

Reinventing the Mongolian *Nutag* (Homeland): Fixing a Nomadic Space and History in State Nationalism

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Introduction

During the recent Mongolian elections in June and July 2017, the President-elect Khaltmaa Battulga, a former Minister of Road and Transport Development as well as wrestling star, attracted the attention of the media for his use of nationalist and anti-Chinese rhetoric.¹ His allegations that one of the other two presidential candidates, Miyeegomboyn Enkhbold, had Chinese ancestry even prompted the latter to publish a family tree justifying his ethnically pure Mongolian lineage.² Not only this example bears a frightening resemblance to President Trump's statements in relation to the 'birther conspiracy' directed at Barack Obama, but Battulga is said to have borrowed Trump's language in general to lead a 'Mongolia first' campaign.³ The anti-Chinese sentiment which seemed to have been a dominant feature of these presidential elections, finding resonance in public discussions particularly in the context of Mongolia's high debts,⁴ also echoed with several

recent conflicts between the two neighbouring countries.⁵ Yet, this anti-Chinese discourse has to be inscribed in a more complex trajectory of competing narratives of Mongolian national self-affirmation. Indeed, Battulga's company Genco Group was also one of the main financial contributors to the imposing Genghis Khan Equestrian Statue overlooking the Mongolian steppe which was built as part of a greater campaign to restore Genghis Khan's legacy and nomadic past – a period in history which had been largely silenced under de facto Soviet rule.⁶ The role of the state in perpetuating the idea of a seemingly inherent nomadic feature of Mongolian national identity is particularly interesting as despite the concept of nomadism often deemed incompatible with a fixed state organisation⁷ -'either nomos or polis'-,⁸ Mongolia seems to have been successful in combining both. In contrast to other nomadic populations such as the Tuareg people who constantly have to move across national borders, the territory of the Mongolian state encompasses all the areas Mongolian herders make use of during their seasonal movements. However, while in 2010, 34% of its 2.4 million population were dependent on mobile or semi-mobile pastoralism as major

¹ Terrence Edwards, 'Mongolians fret over China investment as they prepare to vote', in *Reuters* (24 June 2017), online at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mongolia-election-china-idUSKBN19F0S6> (all online sources accessed last on 9 July 2017 unless otherwise stated).

² 'Crooks, Liars and Oligarchs: Corruption Scandals and Ethnic Chinese Mud-Slinging mar Mongolia's presidential vote', in *South China Morning Post* (23 June 2017), online at <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2099658/crooks-liars-and-oligarchs-corruption-scandals-and-ethnic> and 'Mongolian Voters weigh Love-Hate Relationship with China', in *Channel NewsAsia* (24 June 2017), online at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/mongolian-voters-weigh-love-hate-relationship-with-china-8975280>.

³ 'Ex-Judo Star Poised to Win Mongolia's Presidential Race', in *The New York Times* (8 July 2017), online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/08/world/asia/mongolia-president-battulga.html>.

⁴ Lucy Hornby, 'Khaltmaa Battulga Wins Mongolian Presidency', in *Financial Times* (8 July 2017), online at

<https://www.ft.com/content/49514596-63f1-11e7-8526-7b38dcaef614?mhq5j=e2>.

⁵ In December 2016, the Dalai Lama's visit to Mongolia angered Beijing which resulted in a temporary closure of the border crossing with Mongolia leaving numerous people waiting at the borders: 'China 'blocks' Mongolia Border after Dalai Lama Visit', in *Al Jazeera* (10 December 2016), online at

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/china-blocks-mongolia-border-dalai-lama-visit-161210060313417.html>

⁶ Orhon Myadar & James Deshaw Rae, 'Territorializing National Identity in Post-Socialist Mongolia: Purity, Authenticity, and Chinggis Khaan', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (2014), p. 569.

⁷ Jeremie Gilbert, *Nomadic Peoples and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2014), p. 63.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 380-381.

income,⁹ the number of pastoralist communities is gradually decreasing due to weather conditions,¹⁰ and the consequences of mining activities.¹¹ Nonetheless, the image of a nomadic identity with a close bond to its territory seems to prevail in national discourse and self-portrayals. Participating for the first time in the Venice Biennale in 2015, the artworks by Mongolian artists Unen Enkh and Enkhbold Togmidshirev testify to this intimate connection to their homeland, *nutag* in Mongolian: they work with 'natural organic products from Mongolian nomadic traditions' such as horse hair and dung, wooden sticks, animal skin as well as felt, and one of their artworks includes a nomadic tent, *ger* in Mongolian.¹² Mainly funded by the Mayor of Ulaanbaatar, it also hints at the importance the state gives to perpetuating and preserving the image of Mongolia's nomadic heritage.¹³

Drawing on sociological and poststructuralist approaches, this article examines how the concept of a national nomadic identity and its territorial bond are constructed in state narratives. First, it analyses how Mongolian heads of state use cultural traditions during diplomatic visits to reveal how the nomadic leitmotiv is inscribed in the actual space. Secondly, the paper discloses how those customs and symbols presented as traditionally and intrinsically Mongolian are in fact contested, and thus located in an ongoing process of national appropriation or construction. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how the importance given to the nomadic heritage is translated in delimiting a Mongolian culture against a settled Chinese

Other. This relational identity construction proves itself ambivalent when looking at the attitude towards Inner Mongolians in China in contrast to Mongolian Kazakhs residing in the Mongolian province Bayan Olgii. The next section outlines the theoretical framework enabling this analysis and gives a brief account of Mongolian nationalism.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on a critical reading of Georg Simmel's sociology of space in reference to three concepts; 'exclusivity', 'divisibility' and 'fixity'.¹⁴ The first element reveals how the entitlement to a sovereign state linked to a national identity is embedded in a claim of historical uniqueness, thus conferring to one group the legitimacy over a territory.¹⁵ Simmel's concept of divisibility ties in neatly with a poststructuralist understanding of identity constitution highlighting the constructedness of boundaries which are not natural but 'a sociological fact that forms itself spatially'.¹⁶ This resonates with Michael Shapiro's words that individuals are 'socially and temporally situated beings'.¹⁷ The relational nature of the national identity constitution, i.e. constructed against an Other,¹⁸ and the boundaries' subjective construction of alterity find a perfect illustration in Simmel's bridge-and-door metaphor. The latter discloses the flexibility of joining and dividing identities: 'everything can be considered to be connected, but also as separated'.¹⁹ This echoes with Lene Hansen's reconceptualised Self-Other dichotomy which proposes a 'series of related yet slightly different juxtapositions that can be theorized as constituting processes of linking and

⁹ Caroline Upton, 'Living off the Land: Nature and Nomadism in Mongolia', in *Geoforum* Vol. 41, No. 6 (2010), p. 866.

¹⁰ Sarlagtay Mashbat, 'Mongolia: Managing Transition from Nomadic to Settled Culture', in Jim Rolfe (ed.), *The Asia Pacific: A Region in Transition* (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), p. 333.

¹¹ Gilbert, *Nomadic Peoples and Human Rights*, p. 207.

¹² Mongolian Contemporary Art Support Association (MCASA), 'About', online at <http://mongolia-pavilion-venice-biennale.com/mongolia-pavilion>. See also the official leaflet of the Mongolia Pavilion 2015, online at [http://www.palazzomora.org/var/file_Mongolia_Pavilion_-_La_Biennale_di_Venezia_2015_\(1\).pdf](http://www.palazzomora.org/var/file_Mongolia_Pavilion_-_La_Biennale_di_Venezia_2015_(1).pdf).

¹³ Mongolian Contemporary Art Support Association (MCASA), 'Sponsors', online at <http://mongolia-pavilion-venice-biennale.com/all-sponsors>.

¹⁴ Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Space', in D. Frisby & M. Featherstone (eds. and trans.), *Simmel On Culture: Selected Writings* (Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 137-170.

¹⁵ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Space', p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁷ Michael J. Shapiro, 'Textualizing Global Politics', in Der Derian James & Michael J. Shapiro (eds.), *International/Intertextual Relations* (Lexington Books, 1989), p. 18.

¹⁸ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 9.

¹⁹ Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', in D. Frisby & M. Featherstone (eds. and trans.), *Simmel On Culture: Selected Writings* (London, 1997), p. 170.

differentiation.²⁰ The third component, fixity, emphasises both the boundaries' and the group unity's constitution and constant reproduction through discursive and material practices,²¹ where language takes on a performative nature.²²

In the context of a study of a particular case of nationalism those practices can be located in acts of 'banal nationalism'.²³ These include diplomatic encounters understood as communicative performances based on the representation of national identities,²⁴ which articulate and reiterate acts of territorialisation of national myths and traditional rituals. To locate the claim of a Mongolian historical and spatial uniqueness performing the contemporary borders of the Mongolian nation-state, I consulted primary sources by state representatives, such as interviews and speeches given by former President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, the *Concept of National Security of Mongolia* (2009), UNESCO communications, procedures of visits of diplomats and their testimonies, as well as articles in Mongolian newspapers, such as the *UB (Ulaanbaatar) Post*. This allows us to retrieve those elements which are associated with a supposedly unique Mongolian nomadic identity: a historical claim of Genghis Khan's legacy and the establishment of his nomad empire which is entwined with a special bond to the homeland and animals, especially horses, cast as integral part of pastoral nomad's lives. The use in diplomatic rituals of three elements treated as metonyms for such an identity - the *ger*, the *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle) and *khuumei* (overtone singing) - will be of particular importance.

National Mongolian Renaissance after 1990

Landlocked between Russia and China,

²⁰ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 37.

²¹ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Space', pp. 147-149.

²² John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Clarendon Press, 1962).

²³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage Publications, 1995), p. 7.

²⁴ Pablo de Orellana, 'Struggles over Identity in Diplomacy: 'Commie Terrorists' contra 'Imperialists' in Western Sahara', in *International Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2015) p. 480.

Mongolia has launched a 'Mongol renaissance' after its independence from Soviet tutelage in 1990.²⁵ Referring of the Qing dynasty rule, the brief Chinese occupation in 1919, the Sino-Soviet agreement separating Outer and Inner Mongolia as well as '70 years of virtual Soviet control',²⁶ historian Morris Rossabi highlights the 'painstaking process of reconstructing official history and traditions' at the heart of the current adoration of Mongolian heritage.²⁷ As a response to the Soviet suppression which targeted every historical allusion mentioning the Mongolian empire, its conquests and heroic figures, such as Genghis and Kublai Khan which had been denounced 'as brutal feudal oppressors who raped, plundered and killed,' Mongolia witnessed a large-scale rehabilitation of the former:

Genghis portraits are everywhere-hanging from the tops of street lamps, on posters in schools and on urban bulletin boards. (...) Genghis Khan is now the name of a vodka, and the most imposing hotel in Ulan Bator.²⁸

But while Mongolia is at pains to rebuild a new national self in utilising its distant past,²⁹ there have been different articulations of what it means to be Mongolian. Anthropologist Christopher Kaplonski lays out three different conceptions of national identity formulated in the 1990s.³⁰ First, he makes the difference between 'pan-Mongolism' which embraces Mongols living in Inner Mongolia and other parts of the world; and 'Halh-centrism' which privileges the ethnic core constituting 80% of the population reaching its peak in 1990s when it was argued that the 'presidency should be restricted to a Halh Mongol'.³¹ This paper will

²⁵ Alexander C. Diener, *One Homeland or Two? The Nationalization and Transnationalization of Mongolia's Kazakhs* (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 148.

²⁶ Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (University of California Press, 2005), p. 225.

²⁷ Morris Rossabi, 'Mongolia Recovers a National Identity', in *Wall Street Journal* (30 May 1996), online at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB833386290659775000>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Myadar & Rae, 'Territorializing National Identity in Post-Socialist Mongolia', p. 562.

³⁰ Christopher Kaplonski, *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memory of Heroes* (Routledge Curzon, 2004).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

however focus on the third moment, which he terms

...[a] vague sort of general nationalism or chauvinism, which being *based on history and tradition*, one would expect to come close to pan-Mongolism (...), but in fact remains centered on the state of Mongolia. It, however, is not necessarily limited to the Halh (...). I hesitate to simply term this *patriotism, a love of country* (...). Although determined by territory and the modern state of Mongolia, it is not simply civic nationalism.³²

It is this mixture of different components of Mongolian nationalism which this essay tries to disentangle in tracing the significance of the image of a 'nomadic civilization' whose 'basic characteristics' the government tries to 'reinforce' and 'enrich' through an 'active policy' at the core of its *National Security Concept* (2009).³³ The same official document found on the website of the Embassy in the United Kingdom posits that the government should

...create conditions for learning about and perceiving the history, culture and mentality of the people as well as the *nature of the homeland, inculcate in every citizen (...) a strong sense of patriotism (...)*; make the study, instruction and popularization of Mongolian history, religion and culture the special object of the *government's constant care and support*.³⁴

This excerpt not only makes the promotion of a bounded Mongolian history and culture a governmental endeavour but explicitly refers to the inculcation of patriotism putting emphasis on the specific territorial link embodied in 'the nature of the homeland.'

Diplomacy from the Ger – Drinking Milk and Riding Horses

Understanding diplomacy not only as 'the art

³² Ibid. [all emphasis mine unless otherwise stated].

³³ The Embassy of Mongolia in the United Kingdom, 'The Concept of National Security of Mongolia' (31 October 2009), online at <http://embassyofmongolia.co.uk/?p=206>.

³⁴ Ibid.

and practice of conducting negotiations between nations,³⁵ but also as 'social intercourse (...) [in which] groups that enter in relation claim a distinct existence from one another',³⁶ offers a fruitful angle to analyse how the Mongolian government uses its nomadic heritage to claim a national uniqueness in need of protection, labelling it a matter of 'National Security.' In that sense, the negotiation of a national identity in the domestic sphere can be examined in relation to its performative representation in the international domain, both being mutually constitutive. Concerning performative representations,³⁷ James Der Derian highlights that it is not just 'the 'great' events of power politics or the famous developments of international law which define diplomacy,' but also the "petty' rituals and ceremonies of power."³⁸ Those petty rituals encompass acts of everyday nationalism, particularly noticeable in state visits stressing the cultural diplomatic component. Hillary Clinton, having travelled to Mongolia twice as First Lady and Secretary of State, evokes her emotional response to the significance of historical traditions during her visit in the 1990s:

We drove about forty-five minutes into the high plains to visit one of Mongolia's *thousands of nomadic families*. *Three generations* of this family lived in two large tents, known as gers...They traveled with their livestock by horse and cart...*just as their ancestors had done hundreds of years before*. The backdrop of their life on the steppes was stunning in its *vastness, serenity and natural beauty*...³⁹

In her description of the cultural programme intended for state visits, the emphasis put on the continuity between today's nomads and their ancestors is particularly striking. Indeed, it

³⁵ Adda B. Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History: From the Ancient Near East to the Opening of the Modern Age* (Transaction Publishers, 2010), p. 324.

³⁶ Vincent Pouliot and Jérémie Cornut, 'Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda', in *Cooperation and Conflict* Vol. 50, No. 3 (2015), p. 299.

³⁷ Iver B. Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 637-638.

³⁸ James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 114.

³⁹ Hillary R. Clinton, *Living History* (Scribner, 2003), pp. 308-309.

is this link that also former President Elbegdorj highlights in the closing speech of Nadaam in 2015. The celebration of the *Three Games of Men* - wrestling, archery and horse riding - which due to its link to Buddhism had been forbidden to monks during the Qing Dynasty and suppressed by the USSR later, became the national day after 1990. It has also 'more recently been a celebration of the foundation of the Mongolian Empire by Chinggis Khan 808 years ago.'⁴⁰

The (...) festival of Mongol Naadam is now coming close to an end in Mongolia which has a *great history in the vast territory from sunrise to sunset*. Our wrestlers were strong and agile, our race horses were fast and our archers' aiming was sharp. The Mongol Naadam sounded the cheers of Mongol knights and horse gallop, recalling the *millennia-old history and culture*, respecting the independence and freedom, *protecting the nationality and language... Mongolians have history to take pride in and a great future to create... Nationalism, creativity and effort will bring wellbeing to Mongolia.*⁴¹

Hence, Elbegdorj's bucolic references - as metaphors which shape and structure concepts⁴² - resonate in Clinton's memoirs. Linking 'the vast territory' to the nomadic past and to morally-laden concepts like 'independence' and 'freedom', Elbegdorj's explicitly announces his way to the future: nationalism and history will provide the tools to 'bring wellbeing to Mongolia.' However, it is especially the history of Genghis Khan and the 'golden age' of the Mongolian Empire with its nomads which Elbegdorj highlights and which is being epistemologically fostered in schools, selectively leaving out other phases in history.⁴³

⁴⁰ Mathilde Michaud, 'Nadaam: A History of Pride', in *The UB Post* (18 July 2014), online at <http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/?p=10660>.

⁴¹ Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj in 'Address by the President of Mongolia at the closing ceremony of the Nadaam Festivity' The Office of The President of Mongolia, Press & Communications Division (12 July 2015), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1631>.

⁴² George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 4.

⁴³ Myadar & Rae, 'Territorializing National Identity in Post-Socialist Mongolia', p. 572.

Upon Clinton's second visit in 2012, it was not necessary anymore to drive to the 'high plains' of Mongolia: a state-*ger* called *Töriinn yoslolyn örgöö* (State Ritual Palace) had been set up in the Government Palace, literally fixing the nomadic tent as national symbol in the governmental building.⁴⁴ It is here that Elbegdorj receives his counterparts, such as during the visits of Germany's President Gauck in 2015,⁴⁵ or of Russian President Putin in 2014.⁴⁶ Franck Billé highlights the importance of the inside decoration of the *ger* evoking the Mongolian landscape and hinting at the alleged 'symbiotic relation between humans and environment' in the Mongolian culture.⁴⁷ In the same vein, the room's ceiling in which the *ger* is located depicts the sky epitomising Mongolia's title as 'land of the eternal blue sky' to which Elbegdorj often refers to alluding to the ancient religion of Tengriism, which played an important role in the Mongol Empire.⁴⁸ Moreover, Elbegdorj's speech suggests a strong bond not just between Mongolians and the territory, but also with horses perceived as having 'a strong attachment to the *nutag*.'⁴⁹ The Nadaam activities and horses are hence also part of the diplomatic procedure as the account of former Vice President Joe Biden's visit demonstrates:

The event started with a long song and

⁴⁴ Jonathan S. Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States: A Diplomatic History* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013), p. 48.

⁴⁵ The Office of The President of Mongolia, Press & Communications Division, 'President Elbegdorj holds Meeting with Federal President Gauck', (15 October 2015), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1690>.

⁴⁶ The Office of The President of Mongolia, Press & Communications Division, 'President Elbegdorj held a Meeting with President Putin' (3 September 2014), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1259>.

⁴⁷ Franck Billé, *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), p. 110.

⁴⁸ T. Elbegdorj in 'Address to the Nation by President of Mongolia on the Occasion of the Birth of the 3-Millionth Citizen of Mongolia', The Office of The President of Mongolia, Press & Communications Division (28 January 2015), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1429>.

⁴⁹ Billé, *Sinophobia*, p. 110.

a *morin khuur* ensemble and continued to include *throat singing*. (...) The (...) afternoon program also involved *archery, horse racing, and a wrestling competition* (...) he [Biden] was given a parting gift – a restive brown horse.⁵⁰

While those diplomatic cultural practices contribute to inscribing an identity in space in naturalising national 'traditions' from which the government derives a normative legitimacy, it is necessary to step into the centre of the state-*ger* and analyse those 'unique' Mongolian traditions closer.

Constructing a 'State Sovereign Fiddle'

One copy of the horse-head fiddle *morin khuur*, which the above-mentioned report cites, sits in a glass cabinet in the northern section of the state-*ger*, and has proven crucial for the Mongolian national identity's construction and illustrative for explaining its mechanisms.⁵¹ Made of horsehair, the *morin khuur* supposedly reflects Mongolian nomadic life in embodying the relationship between animals and Mongolians. The model placed in the state-*ger* is called *Töriin khan khuur*, 'State Sovereign Fiddle.'⁵² Whereas the idea to create this copy came from folksong-singer Tserendorj in 1992 inspired by the Mongolian legend of *Argasun the fiddler*, it was the then President Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat who issued a presidential declaration calling 'for the musical instrument to be made and placed within the Government Palace.'⁵³ Testifying *par excellence* to Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition,⁵⁴ the workshop where the fiddle was fabricated was named 'Argasun Factory'.⁵⁵ According to its crafter, 'Mongolia is like a unit, one family (...) and so the fiddle that I made is for this country as a whole.'⁵⁶ This example testifies

to the conflation of a family-cum-country-cum-nation-cum-sovereign state reiterated in Elbegdorj's speeches when calling upon 'our forefather the Great Lord Chinggis Khaan.'⁵⁷ The natural link made between nation and family has in Mongolia's case not only been figurative, but conceived of as a scientifically proven biological lineage with Genghis Khan as father of the nation.⁵⁸

Demonstrating the importance of creating symbols for fostering a national identity perpetuated in naturalising practices such as diplomatic relations; it however, also reveals the relational nature of its constitution: the horse-head fiddle quartet created in the same year only received a real impetus when confronted with the Inner Mongolian ensemble established by Chi. Bulag. Driven by general concerns for establishing a 'uniquely national musical style,' it has evolved into the most renowned state-subsidised ensemble in Mongolia.⁵⁹ Peter Marsh rightly notes that while at the same time the wish to create a national emblem destined to represent the Mongolian personality tried to construct a homogenous 'us', such discourse also came to 'objectify (...) the non-Mongolian Other, which (...) includes all those who could threaten the survival of a distinct Mongolian national identity.'⁶⁰ Referring to Simmel's door-and-bridge imagery, it is important to note that this Other is however not always the same, but situated in space and time:

In the early 1980s, the Other was certainly Russification. But with the appearance of Chi. Bulag and revelations about the progress the Inner Mongolians had made in developing the horse-head fiddle, the Other then became the 'Chinese' (Inner Mongolians).⁶¹

⁵⁰ Addleton, *Mongolia and the United States*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Carole Pegg (2001), *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities* (University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 287.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Peter K. Marsh, *The Horse-head Fiddle and the Cosmopolitan Reimagination of Tradition in Mongolia* (Routledge, 2009), p. 137.

⁵⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Idem & Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 1.

⁵⁵ Marsh, *The Horse-head Fiddle*, p. 137.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

⁵⁷ T. Elbegdorj in 'Speech by President of Mongolia at a solemn Assembly dedicated to the 850th Anniversary of Birth of Chinggis Khaan', The Office of the President of Mongolia, Public Relations & Communications Division (14 November 2012) online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=848>.

⁵⁸ Tatiana Zerjal et al., 'The Genetic Legacy of the Mongols', in *American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 72 (2003), p. 717.

⁵⁹ Marsh, *The Horse-head Fiddle*, p. 143.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.114.

⁶¹ Ibid.

The fear of not being able to claim an exclusively national culture, does not only concern the fiddle, but denotes a wider inclination in the cultural realm, as the Mongolian UNESCO report on the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2012) indicates. In the latter, former Minister of Education and Culture Yondon Otgonbayar states the presidential decrees 'To honor and develop the Morin Khuur' and 'To develop the art of Mongolian Khuumei' referring to the 'State Cultural Policy of Mongolia' (1996) which comprises the act:

To prevent and take any necessary precautions against the *national culture to be absorbed in another culture*, to be *threatened by disappearance*, or the intellectuality of the nation to be *faded or diminished*.⁶²

The anxiety to be 'absorbed in *another culture*' also applies to the nomadic throat-singing *khuumei* which the report on Biden's visit mentions. This style of singing imitates sounds of nature affirming the animistic world view of Mongolians which reiterates the special affinity between the *nutag* and Mongolian nomads.⁶³ The fact that China registered the overtone singing in the UNESCO list as national tradition practiced in the Inner Mongolian and Xinjiang provinces, created tensions in 2009 becoming 'a rallying point for anti-Chinese sentiment' in Mongolia.⁶⁴ As a response, Mongolian authorities later successfully inscribed the throat-singing under a Mongolian entry altering the spelling to 'khöömei'.⁶⁵

A similar issue concerns Genghis Khan whose

⁶² UNESCO, 'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage – Intergovernmental Committee', *UNESCO Periodic Report No. 00786/Mongolia* (24 July 2012), p. 14, online at <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/download.php?versionID=18499>.

⁶³ UNESCO, 'Mongolian traditional art of Khöömei', *UNESCO List of Intangible Heritage*, online at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?RL=00210>.

⁶⁴ Lisa Gardner, 'Mongolia and China mark Ancient Cultural Ties', in *Al Jazeera* (31 August 2014), online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/08/mongolia-china-mark-ancient-cultural-ties-201483085921999916.html>.

⁶⁵ UNESCO, 'Mongolian traditional art of Khöömei'.

portrait is standing next to the State Sovereign Fiddle in the state-*ger*. His heritage as popular hero central to the Mongolian national myth is comparably contested as China refuses to hand over pages of the manuscript *The Secret History of the Mongols* depicting his life.⁶⁶ Moreover, his Mausoleum in Inner Mongolia 'naturalizes' his origin 'as fixed feature[s] of the Chinese nation-space' strengthening the claim that 'the Mongol domination of China (1279-1368) prior to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was part of China's continuous civilization rather than an interruption of it,' thus challenging the Mongolian claim to uniqueness.⁶⁷ Billé connects this to the Mongolian suspicion that China has never fully accepted their independence, exemplified in the Taiwan-based Republic of China's maps inscribing Mongolia within Chinese borders.⁶⁸ Russia conversely is considered as having released Mongolia from Chinese domination, so that Mongolia tends to overlook harsh Soviet suppression such as the denigration of its national heroes and traditions, in focusing on China as 'Other' against which to build its identity.⁶⁹

Erliz' Rape of the Mongolian Pastureland

The efforts to identify those essential components believed to make the Mongolian identity distinct testify to tensions with Chinese and especially Inner Mongolians, where boundaries between societies seem particularly thin. The ambivalence of Mongolian national discourse, and its exclusionary and implicitly violent nature, is revealed when considering the government's determination to revive the traditional Mongolian script deriving from the nomadic pastoralist Uyghur tribe, which largely disappeared in Mongolia after the imposition of Cyrillic.⁷⁰ While launching Elbegdorj's website in this vertical alphabet,⁷¹ initiating the

⁶⁶ Gardner, 'Mongolia and China mark Ancient Cultural Ties.'

⁶⁷ Tong Lam, 'Identity and Diversity: The Complexities and Contradictions of Chinese Nationalism', in Timothy B. Weston, and Lionel M. Jensen (eds.), *China beyond the Headlines* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 160.

⁶⁸ Billé, *Sinophobia*, pp. 17-19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁷⁰ Myadar & Rae, 'Territorializing National Identity in Post-Socialist Mongolia', p. 565.

⁷¹ The Office of the President of Mongolia, Public Relations & Communications Division, 'Visit the Mongol

'Programme on promoting Mongolian abroad,'⁷² as well as inaugurating the 'Day of National Language and Script' in 2005,⁷³ the fact that this script is still used in Inner Mongolia is rarely mentioned.⁷⁴ As further discriminatory practices directed towards Inner Mongolians demonstrate,⁷⁵ a shared language does not always function as a unifying factor in nationalist mechanics. Instead of highlighting similarities, differences are being exacerbated: Inner Mongolians are presented as

... 'blood corrupted' through their association with the Chinese, as 'food and feces corrupted' in relation to dietary differences and their embrace of sedentarism, and as 'dirt corrupted' in relation to their embrace of agriculture.⁷⁶

Their image as 'extractive personage of the Chinese trader,'⁷⁷ is even further enhanced in the discourse on mining activities portrayed as raping the cherished Mongolian pastureland,⁷⁸ starkly contrasting Elbegdorj's image of nomad values:

Nomads never pollute, they never dry rivers up, and damage the nature. The fascinating tradition and wisdom of living as one with nature is Mongolians'. Therefore, the Mongolian people set environmental criteria and requirements. The sense of fairness and justice is in Mongol genes, it's our common value.⁷⁹

Script Version of President's Website' (2 April 2014), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=1141>.

⁷² B. Dulguun (trsl.), 'Mongolia to promote its history, culture and arts through soft power policy', in *UB Post* (3 February 2016), online at <http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/?p=18234>.

⁷³ M. Zoljargal, 'Day of National Language and Script celebrated', in *UB Post* (15 May 2013), online at <http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/?p=4146>.

⁷⁴ Christopher Kaplonski, 'A brief Introduction to Mongol Bichig', in *Chris Kaplonski Blog*, online at <http://www.chriskaplonski.com/mongolia/bichig.html>

⁷⁵ Uradyn E. Bulag, *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia* (Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 171-211.

⁷⁶ Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Billé, *Sinophobia*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

⁷⁹ T. Elbegdorj, in 'We are building a society which enables inclusive and equitable Growth', The Office of

In the context of the development in the mining sector, Elbegdorj referred to his past as a son of a herdsman claiming that it was 'his duty to oversee changes, to make sure his people –the nomads– are not lost or that he doesn't lose that bit of himself either.'⁸⁰

While, the label *erliiz* (hybrid) to describe Inner Mongols, meaning 'offspring of parents of two different national or ethnic...backgrounds' or 'a cross-bred animal,'⁸¹ could indicate a conception of an ethnical nationalism based on Hahl-majority, this argument can be qualified in examining the relation to Mongolian Kazakhs in Bayan Olgii. While here too ethnical or biological differences could be underlined such as their different diet related to their Muslim instead of Buddhist affiliation, or their Turkic instead of Mongol descent, and their presence in the Mongolian mining activities, they seem to have sidestepped the *erliiz* mark.⁸² Instead, their nomadic past and heritage of Genghis Khan is stressed, such as Elbegdorj who refers to them as 'respected members of nomad civilization.'⁸³ Hence, the Kazakh's occupation of the *nutag* as well as their allegedly shared nomadic heritage have functioned as dual conditions for their insertion in the new Mongolian nation. This narrative has contributed to overlooking their prominent status as settlers and presence in the mining sector, which causes so much disdain in relation to Inner Mongolians and Chinese, hence testifying to the malleability of linking and differentiating identities. Mongolian Kazakhs can derive more legitimacy from cultural correspondences and a bond to the Mongolian homeland, than Inner Mongolians living beyond the borders from an 'ethnic'

the President of Mongolia, Public Relations & Communications Division (29 May 2012), online at: <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=718>.

⁸⁰ Stan Grant, 'Mongolia's Nomad President', in *CNN* (30 August 2011), online at <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/08/29/mongolia.president/>.

⁸¹ Bulag, *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*, p. 140.

⁸² Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, p. 152.

⁸³ T. Elbegdorj, in 'Greeting of the President of Mongolia on the Occasion of Nauryz', The Office of the President of Mongolia, Public Relations & Communications Division (22 March 2011), online at <http://www.president.mn/eng/newsCenter/viewNews.php?newsId=520>.

similarity, being portrayed as contaminated by Chineseness.

Conclusion

The symbols and traditions presented at the diplomatic level to an international audience as unequivocally Mongolian are located in a constant process of renegotiation of meaning, revealing the broader struggle of constructing a new Mongolian national identity. Diplomatic practices as a form of productive representation can then be regarded as constitutive in establishing an 'authentic' national identity which is built on the local and international level through various performances in speeches, decrees, the establishing of a state-*ger* or the construction of a 'state-sovereign' instrument. It highlights the state's central role in selectively choosing which memories will define the future of the Mongolian identity, creating signs that distinguish Mongolians from Others. In digging a bit deeper, or looking beyond the mere objects neatly arranged in the state-*ger*, one can discover fractures and ambivalences in the claims of a well-defined national identity which draws on the Smithian concepts of 'golden age' of its 'ancestral homeland' for legitimation:⁸⁴ disputes concerning cultural heritage between China and Mongolia, and the coding of China as a threat, point to the constant process of Simmel's drawing of boundaries. Hence, borrowing Michel Foucault's words, the Mongolian nation-state identity is neither 'an acquisition' nor a 'possession that grows and solidifies' but 'an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers...'⁸⁵ In the Mongolian context, it is above all the reference to a nomadic past, 'where the territory and habitat of the community become inseparable from its history and culture,'⁸⁶ which reveals itself to be a relevant leitmotiv, and also the criteria for the inclusion in the nationalisation

process, based on the incompatibility between settlers and nomads. The discourse legitimising such an antagonistic relationship shows itself to be contingent as various cultural affinities attributed to Mongol Kazaks could be attributed to Inner Mongolians, who are conversely subsumed under a homogenous Chinese identity.

⁸⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (Routledge, 1998), p. 115.

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 146

⁸⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 36.