



Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines

55 | 2024

Mapping Amdo III. Dynamics of Relations and
Interaction, followed by Varia

Tuya Shagdar, Culturedness and Hegemony. Elites in Mongolia after State-Socialism



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/6647>

DOI: 10.4000/126m7

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Société des études mongoles et sibériennes

Electronic reference

"Tuya Shagdar, Culturedness and Hegemony. Elites in Mongolia after State-Socialism", *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 55 | 2024, Online since 19 August 2024, connection on 27 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/6647> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/126m7>

This text was automatically generated on October 27, 2024.

The text and other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Tuya Shagdar, Culturedness and Hegemony. Elites in Mongolia after State-Socialism

REFERENCES

PhD dissertation, defended on 31st January 2024 at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Supervisor: David Sneath. External examiner: Grégory Delaplace. Internal examiner: Christian Sorace.

- 1 This thesis asks: how did a tiny minority, the “oligarchic” elite of Mongolia, manage to dominate the economic and political life of the country for over three decades since the transition to liberal democracy in 1990? With Mongolian media reporting that 99,6 percent of shares listed on the Mongolian Stock Exchange are owned by around 5 percent of the total shareholders and that the ownership of Mongolian businesses is limited to less than a hundred families (Sneath 2018), it might appear that the rule by this minority has become hegemonic. In recent years, however, the superrich have been targeted by a new brand of populist politics. This thesis argues that the emergence, maintenance, and recent targeting of the superrich by a brand of populist politics would not have been possible without Mongolia’s complex history of independent statehood framed within a cultural understanding of what is national and popular.
- 2 Mongolian national independence has been felt to be fragile since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which used to guarantee its *de facto* sovereignty. Consequently, successive governments have geared the national strategy towards the promotion of economic strength and by doing so have tried to address this perceived weakness (Bumochir 2018). Central to the rise, but also to the fall of oligarchic elites is the issue of “national interest” (*ulsyn ashig sonirhol*) and “people’s interest” (*ard tümnii ashig sonirhol*). The highly valorised notion of an independent state constitutes the commonsensical perception of the popular imagination of Mongolians outside of

which, one would be speaking nonsense. Such valorisation paradoxically shapes the capitalist dispositions of the elites, while also being a source of their insecurity.

- 3 In liberal democracies elite power often appears in public culture as something tolerable. In structural Marxist terms, the elite frequently feature as a well-articulated ruling class. The notion of a self-conscious ruling class makes for convincing explanations of relations of stark inequality and the accumulation of resources by a small minority (Althusser 1970, p. 90; Poulantzas 1969, p. 74). Such a concept renders the elite a monolithic and well-orchestrated grouping in a capitalist society. Anthropological studies, however, have demonstrated that this can be a misleading approach to elite power, which is frequently fractured and fluid (Armytage 2020; Lotter 2004, 2012; Simandjuntak 2012; Salman & Sologuren 2011; Sánchez 2016; Lentz 2000; Antonyan 2016; Derlugian 2005). In Mongolia with the rise of recent populist political leadership, a sense of deep crisis of authority has settled in among the oligarchic circles. With many senior careers ending in prosecutions, the events that I explored in my dissertation provide an image of a politically and economically dominant group that is anything but monolithic. The fierce competition, brutal factionalism, and volatility of their status which has intensified in the last decade point to the chaotic and complex nature of politics and the pursuit of wealth in contemporary Mongolia.
- 4 The models of elite power most widely used in Euro-American social sciences have tended to describe relatively stable milieus where knowledge and power are seen as working together to support their status quo (Marcus 1983, p. 19). For Foucault, domination is the result of a more or less a coherent regime of truth whereby power is exercised through the production of truth. Such production of truth, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, depends on the articulation of commonsensical knowledge at the popular level (1985, p. 62). In Mongolia, however, much public knowledge of elites is profoundly negative. Oligarchy (*oligarhi*) and the phrase “billionaires born from the state” (*töröös törsön terbumtan*) have become well-worn Mongolian terms for describing the social order. Many of the richest individuals in the country are indeed politicians but their close affinity to the state also means that such privilege is precarious. By reflecting on Mongolia’s decade-long politics I show that far from being commonsensical the elite rule in Mongolia has increasingly undergone a process of disarticulation. Recently fuelled by public critique about the vast disparities in living conditions and injustices that structure the ordinary Mongolians’ lives, the long-fermented mass discontent was spectacularly unleashed through the emergence of populist leadership. From 2020 onwards many of the elites whom I term the “old grandees” have experienced a series of prosecutions resulting in prison terms. This is an ongoing trend and as threats to nationalise their wealth have become an ever-present possibility, the formal party and popular politics have entered a period of intense flux.
- 5 The crisis of elite authority is not limited to Mongolia as populism continues to challenge the international liberal order (Babic 2020). In recent years the world has witnessed periods of conjunctural crises, whether political – the rise of far-right forms of populism –, public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or the ruptures caused by recent wars in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula. The resulting economic hardships have fuelled further discontent, and it is indicative of organic crises (Hall 1988). Massey and Hall pointed out that while such events may have their independent character, they could be symptoms of the general

“philosophical and political” crises which Gramsci termed as organic crises (2010, p. 59). Gramsci, whose work I drew on extensively in my dissertation, defined such crises as the period of interregnum (Gramsci 1971, p. 276). Throughout my thesis, I asked, “How can reading of Mongolia update our understanding of this interregnum period for the contemporary world?” The emerging themes that I traced in my dissertation are the analysis of such interregnum by reflecting on the crisis of authority of Mongolian elites, their attempts to search for alternative forms of hegemony such as seeking stable Mongolian religious identity, the role of public and popular culture in re-imagining such new directions.

Summary of chapters

- 6 In the introductory chapter, I establish a connection between the ethnographic present, a perception of the elite, and a theoretical discussion on hegemony. Following this chapter, I provide a historical and genealogical link between periods of interregnum in Mongolia’s history, the early history of nation building, the establishment of secular institutions, and the gradual development of a class of experts known as the “sophisticated workforce” during the socialist period. Alongside the institutional developments, I trace the gradual congealment of distinguishing cultural traits of socialist vanguards as persons inhabiting particular worldviews, and tastes, and an emphasis on intellectualism within a broader definition of “being cultured” (Fitzpatrick 1992; Verdery 1995; Bayly 2007). As being cultured (*soyoltoi*) gradually assumed a normative association with being a member of an educated vanguard (*seheeten*)¹, such perception also generated its stigmatised Other. The imagined opposite of this class-like category is the cultureless mass of citizenry, which in contemporary discourses are often evoked as “black masses” (*har mass*). Understanding the legacies of state socialist emphasis on being cultured is crucial as the divisions engendered by the old Leninist categories have recently assumed the central nodes for anti-elitist and anti-establishment mobilisation by the populist leadership. Chapter 3 of the dissertation describes the rise of populism expressed in anti-elitist rhetoric which signals a crisis of authority of the old grandees. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 foreground the strategies of elite socialisation and search for alternative visions in times of public health and political crisis left by the rise of populism and the state of emergency instituted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter outline

- 7 In the first chapter, I open a dialogue between an ethnography on the perceived “deficit of elites” (*elitiin homsdol*) and a crisis of hegemony. Elites, as I demonstrate, are unable to articulate a worldview where their place in it appears as legitimate. The interlocutors from elite and non-elite circles, although entirely familiar with the term *elite*, are eager to point out that there is a lack of proper elite. In informing me so, I understood that for Mongolians the notion of elite stood for highly idealised figures of exemplary leaders (*udirdagch*) who possess an ability to generate followers through high moral (*öndör yos surtahuun*) and intellectual (*oyuny chadvar*) leadership. In contrast to such idealised leadership, the current oligarchic elites are described as lacking

exemplariness (Humphrey 1997), although there is no shortage of people with power and wealth.

- 8 This lack of eliteness (*elitleg*) surfaces in public discussions where the oligarchs are described as crass lumpen-elite (*zerleg lumpen-elit*) and the public who follow them as “black masses” (*har mass*). There is a striking post-Marxist reference to a class-like grouping who lacks consciousness and the old Leninist division between vanguards and the masses re-presented as ignorant elites and masses who have become dark, a term which in Mongolian etymology stands in opposition to being enlightened. In such un-hegemonic times, the elites must couch their distinctive visions in the language of Mongolia’s interest and independence. Independence continues to be the single most hegemonic idea, the articulation of which relates to elites’ strong desire to generate stability, to which I turn in the next chapter.
- 9 The early xxth-century history of Mongolia offers a fascinating lens through which the changes in the political structures, and knowledge system, and the emergence of a new cohort of leadership can be explored. The history chapter of the thesis traces the first attempts by the Bogd Haan government to procure technical and scientific knowledge from Europe to secure the recognition of its sovereignty by the wider international powers. By focusing on the interactions and efforts of the Halh nobility and the Buriat Mongol intelligentsia active during the late Russian Empire and the early Soviet state, I trace the lives of a young cohort of Mongolian students who were sent to Europe to obtain academic and technical training. The young trainees who spent some years in Europe carried back not only the seeds of modern knowledge but also significant re-definitions of what broadly was considered a new culture (Punsaldulam 2018), tastes, habits, and worldviews of a new kind which contrasted with the old modes of living.
- 10 This story is told against the changing political environment – the gradual evolvement from old ecclesiastical polity into a modern nation-state and an increasing alliance with Soviet Bolshevism. Following the rise of Stalin in the Soviet Union, the Mongolian government adopted the Stalinist interpretation of the Leninist concept of the hegemony (*gegemoniya*) of new leadership. The logic of this policy was to appropriate the knowledge and expertise of the existing intelligentsia until the new generation of vanguards were trained. Throughout the xxth century, the set of new professionals in Mongolia known as *sheeten* continued to figure prominently in the development of various branches of science and institutions of modern knowledge. They represented the march of socialist modernity but significantly so they were builders of the Mongolian nation-state. The *sheeten* provided the social and cultural base for party vanguards who came to be known as the indispensable *sophisticated workforce*. Many of the so-called oligarchs made up the late socialist and early 1990s cohort of the liberally minded vanguards. Due to their indispensability to the national economy and modern expertise, they continued to dominate the three decades-long political-economic space until the rise of populist politics which started to emphasise alongside the notion of national interest, the interest of Mongolian people.
- 11 In the next chapter, I show that paradoxically the so-called “people’s leaders” (*ard tūmnii udirdagch*) are themselves oligarchs and that their mobilisation of a large portion of the population was successful because of their communication strategies which cleverly employed “the language of the people” (Myadar & Jackson 2019). By engaging with the theory of semiotics, the existing scholarship on populism, and Mongolia’s history of national popular, I unpack the strategies of affect employed by the anti-

oligarchic oligarchs. In the second half of the chapter, I explore the response by the old grandees to the rise of populist politics. I show that as populism poses a significant threat of the nationalisation of the wealth of the old grandees, the elites increasingly seek to redress their image and status in socialist terms of *sheeten* and a *sophisticated workforce*, terms that carry pedagogic and instructive meaning for the wider public. My fieldwork ethnography presents documentation of the strategies of the old grandees, mostly architects of three decades-long economic liberalisation, and their current moves to discredit the populist leadership through the production of political memoirs, some produced from prison confinement, public interviews, and intense engagement with social media. I supplement my research with ethnographic encounters and socialising with both populist elites and the old grandees.

- 12 Chapter 4 is located between descriptions of two types of events. Events that created a perception that my interlocutors lived in a time of extraordinary social-political upheaval, a state of emergency, and a general sense of crisis. The chapter that precedes describes the rise of anti-oligarchic oligarchs and the state of terror that was unleashed on the privileges of the old grandees. The chapter that follows chronicles the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disease that, apart from its sheer scale and vicious novelty, created a profound sense of biological insecurity among Mongolians. Located between these two sets of intense moments of crisis; biopolitical and economic, this chapter engages with non-material, non-immediate, and more transcendent trends in elite socialisation, especially among women, expressed in religious piety. My ethnography describes the intensification of religiosity among the general population during my fieldwork, but most notably the sudden preoccupation with Buddhism among elite women during the time of perceived instability of their status.
- 13 The chapter on the COVID-19 pandemic discusses some of the enduring ideas about hygiene and modernity (Rogaski 2004). I argue that these ideas are exclusive legacies of the nationalist and socialist modernist ideas about biopolitics. Such legacy shapes a common sense attitude by Mongolians during an intensified period of biopolitical threat coming from “foreign” land. The early closure of borders through the triggering of a state of emergency and subsequently ability to live without internal virus transmission until November 2020 was a source of significant national pride. While the public engaged in pandemic hysteria calling for ever more strict enforcement of the state of emergency such as the suspension of all in-class teaching, closure of borders, and frequent drills emulating lockdowns at home, the elites’ socialisation surprisingly intensified. Even after the internal transmission of the virus which happened late in 2020 and ordinary Mongolians continued to call for dutiful adherence to rules of emergency, the elites continued to socialise ever more frequently to weather the political terror, prosecutions of senior members of political leadership which continued to rattle the foundations of the oligarchic circles. The chapter elaborates on intense socialisation among the elite around alcohol consumption as a way to normalise intra-elite relationships in times of health and political crisis.
- 14 I close my dissertation with notes on precarity, a social condition produced by a particular type of political economy. By documenting the suicide of a man who was rendered in public discourse as no one but a vendor of CDs in the streets of Ulaanbaatar, I reflect on the larger economic and social system which potentially exposes anyone to vulnerability and uncertainty. I conclude that the conglomeration of what may seem as disparate and disconnected events, the rise of populism, increased

religiosity, and the pandemic, could be expressive of larger symptoms, where the order of things once considered stable such as the elites' status, have entered a protracted period of uncertainty. The sense of precarity is strangely familiar to both the desperately poor and the elite alike, although the former's experience is tragically acute compared to the privileged social grouping.

Images from the field. Left: Elite International School. Right: Elite Pub



In some ways the use of the term elite in Mongolia's public language resembles Pareto's notion of the "elite" as simply the best individuals in each field of life ([1915-1919] 1963). The circulation of the term in advertisement and service branding resembles more of Williams' definition ([1976] 2015) where historically the way the term came to circulation was due to the emergence of a strata which increasingly sought more select goods and services to distinguish their cultural milieu

© Tuya Shagdar

Methods

- 15 Broadly speaking, I utilised four broad modes of research which I did not determine in advance, but which emerged as I sifted through my data after the fieldwork in the writing-up stage. These methods include semi-structured interviews in combination with observation of elite socialisation, historical and biographical study, and remaining open to chance and unexpected encounters which Rivoal and Salazar term ethnographic moments of "serendipity" (2013). Although the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns instituted by the Government of Mongolia significantly affected the first half of my fieldwork period, I managed to convince the majority of my subjects to respond positively to my requests for formal interviews. The lockdowns in Mongolia were instituted at intervals ranging from 4 to 5 weeks which meant that I tried to time my in-person interviews in between such lockdowns. These short gaps were periods when public places and entertainment venues were partially open and in-person interaction was rationed using extended curfew hours.
- 16 In total, I conducted over thirty in-person interviews ranging from political leaders, party bosses, party intellectuals, businesspeople, professionals, their families, and friends. I often tried to schedule the meetings in my interlocutors' offices, and, if possible, at their home so that I had an opportunity to observe them in their surroundings. Some of the interlocutors were, however, cautious, especially women in terms of meeting at home. I was only able to "access" their homes and women's circles from late spring in 2021 after the government had completed an aggressive vaccination

campaign against COVID-19. In addition, I spent several hundred hours socialising with a range of friends and acquaintances with some access to elite circles, and at least as much time reading news and social media posts about them.

- 17 Elites are typically aware of the powers of language (Lakoff 2004). Just as they are masters of self-representation, they also know about the potential linguistic powers of social scientists. I came to this realisation when I often had to wait for several months to access some people that I needed to interview. On a few occasions, knowing some of my interlocutors for years was not enough to be granted an interview. I often felt that an invitation to observe their lives was entirely contingent upon their willingness to extend their social graces to a supplicant. This was also, no doubt, a product of the heightened sensitivity of my research topic, because of the recent public scrutiny and political crackdown on the elites, and their subsequent realisation of their insecurity, which drove them to be particularly suspicious of any potentially damaging assessment of their status and wealth. My interlocutors were fully aware of my research goals and due to the close networks among the elite word spread quite fast. Meanwhile, I knew that prospective interlocutors were scrutinising my background on social media and other open sources of information about me, such as my research statement on scholarship websites or research blurbs. This led me to consciously edit my public representation of myself on the internet and across social media. I deactivated and deleted some of my accounts. A sense of self-censorship uncannily follows me even after my fieldwork as my interlocutors sometimes contact me, to give hints that they are observing and watching me closely.
- 18 Some of my interlocutors have good English language skills and having read my publication, they would quiz me about my research and sometimes my political orientation. However, my questions on subjects that they had strong views on such as “Buddhism”, or the notion of “Leadership”, often piqued their interest and opened some doors. Two of my interlocutors were foreign nationals, who had worked closely with senior Mongolian politicians. They, for example, asked to read my thesis after I had written or published it which reflects what Shore termed the elites’ powers of “veto” by which academic work is subject to possible scrutiny and critique (Shore 2002, p. 11). Many, however, tried to influence, direct, and sometimes even control the direction of research. Almost all of them possessed some form of authored book, biography, or other form of textual, or visual material which they would gift and prompt me to study carefully. These were not only invitations to dive into their “doctrines, worldviews, and ideologies”, but also acts of legitimation by which they aimed to establish authoritative knowledge (Marcus 1983, p. 35). I supplemented some of the information given in these self-authored materials, which were often poorly referenced, with research in libraries and archives when they opened for the public toward the end of my fieldwork. These materials were, it turned out, crucial for constructing the “bigger” historical picture of the emergence of the elites.
- 19 In addition to these structured approaches, I often relied on “serendipitous” encounters which allowed me to gain insights into the social activities of the elites. The increased insecurity of the elite, combined with the restrictions of lockdowns, strangely made their socialising activities more intensive. These included gathering in clandestine social spaces where my presence faced me with ethical dilemmas. These moments with which I often opportunistically engaged gave me a chance to observe the elites’ friends, associates, political party alliances, religious merit-making, and travels

in the countryside. Indeed, they provided me with rare opportunities to socialise in elite circles in ways that might not otherwise have been possible, and through direct participant observation to gain an understanding of their world that were beyond their carefully crafted self-representations (Lotter 2004).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althusser, L. [1970] 1971 Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by B. Brewster (New York, Monthly Review Press), pp. 142-147, 166-176.
- Antonyan, Yu 2016 Introduction. Elites or “elites”? Towards the anthropology of the concept in Armenia and Georgia, in Y. Antonyan (ed.), *Elites and “Elites”. Transformations of Social Structures in Post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia* (Yerevan, ASCN), pp. 110-171.
- Armytage, R. 2020 *Big Capital in an Unequal World. The Micropolitics of Wealth in Pakistan* (Oxford, Berghahn Books).
- Babic, M. 2020 Let’s talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order, *International Affairs* 96(3), pp. 767-786.
- Bayly, S. 2007 *Asian Voices in Post-Colonial Age. Vietnam, India, and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press).
- Bumochir, D. 2018 Generating capitalism for independence in Mongolia, *Central Asian Survey* 37(3), pp. 357-371.
- Deluguian, G. M. 2005 *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-System Biography* (Chicago, Chicago University Press).
- Fitzpatrick, S. 1992 *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press).
- Gramsci, A. 1971 *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, edited by Q. Hoare (New Delhi, Aakar Books).
- Hall, S. 1988 *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London, Verso Books).
- Hall, S. & D. Massey 2010 Interpreting the crisis, *Soundings* 44, pp. 57-71.
- Humphrey, C. 1997 Exemplars and rules. Aspects of the discourse of moralities in Mongolia, in S. Howell (ed.), *The Ethnography of Moralities* (London, Routledge), pp. 25-47.
- Laclau, E. & Ch. Mouffe 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, Verso Books).
- Lakoff, G. 2004. *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. The Essential Guide for Progressives* (Chelsea, VT, Chelsea Green Publishing).
- Lentz, C. 2000 “Tradition” versus “politics”. Succession conflicts in a chiefdom of North-western Ghana, in J. De Pina-Cabral & A. Pedroso de Lima (eds), *Elites. Choice, Leadership and Succession* (London, Ethnographica Press), pp. 81-100.
- Lotter, S. 2004 Studying-up those who fell down. Elite transformation in Nepal, *Anthropology Matters* 6(2).

- 2012 Continuity and change as two identifying principles amongst Nepalese nobility, in J. Abbink & T. Salverda (eds), *Anthropology of Elites. Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction* (London, Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 71-94.
- Marcus, G. E 1983 *Elites. Ethnographic Issues* (Santa Fe, SAR).
- Myadar, O. & S. Jackson 2019 Contradictions of populism and resource extraction. Examining the intersection of resource nationalism and accumulation by dispossession in Mongolia, *Annals of American Association of Geographers* 109(2), pp. 361-370.
- Pareto, V. [1915-1919] 1963 *A Treatise on General Sociology* (New York, Dover Press).
- Poulantzas, N. 1969 The problem of the Capitalist State, *New Left Review* 58, pp. 67-78.
- Punsaldulam, B. 2018 *Shine soyol Mongold tölvshsön tүүh (XX зуун)* [The history of instilling new culture in Mongolia] (Ulaanbaatar, Soyombo Press).
- Rivoal, I. & N. Salazar 2013 Contemporary ethnographic practice and the value of serendipity, *Social Anthropology* 21(2), pp. 178-185.
- Rogaski, R. 2004 *Hygienic Modernity. Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- Salman, T. & X. S. Sologuren 2011 Anti-elites as new elites. Complexities of elite performance in baffled Bolivia, *Comparative Sociology* 10, pp. 614-635.
- Sánchez, R. 2016 *Dancing Jacobins. A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism* (New York, Fordham University Press).
- Shore, C. 2002. Towards an anthropology of elites, in S. Nugent & C. Shore (eds), *Elite Cultures. Anthropological Perspectives* (London, Routledge), pp. 1-21.
- Simandjuntak, D. 2012 Beyond wealth and pleasant posture. Exploring elite competition in the patronage democracy of Indonesia, in J. Abbink & T. Salverda (eds), *Anthropology of Elites. Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction* (London, Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 95-112.
- Sneath, D. 2018 *Mongolian Remade. Post-Socialist National Culture, Political Economy, and Cosmopolitics* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press).
- Verdery, K. [1991] 1995 *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Oakland, University of California Press).
- Williams, R. [1976] 2015 *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

NOTES

1. *Sehee, sehee oroh, seheereh* means to gain and regain consciousness, to awaken.