CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

THE LEGACY OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE IN MONGOLIA

Ippei Shimamura

INTRODUCTION

Historical figures are portrayed in different ways at different times. In some cases, a person who has been negatively evaluated is reassessed positively, and vice versa. When it comes to Chinggis Khan, the founder of the Great Mongolian Empire, his portrayal varies depending upon culture, region, era, and individual. Obviously, there is a vast amount of academic research on Chinggis Khan. On top of that, Chinggis continues to be depicted in various fields, such as novels, plays, movies, and music, all over the world. In other words, Chinggis Khan has been the resource for both academic and cultural production across the globe. This is one of the greatest legacies left by Chinggis and the Mongol Empire.

His image differs greatly between the East and the West. Indeed, Chinggis Khan might be the “litmus paper” for testing one’s views regarding Asians.1 In the West and Russia, Chinggis Khan has long been a symbol of brutality and barbarism. As is well known, the “enlightenment” thinkers, such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, disparaged Chinggis and the Mongol Empire, and this tendency carried over to the modern Western world.2 On the other hand, in East Asia, many Asians came to regard Chinggis as their “racial” and/or national hero after they encountered Western “modernity.” For example, some Japanese elites, such as Suematsu Kencho (1855–1920), who studied at the University of Cambridge and was one of Japan’s first Doctors of Letters, fabricated the story that Chinggis Khan was Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), a famous Japanese military commander, in order to overcome their own inferiority complex toward the West. A Yale alumnus named Oyabe Mata-ichiro (1861–1941) also tried to prove the Japanese Chinggis “hypothesis.”3 In China, despite the fact that the historical Chinggis Khan could not speak or write in Chinese, historians have long considered him as one of the greatest “Chinese” emperors.

When it comes to Mongolia, Chinggis Khan and his great empire are the foremost symbol of national pride in the 21st century. If one walks around the capital Ulaanbaatar, it is very easy to find the name and image of Chinggis everywhere. A giant statue of Chinggis Khan sits in front of the government palace, attended by
Qubilai and Ögödei on either side. A 40 meter-high equestrian statue of Chinggis was also built in Erdene county, an eastern suburb of the capital Ulaanbaatar. Moreover, in 2012, National Pride Day coincides with the “birthday” of Chinggis Khan on the first day of the first winter month by their traditional lunar calendar, which falls on different days of the Gregorian calendar each year.

In spite of today’s glorification, Chinggis Khan was, supposedly, almost forgotten when Mongolia started to modernize after they gained independence from the Qing dynasty in the early 20th century. In fact, the glorification of Chinggis Khan began only after the fall of the socialist regime. The democratization movement, which began in December 1989, was regarded by the Mongols as a kind of “ethno-national revival” to liberate themselves from the yoke of the Soviet Union. Chinggis Khan and his empire was the most important icon for their democratization because they were not allowed to speak of him under pressure from the Soviet Union. When democratization started, the rock band Khonkh (the Bell) sung, “Forgive us! We have been unable to sing your precious name during the socialist era. Forgive your poor people for having been afraid to even speak out your name albeit we wanted [to].” The song was enthusiastically supported by the citizens and represented the national sentiment of Mongolia at the time.

Yet can the Mongolian nationalism, symbolized by Chinggis Khan, simply be explained as a reaction to Soviet “oppression” before being “liberated” under the influence of “Western views”? If the name of Chinggis had been completely forgotten during the socialist era, Chinggis would not have suddenly appeared as their nationalistic icon shortly after the democratization movement started. It is more natural to deduce that Chinggis Khan had already been a nationalist icon for Mongols during the socialist era, even if covertly.

As Benedict Anderson argued, the concept of a nation, or the imagined community, was generated in the process of modernization through the proliferation of printing technology, which made it possible for people living in distant regions to imagine themselves as a common literate culture, which he dubbed “print capitalism.”4 What is rather unique about Mongolia is that nationalism was generated by interpreting the “print socialism”: modernization and the spread of printing technologies were brought about during the socialist era, and nationalism was constructed by/with socialism.5 In 1945, under the influence of the Soviet Union, the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced instead of traditional Mongolian script, which had been used since the 13th century. It was, therefore, after the introduction of Cyrillic script that modern education was developed, and the literacy rate increased so rapidly.6 Thus, it is certain that knowledge of Chinggis started to spread in Mongolia during the socialist period (1924–1992), especially after the late 1940s, when education in the Cyrillic script became widespread.

Yet, all publications in socialist Mongolia were censored by the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (hereafter MPRP), which followed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (hereafter CPSU). In fact, the Soviet Russian scholars intervened to recast Mongolian history because both the Mongol Empire and Chinggis Khan represented national humiliation and the two-century-long Mongol rule of Russia, which was denounced as the “Tatar-Mongol Yoke.”7 The Soviet Russian scholars and media constantly provided negative information on Chinggis to local Mongol scholars.

Mongolian intellectuals, however, constructed their own nationalism, absorbing the knowledge from the Soviet Union and interpreting it through “rhetorical negation”: the
more Russians criticized and even demonized Chinggis, the more Mongols saw him as great and a source of Russian fear. This “antonymic understanding” later spread to the general public through word of mouth, which I designate the “reverse of print socialism,” which differs much from print capitalism, or the capitalist formation of nationalism.

Christopher Kaplonski cast doubt on the idea that the socialists demonized Chinggis Khan in Mongolia. Nonetheless, local intellectuals would recollect “he was forgotten from our history” and/or “we were not allowed to speak on him during the socialist era.” Examining the contradictory discourses between “documented past” and “recalled past,” Kaplonski argues it is important for post-socialist Mongols to highlight the negative aspects of socialism to underline Chinggis’s contemporary role: a symbol of national pride and the new democracy. As a result, he concluded the post-socialist Mongols “remembered” the “mythico-history” in which “Chinggis was forgotten in the socialist period.” Yet, quite oddly, Kaplonski ignored both the contents and compiling process of the *History of the Mongolian People’s Republic* (hereafter the *National History*), which should be indispensable materials for examining the socialist discourse on Chinggis Khan.

The *National History*, which was the official history of Mongolia, was compiled three times throughout the socialist period. The first edition was compiled in Russian and translated into Mongolian for publication in 1955. Three volumes of the revised edition came out in 1966, 1968, and 1969, and the third edition was out in 1984. Each edition was compiled in Russian and Mongolian. Thus, in this chapter, I would like to demonstrate how Chinggis Khan was represented in Mongolia during the socialist era and how Chinggis Khan was portrayed as the national hero by interpreting “print socialism,” examining the contents and compiling process of the *National History*.

Whereas Chinggis was portrayed as a bloody invader and destroyer of foreign nations in the first edition of 1954 and 1955, the second edition of 1966 saw him in a different way: the founder of the Mongolian independent state. Yet, the third edition returned to the same stance as the first edition. This dramatic change to the discourse on Chinggis indicates the trajectory of the tough negotiation between Mongolia, the Soviet Union, and even China.

**REPRESENTATION OF CHINGGIS KHAN IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY**

In the early 20th century, Mongolia’s traditional image of Chinggis Khan was that of a religious ancestor: a Buddhist deity or a mythical hero from folklore rather than a historical personage. However, after the Qing dynasty collapsed (1911) and Mongolia regained its independence, Mongolian intellectuals gradually acquired geographical and historical information by translating major works of Western and Soviet scholarship on Chinggis and the Mongol Empire. As a result, the Mongolian historical consciousness was both secularized and Europeanized.

It was in *A Brief History of Mongolia* that Mongolian intellectuals first wrote their own history using modern methodology, while also referring to Russian and European scholars such as B. Vladimirtsov, G. Ramstedt, and W. Kotowicz. The author, A. Amar, was the prime minister of Mongolia in the early 20th century (in office 1928–1930, 1936–1939). However, this volume was not a major resource for constructing Mongolian nationalism because it was confiscated soon after its publication. Amar was then arrested and executed in Moscow on July 10 in 1941.
because he “betrayed the revolution” and was accused of being a Japanese spy.  

After Amar’s purge, Mongolian intellectuals stopped writing on Chinggis Khan and only committed to translating Russian writings on the topic, which was much safer. From the 1940s to the early 1950s, Mongol representations of Chinggis disappeared, and instead, translations of Russian writings became the mainstream. For instance, Ts. Damdin-Surun (Damdinsüren) translated Pozniakov’s *The Mongol Empire and the Age of Chinggis Khan* into traditional Mongolian in 1941. However, soon after its publication, the literacy policy was reset under the influence of Soviet Russia: the orthography was changed from Mongolian vertical script to Cyrillic script in the same year so that writings such as Amar’s work, which praises Chinggis Khan, would not have been widely read by the Mongolian public.

In the postwar period, parallel with the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union adopted a policy of tightening its grip on the nationalism of non-Russian ethnic groups. At the end of 1948, the first Mongolian textbook, *Ardyn Unshikh Bichig* (The People’s Reader), was published. Yet shortly after its publication, Yu. Tsedenbal, the Secretary General of MPRP, officially criticized the book for its “errors” of “praising Chinggis Khan’s robbery campaign” and its “exclusively nationalistic tone.” Accordingly, this volume was banned, and those involved in editing it were dismissed from their workplaces.

Nonetheless, local scholars tried to publish books about Chinggis Khan. Ts. Damdinsüren translated *The Secret History of Mongols* into Cyrillic Mongolian, mentioning the Marxist view, in which Chinggis Khan was the chief of an oppressive feudal clique, in the preface. In spite of the criticism against Chinggis and the Mongol Empire, this volume became “the best seller” throughout the socialist era, being reprinted four times, thus helping spread knowledge of Chinggis to the general public in Mongolia at that time.

In addition, local Mongol intellectuals translated Vasily Ian’s novels, such as *Chinggis Khan* (1939) and *Batu* (1941). The translation project was acceptable for the MPRP and CPSU because these books received a great response in the Soviet Union, and Ian won the Stalin Prize in 1942 at the height of the Soviet–German war. *Chinggis Khan* was written from the perspective of a subject of the Khwarazmshah dynasty, named Rahim, whose home was invaded by Chinggis (1219–1223) and depicted Chinggis Khan as a brutal, barbaric, ugly, and greedy man and the Mongol army as a group of beggarly-dressed ruffians. This volume became widely known in Mongolia because 10,000 copies of the Mongolian translation were published in the country, whose population numbered 758,000 at the time. The Mongolian public accordingly came to learn about Chinggis’s conquest of other countries such as China, Central Asia, and Russia through Ian’s novel because *The Secret History of the Mongols* does not provide accurate geographical information on the foreign wars against Western countries, such as “Oros akh nar” (Russian Elder Brothers).

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After the death of Kh. Choibalsan (1952) and Stalin (1953), the Soviet–Mongolian *National History of Mongolia* project began. It took political intervention from the Soviet Union to make another country’s national history: this volume was de facto written only by the Soviet Russian scholars, albeit the project was named a “joint
work” between the Mongolian Science Committee (MSC, later Mongolian Academy of Sciences) and the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union (hereafter ASSU).

According to the official history of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the joint National History project began in December 1948 after Tsedenbal’s criticism against “the People’s Reader,” with the agreement of S. I. Vavilov, president of the ASSU, and B. Jargalsaikhan, chairman of the MSC. When the first compilation meeting of the book was held in December 1948, it was already decided that Soviet scholars would write most of the volume, except for the contemporary history. The Russian historians Kozin and Iakbovskii were in charge of writing the section on the history of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire.

Thus, Chinggis was portrayed as an exploiter of nomads, a bloody invader, and a destroyer of foreign countries in the first edition, despite such demonization having nothing to do with socialist ideology. The first edition was compiled in Russian first and published in Moscow on October 26, 1954. Thereafter, the National History of Mongolia was translated into Mongolian and published in April 1955 in Ulaanbaatar. A significant number of volumes were printed both in Russia and Mongolia: 10,000 copies of the Russian version and 25,000 copies of the Mongolian version were printed, although the total Mongolian population at that time was merely 827,000.

The contents of the section on Chinggis Khan and the Mongolian Empire consisted of only 31 pages of the total 539 pages in the Mongolian edition. It avoided Temüjin’s youth, which was vividly depicted in The Secret History of the Mongols, and less than two pages were devoted to the process of unifying the Mongol tribes before Chinggis ascended to the throne in 1206.

The book contained a strong bias against Chinggis in the first edition. For example, the author concluded that the nökhör (companions), Temüjin’s chief vassals, “were private servants (shadar zarts) who were accomplices of the nobility of the time” and “their role was to subdue the common nomadic people who fought against feudal exploitation and subjugation,” citing a passage from The Secret History of the Mongols that the nökhörs said to Chinggis “We will capture and offer beautiful girls and swift horses (to your majesty), going to many battles.”

Whereas the first edition describes very little about Temüjin’s early life, it provides detailed information on Chinggis’s campaigns against foreign nations, using the special term “robbery campaign” (Mon. diirmiin ayan dain), not invasion (tüремгиilel) nor conquest (ezegnel, baildan daguulalt). For example, for the fall of Samarqand, the first edition speaks eloquently from the viewpoint of the conquered people, without citing any primary sources:

The citizens of Samarkand showed the invaders how they truly loved the hometown, defending the city so tenaciously and heroically. Chinggis Khan’s army, however, slaughtered thousands of people and occupied the capital of Khwarazm after the encircling operation for four to five months. Driven by hatred, Mongolian warriors killed countless numbers of people.

Finally, the first edition brands Chinggis’s empire as merely a gang of robbers without any economic substructure:

[Chinggis Khan] directed all the power of the Mongol nation into robbery campaigns to enslave the peoples of Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Chinggis’s
empire had no economic base (*niitiin ediin zasgiin suuringüi*), and specialized in military organization for conquest so that it was a mishmash of peoples and tribes that gathered under the rule of the Mongol chieftains.²⁸


Shortly after the publication of the Mongolian version, the Institute of Oriental Studies, ASSU unilaterally sent a letter to N. Jagvaral, chairman of the MSC, on June 8, 1955, informing him that the Standing Committee of the ASSU planned to compile a new three-volume *National History of Mongolia* and asked for Mongolian cooperation in writing and compiling the book.²⁹ However, the Soviet side had already decided the whole schedule and the editorial members. Writing was to begin in January 1956, and the project was to be completed in December 1959 for publication in 1960. The editorial members from the ASSU included A. A. Guber, S. V. Kiserëv, and L.P. Duman.³⁰

In response, the MSC expressed its sincere gratitude to the ASSU and the Soviet scholars who proposed the plan. They promised that Mongolian scholars would “willingly” participate in the new compilation project but also proposed a new deadline of 1965 because there was not enough time to complete the project by 1959. Most notably, the MSC proposed inviting the Chinese Academy of Sciences to participate in this project. The MSC wrote to the ASSU:

> it is essential for us to establish close research cooperation with Chinese scholars because we need Chinese primary sources and also the assistance of Chinese scholars for translating them, in order to write the history of relations between China and Mongolia.³¹

The Soviet Union responded to this proposal on August 17, 1956: “We understood the importance of Chinese primary sources, and agree to the participation of Chinese scholars in our project.”³² Concurrently, they notified the editorial board members and chosen Soviet authors.

Meanwhile, on February 16, 1957, the MSC assigned editors and authors for the second edition and appointed Sh. Natsagdorj to write the part on Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire. On June 19, 1957, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the MPRP established the Preparatory Committee for the Compilation of the Three Volumes of the *National History* from 1958 to 1960. The committee appointed L. Tsend as the chairman, with Sh. Natsagdorj and M. Ser-Odjav as members.³³ Finally, the joint-editorial council, consisting of historians from three countries, gathered in Moscow from December 9 to 18 in 1957. There were 45 participants in total: 33 scholars from the Soviet Union, 3 scholars and 4 interpreters from China, and 6 scholars from Mongolia.³⁴

The council approved two changes to the section on Chinggis Khan from the first edition. The first was the inclusion of Temüjin’s childhood and the struggles in his youth. The change occurred as most Soviet scholars no longer viewed *The Secret History of the Mongols* as “literature” but as a historical source. Secondly, they added a new section titled “the Unified Mongol State,” giving a certain positive evaluation to Chinggis’s unification of Mongolia.³⁵
However, the Chinese scholars suddenly withdrew from the project. On February 5, 1958, the Chinese deputy minister of culture met with Mr. Sosorbaram, the Mongolian minister of culture, in Beijing and said, “Although the joint project of compiling the history is useful, we have not even finished writing our own history, nor been able to come up with the unified view on when feudalism and capitalism began.”36 According to the archival material in the Institute of History, the message from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai stated:

It is not appropriate for our country (China) to participate in the joint compilation of National History of Mongolia by the three countries. However, we are ready to provide all relevant materials in our possession if necessary. If the history of a country is written by historians from another country, it will not be possible to fully and legitimately evaluate the flow of that country’s history.37

Obviously, Zhou’s comments were an indirect criticism of the Soviet-led compilation project. China officially withdrew from the project in February 1958, possibly due to fears the Soviets intended to compile the National History of China in the name of internationalism, which Nikita Khrushchev advocated by criticizing Stalin after his death in 1956 as well as the Sino–Soviet split over the doctrinal interpretation on Marxism. Another consideration was that from the 1930s, Mao Zedong used Chinggis Khan as a resource for building Chinese nationalism, by regarding him a hero of the “Chinese Nation.” For example, Mao composed a poem in praise of himself in 1936, saying, “Although Chinggis Khan was the heavenly Hero who achieved much in one generation, he merely knew how to bend a bow and shoot the giant eagle,” indicating he was superior to the Mongol leader. Mao also moved the mausoleum of Chinggis Khan from Ordos in Inner Mongolia to Yan’an and held a ceremony for him.38

Despite the Chinese withdrawal, the three-volume second edition of The National History of Mongolia was published in April 1966. The second edition saw substantial changes in relation to Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire, now covering two-thirds of the first volume, consisting of 24 chapters divided into 2 parts and 6 subsections. Secondly, the chapter titles changed from negative expressions, such as “The Foundation of the Unified Feudal State of Mongolia” and “The Conquest of Chinggis and the Mongol Empire.”39 More importantly, the second edition reevaluated the Mongol Empire as a state with a political system, instead of a mishmash of robber bands. It devoted 13 pages to a section titled “Political Organization of the Mongol State.”40 As mentioned, Temüjin’s youth received 43 pages based on The Secret History of the Mongols, a source ignored in the first edition.

The second edition adopted “the summer of 1162” as the birth year of Chinggis Khan, based on copies of the Yuan Shi provided by Chinese scholars. Although the Chinese scholars withdrew from the project, their brief participation provided Chinggis Khan’s birth year, which was “unknown” in the first edition. The second edition also described Chinggis Khan’s birthplace: “Temüjin was born as the son of Queen Hö’elün, wife of Yesügei Baatar in Delüün Boldog, which is near the Onon river, in Khentii Province of our country.”41 Mongol scholars may have seen it as essential to identify Chinggis’s birthplace within the territory of the current Mongolian People’s Republic because some foreign scholars located it in Southern Siberia – inside Soviet territory. Also, the evaluation of Chinggis’s early life dramatically
changed. He moved from being a spoiled son of the feudal aristocracy to a person who overcame poverty and hardships; whereas Temüjin was described only as “the son of a rich feudal lord” in the first edition, the second edition eloquently describes Yesügei Baatar’s murder and the subsequent impoverishment of Temüjin’s family.42

The second edition kept an “objective” view of Chinggis’s character. Reflecting back on how he murdered his brother, Bekter, it stated that: “Temüjin grew up to be extremely pompous and ill-tempered, compared to the other children.” On the other hand, it also remarks that “Temüjin was famous among the people for his courage and quick wit,” mixing up his strengths and weaknesses.43 Moreover, dramatic changes were not limited to the treatment of Chinggis’s early life but also that of his vassals and his conquest. Rather than describing the nökör as “private servants” and “their role was feudal exploitation and subjugation,” the second edition evaluated the nökör as diametrically opposite: “First of all, we have to describe that the support of nökhör and anda (sworn brothers) played essential roles for Temüjin’s unification of the Mongols.”44

Regarding Chinggis’s external campaigns, especially the battle of Samarqand, the second edition objectively explains not only the brutality of the Mongols but also the reason why Chinggis was able to capture the city. It is clear that Mongol scholars were able to correct the biased description of Chinggis Khan to some degree in the second edition: the text shifted from “They defended Samarkand tenaciously and heroically” to “there were betrayers inside the city” and acknowledged that the Mongol troops did not kill all the citizens but actually killed “three quarters” of them.45 These changes were made by citing the Jami’ al-tavarikh and the Travels to the West of Qiu Changchun, which the Chinese provided.

On the other hand, the conclusion to the chapter on Chinggis’s achievements in the second edition evaluated him on the basis of socialist ideology: “Chinggis concentrated all of his energy for the aristocracy.”46 “He strengthened feudalism, suppressing the people.” Likewise, it gave a negative assessment of his external campaign as destructive and stunting the development of those countries.47

Meanwhile, the second edition refutes the essentialist discourse made by A. P. Petershevsky, a Soviet historian:

the Mongols’ massacres were so systematic because these were carried out by the direct commands from Chinggis. This system suited the mentality of both Mongolian and Turkic nomads who joined him because this system works only for breaking down resistance, and committing robbery.48

The author of the same chapter in the second edition, Sh. Natsagdorj, offered an alternative view by indicating that some of Chinggis’s sons opposed the massacres, and that such massacres were drastically reduced in the reign of Ögödei Qa’an (1229–1241). In doing so, Sh. Natsagdorj, “indirectly” argued against Petershevsky’s narrative that the massacres were due to the nomads’ inherent racial predisposition toward violence.49

Thus, the discourse of the second edition, which was mainly written by a Mongolian scholar, is more objective than that of the first edition, which was written by Soviet Russian scholars, because the former examined more of the Chinese and Persian primary sources. Moreover, the second edition was written by referring to many international studies written in English, French, German, and Japanese, whereas the first edition was written mainly by referring to Russian materials. Quite
ironically, the source criticism, which was imported from the Soviet Union, enabled Mongol scholars to refute Russian demonization of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire. The Mongolian refutation of the Soviet scholars was, however, limited to some degree due to the constraints of socialist ideology, leading to an inconsistent evaluation of Chinggis’s achievements.

Despite the drastic change of historical views, the audience of the second edition is unclear. In my fieldwork, aside from intellectuals, I have never encountered a Mongolian citizen who read the second edition during the socialist era, though 10,000 copies were published. This is, perhaps, because a purge against representing Chinggis Khan positively occurred four years before the 1966 publication of the second edition.

THE 800TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHINGGIS KHAN’S BIRTH AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

In 1962, a purge occurred when Mongolia was to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the birth of Chinggis Khan. The commemoration festival was planned very carefully, according to J. Boldbaatar, a local historian who held an important post in MPRP at that time. Although the Mongolian intellectuals of the time shared the desire to hold a celebration for the 800th anniversary, it took much courage to speak out because they were afraid of being criticized as “nationalist.” In late 1961, however, shocking news arrived from students studying in China that China was planning to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan’s birth. Flustered by the news, the Institute of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (hereafter MAS) made a plan to celebrate the 800th anniversary immediately.

On January 8, 1962, D. Tsedev, director of the Institute of History, applied to J. Tsedenjav, head of the propaganda section of the MPRP, for permission to hold the 800th anniversary festival. At the same time, he sent a letter to S. D. Dylykov, the director of the division for Mongolian, Korean and Vietnamese Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the ASSU, asking for his opinion on whether it was permissible to hold the commemoration festival, and if so, how the commemoration should be organized.

After some negotiation, D. Tömör-Ochir, the secretary general of the Politburo, proposed a plan for commemorating the 800th anniversary at a meeting held in the Politburo of the Central Committee, MPRP on February 8. On June 10, 1962, the Politburo approved the MAS proposal to honor the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan’s birth, as he contributed to the development of Mongolian history through the unification of Mongolian tribes and establishing an independent state.

In accordance with the resolution of the Politburo, MAS formulated plans for the anniversary that included the erection of a stone monument to Chinggis Khan at Dadal in Khentii Province – his alleged birthplace – a film production on Chinggis Khan, and commemorative postal stamps. Interestingly, Mongolian scholars had to face the fact that they did not know the precise date of Chinggis Khan’s birthday because it was not recorded in the historical sources. Therefore, historians decided the date by Buddhist divination. They asked astrologer-monks at the Gandan Monastery, which survived religious repression. Based on the advice of the monks, the Institute of History of MAS fixed the “precise” date of Chinggis Khan’s birth at 6:00 a.m. on May 31, 1162. In accordance with this inference, the Political Bureau of the MPRP also decided to hold the 800th anniversary of his birth on May 31.
On May 31, the Institute of History of the MAS organized a small academic conference to commemorate this anniversary. Initially planned to be held in the main auditorium of the government palace, it was conducted at the National Library, Room 106, without the involvement of the government. People flocked to the conference and filled the room, while those outside tried to listen by standing in front of Stalin’s statue at the main entrance of the library.56

However, when the conference was about to begin, a telegraph suddenly arrived from Moscow. It contained an article written by I. M. Maiskii criticizing Chinggis Khan. There was no room for doubt that the article was a warning from the Soviet Union because it was unnatural for Maiskii, who was not a professional historian but a geographer, to write an article criticizing Chinggis Khan.57 Yet, Mongolian scholars dared to open the conference as planned.

The conference began with opening remarks by B. Shirendev, president of MAS. The next speaker, Sh. Natsagdorj, who authored the history of the Mongol Empire in the second edition of the National History (1966), stated “Chinggis was the founder of the independent Mongolian state.” He supported Chinggis Khan artfully by referring to B. I. Vladimirtsov, a well-known Soviet academician, as follows: “although he had great talent, Chinggis was a man of a different time and a child of a different people so that we should not see him as if he were an extraterrestrial.” Then, Natsagdorj asserted Chinggis was a real person in history, saying, “Nevertheless Chinggis is not a people’s hero, he was not a legendary or mythical figure.” He added, “Chinggis was one of the Mongol aristocrats who were becoming feudalized, and he did his best to serve the aristocracy. We must not forget that he was a brutal conqueror who inflicted hardship and misery on many peoples of Europe and Asia.” Finally, Natsagdorj concluded,

The name of Chinggis is inextricably linked with the history of the struggle for Mongolian national independence in later times. In the minds of our people, it is appropriate that Chinggis has been remembered as a figure of merit as the founder of the independent Mongolian nation.58

Ts. Damdinsüren, the next speaker, also agreed with Vladimirtsov’s view on Chinggis from the perspective of a scholar of literature. On the other hand, he strongly criticized Vasily Ian’s Chinggis Khan as a “racist” novel, although he was one of the translators of the book.59 Having identified the Russo-Western bias against the Mongols, Damdinsüren concluded that Ian’s novel “was written with no evidence, nor a shred of truth in his reasoning. There is not even the scent of Marxism in Ian’s book.”60 The claims made by Mongolian scholars at the conference were too modest to be termed nationalistic because they only evaluated Chinggis as “the founder of an independent state.” Rather, they supported Marxism. They only argued that the overly critical representations of Chinggis Khan made by Soviet scholars and writers had nothing to do with Marxism.

The Mongolians also made objections against deifying Chinggis Khan. Regarding the project on raising a monument to Chinggis Khan, L. Makhval, the sculptor, initially planned to erect a statue of Chinggis riding a horse with wings on its back. However, B. Rinchen and Kh. Perlee, who served as academic advisors, disagreed with the idea of Chinggis riding astride “Pegasus.” Thus, the monument simply
depicted Chinggis Khan in his _deel_, or traditional costume. Thus, the academic advisors avoided deifying Chinggis and portrayed him as human.61

The Soviet Union replied to this Mongolian “nationalistic movement” with disapproval. _Pravda_, the official newspaper of the CPSU, vehemently condemned the 800th anniversary as the personal worship of Chinggis Khan in an article dated July 21, 1962. This article gave Yu. Tsedenbal an excuse for purging D. Tömör-Ochir, who was the proponent of the 800th anniversary, as well as Tsedenbal’s most powerful rival.

On September 10, 1962, at the third general assembly of the Central Committee of the MPRP, Tsedenbal criticized Tömör-Ochir as extremely “nationalistic,” saying he made the commemoration events too attractive and took credit away from Choibalsan for establishing the independent state by giving it to Chinggis Khan. Tsedenbal claimed it was not Chinggis Khan but Kh. Choibalsan (1895–1952) who was the founder of independent Mongolia. According to Tsedenbal, “Choibalsan contributed to make Mongolia join the United Nations in 1961.” Tsedenbal falsely accused Tömör-Ochir of being pro-Chinese because “Chinese Inner Mongolia also planned to commemorate the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan’s birth.”62 Although Tömör-Ochir was trying to prevent the Chinese from taking over the commemoration of Chinggis Khan, he was ironically accused of supporting the Chinese. Tömör-Ochir was expelled from the party as the Sino-Soviet conflict deepened.

Scholars who praised Chinggis Khan were also purged. On January 9, 1963, _Ünen_, the official newspaper of the MPRP, severely criticized Ts. Damdinsüren, Sh. Natsagdorj, and B. Rinchen for being “nationalistic.”63 Damdinsüren was thoroughly criticized by Tsedenbal at the 3rd General Assembly of the Central Committee of the MPRP for “making nationalistic and racist remarks at the academic conference of the 800th anniversary.” Damdinsüren was demoted from the director of the Institute of Language and Literature at MAS to an ordinary researcher.64

Thus, the proceedings of the academic conference on Chinggis Khan were banned from publication. Additionally, the movie of Chinggis Khan, planned for the 800th anniversary, was also canceled.65 The 800th anniversary was a turning point, after which it became taboo to represent Chinggis positively again. Hence, the _Third Edition of National History_ (1981) was almost identical to the first edition of 1955 regarding Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire. Only 16 of the 667 pages of the text were devoted to Chinggis’s life.66

The Mongolian people, however, started to struggle against the oppressive print socialism through other mediums. A poem on Chinggis Khan, composed by a young student studying in Moscow, spread so quickly through word of mouth because it was not only published in the newspaper of literature (Utga Zohiölyn Sonin) but also was read on the radio in Ulaanbaatar. The poem, titled “Chinggis,” by D. Purevdorj (1933–2009) begins with a verse that seems to strongly deny what someone else has said. It proclaimed the unification of the Mongols in the face of hardship.

Chinggis was not born from the land of the bow.
Chinggis was not born from the tip of an arrow.
Chinggis was not born of Mother Hö’elün
Chinggis emerged from the arid land of Mongolia.67
Purevdorj said in a later interview that he wrote this poem “with all his heart on his sleeve.” It took nerve to do what he did. Why did the poet have to shout as if he was denying someone else’s words, repeating “was not”? Obviously enough, it was Soviet intellectuals who alleged that “Temüjin was born from a bow and arrow.” Because the national epic, which the Russians liked to tell about themselves, was the story of a struggle against the horsemen of the Asiatic steppe – “bow and arrow tribes” such as Avars, Khazars, Polovtsians, and Mongols.

This poem was banned after its publication in 1962 and criticized as an “expression of nationalism” by the National Thinking Committee, so it did not see the light of day for 28 years, until democratization. However, the poem went viral among the Mongols, first, as it was very easy to memorize. It used alliteration, which was very familiar to the Mongols through traditional oral literature. Second, the poem was evocative for younger generations at that time.

According to the aforementioned Professor Ch. Dagvadorj (1942–), who was a student of the Department of Literature at the National University of Mongolia (NUM) at the time, many students of the NUM were so impressed by this poem that they memorized and recited it. Dagvadorj witnessed that all the students in the Department of Literature were able to recite “Chinggis” by heart. Moreover, not only students but also ordinary people learned the poem by word of mouth. “Chinggis” also won popularity in Moscow: Professor G. Tserenkhand (1938–), an ethnologist, who was studying in Moscow at the time, recalled that many Mongolian students in Moscow were able to recite this poem, regardless of their major.

Sengiin Erdene (1929–2000), a popular novelist, testified to a Japanese journalist that the 800th anniversary inspired him to write about Chinggis Khan. Regarding the scenario for a movie about Chinggis, “Under the Eternal Power of Heaven,” which he wrote after democratization, Erdene said that he intended to introduce Chinggis Khan as an “ordinary human to people.” He said, “Whereas there are many films about Chinggis Khan made abroad, none of them have represented him as a normal human being from the viewpoint of us, Mongolians.”

CONCLUSION: DEMYTHOLOGIZING SOCIALISM

The suppression of Chinggis Khan’s discourse by the Soviet Union and its subordinate dictator Tsedenbal on the 800th anniversary caused a strong but quiet reaction in praise of Chinggis Khan. Mongolian intellectuals acquired knowledge from the Soviet Union and other countries, including China, during the compilation of the National History. Second, they tried to represent a revised version of Chinggis Khan in response to the demonization of him by the Soviet scholars. This revision was achieved by compiling the second edition and commemorating the 800th anniversary of the birth of Chinggis Khan. Their attempt, however, ended up with failure due to Soviet intervention.

The Mongolian scholars were not nationalists opposed to socialism but were nationalists who supported socialism. The “socialist” Mongolian scholars agreed Chinggis Khan was a feudal lord who exploited the people and made foreign countries suffer. What was unforgivable for them, however, was that Soviet scholars and writers, irrespective of their ideology, denied Chinggis’s personality and represented...
him as a devil or a robber. The Mongolian intellectuals only wished to reclaim the demonized Chinggis. The only thing they did not concede was that Chinggis had been born as a human child and rose from poverty to become the founder of Mongolia as an independent nation.

The image of a “human Chinggis” was fostered among Mongolian intellectuals through their education in scientific socialism from Soviet Russians. Thus, the barbarian Chinggis, which the Soviet Union constructed, was demythologized by “Mongolian” socialism. Mongolian nationalism was, therefore, unique insofar as it had been formed by demythologizing their hero (Chinggis) and depicting him as an ordinary human, whereas most modern nation-states formed their nationalism by mythologizing “national heroes.”

NOTES

1 Shimamura 2012; Shimamura 2017.
3 Miyawaki 2006.
4 Anderson 2006.
6 The number of literate people in Mongolian script increased from 10,000 (total population 684,000) in 1926 to 70,000 (total population 738,000) in 1933 and 127,000 (total population 739,000) in 1940 (Tserendorj 1969a, 402). Since adopting Cyrillic script, the literacy rate increased from 20% in 1940 to 90% in 1963 (Tserendorj 1969b, 695).
7 Bulag 2010, 47; Figes 2003, 358–429.
8 Kaplonski 2005.
9 For the first edition, see Grekov et al. 1954. For the Mongolian edition, see Grekov et al. 1955.
10 Natsagdorj 1966; Natsagdorj and Ishjamts 1968; Shirendev and Sanjordorj 1969.
14 EMME, 101.
15 Amar 2015.
17 Jamrsanjav 1948.
18 Resolution No. 34/64 of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the MPRP.
19 National Archives of Mongolia, УТА УТНОНБА Х-4, Д-16, Хн-5, х.13.
20 Damdinsuren 1990, 9–11.
21 Jan 1950.
22 Batdorj 2011.
23 Ölzüibaatar 2014.
25 Incidentally, нöкөr is used to mean “comrade” in the socialist period.
26 Grekov et al. 1955, 102–103.
28 Grekov et al. 1955, 118.
29 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.196–199.
30 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.198–199.
31 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.201.
33 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.140.
34 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.149. Shirendev, Damdinsüren, Natsagdorj, Perlee, Gonchigdorj, and Ser-Odjav.
35 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.22–23.
36 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.157–160.
37 The Archives of the Institute of History, Mongolian Academy of Sciences Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-7, х.159.
39 Part 2, sub-part.1 and sub-part.1 chap.3.
40 Volume II, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 5.
41 Natsagdorj 1966, 203.
42 Natsagdorj 1966, 201.
43 Natsagdorj 1966, 203.
44 Natsagdorj 1966, 212.
45 Natsagdorj 1966, 234.
46 Natsagdorj 1966, 240.
50 Boldbaatar 2012, 8.
51 Institute of History, MAS decided to commemorate the anniversary on December 1, 1961, shortly after they knew the news. Institute of History, MAS ф.23, д.2, хн.415, х.1–2.
52 Boldbaatar 2012, 9.
53 Boldbaatar 2012, 9; Archives of MPRP Ф-04, Д-1, Хн-18.
54 Boldbaatar 2012, 10–11.
56 Boldbaatar 2012, 23.
57 Chuluun 2012, 245.
58 Institute of History, MAS, Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-12, No.7, Унен, May 31, 1962.
59 Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-12, No.4, х.4.
60 Ф-6, Д-1, Хн-12, No.4, х.5.
61 Boldbaatar 2012, 28.
62 Boldbaatar 2012, 41.
63 Унен, January 9, 1962.
64 Okada 1988, 277.
65 Boldbaatar 2012, 44–45.
66 Bira et al. 1984, 139–151.
68 Tseveendorj 2007, 147.
69 Figes 2003, 365.
70 Tseveendorj 2007, 146–147.
71 My interview with Ch. Dagvadorj on August 21, 2015, in Ulaanbaatar.
72 My interview with G. Tserenkhand on August 24, 2015, in Ulaanbaatar.
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EMME, See List of Abbreviations.


