

Reviews and Representations: Comparative observations in post-socialist Germany and Mongolia

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The years 1989/1990 are considered a turning point in history. In Germany, where the fall of the Berlin Wall led to reunification, present-day debates around the 30th anniversary focus on matters of disparities in the present time rather than pre-post comparisons. Many issues remain controversial, yet most East German witnesses of the period agree on the positive impacts of freedom gained after 1990, while the ascription of a general inferiority of “the East”, together with a denial of life-time achievements and progressive aspects in the socialist era, belong to their negative experiences. In this short essay, I use a comparative perspective to address some aspects of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) experiences which have (outside social anthropology) largely been unregarded in prevailing portrayals of socialism.

The widespread habit to condemn the era wholesale has led to a yawning gap between representations of this type and individual memories that give a rather nuanced picture. This applies even more for contemporary witnesses who were born into the period of “late socialism” (Yurchak 2005) and whose lived realities and reference points differ substantially from those of earlier generations. While East Germans are often readily dismissed as nostalgists when they balance pros and cons in the light of their personal experiences in reunified Germany, attitudes in post-socialist Mongolia are quite different. I argue that now, thirty years later, experiences with dominating post-socialist representations of socialism contribute to retrospective assessments as much as (if not more than) experiences gained during the socialist era itself.

This process has, of course, begun earlier. In the course of a four-year research project (2004-2008) on perceptions of the late cultural campaigns (*soyolyn dovtolgoon*) in the Mongolian People’s Republic, I encountered interesting strategies on how Mongolians cope with what they perceive as misrepresentations. While I conducted more than 200 individual and focus group interviews with people aged between 30 and 98 from all provinces (*aimag*) in Mongolia, most of the interlocutors older than me wanted to know which Germany I was from. Noteworthy was not only the way this question was usually asked (*Manai Germanaas uu, baruun Germanaas uu?* – From our Germany or from West Germany?) but even more how the answer influenced the process of the interview: In several cases interviewees suddenly started to criticize aspects of socialism, which had so far been portrayed rather positively during the course of the interlocution. When I wondered why, I got answers such as “You are

one of ours, so you know and understand how socialism was”. But being seen as an insider was not the only reason for the credit of trust. Some of the people told me that they would be fed up with entirely condemning depictions of the socialist era by unaware “Americans and the like” (*amerik mamerik*) which is why their painting of a rosy picture was supposed to counterbalance ignorant representations, especially by those foreigners, whose surveys are primarily based on contacts to the same circles of English speaking elites in Ulaanbaatar.

One example are narrations on the appropriate classification of historical periods, including the debate on whether or not Mongolians have ever been subject to colonialism, and, if so, which historical period would qualify as such (Stolpe & Jigmeddorj 2018). The equation of socialism with colonialism by some Western scholars usually results in undifferentiated condemnations. Iveta Silova, Zsuzsa Millei and Nelli Piattoeva (2017) criticized such simplistic depictions as “coloniality of knowledge production ... in and about (post)socialist spaces” and made a passionate plea “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” (ibid.). According to Michael Meyen (2013), the focus on a permanent repetition of primarily negative aspects of socialism, together with a lack of nuances and the denial of progressive aspects, have led to a distorted picture in Germany, where, as he puts it, the West Germans believe that they know how it was ‘over there’ while the East Germans mostly avoid to be ‘uncovered’. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk also observed strategic hiding due to the common portrayal of East Germans as “the Other” (2019: 89). Evidently, there is no othering of this type present in post-socialist Mongolia since people do not feel compelled to continuously justify their realm of experiences vis-à-vis a majority who did not share their lifeworld. However, while “the dismantling of socialism” was “affirmably advertised to the former citizens of the socialist block [sic] as a positive change” (Morozova 2012: 6), most ordinary Mongolians do not have very fond memories of the 1990s due to the multiple crises and the widespread feeling of regression. As David Sneath (2003: 49) aptly put it: “The real transition that Mongolia has experienced has been from a middle-income to a poor country, as if the process of development had been thrown into reverse.”

Throughout my field studies on various topics, such as education, social and spatial mobility, social change and nutag-councils (*nutgiin zövlöl*), the periods associated most with progress and advancement was the late 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s. My interlocutors had memories of considerable upswing and progression,¹ particularly so in contrast to the experiences of the 1990s. One popular TV-programme, titled *Altan Üyeiin Duunuud* and featuring stars of that era, can be understood both as “Songs of the Golden Age” or as “Songs of the Golden Generation”, for these

¹ For examples of achievements, particularly of the youth association see Boldbaatar (2003), on other historical backgrounds see Boldbaatar (2018b).

celebrities are known in Mongolia as *altan üyeiinkhen* (“Golden Agers”). The latter refers particularly to outstanding social mobility opportunities of these generations, facilitated by the permeability of the educational system. This was possible in the context of “one of the strongest modernist and developmentalist visions on history and society, whereas its eschatology and symbolism provided for non-essentialist motivation for the individuals to work for building a progressively improving society” (Morozova 2014: 7).

A common element across the post-socialist world was and is the experience of being portrayed as “behind”, thus in need for ‘development’, yet in an understanding quite different from the previous internationalist paradigm.² After the hopeful era of perestroika³ and the democratic revolution, Mongolia was downgraded from what was known as the “Second World” to the so-called “Third World” in the early 1990s, and later on was discursively moved into the “Global South”. Boris Buden criticized the definition of “the post-communist East as a space of belated modernity” (2014: 174), and, with reference to Rastko Močnik (2009), continued: the “West ... is not only always already in its proper place but also always on time“ (ibid.). In post-socialist Mongolia people shared (and still share) a disillusionment with the fact that most foreign consultants had (and have) a poor understanding of the local conditions, concepts and institutional frameworks that constitute social life.

In the field of education, for example, there was concern that Mongolian notions would not have a chance to develop against “westernizing” (*örnödchlökh*) approaches.⁴ Not many foreign projects took such concerns seriously and reflected upon the pitfalls of development ideologies. That is why the main objective of the project *Mongolization of Civil Society Development in Rural Mongolia* (2014-2018),⁵ was to build on citizen’s capacity to engage in in their respective communities. “*Mongolization*” served as a heuristic frame to better understand the social dynamics in rural Mongolia, including the vital forces of the respect for the native land (*nutag*) and the distinctive features of localities (*nutgiin ontslog*). In 2016, I had the opportunity to join several regional workshops of the project, to conduct interviews and to collect data with a focus on values considered Mongolian, notions of Mongolization, civil society and the role of nutag and nutag-councils (*nutgiin zövlöl*). The workshop participants came from 7 aimags (Bayankhongor, Dornod, Dornogovi, Dundgovi, Övörkhangai, Selenge, Sükhbaatar). Most of them were teachers (24), among other professions or occupations were accountants, dormitory stokers, secretaries,

² On the change of development paradigms and their respective consequences for rural schools in Mongolia see Stolpe (2008 and 2016).

³ Boldbaatar (2018a).

⁴ See for example Tsanjid (2005).

⁵ Co-designed and jointly implemented by CICED/Community for International Cooperation in Education and Development, Denmark and MAPSSD/Mongolian Association for Primary and Secondary School Development.

archivists, drivers, stock keepers, librarians, jijüür (*concierge*), directors/managers, one economist, one methodologist, one medical doctor and one retired zootechnician. Since pre-post comparisons are usually common in such contexts, I had included the following question (number 8 out of 9) into the questionnaires:

During 70 years of socialism, new traditions were introduced in Mongolia. Do you think that there are historical experiences from socialist times that should be maintained and adapted to the current conditions?

Altogether 49 out of 50 questionnaires were returned, and 6 of the 49 respondents had not answered this question. Among the 43 people who provided an answer only 3 had decided for “no”, one of them without any further comment. The two others, had written the following explanations:

- No, because there was a tendency to prefer the readily available (*belenchlekh*) and therefore no interest to learn something new
- No, it is problematic to change from modern times into old times, I don't think this is possible

Among the 40 respondents who had answered with “yes”, only 2 had not added any further explanation, whereas some of the explanations appeared more than one time:

- Work was done collaboratively (*khamtarsan ajil*) – 8 times
- Adequate timing / time compliance (*tsag barimtlal*) – 7 times
- Work results mattered and were valued – 7 times
- Agriculture (*gazar tarialan*) – 7 times
- Infrastructure construction – 7 times
- Industrialisation – 6 times
- Clear responsibility / accountability (*khariutslaga*) at workplaces – 6 times
- Education and literacy – 5 times
- Mongolians showed mutual solidarity – 4 times
- To love and worship the culture and heritage of the Mongolian way of life and to wear a Mongolian deel on a daily basis – 4 times
- Administration and governance (*zakhirakh, zakhiragdakh yos*) was bound to rules – 4 times
- Workplaces used to be staffed with people who were qualified – 2 times
- To fulfil rights and obligations (*erkh üüreg*) – 2 times
- Law and order – 2 times
- Integrity (*shudarga baidal*) – 2 times
- Respect for elders – 2 times
- We should keep some ideas but now we can express our thoughts freely – 2 times

These statements demonstrate that the respondents retrospectively attached a lot of weight and importance to collaborative work and societal progress, related to

personal responsibility, integrity and respect. In contrast to Germany, the remembrance of such progressive aspects has hardly ever been questioned in Mongolia, which illustrates how the dominating social context influences prevalent assessments of the past. During a focus group discussion, elder participants emphasized that a good foundation (*sain suuri*) would have been built to connect the Mongolian people to world culture (*delkhiin soyol*). They also emphasized that people who appreciated various positive aspects would not necessarily have trusted communism (*zaaval kommunistd itgedeggüi baisan*). Some of the statements reflect what the respondents see primarily in contrast to the current situation. One of the most controversial issues brought up during the focus group discussion was the immoderate politicization of administration, the so-called *khalaa-selgee*, which implies appointments of public servants according to party membership rather than qualification (*öörüinkhөө namын огт mergejilgüi khümüüsüig томилдог болсон*) and was characterized as political disease (*улс төрийн өвчин*). The discussants criticized in particular that it would no longer be possible to realize a long-term implementation of policies (*урт khugatsaany залгамж бодлого kheregjüülekh болomjgüi*) and that social relations would be tainted as a result of this gridlocked situation. There was also consensus on some aspects that should, in the view of the participants, not have been abandoned, namely general attitudes towards work, including acknowledgements (*ajildaa setgeleesee khanddag baisan*), a high sense of responsibility (*khariutslagaa ukhamsarlasan*), good interpersonal relations and mutual help (*khoorondyn khariltsaa sain, biye biyedee tusaldag baisan*), integrity and care for the mother country (*shudarga, ekh ornoo boddog baisan*).

As a last example for different attitudes towards representations of the socialist era I would like to touch upon portrayals with regard to museums. In her dissertation on “Mongolian Museums and the Construction of National Identity”, Sally Watterson, based on perceptions in Ulaanbaatar (and despite she did not include written sources in Mongolian), diagnosed a lacking “museological debate“ (2014: 38) and stated that “[...] unlike other countries Mongolia’s state-funded museums have not thoroughly demonised socialism“ (ibid.: 63). – It might be that some foreigners find it odd to see museum exhibitions inaugurated during the socialist era still in place. But instead of assuming that there is (or should be) a worldwide convergence of views on history or that museo-logics have to (or should) follow the same frames of reference and relevance, such sceneries actually invite for enquiry.

During my three visits (in 2003, 2009 and 2011) to the museum in Dornod *aimag*-centre, which focuses on the commemoration of the historical events in 1939 known as *Khalkhyn голын байдан*⁶ prior to World War II, I found the core exhibition arrangements dating from the socialist era unchanged. The visitors present in the

⁶ Russian: бой на Халхин голе. In the former West and Japan commonly known as Nomonhan Incident (*jiken*).

museum did obviously not take any offence, and the guest book contained only laudatory entries. When I asked individuals and groups of visitors from Ulaanbaatar what they think about an exhibition from the socialist era not replaced, there was consensus that this would not really matter since the exhibition would be very interesting (*sonirkholtoi shuu*), though some parts would nowadays appear a bit odd (*jaakhan sonin*). A man (age 44) said that this would be now in itself of historical value, and one could learn here how history was displayed at the time. The museum attendant on duty joined one of the talks and emphasized that she and her colleagues would be proud to receive school classes and thus contribute to the patriotic (in Mongolian “matriotic” – *ekh oronch*) education of the younger generation. And, she emphasized, it would be of utmost importance to make sure that the achievements of the combat veterans are appreciated with dignity. – Whether or not the exhibition actually accomplished that purpose appeared less important than the desire for a continued commemoration of the events⁷ at the beginning of World War II as a heroic and victorious defense of the mother country.

Such statements indicate, among other things, that a considerable respect for memory cultures of the socialist era has remained in Mongolia, which I also experienced in small *sum*-museums in the countryside, for example in Tögrög *sum* (Övörkhangai) in 1997, in Khalkhgoi *sum* (Dornod) in 2009, in Dadal and Bayan-Adraga *sum* (both Khentii aimag) in 2012, but also in Zuunmod (Töv aimag) in 2006 and in the *aimag*-museums in Khovd (2005) and Tsetserleg (Arkhangai) in 2018. All people I asked in these places (museum attendants as well as locals) did interestingly not interpret their museum exhibitions from the socialist era as representations of a bygone social order but instead as a demonstration of lifetime achievements of the local population (*manai nutgiin khümüüs*). Accordingly, nobody in the local communities opts for a clearing out, for the exhibitions are embedded in a social frame of everyday culture and practiced values as a realm of experience.

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, interdependencies between ordinary people’s lifeworlds (Lebenswelten) and cultures of remembrance (cf. Berek 2009: 199) are crucial. As far as I could observe, the respective museum exhibitions seem to be perceived as parts of shared experiences, often complemented by other points of view (for example the insightful exhibition on Stalinist purges in the military museum in Ulaanbaatar), which invite for reflection but do not simply replace other narratives. They do also not reproduce the common use of binary categories and phrases, which Alexei Yurchak, referring to “late socialism”, aptly criticized, emphasizing that “control, coercion, alienation, fear, moral quandaries were irreducibly mixed with ideals, communal ethics, dignity, creativity, and care for the future” (2005: 10).

⁷ Now by more and more scholars characterised as a war – *dain* – rather than a battle. See for example: https://mn.wikipedia.org/wiki/Халхын_голын_дайн. On some early arguments of the discussion see for example Tanaka (2010) and the multifaceted contributions in Ganbold (2013).

In reunited Germany, critical questions on how representation is connected to the trustworthiness of institutions and memorial sites, or more general, how diversity (also with regard to depictions of the socialist past) can be translated into representation (Krüger 2018), gained momentum only recently. Finally, when it comes to German-Mongolian diplomatic relations, it is the anniversaries in West German history (such as 2014 and now 2019) that are in the focus of celebrations, which is especially astonishing when Mongolians who had studied in East Germany appear at the center of this post-socialist publicity.

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