territory. Chinggis Khaan is now seen as giving the nation not only certain aspects of its culture, but its very existence as well. As one government official told me in 1993, ‘If it weren’t for Chinggis Khaan, we wouldn’t be here today’.

In contrast, there was never any question that the events of 1911 were political in nature, and that they were associated with independence. What did change was the meaning and significance given to this independence. The shift we have outlined here was from establishing an independent state (for whatever reasons) to reclaiming the freedom of a nation.

Justifying the nation

To reiterate the point of the paper so far, we are left with the interesting dilemma of a socialist government not using nationalist imagery for socialist ends (as often happened elsewhere), but rather creating a national identity in the first place.

To shed some additional light on why this was necessary, we must look to the political situation in Mongolia during the first half of the 20th century. As I have already noted, what was to become the Mongolian People’s Republic was a relatively recent creation. It did not recreate any long-standing or previously existing political entities.

Western maps of 50 years earlier show two separate parts of the Manchu Empire in ‘Mongolian’ territory, with the western part of Mongolia distinct from ‘Outer Mongolia’. Several maps in the Ethnographic and Linguistic Atlas of the MPR (Rinchen, 1979) also confirm this point (Maps 16 and 17). In particular, Map 17, covering the period from 1760–1911, refers to the western regions of present-day Mongolia as the Hovd frontier (hyazgaar). The implication seems
clear. The western region, which later was to play an important role in the events of 1911 and after was not yet viewed as an integral part of ‘Mongolia.’ Bawden also notes that even in the early 20th century, the Bogd Khaan’s influence did not extend to the Hovd area (1989, p 196).

Nor was the population of Mongolia an ethnically homogeneous grouping. A number of different groups of Mongols resided within its borders, as did a population of Kazaks. The dominant group of Northern Mongolia (the bulk of present-day Mongolia), the Halh, had a history of warfare with the groups in the western part of the country. Just as importantly (if not more so) a greater number of Mongols lived outside of its borders, mainly in the Inner Mongolian region of China, but also in Siberia, than within them. The borders of Mongolia were not drawn by nationalist impulses, but rather the pragmatic politics of power relations in Inner Asia. (Indeed, there were to be several attempts in the 1920s and 1940s to include Inner Mongolia in the new state, but this never came to pass.)

Autonomous Mongolia, which had existed in much the same territory from 1911 to 1921, had been able to draw upon the relatively unifying factor of religion—it was after all, a theocratic state. As such, it drew upon the Buddhist concept of a dualistic rule (spiritual and secular), collapsed into a single figure (see Bira, 1991, pp 41–44). This avenue, which in any case was not fully successful, was not open to the socialist government (although early Party oaths talked of preserving Buddhism). Instead, they were forced to create a new identity, one that would encompass all and only the people residing within the state’s borders. In short, in order to govern, the socialists had to create a national identity. In doing so, they could have chosen to attempt to construct what is referred to as a ‘civic’ form of national identity, an identity based on legalistic principles, such as citizenship, rather than a common ethnic root. If the government of the Autonomous Period had succeeded in establishing a strong political structure apart from the Buddhist hierarchy, this would have been an option. The autonomous government, however, was less than stellar in its administration.

Lacking the legalistic tradition necessary to argue for a ‘civic nation’, the socialists had to fall back, intentionally or otherwise, on history; arguing that an independent state was the inevitable outcome of the struggles of the people—in effect, ‘ethnic’ nationalism. Neither of these ideal types were realized in Mongolia, but in the end neither was neglected. Hence my earlier insistence on blending the two concepts. What was to occur in Mongolia was an attempt at creating something akin to a civic nationalism, while employing an ethnic methodology. This should not be too surprising, since after all, a large part of the 19th-century debate over nationalism—which in turn influenced Lenin and his followers—drew upon the contested ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ models of the Hapsburg Empire and Central and Eastern Europe more generally (see Stargardt, 1995; Bauer, 1995; Stalin, 1995). The theory in these cases was usually ethnic, but reality required attention be paid to the legalistic aspects of ruling a multination state or empire. Lenin’s tactic of allowing national self-
determination in theory in a bid to defeat it in practice highlights nicely this necessary mix.

Identity centred on the nation, then, was a construct of the first half or so of the socialist period, when the government was more interested in consolidating their power and developing the country than in fully and completely indoctrinating the people into communist ideology. This could come later, when the old social structure had been demolished, and people thought of themselves as a unified whole. In this light, it is highly suggestive that the first few decades of socialism are described in Mongolian history texts in terms of creating first the Mongolian People’s Republic, and then socialism. Socialism, according to its own textbooks, did not arrive in Mongolia until the 1950s–1960s. Prior to this period, it was not always certain that there would be something to rule, with civil war breaking out in the 1930s, and the pan-Mongolia movement strong in the 1920s–1930s, and reoccurring in various forms periodically.

The key manner through which the creation of national identity took place was education. The educational system in Mongolia prior to the Autonomous Period was largely in the hands of the Buddhist hierarchy, although private teachers did exist (see Shirendev, 1993, Ch. 2). Although attempts at educational reform had and were being undertaken during this period, it is significant that most of the socialist revolutionaries (and other reformers) had received schooling in the Soviet Union.

The socialists set out to remedy this deficit in home-grown education, seeking to establish a secular educational system. Kuo Tao-Fu, writing in the Chinese journal Progress in the late 1920s, noted the attempts at educational reform. ‘There are now over sixty primary schools in Mongolia besides one middle school and one normal school (i.e. university) in Urga [now Ulaanbaatar]... These schools are all run in the Mongolian language calculated to instill in the minds of the students a sense of national individuality’ (Kuo, 1930, pp 756–775). One assumes if it was necessary to point out the inculcation of national identity as a goal, it was not yet prevalent in this period.

It must be remembered, however, that the restructuring of Mongolian society did not take place through only relatively peaceful means. Wholesale destruction of monasteries and the murder of lamas helped eradicate class differences by the eradication of almost an entire class. Conservative estimates mention 30,000 killed out of a population of about one million.

Through both education and violence, then, the socialists sought to tear down the remnants of a Mongolian society based on the nobility and the Church, and create a new one, based on the nation and socialism.

The efficacy of text

As we have seen, one of the ways the construction of this national identity was accomplished was through the re-presentation of history. Figures like Chinggis Khaan and others were cast in a national light, working on and for a nation that would eventually lead to the socialist present. Some people in Ulaanbaatar
suggested to me in 1993 that ‘socialist history’—by which they meant a history of lies, in opposition to ‘true’ (i.e. more positive) interpretations—was not common until the 1950s. If this view is correct, and there are several reasons to think it is, it would not seem so strange to find differing constructions of history prior to this period, as I have suggested is the case. That is, it is only once a nationalist interpretation of history exists and has meaning, can it be contested by socialist history.

The use of written history was a particularly efficient method of creating national identity in early 20th-century Mongolia, as there was no extensive tradition of historical criticism. As was mentioned, what little education there was in pre-socialist Mongolia was almost exclusively the domain of the Buddhist Church, and was often in Tibetan. Historical texts, when they existed, were within a Buddhist tradition, and were largely unquestioned by the portion of the populace which had access to them, which in any case would have been a limited number.

In this atmosphere, the new emphasis on education would have found a receptive audience. Jack Goody has noted that ‘what is interesting about early schooling [early in the entire process, not in terms of age] is that at the very moment when memory could be dispensed with for certain purposes, precise, verbatim recall came into its own. There is no need to memorize the Qu’ran or the Bible in order to “know” it, but many people do just that. Indeed schools seem to specialize in this kind of memory activity’ (Goody, 1987, pp 234–235). Such a case in Mongolia would have been reinforced by the same emphasis placed on textuality and memorization in Tibetan Buddhism. Whatever view of history being propagated in schools, then, would have been given additional weight through this emphasis on memorization and internalization of knowledge. Knowledge internalized in such a manner would have served as a stronger form of memory (and hence identity) than knowledge merely referred to in books.

The recent memoirs of the former President of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, B. Shirendev, lend support to this argument. In his memoirs, he recounts his early education during the Autonomous Period. Of this education, he notes that most children who received formal education did so at the monasteries, and learned to read and memorize Tibetan, without concern for the meaning (Shirendev, 1993, pp 27, 49). Others learned from parents or other adults, but it appears their encounters with literacy were limited, and the emphasis was on ‘practical’ matters related to subsistence, as well as customs. Shirendev also notes that what secular texts were present tended to be various tales and stories (1993, pp 32–33), some of which are still in print today.

In short, then, there was in the pre-socialist period an importance placed upon texts that Shirendev reiterates at various points in his memoirs. The approach to most of these texts seems to confirm the emphasis placed on the written word. This emphasis would have thus rendered written accounts of history particularly efficacious by drawing upon the already extant Buddhist tradition of bowing to written authority, and in fact, seeing writing itself as a form of authority.

It is rather telling in this light that one of the early 18th-century accomplish-
ments of the Buddhists was the publication of the 333 volumes of the Kanjur and Tanjur over a three-year period (1718–1720). Such was the importance attached to the creation of such holy written texts that it appears an early translator of the Kanjur into Mongolian, Ligdan Khan, in fact lifted previous translations, which he then took credit for (Bawden, 1989, p 36).

Umberto Eco has written that ‘a text is a lazy machine that appeals to the reader to do some of its work’ (Eco, 1994, p 49). The text ‘expects’ readers to approach, interpret and react to it based on their own experiences and expectations. I suggest that the history texts of the socialist era were able to latch onto the authority of the written word that existed in Mongolia, and hence appealed to the reader to be received in a certain way, and in fact often were. Further, because the early socialists (and their texts) were more interested in creating a unified nation than propagating their ideology, they were able to modify the cultural and religious elements the Mongols already identified with into a national identity, by such subtle but important shifts as we noted with Chinggis Khaan and the events of 1911.

Socialist era history books then, appealed to their readers to do some of the work, but included a Five Year Plan for helping the readers reach the desired goals. And, for once, the Plan seems to have worked.

Notes and References

1. I do not mean to argue that this distinction should be totally erased. It has certain uses. Rather, I am suggesting that often attempts to maintain a distinction between types of nationalism or national identity (i.e. civic vs. ethnic) have the effect of clouding, rather than clarifying the issue.
2. ‘Messy’ at the level of being able to separate out components, at any rate. Nationalism and national identity as manifested in post-socialist Mongolia is, on the surface at least, much ‘neater’.
3. The use of terms such as ‘ethnic group’ or ‘tribe’ is problematical here. The exact nature of these groups, however, is not as vital to our current project as the fact that they, not the ‘nation’ served as the loci of identity. (See Sneath, 1997, for an alternative model of pre-national social structure in Mongolia.)
4. There is no publication date on the book itself, but textual references to events of 1924 make this the most likely publication date. Despite its anonymous nature and lack of other information, Charles Bawden, in a letter pasted in the back of the Cambridge University Library’s copy (formerly belonging to Dr Lindgren) notes: ‘It shows all the signs of being genuine—references to past events, spellings, and so on.’
5. Treaties do tend to refer to ‘Mongolia’ as a whole, but two points must be made. The first is that the concerns of international politics can be influential in shaping how a group represents itself (e.g. Norbu, 1992; Mountcastle, 1996). The second is that this usage tells us nothing about the beliefs and feelings of most of the people—our concern here.
6. This fascinating pamphlet is worthy of further study in its own right. Originally published in 1960, it was reissued by the Government Archives in 1992, in (slightly delayed) commemoration of the 1911 Revolution. The 1992 edition has a number of paragraphs deleted from the 1960 edition (apparently left out after being declared ‘not important,’ to which one can safely impute political reasons). The restored introductory paragraph notes how the Mongol aimags had been separated for over 200 years, and ruled by the Chinese, Manchus and Russians. While this sounds more nationalistic, and there are references to Chinggis Khaan and the Mongol Empire, we still do not find the Mongols being referred to as a single nation.
7. They further refer to the Bogd Khaan as ‘the symbol of Mongol nationalism’ (ibid), but in this case, their choice of words is unfortunate.
8. Unfortunately, Dindub’s is not available to me for consultation.
9. My basic argument is premised on the conjunction of this time period with ‘successful collectivization in Mongolia during the late 1950s. I, following Hosking (1989), suggest that there is a connection between collectivization and social memory. See also my comment (above) that textbooks declare this same general period to be the creation of socialist Mongolia.
10. The argument I am making here has a parallel in the idea of physical action as a form of 'habit memory,' which, it has been argued, serves to reinforce memory in other forms (Connerton, 1989).

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