



Competing Narrations: Views on Mongolia's Colonialism Discourses

by Ines Stolpe, Enkhbayaryn Jigmeddorj

Being part of the post-socialist sphere (i.e. the former Second World), Mongolia (Mongol Uls) reels like tumbleweed between the remaining worlds, the Global North and South. Apparently, this applies not only to classifications of development, but also to the country's mapping with regard to colonialism. At one time presented to former colonies as a forerunner on the way into a brighter future, post-socialist Mongolia appears ambivalent concerning the question of whether Mongolians have ever been under colonial rule themselves. These discourses in Mongolian historiography are widely disregarded by Western scholars, some of them even promoting a biased equation of 'post-colonial' with 'post-socialist'.



Post-Socialist Reproduction of the Painting "Bypassing Capitalism" on a Power Plant in Ulaanbaatar
(Foto: Johnny Baltzersen, 2012)

The sovereign nation emerged from the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR, 1924-1992), which was the second socialist state in the world and a satellite of the Soviet Union. Even though dependent, the country managed to maintain a distance from its guiding star, called "older brother to the north" (khoid akh). There is no doubt that the older brother intervened a lot, but he also facilitated a plebiscite, which led to full independence from China, including sovereignty over foreign policy, in 1945.

The Mongolian People's Republic entered colonialism discourses in two ways: via historiography proper, and via the anti-colonial liberation struggle. The latter refers in particular to the MPR's imaginary, yet brisk journey through the history of humankind, pursuant to the Marxist stage model of history: According to the narrative, the country had jumped out of (gloomy) feudalism and landed directly in (bright) socialism without passing through capitalism.



Bypassing Capitalism (Kapitalismyг Algasch).
Painting by Dagdangiin Amgalan (1959)



Bypassing ...? Embroidery in a Countryside Museum
(Khentii Aimag, Dadal Sum, Foto: Johnny Baltzersen 2012)

This deviation from the orthodoxy of the Marxist stage model resulted from the fact that not even rudimentary capitalism existed in the Mongolian steppe, and in place of a proletarian class there were nomadic herders. V.I. Lenin had already decided in 1920, at the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern in view of the prospective Soviet Republics in Central Asia, that "with the aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries, backward countries" could head directly for socialism "without having to pass through the capitalist stage" (Shirendyb 1981:20). Thus, the MPR was practically authorized to take a short cut through the prescribed course of history.

A few decades later, this bypassing-capitalism narrative provided Mongolians (for the first time since medieval times) with a solo appearance on the stage of global history: When many former colonies had gained their independence, ideologists on either side of the Iron Curtain were eager to drag them into their respective political camps. In these Cold War battles, former colonies were ascribed the role of a “third power” within internationalism, and the MPR made its grand appearance as a flagship: It was presented to ex-colonies as a verified example of stunning development, an “ascent out of medieval backwardness and feudal oppression to socialism” (Shirendyb 1981:19). Contemporary sources reported that the MPR had friendly relations with more than 40 former colonies, who supposedly showed interest in the non-capitalist way of development (Rathmann and Vietze 1978). Whether or not this was true, the exceptional representation of the country contributed to its self-perception as an essential part of the Second World.

MPR historiography had already introduced the term “colonialism” (kolonichlol) during the 1940s to denote the period of Manchu (Qing) reign. From 1691 to 1911, the Manchu ruled over what they named Outer Mongolia, which roughly correlates with the territory of the present Mongolian state. Their domination over what they named Inner Mongolia (today an autonomous region in the PR of China) had already started from 1636, whereas westward territories of the Mongolian plateau came under Manchu rule only in the 18th century. In the MPR’s historiography, the Manchu-led Qing reign (Manjiin üye) became the epitome of colonial oppression, as the following depictions from the National Museum show:



(Methods of Torture during Manchu Time
(Source: National Museum of Mongolia)



Subjugation
(Source: Mongol Ulsyn Tüükh, Ulaanbaatar 2017)

While several Western scholars capture this colonialism-narrative, which is prevalent in post-socialist Mongolia’s public discourse even today, some deny it and even equate the socialist era with colonialism. Kaplonski, for example, in the preface to his book *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia*, refers to an article (as his starting point) claiming “the Mongols” would have come “out from under seventy years of essentially colonial Soviet rule” (Kaplonski 2004:viii). Further on, he states that “Unlike the situation with the Soviets, however, the period of the Qing is not remembered as a period of colonization” (Kaplonski 2004:38).

Such bold statements basically disregard Mongolian discourses, which are far more complex and nuanced. A comparative analysis of publications concerning the Qing era yields the following designations: occupation (*ezerkhiilel*), colonization (*kolonchlol*), subjugation (*talkhidal*), oppression (*daranguilal*), control (*zakh-irгаа*), domination (*erkhsheel*), hegemony (*noyorkhol*), usurpation (*türemgiilel*), and exploitation (*möjljög*) (Jigmeddorj 2011:4-5). In contrast to socialist historiography, post-socialist accounts do not focus only on the territory of the Mongolian State (former MPR) (Boldbaatar and Mönkh-Erdene 2004:11; Manjiin erkhsheeliin üyeiin Mongol 2004:11), and many intellectuals agree that while the hegemony (*noyorkhol*) or domination (*erkhsheel*) of the Qing was the most sorrowful period in Mongolian history, people were actually vassals of the Manchu rather than colonial subjects (Sanjidorj 1998:3; Mongol ulsyn түүх IV 2003:5; Manjiin erkhsheeliin üyeiin Mongol 2004:3). However, in Mongolian writings, historians definitely do not associate the socialist era with colonialism.

Mongolian intellectuals heatedly debate how to name and categorize the historical period of the Qing Dynasty, or more precisely, the time from the mid-17th century until the beginning of the 20th century, when most Mongol territories were under the rule of the Manchu. The cover of an “Illustrated History” published not long ago shows that historians rather avoid naming this era, and instead only mention the timeframe and, in an entangled-history manner, the then dominant powers in the area (Russians, Mongols, Manchu).



Book Cover *Mongolchuud* (Ulaanbaatar: Monsudar 2014).

Our brief view of competing narratives illustrates what Silova et al. refer to as “the colonality of knowledge production ... in and about (post)socialist spaces.” (Silova et al. 2017). We support their initiative “to fracture the hegemony of Western-centric knowledge and ... to gain a global viewpoint that is more inclusive of different voices,” and finally also “to reclaim our positions as epistemic subjects who have both the legitimacy and capacity to look at and interpret the world from our own origins and lived realities” (Silova et al. 2017).

Kheltei bol khöltei – this Mongolian saying, which roughly translates as “with language you get around,” has implications for us as researchers and university lecturers: In order to overcome epistemic inequality, we need to raise awareness of processes of knowledge production that happen in languages other than English, and to find ways to make them more visible rather than “mapping the Self with the categories of the Other” (Clammer 2003:21).

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