In 1990, the democratic revolution ended seventy years of Soviet domination in Mongolia. Both in the protests that toppled the existing political system, and in the decade to follow, historical imagery played a key role in public debates on what it meant to be Mongol. This book examines issues of social memory, culture and identity in the context of the collapse of socialist rule in Mongolia. It shows that, in addition to the officially approved socialist interpretation of history, there existed unofficial, competing interpretations of the past.

Using Mongolia as its example, this book examines how knowledge is transmitted and transformed in light of political change by looking at shifting conceptions of historical figures. It suggests that the reflection of people’s concept of themselves is a much greater influence in the writing of history than has previously been thought and examines in detail how history was used to subvert the socialist project in Mongolia. This is the first study of the symbolic struggles fought by the ruling party and its opponents over who controls “the past” and what constitutes a “true Mongol.”

Based on extensive field research spanning over a decade, *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia* is the first English-language account of the Mongolian democratic revolution. Its questioning of preconceptions about socialist control over identity and the writing of history will be of great interest to those studying culture, history and memory, as well as those in the field of Mongolian and Post Soviet Studies.

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TRUTH, HISTORY AND POLITICS IN MONGOLIA

The memory of heroes

Christopher Kaplonski
For Cristina, who started it all, and for Ellen, who made sure it got finished
CONTENTS

Preface viii
Acknowledgements xi

1 Politics, memory and identity 1
2 Ulaanbaatar, fieldwork and identity 27
3 Democracy comes to Mongolia 48
4 The symbols of democracy 71
5 The icebergs of history 92
6 Chinggis Khaan: creating the uls 117
7 Zanabazar and Sühbaatar: Defending and regaining the uls 145
8 Social memory and evocative transcripts 174

Glossary 195
Notes 196
Bibliography 208
Index 221
One Tuesday in April 1990, a group of cultural anthropologists were meeting for a discussion over lunch. A friend of mine, Cristina Eghenter, reached into her backpack and pulled out a photocopy of a human interest piece from that day’s *New York Times*. “Here,” she said. “Mongolia falls between the Himalayas and Siberia. I thought you might be interested in this.” She knew my distaste for hot weather, and that I had been thinking of working in the Himalayas, or possibly Siberia, at that time a relatively new research site for American anthropologists. I read the article, which is still in my files somewhere. It was a short piece about life in Ulaanbaatar. It hinted at some interesting things going on in terms of identity and history, topics that I was interested in. I had become intrigued by how knowledge is transmitted and transformed between people, the power relations implied, and how this applied to vaguer concepts such as identity. The Mongols, the article mentioned, were coming out from under seventy years of essentially colonial Soviet rule. Thinking about history and identity in a new way was part of this, and to my mind immediately offered a chance to explore the questions I was interested in. Well, I thought to myself, it couldn’t hurt to read a bit more about Mongolia. And now, almost a decade and a half later, I am still learning about Mongolia and finding it fascinating.

In anthropological terms, it is relatively easy to explain why I find myself drawn back to Mongolia time after time. I was fortunate enough to first do research in Mongolia during the upheavals of the early years of post-socialism. Life was difficult, but the opportunity to watch and experience identity being rethought as it happened was wonderful. Since then, my interests, and often serendipity, have led my research in new directions. As Mongols have grappled with the numerous issues that post-socialism has presented them with, I have been able to follow along, deepening my knowledge and fascination, but also reminding me of just how little I truly understand. Although this book represents a degree of closure for one project, many of the issues addressed in it – nationalism, identity and memory – continue to act as leitmotifs in my ongoing research.
As a country that was largely closed to the outside world for the seven decades of socialist rule, contemporary Mongolia is not well represented in the literature. As a result, there are relatively few conventions in terms of transliteration of Cyrillic Mongolian and even names. Most of the established transliteration systems are based on Mongol bichig, the vertical script said to have been introduced by Chinggis Khaan. To spell contemporary Mongolian words and names in any of these systems would do them violence. I have thus adopted a transliteration system based largely on transliterating Russian from Cyrillic. The main difference is that the letter usually represented by a “kh” is written here with simply an “h,” a preference many, but by no means all, Mongols themselves use. The “kh” is retained in certain words, such as “khaan,” that are more familiar to English-language readers.

At times I have sacrificed technical accuracy for convention, when this did not effect pronunciation too much. The name Oyun, for example, should technically be written as Oyuun, but the former is a well-established convention which I have followed. At other times, I have followed the Mongolian transliteration more closely. Thus, Ulaanbaatar and Sühbaatar instead of the Russian Ulan Bator and Sukhe Bator. In general, my guiding principle has been to transliterate the Mongolian so as to approximate as closely as possible the way it is spoken by the Mongols of Ulaanbaatar.

In dealing with translations I have tried to stay as close to the Mongolian original as possible. At certain times, however, to better capture the feel or flow of the original, which a technically more accurate translation would miss, I have felt free to translate a bit more loosely than others might have done. Mongolian socialist writing, and in particular party resolutions and pronouncements, for example, was a delightful combination of bureaucratic boilerplate and bombast. I have tried to give my translations some of the same flavor. For most of these cases, I double-checked my decision with a native speaker who was also fluent in English. In both the cases of transliteration and translation, my choices should be transparent. Non-Mongol speakers should not be concerned with them, and Mongol speakers will be familiar with the issues that drove my choices. In the end, my decisions, will, I trust, enhance rather than detract from the book.

There are a few conventions that I have adopted that merit a brief discussion. One is my use of the term “Mongol” rather than “Mongolian” in talking about the people with whom I work. In Mongolian, the word Mongol can be translated either as “Mongol” or “Mongolian.” There is no clear convention here. It does seem that among Mongols writing or speaking in English, there is a preference for the term “Mongol.” I have thus chosen to use the term “Mongol” when referring to the people and “Mongolian” at other times. In cases where someone is not an ethnic Mongol, but a citizen of Mongolia, I have also resorted to the term “Mongolian.”
One of the manuscript reviewers for this book questioned my use of the term “post-socialist,” finding it somewhat “eccentric.” This, like the use of “Mongol” is a debatable point. While “post-communist” appears to be more common among the works of political scientists and economists, the anthropological community has largely, although not exclusively, chosen to term the period and political and social systems that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc “post-socialist.” I have thus adopted this usage as well.

Finally, as is well known, in the Soviet-style socialist systems, the Party and government, while technically separate, often operated as one. I have attempted to maintain, where valid, the distinction between the Party and the government, but this has not always been possible. In certain instances, such as Party resolutions, it is clear whose voice was speaking. In other cases, the two often acted in concert, or a decree may have been issued by the government that was clearly influenced by Party needs. In such instances, where the separation of the two was less clear cut, I have used the two terms in a relatively loose manner.

As I put the finishing touches to this manuscript, I am taking advantage of a sudden opportunity to return to Mongolia for a stay of close to a year. I find myself of two minds. The opportunity came suddenly, leaving me only about three weeks to finish the manuscript, move out of my apartment, put things in storage and take leave of friends and family. Yet as the time draws nearer, I find myself going back and lingering over photos of the first snowstorm of the season blowing in over the mountains south of the city, the sweeping expanses of the steppe, or the magic of Ulaanbaatar on a cold winter’s night. Mongolia has long been a second home to me, and I find it somehow fitting that as this project draws to a close, I will once again be heading home.

Christopher Kaplonski
Worcester, MA
August 2003
This project has had a long genesis. It stretches back in its original form to my Ph.D. dissertation. It was variously revised, set aside and returned to over the intervening years as other projects demanded my attention and the manuscript searched for a publisher willing to take on a book dealing with a not-easily characterized research project focused on an area little known even to most anthropologists and other researchers. It has thus accumulated an ever-longer string of debts and acknowledgements over the years, and it is inevitable that I will neglect to include some people who should be mentioned. My apologies to them.

My greatest debt goes to all the people in Mongolia who have helped in some way or another. Particular thanks are due the countless people who over the years have provided insight, interviews and hospitality during my stays and travels. I have learned more than can be reflected in this work, or any book, from them. Most remain nameless here but I hope I have not done violence to their thoughts or beliefs.

Ts. Shagdasüren sponsored my visa through the National University in 1993. The International Association for Mongol Studies (IAMS) and Professor Sh. Bira provided a home base in 1997, 1999 and 2000. I had the privilege of teaching at the Department of Anthropology at the Mongolian National University in 2000–01, and the various students and faculty members added much to my understanding of life in Mongolia.

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Loretta Kim read a late version of the manuscript and provided useful advice, again, not all of which I followed. She also was a limitless source of enthusiasm for the final few months of the project. Ellen McGill always
had insightful comments, gave unflagging support and made sure the manuscript actually survived its last stages.

Various readers and reviewers of the manuscript at its different stages offered suggestions to strengthen the book and made me rethink it, although I did not always take their advice. An earlier version of Chapter 3 was presented to the Central Asian and Caucasus Working Group, Harvard University, in November 2002. I did not always take their advice in making revisions, but their input was appreciated. Various themes covered in the book have also been presented as conference papers over the years, and the audience members deserve thanks for their questions and comments.

A previous version of Chapter 5 appeared as “One hundred years of history: changing paradigms in Mongolian historiography,” in *Inner Asia: Occasional Papers*. I am grateful to the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit for their permission to include the current version here.

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Faults of both commission and omission are, of course, my own.
In the thirteenth century, Chinggis Khaan and his immediate successors established the largest contiguous land empire ever. For accomplishing what Napoleon only dreamed of, Chinggis Khaan (more commonly known in the West as Genghis Khan) was rewarded in Europe with such titles as “The Scourge of God” and “World Conqueror.”\(^1\) The Mongolian armies were thought by some to be a punishment sent by God. The medieval Europeans were never quite sure how to react to the Mongols who were rumored to be some sort of fantastic monsters, but could perhaps prove an ally against the infidel Muslims during the Crusades. They defeated the best European military forces of the time, famously affected fish prices in England and Columbus was spurred on by tales of the great wealth of the Mongol rulers of China.\(^2\)

The intervening centuries have not been much kinder to the Mongols than the initial impressions in Western eyes. Our perceptions of Chinggis Khaan and the Mongols gives lie to the dictum that history is written by the winners. In this case, our view of the Mongols is shaped by the fact that every time the Mongols encountered Europeans, the Europeans lost, and usually lost badly. A grudging admiration for their military skills is linked to repulsion at the often brutal, but effective, tactics employed. Chinggis Khaan is invoked as the epitome of brutality.

If we look to Mongolia itself, the image of Chinggis Khaan changes dramatically.\(^3\) Mongols, of course, are aware of Chinggis Khaan’s military campaigns, and take pride in them. Yet in the years immediately after the democratic revolution of 1990, this was not the main focus of interest. In contemporary Mongolian literature and thought, Chinggis Khaan emerges as a far-sighted founder of the Mongolian state, one responsible for bringing law and order to Mongolia. Some go so far as to attribute to him democratic tendencies. Only somewhat incidentally, it seems, did he conquer a good part of the world.

In this book, I explore the ways and reasons the perceptions of Chinggis Khaan in Mongolia are what they are. Mongols and Westerners both like to portray Chinggis’s new prominence as a sort of birth. In effect, they
argue, the memory of him was prohibited and died under socialism and was reborn with the fall of the socialist government. Yet rather than a death and rebirth, we should view what took place in 1989–90 as a second birth, a metamorphosis. While the post-socialist view of Chinggis is not brand new, the socialist view of him has not really died any more than a caterpillar dies when it becomes a butterfly.

Yet this book is not simply a work on literary and popular conceptions of historical figures in Mongolia. In examining the shifting images of Chinggis Khaan and two other key figures from Mongolian history (D. Sükhbaatar, “Mongolia’s Lenin,” active in the early twentieth century, and G. Zanabazar, a “living Buddha” of the seventeenth century), I explore the larger issues of the relationship between politics, the uses of history and the construction of identity. In particular, I look at the role of historical imagery in both reflecting and shaping public opinion in the democratic revolution of 1990.

Before we can understand how perceptions of Chinggis Khaan and others changed in late twentieth century Mongolia, we need to understand why this matters. Let us therefore take a step backward for a moment, and turn to how history was written under socialism. It is only by understanding how history was portrayed during the socialist period (1921–90) that we can come to fully appreciate not only how significant the changes that have taken place are, but also how interpretations of history were contested, and identity constructed, under socialism and why we should care. As we shall see, it is simultaneously with and against the views of official socialist historiography that post-socialist understandings of history and identity are constructed. As is always the case, history was more than an accounting of what happened to whom when.

Marxist social and political theory, as generally understood in what was the Soviet bloc, including the then-Mongolian People’s Republic, was predicated on a model of unilineal cultural evolution. Societies, it was held, followed a pre-ordained course, moving from primitive communism through a number of intermediate stages marked by economically driven social conflict, ultimately reaching the utopia of communism. This socio-economic change was explained in terms of progress, each stage arising from, and necessarily supplanting, the previous one.

One of the implications of this model of society and politics is that under Soviet-style socialism the writing of history became much more than an academic exercise. History was a key element in the justification of socialist regimes, suggesting that they were inevitable and desirable. The past existed solely to lead up to and legitimate the present. The ruling party claimed its authority to lead the people on the basis of “scientific” laws that model and predict social evolution. It follows from such an approach to history that accounts of history can be used to legitimize, or contest, the existing political system, and therefore must be controlled. As
Rubie Watson has put it, “In such an environment, incorrect understand-
ings [of history] are judged not only to be wrongheaded but also
 treasonous; they are by definition antiparty and therefore antistate”
(Watson 1994a: 2). We shall see, however, that in Mongolia the control
was far from as total as the Party hoped for.

It should not be surprising then that in the Mongolian People’s
Republic, as in the Soviet Union, the openness and reform begun by the
head of the state and Party, J. Batmönkh (following Gorbachev’s lead), in
the mid-1980s was accompanied by a new level of public debate
concerning history. The “truth” about history became an issue discussed
by both historians and the population at large. Although presented and
often viewed as a debate about the correspondence of writing about
history with an objective reality, it was and continues to be much more
than that. The “truth” in some ways is ultimately irrelevant. As was true
in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, “the debate about history
is a debate about politics” (Davies 1989: 187).

Although the debate about truth in history is a political one, it would be
an oversimplification, however tempting, to draw quick and easy parallels
equating the old socialism with “bad” (i.e. “false”) history and the new
democracy with “good” (i.e. “true”) history. As one Soviet historian
noted, “[I]t would be a profound misapprehension to reduce our new tasks
to a simple arithmetical operation – the elementary substitution of minuses
for pluses (or vice versa) in evaluating the past” (Kozlov 1989: 35). The
actual relationship, at both the public and the private levels, is far more
complex. History was, and continues to be, a battleground. This is much
more than an academic exercise, however. Views of history are often mo-
bilized for political (and other) ends. This mobilization is a global
phenomenon. In other parts of the world, one thinks of the debates
sparked by Daniel Goldhagen’s book, Hitler’s Willing Executioners (1996),
on the role of “ordinary” Germans in the Holocaust. Discussions on
Japanese militarism in Asia, “comfort women” in the Second World War,
and the dropping of the atomic bombs by the US are also part of this
phenomenon. Understanding the process by which this happens will help
us understand the reasons it happens as well.

The question this book asks and seeks to answer, put most simply, is:
what is this relationship between politics, history and identity? In this
form, the question is not new. The fact that there is some sort of relation is
beyond dispute. “To make themselves the master of memory and forgetful-
ness is one of the great preoccupations of the classes, groups, and
individuals who have dominated and continue to dominate historical soci-
eties” (Le Goff 1992: 54). Edward Said has put it rather more bluntly:
“the art of memory for the modern world is both for historians as well as
ordinary citizens and institutions very much something to be used,
misused, and exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there for
each person to possess and contain” (2000: 179). Said reminds us of an important point here – the processes we are talking about are undertaken not only by historians and other intellectuals, who are our main focus in the Mongolian case, but by people who might appear to have less of a tangible interest in such issues. Yet he errs in attributing this solely to the modern world, if by this he intends the twentieth century and after. Although nineteenth-century (and earlier) historians may have pursued a belief in an objective history, Ernest Renan noted that nation-making depended in part on getting history “wrong” (Renan 1995: 145). In other words, perhaps there was an objective history, but at times it was not the most convenient one for the needs at hand.

To expand upon this observation, this study maps out the relationship between perceptions of history and the political changes linked to the democratic movement of 1989–90 in Mongolia and its aftermath. What can we learn about the ways in which public and private discourses on a topic (in this case history) are influenced by and in turn influence political change? The conventional wisdom holds that with the democratic changes came new historical knowledge. People were free to talk about Chinggis Khaan and others in new ways. “His name was forbidden and banished to oblivion” was how one Mongolian researcher recently described the socialist period (Tsetsenbileg 2001: 184). We must ask, however, if the socialists were successful in imposing their view of history, where was this new historical knowledge to come from? Was it unearthed in secret archives? Was it invented? Was it imported? Or perhaps had it actually been present in official accounts all along?

I argue that the major shift was not in the overall stock of historical knowledge itself, but rather in the public presentation of and debate about such knowledge. In other words, what was presented as new knowledge wasn’t really that new. It is not so much that the equivalents of perestroika and glasnost’ instituted at MAHN’s (Mongol Ardyn Huvsalgalt Nam – The Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party) Nineteenth Party Congress in 1986 paved the way for a radical re-visioning of history.6 It would be more accurate to suggest that the changes allowed for the public admissibility of people’s private knowledge of history.7

This argument implies an interesting twist on Vaclav Havel’s by-now famous dictum that under state socialism, all were to some extent both complicit in the maintenance of the system and victims of it (1991). The writing (and understanding) of history in Mongolia further suggests that while all may have been to a degree complicit, many also resisted the system (or had the opportunity to do so) through their readings of history. This, of course, could and did include the writers of history themselves.

We must be careful not to go too far in how we interpret unofficial readings of history. As Rubie Watson has noted, “it is important that we do not credit the socialist state and its agents with too much power or its
citizens with too much boldness” (Watson 1994a: 2). While opposition and resistance did take place, and people held private opinions, many if not most people simply went about their lives. There were few people in Mongolia who could be clearly labeled dissidents, as Havel or Sakharov were elsewhere. Those that are now often seen as dissidents, such as Ts. Damdinsüren, B. Rinchen and even D. Tömör-Ochir, were at times also establishment figures. Their dissent seems largely to have been in being outspoken and criticizing certain policies, rather than an active and willful opposition to socialism per se. As I shall return to below, samizdat – literature produced and distributed underground, relatively common in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe – was rare before the end of the 1980s in Mongolia. A balance must be sought between downplaying and overemphasizing issues of resistance and unofficial viewpoints.

It is clear that the degree to which the images of the figures considered have changed (or failed to) from the period of “the victory of socialist relations of production in the Mongolian People’s Republic” (1954–60) to the late 1990s speaks to certain conceptions of Mongolian identity, which in turn are closely linked to the collapse of the socialist regime. Writing on the post-socialist situation in what was then Czechoslovakia, Ladislav Holy has observed that

references to Czech history recur not only in much political commentary, but also in everyday political discourse. By constantly referring in this way to their history, the Czechs tell themselves who they are. They do so by projecting contemporary ideas and values into their narratives of the past, thus creating myths which are then in turn invoked for legitimation purposes.

(Holy 1993: 210)

I extend Holy’s argument by examining historical imagery not only within the context of political discourse, but in daily life more generally. The influence of politics on thinking about history (and vice versa) is not limited to campaign speeches or political debates. Rather, “‘regressive modernisation,’ the political journey into the future by detour through the past” (Linke 1995: 2), must be seen as a widespread phenomenon in any society. Political discourse may highlight the topic, but it permeates the public sphere in other areas as well. This was true throughout the 1990s and continues to be so today, but the debates have become less prominent as time goes by. This is not because they have declined in importance, but rather because the issues and figures argued about have assumed a certain taken-for-grantedness, if not always a specific place, in the Mongolian imagination. People agree that Chinggis Khaan is important without necessarily agreeing upon precisely why he is so. In Sherry Ortner’s terms, Chinggis Khaan has become a key symbol for Mongols (Ortner 1973).
Often, “the social dimensions of memory [and history] are more important than the need to verify accuracy ... What is important is that the memory be authentic for the person at the moment of construction, not that it be an accurate depiction of a past incident” (Thelen 1989: 1122–1123). In other words, truth can be highly malleable. What is true is largely what one needs to be true. This does not mean that history and the truth can be interpreted in any way whatsoever. Even disregarding epistemological questions on the nature of truth, what is seen as “true” within a certain group must answer to various social constraints. One is ultimately free to claim anything as true, but such claims must invoke larger resonances to be accepted more generally. For example, the nineteenth-century Japanese claim that Chinggis Khaan was a Japanese samurai who emigrated to Mongolia, is known by some Mongolian scholars, but universally ignored (see Suyematz 1879). It simply conflicts too much with other historical “truths.”

Truth, as generally understood within a particular group, is collectively negotiated. In making this statement, I am adopting a stance that parallels what is known as the pragmatic theory of truth, which “focuses ... on what problems are resolved by a particular knowledge claim” (Borofsky 1987: 17). (What is gained by seeing Chinggis Khaan as an expounder of democratic principles?) Ultimately, when we, as outsiders looking in, attempt to judge such claims, we fall back on a coherence theory of truth, which attempts to examine and evaluate different sets of evidence against each other (Borofsky 1987:16–17). (How well – if at all – does the evidence support such a contention?) Although throughout this book, I shall at times compare Mongolian interpretations of past events with what other sources or scholars tell us, I am not interested in being judgmental about such claims to truth. What is of key interest and importance is how and why the statements that are made are, in fact, made. External reference points help to bring the issues into sharper relief.10

This point is driven home in a MAHN Politburo resolution from 21 July 1949. In it, the Politburo discusses the need to recall a recently published textbook, noting that “In [The People’s Textbook] the history section about Mongolian feudalism not only does not give a Marxist appraisal of the class nature of the campaign of pillaging carried out by Chinggis Khaan, but even praises it. This affair shows that some backward elements [heseg] of our intelligentsia are still mired in nationalist egoism” (Party History Institute 1967: 327). Oddly enough, while the textbook in question does have words of praise for Chinggis, the section concludes by noting “The blood of the children of honest Mongolian herders flowed to support [lit.: tölöö] Mongolian feudal privilege, despotism, and rule. In this Chinggis was not honest, and this is the shameful side of history” (Jamsranjav 1948: 56). It may not have been a Marxist reading of history, but it was far from overly laudatory. In this case, as in many others, the
political needs of the moment (what needs to be true) override any other discussion about possible historical truths. Although this is perhaps a particularly egregious example, it must be emphasized that I am by no means arguing such revaluations of history occurred only under socialism. If not always as blatantly, similar influences on the writing of history were to recur throughout the pre- and post-socialist periods as well, as they continue to occur throughout all parts of the world.

In Mongolia in the 1990s, the historical images reflected the key tendency to construct a concept of “being Mongol” in opposition to being Chinese or Russian. Although most immediately apparent after the collapse of socialism in 1990, this tendency was present, if less pronounced, in the later 1990s. In the early 1990s, the construction of this identity hinged in large part upon the exclusion of the socialist period from what was seen as legitimate Mongolian history. It was being brought back into the discussion by the late 1990s, as particular versions of the non-socialist past became more widely established and offered a platform on which to base new concepts of “being Mongol,” and intellectuals and others could deal more directly with the legacy of socialism. (For one such issue, see Kaplonski 1999, 2002.)

Despite this initial amnesia concerning the history of the socialist period, a substantial element of the current interpretations of history remain influenced by socialist constructions. Furthermore, although newly public in the post-socialist period, this “identity-centered” reading of history also existed under socialism as an unofficial, and usually oral, history. It is this identity-centered reading of history that is now in the process of being incorporated into textualized historical knowledge, and will be influential in shaping the direction of future scholarship as well as popular writings. As Chapters 6 and 7 show, this identity-centered view of history could also be found in the officially sanctioned version of the past, if not explicitly so.

As a rough and ready guide, it would not be too far from the mark to see this identity-centered history and the official socialist history as the two main currents of thinking and writing about history over the past several decades. Throughout the socialist period, they were involved in a dance, each contesting yet influencing the other. Which one was to lead the dance may be impossible to decide. It is possible to fully separate them only in theory. As the resolution quoted above clearly indicates, the official socialist history was also designed as an identity-centered version of history. Its identity, however, was the properly socialist one, and it is this basic fact that put it at odds with other interpretations, and often led to it being at least partially disregarded.

As the socialist era progressed, the government attempted to strengthen its control over history. This, however, was only partially successful. “As the official writing of history became increasingly doctrinaire and realist,
it acquired a supratruth value. It was not to be faulted or criticized ... but somehow it lost contact with ‘the truth.’ Few people openly acknowledged the change, but everyone knew it” (Humphrey 1994: 38). The facts, as Caroline Humphrey also notes, might not be open to dispute. But the particular emphasis given to them could be contested. In essence, the two versions of history drifted apart and this would result in one of them – usually the official version – being called into question. In many ways, the two main currents of historiography were dependent upon each other.

I must at this point contextualize this study further. It should be kept in mind that the topics discussed here are to be located within the often chaotic situation of post-socialist Mongolia. Writing in 1992, Caroline Humphrey noted that in Mongolia, the “present ... is an era in the way that a roller-coaster is a place” (1992: 377). The initial fieldwork for this project took place in 1993, when the economic crisis following the collapse of socialism was at its peak. I have followed the topic through repeated visits from 1997 until the present. While I will refer to the entire post-socialist period, the bulk of the discussion and analysis will focus on the turbulent and intellectually fascinating and challenging early 1990s.

Opinions and thoughts about Chinggis Khaan and other historical figures are (or were) relatively easy to come across in Mongolia. This, however, does not mean they were necessarily an overriding concern during the entire period that this book covers. At times important, the debates over history often took a back seat to more immediate issues of politics and the problems of daily life. Yet the role of history often came into focus time and again, most often during discussions on the future of the country and what it meant to be a Mongolian. At other times, the very non-issue of history spoke volumes.

Such taken-for-grantedness pervaded much of my research, often to a much greater degree than I had expected. While many people – intellectuals especially – thought long and hard about issues of history, others didn’t. Standing in a queue for bread one day in 1993 (a frequent and necessary past-time during that period), an old man behind me asked me what I was doing in Mongolia. “Studying history – the relationship between history and politics,” I replied. “Yes, it’s an important topic,” he replied, and went back to ignoring me.

The importance became less explicit as the decade wore on, but this was due in part to the simple fact that it had once again been largely internalized. What was still new in 1993 was commonplace a few years later. Still, such conversations cropped up from time to time. As one woman explained to me: “You know, the fact is [the interest] has subsided ... But, still, there is something, in particular with the mass media people, who from time to time say ‘Hey, Chinggis Khaan was such a hero,’ and that sort of thing.” With such an explicit recognition of the role between
history and politics, we are surely justified in looking to issues of history in understanding identity in post-socialist Mongolia.

Social memory

My theoretical interests that ultimately led to this work are those of social memory and power–knowledge relations. Social (or collective) memory has been defined as “what remains of the past in the lived reality of groups, or what these groups make of the past” (Pierre Nora, quoted in Le Goff 1992: 95).14

Here I want to take a moment and argue against an elision of categories that seems to happen often – if not explicitly – in social memory studies. That is the collapsing of memory into history. As the French historian Jacques Le Goff has noted, “recent, naïve trends seem virtually to identify history with memory, and even to give preference in some sense to memory” (1992: xi). Although written over a decade ago, his observation still stands. While the two mutually influence each other, social memory is ultimately the more expansive category. Social memory includes acts of “commemoration, monuments, street names, definitions of self and other, etc.”15 History, as an attempt to understand, narrate or reconstruct the past, while dealing with some of these same topics, in this context serves social memory. It serves to provide source material and justification for remembering in a particular way. But the two are not the same. This will become clear as we examine different ways of writing and thinking about history in the larger context of social memory in Mongolia.

As noted earlier, state socialism is predicated upon a claim to authoritative knowledge. Marxism provided the blueprint for the development of society and the understanding of history. Dissent from the approved understanding was not just dissent about history or social theory. It was ultimately about the regime’s right to rule. Hence public space and discussions needed to be controlled. The underlying claim to rule effectively precluded the possibility of wide-ranging debate on a number of issues, including history.

Geoffrey Hosking in particular sees the “distortion and suppression of historical truth” linked to the process of collectivization (1989: 120). Collectivization, which represents an intensifying attempt at political as well as economic control, was also accompanied by a shift in social memory. The Politburo resolution cited above (see p. 6) indicates that this shift actually occurred somewhat before successful collectivization in Mongolia (c. 1958–59), but during the implementation of the first five-year plan. Hosking’s general point remains valid in this case, however, for both what we would see as the “distortion of historical truth” and collectivization were part of the larger “victory of the socialist relations of production.” A new social order was being forged, along with a new
identity, and “proper” literature and history were to be as important as collectivized herds.¹-six

Within this context, this present study makes two main contributions to the literature. First, I examine social memory at a period of greater change than has been the case previously. I return to this point later, to discuss some of the difficulties in doing so. This project is not concerned with social memory under a relatively stable socialist regime, but rather looks at it during the aftershocks of the fall of socialism. By focusing on such a period, we are better able to capture and understand the various dynamics involved in the attempt to co-opt history, politics and the “truth.”

In doing so, we can begin to understand the mechanisms by which social history is transmitted and transformed, an area too often regarded as unproblematic. One of the goals of this work is to problematize the concept of the “social” in “social memory.” This is a concept that also has too often been taken for granted, although this has been changing, particularly in the post-socialist context (see Watson 1994a, but also Nuttall and Coetzee 1998). More specifically, we need to take less for granted the availability of spaces and times in which social memory could be constructed.

The interaction necessary for construction of social memories collides with “the colonization of public and private space [which] is one of the hallmarks of state socialism” (Watson 1994a: 19). Not only was the official identity decreed from above, but it actively sought to eradicate all other identities. While this was often the case under colonialism (or at least was perceived to be), a greater autonomy existed under colonialism than socialism. Colonialism was predicated in part upon a difference between ruler and ruled (Chatterjee 1993: 16–18; see also Said 1978), and this difference allowed a certain degree of autonomy in the cultural sphere of the colonized, even while impacting it. Thus, although general patterns may be the same in socialist and non-socialist systems, the mechanisms of construction and transmission of social memory appear to differ.

The degree of difference between issues of social memory under socialist and non-socialist systems can at times be substantial. James Scott’s work, Domination and the Arts of Resistance (1990), although not dealing explicitly with social memory, gives us an idea of the degree of difference. Scott claims that certain areas and/or times could be “cordoned off” from the public discourse, and serve as periods and places of resistance, resulting in what he terms “hidden transcripts” in which the dominant public discourse and the power relations inhered in it could be challenged. Scott warns that “power relations are not, alas, so straightforward that we can call what is said in power-laden contexts false and what is said offstage true” (1990: 5). But they are intended for separate audiences, and thus carry different messages. Scott also argues that both the dominated and the dominators had their own versions of “hidden transcripts,” since
both were involved, albeit unequally, in performances in the public sphere. In the current context, however, we are more interested in the dominated, for even the political leaders in Mongolia were not at the top of the heap. They, too, had ultimately to answer to Moscow. As Caroline Humphrey has put it, “the true, naked interests of both the dominators and dominated ... were known to everyone and found in virtually everyone” (1994: 23). No one, not even the Party bosses, were absolute power-holders in this context.

Humphrey has also noted that conditions in a socialist society are not sufficiently similar to a colonial or class-based antagonism to allow such hidden transcripts to be effective, if possible at all (Humphrey 1994: 25). Scott’s examples (slavery, colonialism, class antagonism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain) all presume a conflict of cultures. This was not the case in Mongolia, nor in other socialist countries. Despite many of the decisions ultimately coming from Moscow, the people issuing the orders, and the face of the government, were still Mongolian or Hungarian or Czech. Both parties belong to a system the other is intimately familiar with. In effect, “everyone understands the arbitrariness of any individual’s position in the hierarchy of power, and everyone knows, therefore, that morality rests elsewhere” (Humphrey 1994: 26). The opposition between dominated and dominator loses some, but not all, of its force. In is not that the opposition ceases to exist or matter. Rather, empathy of a sort becomes possible. Even the immediate dominators are, in a different context, dominated.

Humphrey suggests that rather than hidden transcripts, what existed under socialism were “evocative transcripts” (Humphrey 1994: 22). These are texts, oral and written, that are ambiguous and thus readable in such a manner that it is possible to recover oppositional as well as official meanings. They are deniable if need be, but also recognizable. This public nature of the evocative transcripts is necessary precisely because they were subject to scrutiny. They are hidden in plain view, as it were.

Scott also suggests that the “carriers [of hidden transcripts] are likely to be as socially marginal as the places where they gather” (1990: 123). It will become clear, however, that evocative transcripts, while not omnipresent, were quite common, and while anchored in certain ways (chiefly through texts), neither they nor their carriers were socially marginal.

This is a key theme of this book. In examining the relationship between history, politics and identity, I argue that it was certain key forms of evocative transcripts, to be found in official, approved narratives, that helped propagate and preserve unofficial histories. Social memory hitched a ride, as it were, on the back of the official party line. Some of these anchor points in the history books seem to have been intentional. Despite protests of some Mongols to the contrary, the use of the title Öndör Gegeen
Highest Holiness,” or “Loft Brilliance” in another phrasing), a title of extreme respect, to refer to Zanabazar, the First Javzandamba Hutagt, in socialist era texts, where he was largely seen as a traitor as well as a deceiver of the masses, seems too jarring to be attributable to customary usage. Other linkages may have been less explicit (such as some of Chinggis Khaan’s political accomplishments) but this does not make them any less powerful or valid.

While state socialism sought to possess a monopoly over interpretations of history and identity, and in fact was able to do so to a degree, it was not completely successful. The means by which people resisted the total domination of the state-favored identity was different from other non-socialist systems, but it was present nonetheless. In Duara’s words, “The state is never able to eliminate alternative constructions of the nation” (1995: 9). This held true for the Mongolian case as well, although the state’s attempts to do so must be taken into account for two reasons. The first is that the state’s attempts to control history and identity affected unofficial views. The other, in some ways much more immediate, reason is simply that failure to take the state’s attempts into account could and did have very real consequences for the people living with them. Insufficient commitment to the official view could result in anything ranging from a reprimand to exile or worse.

In addressing the concerns of the historian, Jacques Le Goff has written “the conditions under which the document was produced must be carefully studied … The structures of power in a society include the power of certain social categories and dominant groups to voluntarily or involuntarily leave behind them testimony that can orient historiography in one direction or another” (1992: 183, emphasis in original). The Mongolian case again suggests a slightly different, more complex picture. Although ultimately guidance came from the Soviets, there was an active native Mongolian intelligentsia. While this intelligentsia, the “culture makers,” to use Katherine Verdery’s (1991) phrase, were the writers of the official histories, the histories they wrote often served double duty as evocative transcripts, and were amenable to multiple interpretations. They could and did contest the official messages they carried. As a result, the influence on historiography could not have been as uniform or unilinear as Le Goff suggests. Instead, we must be aware of multiple influences stemming from the same source, each one of which seeks to shape the writing and understanding of history in its own direction.

Others have begun to look at the important aspect of silence in memory. What is not said is often as important (or even more so) than what is said (Trouillot 1995). This silence can be imposed by the state or other powerful institutions and figures, or it can be the self-imposed silence of order and necessity. “We must always remember that memory is an active search for meaning. Sometimes social memory does not so much ‘lose’
specific information as intentionally disregard it” (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 73). We must be aware, however, of “critical distinctions between ‘not speaking of’ and ‘not remembering’ the past” (Cohen 1997: 302).

In the Mongolian case, we can see this clearly with Chinggis Khaan. Chinggis Khaan was obviously remembered, and even taught about, during the socialist period. But there were certain understandings of him that were not spoken of openly. These would include more positive interpretations of his role in history. Other events had to be “not remembered.” This holds true even in the post-socialist period. In seeing Chinggis Khaan as the creator of the first Mongolian state, it is “forgotten” that his methods in doing so included what would, by current standards, be considered genocide of other groups of nomads on the Mongolian steppe (see the Secret History, sections 153–154; Onon 1990: 67–68).¹

One of the key concerns of memory studies has been with commemoration (Gillis 1994; Zerubavel 1995). This overlaps with a concern for spaciality that runs through many studies of memory, social and otherwise. This is understandable. Visible, accessible instantiations of memory often take place at specific sites – commemorations usually happen at monuments, for instance. This link of memory and location is not new. The ancient Greeks, and medieval Europeans, among others, used envisioned physical arrangements as memory aids (Yates 1992).

Mongolia represents an interesting twist on this aspect of social memory. At first, the Mongolian case seems to fit the standard model. Mongolian cultural and religious practices and beliefs place a great emphasis on sacred places, and even today countless ovoo – rock cairns to local gazriin ezen (lords of the earth or land) – dot the landscape. Some are even to be found in Ulaanbaatar itself, and few hills on the outskirts of the city are without them. This spills over into politics, as various government officials travel to certain sites at times of commemoration. Politicians will attend tahilga (prayer services) at sacred mountains, with ample press coverage to ensure their Mongolness is made amply evident (see, for example, Myagmarjav 2001).

Mongolian attitudes towards sacred spaces, however, are different from most attitudes towards space and place in social memory theory. I shall return to this in more detail in the Conclusion, but will note here that by and large it is the place qua place that is important, rather than as a site of commemoration. Physicality, where it does exist in social memory, appears largely (although not exclusively) to be the result of Chinese or Soviet influences. In Mongolia, rather, it is the historical (or mythical) individual who chiefly serves as a focal point for social memory. I shall return to this point in later chapters.

Ulaanbaatar is particularly interesting in regard to social memory. The city itself, where national politics are played out, and public portrayals of the past are largely shaped, is a relatively new city, and one that is devoid
of physical spaces that are associated with pre-twentieth-century history. This reinforces the peculiarities of social memory in Mongolia. Although the city originally was founded as a monastery for Zanabazar, the First Javzandamba Hutagt, there are no physical links with him. As a Buddhist city, Ulaanbaatar is linked more firmly with the Bogd Khaan, the Eighth Javzandamba Hutagt, and ruler of Mongolia from 1911 to 1921. Physical links to Chinggis Khaan are also absent. There are no monuments to or statues of Chinggis in Ulaanbaatar accessible to the public. As a result, imagery and spectacle are co-opted, but they also follow socialist precedents. During Naadam, the national festival held in early July (the date commemorates the People’s Revolution of 1921 that ushered in socialism), the tug – horsehair standards – of Chinggis Khaan are paraded into the stadium by a cavalry honor guard, wearing uniforms that are supposed to be reminiscent of the Chinggis period. Yet the entire process – the parade itself (not to mention Naadam) – are holdovers from the socialist period, dressed in pre-socialist finery. Oddly enough, the parade itself built upon religious precursors from the time of the Bogd Khaan, thus carrying – at least for those who knew their history well enough – its own contestation.

Nationalism and Mongolia

The examination of the historical images and memories in Mongolia inevitably leads us to the concept of nationalism. Although never an unproblematical concept, the issue of nationalism seems to become especially murky in the Mongolian case. It is neither clearly and unambiguously fully ethnic nor political in either content or form. Our best guide to understanding Mongolian nationalism may be to look for clues in the field of post-colonial studies, but even here caution must be exercised, for although much of the rhetoric of the post-socialist period paints the Soviets and their “advisors” as a colonial power, the democratic revolution of 1990 did not result in the establishment of a newly independent state. The parallels hold to a certain degree, but cannot be pushed too far.

Generally speaking, there are two broad variants of nationalism recognized by most scholars of the subject: nationalism as a political (and usually spatial) ideology and nationalism as an ideology motivated by ethnic/cultural concerns. These two broad categories or ways of viewing the nation – as politically and culturally oriented – are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although they may well collide in practice (see Brubaker 1994).

The complicating factor in the Mongolian case is that both are present, but not necessarily in the ways that may be expected. The result has been a collision (although often a silent one) between contrasting views of what it means to be a Mongol, although the views are not always consistently
articulated as such. (For a fuller explication of these strains than what follows, see Kaplonski 2001.)

One of these views promotes an ethnic/cultural understanding of Mongolian identity. In its most political form, it is manifest in the concept of pan-Mongolism, which holds that all Mongolians, of Mongolia, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China and Buriats in Russia, should be united, at least culturally. This brand of nationalism has a long pedigree, appearing at various points in history as a political movement, particularly in the first part of the twentieth century. It is now largely relegated to the sphere of cultural exchanges, and is not generally seen as politically sensitive in Mongolia and has no political proponents.

Contrasted to pan-Mongolism is Halh-centrism. The Halh are the dominant ethnic group in Mongolia, constituting roughly 80 per cent of the population, and concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the country. At its most extreme, it can be seen in the idea, bandied about in the early 1990s, that the presidency should be restricted to a Halh Mongol. Less radically, Halh-centrism can be associated with the collapse of the geopolitical nationalism associated with modern, independent Mongolia into an ethnically based national sentiment focused on the Halh Mongols alone. To be Mongol, in this case, is to be Halh. Other groups may be nominally Mongol, but are not to be viewed as truly Mongol, and it is such Mongols that the strongest hostility of the Halh-centrists is reserved for. Ironically enough, one of the most vocal proponents of Halh-centrism throughout the 1990s, the poet (and later Member of Parliament) O. Dashbalbar, was himself not a Halh. Halh-centrism can be seen as a xenophobic form of nationalism, and is largely a conservative or reactionary phenomenon.

Then, just to make matters more interesting, there is a vague sort of general nationalism or chauvinism, which being based on history and tradition, one would expect to come close to pan-Mongolism (and in certain aspects does), but in fact remains centered on the state of Mongolia. It, however, is not necessarily limited to the Halh. It is in fact this nationalism which was perhaps the most prevalent in the early 1990s. I hesitate to simply term this patriotism, a love of country, which it certainly resembles in many respects. However, in the early 1990s this general nationalism was still constructed very much against non-Mongolian identities. Even this form of national sentiment was tinged with an attitude of superiority. It should not, however, be confused with civic nationalism. Although determined by territory and the modern state of Mongolia, it is not simply civic nationalism, as the main concern remains with an ethnically based identity.

All of these forms of nationalism are largely culturally or ethnically based. In contrast, certain Mongolian politicians and intellectuals have
called for civic nationalism, where one’s allegiance to the state of Mongolia is all that matters. This, however, has largely fallen on deaf ears. It is not that civic nationalism is entirely absent from Mongolia. Rather, it is a voice that is more often than not drowned out in debates over identity and politics.

It is in this context that we can best understand a comment made to me by a Member of the Ih Hural (Parliament) in 1997. I had asked her a question about her opinions on nationalism. “It depends what you mean by a nationalist,” she replied. “I consider myself a nationalist.” She then went on, however, to talk of what she termed the “retrograde nationalists,” the conservative proponents of Mongolian “tradition” and “customs” in the face of encroaching Western ideas and practices.

The term for nationalism itself has a loaded history in Mongolia. Nationalism – ündesten üzel – was viewed at best with suspicion under socialism and at worse was a cause for disciplinary actions. Patriotism (eh oronch üzel), allegiance to the motherland and its development, was something to be proud of and striven for. A good socialist could (and should) be a patriot, but not a nationalist. Civic nationalism thus parallels socialist-era patriotism, and this may well help account for its lack of prominence.

Yet another kind of nationalism is largely missing from the public arena. There is only one major non-Mongolian ethnic group in Mongolia, the Kazakhs, who are largely found in the western regions of the country, and make up just over 4 per cent of the population (National Statistical Office 2001: 50). One aimag (province), Bayan-Ölgii, is seen often as the “Kazakh aimag.” In the rhetoric of many Mongols, the Kazakhs are seen as a nationality, while the various groups of Mongols are seen as ethnic groups, understood as “subdivisions” within nationalities. Bulag reports mutual Kazakh-Mongol discontent in the early 1990s, but this has not been an overriding issue (1998: 101–103). There is not a national-level Kazakh political party. Nationalism on this level thus appears to be absent in Mongolia. Ethnicity (as distinguished among the several groups of Mongols) at times does enter into politics, but I am unaware of any political parties explicitly claiming a minority ethnic basis.

As previously noted, we are justified in suggesting that Mongolian nationalism has much in common with colonial and post-colonial nationalisms. After all, it is in large part in opposition to the Soviets/Russians that Mongolian identity was being asserted in the early 1990s, and the discourse used to describe the events of 1990 has much in common with that of post-colonial settings. This would seem to be the closest fit for modeling Mongolian nationalism, in at least some of its forms. Even here, however, we cannot push the parallel too closely. In the colonial and post-colonial cases, it is usually the nationalists who espouse not only traditional culture and beliefs, but who do so through a Western framework of modernization. The nationalists are both modernizers and
anti-colonialists at the same time. As Partha Chatterjee has observed of the Indian case,

[The legal-institutional forms of political authority that nationalists subscribed to were entirely in conformity with the principles of a modern regime of power and were often modeled on specific examples supplied by Western Europe and North America. In this public sphere created by the political processes of the colonial state, therefore, the nationalist criticism was not that colonial rule was imposing alien institutions of state on indigenous society but rather that it was restricting and even violating the true principles of modern government.

(1993: 74)

This is where the difference and complications of Mongolian nationalism lay. As we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4, the demonstrators in 1990 in effect followed classic colonial form. They argued for Western forms of government, but harnessed images and figures from Mongolian history to do so. One can still find this strand in political discourse, among discussions of the democratic nature of Chinggis Khaan’s rule, for example. The most “retrograde” of the nationalists have adopted a different stance altogether. It is the adoption of Western forms of government that they are protesting about. The problem with Mongolia, they claim, is precisely that the government has chosen to look to countries like America or Germany for models on which to base their laws. Only an adherence to Buddhism or similarly “traditional” precepts can save Mongolia.

This found resonance in the early 1990s in more general attitudes towards foreigners, many times associated with Russians (see Chapter 2). By 1997, however, this attitude had softened among most people.

This discussion has still left us without a working definition of nationalism, one of the key concepts of this work. For a shorter definition, we would do well to look to Richard Fox’s slightly broader definition of “nationalist ideologies,” which he takes to “refer to the production of conceptions of peoplehood” (Fox 1990: 3). It is these kinds of issues, rather than issues of who should be in charge – as in Gellner’s (1983: 1) definition – that concerned most Mongolians, self-labeled nationalists and otherwise, in the early 1990s. Yet this does not mean we can disregard in toto the political elements of nationalist thought and discourse in Mongolia. The expression of a unique cultural identity in Mongolia is now being couched in reference to the (necessary) existence of a unique political identity (even if the latter is not explicitly in question). It is largely for this reason that I have elected to retain the rather problematical term of “nationalism” or “nationalist ideology” for certain aspects of the debate on the construction of identity and interpretations of history in Mongolia.
“What began as the deconstruction of History, turns into the familiar project of recovering the nation” (Duara 1995: 41). Yet in this case, recovering the nation has also meant (re)constructing the nation. While the Mongolian case has certain parallels with nationalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (for examples, see Hann 1998; Holy 1996; Verdery 1993), it diverges in several important aspects. This is due chiefly to the differing historical conditions in the two areas. Prior to the advent of socialism in Eastern Europe, there was a pre-existing period of “national awareness” of some temporal depth, which was modified under socialism. The influence of the Romantic nationalists, among others, was more strongly felt in Eastern Europe before the advent of socialism than in Mongolia during a similar period in its history. Although it would be a mistake to say these issues did not exist at all in pre-socialist Mongolia, they did not do so to the same extent as they did in Central and Eastern Europe, where many of the issues related to nationalism were thrashed out in the context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Stargardt 1995).

Nationalist ideology or nationalism as a distinct form of identity does not appear to have been extant until just prior to the socialist period itself in Mongolia, and did not become widespread until the 1950s. Christopher Atwood has argued for the earlier existence of “country-consciousness” (1994: 70), and a certain equivalence for “country-consciousness” with nationalism; I remain unconvinced. What Atwood terms “country-consciousness” appears to be a form of general cultural identity, which may well lead to nationalism, but is not synonymous with it. Identity as nomads contra the sedentarists elsewhere was long present in Mongolia, as was religious-based identity after the introduction of Buddhism. Neither of these imply the recognition of an identity as a distinct nation.

Sechen Jagchid dates the penetration of nationalist sentiment to the population at large to the increasingly Sinicized Manchu policy towards Mongolia at the start of the twentieth century (Jagchid 1988a: 241; cf. Khan 1995). I would concur with this assessment, but add that Mongolian identity in Mongolia underwent a more substantial shift after the establishment of the socialist state. The early Mongolian socialists were more concerned with creating a sense of political/national unity, especially in regard to the inclusion of various groups of western Mongolia, than in immediately propagating Soviet-style socialism. Hence, the widespread propagation of, and subscription to, a national identity should only be dated to the later socialist period itself.

It should be noted at this point that I have opted to take certain concepts as relatively unproblematical, although recognizing they are not necessarily so. Key among these is the idea of “tradition,” as embodied in the concept of “traditional culture,” which although not dealt with in depth in this work, was very much a topic of discussion in Mongolia in the early 1990s (Humphrey 1992; Kaplonski 1995). By now the concept of
“tradition” has been thoroughly deconstructed, and should be approached with caution. When discussing “tradition” in the Mongolian case, however, I am more interested in the ways in which “traditional culture” is perceived and linked to history than in issues of authenticity itself (although, as we shall see, this was raised by some Mongols). Hence, I am going to take the term to be relatively unproblematical. If Mongols treat a concept or practice as traditional, then so shall I.

The *nutag* and the *uls*

Other issues and terms used in this book bear closer investigation. In particular, there are two terms that occur with considerable frequency in the research that need to be defined and discussed here: namely *nutag* and *uls*. Both terms are central to Mongolian conceptions of identity, and will be a key element in understanding how historical figures are represented in Mongolian social memory.

The first of these terms, *nutag*, means most commonly “birthplace” or “homeland”; it can also mean “pasture-land” in a more physical, material sense. As such, it usually refers to a smaller area of land than does *uls*. It can and is, however, abstracted to reference Mongolia as a whole. D. Natsagdorj’s famous poem on Mongolia, variously translated as “My Motherland” (Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 340) or “My Native Land” (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 13), is titled *Minii Nutag* in the original Mongolian (Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 341). This usage, referring to an area that one feels a particular attachment to or for, carries many of the same connotations as it does in English.

*Nutag* in general does not have the political connotations that, as we shall see, *uls* carries. It is rather a link to the land, a specific place, whether an *aimag* (province) or even a particular valley within the *aimag*. It is this link to the land as birthplace that is important to us. Mongols are explicit about the importance of this link. Many of my friends – young, well educated and fluent in English – wish to study or live abroad. Almost without exception, however, they feel that they could not be separated from their *nutag* (in this case, Mongolia more generally) for more than a few years.

In a discussion on illegal Mongolian immigrants to the US, I was told that this was ultimately a non-issue. Mongols might stay longer than they should, one woman told me, but all Mongols would eventually return to Mongolia, their *nutag*. No self-respecting Mongol would risk dying in a foreign land, I was assured. It is this sense of attachment or belonging which is most important to understanding *nutag* in this case.

*Uls* is a more ambiguous word than *nutag*. It can mean not only either “country” or “state”, but also “dynasty” and “people,” the last being perhaps the oldest meaning. What is important about the term is that all of
the meanings are linked to political entities. Although it now largely means “state” (as in a political system; Mongol uls is the official name of Mongolia and uls töör means “politics”), it previously had a wider range of meanings (see Atwood 1994: 55–66). During the Chinggisid period (the thirteenth century), for example, the term referred to a personal territory granted to a noble, and included the people dwelling there, somewhat akin to a feudal fief (Barfield 1989: 212).

Uls also seems to have maintained a degree of its former meaning of “country-cum-nation-cum-nationality” (Atwood 1994: 57). It is this meaning that is important for us here. When discussing the three historical figures that I examine, it becomes clear that their roles in history are linked to the uls, a political construct tied to the Mongolian people. As I shall try to show, it is precisely because these three people are linked to the reassertion of political power in the region of what is now perceived as the uls (vaguely coterminous with Halh Mongolia) that they were perceived as they were in both official and unofficial discourses during socialism. It is also this same linkage which helps explain the prominence of these interpretations with the collapse of socialism.

An overview of the work

This book is divided into three main sections. The first part provides background and contextualization for understanding the data and analysis presented in the other two, which are concerned with the democratic revolution and case studies of historical figures, respectively. Along with the present chapter, the second chapter constitutes the first part of the book. Chapter 2, an ethnography of Ulaanbaatar, provides a sense of the city. I also use Ulaanbaatar as a background to examine issues of race, identity, economics and social networks through the mirror of doing fieldwork in Mongolia in the 1990s.

The second section consists of Chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the democratic revolution of 1989–90. The third chapter is an account of the democratic revolution itself. In looking at identity in Mongolia, the revolution often serves as a watershed, splitting discussions into pre- and post-1989. The actual situation, of course, is rather more complex. As Chapter 3 indicates, actual reforms and discussions on history started prior to the democratic movement. Yet, both the intensity and nature of these discussions were to change substantially after 1989. While Chapter 3 provides the first detailed chronology available in English, Chapter 4 discusses some of the issues surrounding the interpretations of the events of 1989–90, and in particular the use of language. In addition to studying the use of historical imagery in the protest movement itself, I examine the symbolic connections that are drawn between the democratic movement and events of the early twentieth century. Such connections, I argue, reveal
not only the use of historical precedents for constructing an interpretation of contemporary events, but serve to de-legitimate socialist rule, and thus further the process they seek to explain.

The third section consists of three case studies of historical figures. Chapter 5, the first in this section, discusses historiography in Mongolia over roughly the past 100 years. I have included this chapter for two main reasons: first, I hope it will offer further contextual depth to the case studies. This will enable the reader to see some of the larger trends at work. Second, I shall argue in this chapter that the modes in which history is being talked and written about after 1989 did not appear *de novo*. They are the continuance of traditions of writing about history that stretch back through the twentieth century in Mongolia. The democratic revolution enabled a rethinking of history, but it did not represent a total break with previous ways of doing so. The ideas presented in this chapter thus reappear in the case studies themselves.

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned with the presentation and analysis of the images of three Mongolian historical figures in both the late socialist period and after the democratic movement. Chapter 6, “Chinggis Khaan: creating the *uls*,” examines images of Chinggis Khaan. Officially reviled under socialism as a feudal oppressor, he was nonetheless credited with creating the first Mongolian state. His public image has probably undergone the most change of any of the people considered here. Chinggis Khaan thus offers a natural forum through which to examine the relationships among versions of truth, politics and history. In this chapter, as in the following two, I highlight the means by which the two competing versions of history interacted, and the implications of this for the understanding of identity.

Chapter 7 looks at perceptions of Zanabazar (the First Javzandamba Hutagt) and Sükhbaatar. While not responsible for achieving independence – in fact, it was during his time that the Halh Mongols surrendered to the Manchus – Zanabazar serves as a marker of moderate visibility in the construction of Mongolian identity. Zanabazar, therefore, is informative for several reasons. A religious figure, he nonetheless received a certain amount of recognition under socialism for his cultural achievements. As a less historically central figure than Chinggis Khaan or Sükhbaatar, an examination of Zanabazar reveals how the processes examined here have affected perceptions of history at different levels.

This chapter also looks at changing understandings of Sükhbaatar. As Mongolia’s equivalent to Lenin, we would be forgiven for thinking that Sükhbaatar would have been knocked from his socialist-era pedestal. As the chapter details, however, this is not the case. Sükhbaatar’s link with socialism was partially overridden by his role in establishing an independent Mongolia. Given this link with independence, I suggest that Sükhbaatar has certain rough parallels with Chinggis Khaan as a founding
figure in Mongolian history. Sühbaatar presents us with an ambiguous, yet key, case, one that was highlighted further by the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his birth during my fieldwork in 1993.

While thoughts on and analysis of the presentations of these figures are offered in the corresponding chapters, in Chapter 8 I return to the larger theoretical issues. In this chapter, I discuss the implications for models of Mongolian identity (and identity more generally) that arise from the data in the preceding chapters. Additionally, the last chapter offers suggestions for an expansion of social memory theory based upon the Mongolian case.

**The three figures**

Chinggis Khaan (1162–1227) was a logical and inevitable choice. More commonly known in most of the world as Genghis Khan, he and his immediate descendants conquered a swath of land stretching from Korea and China through Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. It remains the largest contiguous land empire ever created. More importantly, however, Chinggis Khaan is perceived as the founder of the Mongolian state, and an early giver of laws. No study of Mongolian identity or social memory in Mongolia could be complete without him. In addition to his role as founding father, he has come to be seen by some Mongols (and even a few foreigners; see, for example, Sabloff (2002)) as a democrat.

Chinggis’s prominence in post-socialist Mongolia is inescapable even to the most casual observer (although it did change in emphasis and focus over the years). I argue that in some respects his socialist era portrayal has been misrepresented, both in the West and by Mongols themselves. In addition, although his prominence may have been predictable, the shape of it was not. The particular form Chinggis Khaan’s prominence has taken requires explanation.

As the First Javzandamba Hutagt – the third-highest ranking incarnation of the dominant Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama – Zanabazar (1635–1723) provides a direct link with Mongolia’s Buddhist past. The son of the Tüsheet Khan, a Mongolian noble, Zanabazar became a unifying force for the politically fractious Mongols. This was further enhanced by the fact that as a son of the Tüsheet Khan, he was a direct descendant of Chinggis Khaan. He achieved renown not only for his holiness, but also for his artistic talents. Sculptures attributed to him are still on display at various museums in Ulaanbaatar. Zanabazar’s legacy is mixed, however, as he also presided over the events at Dolon Nuur in 1691, when the Halh Mongols submitted to the Manchu rulers of China. He and the following incarnations in his line were seen as such threats to the secular power of the Manchus that after the Second Javzandamba Hutagt, reincarnations were forbidden to be found in Mongolian families. (This would lead to the rather ironic fact
that when the Mongols declared independence from the crumbling Qing Empire in 1911, the Eighth Javzandamba Hutagt, who was elevated as the Bogd Khaan – the emperor of Mongolia – was in fact a Tibetan.)

With the collapse of socialist rule in 1990, Buddhism publicly re-emerged as a key symbol in constructing conceptions of Mongolness. As we shall see in later chapters, the early democratic opposition quickly seized on the symbolic importance of Buddhism in constructing a particular concept of being Mongol. In light of this, Zanabazar is something of an enigma: his socialist-era label of “traitor” has largely been shed, yet he has not assumed the prominence in historical discourse I originally expected.

Sühbaatar (1893–1923), like Chinggis Khaan, was a logical choice for this study. Portrayed as Mongolia’s Lenin, he was the closest thing that official, socialist Mongolia had to a deity. Said to be from a humble herding family, he worked as a printer in the city, and joined one of the two key underground revolutionary groups. Socialist hagiography was to portray him as the founder and leader of the revolutionary party as well as the revolution, although his actual role appears to have been more complicated. He is credited with, among other achievements, founding the Mongolian People’s Army, and establishing Ünen, the newspaper of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party. He died relatively young, in 1923, at the age of 30.

During the socialist era, his role as father figure was inescapable. Thus, one could have predicted that his image would change with the fall of the socialist system, as indeed it did. What I was not prepared for, however, was the manner in which he was re-evaluated. He has not been relegated to the dustbin of history, nor have his statues been hauled away. (Indeed, neither has that of Lenin.) His name still adorns the main square in Ulaanbaatar, a city in Selenge aimag in the north of the country, and an aimag in the south-east. Rather, re-evaluations of Sühbaatar have been portrayed as giving other early revolutionary figures their due, and finally telling the truth about them and him.

Undertaking the research

The initial fieldwork for this project was carried out over ten months, largely in Ulaanbaatar, during 1993 and 1997. Although later trips (in 1999, 2000–01 and 2002) were focused mostly on other topics, I continued to follow the issues presented here. The research draws upon interviews with the intellectuals and cultural elite of Ulaanbaatar, including members of the Academy of Sciences, politicians, other governmental workers and researchers, university students, and so forth. Over time, the group also came to encompass Mongolian workers for international agencies as well. This group was chosen as a focus because as Fentress and Wickham observe:
“essentially, the bearers of national memory since the arrival of capitalism in each country are the upper middle classes and the intelligentsia” (1992: 126). It is the equivalent strata under state socialism in Mongolia that were the bearers of the official national memory, and, as we shall see, bearers of forms of the unapproved social memories as well. It is these groups that I am most concerned with here. In most cases, what discussions and interviews I have had in the countryside, or with non-elites, support the arguments I put forward here. These are necessarily less certain as my research was not as focused on them. Although I shall at times avail myself of the useful shorthand in referring to “the Mongols,” it should be remembered that most conclusions apply most strongly to the intellectuals of Ulaanbaatar.

The term “intellectual” itself is a rather ambiguous one. Mannheim defines the intelligentsia as those “social groups whose special task it is to provide an interpretation of the world” (Mannheim 1936: 10; see Verdery 1991: 15–19 for a fuller discussion of the term). While this is certainly appropriate in the Mongolian case – the issues I am concerned with are nothing if not interpretations of the world – I use the term in a broader sense to encompass what Verdery terms as “various groups, [the] producers of culture and of rule” (Verdery 1991: 3). In a socialist system (and the effects are not immediately shaken off with the first free elections), it is not possible to separate out the discourses of knowledge and politics, culture and rule to the extent perhaps possible elsewhere. The situation is compounded in a country like Mongolia with a relatively small population (2.4 million) and a correspondingly small group of intellectuals. A number of officials were plucked from the countryside to reinforce MAHN’s claim to be a party of the common worker and herder. Nonetheless, as I shall discuss in the following chapter, the social networks of intellectuals and other elites were and remain closely intertwined.

The data for this study were collected through a variety of methods. Formal interviews were conducted with a number of intellectuals, most notably politicians, academics and, in the mid- and late 1990s, people from the plentiful NGOs. Informal interviews and discussions were also carried out with members of these groups. Several focus-group studies were carried out with students at the Mongolian National University, and I learned much from my students when I taught at the National University in 2000–01 and other times. Surveys were administered in 1993 and 1997 as well. The topics I am interested in here would also crop up spontaneously during gatherings with friends and on other occasions.

My initial understandings and views of the topic were refined throughout the decade of the 1990s and afterwards by the repeated trips I made, and the catching up with friends and colleagues, as well as the endless discussions of politics and life in general.

Extensive collection of written materials was also undertaken during fieldwork periods. Weekly sweeps of most of the book stores in
Ulaanbaatar (many of which had disappeared by the changed economic scene of 1997, never to reappear) provided not only written materials, but also some indication of their distribution and popularity. Older, socialist-era publications were obtained from the *huuchin nomyn delgüür* (second-hand book store) and street vendors to provide a basis for comparison with the modern works. In general, I attempted to collect any new publications on history, politics and/or traditional culture. The older material was necessarily collected more haphazardly. The works collected necessarily represented not the full range of socialist-era publications, but rather those that people were selling (but even this can be informative).

Throughout subsequent trips to Mongolia, I continued to monitor publications, television (which I had lacked in 1993) and other sources, as well as continuing to pay attention to historical topics in daily conversations.

There are two concerns that must be taken into consideration when dealing with socialist-era texts and recollections. The first of these has to do with the nature of the texts themselves. We do not have any basis for assuming that such texts necessarily consciously and completely parallel the author’s knowledge and/or attitudes. While it may have been so for some authors and some texts, this is not necessarily true for all of them.

We may, however, safely take it that the text is supposed to reflect the officially sanctioned knowledge (books that did not were subject to recall and confiscation) and, at this level, is aimed at what Eco has termed a Naïve Model Reader, who reads a text at face-value only (Eco 1990: 55). Particular terms and phrases thus become especially important in this context. We must take care, however, to ensure that we do not confuse or limit our levels of analysis, and assume that a naïve reading is the only one possible.

The second need for caution is the simple fact that people’s recollections of the socialist era are being offered from the “other side” of the (successful) democratic revolution. Again, while they may very well be accurate, there remains the possibility that such information has been subtly distorted as a result of the rejection of the socialist ethos. In addition to comparing the recollections with published sources to help to take this effect into account, there are other signposts to aid us in the study. The potential complications seem somewhat mitigated by the fact that, at least in 1993, very few people were claiming an active form of resistance for themselves. Although I had expected to encounter stories of heroic resistance to socialism, even stories of furtive resistance were few and far between. Discussing the socialist period in 1997 also served to help check accounts, as did archival work. While this was related to other projects, it helped shed light on issues discussed here and provided me with a deeper understanding of life and politics under socialism. By the second half of the 1990s, reinterpreting history and confirming certain identities
continued, but not always as self-consciously as during the early 1990s. Indeed, people were now turning a critical eye to the history of the socialist period, an event almost unheard of even in 1993. All of these have been used as clues for evaluating people's recollections of the socialist period.

Few, if any, ethnographies are unproblematical. Yet writing about history and identity in Ulaanbaatar in the early 1990s presents particular problems that are worth discussing here. First and foremost was the difficulty of fieldwork in a time of turmoil. While not as extreme as most cases of conducting “fieldwork under fire” (Nordstrom and Robben 1995), Ulaanbaatar presented its own not inconsiderable difficulties. I shall discuss these in depth in the following chapter, but among the issues worth noting was the depth of the economic collapse, resulting in food rationing, rising crime rates, hostility towards certain categories of foreigners, and the necessity of social networks for access and survival.

The difficulties that gathering data posed are also worth bringing into the open, as they will have inevitably affected the book. Most importantly, many of the questions I was seeking to answer simply did not have answers at the time I first asked them. Identities were in flux and while most people talked and thought about history, economic and social issues were much more pressing than a firm sense of what being Mongol meant. One can get by without knowing for sure what you think of Chinggis Khaan or Sühbaatar, but one cannot get by without food. The social safety net was largely gone, the old ways had been decreed inadequate, but nothing had yet sprung up to replace them.

While the tumult of the early 1990s made it a heady time to be carrying out fieldwork, the immediacy of the issues also meant that there was no overarching perspective to look back on the issues with. To look back now, roughly a decade later, is to look at the same questions with hindsight and clarity that time brings. But the very change that made the topic an important one to study made it difficult to know quite what questions to ask, or for people to know what answers to give. An answer given one week would not necessarily be the same one a person would give the following week. Although it is tempting to bring order and teleology to the discussions of the early 1990s, I have tried to avoid doing so as much as possible. It is precisely in offering a snapshot of the changes that is one of the contributions of this work.

With these issues in mind, I turn to a larger discussion of Ulaanbaatar and urban culture in Mongolia in the following chapter.
Ulaanbaatar occupies a distinct yet ambivalent position in Mongolia. It is the capital, and the social, intellectual and economic heart of the country. Few who live there would give up the opportunities it offers. Yet Ulaanbaatar is often ignored or downplayed in Western accounts (see, for example, Croner (1999) and Severin (1991); but see Lawless (2000) for a partial exception). Most Westerners who visit Mongolia seem anxious to get out to the countryside, to see the “real” Mongolia of nomads and open spaces. Even Mongols often view the “true” Mongol as the one out on the steppe, rather than living in an apartment in the city. One urban intellectual rather shamefacedly admitted to me in 1993 that she did not know how to ride a horse, as if that somehow cast doubt on her identity as a Mongol. (In much the same vein, four years later, I was jokingly told I couldn’t be a real scholar of Mongolia since I could not ride a horse. This is a deficiency I have since rectified, albeit imperfectly.) Many Mongols, like many Westerners, seem to maintain an uneasy truce with Ulaanbaatar.

Yet the relationship is not a simple one. In a survey published in the newspaper Ardyn Erh (People’s Right, 2 December 1992), about 80 per cent of the people interviewed said they preferred a sedentary lifestyle to a nomadic one. Throughout the 1990s people have flocked to the city in search of work, or simply to escape countryside life. By 2001, according to official statistics, fully one-third of the country’s population lived in Ulaanbaatar, and unofficial numbers put the figure even higher (National Statistical Office 2002: 42). The interest in the countryside, it seems, should not necessarily be taken at face value, although it is very revealing about how Mongols think of themselves.

It seems the Mongolia being sought by foreigners (and some Mongols) is some timeless, nomadic and exotic place, not a post-socialist city teeming with life. Yet Ulaanbaatar occupies a central position within life in Mongolia. It was in Ulaanbaatar that the key protests and hunger-strikes of 1990 took place, and that socialism finally came to an end. It is also in Ulaanbaatar that the intellectuals and politicians debate the future of the country and discuss history. Whether or not it is in accordance with
images of what Mongolia is “really” like, Ulaanbaatar is an inescapable presence, and one that must be taken account of. This is what I do here.

This chapter, however, is not an ethnography of Ulaanbaatar in the traditional sense of the term, although I do hope to offer a feel for what the city is like. Rather, through an introduction to Ulaanbaatar, I wish to highlight two interrelated issues. One is a further discussion of the issues surrounding the writing of this book. These include attitudes towards foreigners and the role of social networks, as they affect both doing fieldwork and perceptions of history. The other is how these elements of Mongolian urban culture are linked to conceptions of identity. In order to set the stage for these discussions, I first turn to a description of the city itself.

An introduction to Ulaanbaatar

Ulaanbaatar is located in the approximate east–west center of Mongolia, in Töv (meaning Center) aimag (province) and straddles the Tuul and Selbe rivers. In 1991, it had a population of 579,000, accounting for about one-quarter of the country’s total population (State Statistical Office of Mongolia 1992: 3). By 2001, this had blossomed to 812,500 people, accounting for fully one-third of the nation’s population (National Statistical Office 2002: 42). The city, nestled in a valley, spreads out to the east and west, being bounded on the south by a range of mountains. These include Bogd Uul (Holy or Sacred Mountain), a nature preserve established in the mid-eighteenth century, home to various wild animals, including deer and bears. Ulaanbaatar itself blends into the surrounding countryside, and although urban sprawl has set in, particularly to the east and north, it does not take long to leave the city behind. The No. 7 bus takes you from the center of town to the Soviet-Mongolian monument to the heroes of the Second World War, and the foot of Bogd Uul. After a short climb, with your back to the city, you can look out over the hills and see a seemingly endless expanse of forest. Even in the center of town itself, in the early 1990s, one soon became accustomed to the sight of cattle, sheep and goats wandering the streets, grazing in the parks, or placidly eating the shrubbery in front of the Mongolian National University. One could still find animals along the banks of the rivers several years later, but they were less common as the government clamped down on herding animals in the city itself.

Everyday life in Ulaanbaatar reflects other contradictions as well. It is a blend of the urban and rural, the urbane and the rough-and-ready. Women in elegant dresses and high heels clamber over open construction sites. Especially during the summer, it is not uncommon to see herders in from the countryside riding through the city on horseback in the traditional deel. The young, rich and powerful frequent nightclubs, bars and restaurants,
while outside, street children beg for change. The city tends to be dusty, and the infrastructure is often crumbling, but in certain parts of town, Korean funds have led to concrete sidewalks being replaced with paving stones arranged in geometric patterns.

Ulaanbaatar (meaning Red Hero) was given its present name in 1924, after the People’s Revolution in 1921 and the death of the Bogd Khan in 1924. Founded as a monastery in 1639 for Öndöör Gegeen Zanabazar, it soon became a political and cultural center for Northern Mongolia. Originally a nomadic monastery and city, first mentioned in sources around 1651, it became a permanent settlement after 1779 (Pozdneyev 1971: 44–45). A stela in a park near the MAHN headquarters in central Ulaanbaatar marks the spot where the city is said to have been established.

Ulaanbaatar has gone through a number of changes in name as well as location. Historically known outside of Mongolia as Urga, this is a Russian corruption of the Mongolian Örgöö, roughly translatable as “Palace.” To the Mongols of the time, it had a number of names, but not Urga. “‘Urga’ is almost unknown to the Mongols as the name of this city... At the present time,” Pozdneyev wrote in 1892, “the Mongols most frequently call Urga by its official name of Da Hüree or Ih Hüree, that is, ‘the great hüriyen [= hüree, “encampment” or “monastery’],’ while in common parlance it is called Bogdo Hüree, or the Holy Hüree, and sometimes simply Hüree” (Pozdneyev 1971: 43). It was also known as Niislel (Capital) Hüree from 1911 until it was renamed in 1924.

Although large, the city does not feel crowded. The central part of the city is spacious and open, although rampant construction projects have begun to result in the loss of this space. New housing and other buildings have cropped up in almost every available space since the latter part of the 1990s. There is a severe housing shortage, but most of the new housing – often looking more European in design – is clearly geared towards well-to-do Mongols and foreigners. Other new buildings, such as banks and offices, are also being erected. Several people joked in English that the crane was the national bird of Mongolia.¹

The heart of the city is the massive Sühbaatar Square, named after the main Revolutionary hero and around which are the government offices, the Central Palace of Culture, theaters, shops and the Mongolian stock exchange (opened in 1992 in a former theatre). In the center of the square is a statue of Sühbaatar on his charger, watching over and guiding the running of the government, and the daily lives of the Mongolians. It is said that the statue is placed on the spot where Sühbaatar sat on horseback, rallying people to the Revolutionary cause. Sühbaatar himself faces north, towards the former Soviet Union, Mongolia’s “elder brother” in the socialist terminology.

On the north side of the square sits the main government building, the Government Palace. In front of it (to its south) is the mausoleum of Sühbaatar and Choibalsan.² (While once open to the public, in 1993 it
was open only to visiting dignitaries and has since been closed.) The current building was erected in the 1940s, but the previous building – the Nogoo Bömbögör (the “Green Round,” presumably in reference to the building’s dome) – a theatre that served as a parliamentary meeting place, was located on the same spot.

Just off the square to the south-east is the Ulaanbaatar Hotel. In the early 1990s, it served as a popular and convenient meeting spot for both foreigners and Mongols. This can be attributed not only to its location, but also to the lack of restaurants beyond the local guanz that few foreigners frequented, and its legacy as the chief hotel for foreigners during the late socialist period. The restaurant was often crowded with various Christian missionaries late on a Sunday morning. Although by no means a neglected relic, by the mid- to late 1990s, the Ulaanbaatar Hotel had been largely supplanted as a meeting place, at least for Mongols. Innumerable small bars and nightclubs had sprung up around the city, in almost every conceivable location. This was a source of dissatisfaction to a good number of people, who complained that many cultural or educational pursuits were losing out to bars and nightclubs. During the summer, many of them also sport beer gardens and Ulaanbaatar threatens to become one massive outdoor party, augmented by the colorful lighted decorations that adorn the streets of the capital.

To the north-west of the square (about 1.5 kilometers away) lies Gandan, the largest Buddhist monastery in the country. It had survived as a “working museum” and showcase for visiting foreigners during the socialist period, but has since been revived as a fully functioning monastery, and is being refurbished, in part with donations from the faithful. In 1996, the large Buddhist statue of Janraiseg that formed the centerpiece of Gandan, and which had been removed to Leningrad during the socialist period, was rebuilt. Also constituting the central part of the city are the various embassies, ministry offices (in 1993, still usually without signs – see below), the National Library, the Mongolian National University and other, newer universities. Like the bars, many of these buildings now featured various small enterprises renting space in them.

The central part of the city is ringed by districts of socialist-era apartment blocks made of pre-cast concrete blocks which serve as a physical reminder of the legacy of what is called “barracks socialism” – the dreary sameness of life under socialist rule. Since the collapse of socialism, this has been somewhat alleviated by the sheer variety of furniture and other goods now available to help decorate the apartments themselves. In many parts of the city, apartment blocks are arranged around an open space. Here children play and adults gather to socialize, giving many districts a smaller, community feel.

The city also has a number of “ger districts,” where people dwell in the traditional gers (round, felt tents, better known to many as yurts) or
small wooden houses, with electricity (and some with phone service, often lacking in blocks of flats in the early 1990s), but without running water or plumbing. In general, the ger districts are located on the outskirts of town, although there is one around Gandan. One official, in conversation with me, estimated that 60 per cent of the population lives in gers, but I have been unable to confirm this number. The ger districts also house the bulk of the migrant population, and an unknown number of people have settled illegally on the outskirts of the city and along the banks of the Tuul.

While some parts of Ulaanbaatar date from the early twentieth century, many of the buildings in the central part of the city were built by Japanese prisoners of war during the 1940s. These older buildings can usually be distinguished from later constructions by their much more solid feel, some with walls over a foot thick. The woodwork in the interior of the flats is more ornate than the plain moldings found in the later buildings (if moldings are to be found at all). The socialist-era apartment blocks, further out from the center of the city, are largely of a later origin, and are built in the Soviet style of pre-cast concrete slabs. Whole districts of Ulaanbaatar were built in this fashion in the 1970s and 1980s to accommodate the growing population. Tim Severin describes these as

the grim Soviet-style apartment blocks, their shabby exteriors disfigured by rust streaks from the decaying iron balconies, ugly festoons of external wiring, and [with] graffiti-scarred doors to filthy [and usually unlighted] communal stairwells.


The drabness of the blocks of apartments is relieved throughout the city by the remnants of the older parts of the city. These include the Bogd Khaan Museum (formerly the Bogd Khaan’s palace) and the Gandan monastery, although even these only date from the nineteenth century (Bawden 1989: 11). Other older buildings exist here and there, such as the City Museum, which is housed in a building linked to Sükhbaatar. While not architecturally outstanding, these older buildings do lend a sense of charm to the city, and the omnipresent historical plaques (“This building was used for secret meetings by Sükhbaatar,” “Choibalsan worked here,” and so forth) serve to link the city to its past, even if they do not promote much discussion. (I often seemed to be more familiar with the plaques than most of my friends.)

This was the physical setting where the vast majority of my research was carried out. Any city, however, is defined not only by its physical presence, but even more so by the people who live in it. It is thus to some elements of Mongolian urban culture that I now turn.
Urban culture and social networks

One of the key elements of Mongolian culture – urban and otherwise – is the omnipresent social network. “Essentials of life such as food and accommodation are mostly acquired through acquaintances (tanil), not through public shops or bureaus. To live in Ulaanbaatar at all, one must have friendly contacts, and the whole social organization presumes that people belong to some network and acquire their information through it” (Humphrey 1994: 43, n11). Although in some respects such networks have decreased in prominence in the city since the early 1990s, they are still present, and still important.

There are two main reasons to consider social networks here. One is that they played a key role in subsistence in Ulaanbaatar in the early 1990s. The other is that knowledge, not only of the availability of food, and access to information, was and continues to be passed on chiefly through such networks. The networks are also important for it was through them that alternate versions of history were propagated during the socialist period. Fieldwork thus hinged upon access to such networks in multiple ways.

The extensive use of social networks in Ulaanbaatar reflects a similar reliance on ties (often kin-based) in the rural, herding economy. It was not uncommon, a Korean scholar told me, that during his time in the countryside, a common initial “task” when he met someone was to figure out mutual acquaintances. Such links then provided a means by which he could be slotted into the social order. Although not always as evident, the social networks of Ulaanbaatar function in a similar manner.

One particular recurring incident both amused and bemused me in 1997, until I realized it was explicable in terms of social-network thinking. A friend of mine, who was helping with my research, had the same name as a prominent Member of Parliament. On multiple occasions, if her name came up in the course of conversation, I was asked if I meant the Member of Parliament. I was, I hastened to assure people, not anywhere near important enough to merit such a prominent assistant. This linkage puzzled me for quite some time. I finally realized the question made sense if one assumed that people were trying to establish links between myself and people they knew, or at least knew of.

Social networks were clearly of great importance during the early days of democracy, especially for pragmatic considerations as a means of obtaining food. When food became scarce, it was through such contacts with acquaintances and relatives (usually stretching into the countryside) that supplies were obtained. As Caroline Humphrey notes in the passage quoted above, it was more common in the early days of post-socialism to acquire most food through networks rather than shops, which had only very poor-quality food if they had any at all.
For a foreigner, access to rationed goods in particular depended upon access to a social network. These were sometimes available on the black market at inflated prices, but, for the most part, to obtain such basic items as bread or flour required connections.

Information about food (among other things) in the early 1990s passed through such networks. At times it had the result of obtaining milk or yogurt through a contact in an office building who knew someone else. At other times, it took the form of a phone call, informing one that such-and-such a store has cheap vodka in stock, and please hurry down with some empty bottles. This had changed by the time I returned in 1997. I remember commenting to a friend upon walking into the Dalai Eej market next to my apartment, that it seemed as though I was seeing more food at that one time than I had in my entire stay in 1993. Yet social networks were vital for obtaining more than food.

Other forms of knowledge also presumed such networks. As Humphrey also points out, many ministries and offices bore no signs (1994: 43, n11). Many times they are not even directly recognizable as government offices, looking like any other building in that particular area. Thus, access to people in power (who assume you know where their office, or at least ministry, is) can only be had through such networks. By 1993, this had begun to change. Some government offices (such as the Agricultural Ministry) began to bear signs in Mongol bichig. The result was essentially the same, however, as the majority of the Mongolian population was unable to read Mongol bichig. (I return to the significance of Mongol bichig in the following chapters.)

Upon returning to Ulaanbaatar in the fall of 1997, I noted that many more of the buildings now had signs. As one man pointed out to me, however, this did not always improve the situation much. Government buildings and ministries now carried signs more often than they did in the past, but Cyrillic Mongolian, the official written form, was usually absent. Signs were often in Mongol bichig or English or both. The same held true for many businesses and bars, which now boasted signs and slogans in English. (By 1999, signs were appearing in Cyrillic Mongolian as well.) Social networks, in other words, could still be important in navigating the city or the government.

The role of networks or at least the assumption of widespread knowledge of Ulaanbaatar (which to a non-resident must amount to the same thing) is also evident in the practice of giving addresses. Although Mongolian streets do have names, they are very seldom, if ever, used in giving addresses, except by foreigners. Both people and advertisements give locations in terms of landmarks. This holds true not only for giving general indications (“I live just west of the Dalai Eej food market”), but also for more specific locations (“the nine-story white building just west of Dalai Eej”). Thus, a store might be advertised as being located in “the old
shoe store #22, in the first district.” Presumably, if one did not know the location of the former shoe store, one either had to know someone who did, or else you could not visit the store. (This appeared to be slowly changing, as newspaper ads often carried schematic maps in 1997. Even these maps, however, presupposed a certain minimum amount of knowledge, as they were not detailed enough to find the area unless you already knew something about it.)

The point was made more explicit by my friend Hulan when she took a new job. The building she worked in was next to the Cuban Embassy, she told me. I momentarily drew a blank. “What street is it on?” I asked, although I should have known better. “Come on,” she replied. “You know we don’t use street names in Mongolia.” She then proceeded to list several other landmarks until I was able to situate the building.

The same underlying principle holds true for other forms of knowledge as well. Thus, for example, political rallies in 1993 often seemed to be organized on such a basis, with word-of-mouth being the chief form of notification, rather than published or broadcast announcements. Access to government offices was facilitated through networks whenever possible. It was an unfortunate Mongol (or foreigner) who had to follow all the official channels in dealing with a particular office. At the very least, a relative or acquaintance could make sure you were not lost in the crowd.

More broadly, such networks cross-cut the intellectual strata of Ulaanbaatar society. A relatively small group, it was not uncommon for any given intellectual I met to have some sort of link to other people I had also met. Whether through parents who knew each other, or siblings who had been in school together, most intellectuals in Ulaanbaatar were linked, at least tenuously.

One partial example should suffice. A certain friend, “A,” was the younger sister of a prominent politician, “B”. This politician, it turned out, had been the childhood friend of another acquaintance of mine, “C.” (We used to play soccer together, he told me one day.) This second acquaintance, C, was married to the granddaughter, “D,” of a former high MAHN party functionary, and D was the friend of yet another friend of mine, “E.” This last acquaintance, E, was the granddaughter of a woman, “F,” who claimed to know the first politician, B, well, and was also the sister-in-law of a prominent Mongolian intellectual, “G.” E also knew, it turned out, the younger sister of the politician, A, in part through her mother, “H,” who also knew A because of their professional work. These connections could be expanded almost indefinitely, and doubtless this group of people had more linkages that I was unaware of.

In addition to gaining access, such networks were of particular interest to me because they would quickly draw you into a rich social world, where you gained a fuller picture of the various people in the group from multiple perspectives. Gossip and stories passed quickly
along such networks. Not only did I gain a different impression of people this way, but more than once found that knowledge of a dinner or party I had given, complete with menus, also passed along in such a manner.

While social networks empower the anthropologist once he is inside of one, they can also be constricting. In 1993, Narantuya was my entry into one particular network. She had been able to arrange an interview with the then culture minister, who was a university classmate of her older sister. Yet at one point, I raised the possibility of meeting and interviewing some workers in the city. This, she informed me, would simply not be possible. “My family doesn’t know any,” she explained.

Networks had a similar function in the propagation of unofficial histories under socialism. It was this linkage of a certain part of Mongolian society that was instrumental in the preservation of knowledge. Those creating the new forms of history were closely linked to (and were often the very same as) the people who propagated alternative versions of history. I shall return to this point in discussing the mechanics of such transmission. The networks, however, also affected the forms such histories took. The emphasis on oral knowledge was another factor in the use of “evocative transcripts,” which, as we shall see, are amenable to oral transmission. In other words, the existence of social networks, relying on orality as a means of transmitting information, helped determine the ways in which history and identity could be contested.

For now, it is important to simply appreciate the degree to which such networks shaped life in Ulaanbaatar, and continue to do so.

Race and identity

While all anthropologists encounter problems of access and acceptance in their fieldwork site, the conjunction of a number of factors made the issue particularly acute in Mongolia in the early 1990s. In addition to the issues related to social networks already mentioned, in the chaotic early 1990s, foreigners were inextricably caught up in the rethinking of Mongolian identity. This could and did spill over into violence at times. In the most extreme case I personally experienced, Narantuya, my research assistant in 1993, was physically attacked and accused of being a prostitute for merely walking down the street with me.

The reception given to foreigners in Ulaanbaatar is closely linked to underlying concepts of race and identity, so I take up a more general consideration of these here. These concepts of identity must be linked with the larger political context in which Mongolia has historically found itself in order to understand some of the wariness (and, at times, hostility) towards foreigners. These same concepts also come into play when re-evaluating Mongolian history, although not always explicitly.
Immediately after the collapse of socialism, there was a repudiation of the Soviets’ role of “older brother” to Mongolia’s “younger brother,” terms common both in everyday speech and symbolically reproduced in treaties and other official documents during the socialist period. While people recognized that gains had been made under the socialist regime (most notably in industrialization, education and medicine), immediately after the end of the socialist period many of the ills from the previous seventy years were blamed on the Soviets. “The Russians came and said they were our friends,” Narantuya once said as we wandered through the Gandan monastery. “But they really weren’t.” The Soviets (and now Russians) were seen as a colonial power. And like a departing colonial power, open resentment against them flared up. This was coupled with anger towards the special privileges the Russians had been accorded, including special shops and even transportation, making many Mongols feel like second-class citizens in their own country. By the late 1990s, the increasing presence of non-Russian foreigners coupled with economic pragmatism and a new certainty with regard to identity combined to make foreigners a relatively benign presence to most in Ulaanbaatar.

A joke current in Mongolia in 1991 reflects the attitudes towards Russians at the time.

Three people, an American, a Russian and a Mongolian, were on a plane when it started having engine troubles. The pilot called back to the passengers and told them they would have to lighten the load by each getting rid of some baggage. The American took a last look at his suitcase, which was full of jeans, and threw it out of the plane. The Russian and the Mongolian were shocked. “It’s okay,” the American explained to the other two. “In my country, we have plenty of jeans.” The Russian took his suitcase, which was full of vodka, and threw it off the plane. “Don’t worry,” he said, “there’s plenty of vodka in my country.” The Mongolian looked around, and then pushed the Russian out of the plane. Turning to the American, he said, “No problem. My country is full of Russians.”

It was such resentment that resulted in Narantuya being attacked, since at the time most Caucasians were still assumed to be Russians. (Many people told me I had the added “misfortune” of “looking Russian.”) Other threats, harassment and the occasional attempt to start a fight were common experiences. It must be noted that however widespread resentment towards the Russians was, harassment and violence, while common, was not the response of the majority. On more than one occasion, Mongols intervened on my behalf to defuse a tense situation.
By the late 1990s, Russians seemed better tolerated, and “Russian” no longer served as the default identity for Caucasian foreigners. Schoolchildren tended to greet me more often in English than Russian (or even Mongolian). Indeed, I noticed that by 1999, many of the children who called out in Russian did so with a fairly bad accent, which had not been the case earlier. Street children also reflected this shift. A new phenomenon between 1993 and 1997, they would accost foreigners in 1997 with a plea for *deng*, the Russian term for money. A few years later, they had largely dropped the *deng* for “money, money” in English.

Older people, however, retained more of the association of foreigners with Russians, and throughout my stay in 1997, I was never able to convince one newspaper vendor I frequently visited that I was not Russian and had no interest in Russian newspapers. Even as late as 2002, the occasional Mongol (always male and usually drunk) would let fly at me with a string of (presumed) curses in Russian. Similarly, violent encounters decreased, but did not disappear completely.

The lessening of the resentment did not mean that foreigners were universally welcomed. They still served as a focal point for the more virulent nationalists. In December 1997, an American in the western part of the country shot a Mongolian employee, in what was claimed to be self-defense (but with an illegally imported rifle). The early reports were, as one might expect, confused. It was not clear what the actual events were, or even what type of weapon was used. Nevertheless, Dashbalbar, a vocal nationalist Member of Parliament, issued a statement. He warned:

> Judicial powers at all levels in this country must defend the rights and freedoms of Mongolian nationals and not of foreign citizens. If these judicial powers defend the interests of foreigners we will undertake counteractive measures. Admiration and flattery of foreigners has become the norm among Mongolia’s elite. We shall not allow foreigners to behave as they please and treat Mongolians like dogs.

*(quoted in Baatarbeel 1997)*

This, however, was a minority view. Others espoused caution in importing foreign ideas and manners into Mongolia, and railed against the loss of “traditional” culture, but few took such a hard-line stance towards foreigners themselves.

Foreigners received a mixed welcome for other reasons as well. Some of these reflected newer fears of globalization and international domination. Foreigners brought with them cash to spend, but often imperious consultants and missionaries were and are viewed with some suspicion. This is due in part to the parallels – explicit or otherwise – between socialist-era Soviet “advisors” and current foreign consultants and
“experts.” Indeed, those foreigners with business cards in Mongolian (not a very large group) are often described on their cards as zövlöh (advisor), a word not only used during the socialist period, but also directly related to the word for Soviet itself, Zövlölt (which in turn is based on the term zövlöl, which means “council”). The inauspicious choice of terms reinforces the view of some Mongols of the international agencies as another form of colonialism. Mongolians I queried about this, however, had not usually made the connection themselves, but agreed that it was a valid and intriguing parallel.

Mongols reserve their greatest suspicion, and even hostility (although seldom acted upon), for the Chinese. Almost anyone who had an opinion to express about the Chinese expressed distrust, considering the Chinese to be sneaky and cunning. To say that someone has a Chinese mind is to insult them, to call them sly and dishonest.

As with the negative attitudes towards the Russians, the dislike of the Chinese can no doubt be traced in part to history. In this case, this was the period of Manchu/Chinese rule (1691–1911), and can in part be explicated as a legacy of actual colonial rule under the Qing. Unlike the situation with the Soviets, however, the period of the Qing is not remembered as a period of colonization. This is attributable to two main factors. First, the Qing adopted a largely hands-off policy towards Mongolia for most of their rule, using it as a buffer against the Russian Empire. Second, and more fundamentally, while adult Mongols have had direct experience with Soviet domination under socialism, only a small handful, if any at all, were even alive during the period of Qing rule. Historical rule by China is seen more as an injustice or indignity than an active issue.

In seeking to understand attitudes towards the Chinese, one must also take into account the long tradition of nomadic–sedentary antagonism, where the Chinese are seen as the sedentarists par excellence by the Mongols, who still largely think of themselves as nomads, whatever the demographic reality. It is an integral part of their heritage, and serves to further distinguish them from their neighbors to both the north and the south. But these are not the only reasons. Much of the attitude towards the Chinese is more immediate and visceral, reflecting a fear of domination by them. This draws in part upon the situation in Inner Mongolia, where the Han Chinese now greatly outnumber ethnic Mongols.

Much of the fear and hostility towards the Chinese finds expression in terms of “infiltration,” “swamping,” or “flooding” by Chinese, whether through investment or, more often, a physical presence. This also builds on fears that Mongolia is a country that is underpopulated, making it not only difficult for the country to develop, but leaving it open to domination by its southern neighbor. This part of the attitude was caught succinctly by Undraa, during dinner at a café one night in 2001. Over dinner, we covered a variety of topics, including the decline of morality and the rise of
crime. But it was her one comment on the Chinese that has remained the most vivid in my memory. In a tone blending indignation and exasperation, she neatly summed up the standard view when she exclaimed: “But there are so many of them!”

An excerpt from an interview with an NGO employee from 1997 is worth quoting at length in this regard. I (“C”) began by asking Dulma (“D”) about the reception the more extreme nationalists (such as Dashbalbar) received. Did people buy into what they were saying, I asked?

**D:** Yes, particularly if we understand that whenever and wherever this nationalism issue surfaces it implies only our relations vis-à-vis the southern neighbor. Mongols don’t seem to care enough about other foreigners, you know. The only thing they are concerned with is the … I wouldn’t say “perceived,” it is too much of a weak word … the potential Chinese infiltration.

You know about that. The Chinese operate the whole economic sphere in the whole of Southeast Asia; in many countries in this region. So this is what the Mongols wouldn’t like to see in their country. This is very traditional. This is so irrational, you shouldn’t try to seek any explanation. [We both laugh.]

**C:** So you think the nationalists are basically just picking up on that, playing on those fears?

**D:** Yeah. So Mongolian politicians tell western donors outright: “Don’t you ever be concerned with our jingoistic statements and overstatements, because that implies our southern neighbor. It doesn’t apply to any other foreign partner.”

A similar fear of Chinese infiltration has been expressed in the context of the privatization of industries. The last paragraph of an article in the *Mongol Messenger* (an English-language newspaper) from 10 September 1997 dealing with the issue of privatization ran in part: “Responding to public concern that many Chinese individuals and companies were behind new Mongolian owners, [the head of the State Property Committee] Mr. [Z.] Enhbold said: ‘The Chinese can’t carry these objects away’” (Narantuya 1997: 1). Such assertions, however, seemed to reassure few people, particularly in view of reports that the Chinese “have provided more than 25 per cent of the foreign investment in Mongolia” (Rossabi 2001: 71).

Among many Mongols, there is a fear of a loss of one’s “true Mongol identity,” however conceived, most typically through marriage or settlement by the Han Chinese. Over lunch one day at the Ulaanbaatar Hotel in the spring of 1993, Oyuntsetseg, a young research assistant at the
Geography Institute of the Academy of Sciences, summed this up most succinctly. In contrast to the received opinion of the time, she saw the Russians as okay. This was because they were trying to be helpful. Plus, they didn’t want to marry Mongolian women. The Chinese were another story entirely. There were a lot of them coming to Mongolia who wanted to settle permanently, and marry Mongolian women. If this happened, she continued, in five or ten years there would be no pure Mongolian blood left. Although at the time it did not occur to me to question her about the reverse – Chinese women marrying Mongolian men – William Jankowiak’s account of patrilineal constructions of ethnicity in Hohhot in Inner Mongolia (1993: 55ff.) suggests that this would be viewed as less problematic. Various discussions since then indicate that Jankowiak’s argument holds in Ulaanbaatar as well. An anonymous foreigner writing in *The Mongolian Independent* (no. 4, dated Naadam [i.e. early July] 1993, p. 3) also supported this view. He complained that it was acceptable for Mongolian men to date foreign women, but it was not acceptable for women to date foreign men.

This concern is still felt today. The prominence of the issue seems to have lessened, although it has by no means disappeared. In August 2000, I was holding English conversation classes with several young Mongols. At one point, the Chinese came up. The main concern of all of them in regard to the Chinese was that they would end up marrying Mongol women. One of the young women said a friend of hers worked at a sewing factory that employed 600 people, almost all Chinese men. Many of them, she said, had married Mongol women. This brought sighs and gasps of disbelief from the others, who saw it as a threat to the Mongolian population, which would be “flooded” by Chinese.

Issues concerning purity and the Chinese also played out in politics. During the 1993 presidential campaign, P. Ochirbat, the democratic candidate, was felt by some to be unsuitable as a candidate for president because he was rumored to have a Chinese father.16 Narantuya, who didn’t like Ochirbat, said that this was in part because of everything that had happened during his first term of office: various scandals, accusations of embezzlement and other problems. She also admitted that it was partly because he was said to be Chinese. “We don’t like Chinese,” she announced in her typically straightforward fashion. Nevertheless, Ochirbat went on to become the first elected president in Mongolian history by winning in 1993, although he lost his bid for re-election in 1997.

Chinese influence in politics was also a persistent undercurrent in the 2000 Ih Hural elections. There was a widespread rumor that MAHN – the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, which had been the ruling party under socialism – had been heavily funded by the Chinese Communist Party during the elections. Whether true or not, the rumor was believed by
most people I knew who had heard it. I first heard the stories after the election, where MAHN won 72 out of the 76 seats. It is probable, if we assume for the moment that it was only a rumor, that it was fuelled in large part by the unexpectedly large MAHN victory. Yet the fact that it was the Chinese Communist Party that was the focus of the rumor made it particularly compelling. It would be hard to imagine a more odious influence on Mongolian politics than the Chinese.

The larger issue of race and identity is not limited to foreigners. Various Mongol ethnic groups also come in for discrimination. The Buriats, who emigrated to Mongolia from Russia around the time of the Russian revolution in 1917, are particularly suspect in this regard. Believed to be of questionable loyalty, the Buriats suffered disproportionately during the purges of the late 1930s. The distinction of being Other continues to the present. As more than one person put it to me (including one Buriat, both of whose parents are also Buriat), the Buriats often are viewed as the “Jews of Mongolia,” being seen as highly educated and overly influential. Some Buriats were at pains to hide or change this fact. When this woman’s parents went to get her passport when she was about 16 or so, her mother asked if they could list my friend as a Halh Mongol on her passport. As she told the story, the official then asked: “Well, what is her mother.” “Buriat,” came the answer. “And what is her father?” “Buriat.” “So, then how can we put down Halh?”

U. Bulag implies that ethnic hostility played a large role in the 1992 Ih Hural elections, noting that then Prime Minister “Byambasüren’s progressive, democratic, Buryat, minority, and Chinese-‘half-breed’ government failed to get re-elected in 1992” (1998: 88). He attributes this in large part to Halh distrust of the Buriats and other minorities. Whatever the case, there was an intriguing parallel in the newly appointed MAHN government in 2000. According to newspaper accounts, eleven of the thirteen ministers were Halh, and none were Buriats.¹⁷ I was told by several people, however, that this was simply wrong. One person claimed that only about half of the ministers were actually Halh. MAHN was afraid, however, that protests would result if people learned the country was being run by ethnic minorities, and so they simply changed the ministers’ biographies.

Each of these examples serves to illustrate the Mongolian concern with the preservation and purity of the Mongolian race (ündesten). Mongols tend to see the male as being central to the determination of ethnicity. This appears to be the case in other areas of the broader “cultural Mongolia” as well. Caroline Humphrey has noted that in Siberia, Buriat-Russian marriages were overwhelmingly between Buriat men and Russian women (1983: 34). The case is less clear in the People’s Republic of China, but this is due in part to China’s policies towards
minority nationalities and various quotas, which make nationality in part a strategic issue.

The issue, however, is more complicated than it first appears. The data point to two related factors. On the one hand, the evidence indicates a belief in the dominance of the male element. According to this view, women should not marry out; if they did, their children would not be Mongolian because the male element would overpower the female, as Oyuntsetseg, cited earlier, implied. Bulag also notes that the term *erliiz* (half-breed), although now applied to children of any type of mixed marriage, used to only refer to people who’s father was a foreigner (1998: 141). Yet on the other hand, the data suggest that women should not marry foreigners precisely because it is the women who are seen as the font or carriers of Mongolian identity, implying at some level that men are in fact weaker than women. As Caroline Humphrey noted in the case of the Buriats, “Buriat women have always preserved more of ‘traditional’ culture than Buriat men ... Buriat women are supposed to preserve the purity of blood of the Buriat people” (1983: 35).

The case is the same for Mongolia itself: women are not supposed to marry out not because the male is seen as being predominant, but rather because it falls to the women to preserve Mongolness.18 Thus, even if the male is the dominant contributor to ethnicity, it is the women who are the “carriers” of Mongolness, at least among the population at large. I add this last qualifier because “marrying up” was a fairly common practice for high-ranking officials during both the Manchu period and under socialism. During the period of Manchu domination, Mongolian noblemen would often marry Manchu princesses, and during the socialist period, Russian wives were the preferred marriage partners for some senior Mongolian officials. Although I have no reason to believe that the noblemen’s children were viewed as less Mongolian than others, under socialism, such official’s children were often quite Russified, having been educated in special “Russian schools,” or in the Soviet Union itself. It would not be uncommon, I was told, for such people to speak better Russian than Mongolian. (And in fact, this was claimed of several people I knew personally.)19 Although this was a plus during the socialist period, this now often counts against such people, who, like Ochirbat, are in certain contexts no longer seen as being truly Mongolian.

This classification does not extend just to people who have non-Mongolian (or even non-Halh) parents. It can also be applied, although with less force, to people who were educated in Russian schools, either abroad or in Ulaanbaatar. Although such people reject this classification, they are aware that they are a somewhat anomalous group. There is an entire generation of them, one remarked to me, who speak better Russian than Mongolian, and know little of their own history. Others I have talked to, fluent in English and usually working with international
agencies, are somewhat wary of their own cosmopolitanism. They claim that their education and interests open them to charges of not being “true” Mongols, much as Dashbalbar intimated in the passage quoted earlier.

Related to the concept of race, but also implicating economics, which I take up next, was the issue of poisoned supplies coming through China. It was a fairly common experience in 1993 to hear of people taking ill through Chinese food or drink (such talk seemed absent in 1997 and later). Children ended up in the hospital, comatose, because of Chinese sugar; a man went blind from Chinese alcohol; Chinese grain was infested with insects. The stuff the Chinese were selling as salt wasn’t really salt, either. The list seemed to go on and on. In contrast, I heard only one story concerning bad food from Russia, a report circulating in mid-June 1993 that warned of possibly contaminated eggs that had come from Buriatia.

A German working at one of the government agencies suggested a prosaic explanation for the stories. Very simply, he said, this was to be expected, as the Mongolians weren’t willing (or able) to pay enough for better foodstuffs from China. Also, by buying cheaper goods, a trader is able to have a higher profit margin, and most trade at the time was being done over the Chinese, not the Russian, border. By 1997, trade had diversified, with the food markets carrying not only Chinese and Japanese products, but also those from Eastern Europe and even Britain and the US. I was not able to track the trade routes of these goods. Their mere presence however, and the increasingly diversified trade they imply, may account for the general absence of such stories about Chinese goods in the later 1990s.

While such economic factors must be taken into account, these stories also clearly reflect attitudes towards the Chinese. They were often cited as examples of how the sneaky Chinese couldn’t be trusted. Many of these stories have the structure, and source, of “urban folktales” elaborated by Brunvand (1984). Such stories were almost invariably passed on from someone else, or occasionally heard on the radio. I never met anyone who knew someone personally who had been affected by the alleged epidemic of tainted Chinese goods.

Although stories of poisoned foods no longer seemed to circulate after the mid-1990s, the attitude of mistrust remained. Among people I know, it seemed to manifest itself most clearly in terms of fruit, probably because the vast majority came from China, and it was a relative luxury item. This resulted in an uneasy tension between pleasure at the variety of fruits available, and suspicion at their quality. The stories carried over to encounters in China itself. At dinner one night, a friend was telling me of her recent trip abroad, and how she spent a night in Beijing in transit. “And the hotel had this big pile of fruit. Lots of apples and things. I
wanted to eat them all, but then I remembered that they were Chinese. So
I took only one.” Then she laughed at herself.

Economics and poverty

One cannot discuss Ulaanbaatar in a post-socialist context without at least
a brief consideration of the economic situation. The economic contraction
– at its worst in 1992–93 – is said to have been almost twice as severe as
the Great Depression of the 1930s in the US (UNDP 1997: 7). The end of
socialism was accompanied by an almost total collapse of the economic
sphere, and this included the social safety net, health services, and even
heating and electricity. In the early 1990s, the US Embassy would advise
Americans spending the winter in Mongolia to keep passports, money and
other essentials ready in case of a need to evacuate because of a failure of
the heating system. Rolling blackouts were common in the city – and elec-
tricity and hot water remain sporadic (if available at all) in many places
outside of Ulaanbaatar to this day. All parts of the country and population
were affected. Although nominally more independent than urban dwellers,
the herdsmen also suffered as state-supplied fodder, transportation assistance
and veterinary care disappeared.

Although slowing, and eventually reversing, the economic decline
continued throughout the early 1990s. From 1990 to 1995, the gross
domestic product (GDP) per capita dropped over 33 per cent (Odggaard
1996: 105). Recovery was under way by 1997, but a large portion of the
population still lived at or below the poverty line. In 1997, over one-third
of the urban population was listed as living below this line (State Statistical
Office of Mongolia 1997: 103). Although the poverty line as defined by
income varies by district, for Ulaanbaatar it stood at just over T10,000
(tögrög) a month in 1997, roughly $12.50 at the exchange rate at the
time. Current estimates place anywhere from 30 to 40 per cent of the
country living below the poverty line (see, for example, UNDP 2000: 26).

Here I will give a brief overview of the situation, focusing mostly on the
early 1990s, the main time period for the research discussed here. I focus
on economics as it impacted on the daily lives of the people. While larger-
scale statistics such as GDP and foreign investment serve as indicators of
the economic trends of a country, they do not necessarily translate well
into the issues of day-to-day living.

During the socialist period, as was the case elsewhere in the Soviet bloc,
many goods, necessities and services were heavily subsidized. Rent was
only a token sum, and schooling and medical care were free. Furthermore,
the national currency, the tögrög, was artificially valued at T3–4 to the
dollar. In 1991, this was set at T40 to the dollar (Asian Development Bank
1992: 228). Salaries reflected this economic structure. The average
monthly wage in 1986 was T526. Five years later, it had almost doubled to
T1025, although this represented a decline in actual income (State Statistical Office of Mongolia 1992: 106–107). Prices also reflected this increase, in fact outstripping the rise in salary.

By 1993, the tögrög was trading at roughly T400 to the dollar. The average household income in September 1993 was just over T10,000, and expenditures were 102 per cent of income. In September 1997, with an exchange rate of about T800 to the dollar, the average household income was listed as just over T58,500, with expenditures at about 99 per cent of this figure (State Statistical Office of Mongolia 1997: 95–96). What is perhaps most revealing about these figures is that in both instances, less than half of the household income was from wages.23

Although theses figures do represent an increase in income if converted into dollars, from roughly $25 a month in 1993 to about $73 in 1997, expenses increased as well. To illustrate, let us briefly look at food prices. Other costs, such as utilities, increased in much the same manner and in some instances much more dramatically.

In general, retail prices were relatively stable during my stay in the first half of 1993, becoming slightly higher after a series of economic measures were put into effect in June as part of the economic reforms.24 At a state store in the spring of 1993, potatoes, a staple food, were selling for roughly T30/kg (about 7.5 cents/kg). Prices at the various open-air markets were slightly higher, but so was the quality of the food available. By September 1997, potatoes at the market were selling for T250/kg (31 cents/kg).

With the increase in prices, however, also came an increase in the quantity and diversity of foodstuffs. Thus, while bread was rationed in 1993, four years later it was plentiful, and numerous varieties could be found in the food markets. By the end of the 1990s, even baguettes could be found in some of the markets.

The increase in availability of food also led to the decreasing importance of social networks, at least at the subsistence level. Both basic staples and luxuries (for those who could afford them) were available in the markets, reducing the necessity of relying on social networks for provisioning. This does not mean that they ceased to function at all in this regard. For many people, personal ties to countryside dwellers remain the preferred means for obtaining certain types of food. In particular, dairy products and airag (fermented mare’s milk) are preferably obtained from countryside contacts, although this holds to a lesser degree for meat and other items as well.

Unemployment also became an issue with the collapse of socialism. Following nominal full employment under socialism, one government official estimated that close to one-half of the graduating high-school class of 1993 would be unemployed. Official figures for unemployment were not nearly so high, being listed as 5.5 per cent in 1995 and 4.6 per cent in
2001 (National Statistical Office 2002: 77), but these figures are misleading. Official unemployment figures take into account only people who were previously employed and now are not, and who have chosen to register with the government. For example, the unemployed half of the 1993 graduating class would not have been counted by the official statistics. By other estimates, the actual unemployment rate is close to 25 per cent (National Statistical Office 2001: 94). Unemployment, like poverty, varies between Ulaanbaatar and the various regions of the country. In some parts of the country – particularly some of the aimag and sum (a subdivision of an aimag) centers – official unemployment approaches 40 per cent, putting the actual number out of work much higher.

The flip side of the issue of poverty, of course, is wealth. While everyday existence was and remains a struggle for a large portion of the population, a few became fantastically wealthy with the end of socialism. Whether through trade or other means, a relative few had amassed a considerable fortune. For them, living standards approach those in the West. Fancy restaurants, French wine and expensive cars – often SUVs – are the order of the day. Stores advertise expensive Scandinavian furniture on TV, although one woman remarked to me that most people she knew could not afford such fancy things, and regarded such stores as little more than galleries.

While some of the cultural and intellectual elite I know live at or near the average income levels, few if any live near the poverty line. For example, when I taught at the National University in 2000–01, the monthly salary for a full-time professor at my level was about $130. Others with more seniority made more, although not a lot more. They are neither incredibly rich, nor are they poverty-stricken. Those Mongols fortunate enough to work for international agencies – often, but by no means exclusively, women – enjoy salaries that can run to several hundreds of dollars a month. It was possible and common for them to enjoy many of the restaurants and nightclubs that sprung up in Ulaanbaatar in the mid- to late 1990s. Almost all of them now sport cell phones, although cars remain less common among the people I know. This particular economic group, however, is a relatively recent development.

In the early 1990s, even the intellectuals and elite were not immune to the economic problems the country faced. Some dollar shops offered a few luxury items for those with hard currency, but food shortages and economic collapse affected all. One telling indication of this was that even with recourse to social networks, certain types of food remained very hard if not impossible to obtain. Through connections, education and other means, however, the cultural and intellectual elite – now bolstered by the business elite – seem to have recovered from the economic collapse better than many others.

Ulaanbaatar in the 1990s was an exciting, if at times difficult, place to live. The novelty of the fall of socialism in 1990 had largely worn off,
leaving the city not only with new political and religious freedom, but also crime, unemployment and economic upheaval. The food shortages of a few years earlier had largely abated, but prices were high and food was not always plentiful in the early part of the decade. People still thought about history and Mongolian traditions, but also had to think about more mundane issues of survival. When I returned in 1997, a new prosperity was evident, at least among some members of society. For the poorer ones, life continued to be difficult, and some people wondered aloud about the possible schism of Mongolian society into two parts. These trends continued throughout the 1990s, making Ulaanbaatar a city of both wealth and poverty.

Having laid the groundwork for understanding some of the issues pertinent to understanding truth, history and politics in Mongolia in the 1990s, I turn in the next chapter to a chronology of the democratic revolution of 1989–90. In offering the most comprehensive account of the revolution available in English, I begin to highlight the ways in which history was put in the service of the democratic revolution, and how the revolution in turn shaped conceptions of history and identity. I then continue with a more detailed symbolic analysis in Chapter 4.
By most accounts, it was the very solidarity that was a trademark of socialism that brought about its end in the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) in the winter of 1989–90. Following the Soviet Union in policy, as it had for almost seventy years, the leadership of the MPR faithfully followed it into the confusion and upheaval of reform and democracy. Sending students to study abroad in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the socialist regime had unwittingly sown the seeds of its own destruction on fertile ground. The students came back from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union not only with university degrees, but, having been exposed to the fledgling opposition, they also brought back ideas of democracy and freedom.

Ganbaatar, one of the founders of the MSDN (Mongol Sotsial Demokrat Nam – Mongolian Social Democratic Party) recalled the impact this had:

From the beginning of the 1970s, the people who brought back true information about the world were always students. During this period, I was a student. [The real situation] was completely opposed to what we had learned about European culture. During the seven years I studied [in Eastern Europe], my view of the world changed ... When people of that time learned about European culture, they weren’t satisfied with the Mongolian condition. They didn’t sympathize with the one-party ideology.¹

This exposure to the situation in Eastern Europe was limited, but powerful in its effect. It was no coincidence that most of the key opposition leaders had been educated outside of Mongolia. In an ironic twist of fate, it was often their very positions as the children of intellectuals or Party functionaries that offered them the opportunity to study abroad.

Drawing in part upon the expectations of the former students, during the winter of 1989–90 the reform process that had been started by MAHN at the 19th Party Congress in 1986 erupted into open and vocal discon-

"DEMOCRACY COMES TO MONGOLIA"
tent. It was a heady time, but a frightening one as well. The protesters, led by young intellectuals and students, were not sure what would happen as they stood in the bitter winter cold, when temperatures of \(-20^\circ F\) or colder are common. Tiananmen Square surely came to mind to some. Ganbat, a member of the Foreign Ministry in 1993, recalled the feelings of the time: “People were not used to this sort of thing. Almost everybody had [some] hesitation whether this government will arrest anybody. Everybody used to have some fear.” Despite their fears, and the fact that the army was indeed called out to confront the protesters later in the spring, democracy came relatively peacefully to Mongolia, and ultimately with the support of the ruling party. No shots were fired, and no lives were lost.

From the earliest stages of the process, the links between reform and the past were made clear. MAHN sought to distance itself from the excesses of the recent socialist past and new approaches to Mongolian history became not only permissible but even desirable. As most Western observers were quick to point out, the opposition also made early and visible use of historical symbols, especially Chinggis Khaan. While MAHN had opened the way for such discussions, they did not take decisive advantage of many of the opportunities afforded them, ultimately leaving it to the opposition to do so. Given the simple fact that Mongolia had no history of multiparty politics, it was far from clear who could and would most effectively lay claim to the past. MAHN was by no means to be written off at this stage. Indeed, given their power, influence and existing organizational structures, one would have been forgiven for expecting they would wield the symbolic upper hand.

Oddly enough, most works on Mongolia dealing with the post-socialist political and economic landscape pay scant heed to the democratic revolution itself. Bruun and Odgaard, in “A society and economy in transition,” reduce the first five or so months of the democratic revolution to three sentences, which note the formation of the Mongolian Democratic Association, “a series of demonstrations in the capital,” and the amendment of the constitution (1996b: 28). The introduction to the section “Mongolia today” in Kotkin and Elleman’s edited volume, *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century*, sums up the tension, fear and excitement of the democratic revolution by noting that “In 1990, Mongolia broke with the USSR, eliminated one-party rule, and embarked on a revolutionary path of political and economic liberalization” (1996: 183). Bulag’s work on nationalism and identity (1998), which includes a discussion of the new national symbols and issues surrounding the adoption of the new constitution in 1992, only refers in passing to the “protests” of 1990.

Yet the scope and importance of the democratic revolution cannot be underestimated. The revolution was more than just “a series of demonstrations in the capital,” although these were the most visible and prominent
aspect. There was a storm of activity, uncertainty, debates, demands and counter-demands that took place during those few months of late 1989 and early 1990. While Ulaanbaatar was the focus of the activity, as the seat of the national government, the democratic organizations soon had branches in other parts of the country. The hunger strike in Sükhbaatar Square in March is well known, but what is almost unknown outside of Mongolia (and probably not well known there, either) is that another hunger strike was staged in the city of Mörön, in the western province of Hövsgöl a few weeks later.3

For an understanding and a timeline of the events, one has had to either piece one together from various articles or be able to read Mongolian. I will thus spend some time discussing the democratic revolution itself, as it serves as a key point in Mongolian conceptions of history and identity. In doing so, I shall focus on the first few months. The first public protest took place in early December 1989, and by mid-March 1990, the reigning Politburo had resigned, and soon after, the first multi-party elections were announced. The key elements in the collapse of the old socialist system thus occurred within a four-month time-span. There was still much to be done after the spring of 1990, including actually holding the elections, the establishment of the new government and the writing of the new constitution. These events, however, are generally not viewed as part of the democratic revolution itself, and so I treat them more cursorily. I end my discussion of the democratic revolution somewhat arbitrarily on 3 September 1990, when the democratically elected People’s Great Hural opened its session. I will return to a discussion of history-related issues in government debates later in the book.

In the chapter that follows, I will continue this focus on the democratic revolution. There I examine some of the issues related to the unfolding of the events and their use of historically charged symbolism, such as the historical parallels that were used to discuss and frame understanding of the events, both during the winter of 1989–90 itself and in later reflections. This chapter will help to clarify and underline the point that the relationship between politics and history is mutual; that previous ideas about history are important in conceiving of and talking about political events, and in turn these events affect interpretations of the past.

The events

As with any such series of events, it is impossible to put forward anything as definite as a single date for the starting point of the reforms. An outside observer could well argue for MAHN’s 19th Party Congress in March 1986, which is where we will begin our account. It was at this congress that the need for change in socialism as it actually existed in Mongolia was officially acknowledged. As we shall see, while MAHN
laid the groundwork, it was the protesters who brought about the most substantial changes. Although now imbued with a certain degree of coherence and purpose, accounts from the period reflect the uncertainty and hesitancy with which the changes were carried out. At the time, the outcome was far from certain. Something momentous was happening, but quite what it was wasn’t always clear. Nor was it clear if it would end peacefully or in bloodshed.

Reform, paralleling perestroika and glasnost’ in the Soviet Union, began in the mid-1980s under J. Batmönkh, the general secretary of MAHN and chairman of the Presidium of the People’s Ih Hural (in effect, the head of the government). The 19th Party Congress, held in March 1986, addressed issues of openness, but within the socialist context. It was not intended to be the beginning of the end of socialism. It was rather a critique of the excesses of some of the phases of socialism; an ideological house-cleaning, similar to Gorbachev’s early reforms, or perhaps Khrushchev’s move away from Stalinism in the late 1950s. As Batmönkh phrased it in his speech at the congress when talking about the Party’s “theoretical thinking,”

[T]heoretical cognition and generalisation of the practice of socialist construction have fallen behind present-day requirements. It would not be an exaggeration to say that nowadays the development of social sciences in our country does not go beyond the framework of simple propagation of commonly known truths.

A new approach should be adopted to analysing and generalising the experience of socialist construction, studying and solving many social, political, economic and cultural issues arising from the country’s life. It is high time to direct the efforts of social scientists and social science centers at moving over onto a more complex stage in the creative scientific quest. The method of creative discussions which facilitates finding a truth and acquiring an appreciation of theory should be intensified within the scientific community.

(Batmönkh 1986: 97)

In this passage, we see hinted-at acknowledgements that things have to change, but, as of yet, not the abandonment of socialism itself. Indeed, up until almost the very end, MAHN and the government were to interpret reform as an attempt to save socialism and rejuvenate the economy, much in the manner of Gorbachev. This stance was to be maintained until the very end of the socialist period. In July 1989, official publications were still referring to the 19th Party Congress in the context of developing “Marxist-Leninist scientific ideology” (Altantsetseg 1989: 3). If the winds of change were blowing, it appeared – at least to MAHN – to be no more than a breeze.
This reluctance to abandon wholesale socialist rhetoric was not limited to MAHN. During the early stages of the democratic revolution, the goals of the protesters were also to be described in terms of socialism. While this may have been a tactical move, it is more likely a reflection of the fact that they did not necessarily foresee the eventual outcome of their protests, and were entering into the dialog in what they perceived to be the most effective manner. It was not necessarily that socialism itself was inherently untenable, but rather that the principles of socialism had been betrayed.

This spirit of reform-within-the-system was not unique to Mongolia. It mimics, if not consciously, much of the anti-colonial rhetoric in British India and elsewhere, where “the nationalist criticism was not that colonial rule was imposing alien institutions of state on indigenous society, but rather that it was restricting and even violating the true principles of modern government” (Chatterjee 1993: 74). This parallel is worth bearing in mind, for if the protests at first took the stance of arguing for true socialism, they would soon shift and expand to lay claim to the moral high ground of tradition and history, much as nationalists did elsewhere.

In addressing the changes instituted in 1986, MAHN later declared it had “embarked on a major overhaul of political, economic and cultural life in the country ... Although socialism in Mongolia is firmly on its feet and had proved its viability, it has not yet revealed its full potential” (Namsray 1989: 34). Such an emphasis on the vitality of socialism was to continue throughout the coming events. Above all, what was taking place was supposed to be controlled reform: “The time is ripe for a consistent application of democratic principles and public openness in cadre policy. Naturally, this does not mean that we should let everything take its course” (Namsray 1989: 36, emphasis in original).

At this point, the changes instigated by MAHN were still being envisioned as having a fairly limited scope. The emphasis was on increased economic efficiency. In the publications of 1986, the term öörchlön baig-uulalt (restructuring, the equivalent of perestroika) was not yet in use. The “Economic, [and] social development guidelines for 1986–1990” – the Central Committee draft for the 19th Congress – does not yet speak of “reform” or “restructuring.” It rather states a need to “perfect the methods, forms and mechanism of control of the economy and enhance the standard of management” (JPRS-MON-86–003: 11).

In Batmönkh’s speech to the 19th Party Congress, which runs to over eighty pages in the published (Mongolian) version, he uses the term il tod (openness, which came to be equated with glasnost’) once, but he uses it in a more restricted sense than it would later come to have. Other phrases, such as öörchlön sajriulab (to improve) and shinechlel öörchlöl (to renew) hint at the later terms, but again, this is intended to be a renewal within socialism and the Party, rather than a full-scale shift in social and political relations (see Losolsüren et al. 1986: 60, 61, 64, 73).
One of the first officially sanctioned, although still controlled, criticisms of the socialist past was the critique of “Tsedenbalism.” Named after Yu. Tsedenbal, the ruler of Mongolia from 1952 until his removal by Moscow in 1984, the term refers to the economic stagnation of the 1980s. This critique of Tsedenbalism, which did not begin for another two years after the Party Conference (Sanders 1991: 72), was to mark the beginning of MAHN’s criticism of the socialist past, but it did not and would not totally repudiate it. Errors had been made, but the basic aim of perfecting socialism was not in question.

Between the 19th Party Congress in 1986 and the Central Committee Plenum in December 1989, when the pace of the changes accelerated, most of the steps taken by the government and MAHN were attempts at economic reform. There was, however, a gradual shift in and an expansion of the goals of reform as time went on, again paralleling the Soviet situation.

Reforms were officially expanded to include social life and history at the MAHN Central Committee Plenum held on 21–22 December 1988. (At about the same time, Baabar’s now-famous tract Büü Mart (Don’t Forget!) was being written in Moscow, although it was not to be published openly in Mongolia until 1990.) The secretary of the Central Committee, writing in 1989, said “Certain stages of [MAHN] history need to be critically and truthfully reassessed … If we have really adopted openness, it must also extend to history” (Balhaajav 1989: 52).6 Balhaajav was not suggesting a full reappraisal of all history. Rather, he was talking in particular about the cult of personality that had sprung up around Choibalsan, much like the one that had around Stalin in the Soviet Union, to whom Choibalsan was often compared.7 At this point, a parallel with Khrushchev’s Secret Speech of 1956 would probably be a more accurate view of the intentions of MAHN. Socialism had gone astray, but it was not fundamentally in error (yet). Another area to come in for early reassessment was the purges of the 1930s and the destruction of the monasteries. This may well have been an attempt by MAHN at “the boosting of Mongolian identity in reaction to decades of Russian cultural and linguistic influence” (Bruun and Odgaard 1996b: 33), but, as we shall see, by and large, in the end MAHN was not credited with such accomplishments, which would be the realm of the protesters.

At the same time as the December 1988 Central Committee Plenum, the first protests took place. A small movement, by most accounts consisting of five to seven people, called Shine Üe (New Times) pasted up posters criticizing the government.8 According to one person, the five were soon caught by the Ministry of Public Security (the secret police), and released upon promising not to repeat their misdeeds. One of the members, reminiscing to a newspaper in 1997, does not mention this, but talks of similar actions in early January 1989: “The Ministry of Public Security put out a
warning, and very quickly the majority [of the signs] were removed" (S. Amarsan, quoted in Dashzeveg 1998: 18).

They were apparently largely quiescent until the democratic movement of 1989–90. The founder of *Shine Üe*, Bat-Üül, later became a leader of the Mongolian Democratic Association. These protests, however, seem to have not entered the popular consciousness, and I did not hear of the group during either my 1993 or my 1997 trip. Most Mongols not directly involved with the events of the early 1990s were unaware of the existence of *Shine Üe* when I asked about the group in 1999 and later visits. Another group, largely a discussion group at first, known as the Young Economists’ Club, was founded in April 1989. The members of this group were later to form the nucleus of one of the early democratic groups (Dashzeveg 1998: 65).

Nor was MAHN inactive during this period. Even without a substantial repositioning of official policy, the dam had begun to crack, and the trickle of reappraisals of history was soon to become a steady stream, and then a flood. In a mood similar to, but more expansive than Balhaajav’s, the then culture minister (and member of the Central Committee) B. Sum’yaa later took a swipe at Soviet domination when he wrote the following:

The 5th plenary meeting of the Central Committee (1988) oriented the party and the people on a restructuring of our society …

More attention is being paid to historical subjects. Artists are working enthusiastically to fill in the blank spots in literature and the arts and to open previously closed areas. This is borne out by the production of *Duchess* [sic] *Mandubai the Wise*, a feature film in four parts⁹ as well as by the fact that work has begun on a feature film about Genghis Khan in several installments ….

Still, it is not so much the subjects themselves as *new interpretations of reality that matter* … Our artistic intelligentsia no longer resembles an obedient schoolboy writing what the teacher is dictating (the way it was not too long ago).

*(Sum’yaa 1989: 21–23, emphasis in original)*

Soon it was to become the subjects that mattered. Although reaction to the film about Chinggis Khaan was mixed (see Chapter 6), the fact that it could be made was significant in itself. The opening up of history generally, however, did not win any new adherents to the socialist cause. In retrospect, MAHN failed to exploit this potential as well as they could have. Early articles praising Chinggis Khaan as the founder of the Mongolian state were not to be enough to associate MAHN with changing views on history for most people. They had created the space in which reevaluations were possible, but never controlled it. As subsequent chapters
will make clear, this reading of history was already commonplace. To many people, then, MAHN’s repositioning would simply have been an official admission of what they already thought. In other words, MAHN was already playing catch-up with interpretations of history, even without organized groups opposing them.

At this stage, the emphasis in historical reassessment was still largely on the re-evaluation of the socialist period – criticizing the economic stagnation under previous leaders, and the “excesses” of earlier periods. Much of what was taking place could easily have been misread as just another “thaw” or shift in policy. There was no reason to expect it would develop into something more, although the degree of openness was fairly surprising.

A number of areas were opened up to examination; one of the main ones was the issue of political repression. Many of the newspaper articles of the period ran under the general heading of “Tüüh söhvöl” (“If we look to the past”). This was a careful, controlled and, most importantly, limited examination of the issue. Throughout 1989 and 1990, the full extent of the repression was not discussed. Those cases with a particular resonance, such as the repression of Genden, a prime minister in the 1930s, at the hands of the Soviets, were written about. This was part of MAHN’s attempt to dissociate itself from a history that many people knew, but could or would not talk about.10

More importantly, people wrote into Ünen, the MAHN newspaper, with stories of injustice. One of the earliest that I am aware of was published on 8 January 1989.11 Under the column heading of “In our mail,” there is an item entitled “Let us immortalize the reputation of the repressed partisans.” The author, who identifies himself as a teacher at the polytechnic in Darhan and öndör nastan,12 writes that in 1938, on Choibalsan’s instructions, over thirty partisans of the socialist revolution in 1921 and their relatives were arrested and repressed. “The above people did not commit counter-revolutionary acts,” the author explained, “but struggled for the freedom and independence of their motherland and their people against foreign invaders heedless of their own lives” (Tsend 1989). He goes on to call for a statue to be erected to the partisans, and notes that he and others are ready to make a contribution. Clearly, wronged partisans are a fairly safe bet in terms of issues to bring to light, but the fact that Tsend felt secure enough to do so in such a public forum speaks to the changing times and attitudes. Other historical topics and issues would crop up from time to time, but they continued to largely be a re-evaluation of socialist history. More generally, widespread debate and publication on non-socialist history and culture did not become common until the democratic revolution and especially after. With these discussions on pre-socialist history, discussions on socialism would largely disappear for several years.
Also in 1989, a series of articles, including some by K. Zardihan, a member of the Central Committee and a historian by training, appeared in Namyn Am’dral (Party Life), the magazine of MAHN, calling for an “end to dogmatic interpretations of Marxism-Leninism and to [MAHN’s] political monopoly” (Sanders 1996: 217). Such a call, even in the context of a Party publication, is very telling. It can only be taken to reflect the growing desire for change and the increasing openness of debate. Whether this was a change designed to save MAHN and socialism, or bring about their end, is immaterial to a degree. It is the ability to make such criticisms without drastic repercussions that matters.

In addition to the attempts to reposition MAHN vis-à-vis what were now seen as the excesses of some aspects of socialist rule, much energy and space was devoted to addressing issues of restructuring more generally. My notes from reading the 1989 issues of Ünen say that “Every issue had at least one article on reform or restructuring, and many had multiple ones … [T]here were at least two irregular columns on the topic, Shinechlelien sedveer yarilts’ya (‘Let’s talk about the topic of renewal’) and Ulamjlal, shinechlel (‘Tradition, renewal’).” Many of the articles in these columns probably fell on deaf ears as much of the rhetoric in the articles remained couched in the language of socialism.

One important development lay outside the realm of economics and history proper, yet must not be overlooked: the discussions concerning Mongol bichig. The old vertical script had been almost completely abandoned with the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet (adapted from the Russian) in the 1940s. To reclaim Mongol bichig would soon be seen as instrumental in the repudiation of socialism, and a return to the “true” Mongolian way of life. This was particularly important as Chinggis Khaan was said to have ordered the adoption of the script in the early thirteenth century. However, even this move was co-opted by the opposition during their demonstrations. While the government debated the pros, cons and practicalities of the issue, the opposition stepped in and made the debates academic by simply using bichig. The fact that most people could not read the signs written in it was irrelevant.

The increasing openness facilitated by the political leadership continued to gather momentum. A number of secret meetings were held in late November and early December by various groups of students, teachers and others. These culminated in the announcement of the Mongolian Democratic Association (MoAH), which held its first public demonstration on 10 December. The group’s formation had been timed to coincide with the MAHN Central Committee Plenum, as well as International Human Rights Day. The date was made into a holiday in 1996, although it was still a working day. In 1999, numerous celebrations and commemorations marked the tenth anniversary.
The first demonstration was held on the steps of the Youth Cultural Center, only a short distance from Sükhbaatar Square. This was not as confrontational a location as the square itself or a more visible site would have been. The steps of the Center are somewhat tucked away, facing a small park and the Selbe river. An estimated 200 people attended the rally, which included chants calling for a multi-party system, a free press and respect for human rights. The two-person group Honh (Bell) performed what was to become the “anthem of the revolution,” “Honhny duu” (“The Bell’s Song”) (Dashzeveg 1998: 21). The event, although photographed, was not covered in Ünen. (The demonstrations and protests taking place in Romania at the time, however, did receive press attention.) Perhaps optimistically gearing themselves for international attention, the sign proclaiming the “Mongolian democratic association” is in both Mongolian and English.

Along with staging the protest, the MoAH issued a petition. The petition included demands for changes to the constitution, as well as for the following: the creation of a permanent standing parliament; an elected council for the protection of human rights; the abolishment of special privileges for the nomenklatura; economic reform; changes to the electoral system, including popular elections for the deputies of the People’s Ih Hural by the end of the first half of 1990; freedom of the press; the addressing of the issues of political repression and the large-scale destruction of the monasteries and repression of the lamas in the 1930s; and the recognition of MoAH as a legitimate political organization (Dashzeveg 1998: 21–22). These demands were radical and daring, but they were also not entirely without precedent. Many of the protesters, for example, would have been familiar with Zardihan’s earlier call for electoral reform in his Namyn Am’dral article. Throughout the early stages of the democratic revolution, this was to be the protesters’ modus operandi. They would push for change, and push hard, but seldom were their demands completely without some degree of precedent. This would change in time.

The MoAH protests were to become a regular occurrence, with the second occurring one week later. This was held in front of the State Drama Theater, and was attended by about 2,000 people (Maidar 1991: 5). This moved the demonstration to a much more visible site. The theater is across from the State Library with its statue of Stalin (soon to be pulled down) and within a minute or two of Sükhbaatar Square, which can be glimpsed from the theater.

All the subsequent protests were all held near the center of town, usually in Sükhbaatar Square or Freedom Square, in front of the Lenin Museum. They were widely publicized, with fliers being made to announce them, at times with the tacit approval of high-ranking Party members. Sükhbaatar Square itself fronts the main government building, and thus to demonstrate there, where May Day celebrations were also
Figure 3.1  S. Zorig, the one man most associated with the democratic revolution. He was both a charismatic and practical leader of the democratic movement. The statue was erected after his murder in October 1998. The murder has never been solved.
held, added a certain edge to the proceedings. Indeed, although it is absent from the reminiscences of the participants (see Chapter 4), the protests in the square itself were to develop into something akin to the violation of a sacred site. It is notable in this regard that when the military was called out in April, they were called out to surround and protect the government building, not to surround the crowds of protesters.

The most visible member of the MoAH was S. Zorig, the one man whose name would most be associated with the events taking place (see Figure 3.1). In many ways typical of the opposition leaders, he was young (in his late twenties), a member of the intelligentsia, and had been educated abroad, in Moscow. The Western press of the time delighted in drawing attention to the fact that he was also a lecturer in Marxist theory at the Mongolian National University. Baabar, another key opposition figure, noted that prior to 1989–90, people knew of Chinggis Khaan and his grandson Khubilai. Maybe they also knew of Sühaataar, Choibalsan and Tsedenbal. Now Zorig was added to the list. “It does not mean that Zorig’s name is known throughout the whole world, but today the name ‘Sanjaasürengiin Zorig’ has entered all the world’s large encyclopedias” (Baabar 1995: 130).

While important in the early stages of the movement, Zorig was to fall from prominence during the mid-1990s. Several people suggested to me in 1993 that his ethnic background (he was Buriat, and also part Russian – but identified by some simply as “Russian”) would have precluded him from high office. Despite this, he remained a Member of Parliament throughout the 1990s, and active in politics. He was also minister of infrastructure development in the late 1990s, and was rumored to be a candidate for prime minister, but was brutally murdered in October 1998 before this could be announced. The murder remains unsolved.

Although the Mongolian Democratic Association and other groups (such as the Social Democratic Movement – ASH) have since become known as the opposition parties, the term must be understood within a certain context. What was originally at issue was largely the speed and degree of the reforms. The concepts of restructuring as put forward by the MAHN Central Committee were in general accepted by the early demonstrators. Both MoAH and later ASH repeatedly emphasized their willingness to work with the then leaders of MAHN to effect the changes they were championing. At one point during the spring, which I return to below, they requested Batmönkh to remain in office after he had offered to resign. (Batmönkh himself seems to have been sympathetic to the reforms, but also had to take into account more conservative factions of MAHN.)

From its earliest meetings, the Mongolian Democratic Association was peaceful although illegal, announcing its support of the moves by the Central Committee Plenum towards reform, while urging them towards even greater reform, criticizing the bureaucracy and demanding greater
openness. At this point, the MoAH was still operating within a broader Marxist context, describing themselves as “a public and political organization which appeared as an objective law of social development” (DR, 16 January 1990: 8). One-party rule was criticized, but MAHN’s contributions to Mongolian history and development were also recognized. Despite this rather conciliatory attitude, the fact that protests and rallies were taking place at all was of signal importance.

Even as these moves were being played out, discussion on reform continued within the socialist framework for some time. In a late December 1989 speech, Batmönkh said “I would like to note that the mistakes committed in the past did not derive from socialism’s essences, and were, in actual fact, linked with the distortion of the basic principles of socialism” (DR, 19 January 1990: 8). Nor did the opposition contest this. What was largely at issue at first was the form of socialism that was to be built. Later in the movement, a joint declaration by the opposition parties declared that they were working towards the “development of human democratic socialism” (DR, 12 March 1990: 9). At about the same time, Balhaajav, the secretary of the Central Committee, could still claim “that socialism is an early stage of communism, of that great historical process so natural for the development of humanity” (DR Supplement, 14 March 1990: 67). The debate was shaping up as a debate between democratic and communist socialism. The rhetoric largely belied the actions. Reform was under way, but the discussions around it still seemed more reminiscent of a repositioning within socialism than a total repudiation of it.

The increasingly vocal discontentment with the government and Soviet influence boiled over in late December. Gary Kasparov, the chess champion, commented in a Playboy interview that the Soviet Union would solve some of its economic troubles by selling off Mongolia to China. Mongols, not unexpectedly, were outraged at this. According to articles in Ünen, petitions and letters signed by “many thousands” of Mongols were sent to the Soviet Embassy and the four consular offices (Ünen 1990a). A two-hour work-stoppage was called for, but apparently never took place. At multiple press conferences, a spokesman for the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed regret at the statement, and reiterated that this was not official Soviet policy. Clearly, the dissatisfaction that was being made public by the demonstrations was not confined to the pace of economic and social reform, whatever the rhetoric and position of the organizers.

Another demonstration took place in front of the Lenin Museum (about a kilometer or so from Sühbaatar Square) on 14 January. One foreign journalist estimated the crowd at 4,000–5,000 (Southerland 1990), although Mongolian sources place the numbers at around 10,000 (Dashzeveg 1998: 25; Maidar 1991: 5–6). At this demonstration, the protestors were at pains to position themselves as not being explicitly
against MAHN itself. Maidar quotes an unnamed demonstrator as saying “We are not against MAHN, but we are struggling to replace MAHN’s unlimited authority” (Maidar 1991: 6). If they were not already, the protests would soon be seen as a challenge to MAHN itself.

Other, less prominent demonstrations and meetings also took place during these months. For example, a demonstration was held on 20 January in front of the Yalalt movie theater (next to the Lenin Museum) by the Revolutionary Youth League of one of Ulaanbaatar’s districts, which was generally supportive of the changes taking place, although they called for them to be speeded up (Maidar 1991: 6). The day before, government officials met with MoAH members in a meeting that was broadcast on radio and television. The democratic revolution, in other words, was more than a string of disjointed public demonstrations. It was gaining force and momentum. Other parties and organizations formed and spoke out, and discussions were taking place between the different groups. The demonstrations also soon spread beyond Ulaanbaatar itself, a point not often appreciated, and the major groups acquired branches in the provinces fairly quickly.

It was the demonstration on 21 January that was to become seen as the watershed demonstration. This was the first one to take place in Sühbaatar Square itself, which greatly increased the confrontational nature of the gathering. Mongolian sources claim 20,000 people attended (Dashzeveg 1998: 26; Maidar 1991: 6), although Southerland (1990) puts the number at a mere 3,000. (Photographs of the demonstrations seem to give credence to numbers in the range of the Mongolian estimates, even if they are themselves perhaps a bit high.)20 This demonstration, which took place in the bitter cold of the Mongolian winter, was notable for several reasons in addition to its location.

First, although MoAH (and the recently formed ASH) were regularly referred to as “unofficial” (alban yosny büs) organizations, this demonstration was the first to be staged after the local government had prohibited the holding of demonstrations and meetings on certain streets and squares. While even the existence of unofficial groups went against state policy, this demonstration was an openly defiant act.

Second, the direct opposition to MAHN and its policies seemed to be mounting. Unlike the first demonstration in December, where slogans were chanted but placards were lacking, subsequent meetings sported banners and placards. Among other slogans were the following: “A new time has come: let’s awake!”, “Multi-Party System,” “Towards a legal [erb zui] government,” “Mongols – to your horses!”, “Tsedenbal – To the People’s Court,” and “If you are afraid, do not do, if you do, do not be afraid” (Maidar 1991: 6).

Third, the stakes were raised in other ways as well, most notably in terms of a contest to be seen as the true heirs of the socialist revolution.
Sühbaatar’s grandson, Süh-Erdene, was present at the demonstration, and gave a speech in which he denied that the present-day MAHN was the heir to the Mongolian People’s Party founded by his grandfather. “Today’s MAHN cannot claim to be the successor to the Mongolian People’s Party founded by my grandfather” (Dashzeveg 1998: 21).

A very interesting event also took place at this demonstration. During the meetings, while a famous, state-honored singer, D. Sosorbaram, sang a well-known folk song, people performed a hurailan around Sühbaatar’s statue in the middle of the square. This involved circumambulating the statue in a clockwise direction before performing a ritual of beckoning good fortune (dallaga). The beckoning involves holding one’s hands out palms outward some distance from the face. They are then rotated in a clockwise fashion while calling out “hurai, hurai.” The ritual had been carried out throughout the socialist period, although not very openly. Although it is not clear why this was performed, people I have queried said it would not have been viewed as a challenge to the socialist government, but instead as a way of paying respect to Sühbaatar. In addition to the hurailan, as 21 January is also the anniversary of Lenin’s death, a moment of silence was observed during the demonstration. This, however, was later criticized by some as an overly deferential move.

Support was continuing to increase. At this demonstration, the leaders claimed the existence of nearly sixty branches and a membership of over 30,000 (MAHN, by way of reference, had about 90,000 members at the time) (Maidar 1991: 6).

On the same day, Ünen ran its first coverage of MoAH and the protests. The coverage, on page 3, included two articles. The first, “What do people think about M[o]AH?”, consists of several people being interviewed about the Mongolian Democratic Association in general and Zorig in particular. Each, a person of some authority, was asked a question about their respective areas. For example, the head of the State Committee on Science, Higher and Special Middle Education was asked:

Mongolian National University aspirant [doctoral student] S. Zorig and others have created the unofficial Mongolian Democratic Association. They have a leadership role for not a few Mongolian National University, polytechnic and Teachers’ Institute students. What you do think about this?

The questions seemed designed to invite critical responses. Despite this, the replies were not as universally critical as might be expected. People expressed confusion about the aims and goals of the protesters, but did not unequivocally condemn them. M. Dash, the person asked about Zorig’s influence on students, replied in part:
I see this as one side of the influence of contemporary democracy, the situation of openness *[il tod baidal]*, and the climate of renewal. This isn’t something to criticize. But the MAH should only work with correct aims. If they turn in the wrong direction it will be very bad …

I am a member of MAHN. I am loyal to that party. It is necessary for people and students to understand the association’s goals just to participate in them …

I just don’t understand this democratic association very well. But I think the main idea might contribute to reconstruction. Surely it’s not necessary to talk about repressing or clamping down on the democratic association …

I won’t tell the students not to listen to M[o]AH, not to go to the demonstrations. But what does this association aspire to? They should have a proper understanding of this, treat it wisely, to try to get to the bottom of it – this sort of thing I do tell them.

(Ünen 1990b)

His response is characteristic of the others as well. They express cautious support, or at least not outright opposition to the movement. We can be sure that the answers printed were carefully selected to present an image of MAHN and its members that reflected the particular view the Party leadership wanted to portray – one of cautious but open-minded engagement with the demonstrators. Even this is significant. Factions in MAHN were fighting for influence, yet the moderates seemed to be winning out.21 The demonstrations were to be engaged with, not fired upon.

The following day, “a government spokesman announced that it was prepared to recognize and cooperate with the new opposition, and guaranteed freedom of speech and assembly” (Sikes 1990). The government had already granted *de facto* recognition to MoAH by holding talks with its leaders, but this announcement went a step further, offering official recognition which MoAH had been seeking since it had first formed in December. A spokesman for the Ministry of Defense pledged that force would not be used against the demonstrators, although others in the government warned of the “inadmissibility” of the failure to observe the ban on rallies (*DR*, 26 January 1990: 12).

Throughout this period, the government often seemed not to know quite how to present itself, or how hard a line to take towards the opposition. On 24 January, the official news agency MONTSAME issued a statement denying the rallies had been banned:

In the recent past, foreign media distorted and misinformed the stand of the Mongolian Party and Government towards the Mongolian Democratic [Association] … I would like to state
unequivocally and make it perfectly clear that the Mongolian Government has not passed any decision which bans any meeting or demonstrations. On the contrary, top-level party and government officials have entered into talks and dialogues with the leading members of the newly founded Mongolian Democratic [Association] …

[I]t is quite clear that the ban on holding meetings and rallies applies only to a very few designated places due to evident reasons, but does not in the least apply to the holding of any meeting whatsoever.

(DR, 25 January 1990: 8)

This seems to have been an attempt by the government (and MAHN) to keep the opposition parties from gaining too much of a strong advantage. It also was apparently an accurate statement, at least strictly speaking. Mongolian accounts describe the resolution in question as banning demonstrations and meetings in only certain areas, and the resolution had been passed by the local government, not the national one. Yet this is also a willful blindness to the effects of the resolution. While I have been unable to obtain a copy of the resolution, and thus do not have a list of the banned sites, the practical result was most likely to prohibit demonstrations in the very places they were being held. It seems highly unlikely that such prominent places as Sühbaatar Square would not have been included in the resolution.

At a more symbolic level, the statement was an attempt to give the government some breathing room. It could not afford to be seen as totally naysaying the demonstrations, although the edict had already been issued. Confusion and factionalism within the government seems to have been increasing.

In a move that stepped up the intensity of the confrontation, banners alluding to Chinggis Khaan began to appear at some of the rallies.22 Hong Kong AFP noted “the demands [of the MoAH] have been accompanied by increasing nationalism marked by the rehabilitation of Genghis Khan, 13th century founder of the Mongol nation and long presented in Soviet-inspired books as a bloody and savage conqueror” (DR, 17 January 1990: 6).

The demonstrators remained understandably wary, and these banners had been absent from the 21 January demonstration, as some felt they were “too aggressive in tone” (Southerland 1990). Signs in Mongol bichig (unreadable to most Mongolians, but important as a rejection of socialist-imposed Cyrillic, and, by extension, socialism itself) were beginning to appear at the rallies as well. The demonstrations often also took on a more openly anti-Soviet (or perhaps more generally xenophobic) tone, with banners proclaiming “Mongolia for the Mongolians.”
This nationalist slant was to continue and develop more fully over time, becoming similar to what Wang (1996) has called in the Chinese case “restoration nationalism,” a version of anti- or post-colonial nationalism. Among the varied faces of restoration nationalism are “the recovery of sovereignty,” an emphasis on moral order, and a rediscovery of traditional values. There is also, Wang notes, a link to “the glorious past of a great empire” (1996: 8). It was these very elements that were to become increasingly important in the Mongolian fight against socialism. As we shall see in later chapters, various figures from Mongolian history (and Chinggis Khaan in particular) were reinterpreted in keeping with such a restorationist project. It was as if, as the culture minister N. Enhbayar noted in 1993, that Mongolia was moving in two directions at once, towards the future and the past.23

Responding to the demonstrators, in February Batmönh, the head of the state and Party, agreed to negotiate with MoAH, and a series of roundtable discussions were held. Free elections, Mongolia’s first, were slated for April, although they were not actually held until late July. Batmönh went on to say during a speech later that month that “at a period when democracy and pluralism are developing in this country, the creation of such an organization had neither been a sudden event nor a surprise” (DR, 7 March 1990: 16), again signaling de facto recognition of the opposition by the government. While recognizing these organizations, Batmönh stopped short of openly welcoming them. Again, while the importance of even this step must not be overlooked, the government failed to capitalize on an opportunity to regain the ideological ground they were rapidly losing.

It is important to realize that however many supporters the demonstrators had, MAHN was not completely isolated. Letters and telegrams of support flooded in. On 3 February, and again on 10 February (as well as at other times), Ünen devoted a whole page to letters in support of MAHN.

The support varied in its intensity and nature, but lined up behind the Party leadership. The views the writers took towards the MoAH and others also varied.24 A herder from Hovd province in the west wrote in part:

We don’t require any other parties than MAHN. We don’t need ‘M[o]AH.’

It is not possible to hurry change and renewal in a short period of time. It is correct to do this very carefully. It is not permitted to profit from the name of ‘anti-authoritarianism.’

(Ünen 1990c)

Someone who identified himself as a senior Party member, and resident of Ulaanbaatar, took a more dismissive view of the protests:
Recently, in the name of the ‘M[o]AH,’ some youths have been sticking various writings on the city streets and squares, holding meetings and demonstrations everywhere, attacking the people who lead the party and state, and have been carrying out activities opposed to party policy and the interests of socialist organizations.

(Ünen 1990c)

However plentiful such sentiments may have been, they could not stop the growing demands for change. Some of the protesters, emboldened by their progress, declared the formation of political parties. These organizations were more formal than the various associations and movements. The first of these to do so was MoAH, who on 18 February, during their first congress and in response to the announced scheduling of elections, declared the formation of a political party, the Mongolian Democratic Party, that would take part in the forthcoming elections.

Yet the protesters balanced this opposition by continuing to work with MAHN where possible. Several ministers were invited to MoAH’s first congress, and Byambasüren, P. Ochirbat and Zardihan attended.

Another demonstration was held by the protesters – now calling themselves the “Four Forces” (Dörvön Hüchniilen), which encompassed the Mongolian Democratic Association, the New Development (Shine Devsbilt) Association, the Social Democratic Movement and the Mongolian Students’ Association – in front of the Lenin Museum on 4 March. They made a number of demands of the Central Committee and the People’s Great Hural, demanding an answer via radio and television by 7 March. The demands included the resignation of the Central Committee, the separation of the Party and the state, and the creation of a People’s Provisional Hural, in which all political groups could participate equally (Dashzeveg 1998: 33). It was by now abundantly clear that whatever the rhetoric used – socialist or otherwise – the old system would have to go.

MAHN, in the guise of Ts. Namsrai, a Politburo member and secretary of the Central Committee, as well as a member of the leadership of the People’s Great Hural, gave a response on radio and TV the evening of 6 March, and then again on the morning of 7 March (Ünen 1990d). Unhappy with the answers they received, on 7 March at 2 p.m., ten people began a hunger strike in Sühbaatar Square. “In all, 33 people give their pledges to sit day and night on the cold stone square” (Maidar 1991: 10) (this number included supporters of the hunger strikers). Support came in from the countryside, including the cities of Darhan and Erdenet, where, by this time, MoAH had established branches.

The hunger strike lasted until 9 March, and ended with the resignation of the Politburo. Although accorded relatively little importance in the accounts I collected in 1993, as the decade progressed, this came to be seen

66
as the single most important event in the democratic revolution (see the following chapter). MAHN’s first response was to ask the protesters to end the hunger strike for humanitarian and health reasons, saying that their concerns will be addressed. The hunger strikers refused. In the afternoon of 8 March, Byambasüren, a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, went out to the square to talk to the protesters. He offered a round-table discussion, which would be broadcast live on TV. On the morning of 9 March, the protesters and MAHN reached an agreement, and the strike ended. In a speech given the same day, J. Batmönkh, general secretary of the Central Committee and chairman of the Presidium of the People’s Great Hural, noted that it was correct for the Politburo to resign, but at that point, it was merely the opinion of the Politburo. “This opinion has to be confirmed by the Plenum,” which would be held shortly thereafter (Batmönkh 1990). Batmönkh, however, was also at pains to point out that MAHN had received “a great number” (mash olon) of letters and telegrams in support of the Party’s policy. “This [the resignations engendered by the hunger strike] was the democratic revolution’s first big victory” (Dashzeveg 1998: 50).25

Batmönkh himself, however, was to remain in his post at the request of the demonstrators themselves, who had come to term themselves “the democratic forces” (ardchilsan hüchnüüd). Highlighting his experience and ability to lead the country during this delicate period (and doubtless his moderate stance, although this was not made explicit) and appealing to the fate of the country, they asked that he stay on until “the political leaders of Mongolia are democratically elected” (quoted in Maidar 1991: 17).

In keeping with their earlier attempts to reposition themselves, the MAHN leadership rehabilitated several important socialist-era figures at this meeting as well. Four figures from the 1960s, Tömör-Ochir, Loohuuz, Nyambuu and Surmajav, were all rehabilitated at this meeting. Tömör-Ochir, who died in 1985, had been expelled from the Party in 1962 as a result of the events surrounding the aborted celebrations for the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan’s birth (see Chapter 6). Loohuuz, Nyambuu and Surmajav were all also repressed in the early 1960s as part of a case known as the “Intellectual’s affair.” (In an indication of the symbolic weight this case carried, Ünen had already run several articles on it in 1989 and earlier in 1990.)

On 11 March, MoAH made an appeal to conceptions of Mongolian tradition by holding a rally for Buddhists at the Choijin Lama Monastery Museum, just south of Sühbaatar Square. Another religious rally was held on 2 April, at the same site. These rallies were a particularly adroit move, for people link Buddhism to a wider conception of “Mongol-ness,” viewing it as the traditional religion of Mongolia. To hold a rally for Buddhists then was to play a trump card, linking even further the opposition to some (vague) concept of traditional Mongolia, which was rapidly being constructed in opposition to socialism.
Further reflecting the upheaval the protests were causing MAHN and the government, G. Ochirbat was elected general secretary of MAHN on 15 March, replacing Batmönh. This was not a general election, but rather indicates a shifting of power from within the Party itself, and seems to indicate both the unease at the pace of reforms as well as an attempt by MAHN to maintain some sort of control over events. On 21 March, Batmönh (who was also head of the People’s Ih Hural) and Premier Sodnom both resigned, and P. Ochirbat (no relation to G. Ochirbat) was selected as chairman of the Ih Hural. During this session of the Hural, election laws and the institution of a presidential system were discussed. It was also at this session that the constitution was amended to remove references to the leading role of MAHN, bringing an official, if not effective, end to one-party rule in Mongolia.

The Mongolian Social Democratic Party (MSDN) was founded on 2 March, growing out of the Social Democratic Movement (Ardchilsan Sotsialist Hödölgöön). Chaired by B. Batbayar (popularly known as Baabar, the vocal opponent of socialism), it held its first party congress on 31 March. The MSDN took an interesting line towards the unfolding events. They were careful, at least at first, not to set themselves in direct opposition to MAHN, as they claimed the MoAH was doing. However, in their congress, they denied that restructuring (öörchlön baiguulalt) had been instituted from above in Mongolia, as it had in the Soviet Union, being instead a grass-roots movement (Ulaanhüü 1990a: 12). They thus sought to establish themselves as a legitimate voice of the opposition and, by implication, the people.

In mid-April, an “Extraordinary Congress” (Onts Ih Hural) of MAHN was held. This was an apparent attempt to maintain some degree of control over a situation that was by now almost completely out of their grasp, as well as address issues that could not be ignored. The documents of the Onts Ih Hural make interesting and even contradictory reading (see MAHN 1990). There is a recognition of the need for change and that the political landscape has changed. Other organizations and political forces are openly talked about. Democracy is a much repeated word, and references to “real democracy” are rife. Respect for traditions, the development of Mongol bichig and the need to be free from dogmatic thinking are discussed. Much space is devoted to the issues of reconstruction and renewal. Yet large parts of the reports and resolutions read as if the Party leaders were in a state of denial. Economic plans are laid out much as they had always been, and social policies are discussed. Policies and trends are to be analyzed in keeping with Marxist-Leninist ideology and methodology.

It is unclear if the leaders truly thought they would remain in charge and if such plans could be implemented unchanged. Nonetheless, ultimately the fact that MAHN was acting in a changing environment, and
that they could not avoid making adjustments, was clear to all. Despite the seeming confusion, many of the changes discussed were real and substantial.

During this congress, divisions within the Party manifested themselves when a splinter group of MAHN formed the group “For the Revival of Traditions and Renewal of the Mongolian People’s Party.” This faction was to have an interesting, if brief, life. A leader of the group, K. Zardihan, left to form the Mongolian Renaissance Party (MRP) in December 1991 with other MAHN radicals. In 1992, the MRP joined with various other parties to form MÜAN (Sanders 1996: 144). The MÜAN (Mongolyn Undesen Ardzilsan Nam – Mongolian National Democratic Party) would eventually come to power as part of the coalition government that won the 1996 elections.

Tensions mounted in April. On 7 April, just prior to the Onts Ih Hural, the leadership of the People’s Great Hural issued a decree that required seven days’ advance notice of demonstrations, and also demanded a host of information, including a timetable for the demonstration, attendance, names of organizers, the goals of the protest, and so on. On 24 April, in response to this decree, the MoAH sent a list of demands to the People’s Great Hural and the Council of Ministers. They demanded the revocation of this decree and then once again called for the creation of a People’s Provisional Hural. They also demanded, in a move designed to underline the separation of Party and state, that MAHN vacate the government building and that MoAH be given a building to use. In response, the military was called out to protect the government building (Maidar 1991: 21). On 28 April, another protest was held in front of the Lenin Museum, in which a reported 30,000–50,000 people took part. As a result of the demonstrations, P. Ochirbat hastily returned from China, where he had been on a state visit (Heaton 1991: 52).

In support of these demands, on 28 April a hunger strike was staged in Möörön, in Hövsgöl province in the western part of the country. Eighteen people, including four women, took part in the hunger strike, which lasted until 7 May (Dashzeveg 1998: 57).

Reacting to what was by now the inevitable, at the 11 May session of the People’s Ih Hural, the constitution was amended “to allow a directly elected standing legislature and legalizing political parties” (Sanders 1990: 26). All parties had to be officially registered, including MAHN. The chairman of the MAHN Central Committee, G. Ochirbat, registered his party shortly thereafter. The National Progress Party, headed by D. Ganbold and formed on 14 March, registered a few days later. This was followed in turn by the Free Labor Party, the Mongolian Democratic Party (MoAN) and the MSDN.

At the session of the People’s Ih Hural, it was also stated that Mongolia would adopt a presidential system, and would create a Baga (Small) Hural
to do much of the daily governmental work, thus finally acceding to the demands for a permanent, standing parliament.

At the end of July, the first free elections in Mongolian history were held, in which a reported 98 per cent of the people took part. As expected, MAHN retained a sizable majority in the People’s Great Hural, with 84.5 per cent of the seats. The MoAN won 3.8 per cent and the MSDN 1 per cent of the seats. The elections were generally considered fair, although re-balloting took place in certain districts.

At the Ih Hural session in September 1990, the deputies elected a Social Democrat, R. Gonchigdorj, as vice-president, making him the first non-socialist in a position of power. This, however, left Zorig, the chief coordinator of MoAN, out of the country’s leadership. P. Ochirbat, a member of MAHN, was confirmed as president of the country, and Ochirbat’s choice for premier, D. Byambasüren, was also approved.

There were also a number of smaller parties, such as the Mongolian Renaissance Party, the Green Party and the Mongolian People’s Party (discussed in the following chapter). Only the Mongolian Democratic Party, the Social Democrats and, of course, MAHN achieved major prominence and influence in the early 1990s.

The Baga Hural was convened in September 1990. There was much work ahead of them, including the writing of a new constitution and the overhaul of most of the country’s laws. Yet democracy had come to Mongolia. There would be hopes and fears and political arguments big and small still to come, but the revolution was over. As was hinted at in this chapter, historical imagery and appeals to tradition played an important role in the demonstrations. It is these factors that I take up in the next chapter. In Chapter 4, I look not only at the historical imagery the protesters used, but how they, and others, used history to understand what was happening around them.
During the democratic revolution, the “democratic forces” were quick to capitalize on the potential of historical symbolism. They drew upon Chinggis Khaan, Buddhism and Mongol bichig to position themselves as the true inheritors of tradition and custom. Even when the point was not made explicitly, the use of historical imagery was meant as an anti-colonial statement. It was a reclamation of the past from the Soviet hegemony that had been transmitted and reinforced by MAHN. Despite MAHN’s efforts at re-evaluating history, they were working at a distinct disadvantage. Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, Mongolian history had been written as socialist history, and followed the dictates of Soviet historiography. (I examine Mongolian historiography in the next chapter.) In the writing and presentation of history, like politics more generally, Mongolia played the younger brother to the Soviet Union’s elder brother, who provided guidance and direction.

As a result, despite best their efforts to direct the re-evaluation of history, and to distance themselves from the excesses of the socialist past, MAHN was seen as tainted. Speaking of intellectuals generally (the vast majority of whom would have been MAHN members), Terbish, himself a member of MAHN and a member of the cabinet, in 1993 told me “in the past our elite, I mean those intellectuals who were in this country, who are in this country, they betrayed themselves, they betrayed the ideas, they betrayed everything in order to survive ... [T]hey lost their moral right to form up the elite.” In other words, Terbish, like many others, was aware that many Mongols saw intellectuals and others as compromised by their adherence to the socialist system. Socialist history was, at least on the surface, often at odds with a nationalist understanding of the past. In opening the past to discussion, MAHN admitted as much. Doing so, however, they also implied their own guilt. They also risked undermining their own legitimacy, since the force of history was an integral part of the socialist project. Although not dealing as directly with the topic as the title would suggest, Ünen ran an article in early January 1990 which asked the question “Is it possible to be a patriot without
knowing your own history?” (Hüühenbaatar 1990). Clearly, the concern was in the air.

In keeping with this concern, in this chapter I examine the historical symbolism that was brought into play in the democratic revolution. In doing so, I intend not only to look at the imagery people called upon, but also at the historical parallels and models people used – consciously and otherwise – to help them understand the events taking place.

Remembering the revolution

In looking at how people used history to frame their understandings of the democratic revolution, I first turn to people’s reminiscences. Collected in 1993, I use these accounts to trace out multiple views of the origins of democracy in Mongolia. In obtaining these accounts, I largely let the interview follow the contours established by the person I was talking to. While I did ask some follow-up questions, I was more interested in obtaining people’s own narratives.

These accounts tend not to touch on the specific chronology of events, but rather reflect both the perceived origins of the democratic revolution and personal feelings. They also notably tend to underplay much of the drama and tension present during this time, for reasons discussed below. I first present a number of these accounts from some of the major figures in these events, as well as from other people who lived through them. I then analyze the accounts for what they tell us about understandings of history and identity.

Zorig’s very brief recollection (he was much more interested in discussing foreign aid and development) tended to remain within a broad Marxist-inspired view. In a radio interview in 1990, Zorig had described the Mongolian Democratic Party similarly, saying “[MoAH] is an organization founded at the initiative of the public” (DR, 23 January 1990: 8). The events are historically determined:

The events developed spontaneously in our country. Because of foreign and domestic changes, all kinds of conditions developed. The young people, who didn’t feel any fear, took the initiative. The older generation still remembered the repressions of the past years.

It was all rather spontaneous, he said. As for his own role, “I just kind of got involved and never stopped.” He thought that change was needed and took advantage of the opportunity when it presented itself.

While Zorig alludes to the role of MAHN in his glancing reference to “domestic changes,” he, like most of the other opposition figures I interviewed, downplayed this element, agreeing instead with the MSDN’s
assessment (see Chapter 3) that change was not instigated from above. Given the part he played in the events, it is understandable that he would not give much emphasis to MAHN. Yet, despite the fact that he notes that “young people ... took the initiative,” his account seems strangely lacking in agency. The reference to large groups – “the public” and “young people” – removes a sense of immediacy. One would have been forgiven for expecting a greater emphasis on the actors involved. Even his own part in the revolution is seen largely as a result of outside forces. It is tempting to attribute this at least partially to his background in Marxism, for the spontaneous development of social or economic conditions accords well with Marxist theory. It also fits well with a nationalist viewpoint, an idea I return to later. As we shall see, this acknowledgement of outside forces is a common point in the narratives. This is arguably due to it being an historically accurate assessment, but there is more to this as well.

One of the top Foreign Ministry officials in 1993, Hatanbaatar, like Ganbaatar who was quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter, saw the origin of the protest movement in the practice of sending students abroad to study. It is interesting that he attributes a key role to another hallmark of the socialist Mongolian intellectual – knowing Russian. Hatanbaatar, like Zorig, downplayed the role of MAHN. While remarking on the role of the country’s youth, Hatanbaatar, who was in his late fifties when I interviewed him, also noted that the older generation had a similar experience. This was a point not made by the others. Discussing the events in English, he told me:

Generally speaking, it was the result of the Mongolian government sending many students abroad, mainly to the Soviet Union and former Comecon [Council of Mutual Economic Assistance] countries ... Nor can we deny that what helped was our knowledge of Russian. Due to the Russian language, and sending many students abroad, we received many new ideas, about democracy and freedom ...

For my generation, something very serious happened in 1956, when Khrushchev first criticized Stalin ...

The Prague Spring and French student movement [of 1968] also contributed. And of course, perestroika in 1985 helped, especially with the impact it had on our young people.

In keeping with Zorig’s account, the role of MAHN is ignored. In many ways, the two reminiscences are similar. In addition to their brevity, both place the emphasis on outside influences. There are also significant differences. Hatanbaatar does afford more agency to the people involved, if only implicitly. For him, the events do not develop spontaneously. Still largely
the result of external factors, they are moderated through the influence such factors had on people. Studying abroad or knowing Russian are necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for the democratic revolution. Although it is not made explicit in his recollections, one feels the presence of individual actors just beneath the surface of this account.

Dash-Yondon, who in 1993 was the secretary general of MAHN, predictably placed most of the emphasis on the contributions of his party. Unlike the leaders of MAHN during the winter of 1989–90, through his recollections, Dash-Yondon is effectively able to co-opt the accomplishments of the opposition. In essence, he notes that there was the opposition, but they just moved in the direction MAHN was already headed. Like most of the other people mentioned in this chapter, Dash-Yondon acknowledged the role of forces and events outside of Mongolia itself, linking the events in his country to larger economic and political issues. I spend some time on his reminiscences as they are the only ones I was able to collect from someone who still largely supported the MAHN interpretation of the events, and thus run counter to what was to become the dominant discourse.

The beginning of these events was initiated in 1987–88 by MAHN. This was the beginning. That was the time when the [Soviet Union] ... had begun the policy known as perestroika. That perestroika, our party actively developed in Mongolia. This was 1987–88 ... At this time, from the midst of the youth came the new movements. These new movements were movements for the cause of democracy. These youth movements came out of what was thought to be the sluggish implementation of MAHN’s reforms, and the party’s policies. Then the movement’s center started the complete breaking up of our party’s Politburo, the changing of the government, and the leaders of the then Ih Hural. At the same time as this, the Mongolian parliament began to change all the existing state laws ... Simultaneously with this, the State Baga [Small] Hural was created. The higher part was the Ih Hural, and under this was the State Baga Hural; so this was the government. Thus, our reforms began. They became stronger.

The reforms, it almost seems, are able to be carried out in spite of the protesters. MAHN’s reforms become stronger, but it is not explicitly linked to the demonstrations.

In his consideration of economic issues, Dash-Yondon again attempts to elide the role of the opposition. The relatively sudden shift to a market economy was not the result of protesters. Rather, it was the collapse of Comecon that forced MAHN’s hand. Again, the pace changes, but not the goal, which MAHN had already correctly foreseen.
As regards our own economic policy, in 1988 our party’s Central Committee’s Plenum instituted an economic policy with the goal of moving towards an economy with market relations. I thought that moving to market relations was a good idea, and the party’s internal documents of that period said it was proper to move slowly towards market relations, and supported this. But we were unable to implement this support. We were unable to enter slowly, cautiously; we entered suddenly, with a splash. The reason for this was that the external situation changed decisively:

- The USSR fell apart,
- In Russia, the economy shifted to free market relations,
- In Europe, the other so-called socialist countries were breaking up and these countries’ economies were shifting to free-market relations.

Because of this, it was impossible for Mongolia to carry out a policy of slowly entering the market by itself. It was hopeless. The reason for this is that our country’s main economic relations were with these countries ...

The events of 1989–90 became one of the larger phenomena in Mongolian history. Our party never condemned these events. In fact, our party assisted the events of that time, and we didn’t carry out a policy employing force, oppression, or attacking the important people. We let the activities of the newly emerged parties, coalitions and associations take place freely. This corresponded with the Mongolian national interests. So, to sum up, we can say that period was a very important period.

Dash-Yondon claims active support for the changes on behalf of his party. It is the Party, and not the protesters, who are ultimately responsible for bringing democracy to Mongolia. In retrospect, it seems clear that he was fighting and losing a rearguard action against the remembrances of the opposition. Even several years after the events, he still saw MAHN as having played a central role. In his summation, he makes a play to national sentiment, noting the apparently serendipitous overlap between what transpired and national interests. From his account, one comes away with a feeling of MAHN as the benevolent head of the Mongolian family, watching its children develop under its guidance, a standard socialist image.

Ganbat, who headed a division of the Foreign Ministry, was interviewed in English. His account, rather than dwelling on causes as the others do, dwells on the atmosphere of the time. As an early participant, but not one of the leading figures, his account is also interesting because it illustrates the broad range of reasons as to why people were attracted to the movement.
He also agrees with the assessment given above of the early opposition, namely that it began as a critique of MAHN, not a complete repudiation.

Personally, for me it was a very exciting time. Before we had nothing to do on Sundays, on Saturdays. For example, we used to meet with my friends and we had some parties, or would go around the city, or go to the bazaar, you know where people changed money, and like that.

And then after this movement began, every Sunday something new happened. We were very happy because all these open things, all what were disturbing us, we were not satisfied with ... These things were starting to be discussed openly among the big crowd of the people. That was very exciting for us. And everything, at the beginning of course, they were discussing, you know, something to change the political lines, political courses of the Revolutionary Party. Just criticizing their policy, demanding the change of the policy. Then the movement, eventually [was] changing, demanding more and more, more and more radical changes.

So it was making us more and more happy, and then we had, we had no illusion, or no doubt and then we too started to participate personally. At the beginning of course we were not satisfied because there were people, some people whom we used to know, whom we didn’t like. But then, the critical lines of the new movement were not so clear. For example, I did not like ... it was the 21st of January, 1990 when in [Sühbaatar Square] there was a meeting, a big demonstration. At this demonstration, they, you know, paid courtesy to the day of death of Lenin. And all people had taken their hats off, in this weather; we remember this day. At that time, people really didn’t understand, because [they did not do it] intentionally, it was just their form. They were thinking things should be changed like in Russia, at that time Gorbachev was a very important man. They were thinking the only way to get out of these things, is the way which is taught by Mr. Gorbachev. At that time, we were supporting these things, and then things were changing, changing more rapidly, rapidly. And now we have this society.

As the decade progressed, more and more people were to echo Ganbat’s sentiments. Many people, I would be told, had attended the protests out of something to do, rather than an active understanding of what was going on. People did not truly grasp the significance of the demonstrations; rather, they were a novelty, a distraction.

Terbish, a high-ranking government official and MAHN member, recounted his view of the movement and associated events in fluent
English. He saw the events of 1989–90 as having linkages extending back in time, past the mid-1980s and the reforms instituted by MAHN. He extended the genesis past even the events of 1968, the implicit starting point for Hatanbaatar. His account renders the events as an intriguing subversion of socialist history-writing. All history was supposed to lead inexorably to socialism. For Terbish, all socialism was marked by protests, an inexorable progression to democracy. Although he was the only person I interviewed to make such an explicit claim, it was not an unknown one. We shall see parallels with this view in the following sections of this chapter, when discussing historical imagery.

Well, I think [the events of 1989–90 were] not the start of the democratic movement. It was the … the democratic movement started when there was the 1921 Revolution, when the repressions started. So it means that all, any, every repressed person was a kind of democrat. For example, my grandfather was arrested because he was studying in Tibet. He was a kind of Buddhist medical doctor. So he was arrested and sent to Russia. He escaped from prison there, and on the way here he died, somewhere in Buriatia [in southern Siberia]. His oldest son was also arrested and also shot down here. So I can say that they were also trying to be useful. Well, maybe they didn’t understand the parliament system, or presidential elections, or things, but they were also people helped with these things …

The whole history of seventy years of this dictatorship – it was the process of democratization. Take into account those oppressed people. Nearly every family had several repressed family members.

In addition to stretching the ultimate origins of democracy back seventy years, Terbish makes one other intriguing point. His is the only account to trace the democratic revolution to purely Mongolian roots. He does not mention perestroika or the role of education received abroad. Democracy is something Mongols have always been striving for, and have sacrificed for. Indeed, democracy becomes synonymous with sacrifice.

In the last chapter, Ganbat mentioned the fear and uncertainty that permeated the movement. Terbish’s recollection adds another element to the mix: suspicion. Building on a Mongolian tradition of rumor and gossip1 (in one, Tsedenbal’s Russian wife, Filotova, was a KGB agent), the uncertainty of the time, and possibly even fact, the early days of the opposition movement takes on an almost sinister aspect. Although it was by no means uncommon for people who had proclaimed loyalty to the regime to now be protesting against it, Terbish questions their motives.

I remember those past three years: it was a very suspicious movement. From the beginning, those people who were really active,
the supporters of the regime of those times, suddenly they were found in the rows of the so-called democrats ...

[T]here were some facts that former Politburo members were behind [the opposition]. Formerly our Internal Ministry was also behind those people² ... [A]lso, there were few people really wanting democracy there. But also there were so many people ... For example, there was a girl, who was kind of one of the founders of the first kind of circle. Her husband used to work during that time at our KGB. So it was quite clear that deliberately she was put into this. So, because of this ... from the very beginning I, for example, was very suspicious of this kind of things.

At the same time, there were a lot of things we had to do, if we knew it. There were a lot of mistakes which were made because there wasn’t the proper knowledge. There was just enthusiasm. It was just deliberate over-use of this enthusiasm by some people. It was a very complicated question. The whole democratization process is very ... at the same time it brought to us many, many possibilities. Now Mongolia is in the time when it can choose its own way. This is a very, very, very good moment in our history. Because in the past, we could not choose our way, we had it chosen by Manchus, by Chinese, by Russians. Now it is time that we can choose our own way.

... But, still we feel that this is up to us, whether to survive or not survive. Whether to keep our independence or not keep our independence. So, it’s a very challenging time. It’s a very interesting and very good time. So with the good things, a lot of bad things come ...

In addition to his questioning and his gentle critiques – “there was just enthusiasm” – Terbish connects this part of his narrative with his earlier presentation of the democratic revolution as the culmination of seventy years of Mongolian history. In the end, both figuratively and literally, democracy is linked to independence. Democracy is contrasted with the socialist period, when Mongolia was not free to “choose its own way.” Democracy is important in this view not so much as an end itself, but because it offers a buffer from outside influence. Terbish’s suspicions about the influence of the security apparatus on the revolution mirrors his beliefs about the influence of outside forces on Mongolia. Democracy offers the chance of a Mongolia for the Mongols; it offers a form of national purity.

Terbish’s charges that the security apparatus was involved in the protest are worthy of comment. They serve to remind us of the potentially deadly nature of the game the protesters were playing. While Terbish implies that the Ministry’s agents were there to influence and possibly subvert the movement, this does not accord with what others have said. Several people on both sides of the democratic revolution – the protesters and the government – that I
have talked to confirmed that the secret police had informants among the protesters, and even, it is alleged, among some of the leaders. It seems to have been, at best, an open secret. Yet both sides were equally adamant that the Ministry of Public Security did not try to sabotage or interfere in the demonstrations, but rather simply monitored them and kept the government informed of what was going on and the intentions of the demonstrators.

Although these reminiscences all offer slightly different accounts of what happened, they do reflect certain similarities. They all, for instance, trace the origin of the movement back in time, and reflect a combination of a degree of inevitability with a certain spontaneity. The actual, physical protests that led to the collapse of the socialist system may have arisen on their own, but they were also clearly viewed as the outcome of historical forces at work. One may argue that this is what “really” happened. I suggest that such a narrative reflects a tendency to interpret the events in a nationalist light. The nation awakens to reclaim its birthright and drive out the socialists, who were coming to be seen as foreign impostors.

This is where the lack of agency in many of the accounts becomes significant. The lack of specific actors in the narrative contributes to the feeling of “historical momentum,” the idea that the events, at least in their general form, are the result of forces greater than specific individuals. People can choose to take advantage of such opportunities or not, but are not always able to shape them themselves. Terbish’s account is somewhat anomalous in this respect. While still offering a nationalist reading of the democratic revolution, he differs in seeing individuals as capable of shaping the entire struggle over the decades.

Such a nationalist tendency explains the lack of emphasis in the reminiscences of the tensions and confrontations of the movement. Assembling in Sühbaatar Square, the protesters came right up to the government building. It should be recalled that when troops were called out, they were to guard the building from the protesters, to maintain its sacrality. Some people apparently threw things at the building, and even though they expected to be fired upon, they were not. It is odd and intriguing that this level of fear and contestation does not come through in most of the recollections. One would be forgiven for having expected the accounts to be replete with vivid realizations of the dangers faced and heroically overcome. Such narratives would surely have added even further to the drama of the democratic revolution.

A reading from a nationalist perspective, however, suggests a certain ineluctability to the events, that they were steps on the road to the reassertion of the “true” Mongolian identity. By downplaying (whether consciously or not) the tension and drama of the events, they are perceived of as “natural” events, rather than historically contingent. And this, of course, is one of the key components of nationalist ideologies: to render the nation and its foundation (or, in this case, reassertion) natural, desirable and inevitable.
In other words, the desire to control and direct history applies to even such recent history as three years prior to the reminiscences. The events of 1989–90 are reinterpreted, and it is done in such a manner as to even further distance the socialist past.

Although the protests and the democratic revolution were peaceful, Pandey’s arguments (1994) on the treatment of episodes of violence in history are illuminating here. They help explain why even the tensions and uncertainties that had been part of the democratic revolution are largely missing from the accounts I collected. Pandey suggests that such episodes of violence in history tend to be visible only when the violence or unrest is associated with “Otherness.” This “ruling class” approach to historical violence effectively eliminates state-sanctioned violence from the historical record by portraying it as legitimate and hence not worthy of attention. A variation of this argument can be fruitfully applied in this case as well. Many of the people who were recollecting the events were, after all, intimately tied to them, whether leading the rallies, taking part in them or in the government at the time. The protests are now understood as marking the end of an era that was in turn seen as a foreign imposition. They signal a return to the true destiny of the Mongolian nation. To that extent, the protests were seen as legitimate, and have become subsumed under the post-socialist government; and as Pandey also reminds us, “state violence does not count as violence at all” (Pandey 1994: 191). The nationalist discourse has melded with concerns over legitimacy and self-representation to render the democratic revolution even more peaceful than it was.

“Lenin was right to say, I think, if a woman doesn’t support any revolution, then the revolution is not going to happen.” So one female NGO employee told me in November 1997. I had been asking her, as I had others, about women’s roles in the events of 1990. Although this topic is worthy of more detailed consideration, I want to mention one or two points here. It had struck me that the prominent figures—at least those that I knew of, and those now in the history books—were all men. Returning to the field in 1997, I was determined to find out if this was indeed the case, or if I had simply overlooked the role of women in my 1993 fieldwork.

The answer, it turned out, was a bit of both. Women had played a role in the events of 1990, but had left the visible roles to the men. One may argue that they were excluded from the protests, but no woman I talked to spoke in such terms. Rather, in the words of the NGO employee, women were “doing canvassing during the elections, women [were] collecting things for hunger-strikers, taking night-shifts at the revolutionaries’ headquarters,” and so on. Others spoke of working as fact-checkers and researchers, and of doing the less glamorous jobs of providing food and drink to the demonstrators. Women’s roles in the democratic revolution, in other words, largely mirrored the public/private split of traditional gender roles in Mongolia. This is by no means to imply that their contributions
should be downplayed or dismissed. It simply means that their contributions and influence took place out of the public gaze.

**Historical imagery in the protests**

From the very start, historical images took on and retained a conspicuous role in the events of the winter of 1989–90. Central among these was the image of Chinggis Khaan. Also present were Buddhist imagery, and the abandoned and now reclaimed *Mongol bichig*, the old vertical script said to have been introduced by Chinggis Khaan. Each of these served as a pointer to Mongolian history and a concept of national identity that collapsed pre-socialist history into a single, general category that functioned by declaring many decisions and events of the past seventy years null and void. It was not the actuality of the historical past that mattered. What was important was that it could be “remembered” in opposition to the socialist past. It could be – and was – used to add moral weight to the demonstrations as well.

Most visibly, Chinggis Khaan’s image appeared on opposition banners during the demonstrations. As Bulag, in his work on Mongolian identity, has noted: “Carrying his portrait was a protest, a demonstration of the return of an independent identity ... It is obvious that the existing [socialist] public symbols did not fulfill the nationalist criteria, and the protests of 1989–1991 underlined the need to change the public symbols” (1998: 232). Chinggis was a particularly powerful choice for a protest symbol for a number of reasons.

Chinggis had long occupied a place in Mongolian history and legend. This underwent a number of basic revisions when the socialists propagated their version of history, most notable of which was (in rough terms) the shift from ancestral figure to feudal oppressor. He, more than any other historical figure, stood as a repudiation of the socialist period by the “reclamation” of his true history. (See Chapters 5 and 6 for a fuller discussion of different elements of this.)

Another reason, linked to the first, is that Chinggis Khaan and his descendants defeated and then ruled the Russians for well over 200 years. To use him as a symbol, in addition to being a reminder of the glorious past of the Mongolian nation, could well be interpreted as a veiled warning to the Soviets.

Lastly, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, Chinggis Khaan provides the additional benefit of being far removed in time from the socialist period. Other possible rallying figures, such as the Bogd Khaan (the theocratic ruler of Mongolia from 1911–21), were too close in time to the socialist period. The intervening centuries between Chinggis and the present serve as a buffer, allowing him to be remembered as needed, instead of, perhaps, as he really was.
Some Westerners took the image of Chinggis to mean that “the democracy movement is rooted more in nationalism than in dissent” (Fineman 1990). Fineman also quotes “a [non-Mongolian] diplomat” at some length:

Watching it unfold, you get the feeling this is more a pro-nationalist and pro-Mongolian movement than it is anti-party or anti-government. For example, during the rally, we saw Mongolian national flags that included all but one of the standard symbols. The sun, the moon, the Buddhist yin-yang circle, and the three-pronged flame depicting the past, present and future were there, but the five-pointed star of communism, which is part of the official flag, was missing.

(Fineman 1990)

What the diplomat was describing was the soyombo, a symbol dating back several centuries, but only used as a national symbol since the early twentieth century. It was this form of the flag – the socialist flag minus the star – that was to eventually become the new state flag. The new flag thus rejected socialism by modifying, rather than obliterating, one of its key symbols. In adopting a flag featuring the soyombo, the socialist government had attempted to lay claim to Mongolia’s past. In the new flag, the protesters were wresting it back. The modified flag serves, through the removal of the star, as a conspicuous reminder of the removal of socialism.

While the democratic movement was linked to nationalist sentiment, that does not mean it was not also anti-Party, as the anonymous quoted diplomat thought. Just the opposite is true. The description of the flag and the presence of Chinggis’s image indicate that the protests are indeed “anti-party or anti-government.” By removing only the star from the flag, the point being made is that it is the ruling government/party that needs to be removed from Mongolia. The socialist system (at least as presently incarnated) is declared as being without basis. It is not native to Mongolia – or so the reasoning goes – and thus must be removed.

Despite their early claims to be willing to work with MAHN, and their statements that they were not opposing the Party or government, the protesters themselves were clear on this. The protest movement was soon seen as anti-Party, and became more so as the revolution progressed. The protests against one-party rule may not have been a stand against socialism per se, but they could be read as little else than a swipe at MAHN.

The Party as it had been and was functioning still was no longer tolerable, although this did not mean people had given up hope for some form of socialism. The minister of public security also recognized the anti-Party
nature of the protest (although one may wish to argue with the conclusion he draws), stating that “there are no juridical grounds to qualify the [Mongolian Democratic Association’s] criticism … as an anti-state action [and hence take action against them]. The [Association] criticized the Party, [and] some members of the Central Committee and Politburo, but the Party is not the state, although it is the ruling party” (DR, 12 February 1990: 9). Technically, he is correct to insist on the separation of Party and state, but this also entails a certain degree of willful ignorance as to the actualities of the situation, for it was just such a separation that the protesters had been calling for.

In an attempt to lay claim to the pre-socialist past, the opposition movement sought early on to ally itself with Buddhism, the “traditional” religion of Mongolia. Even at the December 1989 rallies, a Buddhist monk was often present on the platform alongside Zorig and the others. Later, specific rallies were held to focus attention on the issues of religious freedom and tradition. Through these rallies and the imagery used, the non-socialist past was being presented as an atemporal mass, incorporating Chinggis Khaan, Buddhism, Mongol bichig and other elements in an undifferentiated mixture. The entire weight of the reclaimed national past was being successfully brought to bear on the foreign invaders. MAHN, even with their attempts at using the same imagery, were effectively shut out and linked to the worst parts of barracks socialism.5

One of the more intriguing developments of this period was what Caroline Humphrey (1992: 381) calls “historical mimicry,” manifested in the foundation of the Mongolian People’s Party in 1990.

What was notable about the party is not necessarily that it was founded by a lama – Baasan – (although this is interesting), but rather the name. Prior to becoming the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (in 1924), MAHN had been known simply as the Mongolian People’s Party. Baasan’s founding of the new party pre-empted MAHN’s decision at the July 1991 Plenum to drop the term “Revolutionary” from its name (Mongol Messenger 1991: 1). This move, predictably, caused an uproar by MAHN, as it helped shut the Party off from a return to the early – and optimistic – days of socialism. What was being mimicked, in other words, was not so much the name – although it is vital to the project – as the hope, aspirations and political legitimacy of the earlier party. It will be recalled that at the 21 January demonstration, Sühbaatar’s grandson had spoken, denying MAHN’s claim as the inheritors of his grandfather’s legacy. Different groups were rewriting the early socialist period to paint themselves as the true heirs of the Mongolian political tradition, before it was hijacked by the Soviets. In particular, many of the early socialists were being repositioned as capitalists.

Baasan went so far as to hold the 3rd Party Congress, on the grounds that the first two had been held seventy years earlier. (The name change
from the Mongolian People’s Party to the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party occurred at the 3rd Party Congress in 1924.) The first issue of the paper put out by the new party was named Mongol Ünen (Mongolian Truth), and was “no. 7.” This was a further attempt at delegitimating the socialist past, and MAHN in particular, as Ünen (Truth), the MAHN organ, had originally borne the title Baasan’s paper now did. The effect of this was to reject “the revolution and later version of the party as a foreign usurption” (Humphrey 1992: 382), a part of what was to become a wider trend of the post-socialist era.

This was by no means the only example of historical mimicry to occur. The government attempted a similar ploy, also with newspapers. In 1990, the government began publication of Ardyn Erh (The People’s Right). This, like Baasan’s paper, had existed previously. Unlike Baasan’s move, however, where he co-opted what was in effect someone else’s past, the government looked to its own past. Ardyn Erh had been a newspaper that had been published for a short time, starting in 1924, until Ünen began publication in 1925 (Pürev 1991: 17). The government, therefore, had also attempted to return to the earlier, more promising days of socialism, although the degree to which this move was successful is not at all clear. In all probability, however, it was slight. It seems doubtful that most people were sufficiently versed in the history of early socialism to draw the conclusions intended. Ünen, after all, was a current newspaper, and one that carried Sühbaatar’s picture on the front page. Even if one did not know the history of Mongol Ünen, the name was too close to Ünen to doubt the connection. Ardyn Erh, in contrast, had apparently been dredged up out of the dustbins of history.

Taking advantage of the renewed interest in the past, a movement known as the “House of Chinggis Khaan,” led by the well-known writer Doojodorj, dedicated itself to reviving traditional culture. The movement, founded in April 1990, said it would work “for revival of national cultural traditions, including the Buddhist religion” (DR, 3 April 1990: 7). Although popular for a time, the standing of the movement and Doojodorj in particular was to plummet when he spoke out in favor of the Gurvan Gol expedition, the joint Mongolian–Japanese search for Chinggis Khaan’s tomb in the early 1990s.

Recognizing the power of historical symbols, in late March 1990, the Ministry of Culture announced a shift back to the old script, building on discussions over Mongol bichig that predated the first demonstrations. The old script would again be taught in the schools and books would again be published in Mongol bichig. A resolution adopted in 1991 noted that “state business shall be conducted in the traditional Mongolian script” (quoted in Mongol Bichgiin Ündesnii Hötölbör 1995: 30).

While a popular move, the entire Mongol bichig debate was a contentious one, as the majority of the adult population was functionally
illiterate in it. Announced plans to switch completely to *bichig* by 1994 were wildly unrealistic, much debated and ultimately abandoned. The 1995 “Supplement of Resolution 43” of the Ih Hural, recognizing the failure of the initial attempt, outlined a ten-year plan for introducing the old script, which noted, among other measures, that “every issue of the daily papers also must carry something of interest and attraction in the Mongolian script” (*Mongol Bichgiin Ündesnii Hötölbör* 1995: 40). If such a practice was ever undertaken, it had been abandoned by my return to the field in 1997.

By the late 1990s, *bichig* was used for signs on some government buildings, and was taught in the schools, but was not in widespread use. One or two shops had flirted with labels in *Mongol bichig* in 1993, but these had disappeared by 1997. For most, *bichig* remained a marker of “tradition” and “authenticity” rather than a living alphabet. Some of the college students I taught in 2000–01 were fluent in *bichig* (and took great pride in their calligraphy), and friends in their thirties had taken courses offered at their workplaces. Yet few publications were available in the old script, and the vast majority of the few books available were Inner Mongolian imports. There was said to be a newspaper published in *bichig*, although I cannot recall ever finding a copy for sale. As a result, those of my friends and acquaintances who knew the old script complained that they were rapidly forgetting it, as they had few opportunities to make use of their skills.

It must be noted that as important as the use of historical imagery was in the protest movement, it was not universal. In particular, the recourse to such imagery was made only in public instances, and even here it did not always make an appearance. The various documents put out by the Social Democratic Movement in early 1990 contain almost no references to historical imagery (see Ulaanhüü 1990b). These documents, which include speeches made at rallies, letters printed in newspapers, and open letters to members of the government, draw upon other imagery. They instead turn to the previously noted debates about the need for reform and what true socialism is. What history does occur is largely in the realm of socialist history – drawing attention to the mistakes of Tsedenbal, for example. “The emperor has no clothes,” Baabar put it at one point, but it is Hans Christian Anderson’s emperor he cites, not Chinggis Khaan or any other Mongolian emperor (Ulaanhüü 1990b: 19–21).

This need not come as a surprise. I would suggest this reflects a blend of pragmatism and ideological positioning on the part of the protesters. On the one hand, especially early in the movement, the protesters strove to find a balance between pushing the boundaries in their demands and not trying to provoke the hardliners within MAHN too much. On the other hand, the protesters and the parties they would form would look to European political models for inspiration. It is telling in this regard that
the Social Democrats originally used a Mongolian term for “democratic” (*ardchilsan*), but with the formation of the Social Democratic Party switched to a direct transliteration of the English “Social Democrat” – *Sotsial Demokrat* – as the name of the party. The evocation was clear. History had its uses, but modern politics also had to look elsewhere for inspiration.

**Hödölgöön or huv’sgal?**

In seeking to understand the interaction between politics and history, it is imperative to remember that at the same time as the present reshapes the past, the past offers a guide to understanding the present. As people come to terms with momentous change, they attempt to explicate the events in light of existing terms of reference. With this in mind, it can be highly informative to look at how the events of 1989–90 were talked about in the 1990s. The terms used to describe the events draw certain parallels with earlier periods of Mongolian history. The way the choice of words has shifted over time is also illustrative of the changes in how the events of 1989–90 have been thought about.

There are three basic terms that have appeared in interviews, questionnaires, conversations and publications to describe the collapse of socialism. The first of these is relatively value-free. *Yavdal* simply means an act, affair or event. This term itself does not appear in questionnaire answers, but it is equivalent to “democracy” or “shift to democracy,” the answer given by 52 per cent of respondents in a survey I conducted in 1993 when asked to state one of the most important events in Mongolian history. Neither *yavdal* or simply listing “democracy” implies any sort of judgment or evaluation. It was also the term used most often in interviews, but this was doubtless due at least in part to my having phrased my questions using it.

The other two terms link the events back to previous moments in Mongolian history, and occurred with about equal frequency in 1993. *Hödölgöön* (“movement” or “activity”) harks back to the common (socialist) term of reference for the events of 1911. The other word is *huv’sgal*, “revolution.” Here the parallel being drawn is with the People’s Revolution of 1921. Significantly, *temtsel*, “struggle” (usually in the textbook context of a struggle against oppressors and for freedom), did not occur in survey responses (although Bat-Üül, one of the early opposition leaders, did use it). *Boslogo* (“revolt” or “rebellion”) did not occur at all. Both of these latter terms tend to imply the use of force, so their non-use is in keeping with the largely peaceful recollections given above. If either of these two terms had been used extensively, the image conveyed would have been of a much more directly and violently confrontational means of effecting change than is currently the case. It would also imply a period of foreign occupation preceding the democratic revolution much more
strongly. Socialism may have been perceived as such during and after its collapse, but the terminology describing the events of 1989–90 suggests a more ambivalent attitude.

It should also be noted that neither temtsel (struggle) nor boslogo (revolt) have the same implications or expectations of social change that hödölgöön (movement) and huv’sgal (revolution) do. This may have much to do with the choice of words, as the latter two tend to be used to describe much larger-scale events, and ones that usually have a positive outcome. A less successful uprising, however laudable, is usually described in socialist historiography as a temtsel or boslogo. The image projected of the events of 1989–90 is one that is sweeping in terms of the changes the events brought about, but they were not themselves violent changes. Rather, the terms seem to indicate popular support for changes that were almost inevitable. This inevitability which was already noted in the reminiscences is worth returning to briefly.

Although Western scholars and analysts tend to talk of the collapse of socialism, this is not the case in Mongolia itself. Rather, what is talked about is the advent of democracy. The distinction is an important one. The collapse of an old order lacks the purpose and meaning that the rise of a new order possesses. The dialectical method sees each new stage as superseding the previous. Similarly, nationalism sees as important the awakening of the nation, not the collapse or ejection of foreign rule itself. The point here is that the terms used to talk about the events of 1989–90 themselves not only create links to previous historical events, but cast the events in a positive light, whether looked at from the perspective of socialist or nationalist historiography. Society progresses, and after a detour of seventy years is back on the correct path of development. This concept of a detour from the “true” path of Mongolian development was present in discussions and publications as well.

The two terms used – hödölgöön and huv’sgal – are indicative of the models used (if not always explicitly) for thinking about political change in Mongolia. The fact that there was no correlation between age, gender or political affiliation and the use of the terms further suggests that these terms reflect the dominant models for conceiving of political change of the early 1990s. Thus, not only are previous interpretations of the past being contested, but, at the same time, the past (albeit different parts of it) is being looked to to help understand the changes.

The historical connotations of these terms were clear to many of the intellectuals, and would crop up in conversations where the events of 1911 and 1921 would be drawn upon as parallels to what happened in 1989–90. The references to 1921, however, were less clear-cut than those to 1911 in 1993. (The term huv’sgal was occasionally used in referring to the events of 1911, and two respondents described 1921 as a hödölgöön; these, however, are exceptions.) Of the two parallels, it was more often the
one with 1911 that was made. Four years later, the parallels were not as explicit, but the shift in vocabulary was. Almost without exception, the events of 1989–90 were seen as a *huv’sgal*. This led to an interesting shift in how the events of 1911 were viewed. I return to these points shortly.

Ts. Batbayar (the director of the Institute for Oriental and International Studies) draws the parallel between the events of 1911 and 1990 succinctly:

> It is interesting to juxtapose Mongolia’s position in relation to its external environment in the 1990s with that which existed early in this century. In 1911 the Qing Dynasty in China disintegrated giving Mongolia the opportunity to revive its statehood, which had been under alien influence for many centuries. In the 1990s Mongolia’s powerful northern neighbor, the former USSR, disintegrated giving Mongolia the opportunity to become a full-fledged member of the world community.

(1994: 45)

His wording is particularly interesting in that he further heightens the parallel with the double use of the term “disintegrated.” Mongolia in 1990 is pictured as coming out from under a lengthy period of foreign domination, much as it had in 1911. The Soviet Union is thus placed in the same category as the Qing dynasty, that of a foreign power dominating the Mongolian nation. This is a radical change from the period of socialism, when, in official discourse, the Soviet Union played the role of the protective and guiding older brother (*ah*) to Mongolia’s younger brother (*düüi*).

The parallel between the winter of 1989–90 and previous events occasionally came up in conversation through rejection or discussion of the comparison. Tümen, a researcher at the Academy of Sciences and one-time Ih Hural candidate for the MSDN, for example, disputed the parallel: “Some people try to interpret the revolution in 1921, and also the revolution in 1911–12, as democratic movement. I don’t agree with that. The 1921 and 1911 movements were liberation, national liberation.” By extension then, Tümen also rejects some of the more nationalist implications of the events of 1989–90. But even to reject them implies that she was aware of and had thought about the links.

Dorj, a government official, also disputed the parallels. What took place in 1911, he said, was a battle for survival. “It was not a question of living better, it was a question of living or dying.” In contrast, 1989 was about living better. He disagreed with the use of the term “revolution” to describe what had happened in 1989, saying such a description was a remnant of a socialist mindset.

Others would make the comparison even more obliquely, but they made it nonetheless. “I think there was more change after 1989 than after
1921,” one university student told me. He went on to explain that under both the Bogd Khaan and the socialist government, people didn’t have much say, and were ruled from above. But now they have democracy. He thus takes the opposite approach from Dorj, and to a degree Tümen, suggesting that the change was indeed as substantial as the terms bödöl-göön or hvü’sgal would imply.

Despite the debate on the validity of the comparison, the linkage itself is beyond dispute. People draw it if only to reject it, but, in doing so, admit to its possibility. Such rejections were made in the course of arguing against what people perceived of as a common viewpoint.

As Batbayar has noted, there are certain perceived similarities between 1911 and 1989. What has not yet been mentioned (except, perhaps, implicitly by Tümen) is one of the implications of this. By drawing parallels between 1911 and 1989, the argument is being made that the events of 1989–90 constituted, in effect, an independence movement. The point has been made explicit in other Mongolian publications. In a comparison of the 1911 revolutions in Mongolia and China, Jamsran, a researcher at the Institute of Oriental and International Studies, has written

\[\text{However short-lived the 1911 revolution in Mongolia may appear, it did serve as the seed of future successes. In 1921, the Mongols gained their independence from China. This was a direct result of the national liberation movement and not, as some argue, of Russian instigation. Since 1990, a third stage of Mongolia’s revolution has occurred when as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia is gaining a greater degree of independence.} \]

\[(\text{Jamsran 1994: 63})\]

Jamsran develops here a theme – the three historical events as inextricably linked – that was to become common later in the decade. I take up this idea below.

In the winter of 1989–90, if we follow the logic of this argument, it was not only socialism that was being rejected. Along with socialism, and perhaps more prominently, Soviet hegemony was being rejected. What took place was a nationalist movement. Socialism was now seen as inextricably linked to the Soviets. The MAHN of 1990 was being rejected, then, as much for de facto control by the Soviets as for its tradition of one-party rule. In other words, the historical models used to discuss what happened in 1989–90 confirm the rhetoric of the events themselves. Both point to a common underlying reaction to the socialist period.

Jamsran’s view – that of 1990 as a revolution – was the prevalent one by the fall of 1997. At times, the people themselves involved or the political groups formed during the democratic revolution might be termed a bödöl-göön, but the actual course of events was solidly established as a hvü’sgal.
Historians and other writers have reinforced and built upon the parallels throughout the 1990s. One historian, in a typical example, groups all three events under the heading of “Mongolia’s three revolutions,” the title of her book (Erdenetuya 2000). Others also make the linkage, now seeing a historical progression among the three events.

Erdenetuya’s title highlights another tendency that has developed over the course of the 1990s. While socialist historiography had reserved the term *huv’sgal* for the events of 1921, 1911 has now largely acquired the status of a revolution. Thus, not only is there now a tendency to see the three events as linked, one building upon and leading to the next, but they are all worthy events, all dignified with the label of “revolution.” In Erdenetuya’s labeling – which reflects the new received wisdom – 1911 is “the revolution for national freedom” (*ündesnii erh chöloönii huv’sgal*; sometimes it is the “revolution for national independence”), 1921 is (as it was at times under socialism) the “national democratic revolution,” and 1990 becomes simply the “democratic revolution.” There has also been another shift – although less marked – in keeping with this re-evaluation: 1921, historically the “People’s Revolution,” is now, as it is for Erdenetuya, often a “national democratic revolution.” While the label of “national democratic revolution” could be found in socialist-era texts, and some people still call 1921 the “People’s Revolution,” the shift seems to be towards the use of “national democratic revolution.” In other words, there is now a relatively smooth progression throughout the twentieth century in Mongolia, where the revolutions lead from one to another.

The conceptual framework of “revolution” is reinforced by the choice of words. While no term except *huv’sgal* itself is present in all three, *ündesnii* (“national”) ties the first two together, as *ardchilsan* (“democratic”) does the second two. Linguistically, the three events flow smoothly from one to another, a continuous unfolding of national history.

I am also tempted to read this expansion of the use of *huv’sgal* at least partially as an intentional repudiation of the socialist emphasis on the uniqueness of the People’s Revolution in 1921. This aspect, however, is less prominent than the current reading of twentieth-century Mongolian history as one long nation-centered progression. This too is a repudiation of the socialist world-view, but in a different, and more important, way.

A related point was mentioned earlier. As we have seen, in the accounts collected in 1993, the protests themselves formed a focal point for thinking about the events. By the late 1990s, this had changed. What had become the key event by 1997 was the hunger strike in Sükhbaatar Square at the beginning of March. This shift in the social memory – the “hook” upon which views of the advent of democracy are hung – is linked to the shift in terminology. The shift in the focal point occurred for two main reasons, which can be reduced to one central issue: the hunger strikes are seen as a more active form of protest. They are seen not only as active in the sense
that people were doing something – the first activity, although standing in the cold, was also an activity – but they led to the resignation of the Politburo, the second activity. The first sense is somewhat paradoxical, as sitting and fasting is, in the physical sense, less of an activity than standing and chanting slogans. Yet they were undertaken with a specific, focused, short-term goal in mind, lending them a greater sense of “doing something” than the protests, which had more diffuse goals.

While it may be argued with validity that the demonstrations made the hunger strikes and the advent of democracy possible, the link is now seen in some respects as a less direct one. The cause and effect relationship is not drawn as sharply, and is thus easier to downplay. The hunger strikes, in contrast, were much more immediate and tangible, with immediate and tangible results. It is easier to pinpoint the specific and highly visible results of the hunger strikes than it is to point to the results of any single demonstration or meeting.

Historical symbolism was quickly seized on by both MAHN and the demonstrators as a powerful rhetorical tool. It was the protesters, however, who were able to more effectively muster the weight of history to their cause, ultimately portraying the socialist era as a foreign imposition, devoid of any legitimacy. MAHN was tainted by association.

Yet while the opposition groups fostered a nationalist interpretation of Mongolian history – or exploited an already present interpretation – the interaction between politics and history was not unidirectional. The recollections of the events of 1989–90, and the very terms used to describe them, argue that the models people use to think and talk about these events have been shaped by socialist history-writing. The events are seen by some as being a change of great importance, much as socialism portrayed the importance of shifts from one form of socio-economic structure to another. Even those people who do not accept such a role for the events of 1989–90 argue against such an interpretation, and thus pay heed to its potential.

The democratic revolution created the possibility of publicly rethinking and debating history. Despite appearances, the apparently new ways of thinking about Mongolian history did not appear out of thin air. Debates on interpretations of history draw upon socialist-era (and even earlier) history-writing. In the next chapter, therefore, I take up a discussion of Mongolian historiography. In emphasizing the socialist era, I highlight the relationships between old and new models of history, which are carried over into discussions of specific historical figures in Chapters 6 and 7.
The Mongolian historian Sh. Bira noted in an address some thirty years ago that “at the present moment [Asian historiography] assumes ever greater importance in connection with the great historical events which are taking place in Eastern countries” (Bira 1977a: 366). His words, referring to the collapse of colonialism, and the rise of socialism in Asia and Africa, are perhaps even more relevant with the collapse of state socialism in Mongolia and the re-evaluations of history that accompanied it.

Yet it is important to realize the current interpretations of history did not appear de novo with the collapse of the old government. Rather, much of what has emerged in interpretations of history in post-socialist Mongolia are variations on long-running themes. As a prelude to the discussions of Chinggis Khaan, Zanabazar and Sühebaatar in the following chapters, this chapter maps out various influences on historical thought in Mongolia. It illustrates the continuities between earlier ways of thinking about history – and by extension identity – and current ones.

Among other elements, I examine attempts at educational reform, for, as I argue in the course of this chapter, perceptions of history in Mongolia have been closely linked to the development and spread of formal schooling. To understand the differing views of history, one needs to pay attention to the process of education.

The icebergs of history

More than six hundred years ago, Ibn Khaldun noted in The Muqadimmah that one of the distinguishing hallmarks of historians is their critical attitude towards source material (1967: 11ff.). Paul Veyne similarly points to the critical use of sources as the distinguishing hallmark of contemporary historians (1988: Ch. 1). This does not indicate some abstract, timeless superiority of Western models of “doing history.” As Veyne further notes,

History [in ancient Greece] and history now are alike in name only … In its own genre, ancient history was as complete a means
of creating belief as our journalism of today, which it resembles a
great deal. This “hidden part of the iceberg” of what history was,
long ago, is so immense that ... we realize it is not the same
iceberg.

(1988: 5, second ellipses his)

In other words, one can view history, and the ways of doing history, as a
type of belief system, much the way anthropologists view religions. That
we apply the same name to different things should not blind us to the fact
that they are different.

In this chapter, I focus on the lead-up to the current views of history in
Mongolia. The various icebergs that history was (and still may be) in
Mongolia have all calved and contributed to the one in question. I have
chosen this particular iceberg as a result of its predominance in academic
and political discourse, which in turn shape the views offered to the public
through various media. Whatever specific brand of history one prefers
(Marxist, positivist, subaltern, and so on) in whichever academy
(American, British, Mongolian), they all rely to a greater or lesser extent
upon the critical use and analysis of source material, even if they view the
iceberg from different angles.

What is additionally important in the Mongolian context is that
although we can view the current iceberg as an aggregate of several
previous ones, there has been a clear shift to this overarching view of
history over the course of the twentieth century, paralleled by the develop-
ment of a distinctly socialist interpretation of history. This interpretation,
however, was a palimpsest, and through it, previous understandings may
be glimpsed. All of them, including the socialist one, continue to influence
the way history is talked about today.

A general overview

Looking back over the past one hundred years or so of Mongolian history,
the traditions of historical writing can be broken down into four broad
periods. Prior to the ardyn buv’sgal (“People’s Revolution”) in 1921, the
major influences in the writing of history were Buddhist, Chinese and what
we can term a more general, Inner Asian folk view. When examining this
period, separating out these influences is a difficult task.

Some changes in writing about history were to occur in the early twen-
tieth century, roughly coinciding with the Autonomous Period (1911–21).2
In this chapter, I will take issue with Charles Bawden’s observation that
“except that it had expelled the Manchus, autonomy altered nothing
fundamentally in society ... Nothing significant in the field of social
change occurred” (1989: 136). There were indeed attempts at educational
and political reform during this period. Nonetheless, as we shall see, there
also is some truth to Bawden’s observation in that results were limited at best. As in the nineteenth century, religion and history often mixed freely, as Marxism and history would during the coming decades.

To talk of the understandings that prevailed about historical figures at the beginning of the twentieth century is largely to place them in a folkloric or religious context (see, for example, the prayers to Chinggis Khaan in Serruys (1970, 1985)). There were notable attempts at incorporating more critical views, which I take up below. However, while we should not underestimate the significance of such steps, neither should we overestimate them.

An account of history offering the same facts as a critical one, as some early ones did, is not necessarily itself critical. This is not to present the Mongols as “a people without history.” They were well aware of their historical past. My point is different: that awareness of the past does not necessarily equate with “history” as “a genre” (Veyne 1984: 18), or as a specific way of thinking about the past. It is history as a genre that I am concerned with here. It is not so much an awareness of the past per se that I am interested in, as the attitude various Mongols have adopted towards that past at different times.

During the Autonomous Period, there were attempts at educational reform. Some of the nobles and higher-ranking lamas, a number of whom were from Inner Mongolia, were exposed to the ideas of Sun Yat-Sen and other Chinese leaders, as well as the Japanese, who were showing an increased interest in Mongolia during this period. Although these intellectuals introduced reform in education as well as politics, it remains an open question as to how effective this was. (If the attempted political reforms are any indication, the success was limited.)

Under socialism, from 1921 to 1989–90, a Marxist approach to history was gradually adopted and was linked to the introduction of general education for the populace. As we will see shortly, elements of previous historical understandings persisted, influencing both the official writing and the unofficial, or “underground,” histories, which were largely oral in form. What were to become the standard socialist views of history did not take root until the 1950s and 60s, concurrent with the creation of the negdel (the collective farms), rather than the 1920s or 30s (when extensive repressions and the destruction of the Lamaist hierarchy occurred). While there was a history-writing project during the earlier period, it is not clear that it had much impact, in large part due to the lack of an appropriately educated audience. Nor does it appear to have taken a purely Marxist view of the past.

Finally, since the democratic revolution of 1989–90, there has been a new openness in the discussion of history, portrayed as finding out, or, more often, finally telling, the “truth” about history. Part of this has included the republishing of a few pre-socialist and early socialist-era histo-
ries as well as the writing of new ones. Since 1990, the writing of history has shown a large number of influences, including a continuance of both official and unofficial histories from the socialist period. These in turn imply a continuation of previous schools of thought, although not necessarily in a simple, direct manner. Whatever the rhetoric of “truth” and “objectivity” may imply, the political and socio-cultural climate has continued to affect the writing of history. Much of historical writing, intentionally or not, is being reconstructed in opposition to socialist-era views.

Each of these periods requires further elucidation. In addition, it should be made clear that although I have just glossed each period as relatively uniform, this is by no means the case. Under socialism, the official, sanctioned views may have been more or less monolithic (at any one moment in time, subject always to shifts in the direction of the ideological wind), but this is certainly not the case today. And even during the periods of heaviest socialist repression, one must not deny variation in people’s individual stocks of historical knowledge. As rough indicators of such variations, we can usually draw major divisions in attitudes along age and urban/rural lines. To return to Veyne’s metaphor, there has been (and probably always will be) more than one iceberg of history adrift at any one time in a particular culture.

In examining these different periods and influences, I will often compare them to a generalized, abstract model of historiography that includes, among other elements, critical use and evaluation of source material. In doing so, I do not mean to imply that such a model is an objectively superior way of “doing history.” Rather, I intend the comparisons to highlight the various approaches. This method is particularly apt given that most of post-socialist history has been portrayed as “telling the truth about what happened.” Yet, as we will see, such truths are influenced by ways of thinking that most Mongol historians and others would not see as objective.

**Historical influences before 1911**

In order to understand more fully the schools and trends of history-writing in Mongolia in the twentieth century, it is necessary to take a step back and consider historiography prior to this period as well, as certain trends and influences remained prevalent until the beginning of the socialist period, and arguably even after.

Prior to 1921, Mongolia, ruled by the Qing since 1691, possessed an essentially feudal social structure, replete with an aristocracy and a strong ecclesiastical hierarchy. The commoners (*ard tümen*) were liable for a number of duties to the state and their banner prince (the banner being an administrative unit established by the Manchus). The banner princes, at least in theory, ruled at the pleasure of the Manchu emperor (prior to 1911), or later the Bogd Khaan, although they had a large degree of
autonomy. In addition, large numbers of people were bound as serfs (shav’) to the various monasteries and temples.\(^4\)

A large part of “high culture” was Buddhist in nature, and most of the schools were run by lamas. According to Bawden’s estimate (1989: 271), even in the mid-1920s, one-third of the adult male population were lamas; Heissig (1980: 1) gives the same percentage for the nineteenth century. Although not all of these nominal lamas followed religious tenets rigorously (many had families, and lived on the steppe, not in monasteries), it would not be too far-fetched to assume that their religion had some impact on their perceptions of history, to the extent that they thought about it at all, as it was the Buddhist Church that would have been their main, and perhaps only, source of formal education.

Prior to and during the years leading up to 1911, the majority of written literature was in Tibetan, the language of the Church, although some literature did exist in written Mongolian. This latter tended, however, to be translations of Buddhist writings or similar texts (see Atwood 1992). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other educated Mongols (in particular, those in government service) would have been able to read Manchu, Chinese or, later, Russian, and thus had a greater potential to be exposed to new ideas. (Although Russian was not required for government work, many of the early revolutionaries were educated at least in part in the Soviet Union.) In general, such opportunities appear to have been fairly limited.

Up until 1902 – when the first secular school was established in Inner Mongolia (Jagchid 1988b: 212) – education remained almost exclusively in the hands of the Church. Information Mongolia claims:

In pre-revolutionary Mongolia there was no secular education. School education was fully managed by Lamaist monasteries, where lessons were conducted in Tibetan. Therefore the native language and writing were taught through tutors in homes or at a few schools for clerks. Consequently, this kind of education largely depended on the status of the children’s family. Hence, most herdsmen’s children, particularly in poorer families, received no teaching at all.

(Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 279)

This passage must be treated with some caution, although there is some truth to it. Contrary to this claim, the monasteries did sometimes provide education for children outside of the nobility (Heissig 1980: 34), providing in fact just about the only possible avenue of advancement for rural individuals. Choibalsan, who was to become infamous as Mongolia’s Stalin, received his early education in a monastery, although he ran away after two years (Bawden 1989: 248–249). Bawden also sees the influence of the
tutors as being of some importance in terms of historiography. “There was a sense of responsibility for seeing that the coming generation learned the traditions of the past, which must not be underestimated” (Bawden 1989: 248). These traditions, while incorporating historical knowledge, however, must not be confused with an understanding of history as a distinct genre, our interest here. Quite what they did consist of, and how they were received, is not clear, although it is doubtful they would have been distinct history lessons.

It thus appears that the main influence on history up until the beginning of the twentieth century was Buddhist. (It must be noted that the evidence on this point is contradictory and unsatisfactory.) This was the continuance of a long tradition of the “Buddhification” of Mongolian history, which can be traced back at least as far as the first third of the seventeenth century — shortly after the reintroduction of Buddhism to Mongolia — when the chronicle known as the Altan Tovch (Altan tobči) was composed (Bawden 1955: 13).

The Mongolian scholar Sh. Bira (1992) suggests that the Buddhist influence can be traced back even further, to the original introduction of Buddhism and the Phags-pa Lama (1235–80), who provided Lamaist legitimation to the Yuan dynasty during Khubilai’s reign (see also Rossabi 1988). If Bira is right in suggesting the earlier date, and there seems no reason to doubt him, the Buddhist view would have been propagated among a limited circle, as at this time Buddhism was largely confined to the nobility. In either case, by the period we are interested in, the influence of Buddhism on historical topics and understanding was unmistakable.

By way of illustrating this Buddhist influence, let us look at the birth of Chinggis Khaan. In the Secret History (written c. 1240), Chinggis “was born with his destiny ordained by Heaven Above” (Onon 1990: 1). This is a recurrent theme in the text, attributable perhaps either to shamanic sky worship (Bira 1992) or to a borrowing of the Chinese conception of the Mandate from Heaven (de Rachewiltz 1973). It has also been suggested that to be born with a Heavenly destiny was a shared characteristic of the world-view of the time (Gaadamba 1976). In the Altan Tovch, by contrast, his lineage is extended back to the Chakravartian kings of India, and now includes the first king of Tibet.

Both the historic and mythical Chinggis-Khan so popular among the Mongols could not, of course, [have] remained unnoticed by the adherents of the new faith [i.e. Buddhism]. This time the ruling circles of Mongolia who adopted Buddhism did their best to sanctify their great ancestor by means of their new religion. There has been propounded a whole set of new conception[s] of Chinggis-Khan based on the Buddhist teaching on kingship.

(Bira 1992: 45)
The Buddhists had other influences on Mongolian historical writing that should be noted. The German Mongolist Walther Heissig attributes “an extraordinary intellectual leap in the fifty years from 1579 to 1629” to the influence of Buddhism, noting “this leap did not only concern religious literature; it also led to the writing down of a secular history of a different and markedly historical character” (Heissig 1980: 31). Heissig, however, does not expand upon this statement, and fails to note that secular histories (as opposed to Buddhist ones), in the form of official histories such as the Secret History, were already known to the Mongols. Nor does he talk of the reception accorded such histories. We cannot exclude the possibility they were received as historical sources per se (rather than, say, documents of political legitimation), but neither can we be sure they were.

Cultural and religious ties were also made with India, the homeland of Buddhism, through the intermediary of Tibet. Bira notes of these ties:

[O]ne can say that ancient Indo-Buddhist religious and historical traditions had finally become one of the main components of historical and political consciousness of the Mongols. And it is quite reasonable that Mongolian rulers up to the modern time had been taking advantage of various Buddhist religious and historio-political concept[s], such as, for instance, the concept of the unity of laws of Dharma and Secular Power, the concept of kings – Chakravartins, and the concepts of kings of Doctrine or Dharmarajas, etc., in their attempts to buttress their statehood.

(Bira 1989: 26)

It was these ideas – which still reflected the influence of religious thought – that were to inform Mongolian historical writing almost exclusively, if not always explicitly, until the Autonomous period and, to a lesser extent, up to the present.

The Lamaist Church, in its attempts to suppress shamanism, incorporated many shamanic figures into the Mongolian-Buddhist pantheon (see Heissig 1980: 62–64). This served to further modify conceptions of historical figures, in much the same manner as we have noted with Chinggis Khaan, as portrayals shifted to fit the political climate of the time. People and events were recast in a Buddhist context. Heissig also points out that, not insignificantly, “all the heroes of the religious biographies written in Mongolian were not only high-ranking church dignitaries, but personae gratae with the Manchu court as well” (1953: 7). Thus, politics exerted an explicit, as well as less visible, effect on the writing of history. General world-views shifted, and politics assured that particulars were taken into account as well.

Prior to, and concurrent with, the Buddhist influence on Mongolian historical understanding, there ran a “folk” or “traditional” element,
which has at times been portrayed as a shamanic influence. To some extent, it is impossible to separate out, especially by the twentieth century, the Chinese and broader Inner Asian influences from others. It is arguably possible to see even Zoroastrian and Manichean influences in some of the motifs found in the *Secret History* (Bira 1989: 33ff.).

We can include also under this general rubric of “folk” history the later folkloric and legendary elements that became attached to such figures as Chinggis Khaan, or even the eighteenth-century noble and rebel leader Chingünjav (for the latter, see Kaplonski 1993). Although one may wish to dismiss them as folklore, such ideas influenced the writing of history, and appeared in conversations with politicians and others in Ulaanbaatar in the 1990s. To what extent these latter conversations reflected believed-in historical knowledge as opposed to folklore is unclear, but I am loathe to dismiss them out of hand.

There were to be several important publications with regard to history before the twentieth century. In addition to the *Secret History* and the *Altan Tovch*, another history, the *Erdeniin Tovch* (*Erdeni-yin tobč* in the old script), was written by Sagang Sechen, a prince of the Ordos Mongols in 1662. In his foreword to a partial English translation, Krueger calls it “a carefully prepared and generally accurate work” (Kreuger 1967: 4). Yet while the accounts of the various Mongol khans may indeed be carefully written, the work itself cannot be considered a part of Veyne’s most recent iceberg. Interspersed with historical information are fantastic accounts, where, for example, Chinggis Khaan transforms himself into an old man to teach his brothers a lesson in humility. Furthermore, although the mythical ancestors of the *Secret History*, a wolf and a deer, have become humans with animal names, they are now linked (as in the *Altan Tovch*) to the rulers of Tibet. History is not yet thought about in what we would consider a critical manner.

*Information Mongolia* calls the publication of the *Bolor Erih* (*Bolor Erike*) by Rashpuntsag in 1776 an important moment in Mongolian historiography. This history is said to have “made a successful attempt at critical assessment of the sources and appraisal of various historical events. Moreover, [Rashpuntsag] substantiated in his own way the imperative need for criticism and dispute in recording history” (Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 308). Christopher Atwood, in his brief review of Mongolian historiography, largely concurs with *Information Mongolia*’s assessment, noting that Rashpuntsag “was the first Mongolian historian to be significantly influenced by Chinese historical writing” and make use of Chinese historical data (1998: 630). While the use of Chinese data does not automatically indicate a more critical approach to history, it does indicate a telling shift.

A work from the nineteenth century worthy of comment is the *Köke sudur*, *The Blue Chronicle*, a historical novel by an Inner Mongolian
author and poet, Injannasi (1837–92). A translation of the introduction and selected passages exists in English (Hangin 1973, 1978). This work is chiefly notable for the author’s dissatisfaction with the influence of Buddhism on Mongolia. Hangin notes (a bit harshly):

Much to the chagrin of [Injannasi], by his time, due to the Mongol’s entanglement with Lama Buddhism and thanks to the conscientious efforts of lama historians, Mongolian history became hopelessly entangled with Lama Buddhist mythology. Not only was the royal house of Chinggis made to relate to the Indo-Tibetan royal kings, but Chinggis himself was made a Lama Buddhistic deity. Chinggis and his Great Mongol Empire had already lost their historicity and became a part of Lama Buddhistic mythology … Few of [the author’s peers] knew much about Mongolian history.

(1978: xix)

Hangin continues: “on many occasions the author expresses his strong nationalistic sentiments. In glorifying the Mongol past he had never neglected to lament the inglorious Mongol present” (1978: xix). Despite his condemnation of the Lamaist influence, Injannasi’s own work is replete with mythological elements of its own. It may have represented a shift away from Buddhist-inspired history, but it did not represent a commensurate shift towards a critical use of sources and the establishment of history as a distinct genre. National sentiment does not equate with critical historiography, and is in fact often its opposite.

A variety of other works were also published during the nineteenth century, including books of “history, law, medical science, the preparation of medicines, Mongolian grammar … biographies of learned lamas, books on rituals, books about the seasons, and school books …” (Shüger 1991: 146). It is unclear, however, exactly what schools of thought these books represented, and how easily available they were (though one suspects they enjoyed only a limited audience). They may well have represented a codification of local knowledge or the Tibetan tradition rather than an exposure to foreign methods or the development of an indigenous historical scholarship. Bira’s assessment of pre-twentieth-century Mongolian historical literature seems to confirm this view:

Mongolian historical literature written in Tibetan [as the vast majority was] was influenced by [Tibetan historical] science more than by any other … It would be wrong, of course, because of this alone, to overlook all that is original, nationalistic, and characteristic in Mongolian historical literature.

(1970: 5)
He most notably does not say that this historical literature indicated a recognition of criticism of sources or accounts.

These various elements were to continue to be influential throughout the twentieth century and have become especially so in this, the post-socialist period. In particular, a deification of Chinggis has once again become apparent in parts of Mongolia, both in published texts and in everyday life.

The Bogd Khaan period

Some attempts at educational reform were made in the early twentieth century. While there does not appear to be any way to gauge the effectiveness of these reforms, or the degree to which they reached most people, the reforms are worth discussing for their impact on historiography. To the extent that the educational reforms succeeded, they would have had an effect on how people thought of history, for both elementary and middle schools in the Bogd Khaan period were to have taught Mongolian history (Pürvee 1966: 105, 109).7

The educational reforms were largely the result of contact with the Republican Chinese, as well as increasing contact with the Russians. Many of the most ardent reformers of the period were Inner Mongols. They were active both in Inner Mongolia and in Niislel Hüree, as Ulaanbaatar was then known. Some Inner Mongols served in the Bogd Khaan’s government, and contact between the two regions was maintained until the 1930s.

In 1902, Prince Gungsangnorbu of Inner Mongolia opened what Jagchid describes as “the first modern school in all of Mongolia with the possible exception of the Buriat area [in Siberia]” (1988b: 213). In the following years, Gungsangnorbu launched several other attempts at educational reform, although none of them seem to have been wildly successful. (Ulaanhüü, a famous Inner Mongolian nationalist and Communist leader, did attend one of Gungsangnorbu’s schools.) Similar concerns with educational reform existed in Mongolia itself.

The role of the Buriat Mongols, who often played the role of intermediary between Tsarist Russia and the Mongols, must not be overlooked. In particular, Jamtsarano, a famed Buriat scholar, began publication of a newspaper in Niislel Hüree in 1917, and was seeking to raise the educational standard of the Mongols.8 The Finnish scholar Ramstedt also speaks in passing of education in the Bogd Khaan state, noting that an article of his on history appeared “in a reader intended for school in Mongolia” (Ramstedt 1978: 228). A secondary school was opened in Ulaanbaatar in 1912, and staffed largely by Buriats. A number of Mongol youths, including the future leader H. Choibalsan, were educated at schools in Siberia as well. Despite the role of Buriats, which was to increase over time, the main influence during this period remained the Inner Mongols.
According to one count, by about 1912, there were sixty or so schools dotted throughout the Mongolian countryside (Bira 1994: 109). While there were thus a number of attempts to establish schools, it remains unclear just what impact these had. Shirendev, one-time head of the Academy of Sciences, notes in his memoirs (1997) that most of his early education (in the Bogd Khaan period and the early days of socialism) came at the hands of lamas and through informal means. Formal, secular education, in other words, remained minimal.

The Mongol Ulsyn Shastir (History of Mongolia) written during this period seems to suggest that any changes in thinking and writing about history were small indeed. The Shastir was written in 1918–19 under the direction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ochir et al. 1997: 2). Although a history book, it is of a radically different sort from the socialist-era texts. It is, rather, perhaps best described, in Christopher Atwood’s term, as a “peerage” (personal communication).

Rinchen, one of Mongolia’s most famous scholars, offers an argument apparently at odds with the rough outline I have been sketching: that secular education, although present, does not appear to have been widespread. He claims that in pre-revolutionary Mongolia, “there existed official-civilian as well as private-domestic schools which numbered not less than seven hundred,” over and above the Buddhist schools (Rinchen 1972: 68). He further claims that illiteracy was not as common as supposed. Rather, he says, many people could read but not write, and this classification has been wrongly interpreted as complete illiteracy.

I have not been able either to confirm or to refute these numbers, which strike me as rather high, especially given Bira’s estimate of sixty schools around 1912.9 One also wonders, given Rinchen’s status not only as a respected scholar, but also as a sometime critic of the government, if these figures were meant to be read as a critique of socialist claims in the realm of education. Such numbers of schools would go quite a way towards countering the received wisdom that the socialist government deserves most of the credit for introducing mass education to Mongolia. In other words, these claims may be a form of evocative transcript (see below).

It is worth remarking in this context that in his political dealings, the Bogd Khaan found it necessary or expedient to switch between two historio-political discourses, depending upon his intended audience (Humphrey 1994: 32). Whatever changes he or the reformers instigated, he himself appeared to doubt their ability to penetrate all levels of the population. As common (or more so) than appeals to history or nationalism were appeals to religious beliefs and prophetic books (see Sárközi 1992: 13, 127–132). One text that Sárközi cites is from 1892, and hence before the Bogd Khaan period per se, but it is illustrative nonetheless given the Bogd Khaan’s influence. In this text, the Bogd Khaan (or the Eighth Javzandamba Hutagt as he was more properly known before 1911) issued a decree:
from the beginning of the first of fourth month of this year ride to the south and clear away the yellow Chinese population. Read the Mani Megjim for the sake of supporting the good and make it your protector. Place wind-horses at the door. Women should tie their hair into two tails and wear white on their breast – it is good. Do not eat goat meat, chicken meat and eggs. Do not buy Chinese tobacco! If you follow this advice diligently, it is good. You will be without misery now and will not taste bitter sufferings, and from now on you will be without troubles, and will live in very great wealth and abundance – it is certain.

(Sárközi 1992: 131)

Politics was preached, but it was not nationalism, or even politics in a narrow sense of the term. Rather, it was something akin to an apocalyptic vision. Furthermore, it was a vision that was not to be realized (in the form of independence) for another nineteen years.

In short, then, it is not clear that the Autonomous Period was much different in terms of historiography than the preceding decades. Although the evidence is highly ambiguous, functional literacy apparently remained rather uncommon in pre-socialist Mongolia, and one is left to wonder whether the elites, with their numerous political maneuverings, had much time for or interest in historiography. The Bogd Khaan period was also marked by attempts at educational reform, but whether these were effective is questionable. Although critical methods of writing and thinking about history were introduced (largely through contact with China and Russia) during this period, we cannot be certain of the impact. At any rate, such methods did not leave any substantial trace in the socialist and post-socialist writings, as previous traditions did.

**The socialist period**

With the victory of the People’s Revolution in 1921, historical writing was in due course to take a distinctive socialist turn, following the classic Marxist views of history reflecting the evolution of society through a number of stages, culminating in socialism. Mongolia itself, however, did not fit the typical Marxist model, having by-passed capitalism on the road to socialist development. (This would call for some juggling of Marxist theory, but did not radically affect the shift towards Marxist historiography.) Additionally, although a People’s Republic was proclaimed in 1924, it would be some years before the socialists were able to influence history writing, and most of the population would have to be made literate first.

Bira divides socialist Mongolian historiography into two stages, the “revolutionary-democratic stage (1921–1940) and [the] Marxist stage,” which followed after (Bira 1977b: 359). The first stage was characterized
by the secularization of history, and the “arousing and developing [of the] national consciousness of the people” (Bira 1977b: 359). I shall concentrate on the second of Bira’s two stages, albeit it with slightly modified dating. I shall also draw here upon an interview with B. Shirendev that I conducted in 1997. Shirendev played a prominent and colorful role in the history of the socialist government (rising to be a deputy minister) and the academia (holding the post of president of the Academy of Sciences).\(^\text{11}\) He also claimed to be the first trained historian in Mongolia, but his background was originally in European history. According to Shirendev, although there was a move towards Marxism starting in 1940, it was not until 1960 that “full Marxism” was reached.

Before passing on to Bira’s second stage, it is worth taking note of the histories written during his first stage. Although few in number, some were written. By and large, however, they had not yet acquired what was to become the typical later socialist reading of history.

The best known of these histories came out of the history-writing project of the 1930s. This was an early attempt at Marxist-inspired history-writing, and many of the authors involved were also prominent politically. Amar’s *A Brief History of Mongolia* (1989) was one result of this project. Amar’s work is informative in the current context for although it may have represented a shift towards Marxism, it is still decidedly far from what was to become the more fully developed Marxist style of the later years.\(^\text{12}\) Furthermore, widespread education was still absent in Mongolia. Those that could read the early attempts at socialist history, and had reason to, were probably largely the socialists themselves. To the extent that the history-writing project succeeded, it succeeded in large part in preaching to the converted. Shirendev claimed that the book, while not Marxist, was not critiqued as it did not say anything against Marxism, and it had a “lot of facts” in it.\(^\text{13}\)

The history project did not produce the only histories of the period. Magsarjav’s *A New History of Mongolia* (1994) predates the writing project by several years. Magsarjav was, among other things, a teacher of the Bogd Khaan, and the first minister of justice in the early 1920s (Magsarjav 1994: 3). The text itself, written between 1925 and 1927, apparently did not receive widespread circulation, as only three copies of the original are known to exist (Magsarjav 1994: 3).

Dealing with (roughly) the Bogd Khaan period, the work is of interest for both the vantage point of its author and the wealth of detail it provides. As both an educated man and one of the elites, we might suspect that Magsarjav’s writing would betray some early indications of nationalist ideology, which would be a telling shift in terms of thinking about history and its relation to identity. And indeed this is the case. He opens his history by noting that although the Mongols are known in world textbooks, little has been translated into Mongolian, and, in general, people
don’t know about their history (1994: 5). This he attributes to the Manchus. The bulk of the work, however, is not stridently nationalist, and it would be folly to read from it a purely nationalist viewpoint. Magsarjav was among a select elite in Mongolia at that time. His views may be indicative of the politically active elite, but probably not of the bulk of the population.

It was not until 1949 that socialist history, as it was to become established in the later decade, made its appearance. But when it did, it did so with a flourish. In the first half of 1949, a general textbook, The People’s Textbook (Ardyn Unshih Bichig), was published. The Poliburo however, quickly had it recalled, noting in a resolution of 21 July 1949 that

In [The People’s Textbook] the history section about Mongolian feudalism not only does not give a Marxist appraisal of the class nature of the campaign of pillaging carried out by Chinggis Khaan, but even praises it. This affair shows that some backward elements [heseg] of our intelligentsia are still mired in nationalist egoism.

(Party History Institute 1967: 327)

This was followed by another resolution only a few months later. This second resolution, entitled “About the situation of the teaching of the history of the Mongolian People’s Republic and literature in our schools,” citing shortcomings in these areas, laid the groundwork for a one-volume history of the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) (Party History Institute 1967: 328–329). The resolution also discussed measures to increase the political and ideological content of various publications, as well as revising the teaching guidelines on history. The new standards were to devote at least half of the program to teaching about the revolution (Party History Institute 1967: 329). (As we shall see, this division of history was adhered to, and often exceeded, in textbooks over the coming decades.)

It was this history, eventually published in 1955 and written under the “guidance” of Soviet historians, that provided the framework for the socialist view of Mongolian history. Shirendev, one of the authors of the text, said that the Soviet role was largely to ensure a “correct” view of Marxism. He and the other Mongol authors had been warned that they might get something wrong since they didn’t know about Marxism and class warfare.

Although specifics and details would change in subsequent editions, the outline and periodization was set. The following partial table of contents from a late socialist-era history textbook illustrates the standard approach to the official writing of Mongolian history:
The Mongolian Land from very early times until the October Socialist Great Revolution

The period of the formation of primitive communities in the Mongolian land. Class society, the beginning of early states

The first period of feudalism in Mongolia

Feudalism’s developmental stage in Mongolia

Mongolia’s united feudal state (end of the 12th century–beginning of the 13th century) [i.e. the Chinggisid period]

Mongolia’s feudal empire (13th–14th centuries) [the successors of Chinggis Khaan]

The late feudal stage of the Mongol state

The textbook continues on through the socialist revolution to the present day. This same style of periodization underlies the rest of Mongolian historiography under socialism. The socialist period itself receives similar treatment, whereby it is usually broken down into a number of segments, which include the creation of the MPR (1921–24); the development of the MPR along non-capitalist lines (1924–40); the creation of socialist society (1940–60); and, finally, socialist society itself (1960 and later). These divisions are standard, often with the exact phrasing being retained between texts.

The history texts explicitly reflecting this pattern, however, do not constitute the totality of socialist writings on history. We can divide the books concerned with history written during this period into three main categories. The first comprises fairly general histories, albeit those written within the socialist-progressive view, illustrated by the outline we have just seen. General history texts written during the socialist period can be further divided into two sub-categories. The first includes those that discuss the pre-1921 history of Mongolia (usually stretching back to the Stone and Bronze Ages), but do so within a socialist framework. In such cases, in keeping with the second 1949 resolution, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the post-1921 period, often amounting to half of the book. The time before the revolution is often referred to as just that in the text: Ardyn Huu’sgalaas Ömnööh Üe, “The period before the People’s Revolution” (Sodnom 1989).

Other textbooks prefer to start Mongolian history with the People’s Revolution, thus denying the importance or strict relevance of previous periods to the official historical outlook. Whichever approach the text adopts, it tends to do so within an overarching Marxist-Leninist framework.
The second major category of history books comprises those texts that represent a more specific, focused application of the Marxist evolutionist approach to history and, in accordance with this, the necessarily progressive nature of the socialist regime. Thus we find in this group, along with the standard histories of the first category, works with titles like *The Solution to the Problem of the Monasteries and Lamas in the MPR* (Pürevjav and Dashjamts 1965) and *The Founding of a Unified State and Formation of Feudalism in Mongolia* (Ishjamts 1974). Both these deal with various aspects of the standard concerns of Marxism: religion as false consciousness, class struggles, and the development of the various historical stages. The titles themselves indicate their intellectual heritage – religion is a “problem,” and the “formation of feudalism” clearly indicates society’s advancement through stages of development.

The last category of books comprises collections of documents that have tended to be used for political purposes. Thus, we find in this group works along the lines of *The Struggle for Independence in Northern Mongolia led by Chingünjav* (Chimid 1963) and *Memories of Sühbaatar* (Gürtseden 1965), the latter being a particularly popular genre. I also include here reminiscences of individuals and events. While these two categories are not identical, there are enough similarities to warrant their inclusion together. Perhaps the best known of the reminiscences is Övgön Jambalyn Yaria (*Old Man Jambal’s Story*; Damdinsüren 1959).

Caroline Humphrey has suggested that these “memoirs” of old men appeared as a reaction to the belief that official histories had lost contact with the “truth” (Humphrey 1994: 38; see also Chapter 1 of the present volume). Positioned as simple remembrances, how could they not be true? Being memoirs (or collections of them) rather than formal histories, they served to make history somehow more “real,” more concrete. They were, in other words, one approach to the control of historical interpretations. The collections of documents were doubtless designed to be received in a similar manner. By offering primary sources pertaining to a specific event or person, it becomes apparent that the socialist interpretation was the correct one.

In the case of collected documents, some, like Nasanbaljir’s 1954 collection on revolutionary measures taken in the early 1920s, were clearly intended to bolster socialism in a relatively straightforward manner. Others, like those concerned with Chingünjav’s rebellion, were more subtle. Here it was the choice of events or figures that mattered, offering a specific interpretation of history. But like the reminiscences, collections of documents sought to present history as more real through offering an immediate link to the events and people in question. This in turn, it was hoped, would encourage a naïve reading of the texts and history.

It should be recognized, however, as Humphrey notes, that it is quite possible that people were not taken in by such strategies, instead effectively reading between the lines. During the socialist period, there clearly
was a form of oppositional history, which was often embedded in the official texts themselves.

Although Mongolian scholars were by no means relegated to a Dark Ages of historical research under socialism, and connections with the non-socialist world existed, it should be noted that the Marxist school predominated, and overwhelmingly so. The BNMAU-yn Tüüh Sudlah Programm (Syllabus for Teaching the History of the MPR) (Shagdarsüren n.d.)\(^1\) lists no contemporary Western works in the reading list, and only a handful of Russian-language ones that are not explicitly socialist (i.e. often the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin). Not only was the use of reference material controlled, but it should also be remembered that textbooks and other works had to gain official approval (many noting this on their title page).

The important point to be made here is that in spite of this control, the Soviet influence did not totally eradicate the previous views of history, but rather overlay and modified them. For example,

There was launched a large-scale campaign of demolishing the traditional Mongolian conception of Chinggis Khan and molding a new one which had to comply to the political and ideological aspirations and claims of the Communist regime in Mongolia. But the campaign proved to have been unsuccessful. It could not seriously shake the old conception among the people ...

(Bira 1992: 47)

As I have noted here and elsewhere (see Kaplonski 1998), while the post-socialist conceptions of Chinggis Khaan draw upon both socialist and pre-socialist ones, it is not simply that the old conception survived unchanged, as Bira implies here. But his observation that the new history was not totally successful in replacing the old remains valid.

In the official histories of the socialist period, Chinggis received mixed reviews. He was not viewed as the national hero, as he is in post-socialist Mongolia, but as a necessary evil. A feudal oppressor of the masses, he was accorded recognition for the creation of the Mongolian state, and thus for providing impetus to social development. He was a regrettable but necessary step in the development of the country, just as feudalism or capitalism was seen as a necessary but regrettable step towards the development of socialism. A textbook sums up the standard socialist presentation of Chinggis Khaan:

Chinggis Khaan fulfilled an important role when he united the scattered tribes (aimguudyg) and created the new regime (tulgar tör). By establishing the new regime, he stimulated Mongolia’s economy, cultural development and the growth of the Mongol
nation (*ugsaatan*). But beginning from 1211, he began to wage wars of domination against other lands, and this created significant obstacles to future development.

(Sodnom 1989: 19)

Chinggis, then, is placed squarely within the Marxist scheme of history. He existed in this view to help develop Mongolia along the path it is destined for. This is a new emphasis on a pre-existing image of Chinggis. The socialist attention to Chinggis’s campaigns represents in part a refocusing on aspects previously downplayed or largely ignored. Other elements of the earlier images – Chinggis as law-giver and spiritual progenitor of the Mongols – were to remain, albeit with a different emphasis. These same themes would be asserted more forcefully with the fall of socialism.

Writing in the late 1980s, the Russian reformer (and former Moscow mayor) Gavriil Popov called for the need for a new, “true Marxist approach” to history. He took Chinggis Khaan and the Mongols as one of his examples. Under such a history, he wrote,

Chengis-Khan would not cease to be a tyrant, but he would also be the creator of a fairly effective administrative system, which functioned in good order over an area of thousands of kilometres.

(Popov, quoted in Davies 1989: 18)

This “revised” account is intriguing because it is not far from the Mongolian-Marxist view of Chinggis, as we have just seen. It lies, in fact, somewhere between the socialist view of him and the contemporary one, which sees Chinggis Khaan as the father of the Mongolian nation and originator of many of its customs.

A significant aspect of historical writing under socialism, which was to continue afterwards, was the emphasis placed on the ancientness of the Mongols. Although it is a matter of some debate among Western scholars, the Mongolian historians were and remain clear: the Hunnu (“Xiongnu” in pinyin), for all intents and purposes, were the Mongols. Dating back centuries, this view appears in any socialist-era text that deals with the ancient history of the Mongols.

“The formation of the Mongolian statehood dates back to ancient days, to the days of [the] emergence of [the] First state formation among the [Hunnu] in III century B.C.,” starts the English summary of *Mongolyn Uls Töris Töriin Gadaad Bodlogo, Diplomatyn Ulamjalalyn Zarim Asuudal* (Bor 1988: 191). Some authors, while not claiming the Hunnu were necessarily Mongol themselves, see the Mongols as physically present during the Hunnu period. This linkage to the past takes various forms. Some Mongols see it as an ethnic ancestry, claiming the Mongols were present under the Hunnu, and in one variant were the Hsien-pi (“Xianbi” in
pinyin), the successors to the Hunnu on the Inner Asian steppe. Others merely make them part of the same political and cultural history rather than physical descendants.

Quite when this extended past first becomes important is not clear. According to Onon, the Secret History dates the origins of the Mongols to the eighth century AD, about the time they first appear in Chinese records, rather than the time of the Hunnu. The Altan Tovch, while extending the lineage of the Mongols back to Tibet and India, again does not claim a Hunnu-based ancestry, although its own claiming of ancestry is revealing. Amar’s history of Mongolia, written in the 1930s, however, does stretch the origin of the Mongols back to the time of the Hunnu (Amar 1989).

The two faces of the iceberg under socialism

Returning to a key point of this book, it should be remembered that alongside and integrated with the official writings of the socialist period, there existed unofficial histories. These unofficial histories can be seen as “oppositional,” although such a term must be used with some caution. It is not the case that oppositional readings were fully cognized by all readers, although many clearly did read the histories in this manner. These alternative histories largely took the form of evocative transcripts, (Humphrey 1994) as discussed in Chapter 1, in which terms, phrases, inclusions or omissions in the official texts could evoke different readings from the ones officially approved.

The unofficial history, in addition to being embedded within official history texts, had elements based on orality (probably the major component), samizdat and other sources, although these latter sources, including samizdat, apparently only made an appearance towards the latter part of the socialist era. While several Mongols mentioned to me the presence of samizdat under late socialism, several others commented that what little samizdat existed was usually in Russian, which would have served to somewhat limit its reach. Mongolian-language samizdat does not seem to have made an appearance until at least the mid-1980s.

Other forms of non-official history did exist, and were also used in an oppositional manner. Dorj, a government official in his thirties, told me he remembered a history textbook his family had when he was younger. The government had banned it and confiscated all the copies they could find, but his family managed to hide one, which then served as a locus of opposition. (Although he did not remember the name, I now would guess that the book was the famous Ardyn Unshib Bichig, mentioned earlier.) The same man also remembered his older brother coming home and reciting a poem about Chinggis that he had heard, which served not only as a historical source but also as a criticism of the regime. He, like many other intellectuals, mentioned the “preservation” of truth against the official falsehoods throughout the socialist period.
It is important to note that the intellectuals among whom such knowledge circulated are the same ones who wrote (and read) the official histories. As a result, the “underground” history drew influence from, and in turn itself influenced, the official writing of history, albeit more subtly. This occurred in two interrelated ways. First, we can discern a dialog that must, of necessity, have taken place between the two views. Secondly, given the institutional nature of the socialist view, it would have acted upon the non-official view in keeping with existing power relations.

Writing on Soviet historical paradigms, Katerina Clark notes that most often, an overarching paradigm served as an umbrella for historical dialog: “This master model [of periodization], then, serves as a dominant in political and intellectual discourse for a given period; both official spokesmen and more dissident figures tend to articulate their sense of the present in terms of it” (1993: 289, emphasis in original). Clark argues that this discourse was not set by the government, but rather shaped their perceptions as well.

A similar pattern can be seen in the case of Mongolia. There were, however, important differences from the Soviet model. In the Mongolian case, the socialist view served as the overarching paradigm (or had a greater influence on the master model than in Russia). This was the result of the lack of a strong critical historiographical tradition. Socialist history was not mainly opposed to non-Marxist critical styles of writing and thinking about history, as in the Soviet Union, but was opposed to a largely religious-based historiography. Socialist history was arguing, if not always explicitly, against other, competing interpretations, but not a unified school of scholarship. It was arguing against religious and popular presentations of history. The people writing history, who would have heard from their own parents and grandparents different stories, would have been well aware of this. Thus, Chinggis is made into a stop on the socialist path of development, but is not totally ignored. Zanabazar, a key figure in Buddhism, becomes known for surrendering to the Manchus in 1691. In other words, when the socialists got around to writing history, they drew upon the previous constructions of history, modifying interpretations, but for the most part not denying history outright.

If unofficial history influenced official history, unofficial history in turn borrowed from the socialist view of things. In the flurry of newspaper articles surrounding the 100th anniversary of his birth in 1993, Sühbaatar, the ur-hero of the socialist revolution, is re-evaluated but comes out relatively unscathed. This strongly suggests that either the socialist view of history was largely accepted in this instance (a debatable point) or that private views of Sühbaatar never deviated strongly from the official line. The latter appears more likely.

In addition, the current emphasis on Chinggis as a national hero owes its basic structure to the socialist period. Although he was worshipped
prior to the socialist period, I was repeatedly told that it was done in a mostly quiet, reverential manner. Nor was the worship universal, being scattered not only among families but among regions as well. It was less common in many parts of Halh Mongolia than elsewhere (such as Inner Mongolia). Furthermore, worship and the rituals that accompany it are opposed to historicity. In treating an object or person as something or someone to be venerated, they are largely removed from historical time and consideration.

It is not clear that Chinggis Khan served as a rallying point (other than as semi-mythical ancestor) for any sort of nationalist identity prior to the socialist period. Rather, this contemporary, ostentatious use of Chinggis is both a reaction to and a result of the socialist treatment of him. Similarly, Bulag points up the absence of a tradition of using Chinggis’s image in politics during the Bogd Khan period, immediately preceding the advent of socialism (Bulag 1998: 221).

On a more basic level, we can see the power relations between the two types of history as mutually influencing each other. The socialist view of things was, of course, in time, institutionalized. We can thus draw loose parallels between it and the Foucauldian Panopticon, which controls by being omnipresent, or, more precisely, by the threat of omnipresence (Foucault 1979). While in his work on the “arts of resistance,” James Scott (1990) argues for a “backstage” relatively unaffected by the dominant discourse, where the dominated can be, more or less, themselves, I am unconvinced on the applicability of this to a socialist society (see also Gal 1995). In urban settings, such as we are concerned with here, the socialist system was almost omnipresent, much like the Panoptic gaze. This omnipresence sharply delimited the potential for the full development of an autonomous unofficial history, forcing it into the concealed openness of ambiguity and double readings of history texts.

The greater Sino-Soviet context in which Mongolia has found itself cannot be ignored, for it clearly had an impact on the course of Mongolian historiography. Much of Mongolia’s recent history has been played out with this additional element ever-present, and this has affected the way history has been portrayed. When the Soviet Union had cordial relations with the People’s Republic of China, so did Mongolia. When the Soviet Union’s relations soured in the 1960s, Mongolia also became more hostile towards China. Two Mongolian historians, L. Jamsran and G. Sühbaatar, were criticized and exiled in 1980 for their research on the Hunnu, based in part on their use of Chinese sources (Dashpürev and Soni 1992: 72).

With the cooling off of the Sino-Soviet relationship in the 1960s, Chinggis Khan was to become a *persona non grata* in Mongolian history, illustrating for us some of the shifts that occurred within socialist histori-
ography itself. One noted historian told me in 1993 that the Russians “accused” Chinggis Khaan in order to suppress the national consciousness of the Mongols in Russia and that they were afraid of restoring the unity of the many Mongols in the world. The Chinese, in contrast, praise Chinggis because they want to oppose the Russians and win the spirit of all the Mongols. “In this way,” he commented, “the problem of Chinggis Khaan is not a scientific matter. They are making it not only scientific, but also political.”

The events surrounding the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan’s birth in 1962 show this clearly. Indicating the importance of geopolitics to such a commemoration, J. Boldbaatar writes:

The actual celebration, however, clearly depended on prior approval from the Soviet Union and, to a lesser degree, the agreement of the People’s Republic of China. This was because both countries had formerly been invaded and dominated during the thirteenth century by the Mongols under Chinggis Khan; in Russian history this period was often referred to as the “Mongol yoke,” while in China it was called the Yuan dynasty.

(1999: 239)

The Soviet Union originally came out against the celebration, but changed its position when the Chinese government announced their intentions to commemorate it. As rivals, the Soviet Union feared China winning the sympathies and support of the Mongols. They did not want China to be seen as gaining the upper hand.

An article by a leading historian, Natsagdorj, was published in Ünen on 31 May, Chinggis’s alleged birthday (see Natsagdorj 1962). A scholarly conference was held (see Boldbaatar 1999: 242 for a summary of some of the papers) and a monument was erected at his purported birthplace. The nationalist tones of the conference and other events (Chinggis stamps had been printed, for example) raised fears of a crackdown, which followed in due course. Boldbaatar attributes the decision to clamp down on the nascent nationalism to the MAHN Politburo, although Hyer (1966) sees it as coming from the Soviet Union. In either case, D. Tömör-Ochir, a secretary of the Central Committee, was purged in September, taking the blame for the nationalist movement.

The discussion of the subject is fairly extensive, taking up over three-quarters of a broadsheet newspaper page in one particular October issue. In it, Tömör-Ochir was accused of a number of things, including various anti-Party activities. The section dealing with Chinggis Khaan is worth quoting at some length for the insight it offers into the official attitude towards Chinggis.
D. Tömör-Ochir, supporting the nationalist aspiration of excessively praising Chinggis Khaan’s role in history and concealing his reactionary role, was seeking to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan’s birth in a very grand manner.

It is known that at the time when the new Mongolian state was created Chinggis Khaan was responsible for the unification and development of the fragmented Mongolian tribes. But all his works and deeds after this, when foreign countries were occupied, the people of the enslaved lands were slaughtered en masse, their people’s material goods and cultural treasures were destroyed, were especially reactionary.

Chinggis Khaan’s campaign of plunder caused Mongolia’s productive forces to enter into a profound decline, and caused the Mongolian people boundless suffering and sorrow. Thus, to deny the reactionary qualities of Chinggis Khaan’s deeds or to gloss over these characteristics is to deviate from fundamental Party policy, and indeed is to encourage nationalism.

(Ünen 1962a)

The judgment against Tömör-Ochir was severe, with condemnations running in Ünen for days on end. Numerous individuals and organizations wrote in, unanimously supporting the actions the Party had taken against him.

Natsagdorj, the famous historian who had authored a newspaper article on Chinggis (see above), and who told me (in 1993) that he considers his 1991 Chingis Khaany Tsadig (The Biography of Chinggis Khaan) to be the main work of his life, reflecting the importance he accorded Chinggis Khaan, contributed to an Academy of Sciences resolution criticizing Tömör-Ochir for his nationalist leanings and Natsagdorj himself and other historians for following him (see Ünen 1962b).

A 1983 account of the same Central Committee resolution offers some interesting insights into the issue as well as into evocative transcripts. It also reflects the tightening of control over interpretations of history that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. In discussing Tömör-Ochir’s “anti-party activities” (namyn esreg üildsen ajil), the account does not mention Chinggis Khaan at all (Bat-Ochir 1983: 120–122). While this could be taken as an indication that the fervor over the issue had died down, it seems more likely that this is evidence that MAHN recognized the power of such transcripts. Any publication of the section of the resolution covering Chinggis Khaan would have provided a hook on which to hang alternative interpretations of both the events and Tömör-Ochir himself.

In other words, in a realm in which evocative transcripts are commonplace, the only way to ensure that they cannot be used is to ban discussion of the issue in question completely. Including a mention of Chinggis Khaan in the resolution would have given it a hook that would have invited alternative interpretations.
cial accounts both of what had happened in 1962 and of Chinggis Khaan himself.

Milan Kundera tells the story, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, of a man, fallen out of favor, who was airbrushed out of a photo, leaving only his hat, which he had given to the party leader, in future versions of the picture. The man himself, at least in the context of the photo, had ceased to exist. This raises the question of why such a tactic – total silence – was not practiced more often. The answer, I believe, is because the tactic’s strength – denial – is also its weakness, and in many ways the weakness outweighs the strength. As was discussed in Chapter 2, social networks are of great importance in Mongolia. This applies to historical knowledge as well. It may have been possible to gloss over or simply ignore a certain aspect of the criticism against Tömör-Ochir, although many people would have known what actually had been said. It would have been much less plausible to deny that Tömör-Ochir had been repressed, or that it had been for “anti-party activities,” given that he was still alive (he would be mysteriously killed in 1985, a murder often attributed to the security apparatus) and that many people would have known at least the general outlines of what had transpired in 1962, even if it was not openly talked about.

The post-socialist period

With the democratic revolution in 1989–90, the emphasis on the different histories began to shift substantially. This has already been touched on in preceding chapters, and will be taken up in more depth in the next two chapters, but I wish to sketch out a rough outline in a few sentences here. A re-examination of the socialist approach to history (among other things) was instituted at the 19th Party Congress in 1986, but remained largely a critique from within. It was not without effect, as what had previously been the unofficial history began to surface, in both popular and academic writings. This was almost invariably presented as “telling the truth” about history. While people may have claimed, and even thought, that they were abandoning the socialist rhetoric, and with it socialist influence, the matter wasn’t so straightforward.

Historians in the post-socialist period are explicit in their recognition of the dogmatic influences of Marxism and MAHN on history-writing under socialism. They are also aware of the need or desire to learn new research methods. (See, for example, Boldbaatar et al. 1999: 15–19.) This recognition of issues of methodology does not, however, translate directly into thinking about historical figures. A person’s interpretations of historical events or figures are not determined simply by his or her methodology. Despite this portrayal of post-socialist history as a moving away from dogmatic Marxist history, which it indeed was, many similarities and influences in understandings of history survived the transition.
Many of the books published in the early 1990s on historical topics—particularly those that covered Chinggis Khaan—took inspiration from a variety of genres. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, Chinggis was regularly portrayed in Buddhist terms, recalling the pre-socialist conceptions of him. Yet this view of Chinggis also drew upon the socialist teachings, to give him a more explicitly political image than had been the case before. Thus, for example, his unification of the Mongols continued to be seen in a more explicitly political as well as national or ethnic light than had been the case previously.23

As this re-evaluation was (and to an extent still is) taking place, there was also a new interest in, spurred by a new availability of, sources written by foreigners. A translation of Saunders’ *The History of the Mongol Conquests* (1971) was announced during my fieldwork in 1993, one of the first such works to be translated. The one book I was able to find on Khubilai Khaan in 1993 was a translation from the Japanese. Lattimore’s *Nomads and Commissars* (1962) was available in translation in 1997.24 The translation of Western sources on Mongolia (and other topics) continued throughout the 1990s, with an increasing number of works becoming available. The mere availability of such sources should not be taken to reflect a change in perceptions or attitudes. The use of sources and their interpretation are not the same thing. This is particularly so in the case of early Mongolian history, where many of the sources were available in the socialist era. (*The Secret History*, for example, might have been taught as literature rather than history, but it would still have been taught.)

In this context, the greatest change for which the post-socialist period has been responsible has occurred not in historiography *per se*, but in those whom it has reached. Many of the elite received their primary and secondary education in Russian schools, and went to university abroad. Many of these people received little education in Mongolian history. An hour or so a week of Mongolian history during one year of a ten-year education was the norm for most people I talked to who had been educated in such a manner. For those who were not historians, history was often new. This was not the result of radically new facts coming to light, or the total suppression of knowledge about Chinggis Khaan under socialism. More simply, it was the result of their education. This should not be taken to undermine my larger point about perceptions and interpretations of history. What history they did learn fell into the patterns discussed here. What it does speak to is the relative importance of history in socialist and post-socialist Mongolia. People who were not concerned with their lack of historical knowledge suddenly made an effort to read, think and talk about it. History mattered more than ever, and in seeking to understand it, these same people turned not only to newly open sources and opinions, but to a long tradition of thinking about history in Mongolia. With this in mind, I take up a more detailed examination of Chinggis Khaan in the following chapter.
With the demonstrations of 1989–90 and the changes they brought about, it appeared as if whole blocks of Mongolian history had emerged from the River Lethe of Marxism-Leninism. What had only been talked about in the privacy of homes, if at all, again became part of the public discourse. Chinggis Khaan in particular, it seemed, was suddenly everywhere, and was to be found in books, statues, names of products and organizations, and plans, sensible and otherwise. As one recent book on Chinggis Khaan has put it:

In the 1990s, at the time when the winds of Mongolian democracy blew and everyone was freed from all the old hobbles of class, party and ideology and were free to create, writings by Mongolians about Chinggis Khaan began to flourish. For example: When Sh. Natsagdorj [the famous historian] had become an old man [öndör nastan] and was unwell, in order to tell the true history of Chinggis Khaan to future generations, in 1990 he had his own work, “Chingis Khaany tsadig” published.

(Tserenbaltav and Minjin 2002: 35)

In a process that began in the late 1980s, and continues today, much of Mongolian history underwent a re-evaluation of the official socialist views that had prevailed for decades. Although couched in terms of the “truth” about history coming to light, these re-evaluations are about much more than getting history “right.” Rather, they are about asserting a particular version of identity, a particular idea of what it means to be a Mongolian. But, as we have seen, these ideas did not appear de novo. Versions of them were extant under socialism, and were influenced by and in turn influenced official socialist historiography. The changes, furthermore, were often not as radical as they were presented as being.

This interest in history, especially in the early 1990s, spilled over from the academic into the larger public sphere. Non-socialist, historically linked names and images were to be found in commerce and elsewhere.
Books and newspaper articles on history were relatively common throughout the 1990s as were various forms of alcohol with historically linked names. This interest was not limited only to historians. “Our young historians, scholars, and lawyers have written a large number of books about Chinggis” (Tserenbaltav and Minjin 2002: 36). In the newfound freedom to publish, anyone who had anything to say about Chinggis and the money to get it published had their say.

The interest in history has understandably abated since the first days of the democratic revolution. People quickly understood that history alone would not feed them, nor provide fuel for the power plants. The interest in the past also turned in the later part of the 1990s to a more focused examination of less comfortable aspects of the socialist period. In particular, although the political purges of the 1930s were talked about in the early 1990s, it was only later that the gaze became steadier. This does not mean that people have forgotten about Chinggis Khaan. Rather, having examined him thoroughly immediately after the democratic revolution, people now take him more for granted than they did before. The novelty may have worn off, but not the importance. Chinggis has become commonplace, and thus not as explicitly thought about. This is only because he is now publicly as well as privately accepted as a (positive) key historical figure. There is little need to debate the importance of a figure that everyone agrees is important.

In this chapter and the next, I examine three figures in Mongolian history, two of whom are drawn from the pre-socialist period. Their public personas have undergone varying degrees of change with the fall of socialism. Both the changes that have occurred and some that have not reveal not only something about the Mongols’ attitudes towards their past but also speak to larger issues of identity and nationalism. Irrespective of the degree of change, the shifts the public images of these figures have gone through do not necessarily correspond to a shift of the total stock of historical knowledge. Rather, they represent the transformation of evocative transcripts into more open forms of history.

As we shall see in the course of this chapter, the changes in portrayals of historical figures usually have some basis in the socialist world-view. That is, rather than being the sudden emergence of new knowledge, or a new way of viewing things, the post-socialist view of history is largely based upon pre-existing, if not officially sanctioned, elements. During the socialist period, these elements served to provide a locus for constructing competing versions of Mongolness. It is this aspect, rather than any “truth” value in an objective sense, that accounts for their persistence.

These chapters do not pretend that the analysis offered here is the final, definitive view of Mongolian history in a democratic paradigm, even if such a thing were possible. As Mongolian democracy develops further, understandings of history can also be expected to change. Even in the rela-
tively brief period between the democratic revolution and 1993, the strong, openly nationalist fervor reported by Campi (1991) died down. It was this visibly nationalist aspect that drove many of the early reinterpretations of history. It is not the case that nationalism is no longer extant in Mongolia. Rather, it has acquired a more subdued, reflexive nature and is largely concerned with revising Mongol identity. “A nation, or so nationalists believe, must have a past” (Chatterjee 1993: 73). Mongols are not involved in the search for a past; they have always had one, even under socialism. Rather, they are engaged in the construction – or as they would more likely phrase it, a reclamation – of a past that largely obliterates seventy years of socialist rule and firmly establishes the Mongolian nation as one noticeably distinct from both the Russians and the Chinese.

The concept of Mongol identity itself is more of an issue than it may seem at first glance. The allegiance of contemporary Mongols to the modern Mongolian state is the embodiment of Anderson’s (1992) imagined community par excellence (see also Kaplonski 1998). The modern state has no one-to-one correlation with historical or ethnic communities further back than the mid-eighteenth century, although this point is often overlooked by both Mongols and Western scholars. As a political entity, Mongolia encompasses a number of ethnic groups (the 2000 census lists over twenty-five Mongol and related ethnic groups (National Statistical Office 2001: 132)), but also excludes a considerable number of ethnic Mongols living in adjacent regions of China and Russia – a larger number, in fact, than it includes. Clearly, then, it would be fallacious to fall back on a purely ethnic basis for Mongol identity. As currently conceived, Mongol identity is focused on Halh Mongolia, although the strict correspondence between geographical area and ethnic group is not always emphasized. That is, Mongolian identity assumes Halh ethnicity, which encompasses over 80 per cent of the population, as a baseline, much as American identity has long been predicated on the assumption of “white male.” The images of the historical figures we shall examine, I argue, reflect these concerns and emphases, often eliding differences in seeking to construct a Mongol identity. (For one look at “Halhification” more generally, see Bulag (1998: 34–37).)

Chinggis Khaan in this chapter, like Zanabazar and Sühbaatar in the next, is a figure that serves as an anchor point in the periodization of Mongolian historical understanding, both before and after the democratic revolution. As such, they serve best to illustrate the changes that have taken place in both historiography and thinking about identity. The majority of the examples we will examine here are drawn from the early 1990s, as this was the period of the most change and the most explicit rethinking of the topics that interest us. Simply put, it was a dynamic and exciting time to be thinking about identity and history. Nonetheless, I will draw upon examples from other periods now and again to illustrate how these topics have developed over time.
Heroes, exemplars and the *uls*

Mongols divide their history into a number of distinct periods, each of which is usually characterized by a single individual (or, at times, event), who often also serves as a boundary marker, initiating a new era in history. These figures are important not only for their historical deeds, but also as exemplars who give a moral overtone to history.

Caroline Humphrey has suggested that Mongols employ an “exemplar-focused way of thinking about morality” (1997: 26). Morality, in other words, is constituted to a greater degree at the level of the individual than it is in Europe or America, where morality is more often viewed in terms of “a morally ordered universe” (1997: 32). People construct concepts and practices of what is moral through relationships with individuals, historic or living. Moreover, Humphrey continues, “in Mongolia, unlike in Europe, in practice almost no space is given to general ethical precepts as emanations of God or society. Rather, such precepts tend to be authored, and they then appear in relationships as tied to the personalities of both the mentor and the follower” (1997: 33). Morality becomes relational, whether between an actually existing teacher or elder and a student, or between an individual and a figure from history. The relations also vary between individuals: “In Mongolia exemplars are not the same for everyone, but chosen by subjects in their own particular circumstances” (1997: 35).

There are certain similarities between the Mongolian concept of exemplars and the Catholic veneration of saints, although there are important differences as well. Catholic saints also function as exemplars. They, however, exist in a formalized hierarchy, and their inspiration is intended to be the same to all who venerate them. There is room for individual interpretation, but boundaries exist. In the Mongolian case, there are practical limits on choices of exemplars – one would probably not choose Chinggis Khaan as an exemplar in the field of medicine – but who can be an exemplar and the specific relationship between the exemplar and the individual is, in theory, limitless. In other words, while in the case of Catholic saints the focus is on the saint as exemplar, in the Mongol case the focus is on the *relationship* between the individual and the exemplars he or she chooses.

People look to the past, in the case that interests us the most here, and choose figures from whom they can draw inspiration. These historical figures also are often those that serve as markers for the periodization of history. The clearest case, as we shall see, is that of Chinggis Khaan. Zanabazar and Sühbaatar also fulfill the same role to lesser extents and it is obvious that Sühbaatar was intended to do so during the socialist period.

In the atmosphere of unrest and uncertainty of the early 1990s, we find an attempt to broaden and generalize the exemplar model. The original...
model relies upon people choosing personal exemplars for different situations and “the Mongolians’ construction of morality places greater weight on the ‘practices of self’ than on the issues raised by following rules” (Humphrey 1997: 43). Now, however, Chinggis Khaan and others are presented as generalized exemplars. They are still exemplars, but now they are exemplars who themselves are suggesting or offering broader rules to follow. The self-oriented morality has become fused with the concerns of law and order, and hence rules.

The periodization of history extends back at least as far as the socialist period, where similar characteristics are noted and assigned to figures. The particular periodization itself appears to be a product of socialism, the result of stage-based historiography. The periods can also be seen as reflecting naturalized divisions, based as they tend to be around events related to Mongolian independence, or its loss.

In the cases considered here, Chinggis Khaan characterizes the Mongol Empire, while also being the founder. Although the Empire did not reach its greatest extent under Chinggis, but rather under his son Ögedei, this accomplishment is often attributed implicitly to Chinggis himself. Zanabazar, discussed in the following chapter, is linked to the loss of independence to the Manchus in 1691, yet managed to survive as an exemplar in other areas. The start of the revolutionary period and socialism, of course, are demarcated by Sühbaatar.

The key point from this perspective is that all three figures are linked in some way to the creation (or reassertion) of the Mongolian state or realm (uls). That is, their importance is tied to the fact that they are linked to the congruence between political autonomy (or loss of it in the case of Zanabazar) and the uls. Their images in the post-socialist context are all tied to the assertion of Mongolian independence, as they were under socialism as well. This also renders them particularly apt exemplars in the post-socialist era, when the preservation of Mongolian independence and identity in the face of influence from Russia and China are ongoing concerns to many.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, the Mongolian homeland is perceived as central to identity, both as an abstract rallying point and as a specific geographical locus, the mutag, or birthplace, writ large. The link is similar to one Hobsbawm notes for Russia, where

>The empire of the Tsars, the political unit, was Rossiya, a neologism of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries which became official from Peter the Great on. The holy land of Russia was always the ancient Rus. To be Russian is still to this day to be Russky.

(Hobsbawm 1990: 50)
Hobsbawm’s point is that the operative link was to the land, not the political abstraction or the state. Hobsbawm further points out that in the eighteenth century, attempts to link identity to the political concept failed (1990: 50). A similar point can be made for Mongolia, and indeed, at times the link to the land is seen as almost tangible. Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn has written tellingly of the links seen by certain Mongols (in particular, the Buriats) between the people, the land and ancestral spirits (Buyandelgeriyn 2004). She observes that “Possessing the landscape with one’s ancestral spirits was a persuasive form of claiming the land and keeping outsiders at bay” (Buyandelgeriyn 2004: 5). In other words, moving away from one’s birthplace did not imply an abandonment of it. It was, in fact, highly dangerous to forget one’s birthplace and the ancestral spirits who inhabited it.

Other Mongols, such as the predominant Halh, do not necessarily make the link to the \textit{nutag} in such a direct manner, but the attachment remains. Although not always vocalized as such by the Mongols themselves, the local concept of \textit{nutag} has come to be applied to the larger, political \textit{uls}. To a degree, it is not the political unit in and of itself that matters, but rather the abstraction of the physical land now enclosed by the modern political borders. This was not the view advocated by the socialist government, which was interested in the political unit. Yet to the extent that the two views overlapped, they were mutually reinforcing.

The socialist government employed history to encourage fealty to itself. But in doing so it also created a space in which figures associated with independence could be variously interpreted. While at times these views partially overlapped, as in the case of Chinggis Khaan, at others they diverged considerably. In either case, multiple views existed simultaneously within the same text, creating the textual equivalent of Gramsci’s contradictory consciousness (1971: 333). This, however, was also an inversion of Gramsci’s idea. Rather than the contradictions resulting in “a condition of moral and political passivity” (Gramsci 1971: 333), the competing views made possible and even encouraged a form of political and moral action. It was the very discussion of people and ideas that made it possible to contest them. If Chinggis Khaan had truly never been talked about during the socialist period, as people claimed, it would have been much harder to transmit any conceptions of him, as opportunities to do so would have been much more restricted.

Such opportunities for contestation were at times explicitly recognized. O. Dashbalbar, the poet and nationalist politician, once told me in an interview that people knew how to read between the lines of socialist texts. So, for example, he said, a socialist book might quote from Buddhist texts to show how evil Buddhism was. One could simply read the Buddhist parts, ignore the sections that were critical of Buddhism and thus counter the state’s propaganda by reference to their own texts.
With such possibilities in mind, let us turn to the first of the three figures we will examine: Chinggis Khaan, founder of the Mongol Empire.

Chinggis Khaan

There can be no doubt that Chinggis Khaan (1162–1227) plays a lead role in contemporary Mongolian historical consciousness. In a survey I conducted in 1993, he was by far and away the most often mentioned person, mentioned by slightly more than nine out of ten people. The creation of the unified Mongolian state in 1206, cited as his main achievement, was also frequently referred to, being mentioned by over 80 per cent of the respondents. By 1997, in a follow-up survey, his overwhelming dominance had dropped (being named by only half of the respondents), but this does not necessarily mean he was less important. Rather, this is an indication of the taken-for-grantedness that Chinggis Khaan and the implications he carries for Mongolian identity have assumed. It is important to realize that these numbers by no means imply a monolithic view of Chinggis or his accomplishments. Like any symbol in any culture, he remains open to multiple interpretations, as he was under socialism.

“Chinggis Khan – the man who for over 50 years was banished from Mongolia’s consciousness and history books by Mongol leaders toddying [sic] up to their Soviet allies who loathed the memory of 300 years of Mongol fierce subjugation!” (Campi 1991: 10). So runs one view of Chinggis Khaan. Although popular in the West and in Mongolia itself, such characterizations do not stand up to closer scrutiny. He was indeed written about during the socialist period, and, furthermore, the manner in which he was written about allowed for positive, as well as negative, assessments.

This is not an unequivocal claim. Some people claimed not to have been taught about Chinggis Khaan in school, but most had been. About one-fifth of the people surveyed in 1993 reported not learning about him in a formal context, yet most of them still knew who he was. Out of fifty-seven respondents, only two replied “Don’t know” when asked who Chinggis Khaan was (one was a 17-year-old female worker, the other a 28-year-old one).

Others who said they were not taught about him in school still had access to and made use of other resources. “In order not to be ignorant about him, and have wider knowledge about him, I went to the sum library and read books,” wrote one teacher who had grown up in Zavhan aimag in northwestern Mongolia. In addition, many had read the Secret History, albeit usually in literature class, and not explicitly as history. The place where one reads a historical epic does not limit the conclusions one may draw from it. Family and friends also served as sources of information, at times conflicting with the official accounts, which came out the poorer for the meeting.
Those who said they had been taught formally about Chinggis recalled learning that he was a cruel or reactionary tyrant, but, significantly, they also credited him with creating the first unified Mongolian state (*uls*). This corresponds with the view we have already noted in socialist texts (see Chapter 4). People also differed as to their understanding of his officially assigned role prior to the democratic revolution. While most said he was vilified, some said he was accorded a position of importance. Although these two evaluations are not logically mutually exclusive, in the responses to questions they were. This, I would suggest, indicates the blending of public and private views of Chinggis, and the reading of the latter into the former, although the public image was also amenable to such a reading. In fact, it was this amenability that to a significant degree allowed there to be a private view. The fact that he had created the first Mongolian state was not contested by the socialists. In making such an admission they offered, however unwittingly, a base from which to construct understandings of Chinggis Khaan at odds with the official reading. In other words, in the conflicting reports of how Chinggis was viewed under socialism, we are seeing the effects of the evocative transcript. They enabled conflicting interpretations, but when people were queried on them, they were in effect forced to choose one or the other.

While it might seem immediately obvious to the casual observer that Chinggis Khaan should serve as a focal point for Mongolian national sentiment or identity, we should be wary of drawing such a conclusion too quickly. If indeed he had been “banished from Mongolia’s consciousness,” there would not be any reason to expect that his image would play such an important role. Rather, he should appear as a novelty, and the symbolic capital being invested in him would be somewhat anomalous. The entire edifice would have to be built from scratch. Among the intellectuals with whom I worked, this was clearly not the case. Many people, or so they say, saw through the socialist ideology, and not only knew about Chinggis, but praised him as well.4

A former MSDN candidate for the Ih Hural whom I talked to in 1994 summed up what seemed to be a common sentiment: “My own personal opinion is that every single Mongol, even before 1989, was proud of Chinggis Khaan inside of themselves, and people were admiring him. However, the ideology of the Communist party did not allow them to express it freely.”5 “Our *Ezen*. Mongolia’s pride,” added the lead singer of one of the popular new rock bands of the early 1990s, who often included in their repertoire songs about Mongolia, Chinggis Khaan and history. Such sentiment, also including a realization of the multi-vocality of the image of Chinggis Khaan, was expressed by many others as well. Chuluunbaatar, the government official, noted “I think that [every] Mongol has got ... his or her own view of Chinggis Khaan ... So, some people go deeper, understand him deeper. Some people understand him
also in a sense, with a sort of superficial understanding, but I think many people have a love of Chinggis Khaan.”

In response to this assessment, some people warned against taking an overly positive view of Chinggis Khaan. Such warnings indicate both the richness of interpretation that surrounds Chinggis Khaan and the uncertainty over the past that lingers on in the post-socialist context. One elderly academician told me:

Chinggis was not our first khaan. Chinggis didn’t create our first government [tör]. More than a thousand years before Chinggis, there was the first Mongolian state, called the Hunnu uls. Before Chinggis there was our Mongolian state, and Khaan.

For him, the emphasis on Chinggis as the first khaan of Mongolia was some sort of Chinese policy, which was never made clear, to divorce Mongolia from its long and glorious history. Others warned of an over-enthusiasm for Chinggis, which they saw as having the potential to do just as much damage as the socialist disparagement. Yet these were minority views.

Although the most prominent historical figure, Chinggis Khaan was not for many Mongols, except perhaps in a superficial manner, a part of daily life. Most people, even when I had explained my research and interests, did not mention Chinggis by name unless I had done so first.

This was even more so by the time I returned to Ulaanbaatar in 1997. There were still books about Chinggis Khaan, but these were by and large the same works that had been available a few years previous. I was able to find a few new works about Chinggis or his period, but on the whole he had become relatively taken for granted, and hence it was no longer necessary to write about him so much. This changed again in 2000–02, as Mongolia began gearing up for the celebration of Chinggis Khaan’s 840th birthday, and new books again appeared, but even this did not match the displays of the early 1990s.

In various spheres, Chinggis Khaan has become a part of everyday life. His bust now graces the interior of the Government Palace, and the entrance hallway of the Foreign Ministry is dominated by a large mosaic of him. Children are taught songs about him, rather than Lenin or Sükhbaatar, in kindergarten. Yet he is not as much a topic of conversation as he was in the early 1990s. The few people who made conscious explicit references to Chinggis in the political sphere seemed to be the “retrograde nationalists.” (This term was used by one member of the Ih Hural, after she claimed that most Mongols were nationalists. She used the term to categorize the more radical nationalists, such as O. Dashbalbar, to whom we return to below.)

A syllabus from 1995 illustrates this new status of Chinggis Khaan. The Lesson Plan for Learning about History, Customs, Rights, and Society in
General Education Schools (4th–10th Classes), to give it its full title, includes numerous references to Chinggis Khaan. What is interesting about these passages, in addition to the simple fact of their existence, is the manner in which Chinggis is mentioned. Thus, as would be expected, there is a section for “the appraisal of Chinggis Khaan’s historical role” (Pürev 1995: 40) under the “History of Mongolia” section. This is not surprising, or even new. What is new are the other areas and contexts in which he now appears. He appears under the section on “Knowledge of the historical culture of the motherland” (Pürev 1995: 10) – still not very surprising – but he reappears in the section on customs and morals. Here he appears in a list of famous thinkers that include “Buddha, Aristotle, Öelun [Chinggis’s mother] and Chinggis” (Pürev 1995: 16). He reappears in a list of the greats of the culture and civilization of the Middle Ages: “Charlemagne, Chinggis, Philippe IV, Yaroslav the Wise [Prince of Kiev], Karl the Fifth [of Germany], Jan Hus [a Catholic Czech reformer], Babar [founder of the Moghul Empire], etc.” (Pürev 1995: 33).

The meaning of these entries is clear. Chinggis need not be discussed in everyday life simply because he has finally been granted the recognition due to him as one of the great leaders and thinkers of the world. Just as Americans tend not to discuss the founding fathers on a daily basis, nor Russians Peter the Great, Mongols no longer need to do so with Chinggis Khaan. This is not because he has become unimportant, but rather because he has openly assumed the position many Mongols claim to have always accorded him. He is in his rightful place, and the education campaign that helped put him there is winding down.

In order to examine this centrality (explicit or otherwise) of Chinggis Khaan in contemporary Mongolia more fully, it is necessary to review the presentation of Chinggis under late socialism. The main point is that Chinggis Khaan was indeed written about under socialism. Furthermore, the manner in which this was done was amenable to multiple interpretations. I will restrict my discussion here largely to late socialism (the 1970s on), when the official view of Chinggis Khaan had largely stabilized.

“Cruel” or “reactionary” (hargis) is the one word that appeared most often when people recounted learning about Chinggis. This was followed closely by “conqueror,” with the two often appearing as a set phrase. And this is exactly what a surface reading of the socialist period texts would uncover. A textbook for the eighth class (equivalent to a high-school text) notes that despite his uniting of the Mongols and other accomplishments, Chinggis Khaan, because of his cruelty and destruction, in the final analysis should be seen as “completely tyrannical/reactionary” (büheldee hargis) (Bira and Bat-Ochir 1987: 65). Yet this is not what people tended to focus on. Rather, they were interested in other aspects of him, namely his role in creating the state, and bringing law and order to Mongolia.
In addition, similar to the case in the West, socialist texts often covered Chinggis’s military exploits, a point usually glossed over in Mongolian publications after 1989 (but see Jügder 1990), and not usually highlighted by most Mongols. The surface reading thus leaves us with the image of a blood-thirsty conqueror who rampaged across the world – just what the socialists claimed to think of him. Yet, as was also noted in Chapter 5, Chinggis is given credit for advancing the socio-economic development of the Mongols. This point must be emphasized. Chinggis – despite what some Mongols may now claim in their attempts to rewrite the history of socialism – was recognized to have certain positive accomplishments to his credit under socialism, even if such recognition was given grudgingly. It may have taken a bit of work to recover this reading, but it is clear that it was indeed recovered.

It should be noted here that attributing such positive attributes to an otherwise unredeemed enemy of the masses is not unprecedented in Soviet-influenced history-writing. Under Stalin, Ivan IV (the Terrible) was seen as contributing to the socio-economic development of Russia by eliminating the boyars (a class of nobles). It was noted that during an interview once,

Stalin remarked that Ivan IV was a great and wise ruler, who protected the country from the penetration of foreign influence and sought to unite Russia ... One of his mistakes was that he did not manage to eliminate the five remaining great feudal families ...

(Cherkasov, quoted in Davies 1989: 20)

Stalin, of course, drew obvious parallels between Ivan the Terrible and himself as central authority figures who advanced the interests of the state. Similarly, MAHN was engaged in a project of centralizing power and creating allegiance to the state, much as Chinggis Khaan could be portrayed as doing.

In the post-socialist period, there are three main aspects of writing and thinking about Chinggis that interest us. The first is concerned with the writing and reading of history qua history. Chinggis is only one part of this general concern. This trend deals mainly with the dissemination of information (“the truth”) about Chinggis Khaan and his time. In terms of actual publications, there is a great deal of overlap, especially in the popular ones, due to the paucity of sources of information about Chinggis. Standard tales exist in several versions, as do biographies etc., gleaned from the pages of the Secret History, Altan Tovch and later Mongolian sources, as well as the more contemporary Persian ones.

This interest in “the truth” is largely a reaction to the socialist period. The truth being told, however, is a particular one. It is a truth dedicated to ferreting out the misinformation of the socialist period and to constructing a past where the socialist period is often replaced by a historiographical
“white noise,” although this became less the case as the 1990s progressed. To be a traditional Mongol for most people is to be anything other than socialist. It is with establishing this “truth” that people are concerned. As we shall see in reactions to a film on Chinggis Khaan, history is fine and “accurate” as long as it agrees with people’s expectations. When it doesn’t, it is usually history that gives way. History has become subservient to heritage (see Lowenthal 1997), although the distinction is not often recognized.

By the late 1990s, this interest had taken a new and interesting twist – history for the tourists. Several books relating to Chinggis Khaan were now available in English. One is simply entitled *Chinggis Khaan* (Bold and Ayush, n.d.). This is a lavishly produced and illustrated work on and inspired by Chinggis Khaan. With parallel texts in Mongolian and English, it offers photos and paintings of places associated with Chinggis Khaan and inspired by him. The work offers a short preface by S. Badamhatan, a famous ethnologist, which sums up how Chinggis should be understood by foreigners. He writes:

> Temüjin – Chinggis Khaan is seen and referred to by the Mongols as The Supreme Lord, as the greatest of Mongols whose deeds played a major role in cementing the Mongol nation and ensuring its survival throughout the ages.
>
> I have no doubt that this album will contribute to the resurge [sic] of the interest in, as well as of the debate on, the life of the great khaan, the places related to his childhood, adulthood and statesmanhood, and more broadly, the history of what was called “The Empire of the Steppes.”

Thus, even in a book apparently aimed at tourists (although the Mongolian text indicates that the authors hope to reach Mongols as well), Chinggis’s political contributions cannot be overlooked. History must be propagated not only among the converted, but also among those seeking understanding as well.

Another Chinggis-related trend that was discernable in the 1990s is the worship of Chinggis Khan. The worship is a blend of pre-socialist attitudes and newly minted ones (Humphrey 1992: 380–381). Prior to socialism, Chinggis was seen as the founder or originator of almost every Mongolian custom, as well as being revered as an ancestor. These aspects have re-emerged and been coupled with the actual worship of him and with the renewed existence of household shrines to Chinggis, although the latter were uncommon among the urban Mongols that I knew. (Such worship and shrines are also common in Inner Mongolia, and always have been.)

This worship, or at least respect for Chinggis, is fairly widespread, and is manifest in people’s attitudes towards the commodification of Chinggis’s name. In a 1992 survey conducted by Ardyn Erh (*People’s Right*), a
Mongolian newspaper, 37.4 per cent of the respondents felt it was not proper to exploit Chinggis’s reputation in marketing goods; 42.2 per cent thought the matter should be approached with caution; and only 16.6 per cent gave it their full-hearted approval. As Chuluunbaatar explained it:

Well, there are some people saying that this is a very good way of selling this kind of goods, on the market, since we are going to the free-market system. But, I think the majority of people don’t like this. Because it was the tradition of Mongolians to respect their khaans, and to respect not in such ways, you know, as Westerners used to do, labeling the goods and other things. It was a kind of quiet respect, so a lot of people are against it. But, you know, it’s up to a company. But there is the idea that something which is connected with the name of Chinggis Khaan should be considered first by the Parliament, to be allowed to be produced.

Such considerations, which never came to pass, were largely moot by the end of the 1990s. There were several brands of vodka bearing Chinggis’s name, cigarettes (manufactured abroad), a beer and accompanying series of bars and restaurants, as well as a Korean restaurant.

But this does not mean that people did not care what was done with or to Chinggis Khaan’s name. A form of “quiet respect” did indeed exist and continues to do so. Two expeditions to find Chinggis Khaan’s tomb cast light on this. The first expedition was the Gurvan Gol (Three Rivers) Expedition. The expedition was a joint Japanese–Mongolian undertaking, a scientific search to find Chinggis Khaan’s burial place. Running for several field seasons in the early 1990s, and funded by a Japanese newspaper, the project deployed a variety of resources and technologies, including magnometers and ground-penetrating radar. Although a variety of archaeological sites were found, Chinggis Khaan’s tomb was not among them. The Mongolian reaction seemed to be unequivocal. The tomb should not be found. It would be disrespectful, especially since Chinggis himself did not wish the grave to be found. The Mongolian researchers, many people suggested, had agreed to take part as it provided an opportunity to do research they otherwise could not afford. Besides, more than one person added, they knew they wouldn’t find the tomb.

Although I did not meet anyone who supported the expedition, U. Bulag has suggested that some people in fact did (personal communication). He has further argued that some people might want Chinggis’s tomb to be found, as this would prove that he was in fact buried on Mongolian ground, not in Inner Mongolia (and hence “Chinese” ground) as one tradition asserts. By proving that the tomb is in present-day Mongolia, the researchers would in effect be asserting Mongolia’s independence from China. Such a concern, he continues, would override any concerns about
violating the ancient tradition that it should not be found. It would also have the added advantage (at least for Halh nationalists) of reinforcing the concept of the Halh as the “true” Mongols, for the region in which Chinggis is rumored to be buried is largely populated by Halh.

The *Guvan Gol* project took place in the early 1990s. Yet this attitude towards Chinggis continues.

In the mid-1990s, another project to search for Chinggis Khaan’s tomb was announced, this one by a Chicago commodities trader and lawyer, Maury Kravitz, although it did not begin actual fieldwork for several years. The project, funded by investors to the tune of over $1m, was a joint expedition involving American and Mongolian scholars. They claimed to have found a promising site in Hentei aimag, but ran into trouble in the summer of 2002 when the ex-prime minister, D. Byambasüren, wrote to the president, Bagabandi, accusing the expedition of desecrating graves and sacred grounds, as well as erecting buildings near historical sites (see Ooluun 2002). Public opinion seemed heavily against the expedition, citing the need to respect the graves of all ancestors, and Chinggis in particular.

**Under the Eternal Sky**

The response to *Mönb Tengerin Hüchin Dor* (*Under the Eternal Sky*), a film about Chinggis Khaan produced in the late 1980s, sheds some further light on the issue of respect towards Chinggis. The film is sometimes broadcast on Mongolian television during *Naadam*, the national holiday in July. Although an article about the film in a Mongolian newspaper noted “the [length] of the film seems to be the only thing people criticize so far” (Nomin 1992), most people I know would dispute this. The almost universal response (from university students to MAHN dignitaries throughout the 1990s) was that the film was too violent. In an opening scene, Chinggis Khaan cuts out the tongue of a man. Chinggis, the general opinion went, would never have done something like that. Or, even if he had, it shouldn’t be in the film. We don’t want to see Chinggis as a violent person, the reasoning went. Bolormaa, a translator for a publishing house, criticized this scene because Chinggis would not have cut out someone’s tongue by himself, she said (although she did not rule out the possibility that he might have ordered it done). What is important about the reaction to this scene is that when views of what is “true” collide with notions of what is proper or respectful, it is the latter that wins out. Truth in history, it turns out, can only take a person so far.

A group of students at the Mongolian National University complained that the actor who played Chinggis wasn’t very good either. He spoke in a loud voice all the time, they said. Bolormaa, however, liked him, since he looked “Mongolian.” (Others in the movie, in contrast, looked Chinese;
this most definitely would not do.) But most of the people playing Chinggis’s generals, Bolormaa continued, were dancers, and all walked with mincing steps. Besides that, they couldn’t even ride properly. When we watched an installment of the movie on television, she spent most of the evening laughing at various parts of the film. For Bolormaa, however, it was not history itself that was funny, but the collision of her expectations or “knowledge” of history with its representation in the film. In this instance, “truth” should reinforce her expectations. Chinggis and his generals, it seems, should be “authentic,” but not overly violent. Excessive violence was incommensurate with his role as law-giver (see below), and thus had no place in his portrayal.

These comments were more than just criticisms about a film. What is quite clear is that there is a feeling among Mongols that Chinggis should be treated with respect, even when fictionalized for the movies. While his violent aspects cannot be completely ignored, for that would be too reminiscent of the situation under socialism when history was explicitly subservient to politics, they should not be overly dwelled upon either. In other words, history continues to be subservient to political and cultural needs, but it must not appear to be so, to heighten the contrast with the socialist period.

The politics of Chinggis Khaan

The third major trend in writing and thinking about Chinggis is more overtly political in both nature and intent than the previous two. It is not so much a separate trend (none of the trends can be totally divorced from the others) as an underlying theme. This theme is largely concerned with Chinggis Khaan as spiritual progenitor of the Mongol uls or ugsaatan (race), rather than with Chinggis Khaan as a specific historical individual. His historical existence allows for a firm dating of the events, and gives them added credence, but in some respects it is almost irrelevant.

There are a number of variations within this trend, such as the emphasis on Chinggis as administrator, law-giver or humanitarian. This is a trend that has built upon and modified pre-socialist ideas, but that also had a (modified) voice under socialism, where Chinggis is credited with the socio-economic advancement of the Mongols through the establishment of a feudal social structure. The official line was Chinggis Khaan as a necessary evil, a stage to be gotten through, but one that had to occur. Such a stage, while logical from a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, also carried a danger with it. People could and did selectively react to such a portrayal. Chinggis founded the state. That was what mattered. Although the difference in views may seem subtle, they are important. The alternative readings of history not only laid the groundwork for present views of Chinggis Khaan, but their very existence served to contest socialist hegemony.
A sterling example of this political view of Chinggis Khaan is what I call the “invisible empire.” Chinggis is known to non-Mongols largely for his conquests. While these are acknowledged with some pride in Mongolia, they are not as talked about as one might expect. Rather, as we have seen, the emphasis is on the nutag (homeland). What people are most concerned with is the distinctly Mongolian part of the Mongol Empire. Writings on the later khanates that resulted from the break-up of the Mongol Empire are relatively uncommon in post-socialist Mongolia. This is due to the Mongols’ concern with establishing their own distinct identity, contra China and Russia. Chinggis Khaan becomes important for his role as centered on the homeland, and establishing a distinctly Mongolian state. Hence the relatively little emphasis placed on Khubilai, who moved the capital to Beijing, away from the homeland. Hülegü and Batu, who ruled khanates far from the nutag are almost invisible.

One of the more amusing, but still telling, results of this approach is that it is possible to find the military campaigns mentioned in sections of books bearing such titles as “The international relations and foreign policy of the Mongols” (Boldbaatar et al. 1999: 379). The Mongols, it seems, are apt students of Clausewitz’s comment that war is merely the continuation of politics by other means.

It is not Chinggis’s conquests that are important, although newspaper articles in the early days of post-socialism were fond of pointing out that the Mongol Empire was the largest contiguous land empire ever, but rather that he united the scattered Mongol tribes. Never mind that these groups were often at war with each other in previous periods, or that the uniting was occasionally done by force and, in some cases, extermination.

This view reflects a belief in the unity of the Mongols being projected back upon the Chinggisid period, a belief that is not totally supported by the evidence. Although the Secret History does refer to Chinggis as “imposing order upon the Mongolian peoples” (Onon 1990: 110), there is no evidence that there was anything other than a vague sense of commonness based on cultural factors and a link to the steppe. This does not imply the larger, more nationalist reading given to the events of 1206 at present.

The contemporary view curiously echoes to a degree that of the socialist period, in which it was implied that if Chinggis had not expanded his empire beyond the current national borders, his reputation would not have suffered as much as it did. (Thus, in an attempt to drive home their version of Chinggis Khaan, the socialists did dwell on his military campaigns.) In both cases, the positive role is linked to the nutag; expansion beyond it is much less important, and in one case, reprehensible. The basic understanding of Chinggis, however, remains. Interestingly, we find in Information Mongolia a middle-ground, national-defense rationalization for Chinggis Khaan’s wars:
Strengthening the external position of the Mongol state and ensuring its security were the most important conditions for stabilizing its internal structure. Thus, settling relations with the nomadic and semi-nomadic states who had frequently had contact with the Mongol tribes in the past acquired paramount significance.

(Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 100)

The publication date of Information Mongolia is important. Published in 1990, it was written after the landmark 19th Party Congress in 1986 but before the collapse of socialism. As an Academy of Sciences publication during the socialist period, it would reflect the officially accepted interpretations. The views presented in the volume in all probability reflect the relatively permissive late socialist view of Chinggis Khaan and his accomplishments, and thus represent a middle point between the views of stricter periods under socialism and the contemporary conceptions.

**Arig Böh and Khubilai Khaan**

Echoes of this concern with national identity and the link to the steppe are to be found elsewhere, as in the second volume of Mongolyn Tüühiin Deej Bichig (A Treasury of Mongolian History). This is a collection of historical writings on Mongolian history, from a variety of sources (Sühbaatar 1992). It is worth digressing briefly from the discussion of Chinggis Khaan to discuss the portrayal in this volume of two of his grandsons, Arig Böh and Khubilai, as it illustrates the larger point being made.

Arig Böh, Khubilai’s elder brother with whom he waged a civil war for control of the Mongol Empire, is discussed under the topic of the Empire, following the line of previous khaans. Khubilai, who won the war, is discussed in a later section on the Yuan dynasty, with the effect of segregating him and thus divorcing him from the line of legitimate rulers. His brother, who was seen as the defender of Mongolness and the homeland in contrast to Khubilai and his sedentarization and preoccupation with China, is thus implicitly portrayed as the legitimate ruler, even though he lost the war.12 We are told that “Arig Böh is often left out of political discussions,” and later that “Arig Böh is elevated to Khaan” (Sühbaatar 1992: 56). Although the section under this latter heading is concerned with the schism between Arig Böh and Khubilai, the effect once again is to legitimate Arig Böh’s claim. This reflects the concern to construct Mongolian identity specifically in opposition to the sedentary groups, and the Chinese in particular. The parallels between the presentation of this particular situation and Chinggis Khaan reinforce the point that the emphasis on the Mongolian steppe reflects a preoccupation with a conception of Mongol identity defined by its relation to the uls and the mutag, rather than some of
Chinggis’s accomplishments in and of themselves. By most Euro-American standards, Khubilai was the more accomplished of the two brothers, but this is irrelevant to certain trains of thought in Mongolian historiography. He did, after all, move his capital from the steppe to sedentary China.

This coverage of Khubilai and Arig Böh was not unique. Although my copy has disappeared, my field notes from 1999 mention a new magazine in Mongolian and English, *Mongolians of the World*. It included a section on “Khaans of the Great Mongol Empire,” which included Arigh Böh but not Khubilai. To many Mongols, Khubilai was nothing short of a traitor. They often would not mention Arigh Böh in conversation, but would talk about how it was wrong of Khubilai to move the capital to Beijing, and how he wasn’t a real Mongol for doing so.

While Chinggis Khaan is lauded as founder of the Mongol state or nation in post-socialist history, there are also more explicit parallels being drawn with the current political situation. In 1993, several people pointed out that what is really needed in a time like the present is a strong leader, such as Chinggis Khaan. He would be able to lead the country out of the morass it was commonly seen to be in. This statement parallels the critiques of the film *Mönh Tengeriin Hüchin Dor*. In both instances, the image offered of Chinggis is the same: a strong, able leader who can clearly serve as an inspiration for the present. This, in turn, represents a subtle but important shift from the socialist construction of Chinggis. Then he had nothing to offer the present. Now the received wisdom echoes the pre-socialist view that saw Chinggis as the originator and protector of law and custom, but it goes beyond this. It has taken the pre-socialist concerns and blended them with the socialist emphasis on political progress to result in an image of Chinggis that is one of an active, wise leader. No longer do the Mongols merely acknowledge their debt to Chinggis; some of them suggest actively following his example.

It was in this role as leader that Chinggis Khaan appeared the most often by the later 1990s. As noted earlier, his presence (or at least portrait) had been incorporated into government buildings. The role of Chinggis Khaan as leader and exemplar had been largely accepted. That did not mean, however, that he faded into the woodwork as he became taken for granted.

Explicit mention and use of Chinggis Khaan seems to have been relegated to a large degree to an overtly partisan political sphere. Rather than, or overlaying, the general interest in Chinggis Khaan, he had been co-opted by certain political groups. Two examples should suffice. The first is from O. Dashbalbar, in 1997 the chairman of the Mongolian Traditional United Party and its only member of the Ih Hural, as well as a noted poet:

In fact, I respect history’s dictators, such as Hitler, Stalin, Chinggis, Alexander of Macedonia, Shih Huandi, Kim Il-Sung,
Pinochet, Oliver Cromwell, Mao Zedong, Saddam Hussein. They stirred up trouble in other lands, but united their own people and made them strong …

[The Russian] Emperor Peter was a terrible, cruel, hard man. But Peter the First not only made the Russian land Russian, but left a world-class, strong, undefeated country.

They don’t say bad things about the Emperor Peter in Russia, they don’t say bad things about Chinggis Khaan in Mongolia, they don’t say bad things about Napoleon in France; our self-proclaimed democrats must understand this.

(Dashbalbar 1997: 2)

The swipe at the democratic parties in this passage carries an additional weight. At the time he gave this interview, Dashbalbar was siding with MAHN, who was calling for the resignation of the government of the Democratic Coalition, claiming they had not lived up to campaign promises, and that conditions for the ordinary people were worsening.

Dashbalbar’s reference to Chinggis Khaan is a more radical version of the view that was common in 1993. The country is in upheaval, the people are in poverty, a strong leader is needed to get things back on track. The democratic coalition is obviously not up to the job, and, what is more, they don’t even properly understand the historical role of Chinggis Khaan. What is interesting is that this in itself is not a particularly radical stance, although a Mongolian equating Chinggis Khaan with Hitler and Stalin is. Rather, the case is that the general political atmosphere has changed. Problems abound – poverty and unemployment among others – but many people seem to realize, if not happily accept, that such problems are part and parcel of the shift from socialism to democracy. (Although as Dashbalbar told me in an interview, it has been seven years since the end of socialism. How could we still call it a transition? Look what Hitler did in three, he added.)

Another nationalist, Nyam-Osor, took a slightly different approach to the whole issue. While also arguing that Mongolia could benefit from a leader like Chinggis (1997: 250–251), he also thought that Chinggis Khaan was not “incompatible” (harshlahgüi) with democracy, and even claimed that “Chinggis Khaan was a democrat of the highest order” (Nyam-Osor 1997: 250).

Nyam-Osor was not the only person to make this claim. “In his time, he set up the most democratic state,” was how one student responded to my questionnaire. It has been claimed that the Ih Huraltaï, a gathering of nobles, elected Chinggis Khaan, and bestowed him with his title. This was also picked up on in newspaper articles in the early 1990s about the Ih Zasag, the codified set of laws said to have been created by Chinggis Khaan. I turn to the Ih Zasag in more detail below.
Chinggis Khaan and the law

Most important of the portrayals of Chinggis Khaan is an image of him as law-giver and administrator. These are the main characteristics now attributed to him, complementing his role as founding father. Implicit in the credit given for unifying the scattered Mongolian tribes is the belief that this was in some way an administrative act above all else. There is not much attention paid to the fact that this was often a forceful unification. It is as if by creating the laws and administrative structure, much of it probably a continuation of previous steppe traditions, the scattered Mongol tribes flocked to him. The unification process now bears the stamp of Tenger (Heaven), an act that was decreed and inevitable. Emphasis is placed on Chinggis’s political astuteness, rather than his military prowess. The latter is openly acknowledged, although the results of this tend to be downplayed. “Sure, he killed people, but then, who didn’t?” one government official said. While people do talk about Chinggis’s military genius and tactical abilities, they dwell instead on the codification of laws and the organization of the state. Some of this was actually accomplished under his son Ögedei, but this is conveniently overlooked.

The role of law-giver in its later manifestations is also linked to the Tibetan Buddhist influence. It was the ‘Phags-pa Lama who introduced the linkage of state and religion in Khubilai’s time, which was projected backward in time. With the Buddhist right of rule came equality and justice:

‘Phags-pa lama begins the genealogical history of the Mongols with Chinggis-khan whom he called “Khan Cakravartin,” [Universal Khan] born “as a result of the ripening of fruits of the previous good deeds after 3250 years since the nirvana of Buddha.” He also declared Khubilai the khan ruling according to the teaching of Buddha.

(Bira 1991: 41)

Herbert Franke, commenting on ‘Phags-pa’s political theory, writes “Just as the religious order is based on the sutras and magic formulae (dharanî), the secular order rests on peace and quietness … The priest has to teach religion, and the Ruler has to guarantee a rule which enables everyone to live in peace” (1981: 308). The presentation of Chinggis Khaan clearly agrees with such necessity. Even visual representations of Chinggis Khaan in the current period – a Buddha-like pose – often speak to this influence (see Figure 6.1).

One of the key components in the current image of Chinggis as law-giver is his Ih Zasag (Great Law). The exact nature of the Ih Zasag is open to debate. David Morgan characterizes the received wisdom as Chinggis Khaan “laid down a coherent code, this was done at the [huraltai] of
1206, and the code may be reconstituted from surviving fragments” (1986b: 163). Yet this is far from certain, and direct evidence for the *Ih Zasag* as a code of laws is slim indeed. Perhaps the most famous argument in support of the codified version of the *Ih Zasag* is a passage in the *Secret History* when Chinggis Khaan charges his adopted brother, Shigi-Qutugu, to, among other things, make a register of legal decisions (Onon 1990: 112). It is fairly clear that what is spoken of “is a kind of case law, a body of written legal precedents” (Morgan 1986b: 165). While Morgan decides ultimately for a fluid, changing *Ih Zasag* that is a mixture of custom, legal precedents and later decrees, Igor de Rachewiltz, one of the most noted scholars of the *Secret History*, comes to another decision. While he admits that there is no direct evidence that the *Ih Zasag* was a codified, fundamental set of laws, his inclination is to see it as one.

De Rachewiltz also makes an important observation: we need to distinguish between Chinggis’s *zasag*, *zarlig* and *bilig* (de Rachewiltz

*Figure 6.1* Chinggis Khaan in a typical Buddhist pose, dispensing wisdom and justice. The statue, while reflecting his portrayal in Mongolia, clashes with non-Mongol ideas of him as a blood-thirsty tyrant.
1993). Zasag are rulings or decrees that de Rachewiltz see as encompassing principles. Zarlig are orders or decrees, but they are more limited in scope than are zasag. Finally, bilig are “wise sayings” or maxims. The distinctions are important, if only because the categories – especially of zasag and bilig, which usually carry a moral implication – often run together in modern discussions of the Ih Zasag. In contemporary writings, Mongolian authors assume that the Ih Zasag was a uniform code of laws. This is a necessary assumption if Chinggis Khaan is to fulfill his appointed role as law-giver and source of inspiration, but that does not make it a valid one. The inclusion of moral precepts seems to suggest that the Ih Zasag was both more and less than a simple collection of laws. The moral element has become integral to this portrayal of Chinggis Khaan. The laws themselves, except when mustered for support of a particular argument, are secondary. What matters most is that Chinggis was not just an administrator, but a wise and just one. He is being offered as a moral exemplar.

Quotes said to be from the Ih Zasag are to be found in any number of post-socialist publications about Chinggis Khaan: “The elders must be respected and poor helped. The holy sages and meditators (byasalgagch) must be respected” (Nanzad 1991: 23). A newspaper article in a 1990 special-edition newspaper, published in conjunction with the 750th anniversary of the Secret History, gives other alleged excerpts:

Twice every year, the princes must gather and receive my teachings. If they follow my teachings themselves, and rule their subjects properly, everything will proceed easily.

If people follow my decree in words, but reject them secretly, it will be as if my decree is a rock that fell in the water, an arrowhead dropped among the grass, and they will be unable to rule.16

These two extracts show the blend of custom, morality, history and emphasis on law and order that is the hallmark of present portrayals of Chinggis Khaan. That is, they bring together the different interests and concerns of the present to suggest that the solution is to look to the past. The past, moreover, is a specific if not always accurate one – the orderly, just (because traditional) and non-violent past of Chinggis Khaan’s benevolent reign. A 1997 publication offers in a brief English-language summary a nice summation of this view:

Mongolian law has a long tradition. We can find many historical books and documents on Mongolian law. The first one was “The Great Law” which was adopted during Chinggis Khan’s time. The Ih Zasag was used to regulate the social relations of that time.
It was constituted of two parts: law and moral discipline …

Since [1921] the new government of Mongolia has issued many laws. But the majority of them were under the influence of European law.

“The Secret History of Mongolia” is one of the important sources of traditional Mongolian law. We can find lots of important law and legislation. At the present time of updating and revising the laws and legislation, the traditional law of our country is becoming more important.

(Bayarhüü 1997: 3–4)\(^\text{17}\)

Moral discipline is seen as an equal to the laws themselves. The implication is that the socialist-era laws need revising not only because of their socialist roots, but also because they are immoral. It is tradition and the past that hold the key to the future.

A number of the books that appeared in the early post-socialist period were children’s books, such as Chingis Khaany Tuhai Tüühen Ülgerüüd (Historical Tales about Chinggis Khaan) (Oyunhüü and Shagdar 1992) and Chingis Haany Ülger (Tales of Chinggis Khaan) (Enhbat and Lhagvasüren 1992). In these works we find not only the standard range of tales, but also tales in which Chinggis takes on a pedagogical role (this was also noted by some of the people I talked to), teaching the children of the Golden Lineage (Chinggis’s descendants) the need for a single, strong leader:

One day, when many little children of the Golden Lineage had gathered, Chinggis Khaan told them the tale of the snake with 1000 tails, but only one head. “Once upon a time, there was a snake with only one head, but 1000 tails. When the winter’s cold came, this snake’s one head went first into its hole, and the 1000 tails each went into their corresponding dwelling places, and the winter’s cold passed without heed. Contrary to this, there was also a snake with 1000 heads, and only one tail. When the very cold winter came, this snake also wanted to go into its hole to hibernate. But when one of the 1000 heads tried to enter first, the other 999 opposed it, and because of this, none of them were able to enter the den, and they froze to death on the open steppe.”

(Oyunhüü and Shagdar 1992: 3)

Thus, even children, and through them their parents, are being taught to look to Chinggis for guidance and wisdom.

There are also collections of sayings which again highlight the themes of wisdom and morality, and which once more blend with the legal injunctions (i.e. Nanzad 1991). These are distinct from the discussions of the Ih Zasag
in that they do not assume the sayings were a coherent corpus, but rather represent the accumulated wisdom of Chinggis Khaan. They are handy guides to being a “true” Mongol, and a source of inspiration and guidance. One such collection, *Mongol Aildal* (Gongorjav 1991), is a general collection, incorporating sayings from a number of historical figures, including a few from the socialist period (an unusual feature in books of this sort – see Kaplonski (1995)). Chinggis is most prominent in the section on “Government and law,” where we read “One who is able to put his home in order is immediately able to put his country in order; from ruling ten people one is immediately able to rule a thousand people, and can rule ten thousand people,” and “A good official is the state’s jewel; a good wife is the home’s jewel.” We again see the emphasis on law and order that has come to be associated with Chinggis, at the expense of his military campaigns.18

I want to turn now to a booklet I found one day in a “dollar shop” in 1993.19 Entitled *The Secret History of the Mongols and the Mongolian State Policy*, it is a fascinating little pamphlet published in 1991 in English, which, together with its very presence in a dollar shop, indicates that it is intended for a foreign audience. This booklet concerns itself with the relevance of the *Secret History* for today, an issue I have already touched upon. I spend some time on it now as it encapsulates many of the issues I have been exploring in this chapter. In the introduction, we find a blend that includes a nod to Marxism, the efficacy of the past as a model for the present and an implicit comparison with Machiavelli:

If we look at the events of the time of the foundation of the Mongolian state when the glorious star of Chinggis Khan shone brightly, from the perspective of Marxist social analysis, not only does it not deny the link between the past and present, it must also give impetus to future development.

One of the most touchy and difficult problems for the reconstruction of society is probably the question of the responsibility of the state and of those who lead. It would not be unjust to say that the Secret History is not just a piece of contemporary literature composed in fine Mongolian language about the great deeds of Chinggis Khan in the founding of the state and the making of it powerful. It is also a text designed for the edification of those princes who have power in society.

(Dulamhand 1991: 4–5)

This passage makes explicit the desire or need to return to the Chinggisid period for moral and political guidance. The “impetus to future development” could be in the realm of law, or just as easily in the realm of national sentiment. Once again the parallels are being drawn between the past – particularly the Chinggisid past – and the present.
On the topic of law and order, which in this instance includes a healthy dose of Buddhist harmony, we read:

Over the centuries from Chinggis Khan to the popular revolution [i.e. 1921], the Mongolian state was founded on a lasting harmony but was then consumed by others as the philosophy that bound it together was lost. The idea of harmony and union, however, was never lost from the minds of those who loved their country, and Ondor Gegeen Zanabazar has gone down in history for the purpose revealed in his teachings of saving the nation.

(Dulamhand 1991: 8–9)

The singling out of Zanabazar (the First Javzandamba Hutagt), whom we take up next, is worthy of note, as it indicates an almost complete reversal from how he officially was described under socialism. In this passage, socialism and apparently Manchu rule are seen as resulting from the loss of a “philosophy.” Quite what this philosophy is supposed to be is unclear, although some form of nationalist sentiment instilled by Chinggis Khaan seems the most probable explanation.

What is inescapable in this book is the belief that the Mongols were destined to be united. This represents a substantial shift over the socialist readings, where although Chinggis Khaan united the Mongols, a sense that this was an action desired by the people was lacking. Indeed, it should be remembered that the “Mongol people” (an anachronistic term when applied to the thirteenth century) were united to a large degree by force or the threat of it. Clearly, an origin based on coercion would not satisfy a desire to see the Mongol identity as always having existed. We find this belief most explicitly stated in the following passage:

The Mongol people had long desired to unite and find their strength. The advice that Chinggis Khan’s twelve-generation ancestor Queen [Alangoa] gave to her five sons “if you can make and keep the peace between you then you will be like this bundle of five arrows; something that none shall find easy to sunder” is recorded in the Secret History, and we might say that this is the basis of Mongolian political ideology.

(Dulamhand 1991: 5)

This passage is rich in allusions and implications. There is, first and foremost, once again the belief in Mongolian unity. According to a close reading of this passage, “Mongolian political ideology” appears to imply a form of pan-Mongolian nationalism, or, conversely, a more localized Halh-centered nationalism that thus disallows “Chinese” Inner Mongols and
“Russian” Buriats as “true Mongols,” although this would apparently belie Alangoa’s intent.

The story of Alangoa, which used to adorn a billboard across from the Central Post Office in downtown Ulaanbaatar, is a double-edged sword. In the story, Alangoa had five sons, two born to her husband, and three born after his death. Knowing the two older sons suspected a servant of fathering the children (Alangoa claimed a shaft of light had entered her ger and was the progenitor), Alangoa calls her five sons together. She gives them each an arrow, which they all break easily. She then ties five arrows in a bundle, and no one is able to break the bundle. She then tells her sons: “When you are by yourselves, like the five arrow-shafts just now, you can be easily broken by anybody. When you are together and united, like the bound arrow-shafts, how can anybody easily overcome you?” (Onon 1990: 5). The story provides a link back to the Chinggisid period, as the youngest son is the ancestor of Chinggis. But it also serves to remind one on further reflection of the inability of the Mongols to follow her advice through much of their history.

Finally we find the emphasis on Chinggis’s moral stature cropping up yet again. He is linked to peace and goodness, inviting comparisons to the Buddha. One particular event, the genocide of the Tatars, which is recounted without moral judgment in the Secret History, becomes a cause for great shame; the wellspring of morality and order in Mongolia had betrayed his own legacy by engaging in a brutal act of revenge. Despite what the viewers of Mönh Tengeriin Hüchin Dor believed, Chinggis’s violent streak is a contradiction too great to be ignored or downplayed:

The reason why the Mongols remember Chinggis Khan out of all history is probably because they like to take spiritual strength from the intelligence, bravery, aspiration, character and zeal of this son of their soil who led all the people at that glorious time of the unification of the felt-tent dwellers and the establishment of peace … The secret of his underlying fame lies in the fact that although he was a man of the sinful world, full of iniquities, he shone like a torch in the struggle for peace of the Mongol nation …

Moreover, the massacre of the Tatar nation in revenge for the poisoning of his father Yesuhei baatar has left a stain of blood on the history of Mongolia that will never be washed clean.

(Dulamhand 1991: 21–22)

Chinggis Khaan, it seems, was, after all, only human. He was a patriot, a leader, and a source of great inspiration and strength, but, in the end, he also made mistakes. We arrive almost at the complete inversion of where we started from in late socialism. Then, Chinggis Khaan was a man who
made many mistakes, but managed to do some good in the process. Now he is a man who has done much good, but also made some mistakes along the way.

The shift from socialism to democracy has been accompanied by a shift in the portrayal of Chinggis Khaan. The current image, however, did not appear *ex nihilo*. Many components of the current image could be found in the socialist-era textbooks, and some trace their roots back even further. With the collapse of socialism, these components would be given their “correct” meaning – one which involved the visible rehabilitation of Chinggis Khaan. While certain elements in the image of Chinggis Khaan have remained the same and indeed originated with the socialist portrayal (i.e. the unification of the Mongols as a political act), the main emphasis has shifted to his abilities and legacy as a law-giver and administrator.

These newly open views are not presented by many Mongols as being radically new, but rather as the public acknowledgement of what had previously been private knowledge, which would occasionally be manifested discretely in public images, if one knew how to look for it – how to read the text within the text.

These images, while interpretable as nationalist in origin, are not only that, but also something more. They reflect a view of nationalism that differs from definitions of it as the congruence between political and ethnic boundaries (see, for example, Gellner 1983: 1). There is this element – which is why Chinggis Khaan and the figures in the following chapter in particular are important – but there is more as well. The images seek to link contemporary Mongolia to an Inner Asian nomadic tradition, a tradition that is important for being (a) linked to the steppe/mutag, and (b) neither Russian nor Chinese. Thus, the form of nationalism evidenced here is what we can call “defensive” nationalism. It is Hobsbawm’s negative ethnicity (1990: 66) turned on its head. Hobsbawm is speaking of “‘visible’ ethnicity,” referring to skin color, when he notes “it is much more usually applied to define ‘the other’ than one’s own group” (1990: 66). Yet his point can usually be generalized – it is the Other that is precisely that, “other,” strange, different and hence worthy of note. We know who we are, and this is largely reaffirmed by pointing out that They (however defined) are different from Us. Yet the Mongolian case reverses this general tendency. What becomes visible, metaphorically speaking in this case, is Mongolness rather than Otherness.

It is worth remembering that many of the same elements that constitute the images of these figures currently are said to have been preserved in the social memory under socialism, such as Chinggis’s attributes as law-giver and founder of the country. With the preservation of these elements, not only is an identity constructed and transmitted, but, more importantly, it is an identity at odds with the official stance of socialism.
As we shall re-examine in the following chapters, the ambiguity of the texts published under socialism served to facilitate the preservation of this social memory. By admitting that Chinggis Khaan did some good, a crack was opened in the public condemnation – a crack in which opposition could take root and draw sustenance. One need only to remember that one of the most visible symbols the protesters of 1989–90 used was Chinggis Khaan’s portrait. History, especially in a regime that claims to draw its legitimacy from it as socialism did, can be a powerful weapon. The view castigated in the 1949 MAHN resolution in the last chapter – Chinggis Khaan was being praised, not condemned – could be read as a stand against socialism, but one that socialism never managed to eradicate from its own texts.
In the middle of the square that still bears his name, there is a statue of Sühbaatar astride his charger. Unlike statues of Lenin in parts of the former Soviet Union, and even in Ulaanbaatar, Sühbaatar’s statue has not been vandalized. Flowers are laid by government leaders at the statue on the November anniversary of the proclamation of the first socialist constitution in 1924. The statue often serves as a backdrop for Mongols having their picture taken in the square. Similarly, Sühbaatar is still present and relatively unscathed in the post-socialist history books. Given his role as Mongolia’s equivalent to Lenin, and the hagiography that surrounded him during the socialist period, the current status of Sühbaatar may raise a few eyebrows. One would have expected that the father of Mongolian socialism would have suffered a worse fate since the democratic revolution. The changes in public portrayals of Sühbaatar are more changes in degree than in kind. Because of this, Sühbaatar provides further illumination in the quest to understand the transmission of contesting views of history and the construction of Mongolian identity.

A similar case holds for Zanabazar (1635–1723, the First Javzandamba Hutagt, a Mongolian “living Buddha”). Although he has been talked about, written about and re-evaluated since 1990, he never claimed the prominence that Chinggis Khaan demanded. What this means is that both Zanabazar and Sühbaatar arguably serve as better indicators of how deeply the ideas of reconstructing an identity based on the past have penetrated Mongolian thought. The very lack of daily discussion over them make them important in this regard. Immune from much of the publicity that surrounded Chinggis Khaan, re-evaluations of Zanabazar may be expected to be less explicitly self-reflexive than those of the other figures. As such, they can indicate to us how deep the concerns reflected in the more public re-evaluations run. While Sühbaatar was much discussed in the early 1990s, he quickly faded from public discussions on history and the past. He, like Zanabazar, is useful as a gauge for determining the breadth and depth of changes in historical thinking.
I group these two together for two main reasons. While Chinggis is seen as having created the Mongolian state, the roles of Zanabazar and Sühbaatar are more complex. Zanabazar was portrayed under socialism as being responsible for the loss of Mongolian sovereignty to the Manchus. As we shall see, this image has been inverted, and he is now often seen as having acted in the long-term interests of the Mongols. Sühbaatar was credited with the creation of the socialist state, but since this is now seen as having brought about seventy years of effectively colonial rule, this complicates his legacy. For purely chronological reasons, I turn to Zanabazar first.

Zanabazar

Zanabazar was the son of a Halh noble, the Tüs heel Khan, Gombodorj. He was proclaimed the leader of Mongolian Buddhism in 1639, largely in an attempt to provide a rallying point for Mongol nobility. In addition to being recognized as a reincarnation, he achieved fame as a sculptor and artist. The modern city of Ulaanbaatar grew out of his monastery and surrounding encampment.

In addition to his role in judging re-evaluations of history, there is another aspect of Zanabazar that makes him of interest. Simply put, it is his title: Öndör Gegeen. The title is a term of high respect, which Bawden in his dictionary translates as “Lofty Brilliance.” Another possible translation would render it as “Most Serene.” What is unusual about the title is that it was often used in official texts during the socialist period. I will return to the implications of this in more detail below. One of the effects, if not causes, of the use of this title was to legitimate further an oppositional reading of history. If this is indeed the case, it is worthwhile to examine how the use of the title shifts with the collapse of socialism. Does it remain as a marker of respect? Or, now no longer needed as a political statement, does it fall into disuse? The answers to these questions help us understand what the future may hold for evocative transcripts and the forms the relationship between history and identity take.

Zanabazar is interesting for still another reason. Under socialism, there were in effect two Zanabazars. There was Zanabazar the political actor, and Zanabazar the cultural figure. While the socialist mindset accorded him praise for his cultural and artistic achievements, it was less forgiving of his political actions. Both of these elements of his life have continued in post-socialist understandings of him. One final aspect of Zanabazar worth pointing out is that, if anything, the number of works on him (still small, however) increased as the 1990s progressed, peaking in the mid- to late 1990s before trailing off. This is different from both the case of Chinggis, where the explosion of works in the early 1990s died down but never completely diminished, and Sühbaatar, whom, after the first few years of post-socialism, was hardly written about at all.
If Chinggis Khaan and Sühbaatar are to be understood in terms of creating an independent state, and an identity to match, Zanabazar now is viewed largely for his role in the maintenance of Mongol identity, in the guise of the Mongol ubs (state/people). Although it would be possible to argue that through his association with Buddhism, Zanabazar also in a sense helped to create Mongolia, this is not done. Building instead on a contested interpretation of his socialist portrayal, Zanabazar is accorded the status of a defender of Mongolia. In the public sphere, this is a newly emergent role for Zanabazar, although it mirrors unofficial views of him under socialism.

It was noted in the last chapter that many figures in Mongolian history serve as markers for the periodization of history. So too does Zanabazar. Unlike Chinggis Khaan and Sühbaatar, both of whom are linked to independence, Zanabazar is linked to the loss of (Halh) Mongolian political independence in 1691. From this alone we might predict that he would not be as important today as the other figures. While this is indeed the case, Zanabazar is not being written out of the history books. A positive accounting can still be rendered. This is due in part to his cultural rather than political role, both under socialism and at present. Under socialism, this allowed his negative political evaluation to be downplayed, while at present, it locates Zanabazar more centrally (if not always explicitly) in the debates on traditional culture, which in turn link him to issues of what it means to be a “true” Mongol. As we shall also see, it even has proven possible by an interesting twist of historical interpretation to give a positive rendering of his political adventures. If, the logic seems to run, the socialists thought Zanabazar was evil, then he must in reality have been good. As analysts and observers, we must be careful of simply substituting negative and positive signs in the arithmetic of historical evaluation, but not everyone need be or is.

Zanabazar’s legacy under socialism had both positive and negative aspects to it, aspects which paralleled a split between the political-economic and cultural spheres of his deeds. On the negative side, he received the blame for the signing of the treaty of Dolon Nuur in 1691, when the Halh Mongolian nobles surrendered their nominal independence to the Manchus in return for protection from the Zungar.1 In his role as the First Javzandamba Hutagt, Zanabazar was also seen as one of the chief disseminators of the shar shashin (Tibetan Buddhism),2 and, as such, was a deceiver of the people. On the more positive side, Zanabazar’s role as a sculptor and artist did receive some recognition under socialism.

His place in socialist history, therefore, is not always clear. In the history textbooks of the period, it is his role as Buddhist incarnation and member of the feudal oppressor class that received the most notice:
Some of the Halh’s important [lit.: *tom*] feudal lords wanted to strengthen the unification of Mongolian politics by uniting the people’s minds (*sanaa setgel*) by means of a single faith. As part of this plan, the Halh feudal lords invited the Tüsheit Khan Gombodorj’s five year old son Zanabazar to be the head of Halh Lamaism, and elevated him to the title “Gegeen”.

(Davaatseren and Gongor 1972: 51)

We find, as we may well have expected, the feudal lords scheming to control and oppress the masses, most effectively by means of religion. Class relations and ideology find their most perfect feudal expression: a feudal lord who was also a god. The fact that Zanabazar was said (and believed) to be an incarnation, in this view of things, serves solely a political end. Belief is irrelevant.

Later in the same text, when considering the treaty of Dolon Nuur, we are informed that “Öndör Gegeen, Chahuundorj [his brother, the current Tüsheit Khan] and many other (about 500) Halh traitor *noyon* and *taij* [both noble ranks] took part in this treaty” (Davaatseren and Gongor 1972: 51). The act is contrary to the development of Mongolia and is to be condemned: not only are the participants labeled traitors for giving their country over to foreign oppressors, but it is emphasized that they were nobles as well, a doubly damning indictment.

The treaty is usually seen as an attempt by the Halh lords to seek relief from the predations of the Zungars to the west, as maintaining their independence unaided was not a viable option. Since the Manchus of the Qing dynasty were in certain ways closer culturally to the Mongols than the Han Chinese or the Russians, it seems that the Halh nobles did not view this surrender as grievously as their descendants would almost three hundred years later.3 There is thus a certain ground for arguing for a common interpretation to be given to the actions of the post-socialist period: that what Zanabazar did was in the best interest of the Mongols.

In fact, such a reading of history also occurred in some socialist texts. At the time of the Halh–Zungar wars, the Halh were looking for protection and assistance from one of their neighbors. It was not clear whether they should turn to the Russians to the north or the Manchus to the south. Zanabazar is said to have observed that

The northern Yellow Chinese [*sbar hyatad*, i.e. the Russians] state’s imperial government is very peaceful; however, it would not be possible to propagate [our] religion; ... Under the imperial government Black Chinese to the south [i.e. the Manchus] it would be peaceful and good, and they have propagated Buddhism [*burhny shashin*].

(Pürevjav 1978: 72)
Thus, the Concise History of Buddhism in Mongolia continues, the Manchus were able to easily conquer the Halh as the result of the opinion of one man. This passage, however, did offer a point upon which to pin other interpretations of history. This incident would later come to be understood positively: Zanabazar was looking out for the best interests of Buddhism, and, by extension, Mongolian custom and culture. Although it didn’t seem like it at the time, he actually did the right thing.

Dashbalbar, the member of the Ih Hural, picked up on this reading of Zanabazar during our 1997 interview. He saw the surrender of the Mongols to the Manchus as a necessary episode in history, and said that, after all, it was only temporary. Napoleon took Moscow and Lenin lost Brest, he said, but those too were temporary events. (In my notes at the time, I mused that over 200 years seemed like a rather extended definition of “temporary.”) Dashbalbar also offered what was probably a unique reading of the events, saying in effect that the surrender guaranteed the purity of the Mongol race. If the Mongols had fought the Manchus, his logic ran, all the men would have been killed, and then who would have the women married?

Other sources from the socialist period also present a negative picture of Zanabazar when dealing with historical events, as we would expect. We see this, for example, in Ih Shav’ (Tsedev 1964). After being told that the Mongolian khans and noyon were defeated by the Manchu Emperor, and entered under his rule, we are told “In this way, the first Javzandamba Hutagt carried out his main active role when he caused the Halh Mongols to submit to the Manchu Emperor” (Tsedev 1964: 9).

In 1997, one historian offered an interesting explanation for this view of Zanabazar under socialism. He pointed to rivalry between ethnic groups as an influencing factor. Tsedenbal, the leader of Mongolia from the early 1950s until 1984, was Dörvöd, he said. The Dörvöd are a western Mongolian group, one that would have been part of the Zungar khanate. As a result, Tsedenbal did not like Zanabazar, who was Halh. That, he explained, is why the socialist texts took such a harsh view of him.

Whatever the reason, the evaluation of Zanabazar was widespread, although it did vary somewhat. Natsagdorj’s Manjiin Erhsheed Baisan Halh Mongolyyn Tüüh (The History of Halh Mongolia under Manchu Rule) (1963) offers similar coverage of Zanabazar’s place in history. He does note, however, that “In general, the Javzandamba and the Tüsheet Khan did not view surrendering to the Manchus as significant (chuhalch-lagüi),” but rather as a means of obtaining aid in driving the Zungar out of Halh Mongolia (1963: 45). This is perhaps the most explicit indicator that what would become a post-socialist view of the matter was also extant during the socialist period. What is important, if not spelled out, is the integrity of Halh territory and identity. The Manchus are not
dangerous or to be feared if submitting to them leads to the preservation of the Halh.

Yet we should not be too quick to castigate such a portrayal as mere Marxist propaganda, for it is fundamentally the same as that offered by Bawden, whose history of Mongolia is usually taken as the standard work for the period. “It seems most likely that what Gombodorj [Zanabazar’s father] had in view was the creation of some centrally attractive force around which the remaining independent Mongols could unite themselves” (1989: 54). That is, much like the official socialist line, Bawden sees the recognition of Zanabazar as the Javzandamba Hutagt as a largely political move. There is a faint echo of the role Zanabazar would assume in post-socialist Mongolia in Bawden’s comment. Even if he was responsible for the Manchu occupation of Mongolia, Zanabazar was a central figure who helped solidify political support around the Buddhist Church.

The role of Buddhist incarnation is central not only to the socialist-era view of Zanabazar, but also to that of the contemporary era as well, although the interpretation and particular emphasis has shifted. Zanabazar being an incarnation is seen as strictly a political ploy under socialist historiography, but with the 1989 democratic movement, the religious aspect of Zanabazar was to become more evident.

Although not mentioned in most socialist texts, Zanabazar is also celebrated as the founder of Ulaanbaatar, whose origins stretch back to his monastery, founded in 1639. This aspect was especially marked in 1999, with the 360th anniversary of the city being celebrated. A stele was erected in a small park on the south edge of Sühbaatar Square, commemorating, I was informed, the exact spot where the city was established.6

The emphasis on Zanabazar’s role in the founding of the city additionally serves to distance the city, with its socialist-era name, from socialism itself, linking it back instead to Buddhism and “traditional” Mongolian identity. Although not a point dwelled upon by anyone I met, this role is important because Ulaanbaatar as it exists is largely a socialist construction. It has no – nor can it claim any – links to the time of Chinggis Khaan.

Although the passages examined above are from history books (and others contain similar ones), knowledge about Zanabazar, the First Javzandamba Hutagt, seems to have come from largely outside of the schools. Most people whom I questioned in 1993 said they were taught little or nothing about him in a formal setting. Yet a quarter of the respondents did mention his role in Mongolia coming under Manchu rule, indicating that the socialist teachings had indeed reached them. “He favored giving Mongolia over to Manchu rule, and he was guilty of 300 years of oppression,” one wrote. This particular passage is especially intriguing. If we take the length of time at face value, it means that the socialist period is being portrayed simply as a continuation of Manchu rule. This is itself not
particularly unusual. Socialism is now largely viewed as a foreign imposition, and the parallel between Manchu rule and socialism is not unexpected. As was discussed in Chapter 4, parallels are often drawn between the independence from the Manchus achieved in 1911 and the democratic movement (“independence” from socialism) in 1989–90. What is unusual is that the respondent is linking the two events explicitly, instead of simply suggesting certain parallels. Furthermore, crediting Zanabazar, however obliquely, for the evils of socialist rule is unique. Clearly not everyone has a favorable view of Zanabazar.

The reported lack of coverage in formal schooling should not be seen as limited only to the study of Zanabazar. The whole period of Mongolian history in which he is situated is often glossed over in history texts. While Chinggis may get a few pages, and the rest of the Empire a page or so (if that), the roughly three hundred years from the fall of the Yuan dynasty to coming under Manchu rule generally is allotted only a few pages. Sometimes this sparse coverage continues until 1911. One is tempted to wonder if this could be seen as a form of backhanded nationalism.7 Not much to exalt or take pride in happened during this period. The Mongols were largely in disarray, and much time was spent by different factions in vying for power. To gloss over Zanabazar, then, is not to downplay him specifically, but rather to collapse the time of origins and the present into one. Under socialism, this served the double purpose of giving the Mongols a more glorious (from a nationalist point of view) history as well as helping gloss over the rather troubling (from a Marxist-Leninist unilinear progression point of view) period of “feudal disintegration” (as much of the period in question is often glossed), when as a result of the infighting of the nobility, history seemed to move backwards rather than forwards.

With little emphasis being placed on Zanabazar in formal schooling, museums and books played the key role in the transmission of knowledge about him. People often said that they had learned about him from his artwork—“Visited the museum with my classmates to get acquainted with his artwork,” was one typical response to my questionnaire. This artwork can still be seen today in the Bogd Khaan Palace Museum in Ulaanbaatar, which has a fairly extensive collection of sculptures and paintings (including a self-portrait) by Zanabazar. The Choijin Lama Museum (also in Ulaanbaatar) has a collection as well. Zanabazar’s image, both painted and sculpted, was also to be found in a 1993 exhibit at the Fine Arts Museum (named after him) of religious objects said to have been hidden in the Gov’ (Gobi desert) during the socialist period and recently recovered. The museum also boasts in its permanent collection sculptures and other artwork attributed to him. Zanabazar, even if not talked about explicitly, was present in multiple ways.

This emphasis on his artwork, which does sometimes occur in history texts, but in a different section from his political contributions, is an
important one. The artwork itself has been used to reinforce the social memory of Zanabazar. On display during the socialist period, it was disconnected from any direct link to his negative political role. Rather, it served as a tangible reminder of his religious nature – it was not by accident he sculpted and painted religious images! – thus implicitly contesting the official anti-religious socialist agenda. Yet it also served the purpose of the socialist government. As in the case of keeping the Gandan monastery open as a “working museum,” the display of religious paintings allowed the socialists to show their purported tolerance of religion. It also showed the cultural development of the Mongols (necessary for the Marxist evolutionist argument to work), while also highlighting the excesses of the feudal classes.

*The Eminent Mongolian Sculptor – G. Zanabazar* (Tsültem 1982) is one socialist-era work that emphasizes Zanabazar’s artistic aspects. Interestingly enough, this work also gives him a rather glowing evaluation in general, which would have been somewhat anomalous at the time of the book’s publication. Although we are not surprised to find a Mongol giving a positive evaluation of Zanabazar, to find it in print in the early 1980s (even before the reforms of the 19th Party Congress in 1986) is surprising. Against this is the fact that this book is obviously intended for foreigners. By Mongolian standards, in 1993, it was extremely expensive – $15. This was equivalent to 6,000 tögrög at a time when most books cost a small fraction of that. Although Mongols can and do buy it (and others like it, on art, traditional instruments, etc.), they are not intended as the main audience. Indeed, the book is not even written in Mongolian. The text is offered in Russian, English, French and Spanish. 8

This book is worth examining in a little more detail because it reflects what appears to be a more recent evaluation of Zanabazar:

Zanabazar, though obliged to bow to force and submit to a foreign power, never in his mind and heart ceased to be a patriot, and this explains why the people, over the centuries, have kept a grateful memory of him, associating his name with their noblest aims and aspirations, regarding him as a symbol of their independence and sovereignty ...

Zanabazar was extremely gifted in a variety of ways, and he played a very active part in the development of many branches of culture and art.

(Tsültem 1982: 7)

We find in this passage an inversion of what was being taught in the socialist texts. Zanabazar is now a victim of circumstance rather than an active participant in a traitorous event. As a result, people can have a “grateful memory” of him, rather than castigating him for his role in the
loss of Mongolian independence. Even more telling perhaps is the fact that such a recounting of events seems to place the blame squarely on the Manchus rather than the Zungars, who, after all, were Mongols and now constitute part of the present-day country of Mongolia.

The loss of Mongolian autonomy is the result of foreign forces, much as the socialist period has since its end come to be seen as a Soviet corruption of more noble Mongolian aspirations. An echo, albeit a faint one, of the role of Chinggis Khaan can thus be heard. Zanabazar, admittedly, did not create a Mongolian state, but did fight against foreign influence. He can, in this view of things, thus be aligned with the (attempted) preservation of Mongolian identity, again paralleling the situation of the 1990s. His role as the first person to embody both secular and religious rule in Mongolia reinforces this interpretation. What had been a matter of feudal ideology becomes a meeting point of two strands of Mongolian identity – independence and Buddhism.

This view is echoed in some of the accounts of Zanabazar given as responses to my 1993 survey. For example, one person wrote that Zanabazar’s “big mistake was giving Mongolia over to Manchu rule. But he had endless love for Mongolia.” An even more forgiving student wrote that “although at that particular time submitting to the Manchus was wrong, in the long run it was a very correct [mash zöv] decision.” While such accounts see Zanabazar as directly responsible for the loss of independence, they nonetheless seek to lessen the blow. The “truth” is not avoided, but rather reshaped, re-understood.

These accounts highlight a rejection of the official socialist line, while at the same time incorporating elements of it, as was the case with Chinggis Khaan. They do not seek to deny that Zanabazar contributed to the loss of independence of the Halh. Rather, they now argue that he did what he thought was best, and in the end it turned out to be so. The detour may have been regrettable, but at least the Mongols ended up where they wanted to go.

This is a key point to understanding both past and current perceptions of Zanabazar. The shift in the view of his political role can best be understood in terms of defending the uls. While under socialism Zanabazar was seen as betraying the state and the people, he is now seen as having made an attempt to defend them, an attempt decreed by some, such as the student and Dashbalbar, to have been successful. Others may think it was a mistake, but there is no doubting he intended well. He is, by most measures, a true hero of the Mongolian people. No one, it seems, still subscribes (if they ever did) to the official socialist view of him as a traitor.

Overall, Zanabazar’s importance and visibility have increased since 1989, but this has been accompanied by a shift in the realms in which he is talked about. In response to a questionnaire item asking people to list the five most important people in Mongolian history, Zanabazar finished in
sixth place, with only one vote less than Zorig, who is usually credited with bringing about the democratic movement. This visibility continued to increase as the 1990s progressed. By the later 1990s, although Zanabazar was far from a household name, works on him were slightly more common.9

Zanabazar’s visibility is now largely in the realm of religion and culture. In this sphere, Zanabazar is becoming as prominent if not more so than the Bogd Khaan, who, as the Eighth Javzandamba Hutagt and the ruler of autonomous Mongolia in the early twentieth century, is probably the other most notable religious figure in Mongolian history. One might have easily expected the reverse, since the Bogd Khaan is located closer to living memory than Zanabazar, having died in 1924.10 It would seem logical to assume that he would therefore be preserved in the social memory as the major icon for Buddhism in Mongolia, particularly since he can be credited with the re-establishment of Mongolian independence in 1911.

His closer link to the present was instead the Bogd Khaan’s downfall, as he provided a necessary point for the socialist government to react against. By 1921, Zanabazar was already wrapped in the mists of time and legend. He was thus more effectively buffered from socialist influence than was the Bogd Khaan, whose death marked the official beginning of socialist Mongolia.

This is not to reject completely Caroline Humphrey’s argument (1992) that in effect all pre-socialist history is equally past in post-socialist Mongolia. This indeed is the case. What I am concerned with here is not the moral weight, and thus influence, that a historical period currently has, but rather its ties to the socialist period. The Bogd Khaan period, for example, like Zanabazar, does exert influence, but in a different manner. The very fact that the Bogd Khaan period immediately preceded socialism necessitates a close link between the two. As Paul Connerton notes, “to construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old tyranny is to recollect the old tyranny” (1989: 10). In the same way, to repudiate the Bogd Khaan period, it was portrayed under socialism as a corrupt theocratic government, led by a “deceiver of the masses.” It was necessary to portray the Bogd Khaan period in a negative light to highlight the accomplishments of the socialist revolution. If the Marxist-Hegelian model of social evolution is to be valid, the Bogd Khaan period must be the time when the thesis and the antithesis bring about crisis and the creation of the synthesis that lead to the socialist stage.11

The reaction against the socialist period did not, in this case, result in a simple reversal of historiography. The Bogd Khaan is usually portrayed as a political actor who was a religious figure, rather than a religious figure who was also a political actor, as is the case with Zanabazar. The exemplar of religion for religion’s sake (tempered as always with political astuteness) is now Zanabazar.
With the resurgence of public and official Buddhism, it is Zanabazar who has been appointed standard-bearer. In the early 1990s, his picture and statue (see Figure 7.1) were common items in the souvenir section of the State Department store and elsewhere, while the Bogd Khaan’s image remained absent. An art shop in the ger district near Gandan that was selling religious items, along with portraits of Chinggis, contained icons of Zanabazar but none of the Bogd Khaan.

Post-socialist publications and newspaper articles about Zanabazar are not common, but what information there is largely reflects this new religious emphasis. One book that takes up Zanabazar, Mongol Ulsyn Myangan Jiliin Gaihamshig (Mongolia’s Thousand Year Wonder, Tsodol, 1992), briefly considers his status as Hutagt, before moving on to his artistry. Although his art receives more attention than the religious aspect, he is described as being a “true incarnation” (jinhen huvilgaan), something unheard of under socialism (Tsoodol 1992: 65). His role as living god has gone from being merely a political ploy to an unquestioned matter of faith. His political influence – which was substantial (see Bawden 1989: 53–58) – is not mentioned at all, again a significant shift from the socialist portrayal.

Öndör Gegeen G. Zanabazar (Dashbaldan 1991) takes a similar approach. This little pamphlet starts out by noting that Zanabazar participated in many of the influential events in Mongolian society, politics and

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*Figure 7.1* A small statue of Zanabazar, the First Javzandamba Hutagt.
religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Dashbaldan 1991: 5). We do not, however, learn what these influential political events were. The booklet is dedicated to providing a brief biography with an emphasis on his artwork. The work, which ends with a beckoning of good fortune ("hurai, hurai, hurai"), notes that although now his gifts are clear to us and the people honor him, only very recently there was a time when he was not only forgotten but his name was spoken only in fear and disgust (Dashbaldan 1991: 26). The socialist period or its evaluation of him is not made explicit, but in 1991, no reminder was needed. The “proper and true” conclusions that one should draw about Zanabazar would be clear, even if he wasn’t compared to the artistic giants of the European Renaissance (Dashbaldan 1991: 26).

The shift, although overwhelming, is not total. In 1994, a conference on Zanabazar was held. The papers from the conference were published as Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar: Research Papers (Ichinnorov 1998). Many of the papers in the collection deal with political topics, including, among other things, the Ih Shav’ and Mongolian–Tibetan relations. But these are by no means the majority of the papers. Many of the other papers deal with Zanabazar’s artistic accomplishments and tales about him. What is significant about this collection is that none of the papers are explicitly about the 1691 treaty of Dolon Nuur. Zanabazar’s political side is not ignored, but it is selectively studied. The topics that are covered fall into two categories. There are those that can be seen as “telling the truth” or offering information not available before. In this category would fall articles like “Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar was the founder of Mongolian Buddhist teachings (üzel sanaa).” But this article highlights the second category as well. In addition to covering a topic not discussed in positive light under socialism, such a topic serves to position Zanabazar more strongly as a religious and cultural icon for Mongolia. It is his links to topics now identified as “traditionally Mongolian” that are emphasized. Other topics in the collection, such as “Oral and written tales about Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar,” are offered as proof of the importance Zanabazar has had throughout history. The current interpretation of him is legitimized through an appeal to the past.

The shift from despised traitor to religious and cultural icon should not surprise us overmuch. It is linked to the newly permissive attitudes towards religion, and signals the re-evaluation of the status of Buddhism. Buddhism is now seen as one of the integral markers of “traditional” Mongolian culture, whether a person is religious or not. Mongols were Buddhist, and so should be once again. Belief is once more, as it was for the socialists, less important than the existence of Buddhism itself. As the First Javzandamba Hutagt, Zanabazar becomes not only a source of pride for his personal accomplishments in the realm of art, but also a confirmation of Mongolness as reflected through Buddhism. There are several
factors in addition to the largely political ones noted above that make him better suited to fulfill this role than the Bogd Khaan, the other major religious candidate.

Unlike in the case of the Bogd Khaan, there is apparently no evidence of a debauched lifestyle, although Zanabazar did have a wife, known as the “Girl Prince” (Bawden 1989: 56–57). She, however, was said to have miraculous qualities, and so silenced her critics. Even the socialist sources do not portray Zanabazar in such a negative light as the Bogd Khaan. We have already seen that they preferred often to ignore the religious aspects of his position in favor of the political ones. As an artist, he is also able to serve as a focal point for the intelligentsia. Many people saw him as a cultured figure, reaching beyond his own art into other areas, such as poetry, theology and literature. He thus serves as a cultural as well as spiritual ancestor to the present-day Mongolians. “A historical figure who accomplished an important [positive] task when he propagated religion and culture in Mongolia,” is how one 41-year-old economist described him. This view is reflected and reconfirmed by the fact that the soyombo, the national symbol of Mongolia, was designed by Zanabazar, a point that is now sometimes called into prominence: “The present national symbol of Mongolia’s sovereignty [the] ‘Soyombo’ was designed by Zanabazar. This national symbol Soyombo is a magnificent combination of Tibetan and Mongolian historical and cultural identities and wisdom” (Choinhor 1995: 134).

Zanabazar also designed the soyombo alphabet, which never attained widespread use. Information Mongolia offers a fascinating if somewhat perplexing perspective on this:

In 1686, when the freedom of the Mongolian people was threatened by the Manchu, the Mongolian scholar Zanabazar, a philologist of the Tibetan-Indian school who had made an extensive study of the famous grammar of the Indian philologist Panini, invented the Soyombo and the horizontal square scripts on the basis of ancient Indian writing of Brahman origin.

(Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1990: 61)

Quite what the link between independence and inventing a different alphabet is supposed to be is not clear in this case. The Mongols already had an alphabet, and there had been other attempts to introduce new or revised writing systems in the past. Linguistic nationalism, while clearly the motivating force behind this statement, thus appears misplaced, particularly since Zanabazar was competing against a script said to have been introduced by Chinggis Khaan. One should also note that in this particular passage, Zanabazar’s religious identity is completely ignored. He is described as a scholar, nothing more. This provides an effective method by
which to avoid having to condemn his role as a religious leader. What is not talked about is harder to remember, but also harder to condemn.

There is one more factor that is perhaps the most important of all. While the Bogd Khaan was ruler of Mongolia, he was himself not a Mongol. He was in fact Tibetan (and, so it is said, a syphilitic and blind one at that). On the other hand, Zanabazar was a Mongol. But more than that, he was a descendant of Chinggis Khaan, a member of the Golden Lineage, one of the reasons he did in fact make an ideal figure for motivating political action. It was perhaps in Zanabazar, although he never held an official political title, that the wedding of Church and state came to its peak.

Bira briefly touches upon this when he notes:

At the end of the 16th century with the introduction of Lamaism, the most influential rulers of Mongolia after having again entered into close contact with the religious head of Tibet tried to revive Khubilai-khan’s policy of the “Two Orders.” As is well known, Altan-khan invited the Third Dalai-lama to Mongolia and set up an alliance with him. And the theory of the “Two Orders” again occupied the main place in the political and theological thinking of the Mongols.

(Bira 1991: 44)

This idea of the “Two Orders” linked the political and religious leaders in a mutual relationship of legitimization and rule. Although only one person explicitly stated in responses to my surveys that the First Javzandamba Hutagt was “the leader of the state and religion,” it is implied in many descriptions of him. In the description of the Eighth Javzandamba as the last person to combine religion and state is a necessary recognition that there were others. In fact there was not a unified Mongolian state at the time Zanabazar lived, and so to portray him as the leader of a state is somewhat misleading, but rather telling. It is in keeping with the nationalist backward-projection of political unity that informs much of the historical reinterpretation taking place. Once again, the truth value of the current belief is stronger than any “objective” measures.

As the First Javzandamba, Zanabazar is also well situated to act as an originator, a source of legitimation for later Hutagts. How could there be a second and a third if there was not a first?12 This may seem like an obvious point, but that does not mean it can be overlooked. As the embodiment of Buddhism during the years of Manchu rule, the Javzandambas provided a focal point for Halh Mongolian identity. This does not mean that there was a conscious recognition of something akin to nationalism present at the time. Rather, the Javzandambas would have provided an anchor for identity contra the Manchus, but not necessarily in a nationalist
form. At the time, the Javzandambas were looked to not so much for being ethnic Mongols, since most were not, but for being Buddhists and, in the case of the First Javzandamba, for being a descendant of Chinggis Khaan.13

In the end, the importance of Zanabazar’s religious role is only part of a larger contribution that he is seen as making, albeit a vital part. Since Zanabazar cannot be seen as asserting Mongolia’s political independence, although he is now largely exonerated for his role in 1691, he has been credited with asserting Mongolia’s cultural independence, both through his links with Buddhism and his artistic accomplishments. This is the main reason Zanabazar is now seen in a positive light. Along with his many artistic achievements, he was a major figure in Mongolian Buddhism. Seen as a propagator and proponent of Buddhism, he is by extension one who gave Mongolia a unique cultural identity. (One can push the case and point out the parallels with the period of the Mongol Empire, with the support of Buddhism by Khubilai.) Buddhism was not and is not Russian, nor is it seen as being particularly Chinese. Thus, even if Zanabazar did not do much for Mongolian political independence, he becomes a leading light in the assertion of a specific cultural identity, one that has become quite prominent during the post-socialist period. In a similar manner, other figures associated with the early stages of Buddhism, such as Altan Khan and “Saint” Ligden Khan, have achieved a certain degree of prominence. In particular, Altan Khan is noted for the reintroduction of Buddhism into Mongolia, and awarding the title of Dalai Lama to Sonam Gyatso in the late sixteenth century. However, perhaps because he himself was not a living deity, Altan Khan does not have the same status as Zanabazar. Another reason for this, which must not be overlooked, is that while Zanabazar was Halh, the Altan Khan was a Tumet Mongol from Inner Mongolia. He thus falls outside the view of Halh-centric history.

Let me now turn to Zanabazar’s title. A closer look at the way in which the title was and is used illuminates further some of the issues involved in the use of history as a tool for opposing the official socialist line and propagating identities.

In many of the socialist-era texts, Zanabazar is referred to by a reverential title, Öndör Gegeen. This, simply put, does not make a lot of sense. Öndör literally means “high” or “tall,” but in this case is being used as an intensifier. Gegeen has a range of meanings, including “sunlight” and “splendor,” but is usually translated in titles of incarnate lamas as “serene” (Lessing 1995: 374). He is thus being called something akin to the Most Serene Zanabazar. (Another possible gloss would include “holiness,” making him the Most Serene Holiness Zanabazar.) This does not strike one as a title that a committed socialist would use to describe a deceiver of the masses. The effect is akin to reading tracts by the theologians of the
Reformation, and finding them referring to the Pope as “His Holiness” without any trace of irony. One suspects that at some level, another reading must be possible.

The mystery deepens because there are other ways to refer to the same figure without invoking a title of respect. One could simply refer to him as Zanabazar, or even the First Javzandamba Hutagt, a title which indicates his Buddhist nature and ranking but without honorifics. Yet, while these two usages can be found in socialist texts, they are less common than Öndör Gegeen. For example, when recounting the events of 1688–91, when the Mongols surrendered to the Manchus, the official three-volume history of the Mongolian People’s Republic refers to Zanabazar as Öndör Gegeen (Institute of History of the MPR Academy of Sciences 1966–69: vol. 2, 92–95). Natsagdorj, who refers to Zanabazar simply as the Javzandamba Hutagt in the passage cited earlier, refers to him as Öndör Gegeen elsewhere (see Natsagdorj 1963: 44). Such usage, it would seem, needs explaining.

Yet when I questioned several people on this in the fall of 1997, they were more amused by my questions than they were puzzled by the usage itself. It was his title, what else were they supposed to call him, was the general response. “Oh, so you think you discovered some secret message?” asked my bemused friend when I tried to explain the importance I attached to this lexical oddity. But this does not mean we would be justified in ignoring the usage ourselves.

Simply put, the term Öndör Gegeen is a particularly explicit example of what I term a “simple” evocative transcript. In the last chapter, we saw how descriptions of Chinggis Khaan from the socialist era could be and were used to construct multiple readings of the text. From this it was possible to contest the socialist hegemony, or, as it was explained to me, to know the “truth” about Chinggis Khaan.14 The use of the term Öndör Gegeen to refer to Zanabazar is another such case. Yet it does not require any particularly close critical reading of the text. It is the same referent used by the official histories themselves. As opposed to cases that required one to interpret what one read, Zanabazar’s honorific was splashed across the socialist pages. One could easily fall back on the argument, as my friend and a historian did, that it was just his title after all. What else was one supposed to call him?

Yet the argument should not be left there. At the most basic level, in addition to using Öndör Gegeen, there were in fact other ways in which to refer to Zanabazar, as was sometimes done in the texts. The result is that the use of the honorific title means that a choice was indeed made. This had implications for transmitting multiple readings of history. As the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has noted, the readers of a text “are forced to take an active part in the composition of ... meaning” (1974: xii). Even if Öndör Gegeen was “merely” Zanabazar’s title, the choice and use of it
over other terms of reference carries with it a meaning of respect that accompanied the reading of the history texts and the creation of meaning within them. There is no way to avoid the implication. The socialist texts thus undermined their own official reading through their choice of terms. Yet they could do so with some degree of safety; after all, Öndör Gegeen was indeed one way in which to refer to Zanabazar, and to claim “it was his title” was to make an accurate statement.

With this being the case, it makes sense to ask how Zanabazar is referred to in the post-socialist world. Does he retain the honorific Öndör Gegeen, or does he become simply Zanabazar, or the First Javzandamba Hutagt? How this question is answered helps us to understand what has become of evocative transcripts, and what weight they carried. Were they “merely” means for transmitting multiple interpretations of history, or did they also affect more deeply how people thought of the “truth” behind the history? The answer to how Zanabazar is now written about is not so simple: he is referred to by all three methods. Yet there are differences in the presentation, and these are instructive.

In certain contexts, the honorific remains. Yet in these contexts the honorific is intended as that. One particular example of this is the collection Biographies of Öndör Gegeen (Bira et al. 1995). This is a collection of the translation or transcription (from old script) of three different biographies of Zanabazar. As the biographies predate the socialist period, we cannot read anything concerning evocative transcripts into the texts themselves, yet they are illuminating. Throughout the three texts, Zanabazar is referred to in various ways: Zanabazar, Öndör Gegeen, and the First Javzandamba. In other words, although there are precedents for using the honorific, they are not exclusive. The socialist emphasis seems to represent, if anything, a shift towards using the honorific.

The introductions to the biographies are also informative. They refer to Zanabazar by all three ways – name, title, and honorific. Damba, on the contrary, simply uses “Zanabazar” in his 1995 Ih Mongoloos Olnoo Örgögsön Uls (from the Great Mongol Empire to the Bogd Khaan State). Similarly, the Mongolian section of the UNESCO volume, Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (Choinhor 1995), uses all three methods, although the use of Öndör Gegeen seems to predominate slightly. Dashbaldan, in his 1991 pamphlet Öndör Gegeen G. Zanabazar, tends towards using just the name. But as we have seen, this work focuses mostly on Zanabazar’s artistic work, and so this use is not surprising. The collection of conference papers discussed above (Ichinnorov 1998) uses all forms. Various authors in the volume call him at various times Öndör Gegeen, Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar, and simply Zanabazar. Other works continue this trend. Mongol Ulsyn Tüüü (The History of Mongolia) tends to refer to him as Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (Boldbaatar et al. 1999: 191), while Lectures in Mongolian History sidesteps the issue by noting that Zanabazar was
proclaimed the head of Mongolian Buddhism and given the title “Gegeen.” “This Zanabazar became known in Mongolian history as the First Bogd Javzandamba or Öndör Gegeen” (Zaanhüü and Altantsetseg 1999: 159).

The trend these works exhibit is highly telling. With the collapse of socialism and the re-evaluation that accompanied it, evocative transcripts were no longer necessary in history texts. As a result, the way in which certain figures were talked about could, and did, shift. Not only did the interpretation of Zanabazar’s deeds shift from what had been the official line, but so did the way in which he was talked about. Yet the honorific does indeed remain in certain contexts. The evocative transcripts, then, fulfilled both their functions. They not only offered a reading of history contrary to the officially sanctioned one, but they also helped in the transmission of a view of history that people believed in. Now that they are no longer necessary, they are slowly, if haphazardly, falling into disuse.

As with Chinggis Khaan and Sükhbaatar, the images of Zanabazar are linked, if less explicitly so, to the nutag, uls and conceptions of identity. Despite the fact that Zanabazar was a high-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism, and traveled and studied in Tibet, these facts are not emphasized. Rather, it was what he did, both politically and culturally in terms of the nutag, that are important. It was his role in providing (or reinforcing) a Mongolian identity linked with Buddhism, but Mongolian Buddhism. Indeed, the proclamation of Zanabazar as the First Javzandamba Hutagt is itself indicative of Mongolians staking a claim to their own branch of Tibetan Buddhism. With this act, the (Halh) Mongolians now had their own reincarnation to rival or exceed most Tibetan ones.

Portrayals of Zanabazar have thus shifted since the socialist period, but only in emphasis. The same events and deeds are attributed to him, but they are now weighted differently. The same cannot be said for Sükhbaatar. As we shall see in the following section, the status accorded to Sükhbaatar has changed, but not in the ways predicted. The change, as we have come to expect, is portrayed as now telling the truth about Sükhbaatar, a truth that was known all along during the socialist period, if not talked about.

Sükhbaatar

In the opening pages of a socialist-era book, there is a quote by the then president of the Mongolian People’s Republic, J. Batmönökh, that sums up the prevailing socialist attitude nicely: “Sükhbaatar was, is and always will be with us” (Gongorjav 1984). This, of course, echoes the “Lenin is still with us” (“Lenin vsegda s nami”) of the Soviet Union. And like Lenin’s cult in the Soviet Union (see Tumarkin 1997), there was a similar cult of Sükhbaatar in socialist Mongolia. However, Tumarkin also notes that “by the spring of 1996, Lenin was at once a focus of reverence, admiration, anger, and nostalgia – as well as an object of commercialization and

162
humor, depending on what you read and where you looked” (1997: 288). This was not the case with Sühbaatar. With the attention showered on Chinggis Khaan, after an initial flurry of re-evaluation, Sühbaatar largely faded from public consciousness.

What is intriguing about Sühbaatar is the degree to which his reputation has survived unscathed. Sühbaatar’s links to the socialist period are not denied, but they are, to the extent that it is possible, largely ignored. More importantly, he is tied to the achieving of independence in the form of the modern Mongolian state, although the socialist period that followed is largely silenced. This has been his saving grace. It is indicative of Sühbaatar’s resonance with the conceptions of Mongolian identity we have been exploring. His repositioning reflects the tension inherent in the collision of new modes of “true” history and the lingering influence of the socialist period. All history, despite attempts to the contrary, cannot be placed into categories of good and bad, black and white. There are times and people who stubbornly resist such categorization, and Sühbaatar is one of them. Despite his role as Mongolia’s Lenin, the evils of socialism are not attributed to him, but rather to the Soviets, and in particular to Rinchino, a Buriat Mongol influential in the early days of the revolution. Sühbaatar’s vision for Mongolia is seen as having been corrupted and ignored.

Sühbaatar is of interest to us not only in his role of socialist revolutionary. He is also of interest because the re-evaluation of his accomplishments takes place in the larger context of the rehabilitation of early socialist figures. It is not so much the remembering of the “truth” about Sühbaatar that occurred as the remembering of the “truth” about others.

People in post-socialist Mongolia do not usually directly contest what Sühbaatar is credited with doing. Rather, they now have publicly rehabilitated other early socialist figures, such as Danzan and Bodoo, and have elevated them to a status similar to that of Sühbaatar. People also claim that this was the oppositional history under socialism. “They say Sühbaatar did X, Y and Z, but we knew the truth,” ran the general formula in most discussions about him. Sühbaatar also becomes important for his links, if only by association, with Rinchino, the Buriat who has become something of a bogeyman to some Mongols.16

Whatever the details of the case, Sühbaatar is still seen as playing a key role in Mongolian history, with about two-thirds of the people I surveyed in 1993 listing him as one of the five most important people, second in frequency only to Chinggis Khaan. Similarly, the 1921 revolution ranks third in importance with about 70 per cent of the respondents’ nominations; it finishes behind Chinggis’s creation of the Mongolian state in 1206 and the democratic revolution. In 1997, Sühbaatar was mentioned 40 per cent of the time by my few respondents, only slightly behind Chinggis Khaan’s 50 per cent rating.17
Other reports give a slightly different picture. In the joint Mongolian–Japanese survey published in Ardyn Erh (2 December 1992), when asked what Mongolia had to be proud of, only 1.9 per cent of the people chose Sühbaatar. Apparently, he was considered important, but not overly popular. His legacy of establishing an independent Mongolia clashes with the lingering legacy of socialism. The former does not lose out, but it is not overwhelmingly victorious either, although it has become more so as time has passed.

Yet another survey gives an even more fascinating result. Towards the end of 1999, the newspaper Zuuny Medee, in conjunction with Mongolian Radio, ran a poll to name the most important historical figure of the twentieth century. The winner, with 42 per cent of the votes received, was H. Choibalsan, “Mongolia’s Stalin.” Seven other people were listed as runners-ups. Sühbaatar, however, was not among them.18

In general, people did not report as great a change in how they viewed Sühbaatar as they did for other people listed in the survey I conducted. They, following the pattern set in the newspapers and other sources, saw any change as a re-evaluation of his roles, rather than a complete rewriting of them. “My perceptions concerning him as an individual did not change, but conceptions of the role he played changed,” wrote one 20-year-old university student. Some did see a larger re-evaluation of him. This re-evaluation was to take the form of a repositioning of Sühbaatar to make him more palatable to post-socialist, neo-capitalist Mongolia.

This lack of a major shift in the way Sühbaatar was thought about should not be taken to imply that there were few, if any, counter-histories surrounding Sühbaatar under socialism. This would be inaccurate. Rather, the same characteristics that made Sühbaatar such a suitable candidate for socialist sainthood are still important today. What did happen was that the cult of Sühbaatar, instituted by his successor, Choibalsan, was contested. The opposition centered not on denying Sühbaatar but on remembering others, and, as was the case before, this oppositional history has emerged to form the basis of post-socialist understandings. What is different, however, is that Sühbaatar’s role as an agent of independence was never questioned under socialism. Here the various versions of history were in agreement. In this regard, there are similarities between Sühbaatar and Chinggis Khaan, for neither was Chinggis’s role in the creation of the Mongolian state denied under socialism.

The view that has emerged since 1989 has the further advantage of being able to lay claim to the historical “truth.” While understandings of other historical figures, such as Chinggis Khaan and Zanabazar, also claim to be the truth, Sühbaatar is a much more recent figure in history and a greater amount of information exists about him. To what extent this does indeed support the interpretation now put forward is somewhat irrelevant.
The data exists to be appealed to – to bolster claims of objectivity and truth.

During the socialist period, Sühbaatar was seen as the single leader and founder of almost everything. A book, entitled simply Sühbaatar (Gongorjav 1984), provides a good example of this. It “is dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the birth of the founder of MAHN and the people’s state, and the Mongolian People’s Revolution’s skillful leader, D. Sühbaatar.” He is also usually credited with, among other things, the foundation of Soviet–Mongolian friendship and the Mongolian army. He was portrayed as the key revolutionary-era figure, despite the fact that he never held the office of prime minister. He was, instead, a far-sighted military genius from a poor herding family who understood that the only way forward was through socialism.

![Figure 7.2 Two images of Sühbaatar on Mongolian currency. The top image is of socialist-era currency, while the bottom is from the 1990s. Note the shift in Sühbaatar’s clothing to a more traditional Mongolian style.](image-url)
The publications on Sühbaatar during the socialist period mirror this omnipresence. A short list should suffice. There were poems, such as Damdiny Sühbaatar (a book-length poem, first published in 1957 and reprinted at least once, in 1971); numerous biographies (usually just entitled Sühbaatar); collections of tales, such as Ih Janjny Iveel Dor (Under the Protection of the Great Commander) (Ichinhorloo 1982); and collections of materials related to Sühbaatar, such as D. Sühbaatar: Collected Documents (Pürvee and Sodnomdagva 1971). These largely mirror the types of works about Chinggis Khaan discussed in the previous chapter.

This listing does not include the various books on the People’s Revolution or MAHN in which Sühbaatar figured so prominently. When one adds in money with his portrait on it (see Figure 7.2), and the publishing houses, streets, city districts, the city, the aimag and of course the main square named after him, Sühbaatar did indeed enjoy a form of immortality in Mongolia.

Sühbaatar was active in the early phases of the revolutionary movement and was a member of one of the early secret revolutionary groups. However, socialist hagiography went beyond this. It credited him with the founding of the East Hüree group, one of the two that would eventually merge and lead to the creation of MAHN (Bat-Ochir and Dashjamts 1983: 50). Although this biography of Sühbaatar does list the other founders of the group, it is clear that it affords the bulk of the credit to Sühbaatar. Other works are more explicit: Davaatseren and Gongor’s 1972 history text, for example, states that the Hüree group was founded by D. Sühbaatar, without any mention of the other members. To emphasize his prominence, this work also makes it clear that the Hüree group was in fact the first of the two “secret revolutionary groups” that were formed (Davaatseren and Gongor 1972: 85–86). In contrast, Baabar’s recent history credits the Consular Hill group, founded by Bodoo, as being the first formed (1999: 197–198). Additionally, Baabar also points out that these two groups were not the only ones in existence. Numerous secret groups, including those formed by lamas and nobility, existed in Mongolia in the early years of the twentieth century. Sühbaatar becomes just one of many reformers and revolutionaries in Mongolia at that time.

Other claims for him under socialism were justified – he was indeed (eventually) the leader of the army, and he was on one of the famous trips to the Soviet Union to seek their aid in the early 1920s. But a key element of his iconography has been rejected. Under socialism, it was claimed that Sühbaatar had met with Lenin. The most famous of the paintings depicting this event shows him meeting Lenin alone, although other sources place him as part of a group. Whatever the case, the latter version is now the accepted version. It is also pointed out at times that Sühbaatar wasn’t even particularly active in the delegations to the Soviet Union. Sühbaatar, along with Choibalsan, remained in what is now Ulan Ude in Siberia, while a
party of three (out of the “First Seven”) – Danzan, Losol and Chagdarjav, who were all later purged – went on to Omsk and eventually Moscow. It appears that much of this particular emphasis on Sühbaatar can be attributed to Choibalsan’s efforts, although people have said it continued under Tsedenbal as well. It must also be realized that five of the “First Seven” of the revolution (the party that had gone to the Soviet Union seeking aid) had later been executed as enemies of the people. As it was possible to implicate Choibalsan in these deeds, he also could not be seen as Mongolia’s answer to Lenin (Baabar 1999: 379). Sühbaatar was thus nominated for the role almost by default. His historical legacy has clearly benefited from this melding of real-life accomplishments and socialist enhancements, as it did by his early death at the age of 30. As a result of these various elements, it is Sühbaatar who is most identified with the gaining of de facto independence in 1921.

Sühbaatar’s physical appearance also helped in his positioning under socialism. Youthful, he was also a handsome man. He presented the ideal Mongol male: young, dedicated and hard-working. His youth contributed to his legacy in two additional ways. At one level, his youth reinforced Mongolia’s role as the Soviet Union’s younger brother. In the socialist iconography of Sühbaatar meeting Lenin, their respective roles are emphasized by the difference in their ages. At another level, Sühbaatar’s youth represented the idealism of Mongolian socialism, and also its unrealized potential. While this last aspect was never a part of the official iconography, it offered an anchor point for alternative interpretations of history. Since the collapse of the socialist regime, Sühbaatar has largely become inconspicuous by his presence. He is still present, but not in the way he was before 1990. He has again become human, although he is still seen as a founding-father figure. Children are still taught about him in kindergarten, but ahead of Sühbaatar now stands Chinggis Khaan. Instead of being relegated to the dust heap of history, Sühbaatar had others join him in the revolutionaries’ pantheon. It was not so much the case that Sühbaatar was demoted as it was that others were (re)promoted. Those who had been purged were rehabilitated, and Sühbaatar had to share his lowered pedestal with them.

This re-evaluation of Sühbaatar took place rather quietly throughout the 1990s. It was given a boost in 1993 by the observation of his 100th birthday, with an exhibit at the History Museum (the former Revolutionary Museum), and numerous articles in the newspapers at the time. After the exhibition, however, Sühbaatar seemed to largely fade from public consciousness. While some of the articles in the early 1990s dealt with Sühbaatar’s accomplishments, many of them were devoted to repositioning him. Rather than the traditional poor herder (and, thus, good socialist) origins ascribed to him, Sühbaatar was now being described as a member of the early Mongolian middle class. The articles are also at pains to point
out the invented nature of much of the traditional hagiography, including
that which concerns Sühbaatar’s origins and his leading role in founding the
East Hüree group. When discussing this latter point, however, one friend
volunteered that although this is what they were taught in school, they knew
that Danzan and Bodoo were responsible, rather than Sühbaatar.

Danzan in particular, who had been purged at the 3rd Party Congress in
1924, was rehabilitated, and is now portrayed as a proto-capitalist, as
Sühbaatar himself is at times. The rehabilitation of early socialist figures
becomes a double condemnation of the later socialist period and the
Soviets in particular. Not only did they purge the true Mongolian leaders
of the revolution under the direction of Comintern and, by extension, the
Soviets, but in doing so they turned Mongolia away from a more capitalist
line of development.

The purges, like Sühbaatar’s early death, now allow the Mongols to
claim that the full potential of Mongolian socialism was never realized,
and that it would have developed into something altogether different if the
early revolutionaries had lived. Such claims have been particularly effective
in politics. During the democratic revolution, it will be remembered,
Sühbaatar’s grandson joined in the protests to announce that MAHN was
not the legitimate heir to his grandfather’s vision.

This new “truth” about history is in part an official embracing of what
people said was the unofficial history during the socialist period. To
contest the representation of Sühbaatar under socialism – and, by exten-
sion, socialism itself – one therefore did not have to deny Sühbaatar had
any role whatsoever. Just as one could read multiple interpretations of
Chinggis Khaan into the official discourse, by merely asserting Sühbaatar
was indeed human, one managed to call into question the entire founding
myth of socialism. Those who had been declared enemies of the people,
and dealt with appropriately, were seen instead as victims of overzealous
ideologues. In questioning the decrees of the state, people questioned the
state itself. The revolution of 1921 is no longer a wonderful, inevitable
socialist victory bringing enlightenment. It is now, rather, yet another stage
in the progress of the Mongolian nation, part of the continuing process
that began with Chinggis’s foundation of the state in 1206 and continued
in the democratic revolution of 1990.

From this perspective, the evocative transcript that surrounded Sühbaatar
was not any particular reading of Sühbaatar’s own history. Rather, it was the
refusal to silence the other voices of the revolution. This act, although it may
not appear as significant as rendering a positive evaluation of Chinggis
Khaan, is arguably even more so. A new beginning necessitates that which
went before it. To question the new beginning, as alternative readings of
Sühbaatar’s history do, is to call into question that which is supposed to
arise from it. This is especially true in the case of socialist historiography,
with its emphasis on unilineal development and “deviations.” What is being
claimed in the questioning of the official storyline is in effect that all of the socialist period as it actually developed was itself a deviation. The plus and minus signs of history are once more exchanged.

The repositioning of Sühbaatar as a member of the nascent middle class is also instructive. Now a part of the new received wisdom, such a rewriting of the past serves to distance Sühbaatar from his socialist self and link him more closely with the newly emergent Mongolian society, where petty traders and capitalists, rather than poor herders, are the new models. Sühbaatar therefore still serves as an exemplar, but now as one that rejects what he used to stand for. His role in gaining Mongolia’s independence remains untouched, but not how this was accomplished. As we shall see in an interview below, the socialist revolution, rather than an end in and of itself, becomes a means to a greater end. This also results, once again, in the expulsion of the Soviets from their previous role. They are now tools that were lost control of, rather than guiding lights.

What we have been examining so far has been a fairly moderate repositioning of Sühbaatar. This, however, was not the only approach taken under socialism, or in the post-socialist period. Some have taken a more radical stance in reassessing Sühbaatar, although such radicalism seems largely limited to the period during and immediately after the collapse of socialism, when the need to emphasize the difference between the old and the new was that much greater. In a historical summary accompanying the proceedings of their first congress, the Mongolian Social Democratic Party does not mention Sühbaatar’s name even once, focusing instead on the purged revolutionaries Danzan and Bodoo. Instead of Lenin meeting Sühbaatar one-on-one, one of the key images under socialism, we are merely told that “Lenin received the Mongolian delegates” (Ulaanhüü 1990a: 8–9). The plural is as instructive as the omission of any direct reference to Sühbaatar. A complete rejection of Sühbaatar remained untenable, for that would have been too close to socialist rewritings of history. And, as must be emphasized, Sühbaatar and his comrades did indeed achieve a form of independence for Mongolia, a point that is not to be forgotten.

An examination of this claim, that Sühbaatar achieved independence for Mongolia, is warranted here. This, of course, was the standard interpretation under socialism. It has largely remained so even today, despite the repositioning of the socialist period as one of Soviet domination. Unlike Zanabazar, who is acknowledged as having brought Mongolia under Manchu rule, albeit, it is now said, with the best of intentions, Sühbaatar is not usually seen as having brought Mongolia under Soviet domination. The claim that Sühbaatar brought about Mongolia’s independence, while arguably a contestable point, has allowed him to survive the post-socialist transition relatively unscathed, even if in comparative obscurity. The claim also allows Sühbaatar to retain his link to the nutag while simultaneously discrediting the socialist project. He acted in the best interests of the
country, but his early death, even before Mongolia was proclaimed a People’s Republic, kept the full potential of the early dreams from being realized. What started out as a grand vision developed, as a result of foreign interference, into Soviet colonial rule.

An article on the re-evaluation of Sühbaatar from the *Mongol Messenger* (MM), a weekly English-language newspaper, is worth quoting and discussing at some length. An interview with an eminent historian, O. Pürev (P), published on the anniversary of Sühbaatar’s birth in 1993, it is fairly characteristic of attitudes at the time. Although parts of it are more radical than other reconsiderations, several points can be made from this particular article.

**MM:** Today, we are reconsidering the past history of Mongolia, including that of Sühbaatar. What new trends are there in the study of Sühbaatar’s history?

**P:** Historians studying the life and activities of Sühbaatar have a different approach to this matter. For instance, historians are divided on the role of Sühbaatar in the country’s history, whether he was the number one man in the state and party history. This is one new trend in the study of the history of Sühbaatar.

If we look back at history, we find that Sühbaatar was never appointed the country’s Prime Minister or the Chairman of the Party Central Committee, but he was the Minister of War and Commander-in-Chief. Basing on historical facts and photographs, which are incontrovertible evidence, I personally strongly believe that Sühbaatar was the number one man. This is proved by the Government Rules approved on 23 April 1921, which says that Commander-in-Chief Minister Sühbaatar, Chairman of the Party CC [Central Committee] Danzan and Premier Bodoo (their names are written in this sequence of order), shall be the Presidium of the state and government. From here we find that Sühbaatar’s name appears in front of the Party chief and Premier and moreover the rules say that during the times of war Sühbaatar shall oversee state and party matters. In 1921 there was an armed struggle, and so Sühbaatar was in full control over government matters ...

(*Mongol Messenger* no. 5, 2 February 1993, 3)

Here, in essence, Pürev is reiterating the received wisdom on Sühbaatar. He is contesting the new wisdom that perhaps Sühbaatar does not deserve all the credit he received. Pürev goes on to note that many things that Bodoo and Danzan did were attributed to Sühbaatar. Yet he re-emphasizes that “now, when we are studying history, not through a distorted prism, we find that Sühbaatar was one of the founders of the party, the new government, Mongol-Soviet friendship, and that he was indeed the founder of the
Mongolian People’s Army.” Pürev does allow, however, that Sühbaatar was not the only person to have met with Lenin, and was in fact only part of a delegation. He does not, however, support the revisionist historians, some of whom have suggested that Sühbaatar in fact never actually met Lenin.

Sühbaatar’s premature death in 1923, officially due to illness, has been explained in various ways. It was widely rumored that he was poisoned, but quite who is said to have done the poisoning has often been a good indicator of the shifting political winds. Pürev addressed this issue as well. He begins by establishing that all the early Mongolian leaders – Sühbaatar, Danzan, Bodoo, and others – were all loyal and dedicated to protecting the independent nation. This is a key point. When all is said and done, Sühbaatar’s reputation remains because he is seen as having been loyal to the nation. Whatever he did (or didn’t do) was aimed at reclaiming Mongolia’s independence. Pürev goes on to observe that

P: Sühbaatar, Bodoo, Danzan and Chagdarjav, they all stood for an independent statehood. These leaders were purged starting in April 1921 just one month after the liberation of Hiagt. These purges were master-minded and engineered by a Buryat – Rinchino, who was sent to Mongolia by the Comintern. That Sühbaatar was also a victim of Rinchino is also proved by the medical reports and statements issued after Sühbaatar’s death. (Mongol Messenger no. 5, 2 February 1993, 3)

The issue of ethnicity here is key. Rinchino was a Buriat. In contemporary constructions of Mongolness, Buriats (a Mongolian group living in Russia23), like Inner Mongolians in China, are usually excluded from the category of “real” Mongols. They are excluded for their “Russianness” and, by extension, for their betrayal or loss of “Mongolness.”24 To implicate a Buriat is to implicate the Soviets, an assault on the center of Mongol identity by an outsider. The statement is as much if not more about who is a “true” Mongol – one, by extension in this case, loyal to the revolutionary movement and Mongolian independence – than it is a theory of who killed Sühbaatar. Although such an assessment may be accurate, the blaming of Rinchino for Sühbaatar’s death also serves as a telling indictment of Soviet Russia’s guilt for Mongolia’s current woes. Russia has gone from being Mongolia’s ah (older brother) to the murderer of its great hope for democracy that Sühbaatar is now portrayed as.

Finally, Pürev makes the repositioning of Sühbaatar explicit:

MM: The socialist society, which we have been trying to build in the past 70 years, is it the society which Sühbaatar had in mind?

P: Sühbaatar wanted to build a free and democratic society, which we are trying to build now. Sühbaatar and Danzan were real
close friends, and I am sure Sühbaatar shared Danzan’s views, who warned that Mongolia “should not by-pass capitalism, if it does, it will fall into that abyss.”

(Mongol Messenger no. 5, 2 February 1993, 3)

Throughout this interview, there is a notable emphasis on national sovereignty. This, as we have seen with Chinggis Khaan and Zanabazar, is the key theme that runs throughout re-evaluations of Mongolian history. Former revolutionaries now stand as democratic protectors of the faith and the nation, in effect looking backwards instead of forwards. Those who were far-sighted enough (as Danzan is now said to have been) to argue for some sort of capitalist development are to be doubly blessed. Sühbaatar, the unswerving representative of all things socialist in Mongolia, is now portrayed as a capitalist.

There are several other points worthy of note in this interview. We find the wholesale, if largely unremarked-upon, rehabilitation of Danzan and Bodoo, with the result that Sühbaatar’s accomplishments are downgraded to what is probably a more realistic level, although they are not denied. Sühbaatar now stands alongside of, instead of in front of, Danzan. In fact, they are now said to have been friends – a strange combination under socialism indeed: the father of socialist Mongolia and a rightist enemy of the people! This is significant: Danzan was purged in 1924 for his rightist views, having advocated a more capitalist development than other revolutionaries had wanted. Sühbaatar is thus rewritten not only as a hero of the Mongolian people, but as a proto-capitalist as well. He has gone from being at the vanguard of the socialist revolution to being one of a lonely group of far-sighted democratic capitalists, crushed by their overbearing neighbor to the north. It is thus not his actual accomplishments that are being denied, but rather their implications. It is now the Soviets who take the blame for socialism, rather than Sühbaatar receiving the credit. “Democratic changes in the political, social and economic spheres were started [in 1921]. Unfortunately, due to its disadvantageous geopolitical location, Mongolia found itself encased from the late 1920s on [i.e. after the death of Sühbaatar]” (Dugersuren 1994: 16). Sühbaatar and the others were nationalists first and foremost. They thought that their nationalist ends would be best achieved by turning to the Soviet Union. They may have been mistaken, but only in the same manner in which Zanabazar is now sometimes seen as being.

What these re-imaginings of Sühbaatar have served to do is in effect delegitimate the entire socialist experience. Under socialism, Sühbaatar was a revolutionary hero, the one who, with the aid of the big-brother (in a positive, protective sense) Soviet Union, was going to lead Mongolia down the path of non-capitalist development. He had met with Lenin, and had received guidance from the very fountainhead of socialism himself.
Instead, Sükhbaatar is now portrayed as having been Mongolia’s one true hope until he was murdered by a peripheral (non-)Mongol working for the rapacious Soviet Union. Sükhbaatar in this light serves as a middleman between Chinggis Khaan and Zanabazar. Chinggis Khaan created the Mongolian state; Zanabazar did his best to protect the interests of the uls, even if it didn’t seem so at the time; Sükhbaatar is a combination of these two elements. He, like Chinggis Khaan, (re)created the Mongolian state, this time in socialist form, but he did so in the best interests of the Mongolian people. Like Zanabazar, Sükhbaatar was ultimately frustrated. It is this message, even if not spelled out explicitly, that served as a counter-history under socialism. Because he did, by any measure, work to achieve Mongolian independence, the counter-history did not need to be, and was not, as radical as it was in other circumstances. One did not need to argue that Sükhbaatar was evil; merely to suggest that he did not do all that people said he did was enough.

In the next chapter, I draw together the discussion of the three figures to illuminate more explicitly the issues they are concerned with. I also wish to return to the larger issues of the propagation of counter-histories, and to suggest what the case of Mongolia has taught us about opposition and identity under totalizing regimes.
Throughout this book, I have been examining the ways in which history was used and historical figures thought about in Mongolia during the late twentieth century. Images of people like Chinggis Khaan were used in an attempt to construct different conceptions of what it meant to be a Mongol. Ladislav Holy has observed that “nationalism is a discursive agreement that history matters without necessarily agreeing on what it is and what it means” (1996: 13). From the earliest days of il tod and öörchlön baiguulalt in the late 1980s, this has been clear. This was thrown into even sharper relief during the democratic revolution itself as the protesters and MAHN attempted to gain the symbolic upper hand through the use or rejection of symbols freighted with historical and national significance.

We have also examined the trends towards a possible agreement on what history and identity means that emerged as the post-socialist period progressed. These, as always, remain disputed. Yet the general tendencies have become clear. In this chapter, I return to a more explicit consideration of the issues behind the specifics we have been looking at and draw together the different threads that run throughout this study.

It is clear that in many ways the actual historical knowledge, as opposed to the public presentation of such knowledge, of Mongolian intellectuals, students and others did not change as much as it has been claimed since the collapse of socialism. For some, the change was substantial, but for many, it was not. The shift in public discourse that followed the change in political systems reflects certain ideas about Mongolian identity, ideas that we can loosely term nationalistic. While these ideas are being shaped in part by present circumstances, they are also based to a large extent on the historiographical trends outlined in Chapter 5. In other words, partially bounded by existing ways of thinking about the past, claims to new historical knowledge are in fact part of the identity-construction project. The socialist past, as remembered through discussions on history, is remembered within certain constraints. That is, the past, as always, is reinterpreted in keeping with present needs and, in particular, the current
political context. Some aspects of the past are being highlighted while others are downplayed, and this process is not random. This became clear during the democratic revolution with the protesters’ adroit use of historical symbolism and MAHN’s more fumbling attempts to win history to their side.

In this chapter, I return to and build upon an idea from previous chapters; namely that whatever the official position towards certain historical figures such as Chinggis Khaan or Zanabazar, the actual presentation of the figures in the written histories of the socialist era was often sufficiently ambiguous to serve as a locus of both official and oppositional histories. That is, there was created (or existed the potential to create) within the officially sanctioned texts a dualistic discursive space. From this, I argue for the need to rethink or expand certain areas of social memory theory in light of the Mongolian experiences under state socialism.

Mongolian identity and history

All three of the figures from Mongolian history can be linked to a sense of identity centered on the *nutag*, or homeland. This is not in the narrow sense of *nutag* as pastureland, or birthplace strictly conceived. Rather, in terms of identity, the idea became more abstract during the socialist period, and refers to Mongolia as both a geographical location and a political construct (cf. D. Natsagdorj’s poem, *Minii Nutag*; see Chapter 1 p. 19). The figures discussed in this book, and other figures as well, and their accomplishments are interpreted in light of this context – how they have contributed to the creation or affirmation of Mongolia as it is presently conceived.\(^1\) We can situate these figures within one of two overarching frameworks: as either situate the *uls* or defending it.

These broad categories were valid under socialist history-writing, and have continued to be so in the post-socialist period. This is largely so for two reasons. First, the socialist interpretation of historical events and figures influenced unofficial histories, and through its emphasis on state formation as a necessary step in social evolution, helped shape the current thinking on figures in Mongolian history. Chinggis Khaan, for example, went from being an ancestral cultural figure to a founding political figure (see also Kaplonski 1998). Second, the concern with state-formation and the social development of socialism was, and is, amenable to a more nationalist reading than the official line would allow. It is largely this second reading of history that has come to the fore in the post-socialist period.

The overarching categories for thinking about history are linked to the concept of an independent Mongolian nation-state. This particular twist is a relatively recent addition to Mongolian historiography. Also relatively new is the equation of the land (*nutag*) with a modern state system. This
equation of the nutag with a state system is largely a socialist construct
designed to foster allegiance to the state. This linkage of land and state
shifted with the fall of socialism, and the dominant theme became the
assertion or defense of Mongolian political independence. Whereas under
socialism historical events were officially important because of their role in
socio-political evolution, in post-socialist Mongolia, and in private in
socialist Mongolia, they became important as instances of Mongolian
political and cultural self-assertion. In its present form, this view of the
nutag also builds upon a previously existing idea, drawing upon the legacy
of the Mongol Empire to offer a new interpretation of the “truth”. Such a
reading of history seeks to legitimate the post-socialist Mongolian state by
drawing parallels with previous periods and figures in history, and illustrat-
ing how these were responsible for the preservation of Mongolia in the
face of outside opposition. History is now combed, much as it is by most
nation-builders, to demonstrate the irrefutable presence of the Mongolian
nation over time.

The emphasis on the Mongolian steppe as homeland and hence locus of
identity in its general form predates the arrival of Euro-American styles of
nationalism, or indeed any form of nationalism. The war of succession
between Chinggis’s grandsons Khubilai and Arig Böh was apparently seen
in such terms. It was, however, not a strictly nationalist interpretation, but
one based on more general cultural principles and similarities.2

In writing on Third World, or post-colonial, nationalism more gener-
ally, Eric Hobsbawm has observed that

the territorial units for which so-called national movements
sought to win independence, were overwhelmingly the actual
creations of imperial conquest, often no older than a few decades,
or else they represented religio-cultural zones rather than anything
that might have been called “nations” in Europe.

(Hobsbawm 1990: 137)

This was the case in Mongolia as well, where political boundaries of the
newly independent state (based on Manchu administrative boundaries) cut
across ethnic lines, to exclude the groups of Inner Mongolia and the bulk
of the Buriats, but to include (since the end of the nineteenth century) the
non-Mongol Kazakhs and to combine the historically often antagonistic
Zungar and Halh Mongols.

While certain elements of this identity existed prior to the revolutions of
1911 and 1921, the current nationalist twist is ironically the result of
socialism, the allegedly international movement. Almaz Khan (1995) has
suggested that being Mongol came to be seen in terms of ethnicity during
the latter part of the nineteenth century, as a reaction to increased Han
Chinese colonization of Mongolian territories. While I agree with him on
this point, I would argue that socialism did much to solidify national identity in what is now the country of Mongolia, coalescing it around the new Mongolian People’s Republic (Kaplonski 1998). Furthermore, it is open to speculation to what degree the early twentieth-century national identity penetrated beyond the intellectuals. A limited number of intellectuals had been exposed to ideas of the nation and nationalism through their experiences in China and Japan, but the bulk of the ard were not. It seems to me that it must remain an unanswerable question whether the anti-Chinese sentiment of the herders was particularly nationalist or based on other motivations, such as economic conditions.

The continuity of the nutag as a key component in the articulation of Mongolian identity is reflective in part of Mongolia’s geopolitical position. Historical images both under socialism and particularly after can best be understood as attempts to establish a Mongolian identity, not in and of itself, but specifically contra China and Russia. This is reminiscent of Barth’s (1969) take on ethnicity as a boundary marker. I do not suggest that this is the entire issue, especially as distinctions were and are made between different Mongol groups, with the non-Halh groups, especially those of western Mongolia, being associated with a degree of Otherness through their association with “traditional ethnic” costumes, dances, and so on. Particular groups at times seem singled out for having a high degree of Otherness, such as the Darhad of north-western Mongolia, who are often highlighted as being Mongols who practice shamanism, unlike the Halh who are mostly Buddhist.

Just as important as establishing a new identity in the post-socialist period is the rejection of the socialist era through a rejection of its presentation of history. In light of this rethinking of history, we should not be surprised to read in the editor’s preface to one work on the Chinggisid period about the “reawakening of the national consciousness” (Mandir 1990: 5). An encyclopedia of Mongolian customs and traditions – a popular genre in the early 1990s (Kaplonski 1995) – makes the point of equating non-socialist identity with the “true” Mongol identity even more bluntly: “If you lose your customs, it gives rise to bad people. If you forget your rituals, you will lose your ‘Mongol-ness’ [Mongol törhöö]” (Av’yasüren and Nyambuu 1992: 3). Most of these customs and rituals were officially discouraged if not banned outright during the socialist period. Celebration of the Mongolian lunar New Year, Tsagaan Sar, for example, was banned from the early 1950s on, although it was permitted in the later socialist period, but then only in the countryside, and under the rubric of “the herder’s holiday.” It was only officially re-allowed in 1988 (Av’yasüren and Nyambuu 1992: 808–809). To remember such customs is to make a statement not only about being a Mongol, but also about the moral bankruptcy of the socialist period.
The resurgent interest in customs that are seen as “traditional,” however, is only a more explicit manifestation of the general trend we have been examining throughout the course of this book. At the heart of this trend is the rejection of people, things and ideas foreign (or perceived as such), and the embracing of all things Mongolian, as defined by their relation to the steppe and to “traditional” Mongolian culture.

Heroes and history

Let us briefly re-examine the three figures. Keeping in mind the ideas we have just outlined, the various shifts and non-shifts in the public images of the figures can more easily be made sense of. In addition, other contributing factors become clearer. Key among these is a strong continuation, especially in the case of Chinggis Khaan, of previously existing images throughout the socialist period and after. To recapitulate these points here provides us with the opportunity to call them into sharper relief.

Chinggis Khaan

Within the outlined framework, the questions I wish to return to are: why the emphasis on Chinggis Khaan as law-giver, and, by extension, why is there so little emphasis on Chinggis Khaan’s military campaigns? The particular choice of Chinggis Khaan in this context becomes essentially a non-question. We saw in Chapter 5 that he has long played a central, if shifting, role in Mongolian accounts of their own history. The socialist-era texts furthered the image of Chinggis as founder of the state, rather than suppressing it. Thus, in Amar’s Mongolyn Tovch Tüüh (1989), originally published in 1934 but not strongly reflecting socialist influence, we read of Chinggis uniting the Mongolian nation (Mongol ündestniig negtej) but not of him creating the Mongolian state. The explicit political aspect is absent. It is not until the later socialist writings that we read of Chinggis as creating (baiguulah) the Mongolian state. The shift is fairly subtle, but important. The first of these – uniting the Mongolian nation – while implying a sense of commonality among the peoples of the steppe, does not do so in an explicitly political sense.

At this point we must address more directly the idea of the mutual influence of official and unofficial histories on the portrayal of Chinggis Khaan during the socialist period. Chinggis Khaan played a central role in Mongolian accounts of history prior to the advent of socialism, but his role was given a different interpretation. He was seen much more as an ancestral figure rather than a political one. The socialist account of him built upon these tendencies, but gave them its own twist. The polit-
ical aspect of Chinggis Khaan’s accomplishments became important in terms of socio-economic evolution, much as Ivan IV was credited by Stalin with advancing the cause in Russia by breaking the power of the boyars.

Only a specific part of the socialist interpretation given to the deeds of Chinggis Khaan was contested afterwards. Other aspects, such as his founding of the Mongolian state, blended with previously existing reverence for him to form the basis for the images current today. The particular emphases, if not the exact details, of socialist history were to remain with the fall of socialism, but what was the largely unofficial, oral history became the dominant, “official” historical discourse. This was not to be a complete erasure of prior thought, but rather a modification of previous interpretations. The particular emphasis on Chinggis as political creator now evident is thus clearly an artifact of socialist writing.

Similarly, the emphasis on law and the de-emphasis of Chinggis Khaan’s military campaigns can be attributed to two basic factors. One is the Buddhist tradition, which has long emphasized Chinggis Khaan as protector of the law and spiritual progenitor of the Mongols. This influence is apparent with the publication of collections of *bilig* and other sayings, which represent a blending of the Buddhist view of upholder of the law and the more active role of law-giver apparent in other sources (see Juvaini 1958: 41–2). Under socialism, Chinggis’s law was duly noted, but was interpreted as a tool of oppression of the feudal classes. The aspect of law-giver was not denigrated through absence or oblivion, but rather by active representation. The very fact that accounts of the law remained in the textbooks more easily allowed the official account to be contested. The social and political upheavals following the democratic revolution reinforced this particular focus. The uncertainties of the time and the need to replace the socialist system provided further reason – once he was already being looked to – to see Chinggis Khaan as a man capable of creating order out of chaos.

The relative non-emphasis of Chinggis’s military campaigns is first and foremost the result of the focus on the *nutag* and the *uls*. It is also due in part to the socialist portrayal. Rather than confront the socialist interpretation head-on, it would have been easier to look at Chinggis Khaan’s other exploits that were more amenable to multiple readings. It is easier to create evocative transcripts based on positive aspects of law- and state-creation than to build an argument which claims that the conquest of foreign lands was beneficial, although the latter can be done. Given this, I would not be surprised, as Western scholarship becomes more available in Mongolia and socialism further rejected, to see Chinggis Khaan’s military campaigns increase in prominence, albeit with an interpretation different from that to which we are accustomed.
Zanabazar

Zanabazar, the First Javzandamba Hutagt, represents a different but no less interesting case. Not highly prominent under socialism, he has regained a certain degree of visibility in the post-socialist context. Here, in contrast to the other figures examined, he has taken on a largely apolitical air. There remain certain intimations of politics, however. Under socialism, he was castigated for taking part in the surrender of the Halh Mongols to the Manchus in 1691. When this is talked about in contemporary Mongolia, it is more often than not seen as a necessary evil. Rather than betraying the interests of his country, as the socialists claimed, he is now said to have done what was best in the long run.

This, however, is not the main emphasis placed on Zanabazar. What is prominent now is the religious role that he played. This, again, can be seen in terms of identity. He is now closely associated with Buddhism, which is a distinctly non-Russian — and, to a lesser degree, non-Chinese — cultural marker. By emphasizing the religious aspects of Zanabazar, the political interpretations of socialism are thus rejected, and Mongolian identity, seen as distinctly Buddhist in character, is reaffirmed at the same time.

Zanabazar, as the First Javzandamba Hutagt, is particularly suitable for this role. Not only was he clearly more memorable than most of the other seven incarnations of his line (excepting the Bogd Khan), but he is linked to the early dissemination of Buddhism. While this role was a negative one under socialism, it is now viewed positively. He and others linked to early Buddhism, such as Altan Khan and Ligden Khan, are thus seen as responsible for contributing a vital element to current Mongolian conceptions of what it means to be a Mongol.

Zanabazar is particularly interesting to us, for in ways the other figures do not (excepting, of course, Chinggis Khan), he highlights the cultural aspects of current discussions of what it means to be Mongol. Zanabazar can be viewed as embodying a variation of the Two Principles of Buddhist government, spiritual salvation and worldly welfare, or, in this form, the cultural and political identities of the Mongols. Both, like the images of Zanabazar, are mutually interdependent and serve to reinforce each other.

Sühbaatar

Here again the emphasis on independence helps to explain the otherwise anomalously continuing role of Sühbaatar in Mongolian history. If we contrast the treatment that Sühbaatar has received since the fall of socialism with that of Lenin in a similar context, we find that Sühbaatar has fared better. Whatever his negative connotations because of socialism, Sühbaatar is still inextricably linked with the reassertion of Mongolian independence, and this has been his saving grace.
It was the Communist partisans – led, of course, by Sühbaatar – who were credited with driving out the Chinese from Mongolia. Sühbaatar could therefore be interpreted in several lights. Not only did he bring socialism to Mongolia, a now relatively downplayed event in his biography and one in which the blame has been shifted, but – more importantly – he brought independence by driving out the Chinese, who remain a source of much concern to the Mongolians even today.

Thus the current focus on Sühbaatar is to do away with what are regarded as the excesses of socialist historiography. He is still credited with carrying out many deeds, including the creation of a “new Mongolian state,” but he is now seen as having been one among many rather than the sole actor. The socialist view of Sühbaatar becomes rejected to the extent that he loses his hallowed position as sole progenitor of modern Mongolia. This line of reasoning, it will be recalled, was taken to the extreme by the Social Democrats in their first congress, held during the democratic revolution. Here, when recounting historical events where Sühbaatar would have been the only name mentioned under socialist history, we find he is not mentioned at all (Ulaanhüü 1990a: 7–8).

This tempered re-evaluation of Sühbaatar suggests that he is too strongly embedded in Mongolian historical consciousness to be completely denied. This strength, I suggest, is largely due to him being associated with the incarnation of Mongolia in its modern, state-based form. In other words, despite the recent sea changes, the socialist project of building up Sühbaatar has been largely successful. His role of founding father (but still at least one rank below Chinggis Khaan) appears safe for the foreseeable future.

What these various changes and non-changes argue is that there are two major driving forces behind interpretations of history in post-socialist Mongolia. The first, more important in the early 1990s than today, is the rejection of socialism. The second is the establishment of a uniquely Mongolian identity. By shifting the emphasis away from a socialist interpretation of history to what is now being presented as a “truer” picture, both of these forces are brought into play. Additionally, previously existing elements of folk and religious interpretations of history continue to be influential, as they were under socialism.

Although at first glance the changes in the public images often appear to be quite substantial, in fact a closer look shows us that the available facts have not changed as greatly as imagined. The current post-socialist images of Mongolian historical figures owe a sizeable debt to socialist modes of history-writing. This is the result of both a reaction to socialist views and a permeation of these same views through the unofficial, largely oral, history. Thus, for example, Chinggis has become a political figure, much more so than prior to socialism, although the change is not remarked upon.
This is not to say that the changes that do exist are unimportant. Indeed they are. The point I am making is that for the intellectuals of Ulaanbaatar at least, the changes in total historical knowledge were not as great as many Western commentators would have us believe. What did change, and often drastically, was the use to which this knowledge was put, both consciously and otherwise. It should not be thought that only with the fall of socialism did the influence of identity-construction become felt in thinking and writing about history. It was only after 1989, however, that these issues could come out into the open and could be debated.

I now shift to an examination of what the three figures we have been looking at can tell us about social memory more generally.

The social memory of exemplars

The particular emphasis on specific historical figures – whether we see them as heroes or exemplars – requires additional comment in the context of social memory. This is an area in which the Mongolian case calls for a rethinking and extension of existing theory. While social memory studies have often focused on memory as constituted through places or coalescing around events, here we have been examining social memory as organized around particular individuals often acting as exemplars. The Mongolian case thus expands the current thinking on social memory by forcing us to shift our emphasis and take normally neglected aspects of social memory into account.5

The three historical figures we have examined range along a continuum that explicates “the social memory of the hero.” The continuum defines to what extent the actor or exemplar is seen as a “carrier” of the events with which he or she is associated. At one end of the continuum is Chinggis Khaan. He is seen not as an actor within a specific event, such as the creation of the Mongol Empire, but rather the originator or creator of such an event. In this case, the exemplar/hero has clear primacy over events, which are created by the person in question.

Sühbaatar lies further along the continuum, where the supremacy of the individual actor is still maintained, but it is less clear-cut than was the case with Chinggis Khaan. Such was the case during the socialist period, when despite lip service to the concept of a people’s revolution, historiography and official attempts at social memory made it clear that it was Sühbaatar’s revolution. Here the actor maintains a primacy over events, although the events exist outside of the individual as well.

At the opposite end of the continuum from Chinggis lies Zanabazar. Here the presentation of the individual as originator of the historical events is even less clear. The individual, however, is accorded supremacy in the social memory – and often historical – accounts. Zanabazar may not have initiated the movement to surrender to the Manchus, but he is clearly
assigned responsibility, both under socialist historiography and afterwards. While he may have been reacting to larger events, he is still seen as an individual who is able to shape them decisively.

These cases argue that most social memory studies have in fact not problematized the issue of social memory to the degree that is often assumed. Jonathan Boyarin’s work, for example, calls for a rethinking of the issues of time and space in association with “the politics of memory,” but does not challenge the primacy of these concepts in memory itself (Boyarin 1994b). Through their selected focus on events and space, they threaten to elide differences in how memory is actualized. Such a realization is important, for as Le Goff argues, “there is no unmediated, raw collective memory” (1992: 59). We must not assume certain elements are more fundamental universally without evidence. While most studies focus on the meanings of memory and the re-rememberings given to them, up to now less attention has been paid to the influences on the characteristics of the memories. We must therefore be sensitive to the patterns and characteristics of memories rather than simply imposing our own.

Mongolian social memory and culture more generally have downplayed the importance of physicality, and place in particular, in commemoration, although they are not completely absent. While space and place remain important in the context of sacred sites and the nutag, historically they have not been as important in the use of commemoration of specific events and individuals. The monuments to such figures as Sükhbaatar to be found in Ulaanbaatar and elsewhere are largely a result of Soviet-era influence. Even the emphasis on pinpointing the birthplace of Chinggis Khaan is a relatively recent phenomenon. The preoccupation with his burial site is almost exclusively a foreign one. Harhorin, the seat of the Mongol Empire, is not a pilgrimage site, despite its association with Chinggis Khaan. Such places may have been remembered in epics and local legends, but the specific locality usually lacks any greater resonance. It is worth exploring this aspect of Mongolian social memory further.

Certain cases that may at first glance appear to undermine the argument in fact reinforce it, but with a reminder against drawing dichotomies too sharply. There is some evidence that over time, place has played a role in certain sites of worship (see Elverskog 2000), but caveats exist. One is that it is not clear if the place as a particular locality becomes important for its association with history or for more pragmatic political reasons – for example because a particular group controls the rites of commemoration, a factor which becomes important in terms of political and symbolic capital. Another is that such locations are, to a degree, “invented.” The örgöö, or palace ger, of Abatai Khan, who introduced Buddhism to the Halh, was preserved and served as a site of worship (Pozdneyev 1971: 60–61). By one measure, the location of Abatai Khan’s örgöö was important. It is said that the örgöö was
destroyed and the site used for a Revolutionary Youth League building in the 1930s. This would seem to indicate that the site itself was accorded importance at least by the early socialist government. Yet the site in eastern Ulaanbaatar was clearly not the original site of the tent, as the city had not yet been founded when Abatai Khan was alive. Finally, to the extent that such places become important, they are important because they are associated with a particular individual. It was the tent, not the specific site, that ultimately mattered.

It is worth pausing to link this point back to the concept of the nutag. We have seen that individuals are important for their role in history in relation to the nutag. Hence, Chinggis is known and remembered for his deeds in relation to the foundation of a state focused on the nutag, not for his world conquests. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the nutag can mean a specific locality; in the context we have been discussing, it refers to the larger abstraction of the Mongolian land/state. To link Chinggis Khaan to the nutag is not to associate him with a specific site suitable as a place of memory. The linking of the hero to the nutag, in other words, does not undermine the fact that location is largely subservient to the individual in social memory. Rather, it explains why certain individuals are more remembered than others. The nutag provides a link and added impetus but in itself is not sufficient to ensure commemoration.

There are indeed some instances in which a place is important, but here it is the site itself that matters, not because it is associated with a particular person or event. Sacred mountains, for example, are sacred in and of themselves, not for any clearly remembered event that took place on them, or for any person associated with them. There may have been some event or person associated with a particular site at one particular time, but, if so, such factors have not been mentioned in discussions I have had with people about such sites.7

These statements, like any generalization, need some qualification. There are elements of materiality that crop up in commemoration throughout steppe history.8 To cite a few examples, the örgöö, or palace tents, of Mongolian rulers were often preserved after their death, as was the case with Abatai Khan. Gravesites at times have been places of worship and commemoration among the Mongols and other steppe groups. And finally, various Chinese rulers have erected markers to commemorate military victories. There are other examples that could be cited, but I think these three provide a range with which to test my argument.

Two key points are immediately clear. The first is that the focus remains largely on the exemplar. Thus, only graves and palace tents of significant figures are maintained. Place becomes important, but only through its association with a specific individual. The second is the highlighting of various cultural influences throughout Mongolian history.
While it seems quite plausible and even probable that the specific emphasis on the individual owes at least some of its existence to the historically nomadic nature of the Mongols, a simple sedentary/nomadic split is insufficient as an explanation here. It is clear that both sedentarists and nomads do have different concepts of land and space and that this would influence formations of social memory. We must bear in mind that Inner Asian “nomads” have built cities over the centuries, and that there has been a long interaction with more settled peoples. Most notably in the Mongolian case, this latter includes China and Russia/the Soviet Union. Such markers as those commemorating military victories were established by a sedentary bureaucracy. Buddhist temples were also usually settled locations, allowing for and promoting a greater emphasis on space and place. In this context, however, the Buddhist influence could well have shaped the focus on the exemplar, given its emphasis on hagiographies and autobiography. Hagiographies, however, require a more standardized interpretation of individuals than the Mongolian approach to exemplars indicates. Ultimately, while we can glean hints of Mongolian social memory from earlier periods from travelers’ reports and the archives, we cannot be totally sure of how it operated or what form it took. It may well not be possible to ultimately pinpoint a single “cause” or set of “causes” for the particular forms that Mongolian social memory has taken.

Clearly, the Mongolian case calls for a more nuanced approach to memory. In particular, it demands that while we need not discard the emphasis on physical embodiments of memory, we do need to recognize that this may well be a preoccupation ascribable to sedentary societies, or to heirs of a particular cultural tradition.

France Yates, in *The Art of Memory*, for example, has amply documented the particular emphasis Western thought has placed on the physicality of memory throughout history, even to the extent of imaginary physical locations being used as memory aids (Yates 1992). Such physicality spills over into the emphasis on monuments as forms of commemoration (Gillis 1994; Young 1993). A person or group considered worthy of commemoration yet lacking a physical presence such as a monument is often considered slighted. Such physicality also exists to a certain degree in the social memory of specific individuals. Whether one thinks of the relics of Catholic saints or museum exhibits on historical figures, a physical presence translates into a form of immediacy.

The Mongolian case is important and instructive for it argues that we need to broaden our understanding of social memory. Most works on social memory assume, if not always explicitly, that memory is constituted through a focus on places or events. Even those cases that would seem to lend themselves to a focus on a specific individual are often rephrased in terms of events. Shimon Bar Kokhba, a Jewish leader who spearheaded a revolt against Roman rule in the early second century AD, would seem to
be one such example. Yet the focal point in Jewish social memory is not on Bar Kokhba himself, but on what has become known as “the Bar Kokhba revolt” (see Zerubavel 1995: Ch. 4). There are exceptions. If not explicitly couched as social memory, the cases of Eva Peron (Taylor 1979) and Charlemagne (Morrissey 2003) are nonetheless instructive. Yet such cases remain a minority in social memory studies. The Mongolian data, in contrast, strongly suggest that we need to be aware of another axis of social memory, one that has been largely untouched in the current literature. In outlining the relationship between exemplars and social memory here, I have tried to show how such an approach to social memory plays out. With this in mind, I now turn to an examination of the mechanisms of social memory in the form of evocative transcripts. I also link this to their role in both repudiating socialism and maintaining the “truth.”

Evocative transcripts reconsidered

I wish to build upon and expand Caroline Humphrey’s modification of Scott’s (1990) concept of the “hidden transcript.” She has argued that Scott’s idea of a “backstage” area where resistance could take place is an inappropriate model for a socialist regime (Humphrey 1994: 22–23; cf. Gal 1995: 416). She has suggested instead that what existed were “evocative transcripts,” where resistance was open but encoded.

In encapsulated Soviet-type situations … in order to come up with a version [of a transcript] that will be memorable and effective even for one’s own “side”, one has to use language that is, in a sense – but not in a very strong sense – the preserve of the other side.

(Humphrey 1994: 27)

Humphrey has shown that historical writings of the socialist era could be read in multiple ways in an act of resistance or subversion; I wish to take this idea further. While she has applied the concept of evocative transcripts fruitfully to a number of different forms, including rumors and jokes, I will restrict my discussion here to history texts. In doing so, however, I will suggest the ways and methods by which the evocative transcripts served to transmit knowledge.

Although the concept of evocative transcripts is a useful and powerful one, we must realize that several “levels” or forms of these transcripts existed under socialism. (Indeed, Humphrey states that she employs the term to cover “a range of different types” (1994: 26).) That is, while most socialist-era history texts can (and probably should) be read as “evocative transcripts,” this does not necessarily mean that they are all equivalent, or that the official level of discourse can be disregarded. For some people, they doubtless did represent the “truth.”
I am going to restrict my discussion to the mid- to late socialist period (from the 1950s on). It is entirely possible that “hidden transcripts” as envisioned by Scott did exist during the 1920s and 1930s in Mongolia. During this period and even up until the early 1950s, the ideological hegemony of socialism was not yet fully established, and may well have been contested as Scott suggests. After this period, however, control was largely consolidated.¹¹

Although for the figures discussed in this work, socialist historiography built upon and modified pre-existing trends and interpretations (except, of course, for Sükhbaatar), this does not mean it was a superficial imposition. On the contrary, as we have seen, the emphasis placed on certain figures by the socialist ideology has in fact resulted in lasting changes in historical perceptions. The written official and usually oral unofficial histories cannot be de-linked; their mutual influence must be recognized. One can fruitfully speak of evocative transcripts, but it must be remembered that they are not entirely autonomous, which is largely their strength.

Evocative transcripts can be broken down into two sub-types, dependent upon the actions required by the reader to extract (or recognize) a meaning distinct from the sanctioned one.

The first of the two sub-types is the type that Humphrey focuses on most, which does not necessarily presuppose an extensive base of historical knowledge. I label these “simple” evocative transcripts, for they are relatively easy to read. Referring to Zanabazar by respectful titles in socialist history texts is one such example.¹² While cultural knowledge is necessary to understand these evocative transcripts, this knowledge would not be specialized historical knowledge. One does not have to be a trained historian, or even widely read in history, for simple evocative transcripts to be effective. As a result, simple evocative transcripts are easily accessible to the population at large. They indicate to us that socialism has not succeeded in totally eradicating opposing views of history, but do not require opposition to be actively undertaken. It is even quite possible that such transcripts are enacted without undue reflection. Unless queried, one may well not notice that Zanabazar is being referred to as Öndör Gegeen (a highly respectful term). It would, of course, be possible for people not to possess the requisite knowledge necessary to “translate” these transcripts, but that is another issue, and from my discussions apparently not a common one.

Simple evocative transcripts are particularly interesting given the educational background of many of Mongolia’s intellectual and political elite. By the late socialist period, most elites and their children had been educated either in Soviet-run schools in Mongolia or in the Soviet bloc, or both. While they did possess knowledge of Mongolian history, it could at times be shallow. For such people, then, complex evocative transcripts, which I discuss below, may well have required a greater knowledge of
history than they possessed. Simple evocative transcripts, however, did not. One did not need a deep understanding of history to realize Öndör Geegen was an honorific title. One needed only to understand Mongolian.

The second type of evocative transcript we can term “complex” or “critical.” By this I mean that this category of transcript requires a certain amount of historical knowledge that the reader must bring to the text to extract the intended meaning. It requires a re-evaluation of the proffered interpretation of the event or person. Recognizing that a certain term for a religious figure is respectful is a relatively simple act, and can be done (and usually is) in an essentially passive manner. On the other hand, reading Chinggis Khaan’s Ih Zasag as a progressive rather than oppressive development is a more complex undertaking, and requires the active engagement of the reader.

In this second type of transcript, it is not so much the case that the oppositional reading is implicit in the text, but rather that the opportunity for it is created. At one level, this holds true for simple evocative transcripts as well. At a second level, however, they are different. Drawing upon a more generalized cultural knowledge, simple evocative transcripts are more likely to be “automatically” cognized. One does not usually need to actively work at understanding a joke, or to realize that titles such as “August” or “Saintly” are respectful. While some element of this remains in the complex transcripts, they also require more active interpretation. To contest Zanabazar’s assigned role in history requires at some level a rethinking, rather than the simpler act of applying pre-existing knowledge.

Evocative transcripts create a dualistic discursive space. In order to understand the ways in which this space is accessed and the alternative history recovered, let us turn to the work of the semiotician Umberto Eco. Eco presents two types of reader, the Naïve Model Reader and the Critical Model Reader (1990: Ch. 3). In the case of Mongolia, the meaning of the history texts differs depending on whether one approaches them as a Naïve Model Reader or as a Critical Model Reader. A reading by the former would result in the recovery of the sanctioned account, while a reading by the latter would be an act of resistance or opposition. Thus, by way of example, the following passage can be read in two intermingled yet distinct ways:

The elimination of tribal divisions and the political unification of Mongolia into a single state could have helped to augment the productive forces of the country and promote its cultural growth but this was hindered by the campaigns of conquest undertaken by the steppe feudal aristocracy under the leadership of Genghis Khan.

(USSR Academy of Sciences and Mongolian Academy of Sciences 1973: 109)
Approaching this passage as a Naïve Model Reader, one would extract from this exactly what the socialist rulers clearly wished to be conveyed: Chinggis Khaan, despite whatever positive impact he may have had, when all was said and done was a heartless feudal warlord. This is the fairly transparent “official” reading of the text, and exactly what people say they learned about him from official sources. Not only was this the expected, sanctioned reading of the text, but it also functioned as a “safeguard.” It was the naïve reading of Mongolian history that solicited the stamp of the Ministry of Education and allowed the book to be published. In this way it is like the “joking expression” about “oxen sitting in carts” that Humphrey refers to (1994: 27). It is an implicit but universally understood critique of Party bosses. Yet a naïve reading is merely a comment about oxen and carts. The critical interpretation might be understood, but it is shielded by the more naïve possibilities.

A Critical Model Reader, on the other hand, would look past this first reading and extract a different interpretation of the quoted text, the one in fact now openly acknowledged in the post-socialist period: Chinggis Khaan, while he may have waged a few wars, did so to unify the Mongols and create the Mongolian state. The Critical Reader is supposed to appreciate the way in which the text says what it does, to recognize the ambiguities (or other literary devices) of the text and their implications. Both readings are embedded in the text. Which one is extracted from the text, however, is ultimately dependent upon the reader and her motivations.

It has been suggested by other theorists that what Eco refers to as the Critical Model Reader is in fact shaped by the text itself. The German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser discusses this aspect by talking of an “implied reader.” “This term incorporates both the prestructuring of potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process” (Iser 1974: xii). We can, I think, fruitfully apply this idea to the evocative transcript. The presence of these evocative transcripts “prestructures” the potential meaning of the reading act, bounding the range of interpretations, while relying upon the largely oral, unofficial history to realize the potential.

I pause to note that here, as I do with Eco’s ideas, I am drawing upon theory that was originally intended to deal with fiction rather than history. Non-fiction writing, it is held, is “exempt” from these theories because it is relatively straightforward and “true.” The author intends to convey a certain message, and writes clearly enough (or at any rate attempts to) to make his meaning explicit. There is, it is hoped, little ambiguity. Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC, and while we may debate the causes and implications of this event, the meaning of the phrase itself is fairly clear, even if we know nothing else of Rubicons or Caesars.
This is all well and fine, if we assume we are dealing with some abstract text being read by a hypothetical typical reader who believes history follows some general conception of “truth.” In Mongolia, and under socialism more generally, for the intellectuals at least, history simply did not fit this picture. Socialist texts were read much more as fiction than is usual in the West. Everyone, including most of the authors, knew that the texts followed and were shaped by the ideological currents. “It was all one big cliché,” was how one government official described reading and writing history to me. An elderly historian noted that interpretations of Chinggis Khaan and others were made into political instead of scientific matters because of the larger context of Sino-Soviet politics.

In other words, even history texts took on a certain literary quality (although not in terms of style) under Mongolian socialism. Iser has described the difference between literature and film by noting that “With the novel the reader must use his imagination to synthesize the information given him, and so his perception is simultaneously richer and more private” (Iser 1974: 283). A similar process can be said to have happened with evocative transcripts and socialist history. History was not like a film, with images for everyone to see, although this was the ideal goal of socialist historiography. We were not given an image of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon around which to crystallize and hence limit our understanding. Rather, history was like a novel, suggesting images and meanings. Actually existing socialist history was even more suggestive than usual.

The reader of these texts had to use his or her knowledge of history to synthesize information in them. Historical knowledge gained from other sources, such as family, friends, and books no longer politically acceptable, found confirmation and reinforcement in the evocative transcripts. The two types of history – oral and written – came together, and out of their synthesis came a reinforced if slightly reshaped unofficial history.

In other words, readers of necessity brought their own context to their encounter with the text. This in itself is nothing special. What is special is the fact that because socialist history was so often viewed as a form of fiction, the context was able to have a much greater impact than we might otherwise have expected. To rephrase the point in Iser’s wording, the readers of socialist history “[were] forced to take an active part in the composition of ... meaning” (1974: xii). They could not sit idly by and have meaning given to them. Or, rather, they could, and some did, but in doing so they risked succumbing to the socialist view.

Social memory and socialism

So far I have been discussing the Mongolian case, and have focused mostly on relatively concrete examples. For this last section, I wish to generalize a
bit more, and consider some of the theoretical implications of what we have been dealing with as a means of tying together the various issues. In doing so, I address some points that are broader in scope than those I addressed earlier in the discussion of exemplars and social memory. In particular, I wish here to rethink social memory in light of the socialist experience.

At the beginning of this book, I suggested that social memory theory in its present form is not always applicable to the socialist context. This is because social memory, drawing mostly upon Western case studies, is based on several assumptions that are not always spelled out, including, as we have seen, their apparent rootedness in sedentary cultures. But there are also other underlying assumptions. It is the validity of these assumptions or prerequisites that I now bring into question. I limit myself here to pointing out the need for such a rethinking and expansion by continuing the discussions of evocative transcripts and James Scott’s work. For part of this discussion, I shall again be referring to Scott’s work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). While he does not make an explicit connection between his work and social memory, the parallels are clear. His work is useful to us, then, in that he addresses what are in essence issues of the social memory of dominated groups, a point largely neglected by other social memory theorists (but see Fentress and Wickham 1992: Ch. 3; and Watson 1994b).

One of the prerequisites we need to examine is the need for an “operative space.” While granting that much of what takes place in the formation of social memories does not happen consciously, there still needs to be a certain space – physical or otherwise – in which the creation of social memories can happen, for example Scott’s idea of a “backstage” area. By their nature, social memories are collective in origin and propagation. However, spaces that could be assumed to be uncontested were rare under socialism, and the penalty for a mistaken assumption could be high. Scott’s argument for hidden transcripts assumes, as social memory theory does more generally, that even if hidden, there were areas not open to penetration from the hegemonic ideology. Humphrey has noted that the case was otherwise under socialism, at least in Mongolia.

In Soviet-dominated Mongolia, such like-minded gatherings no doubt existed, but they were not peopled by the kinds of stable and enduring groups with their own social space that Scott rightly insists are necessary for the production of hidden transcripts. Furthermore, they were constantly subverted by the knowledge that virtually everyone has a double life, that anyone could be an informer …

(Humphrey 1994: 25)
In this context, it is worth considering the size of the informer network of the Mongolian security service. Although no one was able to supply me with exact numbers, or anything more than estimates (such figures are still classified), one historian working on the topic of political repression cited a figure of 60,000 people. While Mongolia’s population of about 2.4 million people is tiny, this is also a relatively recent figure. In 1980, the population stood at just under 1.7 million people (State Statistical Office 1992: 3). If we take this as our population estimate, that means about 3.5 per cent of the population were informants for the Ministry of the Interior.13 Timothy Garton Ash, in his work based on his reading of his own Stasi file, estimates that one out of every fifty East Germans were connected with the Stasi (1997: 74). In Mongolia, then, if the figure I was cited is correct, the ratio was much higher: one in twenty-eight Mongolians had connections with the secret police. Once we eliminate children, the numbers skyrocket. Even if the numbers I was given have been exaggerated substantially, the penetration of the security service remains substantial. No wonder people are reported to be against any plans to make lists of informers public knowledge.

It is also quite probable that the urban centers had more than their fair share of informants. The same historian (who claimed that he himself had been a victim of the Ministry of the Interior for pointing out discrepancies between what Voice of America and Ünen, the MAHN newspaper, had said) also reported a figure of 100 informants in the Government Palace (the main government building) alone.14 The point of this apparent digression is that in Mongolia, apparently even more so than in infamous cases like East Germany, informants were omnipresent, and “backstage” areas almost non-existent.

To return to our critique of social memory theory, systems like colonialism and slavery, which form the basis for Scott’s arguments, are based largely on physical or structural domination, rather than ideological domination. This was not the case under socialism, although we should by no means underestimate the efficacy of fear and terror in maintaining control. In this sense, socialism was much more pervasive than the other systems. Fentress and Wickham have noted that “social memory … is articulate memory” (1992: 47). Under colonialism and slavery, spaces remained in which this articulation could occur. As Scott himself notes, “the subordinate group must carve out for itself social spaces insulated from control and surveillance from above” (1990: 118). Scott is correct, given his assumptions – assumptions, however, that did not hold under socialism. As this quote indicates, social memory theory and Scott’s application of it assume a single, coherent group. It assumes that one can pit the oppressors against the oppressed, and, further, that it is usually fairly clear-cut which is which. This was not the case in Mongolia, nor elsewhere under state socialism. With extensive secret police networks, people with ideological
commitment to the ruling ideas, and other “incentives” to be loyal, control and surveillance was very seldom, if ever, eradicated from all social spaces. As a result, the hidden transcripts were forced back into the open, into the form of the evocative transcripts we have been examining.

This was particularly so in the Mongolian context. Not only was there the state security apparatus; Mongolia’s “younger brother” status vis-à-vis the Soviet Union also needs to be taken into account. Soviet advisors were omnipresent, and even the top Party members could be and were removed by the leaders of the Soviet Union. In other words, the penetration of both the public and private spheres existed at multiple levels.

This does not mean that opposition, and, by extension, social memory, that contested the official ideologies did not exist at all under state socialism. It clearly did. In perhaps the most famous case, the academic B. Rinchen stood out as an early and vocal dissident of the regime in Mongolia, although he also worked for the state. More generally, families and friends did share views that went against the accepted ideology. But this was not without risk. Although such research remains scarce (if extant at all) concerning Mongolia itself, we know from elsewhere that people did indeed inform on family members. Others, if not directly informants, did act – through fear or self-interest – in the interests of the state. One woman recounted to me how, having hidden two books that were supposed to have been confiscated, her own sister, through fear of being caught, found the books and turned them in. Clearly, a secure social space was at best tenuous and fleeting, and at worst a dangerous fiction.

The Mongolian case, in other words, argues for a need to expand current theories of social memory to include social memories under a socialist system, as I have tried to do here. Part of this revised theory must surely include a recognition that social memories of groups within a culture are not autonomous. In recent years, anthropologists have called into question the usefulness of overarching concepts such as culture and society (for a concise summary of the arguments over the term “society,” see the 1989 debate in Ingold (1996)). The same must also be done at times within such overarching categories. By tracing understandings of Chinggis Khaan, Zanabazar and Sükhbaatar through the late socialist period and the early post-socialist era in Mongolia, I have also shown that the construction and transmission of social memory is more complex than is often assumed.

Among the intellectuals of Ulaanbaatar, it was and is not possible to divorce completely private and public perceptions of history or identity. They have had a long symbiotic relationship, with the public creeping in to influence the private, and vice versa. With the fall of socialism and the advent of a democratic political system, this relationship will shift as the two spheres of history begin to collapse into one another. Evocative transcripts are no longer as necessary as they once were, and debates can take place in relative freedom. We have already witnessed some of this.
The various views of history will never disappear completely, and there will always be differences between the public and private spheres. Nor will there ever be total agreement among all Mongols on what it means to be a Mongol. Yet through their rethinking and re-remembering of history, a rough consensus has been reached that demarcates certain areas and topics as of relevance, and others as irrelevant, for thinking about identity. This is perhaps the most that any group can do. Interpretations, meaning and symbolic importance cannot be mandated. They can at best be offered, to be received, rejected or modified. Thinking about history and identity, even during the strictest periods of socialism, has never been homogenous in Mongolia, and there is no reason to think that it will start to be so now.
GLOSSARY

Aimag  Province.
Ard  People, usually used in the sense of “common people,” or “the masses.” Ard can sometimes be found as arat, based on the Mongol bichig.
Il tod  Openness, the Mongolian equivalent of the Soviet glasnost’ instituted in the late 1980s.
MAHN  Mongol Ardyn Huvsгалт Нам (Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party), the ruling Party during socialist rule, and which remains a political force in post-socialist Mongolia.
MoAH  Mongol Ардын Хүүсгэлт Нам (Mongolian Democratic Association), the first protest group to publicly announce its existence, in December 1989. MoAH later formed the Mongolian Democratic Party, which was later absorbed during consolidations of the various democratic factions in the 1990s.
Mongol bichig  Literally, Mongolian writing. Mongol bichig is used to refer to the classic vertical script used in Mongolia up until the 1940s when it was gradually replaced by a Cyrillic alphabet. Mongol bichig is said to have been created on the order of Chinggis Khaan.
MSDN  Mongol Sotsial Demokrat Нам (Mongolian Social Democratic Party), which was formed out of one of the early opposition groups and became one of the two main democratic parties in the 1990s.
Nutag  Homeland. The term can be used in the limited sense of a specific area (such as a valley), a province, or more broadly to mean Mongolia as a whole.
Öörchлэн баiguulalt  Restructuring, the Mongolian equivalent of the Soviet perestroika.
Tör  State.
Uls  Country; older meanings include “people.”
1 Politics, memory and identity

1 “Chinggis Khaan,” while an amalgam of transcription systems, is probably the most common spelling in more scholarly works, as well as better reflecting the Mongolian pronunciation. Genghis is a corruption ultimately traceable to French and Persian sources.

2 Matthew Paris recounts that the price of herring dropped at Yarmouth when, out of fear of the Mongols, the Baltic fishing fleets did not put out to sea (Morgan 1986a: 23). Columbus was inspired at least in part by the tales of the riches of the East that Marco Polo wrote about. Polo, in turn, was discussing the court of Khubilai Khaan, the grandson of Chinggis Khaan.

3 In this book, unless otherwise noted, I use the term “Mongolia” to refer to the independent country of Mongolia (from 1924 to 1992, the Mongolian People’s Republic). This may be a somewhat contentious use to some, as the term could equally well be applied to a larger culture area, which would include the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China and parts of Russia. When I refer to these larger areas, I will indicate so. The focus of this book, however, is on the more limited area of the politically independent country of Mongolia.

4 History writing is never just an academic exercise. But in certain times and places – under socialism, under colonial rule, in new nations – it is even more obviously a political exercise than usual.

5 Mongolians commonly use only one name. The initial preceding it refers to their ovog, based on their father’s (or sometimes mother’s) name.

6 The acronym is usually pronounced “MAKh Nam.”

7 This also holds true for the knowledge of the history of socialism itself in Mongolia. This is a subject outside the scope of the present work, but one I am currently addressing in other projects.

8 Ts. Damdinsüren (1908–86) was a famous writer and scholar. B. Rinchen (1905–77) was a noted scholar. D. Tömör-Ochir (d. 1985) was a member of the Politburo who was later purged. Andrei Sakharov was also an establishment figure, but the point here is that in Mongolia, dissidents as a separate category of people – as Sakharov became – were largely unknown.

9 The phrase is that of the official socialist Mongolian texts; see, for example, Mongolian and Soviet Academies of Science (1984). As will become clear later, the most substantial shift in historiography was to take place at roughly the same time.
I will on occasion also use such external reference points to apply a coherence theory of truth to certain claims. This again, however, is largely to highlight the particularities of the statement in question.

One might well be tempted to argue that rather than a matter of truths, this is ultimately a matter of interpretation. Besides remembering that it is what is believed to be true that matters, one should also keep in mind that even if any particular interpretation cannot decisively be shown to be true, interpretations can be ranked as more or less probable, and by extension, more or less “true.” (Always, of course, according to the standards of the time.)

The data could be falsified, but this would be hard to verify without access to original documents or other sources. At any rate, in such cases — such as painting a picture of inequality and oppression before the socialist period — the general outlines reflected something approaching the actual conditions of the time.

This interview was conducted in English. In the course of fieldwork, I conducted interviews in both English and Mongolian. The choice of which language to use depended on a number of factors, such as our relative fluency, as many intellectuals, especially by the later 1990s, spoke better English than I did Mongolian. Unless otherwise noted, materials from the Mongolian are my own translations.

In the literature on the role of memory in shaping culture and identity, there are two basic terms that have come into use. The older is “collective memory,” while others use “social memory.” I have adopted the latter usage here, in part to avoid what strike me as the Jungian or Durkheimian overtones of “collective memory.” Social memory is shared and constructed between members of a group, but is ultimately drawn upon and shaped by individuals.

Amy Mountcastle, personal communication.

Another Politburo resolution from approximately the same time dealt with the teaching of literature and history in schools (see Party History Institute 1967: 328–330).

Many, if not all, of Mongolia’s socialist era leaders were appointed and/or removed under the direction of Moscow.

First, the leaders of various Tatar groups were killed: “the important peoples – the Chaqan Tatar, the Alchi Tatar, the Dutaut Tartar and the Alqui Tatar – were wiped out” (Onon 1990: 67). Then a discussion was held on the fate of the others. Chinggis says, “Let them be killed! We will measure them against a linchpin and kill off (those who are taller) until they are completely destroyed” (Onon 1990: 67).

There is one in the government palace, but this is normally closed to most people.

“Naadam” itself means festival and there are numerous naadam throughout Mongolia at various levels and at various times for numerous reasons. However, when simply talking about “Naadam,” the national festival in July is usually understood as the point of reference.

These, of course, are not the only types of nationalism. A myriad of more specific types may be discerned (Hall 1993), if one is a splitter rather than lumper. These two over-arching categories, however, remain useful for classifying writings about nationalism.

It would not be insignificant, I think, to note that Ulaanbaatar is located squarely in traditional Halh territory.

A nation or nationality is usually translated in Mongolian as ündesten. The term is also sometimes translated as “race.” Yastan refers to an ethnic group, seen as a subgroup of an ündesten. The Mongols as a whole would be seen as an ündesten as would the Chinese or Russians, while a Mongolian group, such as the Buriats or Dörvöd would be seen as a yastan.

After the collapse of socialism, however, numerous Kazakh families migrated over the border to Kazakhstan. A few Kazakhs complained of discrimination – in particular, they claimed they were denied permission to build a mosque in Ulaanbaatar – but these issues do not seem to have achieved widespread attention at the national level in politics.

Even parties that might support Halh-centrism do not make it part of their official platform.

In conversations with various US officials, I was told that in the early 1990s, about half of the Mongols who visited the US overstayed their visas.

This is not to suggest, however, that such separation is possible in toto anywhere. Rather, it exists to various degrees, but less so in Mongolia than elsewhere.

As could the origin of the books. Rather selfishly – and now regretting the lost opportunity to do further research on economics and networks – I did not enquire exactly how various books, often bearing library marks (some from the western provinces), had made their way to the different vendors.

### 2 Ulaanbaatar, fieldwork and identity

1. The joke, however, only works in English.
2. Traditionally, Mongolians orient themselves facing south. The word for south, ömnö, can also mean “in front” or “before” (both spatially and temporally).
3. Guanz has no good translation into English. It literally means a restaurant, but the somewhat old-fashioned term “canteen” perhaps better captures the atmosphere of most of them.
4. Sitting in the reading room of the National Central Archives in 1997, I often was serenaded with music that drifted through the walls from the shop in the same building, although the shop was closed when I returned a year and a half later.
5. Some Mongols, however, complained to me of the opposite. With the increased mobility of families since the early 1990s, they said, the sense of community has in fact lessened.
6. In the early 1990s, bottled products in Mongolia (arbi, undaa, beer) were bought either with bottles (shiltai) or without. One had to specify if you wished to buy a beverage shiltai, as most bottles were returned and reused. The cost of the bottle (in effect, a deposit) could often approach or exceed the value of the beverage inside. Currently, only certain bottles are returned.
7. Mongol bichig is the term used to refer to the old, vertical script in use prior to the 1950s, and still used in Inner Mongolia. Bichig itself simply means “writing.”
8. This method encouraged a fairly detailed and developed knowledge of buildings and landmarks. I was often surprised to find upon moving into an apartment that people could instantly recognize the exact building based upon my general description. Many could also often give more detailed descriptions of the building and area than I could.
9. This particular role of networks seemed to decrease in importance as the 1990s wore on. This, however, was not due to a decrease in the importance of
networks *per se*, but rather an increased emphasis on the concept of the rule of law, and the portrayal of such network-driven access as a form of corruption.

10 I was amused by his attempts. He would lift a pile of Mongolian newspapers to show me whatever Russian papers were hidden underneath the Mongolian ones, as if there was something slightly obscene about his carrying them. He seemed to remember me on my subsequent trips, but had since realized that most foreigners didn't read Russian newspapers. Instead I became memorable for the variety and number of Mongolian newspapers I would buy from him.

11 Early in 1998, the American was found guilty of a reduced charge. Sentenced to eighteen months in prison, this was reduced to time already served, about three months, although he was supposed to spend the rest of the period in Mongolia. Part of his sentence was to provide child support for the Mongolian's two young children, although the sum was quite minor.

12 Such views of consultants and aid workers were reinforced in some people's view by the “Steppe Inn,” a weekly Friday gathering at the British Embassy that at various times – but apparently more often than not – has maintained a “no Mongols” policy.

13 In a document related to the 1911 Revolution, it is noted “The Chinese are born with bad characters and they find it very easy to betray others,” an attitude still prevalent today (Onon and Pritchatt 1990: 12).

14 Technically, the Mongols were ruled by the Manchus during the Qing period. The Mongols see themselves as more closely tied to the Manchus than the Han Chinese, and some Mongol groups took part in the Manchu conquests. Yet Mongols tend to talk of the Qing period as one of Chinese rule.

15 This interview was conducted in English.

16 I am told this belief originated because his ovog was based on his mother's name, rather than his father's, as is almost always the case. This was seen as an attempt to disguise his father's origin, for which there seemed to be only one logical explanation. (In fact, the mother's name could also be used if the child was illegitimate, or if the father had an “undesireable” social background.)

17 My notes indicate that the article was from the 9 August 2000 issue of Önöödör (*Today*). Unfortunately, the notes do not give the title of the article, and I have been unable to find the original in my files.

18 For a similar argument in regard to women and identity more generally, see Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) and Kandiyoti (1994).

19 This issue is interesting in its own right. Some people happily admitted that their Russian was better than their Mongolian, blaming their education. Others, friends warned me, would not be happy to be so classed, seeing it as a denial of their Mongolian identity.

20 The “urban” population in Mongolia is taken to include not only the population of Ulaanbaatar and towns like Erdenet, but also the aimag centers.

21 This is an average poverty line. The minimum subsistence level is set slightly higher in Ulaanbaatar than in the countryside. Although I have not been able to track down current official figures, government officials tell me that for Ulaanbaatar, it is about T20,000 (approximately $18) per month.

22 The economic impacts of the collapse of socialism are probably the most studied aspect of contemporary Mongolia. The UNDP’s Human Development Reports for Mongolia (UNDP 1997, 2000) are useful sources of information; see also the articles in Bruun and Odgaard (1996a), among other sources. Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath offer an anthropological look at some of these issues as they pertain to the countryside in *The End of Nomadism?* (1999). I will not address the topic of the privatization
of industries or state-owned livestock here, largely because it was not an issue which was discussed much, if at all, during my fieldwork.

23 In 2001, average household income and expenses were both listed as T111,119 (National Statistical Office 2002: 220, 222). The data, however, are less enlightening than in the past. A category of “other” has been added to the income figures, which includes “undefined income (statistical discrepancy of income and expenditure)” (National Statistical Office 2002: 220). In other words, the data have been adjusted so that expenditures do not exceed income.

24 Official statistics give an inflation rate of 183 per cent in 1993 (National Statistical Office 2002: 91), but this is not reflected in my records of prices from the first half of 1993. This may be due to at least two factors. One would be an increase in the later part of the year, when I was not there. Additionally, official statistics are presumably pegged to the official exchange rate, which did fluctuate substantially. This was largely a fiction at the personal level, however, as most people who dealt in dollars did so at the unofficial exchange rate.

3 Democracy comes to Mongolia

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from my interviews, and are my own translations from the Mongolian.

2 This interview, like some others, was conducted in English.

3 My own informal questioning of a number of Mongol friends reveals that none of them were aware of the Hövsgöl hunger strike.

4 Namsrai was at the time the secretary of the Central Committee and a member of the Politburo.

5 The US Joint Publications Research Service: Mongolia Report; “86” indicates the year, and “003” the issue number.

Compare Gorbachev’s address in February 1986 to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

The policy of acceleration is not confined to changes in the economic field. It envisages an active social policy, a consistent emphasis on the principle of socialist justice. The strategy of acceleration presupposes an improvement of social relations, a renovation of the forms and methods of work of political and ideological institutions, a deepening of socialist democracy, and resolute overcoming of inertness, stagnation and conservatism – of everything that is holding back social progress.

(Gorbachev 1986: 22)

The parallels are clear, as is the fact that the MPR was operating on a timetable slightly behind that of the Soviet Union.

6 Balhaajav had by this time replaced Namsrai as secretary of the Central Committee.

7 H. Choibalsan was the prime minister of Mongolia from 1939 until his death in 1952. Despite his role in the liquidation of at least 22,000 lamas, intellectuals and others in the late 1930s, he remains at worse an ambivalent figure to most Mongols.

8 One Mongolian book states the Shine Üe started their work “from 1989” (“1989 onnoos”), but doesn’t give additional information (Erdenetuyu 2000: 50). Other sources (see, for example, the entry for Bat-Üül in Sanders 1996) place the foundation of Shine Üe in early 1988, but I have been unable to confirm this.
9 The film was about eight hours long. A shortened version, of about four hours, was also released. Manduhai is usually referred to as Queen (Hatán).

10 One of the articles, from 31 May 1990, “Helmegdsen nam” (“The repressed party”), foreshadowed what would become MAHN’s official stance towards political repression later in the decade (see Kaplonski 1999).

11 Due to time and other constraints, I was not able to check the 1988 issues of Unen. Given the timing of events, however, I would be surprised to find much discussion earlier than this letter.

12 The phrase öndör nastan is most usually translated as “old person,” but it carries connotations of respect and authority conferred by age. The term has no real equivalent in English when used as it is in the present context, although perhaps “Elder” comes closest.

13 Unfortunately, I have not been able to see these articles myself.

14 The Chingis Khan Hotel is now located across the river from the Cultural Center, but it was not open at the time. It appears to have been under construction during the time of the protests, but I cannot be sure of this.

15 Apparently, the square in front of the Lenin Museum did not previously have a specific name. Dashzeveg dates the label of “Freedom Square” to a demonstration held there in early March 1990 (Dashzeveg 1998: 32).

16 For example, P. Ochirbat, the first democratically elected president of Mongolia, was a minister of foreign economic relations and supply during the democratic revolution. The Ministry had printing facilities and photocopiers, and some of the youth involved in the democratic movement asked permission to use them. Although official policy was to deny them access to such facilities, Ochirbat said he told them they could, but to do it after working hours.

17 I am indebted to Caroline Humphrey for this perspective.

18 Indeed, the murder has become something of a Rorschach test of Mongolian politics, with myriad theories and explanations being offered. Most commonly, Zorig is said to have been murdered by political forces who feared he would have exposed rampant corruption if appointed as prime minister.

19 The Daily Report for East Asia, 16 January 1990. The Daily Report for East Asia is a publication of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. The Daily Report is in essence a listening service, providing transcripts of broadcasts from Mongolia.

20 Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain copies of the most dramatic of these photos. I was working in the photo archives in 1999, while preparations for the 10th anniversary of the democratic revolution were in full swing. As an apparent result of other people’s interest in the same photos, the archive staff and I, after sifting through hundreds of negatives, were unable to find the ones for the photos in question.

21 Over dinner in 1999, P. Ochirbat confirmed that there were two main factions in MAHN. He was apparently referring to the early days of the democratic revolution, because he said of the two factions that one wanted to outlaw it by decree, and the other wanted to crush it by force.

22 Curiously enough, although all accounts mention the banners and slogans concerning Chinggis Khaan, I have never actually seen a photograph of one.

23 In August 1997, Enhbayar, no longer culture minister, was elected to the Ih Hural in the by-election for the seat left by Bagaband (the new president). In 2000, he became prime minister.

24 A few people (see Becker 1993) have implied that at least some of these letters were made up. Judging, however, from the number of letters to the government in the archives surrounding other events, such letters were a fairly common
occurrence. We may speculate about the motives behind the letter writing, but there is no real cause to doubt they are genuine.

25 P. Ochirbat credited Batmönkh for leading the resignation when he realized the democratic revolution could not be stopped by decree.

26 Batmönkh was to return to private life and a low profile after his resignation.

27 The premier was the chairman of the Council of Ministers – in effect the prime minister. This latter title was used at various periods, although premier is more common for the majority of the socialist period.

28 Gonchigdorj was head of the MSDN in the mid-1990s, and speaker of the Ih Hural from 1996 until 1998.

4 The symbols of democracy

1 The role of rumor and gossip in Mongolian society reflects the strengths and utility of social networks, discussed in Chapter 2. They can also be taken as reflective of doubts about the government, although their use extends beyond politics.

2 The Ministry of the Interior was the secret police – the Mongolian equivalent of the KGB. At the time of the democratic revolution, it was actually called the Ministry for Public Security. The Ministry of the Interior (Dotood Yam) was one of its earlier names, as was the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Dotood Yavdlyn Yam). Dotood Yam was a common term of reference for the Ministry in post-socialist Mongolia.

3 We should, I think, also consider the possible effects of Marxist-Leninist theory here, as I suggested earlier with Zorig’s account. After all, the arising of the opposition from the inherent inadequacies of socialism fits the Hegelian dialectical model of history perfectly.

4 I have been told by someone who knew some of the troops that they claimed they would have opened fire on the crowd if they had been ordered to do so.

5 “Barracks socialism” is a term used by the Mongolians to describe the dreariness and conformity of life under socialism, much like life in a military barracks.

6 A few specialist academic texts had been published in the old script under socialism, but these were rare exceptions.

7 As far as I am aware, this was the only use of demokrat in Mongolian. (The Social Democrats combined with a number of other parties to form the Democratic Party in December 2000.)

8 As this was a free-listed answer, all the respondents did not necessarily list the events of 1989–90 as one of the five most important events in Mongolian history. Additionally, some respondents gave less than five answers.

5 The icebergs of history

1 A previous version of this chapter was published in 1997 in the occasional papers series, Inner Asia 2(1): 48–68, as “One hundred years of history: changing paradigms in Mongolian historiography.”

2 I have elected for analytical purposes to collapse the abrogation of autonomy in 1919 into the Autonomous Period, as it seems to have had no significant impact on historiography.

3 The discussion of pre-twentieth-century historiography is necessarily cursory. Atwood (1998) offers a concise look, and the works of Sh. Bira are key contrib-
butions to the study of the period. Bira’s *Mongolian Historical Writing from 1200 to 1700* (2002) came to my attention too late to incorporate here.

4 The degree to which the shav’ can accurately be described as “serfs,” and the social structure as “feudal,” is, like most things to do with Mongolian history, open to debate. Nonetheless, both terms will serve us adequately here.

5 These references came up during conversations on history rather than folklore. This does not guarantee they are believed in as historical truth, but nonetheless the connection should not be ignored.

6 As far as I have been able to determine, this does not exist in English translation, nor in Cyrillic Mongolian. While it exists in the old Mongolian script, I am currently unable to consult this version with much fluency.

7 The degree of difference between government decrees and the actual situation is not clear here, although there is no reason to automatically doubt that history was taught.

8 Rupen, in his article “The Buriat intelligentsia,” attributes these contributions to the influence of the Russian minister, Korostovets (1956: 393).

9 It is interesting to note the parallels between the number of schools Rinchen claims existed and the number of monasteries extant at the time, over 700 in both cases. This could merely be a coincidence, indicative of some secular office attached to monasteries, or, despite Rinchen’s claim, the reading of Buddhist schools as “civilian” ones. It is possible that the “private-domestic” schools were nothing more than tutors, in which case a parallel between the number of monasteries, which would have provided the source of monks as tutors, and schools makes perfect sense.

10 The actual interpretations and presentations of history during the socialist period were by no means monolithic, as this section may seem to suggest. A detailed analysis of the shifts and trends within socialist historiography is beyond the scope of this chapter. This part of the chapter, rather, is intended to offer a broad outline of this period in Mongolian historiography.

11 See his autobiography, *Through the Ocean Waves* (1997), for more detail, although he was reticent in offering some of the insight he surely could have given into his posts and experiences.

12 For a fuller discussion of Amar’s work, see Kaplonski (1998).

13 There were other histories written under the auspices of the history project. Unfortunately, I have been unable to consult them.

14 Shirendev, evidently confusing dates and names in the interview, spoke of a “history book” written by Jamsüren and Sühaatar around 1960 that was criticized by the government. This clearly refers to the *Ardyn Unshih Bichig*. Shirendev reported that several people lost their positions as a result of the criticism.

15 The book is divided into two parts, each of which is divided into classes, which in turn are divided into chapters. Each chapter also has sections. This is only a partial, edited listing of the table of contents.

16 Although the syllabus is undated, works are cited from 1986, but no later.

17 Although published in 1989, after the reform process had begun, the textbook quoted here reflects the sentiment of the socialist period from at least the 1960s on.

18 I have been unable to find copies of the original papers, although they may well exist in archives that I did not have time to check.

19 The term I have translated in this passage as “reactionary” can also mean “cruel.”

20 The original Mongolian of the sentence clearly conveys the idea that this was a progressive step.
Ard tümnii büteesen ed material, soyolyn ünet züülüüg.

Tsadig is an interesting word to have chosen for the title of this book. While both tsadig and the other common Mongolian word for biography, namtar, can be traced back to religious origins (tsadig is from Sanskrit, namtar Tibetan), tsadig is a more respectful and literary term, implying something beyond a mere biography.

For an expansion of this particular point, see also Kaplonski (1998).

Owen Lattimore’s highly sympathetic book was also known and well-received in Mongolia during the socialist period, earning him membership of the Academy of Sciences.

6 Chinggis Khaan: creating the ulus

1 Among the former, Lenin Avenue was renamed Chinggis Khaan Avenue. Among the latter, there was a suggestion in the early 1990s to rename Ulaanbaatar “Chinggis Khaan City.”

2 Other figures from Mongolian history, not examined here, have also been used to construct a “Halhified” Mongolian identity (see Kaplonski n.d.). This clearly excludes the Kazakhs in Mongolia. Although Mongolian in terms of citizenship, they are often bracketed aside or treated as a special case in discussions of ethnicity. (See Chapter 2.)

3 In 1997, for a variety of reasons, I was only able to obtain ten responses. While this is not a significant sample size, the data is in line with that obtained from other sources and by other means.

4 Others did report that their understanding of him had changed greatly.

5 This translation is by S. Oyun.

6 The actual phrasing of the answer chosen by this last group was “It is a beneficial thing which would help to awaken the national (traditional) consciousness.” There was no option for the equivalent of “Yes, it’s fine to use his name. It doesn’t matter.”

7 Nothing ever came of this idea.

8 In the late 1990s, it was claimed that some of the Mongols, who had a good idea of the area the tomb was in, had purposely lead the Japanese astray.

9 I have not been able to confirm the exact date of the film. People I have talked to have given a range of dates, from 1987 to 1990.

10 Although I have seen parts of the film, I have not been able to see it in its entirety.

11 Maidar’s book on the Mongol Empire (1990) is a notable exception.

12 The fact that Arig Böh was older does not really come into play in the issue of succession. It may have given him slightly more legitimacy, but age was never a key factor in issues of succession in Mongolia. Some sources claim that Khubilai was older, but this is wrong.

13 This should not be confused with World Mongolians, a similar publication that came out in 2000, although it appears to be published by the same organization.

14 It should be noted that some people, including another member of the Ih Hural, told me they weren’t sure if Dashbalbar totally believed what he said, or if some of it was merely posturing. In addition, members of the Ih Hural were granted immunity for anything said during a session of the Ih Hural. Dashbalbar apparently took full advantage of this, being rumored at one time to have threatened members of the Ih Hural who did not support him.

15 This was actually much more of an acclamation ceremony than an election.
Unfortunately, I have no other publication data on the newspaper, which was apparently a one-off publication.

I have taken the liberty of editing the English of the introduction. No Mongolian equivalent is given in the book.

The source of this publication is worthy of note as well: it was published by Ünen, the MAHN newspaper, and edited by L. Tüdev, who was to be the unsuccessful MAHN presidential candidate in 1993.

A dollar shop was a shop where only hard currency was accepted. In 1993, they also tended to have more luxury items than the regular shops. Depending on the shop, these could be foreign beer, sugar cubes, soda or Eastern European cookies, among other items.

The painting was made in 1991, and was painted over between my trips of 1997 and 1999.

7 Zanabazar and Sühbaatar:
Defending and regaining the uls

1 The Zungar were a political confederacy of western Mongols, who, until their defeat in the mid-eighteenth century, were a dominant force in Inner Asia, feared as much as the Russians, if not more so, by the Qing.

2 Shar shashin, “yellow religion,” technically refers only to the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The term, however, tends to be used by many people to refer to Tibetan Buddhism more generally.

3 Such a view of the relationship between the Mongols and Manchus was to persist over time, and formed the basis for the Mongol declaration of independence when the Qing dynasty fell in 1911. The Mongols, they claimed, owed allegiance to the Manchus, not the Chinese state.

4 “Shav’” refers to the serfs subservient to a high-ranking incarnation. “Ih shav’” refers specifically to the estates of the Javzandamba Hutagt.

5 This work is perhaps more often known by a shorter title, Halhyn Tüüh (The History of the Halh).

6 Besides the obvious questions of how a city can be founded in a single spot and how that spot was recorded, this claim overlooks the fact that during Ulaanbaatar’s early history, Zanabazar’s temple and encampment were nomadic.

7 The real reason may be much more prosaic: not a whole lot did happen, and it wasn’t very interesting. Similar elisions can be found in popular American historical thought. Not much is usually thought to have happened between Plymouth Rock and the Revolutionary period.

8 As many urban Mongols understand Russian, this would not present a problem to those who wished to read it.

9 Part of this may be due to a simple time lag; it simply took a few years to translate old texts about him, etc.

10 In fact, although the People’s Revolution took place in 1921, it was not until the Bogd Khaan’s death in 1924 that Mongolia was proclaimed a People’s Republic.

11 Many of the criticisms leveled against the Bogd Khaan by the later socialists were also made by some of his contemporaries, who were interested in reforming Buddhism. In the religious sphere, he was apparently not a paradigm of spirituality.
The Dalai Lamas did come close to accomplishing this. The first living person to be given the title was the third Dalai Lama. His two previous incarnations were recognized posthumously.

Starting with the Third Javzandamba Hutagt, incarnations were prohibited from being found in Mongolia to prevent the concentration of power in noble families (Bawden 1989: 33).

I return to this point in the final chapter, but the case involving Chinggis Khaan is what I have termed a “complex” evocative transcript. It requires a greater amount of historical knowledge and reading against the socialist grain than a simple evocative transcript does.

This book was published “In commemoration of the 360th anniversary of Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar, the first Bogd Javzandamba Hutagt, the Mongolian great enlightener, outstanding spiritual leader and statesman,” according to the title page.

See, for example, Baabar (1999: 260–266), and Dashpurev and Soni (1992: Ch. 2).

The 1997 results placed a greater emphasis on contemporary figures than the 1993 results did.

The Mongol Messenger, an English-language paper, published a list of the “Millenium's Most Influential Mongols” at about the same time. In this list, Sühbaatar finishes third, after Chinggis Khaan and Khubilai Khaan. It is not indicated, however, how the rankings were arrived at (Mongol Messenger 1999).

As shown in Figure 7.2, Sühbaatar still graces some of the Mongolian currency. He appears on notes of 100 tögrög or less, while Chinggis Khaan appears on those with a value greater than 100 (the 500, 1,000, 5,000 and 10,000 tögrög notes).

The other two members of the delegation, Bodoo and Dogsom, returned to Hüree.

The exhibit had actually closed before I learned about it. Narantuya managed to get us into the exhibit anyway. But because of this, I do not have information on how the exhibition was received, etc.

Unfortunately, my copies of the original articles have been lost. The section on these articles is based on notes I made at the time. I am indebted to S. Oyun for her help.

Buriats also live elsewhere, including Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, although they are originally from around Lake Baikal.

In Mongolia even today, Buriats are at times referred to as the “Jews of Mongolia.” One Buriat friend told me that her parents tried to register her on her passport as Halh to avoid discrimination and other problems, but were rebuffed (see Chapter 2).

8 Social memory and evocative transcripts

Although the article was not originally written from such a viewpoint, Kaplonski (1993) offers readings of Chingünjav and Amarsanaa, two eighteenth-century Mongolian figures who fit the pattern as well. See also Kaplonski (n.d.).

That is, Khubilai and Arig Böh were seen as representing different cultural traditions (sedentary and nomadic, respectively). Yet to reduce a preference for lifestyle or culture to a nationalist argument is simplistic, particularly since we
have seen that the Mongol Empire included a number of groups that were not Mongols.

3 Indeed, at least some of the iconography of Chinggis seems to have been shifting towards more military portrayals in the past few years. I have not been able to study this in any depth, and at any rate I remain unsure if this represents a shift in Mongolian thinking about Chinggis or merely an attempt to market him in accordance with the expectations of foreign tourists.

4 This, however, is technically inaccurate. The Chinese were driven out by Baron Ungern-Sternberg and his army. It was the Baron, in turn, who the socialists drove out of Mongolia.

5 What follows is not a total description of Mongolian approaches to commemoration. There are numerous areas which need further exploration, including Tibetan Buddhist and Chinese influences before the twentieth century. The focus here, however, is on the late twentieth century and social memory (as distinct from official forms of commemoration).

6 Harhorin is technically more fully associated with Chinggis Khaan’s successors, but this is often conveniently overlooked, as much of the Mongol Empire has been collapsed back to the time of Chinggis Khaan himself.

7 There are a few exceptions to the sacredness of a place being the main characteristic, but the general observation holds.

8 I am indebted to Chris Atwood and Ellen McGill for bringing some of these examples to my attention.

9 While it may be useful to outline the various factors that have influenced current constructions of Mongolian social memory, we must also be wary of placing too much emphasis on the origins of contemporary practices. Attempts to do so threaten to lead us to what Evans-Pritchard so famously described as “if I were a horse” reasoning.

10 Here, however, we also begin to see parallels with the Mongolian case, where relics of Buddhist incarnations were relatively common. In the case of saints, we also see a physical object being linked to a specific person, suggesting something akin to the Mongolian emphasis on the individual.

11 It should also be made clear that this does not mean it was necessarily safe to be too openly in opposition prior to the 1950s. The late 1930s had witnessed the liquidation of probably 25,000 people (out of a population of about 750,000) based on religious or class background. Others were also implicated for alleged anti-revolutionary activities.

12 This discussion builds upon an example Humphrey uses (1994: 27). In writing this section, I had apparently read and then forgotten her use of the same example.

13 The population in 1960 was still under 1 million people, and if we still assume 60,000 informers, that would mean over 6 per cent of the people were informers. The data is somewhat problematic, as it is not clear how “informers” was defined. In other post-socialist countries, such a category at times included people who unwittingly provided information to the government. Even so, the public security network in Mongolia appears to have been substantial.

14 While no one else I talked to was willing to quantify the role of the secret police and their informers, one then Member of Parliament said that she had had the opportunity to see a listing and had recognized at least one name, and often several, on every page.
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210
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INDEX

Abatai Khan 183–4, 184
Alangoa, Queen (ancestor of Chinggis Khaan) 141–2
Altan Khan 159, 180
Altan Tovch 97, 99, 110, 127
Altantsetseg, T.: Lectures in Mongolian History (Mongolyn Tüübiin Lektsiüüd) 161–2
Amar, A.: A Brief History of Mongolia (Mongolyn Tovch Tüüh) 104, 110, 178
Amarsanaa, S. 54
ancestral spirits 122
Anderson, B. 119
Anderson, Hans Christian 85
Ardyn Erh (newspaper, The People’s Right) 27, 84, 128–9, 164
Arig Böh (grandson of Chinggis Khaan) 133–4, 176
art: achievements of Zanabazar 146, 151–2, 155, 156, 157, 159;
paintings of Sühbaatar’s meeting with Lenin 166
The Art of Memory (Yates) 185
ASH (Social Democratic Movement) 59, 61, 66, 68, 85, 85–6
Asia: rise of socialism 92
Atwood, Christopher 18, 99, 102
Autonomous Period (1911–21) 93, 94, 103
Av’yasüren, Ch. 177
Ayush, N. 128

Baabar (B. Batbayar) 53, 59, 85, 166
Baasan 83–4
Badamhatan, S. 128
Baga Hural 69–70, 74

Bagabandi (president) 130
Balhaajav, Ts. 53, 54
Bar Kokhba, Shimon 185–6
Barth, F. 177
Bat-Ochir, L. 126
Bat-Üül 54, 86
Batbayar, Ts. 88, 89
Batmönkh, J. 3, 51, 52, 59, 60, 65, 67, 68, 162
Batu (ruler of khanates) 132
Bawden, Charles 93–4, 96, 96–7, 150, 157
Bayan-Olgii (province) 16
Bayarbüü, G. 139
Beijing 43, 132
Biographies of Öndör Gegeen (Bira et al.) 161
Bira, Sh. 92, 97, 98, 100–1, 102,
103–4, 108, 126, 136, 158, 161
BNMAU-yn Tüüib Sudlah Programm (Syllabus for Teaching the History of the MPR) (Shagdarsüuren) 108
Bodoo 163, 166, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172
Bogd Khaan (emperor of Mongolia) 14,
23, 29, 81, 89, 95, 102–3, 104, 158,
180; perceptions and images of 154,
155, 157; period of rule (1911–21)
101–3, 104–5, 154
Bogd Khaan Palace Museum 151
Bogd Uul (Holy or Sacred Mountain) 28
Bold, D. 128
Boldbaatar, J. 113, 132, 161
Bolor Erih (Rashpuntsag) 99
Bolorma (translator) 130, 130–1
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (Kundera) 115
Borofsky, R. 6
boslogo (revolt/rebellion) 86, 87
Boyarin, Jonathan 183
Brest 149
A Brief History of Mongolia (Amar) 104, 110
Brunvand, J.H. 43
Bruun, O. 49, 53
Buddhism 17, 18, 177; and conceptions of Mongol identity 23, 67, 153, 156–7, 158–9, 162, 180; and Doojodorj's movement 84; and imagery used in democratic revolution 71, 81, 83; influence on historiography 93, 97–8, 100, 185; örgöö of Abatai Khan 183–4; portrayals of Chinggis Khaan 97, 100, 116, 136, 137, 142, 179; resurgence of 155, 156; socialist texts against 122; and Zanabazar 22–3, 141, 146, 147, 147–8, 148–9, 150, 154, 155, 156–7, 160, 161–2, see also Gandan monastery; Lamaism
Buriatia 43
Buriats (ethnic group) 15, 41, 42, 59, 101, 122, 142, 171, 176, 198n
Büü Mart (Don't Forget!) (Baabar) 53
Buyandelgeriyn, Manduhai 122
Byambasüren (ex-prime Minister) 41, 66, 67, 70, 130
Campi, A. 119, 123
capitalism: and historical figures 168, 172; and Marxism 103
Catholic saints 120, 185
Chagdarjav 167, 171
Chahuunddorj (Zanabazar's brother) 148
Charlemagne 186
Chatterjee, Partha 17, 52, 119
Cherkasov 127
children's books: post-socialist view of Chinggis Khaan 139
Chimid, O.: The Struggle for Independence in Northern Mongolia... 107
China: and 800th anniversary of birth of Chinggis Khaan 113; colonization of Mongolian territories 176–7; earliest records of the Mongols 110; ethnic Mongols living in 119, 171; interactions with Mongolians 185; and issue of nationality 41; issue of poisoned supplies from 43; and Khubilai Khaan 133, 134; Mongols' gaining of independence from 89, 181; policy on Chinggis Khaan 125; post-socialist attitude towards 121, 177; relationship with Soviet Union 112–13; 'restoration nationalism' 65, see also Manchu/Chinese era; Qing Empire; Tiananmen Square; Yuan dynasty
Chinese: influence on historiography and educational reform 93, 94, 99, 101, 103, 112; Mongols' hostility towards 38–40, 43
Chinese Communist Party 40–1
Chinese language 96
Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan): 800th anniversary of birth 67, 113; and adoption of Mongol bichig script 56, 157; birth 97; changing images and perceptions of 21, 98, 134, 162, 168; conquests and empire 22, 100, 121, 132, 179, 182; film about 54, 130–1; folkloric elements attached to 99; as historical figure 119, 120, 121, 123–33, 163, 164, 172, 173, 178–9; imagery used in democratic revolution 71, 81–2, 144; as law-giver 136–44, 178; parallel with Sükhbaatar 21–2; poem recited during socialist period 110; as political figure 131–3, 175, 181; portrayed in Buddhist terms 97, 100, 116, 136, 137, 142, 179; post-socialist perceptions of 1, 8, 22, 102, 108, 116, 123–6, 127–30, 131–3, 134, 135, 139, 142, 143, 179; rebirth of memory of 1–2, 4, 5, 49, 64, 81, 101, 117, 118; rule of 17, 81; search for burial place of 84, 129–30, 183; social memory of 14, 59, 182, 184; socialist view of 2, 4, 13, 21, 81, 108–9, 111–12, 112–15, 122, 126–7, 131, 132–3, 142–3, 168, 178–9; views from survey (1993) 123–4; worship of in 1990s 128–9; worship of prior to
socialism 111–12; and Zanabazar 158, 159
Chinggis Khaan (Bold & Ayush) 128
Chinggis Khaany Tsadig (The Biography of Chinggis Khaan) (Natsagdorj) 114
Chingis Haany Ulger (Tales of Chinggis Khaan) (Enhbat & Lhagvasüren) 139
Chingis Khaany Tuhai Tiühen Ülgerüüd (Historical Tales about Chinggis Khaan) (Oyunhüü & Shagdar) 139
Chingünjav 99, 107
Choibalsan, H. 29, 53, 54, 59, 96, 101, 164, 166, 167
Chojijn Lama Monastery Museum 67, 151
Choinhor, J. 157, 161
Clark, Katerina 111
class struggle 107
Clausewitz, Karl von 132
collectivization 9–10
colonialism 10, 92, 192
Columbus, Christopher 1
COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) 73, 74
commemoration: emphasis on monuments 13, 185; and memory 13, 183; of first public protest 56; stele marking founding of Ulaanbaatar 150
Communist Party of the Soviet Union: 27th Congress 200n
Concise History of Buddhism in Mongolia (Pürevjav) 148–9
Connerton, Paul 154
Council of Ministers 69
cultural identity 17, 184; importance of Zanabazar 157, 159; in Marxist view of history 152
culture: importance of Zanabazar 146, 147, 157, 159; and nationalism 15–16; and tradition 18–19
Cyrillic Mongolian writing 33, 56
Czechoslovakia 5
Dalai Lama 22, 159
Damba, S.: Ibb Mongoloos Olnoo Örgöödsön Uls 161
Damdinsüren, Ts. 5, 107
Danzan 163, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172
Darhad 177
Darhan 55, 66
Dash, M. 62–3
Dash-Yondon 74–5
Dashbalbar, O. 15, 37, 39, 43, 122, 125, 134–5, 149
Dashaldan, D.: Öndör Geegen G. Zanabazar 155–6, 161
Dashjamts, D.: The Solution to the problem of the Monasteries... 107
Dashzeveg, H. 67
Davaatseren, G. 148, 166
Davies, R.W. 3
democracy: arrival in Mongolia 70, 117; and changing perceptions of history 118–19, 143, 193–4; MAHN discussions 68; and nationalist perceptions of Chinggis Khaan 125, 135, 153, 1214; Terbish’s view 77, 78; use of term when describing collapse of socialism 86, 87; views of origins in Mongolia 72, 77
Democratic Coalition 135
democratic revolution (1990) 14, 20–1, 47, 48–9; events 50–70, 168; historiography since 94–5, 115–16, 117–18, 118–19, 168, 181–2; history and political change linked to 4, 115, 117; impact of students returned from abroad 48–9; importance of Ulaanbaatar 27; importance of Zorig 58; and rebirth of interest in Chinggis Khaan 117, 118, 144; reminiscences 72–81, 91; role of historical imagery 2–3, 49, 70, 71, 72, 81–6, 91, 144, 174, 175; scope and importance 49–50; terminology used in descriptions of 86–91
demonstrations 27, 41, 49, 56, 57, 60, 61, 63–64, 66, 69–70, 81, 84, 91, 168, 201n, see also protests
dictators: Dashbalbar’s view 134–5
Dolon Nuur 22, 147, 148, 156
Domination and the Arts of Resistance (Scott) 10–11, 11, 112, 186, 187, 191, 192
Doojodorj 84
Dörvöd (ethnic group) 198n
INDEX

Duara, P. 12, 18
Duchess Manduhai the Wise (film) 54
Dugersuren, M. 172
Dulamhand, S.: The Secret History of the Mongols and the Mongolian State Policy 140–3

East Germany: Stasi 192
East Hüree group 166, 168
Eastern Europe: nationalism 18
Eco, U. 25, 188–9
Economics: Korean funds 25; MAHN’s early reforms 52; and poverty in post-socialist Ulaanbaatar 26, 44–7; and race 43
Economy: shift to free market 74–5; and social networks in Ulaanbaatar 32
Education: early reforms and spread of formal schooling 92, 93–4, 94, 96–7, 101–2; lack of teaching about Zanabazar 150–1; new status of Chinggis Khaan 125–6; Russian schools 42, 116; under socialist regime 36, 187, see also students
elections: first free (July 1990) 65, 66, 70; of 1996 69
Electricity: problems in post-socialist period 44
Elleman, B.: Mongolia in the Twentieth Century (ed. with Kotkin) 49
The Eminent Mongolian Sculptor — G. Zanabazar (Tsültem) 152–3
English language 37, 42, 86, 128
Enhbat, Ts: Chingis Haany Ülger (Tales of Chinggis Khaan) (with Lhagvasüren) 139
Erdenet 66
Erdenetuya, N. 90
Erdeniin Touch 99
Ethnic groups 15, 41, 119, 177
Ethnicity: and geographical area 119, 176–7; Hobsbawm’s perspective 143; of Mongols in socialist histories 109–10; and nationalism 15, 16, 198n; status of Buriats 171
Europe: political influences on protestors 85–6
Evocative transcripts 102, 114–15, 118, 162, 168–9, 186–90
Exemplars: social memory of 182–6, see also historical figures
Fentress, J. 13, 24, 191, 192
Feudalism: Marxist view 107, 131, 148, 153
Films 54, 130–1, 134, 142
Fine Arts Museum 151
Fineman, M. 82
Folklore: and history 93, 94, 98–100
Food: issue of poisoned supplies from China 43; problems in supply in post-socialist period 26, 46–7; and social networks in Ulaanbaatar 32–3
Foreigners: post-socialist attitudes towards 26, 37–8, 40
Former Soviet Union: nationalism 18; statues of Lenin 145
Foucault, Michel: Panopticon 112
The Founding of a Unified State... (Ishjamts) 107
Fox, Richard 17
France: student movement (1968) 73
Franke, Herbert 136
Free Labor Party 69
Ganbaatar 48
Ganbat 49, 75–6
Ganbold, D. 69
Gandan monastery 30, 31, 152, 155
Garton Ash, Timothy 192
Genden (prime minister in 1930s) 55
Germany 17
Gers 30–1, 184
glasnost’ 4, 51, 52
Goldhagen, Daniel: Hitler’s Willing Executioners 3
 Gonchigdorj, R 70
Gongor, G. 148, 166
Gongorjav, G. 140, 162, 165
Gorbachev, Mikhail 3, 51, 76, 200n
Gov’ (Gobi desert) 151
government: and social networks 33
Grammar, A. 122
Green Party 70
Gungangnorbu, prince of Inner Mongolia 101
Gürtsseden, D.: Memories of Sühbaatar 107
Gurvan Gol (Three Rivers) expedition 84, 129–30
Halh Mongolia 112, 119
Halh Mongols 15, 41, 119, 122, 130,
176, 177; importance of Zanabazar to identity of 158–9, 162; surrender of to Manchus (1691) 21, 22, 147, 148–50
Halh-centrism 15, 141–2, 159
Han Chinese 38, 39–40, 148, 176
Hangin, G. 100
Harhorin 183
Havel, Vaclav 4, 5
health and social services: problems in post-socialist period 44
Heissig, Walther 98
Hentei 130
herders 44, 65, 165
heroes: and history 178–82, see also historical figures
historical figures 118, 119, 174; collections of sayings 140; and history 147, 173, 175, 178–82; in late socialist period 118, 121, 175, 193; portrayals of during Manchu period 98; post-socialist images of 118, 121, 146, 181–2, 193; in recent educational syllabus 126; recent poll 164; social memory of 143–4, 182–6; and the uls 120–3, see also Chinggis Khaan; Sühbaatar; Zanabazar
historical imagery 177; and democratic revolution 2–3, 49, 70, 71, 72, 81–6, 91, 144, 174, 175
historiography 91; Buddhist influence 97–8; and education reforms in Bogd Khaan period 101–3; folklorist influence 98–100; influences before 1911 95–101; overview of past hundred years 21, 93–5; periodization 111, 120, 121, 147; since democratic revolution 87, 94–5, 115–16, 127–8, 174–5, 181–2; Soviet 71; two faces of the “iceberg” under socialism 110–15, 175; under socialist rule 2, 4, 7–8, 71, 77, 81, 85, 87, 91, 94, 95, 103–10, 117, 121, 122, 169, 181, 186–90
History Museum (former Revolutionary Museum) 167
The History of the Mongol Conquests (Saunders) 116
History of Mongolia (Mongol Ulsyn Shastir) 102
Hitler, Adolf 134, 135
Hobsbawm, E. 121–2, 143, 176
Hödölgöön (movement/activity) 86, 87–91
Holy, Ladislav 5, 174
homeland see nutag
Honh (musical group) 57
Hosking, Geoffrey 9
“House of Chinggis Khaan” movement 84
housing: Ulaanbaatar 30–1
Hülegü (ruler of khanates) 132
Humphrey, Caroline 32, 33, 41–2, 83, 120, 121, 154; on hidden transcripts 186, 189; on social memory 8, 11, 107–8, 191
hunger-strikes 27, 50, 66–7, 90–1
Hunnu (Xiongnu) 109–10, 112, 125
Hüühenbaatar, D. 72
huv’sgal (revolution) 86, 87–91
Hyer, P. 113

Ibn Khaldun: The Muqadimmah 92
Ichinnorov, S.: Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar: Research Papers (ed.) 156, 161
identity see Mongolian identity
Ih Hural (Parliament) 16, 124, 134, 149; elections 1992 41; elections 2000 40–1; People’s 50, 57, 66, 67, 69–70; plan for introducing Mongol bichig 85; upheavals in 1990 68, 74
Machiavelli, Niccolò 140
Magsarjav, N.: *A New History of Mongolia* 104–5
MAHN (*Mongol Ardyn Huv'sgalt* Nam, *The Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party*) 24, 29, 83–4, 127, 135; 3rd Congress, 1924 168; 19th Congress, 1986 4, 48, 50–1, 52, 115, 152; Central Committee Plenum (December 1989) 53, 56, 59–60; Central Committee resolution against D. Tömör-Ochir 114, 144; criticism of socialist past 53, 56, 71, 91, 168; effects of democratic revolution 49, 52, 53, 54–5, 62–3, 65–6, 68, 89, 168, 175; Extraordinary Congress 68–9; fifth plenary meeting (1988) 54, 75; in 1h Hural elections, 2000 40–1, 41; influence on historiography 115; opposition to 61, 62, 66–7, 71, 82–3; Politburo 6–7, 9, 113; in recollections of the democratic revolution 72–9; Sühbaatar as founder of 23, 165, 166, 170; winning of first free elections 70
Maidar, D. 61, 66
Manchu language 96
Manchus 105; rule 38, 42, 95–6, 98, 141, 153; surrender of Zanabazar and Halh Mongols to (1691) 21, 22, 111, 121, 146, 147, 148–50, 150–1, 153, 160, 182–3
Mandir, T. 177
Manicheanism 99
Manjiin Erhsheeld Baisan Halh Mongolyn Tüüh (*The History of Halh Mongolia…*) (Natsagdorj) 149–50
Mannheim, K. 24
marriage: and issues of race 42
Marxism: approach to history 9, 94, 103–4, 105–7, 108, 109, 115, 140, 150, 152, 154; MoAH 60; social and political theory 2; Zorig’s background 73
Marxist-Leninism 68, 106, 117, 131, 151
memoirs see reminiscences
*Memories of Sühbaatar* (Gürtseden) 107
memory: and commemoration 13; and history 3–4, 185, see also social memory
migrants: Ulaanbaatar 31
Minjin, Ts. 117, 118
MoAH (Mongolian Democratic Association) 49, 54, 61, 65, 72; first congress 66, 181; public protests 56–60, 62, 63–4, 67, 83
MoAN (Mongolian Democratic Party) 69, 70
monasteries 96
*Mongol Aildal* (Gongorjav) 140
*Mongol bichig* 33, 56, 64, 71, 81, 83, 84–5
Mongol Empire: and Chinggis Khaan 22, 100, 121, 182; post-socialist views 132; seat of 183; and war between Arig Böh and Khubilai Khaan 133, 176
*Mongol Messenger* 39, 170–2
*Mongol Ulsyn Myangan Jiliin Gaihamshig* (*Mongolia’s Thousand Year Wonder*) (Tsoodol) 155
*Mongol Ulsyn Tüüh* (Boldbaatar et al.) 161
*Mongol Ünen* 84
*Mongolia in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Kotkin & Elleman) 49
Mongolian Academy of Sciences 40, 104, 114, 188; *Information Mongolia* 96, 99, 132–3, 157
Mongolian identity: and Arig Böh 133, 176; Buddhism 23, 67, 153, 156–7, 158–9, 162, 180; and the democratic revolution 50, 79–80; importance of Sühbaatar 163; importance of Zanabazar 147, 150; and link to the steppe 132, 133, 143, 176; in post-socialist period 7, 16, 26, 81, 119, 177–8; and public images of historical figures 118, 162, 174, 177; and race 35–43; relation to ulus and nutag 133–4, 175–6; relationship with politics and history 2, 4, 8–9, 11, 17, 35, 47, 117, 174–5, 193–4; and uniting of Mongols 141
*The Mongolian Independent* 40
Mongolian language: pre-1911 literature 96; samizdat 110
Mongolian National University 24, 28, 30, 62, 130
INDEX

Mongolian People's Army 23, 165, 171
Mongolian People's Party (founded by Sühbaatar) 62, 70, 83–4
Mongolian People’s Party (founded in 1990) 83
Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) 2, 103, 177; history textbooks 105, 106; nature of socialism 48; reform from mid-1980s 3
Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party see MAHN
Mongolian Radio 164
Mongolian Social Democratic Party see MSDN
Mongolian Students’ Association 66
Mongolian Traditional United Party 134–5
Mongolyn Tüühiin Deej Bichig (A Treasury of Mongolian History) 133
Mönkh Tengeriin Hüchin Dor (Under the Eternal Sky) (film) 130–1, 134, 142
MONTSAME (official news agency) 63–4
monuments 13, 28, 113, 183, 185
morality: and law 139; Mongols’ concept of 120; sayings 139–40
Morgan, David 136–7
Mörön: hunger-strike 50, 69
Moscow 11, 53, 149, 167
MRP (Mongolian Renaissance Party) 69, 70
MSDN (Mongol Sotsial Demokrat Nam, Mongolian Social Democratic Party) 48, 68, 69, 72–3, 86, 124, 169
MÜAN (Mongolyn Undesen Ardchilsan Nam, Mongolian National Democratic Party) 69
The Muqadimmah (Ibn Khaldun) 92
museums 151, 152, 167

Naadam (national festival) 14, 130
Namsray, Ts. 52, 66
Namyn Am’dral (Party Life) 56, 57
Nanzad, V. 138, 139–40
Napoleon I Bonaparte 149
Nasanbaljir, Ts. 107
National Congress Party 69
national currency 44–5, 165
nationalism 14–19, 119;
- commemoration of Chinggis Khaan's 800th birthday 113;
- “defensive” 143; and the democratic revolution 64–5, 73, 78, 79–80, 81, 82, 89, 91, 119; in Dulamhand’s pamphlet 141–2; and historical figures 118, 172, 174; post-colonial 176–7; and rehabilitation of Chinggis Khaan 64, 82, 124, 125, 135, 143, see also uls
Natsagdorj, D. 19, 175
Natsagdorj, Sh. 113, 114, 117, 160;
Namjin Erbsheeld Baisan Halh Mongolyn Tüüh (The History of Halh Mongolia…) 149–50
New Development Association (Shine Devshilt) 66
A New History of Mongolia (Magsarjav) 104–5
Niislel Hüree (later Ulaanbaatar) 101
nobility: influence on education and historiography 94, 97; secret groups 166; in time of Zanabazar 146, 147, 148–50, see also Ib Huraltai
nomads: Mongols’ identity as 38, 185; and perceptions of the ‘real’ Mongolia 27, 143
Nomads and Commissars (Lattimore) 116
Nomin, L. 130
Nora, Pierre 9
Nordstrom, C. 26
mutag (birthplace or homeland):
- different meanings 19, 121, 175–6, 184; and historical figures 184; and Mongolian identity 133–4, 143, 162, 175; post-socialist emphasis on 132, 170; and sacred places 183; and uls (country or state) 19–20, 122, 179
Nyam-Osor, N. 135
Nyambuu, B 67
Nyambuu, H. 177
Ochirbat, G. 68, 69
Ochirbat, P. 40, 66, 68, 69

228
Odgaard, O. 49, 53
Ögedei (Chinggis Khaan’s son) 121, 136
Omsk 167
Öndör Geegen: as Zanabazar’s title 146, 159–62, 187
Öndör Geegen G. Zanabazar (Dashbaldan) 155–6, 161
Öndör Geegen Zanabazar: Research Papers (Ichinnorov) 156, 161
Onon, U. 110, 142
orality: unofficial histories 110
örgöö (palace tents) 183–4
Ortner, Sherry 5
Övgön Jambal Yaria (Old Man Jambal’s Story) (Damdinsüren) 107
ovoo (rock cairns) 13
Oyunchüü, J.: Chingis Khaany Tuhai Tüühen Ülgerüüd (Historical Tales about Chinggis Khaan) (with Shagdar) 139

pan-Mongolianism 15, 141
Panchen Lama 22
Pandey, G. 80
Party History Institute: The People’s Textbook 105
patriotism 16, 71–2
People’s Revolution (1921) 14, 29, 55, 77, 163; historiography before 93; as huv’sgal or hödölgöön 86, 87, 88, 89, 90; and Rinchino 163; socialist historiography 103, 165; Sühaatar’s importance 165, 166
The People’s Textbook (Ardyn Unshib Bichig) 6, 105–6, 110
perestroika 4, 51, 52, 73, 74, 77
Peron, Eva 186
Phags-pa Lama 97, 136
place see sacred places
Playboy 60
Politburo: and The People’s Textbook 105; policies on Chinggis Khaan 6–7, 9, 113; in recollections of the democratic revolution 78; resignation of 66–7, 74, 91
political repression: during People’s Revolution (1921) 77; examination of 55, 67; exiling of L. Jamsran and G. Sühaatar 112; and informer networks 192–3, see also purges
politics: Chinese influence 40–1; during Autonomous Period 93–4, 94, 103; European models 85–6; link with religion in the “Two Orders” 158–9; relationship with history and identity 2, 4, 8–9, 11, 35, 91, 117, 174–5; and views of Chinggis Khaan 116, 125, 131–3, 178–9, 181; views of Zanabazar’s role 146, 147–8, 150, 153–4, 155–6
Popov, Gavriil 109
poverty: in post-socialist period 44–7, 135
Pozdneev, A.M. 29
Prague Spring 73
protests see demonstrations
publishing: articles about Sühaatar at his 100th birthday 167–8; books about Sühaatar during socialist period 166; books about Zanabazar in 1990s 155–6, 161–2; post-socialist books on Chinggis Khaan 116, 118, 125–6, 128; socialist period 25, 105, 126–7, 144
Pürev, O.: article in Mongol Messenger 170–2; Lesson Plan for learning about History... 125–6
Pürevjav, S.: Concise History of Buddhism in Mongolia 148–9; The Solution to the problem of the Monasteries... 107
purges: of D. Tömör-Ochir 113–14,
INDEX

115; of leaders of People’s
Revolution 168, 171, 172

Qing dynasty: collapse of 23, 88;
colonial rule under 38, 95–101, see
also Manchus

race: and identity 35–43, see also
ugsaatan
Rachewiltz, Igor de 137–8
Ramstedt, G.J. 101
Rashpuntsag: Bolor Erïb 99
recollections: of democratic revolution
72–81; of socialist era 25–6
reincarnations 22–3
religion: link with politics in the “Two
Orders” 158–9; Marxist views 107,
152; and politics before People’s
Revolution 94; Zanabazar as
exemplar of 154, 159, see also
Buddhism
reminiscences: of democratic revolution
(1990) 72–81, 91; of socialist period
107
Renan, Ernest 4
resistance: and evocative transcripts
186, 193
revolution: events of 1911 86, 87–8,
89, 90, see also democratic
revolution (1990); huv’sgal; People’s
Revolution (1921)
revolutionaries: early groups 166–7;
post-socialist view of 172
Revolutionary Youth League 61, 184
Rinchen, B. 5, 102, 193
Rinchino 163, 171
Robben, A. 26
rock bands 124
Romania 57
Rossabi, M. 39
Russia: Buriats 15, 101; ethnic
Mongols living in 119; Hobsbawm
on homeland of 121–2; and Ivan IV
179; post-socialist attitude towards
121, 177; shift to free market
economy 75, see also Buriatia; Soviet
Union
Russian Empire 38
Russian language 42, 73, 74, 96, 110
Russian schools 42, 116
Russians: attitude towards Chinggis
Khaan from 1960s 113; increased
contact with in early twentieth
century 101, 103; interactions with
Mongolians 185; post-socialist
attitudes towards 36–7, 40, 59, 171;
in time of Zanabazar 148; under
rule of Chinggis Khaan 81
sacred places 13, 183–4
Sagang Sechen (prince of Ordo
Mongols) 99
Said, Edward 3–4
Sakharov, Andrei 5
samizdat 5, 110
Sanders, A.J.K. 56, 69
Sárközi, A. 102–3
Saunders, J.J.: The History of the
Mongol Conquests 116
Scott, James: Domination and the Arts
of Resistance 10–11, 11, 112, 186,
187, 191, 192
sculptures: attributed to Zanabazar 22
Secret History (c. 1240) 97, 98, 99,
110, 116, 123, 127, 132, 139, 142;
Dulamhand on 140, 141; support of
Ih Zasag 137, 138
The Secret History of the Mongols and
the Mongolian State Policy
(Dulamhand) 140–3
secret police 78–9, 192–3
sedentary cultures 185, 191
Selbe river 28, 57
Serruys, H. 94
Severin, Tim 31
Shagdar, H.: Chingis Khaany Tuubai
Tüühen Ulgerüüd (Historical Tales
about Chinggis Khaan) (with
Oyunhüü) 139
Shagdarsüuren, O.: BNMAU-yn Tüüh
Sudlab Programm 108
shamanism 177; and historiography 96,
98, 99
Shigi-Qutugu (Chinggis Khaan’s
adopted brother) 137
Shine Üe (New Times) 53–4
Shirendev, B. 102, 104, 105
Shüger, Ts. 100
Siberia 41, 101, see also Ulan Ude
Sikes, J. 63
slavery 192
Social Democratic Movement see ASH
social memory 9–14, 175, 191; of
INDEX

Chinggis Khaan 14, 59, 182; of customs 177–8; and evocative transcripts 191–3; of historical figures or exemplars 143–4, 182–6; under socialism 143–4, 174–5, 190–4
social networks 26, 32–5, 45, 115
social spaces: under socialism 191, 192–3
socialism: collapse of in Europe 75, 167; collapse of in Mongolia (1990) 23, 27, 48, 92, 162, 193; and current nationalism 176–7; debates about true nature of 85; descriptions of collapse of 86–7, 89; Dulamhand’s view 141; goals in early stages of democratic revolution 52; history 111–12, 121, 144; influence on post-socialist historiography 181–2; protests against 53, 64–5, 67, 83; social memory 143–4, 174–5, 190–4; Sühbaatar’s importance to 146, 163, 164, 166–7, 171–2, 181; texts against Buddhism 122
Sodnom, D. (premier) 68
Sodnom, S. 106, 109
The Solution to the problem of the Monasteries… (Pürevjav & Dashjamts) 107
Sonam Gyatso 159
Southerland, D. 64
Soviet bloc 2, 44
Soviet Union: and 800th anniversary of birth of Chinggis Khaan 113; collapse of 75, 88, 89; cult of Lenin 162–3; education of students in 42, 73, 96, 187; as elder brother to Mongolia in socialist period 12, 71, 88, 167, 172–3, 193; historiography 71, 111; increasing criticism of 14, 36, 60, 64, 163, 169, 170, 171, 172; Mongolian delegations to 166–7; parallels with during reforms 53; process of reform and democracy 3, 48, 51, 74; relationship with China 112–13; repression and purges by 55, 168; significance of Chinggis Khaan imagery to 81, see also Communist Party of the Soviet Union; former Soviet Union; Moscow; Russia soyombo 82, 157
Stalin, Joseph 53, 57, 73, 127, 134, 135, 179
Stalinism 51
state see ils
statues: Chinggis Khaan 137; Lenin 145; Stalin 57; Sühbaatar 62, 145; Zanabazar 155; Zorig 58
The Struggle for Independence in Northern Mongolia… (Chimid) 107
students: response to film about Chinggis Khaan 130; studying in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 48–9, 73, 74, 116
Süh-Erdene (Sühbaatar’s grandson) 62, 168
Sühbaatar, D. 2, 21–2, 23, 59, 62; and achievement of Mongolian independence 164, 169–70, 171, 173, 180–1; early death 168, 170, 171; grandson of 62, 168; as historical figure 119, 120, 121, 125, 145–6, 162–73, 180–1; images of on currency 165; importance to socialism 146, 163, 164, 166–7, 171–2; portrayal of under socialism 23, 162, 164, 165–7, 172–3; post-socialist re-evaluations of 111, 145–6, 162, 163–4, 164–5, 167–71, 180, 181; social memory of 182;...
statue of 145; and Ulaanbaatar 29, 31
Sühbaatar, G. 112, 133
Sühbaatar (Gonggorjav) 165
Sühbaatar Square 60, 61, 64, 145, 150, 166; demonstrations 57–9, 76, 79; hunger strike 50, 66–7, 90–1
Sum’yaa, B. 54
Sun Yat-Sen 94
Surmajav 67
tahilga (prayer services) 13
Tatars: genocide of 142
temtsel (struggle) 86, 87
Terbish 71, 76–9
Thelen, D. 6
Tiananmen Square protests 49
Tibet: and Bogd Khaan 158; and cultural and religious links with India 97, 98, 99, 157; and histories of the Mongols 110; in stories of Chinggis Khaan 97, 99, see also Buddhism
Tibetan language: pre-1911 literature 96, 100–1
Tomör-Ochir, D. S, 67, 113–14, 115
totalizing regimes 173
trade: diversification 43
traditional culture 18–19, 37; and Buddhism 156–7; Doojodorj’s movement 84; reclaimed since democratic revolution 71, 177–8
truth: in accounts of Zanabazar 153, 156; and history 3, 10, 95, 110, 127–8, 130, 163, 168, 186, 190; and memoirs 107; post-socialist interest in 127–8, 181
Tsagaan Sar (Mongolian lunar Nnew Year) 177
Tsedenbal, Yu. 53, 59, 85, 167; wife of 77
Tsdev, D.: Ih Shav’ 149
Tsend, T. 55
Tserenbaltav, S. 117, 118
Tsetseriileg, Ts. 4
Tsoodol, I.: Mongol Ulsyn Myangan Jiliin Gaibamshig (Mongolia’s Thousand Year Wonder) 155
Tsültem, N.: The Eminent Mongolian Sculptor – G. Zanabazar 152–3
Tumarkin, N. 162–3
Tumet Mongols 159
Tüséet Khan (Gombodorj) 22, 146, 148
Tuul river 28, 31
ugsaatan (race) 131, see also race
Ulaanbaatar 23, 142; and democratic revolution 50; fieldwork and research 20, 23–6; importance of 27–8; intellectuals of 34, 182, 193; monuments to historical figures 145, 183; physical setting 28–31; post-socialist economies and poverty 44–7; race and identity 35; schools 101; and site of ger of Abatai Khan 184; social memory 13–14; urban culture and social networks 32–5; Zanabazar as founder of 146, 150, see also Niislel Hüree
Ulaanhuu, P. 101, 169
Ulan Ude, Siberia 166
uls (country or state): and Chinggis Khaan 124, 125, 131, 173; and historical figures 120–3, 147, 162, 173; Hunnu 125; and Mongolian identity 133–4, 147, 162, 175–6; and nutag (birthplace or homeland) 19–20, 122; and Zanababazar 147, 173
unemployment: in post-socialist period 45–6, 135
Ünen (newspaper) 23, 55, 56, 57, 60, 62–3, 65–6, 67, 71–2, 84, 113, 114, 192
United States of America (USA) 17, 19
urban culture: Ulaanbaatar 28–9, 32–5
USSR see Soviet Union
USSR Academy of Sciences 188

Verdery, Katherine 12, 24
Veyne, Paul: on “icebergs of history” 92–3, 94, 95, 99
Voice of America 192

Wang, G. 65
Watson, Rubie 3, 4–5, 10, 191
wealth: with end of socialism 46, 47
Western ideas and practices: about Mongolia 27; in government 17
Wickham, C. 13, 24, 191, 192
women: and concerns about
Mongolness 42; role in the democratic revolution 80–1

Yates, F.: *The Art of Memory* 185

yavdal (act/event) 86

Young Economists’ Club 54

Yuan dynasty 97, 113, 133

Zaanhüü, J. *Lectures in Mongolian History (Mongolyn Tüühiin Lektsüüd)* 161–2

Zanabazar, G. (First Javzandamba Hutagt) 2, 12, 21, 22–3; accounts given in 1993 survey 153; as artist 146, 151–2, 155, 156, 157, 159; and Buddhism 22–3, 141, 146, 147, 147–8, 148–9, 150, 154, 155, 156–7, 160, 161–2; in evocative transcripts 188; as historical figure 119, 120, 121, 145–6, 146–62, 147, 164, 169, 172, 173, 180; importance to Mongolian identity 147, 150; post-socialist re-evaluations of 145–6, 153–9, 161–2, 180; social memory of 182–3; socialist portrayal of 111, 146, 147–53, 160–1, 180; statue 155; and surrender to Manchus 21, 22, 111, 121, 146, 147, 148–50, 150–1, 153, 160, 182–3; title of Öndör Gegeen 146, 159–62, 187; and Ulaanbaatar 14, 29

Zardihan, K. 56, 57, 66, 69

Zerubavel, Y. 186

Zorig, S. 58, 59, 62, 70, 72, 83, 154

Zoroastrianism 99

Zungars 147, 148, 149, 153, 176

*Zuu ny medee* (newspaper) 164

INDEX

233