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The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia

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There are likely to be some peculiar problems when people look for moral authority in the distant past. What happens when one's own recent past and the times of one's parents and grandparents are generally seen as bankrupt and permeated with injustice and cruelty? Many, perhaps most, Mongols wish to break with the structures of the socialist period, yet they do not look to any external contemporary society for inspiration. Both of their immediate neighbours, China and Russia, are regarded with apprehensive aversion. Capitalist societies, though widely regarded as having the secret of some magically succesful economic mechanism, are distant and foreign. The Mongols are now in the process of rethinking their 'deep past', not only because this is for once their own, but because historical origin in Mongolian culture is the source of moral authority in the present. Thus the 'deep past' is being called upon to provide inspiration for a discontinuity with the immediate past. I shall suggest that there are two kinds of iterative enactment by which this is being done. Although the specifics of this are Mongolian, the types I shall later describe may have analogies in other societies emerging from state socialism.

In Mongolia a new term has been coined for this process in general: *sergen mandal,* which is translated as 'renaissance'. *Sergen mandal* literally means 'awaken flourish', but its interpretation by Mongols today looks not to the future but to past glories. To quote from a recent interview with a leader of the National Renaissance Movement,

> *Sergen mandal* is to be understood as linked with independence... It is the awakening of the spiritual wisdom of the people... It is freedom from the imposition of foreign tyranny which is a pressure on the purity of intellect of every person. From the historical point of view, we take the origin of the Mongolian people's renaissance back to the third century BC... In 1911, throwing out the Manchu usurpers, and again in 1921, the Mongol people gained independence and freed their spirit from pressure.[1]

Mongolia's socialist revolution in 1921, much aided by the Red Army, was the first outside the Soviet Union. In the following decades Soviet ideology was taken up almost more sincerely, more naively, more brutally than in the USSR itself. In the 1930s the Mongolian government destroyed every single one of the 700 Buddhist monasteries in the country and killed tens of thousands of people, anihilating all that was best and most sophisticated about native Mongolian culture, philosophy and art.[2] This was truly a kind of auto-destruction. A feudal society permeated with religion at all levels was abruptly replaced by a European, atheist ideology, predicated not on a model of the past but on the modernist development of the present. The moral authority of the socialist period was based on a vision of a future society, which was to be egalitarian, industrialised and single-minded. This ideology was imple-

mented by Soviet advisers stationed in every public institution, and it was reinforced by the presence of Red Army garrisons and planned economic dependency on the USSR.

Since 1989 Mongolians have turned again to the past. But demography presents a situation which makes Mongolia unlike the countries of Eastern Europe and more similar to the Central Asian countries which were inside the USSR. Today Mongolia has one of the youngest populations in the world. Well over 50 per cent of the people are aged 25 or under. Ministers, party leaders and members of parliament are predominantly in their thirties and forties. This means that the country is ruled by people who do not personally remember the tragic period of the the 1930s, let alone the revolution or times before it. There is a huge gap, a period filled only with the white noise of socialist construction, which must somehow be both negotiated and bridged in order to reach a time which is regarded as truly Mongolian.

For this generation now in power, I shall suggest, any time before the socialist period belongs to another world. Things in that world are both ancestral and little known.[3] The eradication of recent prerevolutionary political morality was so effective that for people today it is not better known and has no greater legitimacy than more ancient models of Mongolian statehood. Thus the dual sovereignty of the Buddhist religion and the state, which was embodied between 1911 and 1921 in a single person, the Bogd Khaan, who was both ruler and head lama, has no greater salience than the virtually entirely secular and much earlier model of the imperial military ruler, Chinggis Khaan. In fact, people were taught during the socialist period to be ashamed of both the 'feudal-religious' and the 'militarist' versions of Mongolian history, without being told much about them at all. The only object to be admired was the mysterious appearance of the 'masses', surfacing now and again from one or another type of oppression from the the twelfth century to the twentieth. In fact, Mongolia's adoption of socialism was difficult for Marxist theorists to account for, since the country arrived at its revolution without having undergone the due stages of social evolution. The theory developed to explain this, known as 'bypassing capitalism', necessarily had to abandon standard evolutionsism. Thus the socialist ideology of history taught in Mongolia fudged both social evolution and chronological causation. It is for these reasons, I suggest, that the prerevolutionary past appears to ordinary people as something like a single other world, a pool from which images can be picked almost at random. All such history is equally distant, seen across the repressive system which people know, within which they were brought up and with which they are still struggling. What I have called the 'deep past' is reached across the chasm of Stalinism. This was such a total displacement of society and culture that it established *any* earlier past as a different era from today, a time of 'long ago' whenever it may have happened.

If the years from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s can be regarded in many respects as a 'period' (the socialist period), it would be incorrect to advance some idea of 'today' simply as a level platform. Since mid-1989 and the great public demonstrations and hunger strikes against the government, there have been a series of events which have constituted radical breaks with socialism. This has been history speeded up, as it were, throwing up new leaders, political parties, legal rights and economic measures almost by the month. According to a leading US adviser, privatisation has gone further in Mongolia than in any other reforming socialist country.[4] Since 1989 a multitude of new laws have been introduced. In January 1992 a new democratic constitution was adopted, though it is in conflict with some of the laws passed only a few months earlier. Mongolia has been lurching from crisis to crisis in its economy,

from the Russian decision to cut off electric power from its Siberian grid to the recent 'loss' by Mongolian financiers of millions of dollars in international money markets. It is thus difficult to talk of 'a situation' from which Mongols view the authority of the past. What we have, rather, is a number of uncontrollable predicaments, or, to put it another way, a present that is an era in the way that a roller-coaster is a place.

Yet all political groups without exception, including the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (i.e. the communist party), are concerned with national identity, with creating a 'truly Mongolian' moral society. This double movement, of the rejection of Soviet-type socialism by the very party which had implemented it and the welcoming of the traditional past, was exemplified at the 1991 celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the revolution. The marches of previous years with their grim cheerfulness were abandoned. Instead, a monument was founded to the victims of the purges of the 1930s, and there was a ceremony of raising the nine white standards, that is horse-hair battle-standards of a type said to have been used by Chinggis Khaan and to represent the spirit of the nation. An official account of the occasion stated that 'the most important task today is to revive traditions'.[5]

Anthropological monographs generally used to have as their essential object the form or order of a system. Such an ahistorical approach focuses on the coherence or reproduction of culture and society 'out of time', and it leaves 'history' as an unstructured, incoherent residue. Nicholas Thomas in his recent book has pointed out that attempts to incorporate history as an addition of something which anthropology used to omit are flawed, because certain historical perspectives 'cannot simply be added to others, since their objects are incompatible, demanding disjunct exclusions.'[6] Sherry Ortner has suggested that the way forward, in the context of this opposition between 'external' events and a coherent cultural system, is 'practice theory', which she describes as a matter of translation between an objective world and a subjective one.[7] Ortner's own theory of 'cultural schemas' provides one such case of a mediating practice which allowed Nepalese Sherpas to domesticate or translate the world, such that they could, for example, culturally incorporate new external economic opportunities in India. Such a structuralist analysis of history says something about how schemes of meaning incorporate events, but these 'events' (or 'real history' as Thomas puts it) are still seen as generated from outside.

Ortner formulates the notion of practice as 'inextricably tied to a notion of structure'.[8] She emphasises that structure in such a view must now itself be seen as appearing in forms that contain a dynamic assumption, and that it consists both of a public culture and of embodied dispositions that are 'stamped on actors' beings.' I am in general sympathy with this approach, which can go a long way towards explaining transformations generated within the system of culture itself. However, I think that the present critical juncture in countries like Mongolia requires an analysis of events or enactments rather than of structures. The 'cultural schema' is a complex structure similar to an oft-repeated story, by which external events are translated and which allows the reenactment of characteristic scenarios in a continuous, seamless stream through time. But in Mongolia and other formerly socialist and socialist-dominated countries this continuity was broken and cultural scenarios were obliterated. The deep past of Mongolian culture has to be reached across a chasm of foreignness, and this is now done not by structures but by means of singular, diverse and individualised actions.

I propose here to define two specific types of enactment which people delineate by reference to the past, yet which are also essentially innovative. Considered individually these actions are 'iterative' (i.e. they have some quality of sameness with the

past object) but if we look at them as a number of events in recent years they are always differentiated from one another. Rather than analysing the relation between 'external events' and a cultural *system* or scenario, the focus here is on the relation between a single enactment and the various kinds of past-oriented meaning which may be attributed to it. The types of enactment I shall propose are not of course all that is going on in Mongolian society. Nor do they address the large-scale or regional transformations in Mongolian history. But perhaps anthropology should be modest at this time of turbulence, when even inside the society people seem only to surprise one another. I hope that the two types will contribute to our ideas about the 'invention of tradition'.[9] What needs to be done now is to go beyond the sociological observation that 'traditions' may be invented to analyse specific qualities of past-related action and ones which are particularly pertinent to the situation of disjunction from the recent past which I have just mentioned.

One of these enactments I call 'historical mimicry', that is, the intention to reproduce physical events or objects of the past while always emphasising the symbolic capacity of these objects to represent ideas.[10] Because it is the ideas which are important there is no serious attempt to reproduce the features of the past in their entirety. For example, in representing Chinggis Khaan this or that element may be selected as metonymic and symbolic. Each present action is recognised to have a new and different starting point in time. Historical mimicry may often happen when 'history is in the making', as they say, and people feel they are masters of their destinies. Contemporary events, 'real history' as Thomas puts it, that result in the difference from previous enactments are not seen as external, because they are felt to be set in train by 'us', by the actors themselves (raising the nine white standards is an example of this). People are conscious that the present event is only a simulacrum of a past enactment, but this is not a cause for dismay because the aim is to create an event which represents an idea.

The other type of enactment, which I call 'embodiment', is the identification of people or actions in the present with those of the past, although they may look quite dissimilar. Here what happens is that a contemporary action is ascribed with an ontology: it is said to be essentially of the same nature as some past event, that is to have, in some sense, the same identity, even if no conscious attempt has been made to copy anything. The crucial Mongol term here is *xubilgan*, which can be roughly translasted as 'incarnation', but which is based on a root meaning 'change' or 'metamorphosis', and thus refers to the physical differences which are evident. The underlying identity is provided by the fact that all manifestations, in the past and the present, are held to represent a single spiritual entity.

Both of these types differ from what Paul Connerton calls 'habit-memory', which is the accumulative practice of the same habitual skills in society.[11] The difference lies in the leap which must be undertaken to attain the past. But the two types do not accomplish this in the same way. In 'historical mimicry' modern temporality, the ceaseless addition of commodity forms and new forms of behaviour, is recognised in the very fact of choosing new and different token elements of the past to imitate. 'Embodiment', on the other hand, takes place in a qualitatively different time-frame, a sacred time which is not reducible to profane time; here the gulf between the present action and that of the past is apparent in the fact that the two may be quite different to all outward appearances.

In both of these types it should be stressed that the idea of the past moment is a matter of the imagination. The work of historians is constrained by the documents and relics that speak up for the past. But in the present situation in Mongolia existing

written histories of the socialist period are mistrusted, and so to some extent are the materials which went into them. The whole practice of academic-political history, of thinking about the past by analysis supported by collation of evidence, has been placed behind a question mark and has yet to reemerge with widespread legitimacy. Perhaps people accept that there should be rules for doing history, rules which would differentiate writing history from fiction and which would establish acceptable notions of causality, but just now noone knows what such rules might be and for the moment they remain in abeyance. What we have now are images of the past, which are representational by definition, both iconic and symbolic, and yet lack an analytic or even a chronological context. Thus the object of past-focused enactments is constantly tugged forward in the light of present desires. From the point of view of the orderly practice of academic history this may seem wayward and anarchic. Indeed, scholars from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences are hastening to tidy up, as it were, and writing articles correcting popular misunderstandings. But in these days, when even the President of Mongolia has acquired a personal clairvoyant, such academic efforts are to little avail. If, as Stephen Owen has written, '"history" is something we do to the collective memories of the civilisation, just as...autobiography is something we do to our own memories',[12] perhaps the types of enactment I have mentioned can be seen as substitutes for history at a time when history itself is only now becoming possible.

Before the revolution Mongolia was a society, perhaps like that of Ortner's Sherpas in Nepal, which constantly returned to the reenactment of established notions in culture. Such a reenactment had *both* of the qualities I have separated out above. That is, it was simultaneously a copy of an idea of a past action and identified with it as 'being the same' as the archetype. To give an example, the Bogd Gegeen, the highest Buddhist incarnation in Mongolia, when he was first introduced to office as a child, used to make a visit to the Tushetu Khaan, who was the senior descendant in the line of Chinggis Khaan. The prince and princess, that is the Tushetu Khaan and his wife, used personally to light a fire and make tea for the young incarnation, as it were welcoming him as a 'son' of the imperial line. The precedent for this was the fact that the first Bogd, in the seventeenth century, had in fact been born as the son of the then Tushetu Khaan. But this combination of religious and temporal authority soon came to be seen by the Manchu overlords as a potential threat and they ordered that subsequent incarnations of the Bogd be found in Tibet. The tea-making ritual, which nevertheless took place for each subsequent incarnation through the centuries, was thus an enactment which symbolically established a Tibetan child as heir to the political as well as the religious heritage of the first Bogd. It had to do not so much with the Buddhist concept of reincarnation as with an idea of spiritual identification with the imperial ideal of Chinggis Khaan, held latent, as it were, until the eighth Bogd ascended the throne in 1911 and took on actual kingly powers.[13] In a case such as the tea-making ritual the qualities of copying a physical series of actions and identifying those actions as 'the same' as those of the past were inextricably intertwined. But what is proposed here is that these two qualities can be separated, and that a colossal social and cultural upheaval like the Stalinist transformation in Mongolia is likely to push them apart.

In the Stalinist period any ordinary reproduction of identifiably 'traditional' social and cultural forms became impossible. It is difficult to convey the extent of the obliteration of Mongolian culture. Though travellers to Mongolia might still observe people living in tents and looking after herds, in reality everything that looked the same was changed because it now had a different place in social relations, in the

organisation of work and in people's values. The tiniest everyday things, like hair-styles or the kind of carpet an official had in his office, became ideological signs and potential entrapments for the unwary. The little signs were attached to terrible tragedies, in which the best people were imprisoned, beaten or killed. This kind of annihilation cannot accurately be described merely as a 'social transformation', despite the many positive achievements of the Mongol-Soviet government, but was more like a strange apocalypse, in which ordinary people were stunned but nevertheless had to go on living. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate here to explore the facets of memory which have been described for survivors of the Holocaust, like the ideas of deep memory, anguished memory, humiliated memory, tainted memory and unheroic memory distinguished by Lawrence Langer.[14] But I will limit myself to a basic distinction which applies to the two types of enactment during the period of Soviet domination. 'Historical mimicry' recreates *suppressed* memories, while 'embodiment' revives memories which have been *repressed* (in a general, not necessarily Freudian, sense of 'repressed').

In 'historical mimicry', cognitions of appearances, names, layouts of buildings, lines of songs, gestures and other facts which have been suppressed by simple physical abolition or by being forbidden by external authority must somehow be dredged up or their values reconstructed. This could be done only in secret in the Soviet period, if at all, but nowadays it is a widespread activity. Two things are important about this kind of knowledge: first, that it is public (i.e. it was suppressed as a matter of common policy and now is coming to be 'known' again in the public sphere); second, that it is by no means easy to establish (or reestablish). An indication of this is the fact that in Mongolia today, although very old people are privately consulted about matters of ritual and so forth, on the whole they are not brought forward as arbiters and founts of knowledge. Perhaps it is felt that their knowledge is too idiosyncratic and possibly even too genuine and archaic to provide what is required today. Instead, we find newspapers and television programmes being used to determine *zan zanshil* ('good behaviour and custom'). Especially popular is a nationwide television competition called *Dörvön Berx* ('the four sides of the ankle-bone'), animal ankle-bones being widely used in Mongolia like dice as a means of divination. In this programme four teams, called the sheep, goat, horse and camel teams, devise questions. The host of the show throws sheep, goat, etc. bones to determine how many people of another team will try to answer, and the questioners grade the replies of opposing teams by awarding them ankle-bones of the respective animal. Questions are on all sorts of topics — on how a younger female guest should behave towards an older male host, for example, or on the correct way to hold a cup on a particular occasion, or on Mongol customs of respecting the environment. The teams are sent in by offices or factories or collective farms. They comprise people of all ages and come from all corners of the country. Indeed there are regional heats and several stages before the finals held in the capital, and all of this is televised. In this way, a popular, public and essentially modern knowledge of 'tradition' is being created. It seems somehow appropriate that ankle-bones, which are normally used in games of chance and to divine the future, are here employed to mark success in what almost amounts to divining the past. This is not commoditised knowledge: the prize in this competition is not money or goods, but a gold-coloured, ceramic ankle-bone.

Let me give two more examples of the 'historical mimicry' type of enactment, one of a private and one of a public nature. The first concerns the recent elevation of Chinggis Khaan as an object of private worship. What happens is that families buy a representation of the great Emperor.[15] They place it on an altar at home, where small

oil lamps and incense are burned, and people bow before it and say some prayers. This is part of the mimicry in the enactment, since the altar is erected in the same space in the tent or apartment as a Buddhist altar would have been, and the prostrations and other actions and gestures are also the same as if a Buddhist deity were their object. The whole ritual is called by the same term, *taxil* (roughly, 'ceremony of offering'). What is different is the explicitly new and even forward-looking situation of the subject and consequently that of the historical object. The subjects (or actors) do not consider themselves to be engaging in religious worship, and in fact may think of themselves as atheists. They constitute the object as a historical figure, Chinggis Khaan. One striking fact, however, is that the terrifying and implacable warrior aspect of Chinggis is quite absent from these representations. He is peaceably seated on a pile of flat cushions just like a great lama, and the outline and three-dimensional form of the ceramic statue are similar to the image of the Buddhist saint. Only the hat, which mimics the hats in early Chinese portraits of the Mongol Emperors, tells us that this is Chinggis. What we have is a respectable law-giver, as denoted by the book in his hand, with not a weapon in sight. Now, the law-giving aspect of Chinggis is less well known in the West than his martial and empire-building activity, but it is important from the Mongol point of view.[16] Chinggis' compilation of written law, the *Xöx-Debter* (Blue Book), has not survived, though this and other categories of law, such as decrees and cases for precedents, are known to have existed. This body of law has been unified by subsequent generations into an idea of 'the Great Law' which emanated from the Emperor, although it is now lost. Chinggis' *bilig* (moral laws or words of wisdom), on the other hand, have been handed down orally to the present day. Of course noone seriously suggests reviving these now, but it cannot be entirely coincidental that the ceramics factory turned to making this particular image of Chinggis at the very time when (in 1990) parliament was debating a new constitution for the country.

Another feature both links the Chinggis image to those of Buddhist saints and differentiates it from them. This is the inscription at the front of the image. The factory which takes orders for the statues leaves this space blank and it is the customer who decides what should be written there. Buddhist statues and paintings require a ritual of consecration, including the addition of some written words, before they are fit for worship. This would generally be a *mantra* or some other sacred formula, often kept inside the statue. But in the case of the Chinggis statue the inscription usually links the statue with its owner, naming the owner, together with the date. Inside the book held by Chinggis the factory will inscribe one of his moral injunctions (*bilig*) according to order. In this way way the act of making Chinggis an object of worship is explicitly linked to a time, to a particular person or family and to a moral injunction ascribed to him, and all of this labelling is a constitutive part of the meaning given to the statue. Before the inscription it is just a factory-made copy, but afterwards the statue as it were has a trajectory (from the owner to a particular understanding of Chinggis).[17] There cannot be just one meaning of the Chinggis statue, since the givers and owners of these statues write their own inscriptions, but this whole phenomenon is typical of post-socialist times. We have a mass-produced object in wide circulation, of which the detailed meaning is democratised and individualised, but which represents the general meta-message: the personification of our nationhood (Chinggis) is the fount of the rule of law.

The other example of 'historical mimicry' occurred with the founding of the Mongolian People's Party (*Mongol Ardyn Nam*) in the autumn of 1991. The first issue of the party's newspaper *Mongol-un Ünen (Truth of Mongolia)* appeared in

October. It sounded strangely familiar – surely there was already a Mongolian People's Party and a paper called *Truth?* In fact, a party and newspaper with these names were founded before the 1921 revolution. This party was, however, subsequently (in 1924) renamed the Mongolian People's *Revolutionary* Party, becoming in effect the communist party, and the newspaper became *Ünen (Truth)*, the organ of communist ideology. Now the founder of the new party, who is a Buddhist lama called Baasan, wishes to return to the ideas of the original party, rejecting the revolution and later version of the party as a foreign usurpation. This, of course, has infuriated the leaders of the Revolutionary Party, who see their legitimacy as inheritors of a genuinely Mongolian socialist movement suddenly snatched out of their hands. Meanwhile, Baasan Lama went on 'brazenly' to publish the first copy of his newspaper *Mongol-un Ünen* as number 7, on the grounds that numbers 1–6 came out in 1920–1.

Let me quote from the manifesto of the (new) Mongolian People's Party.

> The Mongolian People's Party was founded early this century by comrades headed by Bodoo to promote Mongolian autonomy, to continue the dual principle of state–religion partnership, to establish friendly relations with foreign countries, and improve the standard of living and harmony in people's lives. In 1924 the Party was destroyed and the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party put into practice the foreign, cruel, atheist dogma of change. Thus we few Mongols abandoned Holy Lord Chinggis' traditional Mongolian form of government and our native-born Buddhist religion, which flourished as a pair like the sun and moon. Antiquity, the present and the future, these three times constitute Mongolia's fate and are the incontestable reason for setting up a new party... It is a historical tradition that the Mongols should inherit their ancestors' pure hearth-fire, the Mongol earth and land, her language and traditions, her pure customs and traditions, and her political law. In this, we Mongols are inspired to renew *(sergeex)* our own truth, and the republishing of the *Truth of Mongolia* is a favourable circumstance for this. In the days to come, the simple-born people of the deceiving world will be waiting for the traditional teachings from us. Nagarjun-Teacher, who spread the religious concept of emptiness in his work 'A Drop of Dew Enlightening the People', which was translated from Tibetan to Mongolian at the time of Ligden Khaan [in the seventeenth century], is our guide; in this work the idea of 'simple-born people' is translated as *ard*, and this includes both the nobility *(yazguurtan)* and the ordinary folk *(xarts)*. The later use of *ard* ('the masses') in governmental and bureaucratic language, and dogma about the 'class situation', greatly distorted the Mongolian native concept of humanity.[18]

Even this brief excerpt is enough to show that the revival of the Mongolian People's Party is not at all a simple resuscitation: it is in fact aimed against the socialist 'divisive dogma of the class struggle', even though it seems that the original party of this name was in fact inspired to some degree by this idea in 1920–1. The 1991 enactment employs iterative mimicry; for example, calling the first edition 'number 7' and thus retrieving the newspaper *Mongol-un Ünen*, whose existence had been erased from official history. At the same time, drawing on a variety of sources from the distant past (from the Indian sage Nagarjuna to the Buddhicisation of Chinggis), the party has succeeded in creating something new. This new party has a clear moral message, which is the need for a universal infusion of Buddhist values into modern political life,

without reference to class.

The other type of reenactment relies on a quite different kind of knowledge of the past. 'Embodiment' involves personal recollections of experiences and of relationships, but most of all a sense of who one is existentially and culturally: self-identification. It involves a dimension of mythic or sacred time which coexists with ordinary chronology. In the Soviet-dominated period Mongolian sacred identities were savagely attacked by the ideology of a state which defined people as 'workers', and they existed only in secret, if at all. 'Embodiment' as a type of enactment does not, of course, only occur in situations of oppression, as can be seen from the political prominence of the reincarnations of Buddhist saints in Tibet and Mongolia in the past, but its more secular and grass-roots manifestations often run counter to more secular forms of the state (not only the socialist state). This idea may not be entirely clear, so I would like to give an example.

The case is that of the *Xüüxen Xutagt* (the Girl Saint) and it originated in the period of Manchu domination in the eighteenth century and the Mongols' revolt against oppressive control from Peking. The Girl Saint was reembodied in a number of people, both men and women. They appeared here and there at various times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were said to be reincarnations of the Mongol prince Chinggungjav who in 1756 had raised the banner of revolt against the Manchus. Chinggungjav was in fact defeated, taken to Peking, tortured and executed. But in mythic time, in various stories, Chinggungjav died only to be reborn. It is said that he was twice reborn as a son of the Ch'ien Lung Emperor himself, but on both occasions these babies were put to death. Finally, he had the foresight to be reborn in Mongolia as a girl and so escaped death. Since that time he has manifested himself as the Girl Saint, now as a man, now as a woman.[19] To this day the Minggads of Western Mongolia sew blue cloth around the doors of their tents and explain this as a sign that they are waiting for the Girl Saint to come again. From conversations with people in Mongolia about this it appears that what the people are waiting for is not the Girl Saint as such (this particular embodiment is regarded with some disfavour as effeminate; even if the Girl Saint is represented as a man he will have some signs of femininity) but the manifestation of an ideal, the heroic rebel, in other words the spirit which infused Chinggungjav and all subsequent representations and which constitutes the identity between them.[20]

A secular account of the Minggad custom might say that they are not really waiting for anything at all, and that the possible appearance of the Girl Saint is only a colourful explanation for the fact that the Minggad differentiate themselves from their neighbours by sewing blue cloth around their doors. Nevertheless, even during the Soviet period, a time of maximum atheist values in which the Mongolian people as a whole participated, the blue cloth was interpreted as a sign of expectation and not in any other way. During this period the great incarnations of the Buddhist church were all annihilated, and only secret whisperings and rumours of 'likenesses' and guessed-at 'previous lives' kept the phenomenon alive. But in the past two or three years several incarnations *(xubilgan)* have come to public recognition. These range from children perhaps only transiently acknowledged as having had a previous existence to incarnations of the high saints of the Buddhist church. In contrast to the situation under the monolithic and universal ideology of the socialist period, all these persons become foci of individual faith, the entirely unforced point of longings and ideals. Each incarnate spirit represents a moral quality, such as wisdom, benevolence or purity.

'Embodiment' is different from imitative reenactment, in that it no longer involves

a conscious copying of past events. It is not an invention using rules to repeat the past 'traditional' form, but is actually a 're-being' – a relinquishing, one could almost say, of conscious reiteration and invention to allow an inner identification with the past.

Because the idea of incarnation, which is so widespread in Asia, alludes not only to the past but also to the future, there is, as it were, a cultural space available for actions of identification. People do wait for new incarnations. This was true of Chinggungjav and numerous other historical or sacred personages, and it is also true of the eighth Bogd Khaan, whose ninth incarnation was awaited from 1924 until today. In the prerevolutionary period, it was clearly easier to identify an action (or even oneself) with a precedent, because a whole cast of characters was permanently renewed over the years (the Manchu Emperor, the Bogd Khaan, the Tushetu Khaan, the Tibetan origin of the Bogd's line and so on). But despite the disappearance of this stable cast in the socialist period, the possibility of reincarnation remained in the collective imagination. It could even be manifested in a secret way because of the fact of difference or disguise implied in the concept. An event or person need not be like the object-of-the-past to be identified with it. This physical unlikeness is of crucial importance during periods of ideological oppression, when overt identification with a person of the past would have been condemned as subversive superstition.

The trajectory of this practice of 'embodiment' through the very different political environments of Mongolia over the past few centuries indicates that it is not just a particular religious institution set in a particular structure at a particular time. It is true that the most well-known examples are the lines of reincarnations in the Buddhist church, but there are also secular examples, as we have seen with the Girl Saint. There are numerous cases of proposed incarnations which fail, children whose actions or words seem somehow magical, who are locally and transiently acknowledged, but who are never widely recognised and soon fall back into obscurity. Finally, there are cases of identification which are not socially institutionalised as reincarnations *(xubilgan)* at all, but nevertheless popular imagination makes the link, for example when it is said half-seriously about a given politician that he must have been a certain historical figure in a previous life. This suggests that Buddhist reincarnation itself is a particularly focused form of a more general phenomenon which may not be confined to Buddhist cultures.[21]

Clearly the phenomenon of 'embodiment' involves a particular combination of individual self-identification and public recognition (i.e. social acceptance of the claim that someone is 'really' another person from the past) and I would like to dwell a little on this point. In normal life, as Connerton has pointed out, personal memory claims take as their object one's own life history.

> When I say, 'I arrived in Rome three years ago', I am in a certain sense reflecting upon myself. In making that statement I am aware of my actual present, and I reflect on myself as the one who did this or that in the past. In remembering that I did this and that I see myself as it were from a distance. There is a kind of doubling: I, who speak now, and I, who arrived in Rome three years ago, are in some ways identical but in some ways different. These memory claims figure significantly in our self-descriptions because our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves: our self-knowledge, our conception of our own character and potentialities, is to a large extent determined by the way in which we view our own past actions. Through memories of this kind, persons have a special access

> to facts about their own past histories and their own identities, a kind of access that in principle they cannot have to the histories and identities of other persons and things.[22]

However, in some densely collectivist societies such as Mongolia, persons are not thought to have uniquely privileged access to their own past and identity. Society, in the form of opinions and sayings which are told and retold, may take an active part, telling historical actors, possibly against their will, who they truly are and what they represent. In these cases an aspect of the self is projected outwards, articulated on an external rather than an internal stage, in a collective rather than an individual idiom.

The phenomenon is religious and ethical in the widest sense. The 'embodiment' is the incarnation of a principle, whether of wisdom, compassion, independence or revenge. But all such principles, emerging from the inchoate truths of popular culture as well as from the Buddhist church, were inimical to the Soviet-dominated state and were blotted out in the construction of the person which prevailed in the Stalinist period. Now Mongolians acknowledge that it is not possible to see themselves merely as the victims of a totalitarian system, since they themselves helped to create it. It is this agonising fact which allows us to say that what happened was a matter not only of external suppression but also of psychological repression, and which some Mongolian commentators say has caused widespread despair *(buximdal)* in the present.[23]

> *Buximdal*...may mean all sorts of negative psychical states, from light stress to rancorous bitterness...The reason for its prevalence today lies in the fact that during seven decades the internal tension of people accumulated to alarming proportions...The 'new man' of socialism has long since been moulded. New strains of people nurtured in a bestial manner are indeed an ugly sight; the 'new man' is totally cut off from the classical heritage of humanitarian thinking; he does not even suspect that there are moral and ethical notions and standards. He is deceitful, suspicious and a coward...This man will continue, for a long time to come, to pose a threat to people, society, the environment and the whole world. It will take years and generations before civilised behaviour returns to its rightful place. Until then, one should be careful of us.[24]

Perhaps faith in 'reembodiment' is one way in which Mongolians are lifting the anomic blankness caused by years of repression of their own culture. An example is Ölziijargal, a young woman now living in the Zavxan region of Mongoia. She is held to be reembodiment of the Green Tara, the goddess of compassion. Ölziijargal is poor and worked formerly as a cleaner, now as a builder. She lives at home with her parents and her baby son. From an early age she had abilities to foretell the future, to cure and calm people – abilities in which she herself only gradually came to believe. As a young girl she set herself tests to see whether her predictions would come true, and as they did and her name spread, she began to be sought out far and wide.[25] She cures people mainly by stroking their bodies. Pale, shabby, worn-out and frequently ill, she was described by her mother as shy and uncommunicative. Nothing could be further from the vital, sensuous image of the Green Tara as depicted in paintings. Let us see what Ölziijargal said about her miraculous gifts (she was speaking in 1989, just at the end of the socialist period).

> As soon as people come in I know from the first glance why they have come and what is hurting them. I know this not only from their external appear-

> ance, from their eyes and faces, but because my soul is telling me... Sometimes my head is so full of various thoughts about what will happen to them that my mind cannot distinguish these pictures... I cannot sleep or rest, because all the time without ceasing people come to see me. Even at night they come with children, with ill people, and they must be fed and bedclothes must be got ready for them to sleep on. I have several brothers and sisters, so it is difficult for all of us and the visitors to fit into the tent. But all the same I try to help people... Some things are difficult for me to do, and when this happens I feel great mental anxiety. Our party and government made it their main goal to help every person. Helping others is the highest form of charity (*buyantai üils*). To help every person means each time giving something of oneself and that is very difficult. Sometimes I think that I should stop living like this.[26]

In all of this, Ölziijargal never once mentioned reincarnation. As Langer showed, the effect of the repression of personal memory is to place the ordinary identification with past selves in doubt. A survivor of Auschwitz told him, 'I have the feeling... that the "self" who was in the camp isn't me, isn't the person who is here opposite you. No, it's too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other "self", the one from Auschwitz, doesn't touch me now, *me*, doesn't concern me, so distinct are deep memory *(mémoire profonde)* and common memory *(mémoire ordinaire)*'.[27] In the case of Mongolia we are not addressing the personal recollection of an earlier self but identification with an ideal 'self' known to have been embodied in the past. The kind of knowledge involved must in any case be intuitive, deeply personal and spiritual, but it was precisely this non-rational aspect of Mongolian culture which was most hard hit in the socialist period. The effect of repression is to remove such identifications almost entirely into the sphere of recognition by the public, such that the subject comes to 'relive' the prototypical and dislocated 'self' (a self which is also another) while being hardly aware of it. Thus it is the people, not Ölziijargal herself, who are convinced that she is the embodiment of the Green Tara.[28] Her actions are untheorised and spontaneous, and yet she is under the compulsion of other people's expectations. Many sick people have moved to live near her, and some of them grow ill if she goes away for some reason and are only well in her presence. The constant pressure forces her to be Tara, whether she wants to or not. This is different from the pattern of reincarnation in the past, when subjects frequently first proclaimed themselves to be *xubilgans*, consciously constructing their persona in this light, and only later were (or were not) acclaimed by the people.

The post-socialist atmosphere of self-doubt in Mongolia seems to be driving apart the incarnation of high lamas from grass-roots manifestations like Ölziijargal. This is a matter of the kind of knowledge required to make identifications with past persons. In the case of high lamas the reading of signs is in principle indirect, primarily a matter of astrology, and more obvious links, such as recognition of objects or clothes belonging to the previous incarnation, have to be authenticated by church officials. In pre-revolutionary times astrology was much more widely practised than today and the church omnipresent. The idea of such abstract correspondences and authentications was known to everyone, and this gave both the church and the people's incarnations a base in common culture. So unquestioned were such identifications that the incarnation, once officially recognised, was sacred however he behaved (the licentious and occasionally cruel eighth Bogd, who was nevertheless widely worshipped, is a good example of this). But today astrology is the realm of specialists and is outside the

knowledge familiar to ordinary people. It continues to be important for the institutionalised reincarnations of the church, but it is much less so for the grass-roots *xubilgan* springing up here and there today. Primary in the case of Öliziijargal are her actions. These actions do not have to be interpreted through abstruse manuals, but directly manifest the ideal, and in this I see the influence of Marxism on generations of Mongols. It seems that practice has come to supersede magical correlations in the representation of morality. Ölziijargal herself saw her actions at that time of ambivalence in 1989 as mixture of idealised party praxis and Buddhist charity. Perhaps she would use different language now. But all I have heard about her from Mongolian informants suggests that it is still these compassionate actions which are seen as the 'medium', so to speak, of her embodiment; that, however humdrum, it is these actions which point to the Tara image and which have become the signs of the ideal of divine mercy. This still requires a leap of the imagination, the uncovering of hitherto unconscious values from the past, but it is not a matter of abstract calculation as in astrology. In other words, Mongolian people have moved to a new time which emphasises its own way of producing similarities, no longer the abstract certainty of astrological correlations but a reading-back from spontaneous, disorganised action to a moral idea.[29] This and astrology are alternative ways of construing a past which is unlike a linear, chronological history, and closer to the idea conveyed by our word 'immemorial'.

This paper has drawn attention to two types of enactment by which people draw moral authority from the 'deep past' which preceded socialism. Both have a certain complexity from the fact that they could not simply be repetitions in an uninterrupted tradition. The first mimics facts and appearances from a time attributed with greatness and genuineness, but constructs the likeness as an analogy, which allows the 'copy' to symbolise an idea about the present and future. The second transforms present intuitive haphazard activity into 'sacred actions' by giving them an identity as bearers of an idea, such that, whatever they are, these actions are held to represent the idea in just the same way as was done in the past. I do not wish to claim that there are no other forms of engagement with the past, nor that these particular ones are universally practised. But analysis of these two forms has allowed us to perceive how the moral authority of the past is used to create different trajectories for the ethical concerns of the present.

Notes and References

[1] *Erdeni Erike*, 27 March 1991, p. 1.

[2] No accurate figures exist for the number of people killed in the Stalinist period. Mongolian intellectuals say that 30,000 people are known to have died and up to 100,000 may well have perished. The upper limit is 300,000. This is in a total population of around one million in the 1930s.

[3] Up to the 1920s, Mongolian political culture had retained a notion of the dual empowerment of state and religion, which originated perhaps with Khubilai Khaan in the thirteenth century (Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 40–1). In this vision the imperial patron and the religious sage were complementary and interdependent, each of them legitimated by their own long lines of succession reaching into the distant mythological past. Between 1911 and 1921, that is from the overthrow of the Manchu Dynasty to the revolution, the country was ruled by a Buddhist incarnation, who for the first time combined in his one person the principles of religion and state power. He was known as the Bogd Khaan (the Holy Emperor). After the death of the Bogd Khaan in 1924, a socialist state was established and one of its first acts was to separate religion from the state.

It was decided not to search for a further reincarnation of the Bogd. The notion of a mutual empowerment of religion and state, known by the more general philosphical term *arga bilig* ('skilful means and wisdom', 'matter and mind', or the male and female principles) became a forbidden topic in political education. *Arga bilig* is a version of the yin–yang theory of cosmic renewal, which some Mongol scholars now claim to have been an invention of their ancestors, the people of the steppes, in prehistoric times (Ch. Erdene, 'Arga biligiin uxaan bol manai yazguur öv' ('The theory of *arga bilig* is our native heritage'), *Il Tovchoo*, 28 April 1991).

[4] Peter Murrell of the University of Maryland, quoted in *The Mongol Messenger*, no. 6 (32), 11 February 1992, p. 3.

[5] *The Mongol Messenger*, no. 26, 24–30 December 1991.

[6] Nicholas Thomas, *Out of Time: History and Evolution in Anthropological Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 102. Bourdieu and Sahlins, for example, in writing about cultural structures in time, each introduce their own distinct concepts of time, which have divergent analytical implications.

[7] Sherry Ortner, *High Religion: a Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 17–18.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 13.

[9] E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[10] Both of these types of action are 'mimetic' in the sense used by Benjamin in his famous essay (Walther Benjamin, 'On the mimetic faculty', *One-way Street and Other Writings* (trans. Jephcott and Shorter, New Left Books, 1979)). The distinction between them corresponds roughly to Benjamin's 'sensuous' as opposed to 'non-sensuous' mimicry, but because Benjamin uses these terms in a wider and more general sense than I do his terms have not been used here.

[11] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 28–36.

[12] Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: the Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 7.

[13] The making of tea was only one of such enactments, which involved both copying the precedent and putting oneself in the imagined geographical space of a long-distant past. Every year the eighth Bogd used to go to the site in Urga where the sixteenth-century Avtai (Abdai) Khaan, grandfather of the first Bogd Gegeen, had stationed his tent, and there tended a fire in the manner of a youngest son and heir. (See Caroline Humphrey, 'Remembering an enemy: the Bogd Khaan in twentieth century Mongolia', forthcoming in Rubie Watson (ed.), *Secret History in Socialist Societies* (School of American Research).)

[14] Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: the Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991).

[15] This is usually a ceramic statue but may also be a reproduction of the painting. There are also occasions where Chinggis is worshipped publicly.

[16] The Buddicisation of the image of Chinggis goes back at least to the seventeenth century, as can be seen in the Mogolian chronicle *Erdeni Tobchi*.

[17] In some ways this is like what happened to photographs of the great events of recent years, when overnight it is decided to show them on television or put them in a new exhibition of the revolution. Now commentaries or captions give them a 'point' and they begin to play their part in today's news.

[18] Leader article in *Mongol-un Ünen*, no. 7, 1991, p. 1.

[19] Charles Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia* (London, 1968), p. 57.

[20] John Gaunt, personal communication. There used to be a monastery near Urga (Ulaan-Baatar) which became the seat of reincarnations of the *Xüüxen Xutagt* in the Buddhist idiom. This does not, however, necessarily conflict with the fact that the Minggad were awaiting a heroic and secular version of the incarnation. It is possible for there to be two or more simultaneous incarnations of the same spirit or deity. For example, the incarnation of the Green Tara described below is not the only incarnation of this deity in Mongolia today.

[21] Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (Chicago University Press, 1987) and Joanne Rappaport, *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretations in the Colombian Andes* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) give salient examples from completely different cultural settings in Latin America.

[22] Connerton, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[23] Vera Schwarcz, 'No solace from Lethe: history, memory, and cultural identity in twentieth-century China', *Proceedings of the American Academy of Sciences*, vol. 120, no. 2, 1991, pp. 85–112, provides a valuable insight into the equivalent predicament in China.

[24] Ch. Erdene, 'Commentator's column', *The Mongol Messenger*, 10–16 December 1991, p.3.

[25] For example, she said, 'One day I was mixing up plaster. Another builder was going to the shop and I asked him to get soap for me. Suddenly I had the thought that I would get neither my money back nor the soap from that man. I decided to test myself, and began to wait for his return with impatience. He suddenly came back and said there was no soap, and he pulled out of his boot some other money (which I had not given him). From that time onwards, I began to believe in my powers of prediction.' (B. Bold, 'Id shidtei küüken' ('The girl with magic powers'), *Ködölmör*, no. 47, 27 April 1990). It is interesting that such trivial moments built up to the divine persona which Ölziijargal is now supposed to have.

[26] Bold, *op. cit.*

[27] Langer, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[28] Recently I have heard that lamas from Ulaan-Baatar are having a sacred image painted for her and are collecting money for a shrine.

[29] I do not mean to imply that reading-back from morally infused action was absent in the prerevolutionary period, only that it was subordinate to astrology. The present emphasis means that if the enactments are no longer magically effective, which they seem often not to be in post-socialist Mongolia, the identification can lapse.