

Modern Mongolia and Chinggis Khan

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Mongolia and its renowned thirteenth-century ruler Chinggis Khan have become increasingly prominent in Northeast Asia. Its geographic location, however, has often not been advantageous, surrounded by the two “socialist powers,” China and Russia. The Qing dynasty of China ruled and exploited the country from 1691 to 1911, and the Soviet Union played a pivotal, if not dominant, role from 1921 to 1990. Lacking independence for almost three centuries, Mongolians were, to a large extent, deprived of their own views of Mongolian cultural heritage. Their only world-renowned leader was Chinggis Khan. When the country abandoned socialism in 1990, Mongolians attempted to bolster their image by emphasizing their relationship to Chinggis.

This essay focuses on changes in the Mongolian perceptions of Chinggis since 1990 and the reasons for such transformations. The government, in particular, employed his image to deflect the people’s numerous problems as a result of the economic and political turmoil that engulfed the country. The elite, some of whom had profited enormously from the rapid and chaotic transition to a market economy, echoed the state’s pronouncements on Chinggis. In recent years, as corruption has become pervasive and as economic decline persists with ever-higher rates of poverty, the appeal of Chinggis appears to be receding.

History of the Image of Chinggis Khan

Development of the Image Until 1921

After the collapse of the Mongolian Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, most Mongolians, especially those who had occupied China, returned to their homeland. Unification eluded them, and they generally divided into Eastern and Western Mongolians, although separate groups developed within each of the two major divisions. The title of “Khan” was reserved for rulers directly descended from Chinggis. In the 1570s, Altan Khan sought to use Tibetan Buddhism as a unifying force. Although most Mongolians adopted Buddhism, they remained disunited, a vulnerability which allowed Qing China to occupy Mongolia starting in 1691. The Buddhist monasteries—which the Qing favored—prospered, but the state and Chinese merchants

exploited and manipulated much of the rest of the population, leading to extreme poverty and oppression. Yet, no major Mongolian rebellion against the Qing erupted.

Instead, Mongolians looked backward to the era of Chinggis Khan, which they perceived to be their most glorious heritage. Then “faced with threats to their lands and to their very existence, the Mongol[ians] repeatedly sought to identify with heroes of the past, an effort that was significant in inspiring bonds of identity.”¹ The first Mongolian historical and literary works, which started to be compiled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, evoked Chinggis as the country’s symbol. A Chinggis cult emerged in which the members sometimes depicted him as a great hero and at other times as a deity. Written sources provide few details about the cult, but it appears that the prayers and sacrifices offered to secure the blessings of the Mongol ruler incorporated shamanic and Buddhist elements. Four seasonal festivals and wedding feasts portrayed Chinggis as a deity and included such shamanic practices as the scattering of mare’s milk for good fortune and the performance of rituals on hills or mountains. Buddhism, which became prominent in the seventeenth century, often integrated Chinggis into its ceremonies. These developments contributed to the creation of a Mongolian identity to counter the threat posed by the Qing. Deification of Chinggis continued after the fall of the Qing in 1911 until the rise of socialism.

Socialist Era Depiction of Chinggis

Mongolia’s transition to socialism under guidance from the Soviet Union in 1921 transformed Chinggis’ image and resulted in deliberate erasure of all positive mentions of him until 1990. The Soviet Union depicted Mongolian rule over Russia as the period of Tatar Yoke and portrayed Chinggis as a feudal conqueror who rampaged, killed, and destroyed. Dependent on Soviet aid, trade, and technical assistance, the Mongolians abided by the Soviet perception of Chinggis. Because the Soviets tried to disassociate Chinggis from Mongolian nationalism, the Mongolians complied and frequently omitted his name from books and school curricula. In 1962, concerned both about the denigration of the unifier of the Mongolians and about the overpowering influence of the Soviet Union, Mongolia’s second most important Politburo official, Daramyn Tömör-Ochir, together with historians and nationalists, planned to commemorate the eighth centenary of Chinggis’ birth. Severe Soviet condemnation led not only to cancellation of all the events but also a purge and imprisonment of Tömör-Ochir and other figures involved in the projected programs.² Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal, the Prime

¹ Morris Rossabi, “The Development of Mongol Identity in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Leonard Blussé and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, eds. *Shifting Communities and Identity in Formation in Early Modern Asia* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, Universiteit Leiden, 2003), 45.

² On these events, see Paul Hyer, “The Reevaluation of Chinggis Khan: Its Role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute,” *Asian Survey* (December 1966): 696–698 and J. Boldbaatar, “The Eight-hundredth Anniversary of Chinggis Khan: The Revival and Suppression of Mongolian National Consciousness,” in Stephen Kotkin and Bruce Elleman, eds., *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 237–246.

Minister and Secretary of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party who instigated the purge had studied in the USSR, married a Russian woman, and was sympathetic to the Soviet viewpoint. During his more than three decades of governance, restrictions on the written and visual representations of Chinggis persisted.

Deification of Chinggis Khan Today

The 1990 collapse of socialism in Mongolia ushered in a decades-long virtual deification—or at least glorification—of Chinggis Khan.³ Mongolian nationalists were surely relieved when the USSR collapsed, because they could resurrect the image of Chinggis Khan and talk and write openly about him. He was no longer banished from Mongolian history, and a more even-handed assessment of his role and career was permissible. However, a balanced representation proved to be impossible, especially as social and economic conditions deteriorated and the state looked to the country's heritage to counteract the hardships of parlous times. The various administrations since 1990, as well as many of the country's elite, fostered these perceptions. A large sculpture of Chinggis now dominates the entrance to the State Great Khural (which houses parliament). A private company constructed an even more colossal steel statue of the Great Khan riding a horse approximately one hundred miles from the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. The government overreached recently in renaming the central square, the equivalent of Red Square in Moscow or Tiananmen in Beijing, from Sükhbaatar Square to Chinggis Khan Square. Sükhbaatar, the first leader of the socialist movement, was associated with Ulaanbaatar, which did not exist at the time of Chinggis. Protests by historians, nationalists, and the general public caused the government to reverse the change and to abandon its effort, but this change was the only reversal in the frenzy of renaming. Chinggis Khan's purported image is found on paper money and on stamps, the government renamed the airport in Ulaanbaatar in his honor, and his portrait hangs in Mongolian embassies around the world.

Private groups have matched the government's prodigious efforts to associate themselves with Chinggis. One group constructed a hotel in Ulaanbaatar in his honor, while others introduced a Chinggis Khan vodka, beer, restaurant, and pub. Reputed portraits of the Mongolian ruler hang in stores and in advertisements. A rock and roll band has coopted his title of Chinggis Khan, but none have adopted his birth name of Temüjin.⁴

³ Yuki Konagaya asserts that in the 1930s the Japanese, for their own political purposes, contributed to the revival of the deification of Chinggis, see: "Modern Origins of Chinggis Khan Worship: The Mongolian Response and Japanese Influences," in Morris Rossabi, ed., *How Mongolia Matters: War, Law, and Society* (Brill, 2017).

⁴ For a more complete list of such renaming, see Nomin Lkhagvasuren, "Today's Genghis Khan: From Hero to Outcast to Hero Again," in William Fitzhugh, Morris Rossabi, and William Honeychurch, eds., *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 285-286. On the astonishing number of depictions of Chinggis in stone, textiles, and porcelain, see Isabelle Charleux, "Critères changeants d'authenticité. Sur quelques portraits anciens et modernes de Chinggis Khan dans le monde mongol," in Denise Aigle, et. al., *Miscellanea Asiatica: Mélanges en l'honneur de Festschrift in Honour of Françoise Aubin* (Sankt Augustin: Institute Monumenta Serica, 2010).

Strangely enough, there is a Chinggis Khan University, founded for a ruler responsible for considerable destruction of towns and sites and the killings of numerous individuals during his campaigns.

Idealization of Chinggis by Mongolians and credulous Westerners has contributed to the confusion and blurring of his image. Many portray him as an advocate of democracy, women's rights, and international law on the basis of distorted and tortuous reading of the sources about him. One author titled his book *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* and implied that the Mongolian ruler and his descendants had an impact on the Renaissance, a totally ahistorical analysis.⁵ Others, Mongolians and Westerners alike, designated him a great military figure, although nomadic pastoral groups had developed the same weapons, strategy, and tactics, including the impressive and innovative use of cavalries, centuries before the Mongols. Chinggis' greatest contributions, such as selection of leaders based on merit rather than social status and unification of the various groups in Mongolia, were actually administrative.

Explanations for the Revival of Chinggis Khan

The Natural Revival of the Image Absent Socialism

Adoption of a policy of "shock therapy" through immediate privatization of state assets, minimalist government, liberalization of trade and prices, and support for a pure market economy caused considerable disarray in Mongolian society. Unemployment, poverty, inequitable distribution of income, corruption, and attendant social problems plagued the country.⁶ Despite a temporary mining boom in the early twenty-first century, Mongolia currently faces a recession, if not a depression. Many herders abandoned pastoralism to move to the capital as the herding economy lost its state support. Ulaanbaatar is now home to 50 percent of Mongolians. A focus on better times during the economic recession has inspired the greater prominence of Chinggis. Yet, assessment of the Mongolian leader has gone to extremes in depicting him as a believer in democracy and international law.

One explanation for such deification is that the Mongolians had indeed fashioned a Chinggis Khan cult as early as the seventeenth century. The families descended from the Khan sacrificed to him as part of the practice of ancestor worship. His accomplishments were recited, and his descendants sought his support and protection. The larger Mongolian community also worshipped him and practiced rituals designed to secure Chinggis' favor. The socialist government that took power in 1921 forbade and attempted to extirpate the Chinggis cult, but some limited evidence suggests that some Mongolians covertly engaged in the rituals associated with deification of the Mongolian

⁵ This error-filled book is by Jack Weatherford published in New York by Crown Publishers in 2004.

⁶ For an assessment of these developments, see Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

ruler.⁷ The downfall of socialism permitted the cult to reemerge, contributing to the post-1990 revival of Chinggis' deification.

Deliberate Use of the Image of Chinggis

Another explanation for the hagiography surrounding Chinggis derives from the previously detailed deteriorating economic conditions for much of the population, as the deification may be attributed to deliberate manipulation by the state and elites. In a time of gross inequality and government corruption, some perceived a drive toward national unity as an attempt to divert the attention of the less fortunate from social and economic disparities. Onlookers view the reverence toward Chinggis and repeated observances of events in his life as efforts to promote so-called Mongolian unity and to deflect antagonism toward the tiny group of wealthy Mongolians and the increasing corruption in government. The miniscule number of Mongolians able to afford items at Louis Vuitton and other luxury stores, to live in elaborate town houses with concealed swimming pools, to travel abroad in business and first-class seats, and to employ chauffeurs and servants benefit from such misdirection. Memories of their glorious heritage consoles ordinary Mongolians, and they might believe that they can overcome their current hardships and look forward to a bountiful future. Such reactions can distract from the considerable economic and social problems the majority of the population faces, ultimately contributing to "national unity." Repeated and pervasive references to Chinggis' greatness and his role as protector of the Mongolian people as a god-like figure has contributed further to the bonds allegedly uniting Mongolians.

The Power of Chinggis' Image in Today's Mongolia

Recent events suggest that the Chinggis Khan phenomenon may not be as effective and promulgated as in the early post-socialist days. The earlier optimism, which had been bolstered by references to Chinggis, resulted in festivals and celebrations lauding the Mongolian ruler. His image was attached to public documents and artifacts, such as paper money, statues, and symbols associated with the Great Khan. This optimism, which was supported by appeals to the magnificent past and to the blessings of Chinggis, prevailed. The idealization of Chinggis was especially prevalent after the 1996 defeat of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, which was the only legal political party in the socialist period. However, since 1996, because the government has not succeeded in dealing with corruption, inequality, and economic development, references to Chinggis have diminished and confidence in securing his god-like blessings has eroded.

The June 2016 Khural (parliamentary) elections attested to a growing disillusionment with the uplifting morale linked to the Mongolian conqueror. A poll taken before the election found that "over one-third reported that they did not trust any of the [political] parties to properly lead the country and 77 percent stated that none of the parties

accurately represented public opinion.”⁸ Quite a number of the members of the Khural are businessmen or businesswomen, and many Mongolians suspect that they have their own—rather than the country’s—economic interests at heart. Bribery, graft, and nepotism, which led to the imprisonment of one of the country’s presidents, have become pervasive. In 2015, Transparency International ranked Mongolia 72 out of 179 countries in its Corruption Perception Index.⁹ In 2012, Mongolia’s Judicial Index was at 122 of 142 countries, and as of 2016, reforms have not been successful.¹⁰ In addition, young sons and daughters of officials whose only work positions were in government were revealed to have substantial offshore accounts, raising even greater suspicions about Mongolia’s political leaders.

The lack of enthusiasm for any political party in the June 2016 elections revealed the public’s disillusionment with the political process. The Mongolian People’s Party won a resounding victory, but only because the Democratic Party, which dominated the previous Khural, was in such disrepute. Since then, interviews and polls indicate a lack of confidence in the Mongolian People’s Party and perhaps even in democracy. Under these circumstances, the deification of Chinggis Khan and the use of his image as a unifying force have faltered. The government and the elites, which championed the “revival” of Chinggis, have scarcely had a favorable rating. Mining, which politicians, elites, and foreign advisers have emphasized as critical to the economy as opposed to herding and light and a select group of heavy industries, has declined due to a lack of Chinese demand for copper, gold, and coal. A growing number of unemployed and poor Mongolians has become less concerned with Chinggis as they are with eking out a living. The appeal to Chinggis is not as effective as in the 1990s, and contemplation of the past does not help to resolve Mongolia’s current pressing problems, which include beginning to repay massive debts that the country incurred over the past twenty years.

Conclusion

Politics has dictated the Mongolian image of Chinggis Khan, who, with his grandson Khubilai Khan,¹¹ are the most recognizable Mongolian leaders. During the Mongolian Empire, Chinggis’ descendants ruled much of Asia and respected his legacy as the founder of their state, but he was not an outsized national symbol. When Qing China conquered Mongolia in the seventeenth century, Chinggis became an inspiring figure and was virtually deified during this abyss of Mongolian history. The victory of socialism in 1921 crushed the cult that had developed around him. The Mongolian socialist state, adopting the Soviet Union’s agenda and views, either excluded Chinggis from

⁸ Morris Rossabi, “Mongolia’s Mangled Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, 30 May 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/mongolias-mangled-politics> (date accessed: 27 January 2017).

⁹ Transparency International, *Corruption Perception Index 2015*, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2015> (date accessed: 21 January 2017).

¹⁰ Rossabi, “Mongolia’s Mangled Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*.

¹¹ For Khubilai Khan, see Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, rev. ed. 2009).

discourse or denigrated him as a “feudal” barbarian who destroyed towns and massacred tens of thousands.

After 1990, in the initial stages of post-socialism, the government and the elites successfully revived and deified Chinggis during a chaotic time of transition to a market economy and the ensuing crises of unemployment, poverty, and social problems, including alcoholism, domestic abuse, and declines in education and medical care. Yet as negative trends increase, such as corruption, income inequality, disillusionment with politics and politicians, and economic dependence on China, the government’s and the elites’ glorification of Chinggis no longer reverberates with the population, and the future of Mongolia is uncertain. Use of Chinggis’ image to foster national unity and to conceal the population’s problems has become insufficient to cope with the magnitude of the economic, political, and social difficulties Mongolia faces.

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