

City and ideology

Urban space is one of the ways by which the state's ideological shift is articulated in post-socialist Mongolia.

The state's ideological shift is easily 'readable' in the post-soviet cityscape, especially in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, where the city's symbolic architecture and iconography have been profoundly altered to reflect the ongoing power arrangements. Specifically, the state has appropriated Chinggis Khan¹ to symbolically narrate a new political ideology and has used him as the foremost representation of national identity in the post-socialist era. The omnipresent glorification of Chinggis Khan in the new Mongolia can be juxtaposed against the disappearing and displaced symbolic representations of the Soviet era (e.g., the statue of Lenin) to show the manner in which Chinggis Khan has been used as a political and ideological tool in post-socialist Mongolia. To illustrate this juxtaposition, the article examines the changing symbolic landscape of post-socialist Mongolia's urbanscape using three primary sites: the central square, the statue of Lenin, and the Chinggis Khan monument.

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THESE THREE SITES ILLUSTRATE the state's instrumentality in determining which version of history is invoked and which version is silenced at any given period. The dialectical method is helpful to situate the integrated totality of the state's appropriation of the national past and its fractured materiality within the confines of an ideological framework. It illuminates the binaries within the structure of the state's ideological pursuits: between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

While many Mongolians clung – and continue to cling – to socialism, the Mongolian state's commitment to socialist ideology came to a halt following the collapse of international communism in the late eighties and early nineties. Since the break-up of the former Soviet Union, Mongolia has gone through a remarkable political transformation – effectively shedding its socialist cast and breaking away from the Soviet ideological model. The new Mongolian elite assumed the role of producing a Mongolian ideological path detached from the Soviet mold. This ideological path would justify the dismantling of cherished vestiges of socialism. The process has been, in Bulag's words, "a challenge to seventy years' of production and reproduction of Mongol identity and the entire social order".²

When a political regime changes, new national leaders often use urban space to articulate the ideological shift, unless the new regime is largely an extension of the previous regime. Symbols of national and political identity serve as *milieus* of national identity and sites of political contestation. New expressions of the state ideology, however, are not imposed onto an empty landscape. Rather the old has to be razed for the new to occupy the space, both literally and

metaphorically. A substantial amount of human and material resources are devoted to inscribing the state's new ideology and to projecting the new triumphant national identity.

The central square

Like many former socialist cities, Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia, radiates physically and symbolically outwards from its central square. Long before the square was cemented, it was already a gathering site where political leaders spoke to the public from a wooden podium. One such leader was Sukhbaatar, Mongolia's most idolized figure during the socialist era for his role in fighting and securing Mongolia's independence. During the socialist years, Sukhbaatar was undoubtedly the foremost representation and symbol of the country's socialist ideology. He became the material expression of the state, from banknotes, to grand statues, to streets, provinces and cities either decorated with his image or named after him. To honor and monumentalize Sukhbaatar's legacy, the central square was chosen as the embodiment of his contribution to the national cause. In the center of the square, a prominent equestrian statue of Sukhbaatar was erected in 1946. Sukhbaatar is seated on his horse looking north – presumably toward Russia – capturing Mongolia's commitment to the Soviet Union and Soviet leadership in the quest for international communism. Sukhbaatar was the original leader of the Revolutionary Party until his untimely death at the age of 30. The Revolutionary Party went on to control Mongolia for seven decades, during which time many generations of Mongolian's grew up playing, walking, and gathering under Sukhbaatar's fatherly eye.

In 1954, a mausoleum was built and ceremoniously opened immediately to the north of the square, as part of the main government building. The mausoleum was to house the remains of Sukhbaatar reifying his legacy and preserving his cult of personality posthumously. Although Sukhbaatar had been dead for over three decades by the time the mausoleum was constructed, his remains were exhumed and transferred from Altan Ulgii, where he had been previously buried. In the mausoleum, Sukhbaatar's remains were accompanied by those of Horloogyn Choibalsan. Choibalsan ruled Mongolia for over two decades after Sukhbaatar, amassing complete political power. The mausoleum was thus to embody and serve as a constant reminder of Sukhbaatar and Choibalsan and the socialist ideology they personified. With Sukhbaatar's statue at its center and his remains in an overlooking mausoleum, the square was always, since formalized inception, known as Sukhbaatar's square.

And then surprisingly, breaking from this long history, the state changed the central square's name from Sukhbaatar Square to Chinggis Khan Square, in the summer of 2013. It was a remarkable move not only because the square is an important public space, but also because it has served as a primary platform for both political expressions and informal gatherings since its inception. One of the common metaphors that is used to understand the politics of space is that of understanding a site as a text. Geographers have long argued that an urban space functions as a text bears meanings that are authored for particular purposes.³ If we use the text metaphor to understand the evolving meanings of the square, we can see that the square has been used as a site to express the changing political ideology of the state.

The decision to change Sukhbaatar Square's name to Chinggis Khan Square can be read not only as an attempt to signal the ideological departure from the previous regime but also as an effort to erase the memory associated with the site and to instill a new memory. Similarly, the material expressions of socialist ideology are fading in post-socialist Mongolia. The grand mausoleum of Sukhbaatar and Choibalsan, for example, was demolished and in its place now stands a statue of Chinggis Khan. When the government of Mongolia removed the mausoleum it was not a mere architectural re-arrangement of the physical space. By demolishing the left-over relic of the socialist-era, the newly appropriated space was to represent the country's departure from its socialist legacy and arrival at a newly reinvigorated society.

Statue of Lenin

During the same year that Sukhbaatar Square was renamed Chinggis Khan Square (2013), another monument of socialist memory was erased from Ulaanbaatar's symbolic landscape: the statue of Lenin, which had stood near the center of Ulaanbaatar for several decades. Witnessed by about 300 people on a sunny October day the statue was brought down, whilst the mayor of the city, Bat-Uul Erdene, gave a speech justifying the act (fig.1).

Until that ill-fated day, the colossal statue had stood dignified, looking down from high above, superimposing a visual hierarchy over passersby and demanding respect and reverence.⁴ For decades the statue was one of the foremost symbols of Mongolia's ideological commitment. The statue symbolized the Mongolian state's allegiance to international communism since the country joined the socialist camp in 1921, preceded only by the Soviet Union. The year 1921 marked Mongolia's much celebrated rebirth after its two-hundred year long subjugation by the Manchus and Chinese. In the following seven decades the Mongolian state exerted considerable efforts to re-territorialize not only the national political and ideological landscape, but also material urbanscapes.

Fig.1: Fallen statue of Lenin. (Photo by Michael Kohn)



Politics of urban space in Post-Socialist Mongolia

The statue of Lenin, erected near the heart of the city in 1958, was one of countless state efforts to imprint the popular psyche with materialized and embodied socialist icons, which undoubtedly served to articulate the state's greater ideological project. The statue was not an accidental urban site, but its purpose was to concretize a particular set of meanings, consistent with the state's overall ideological discourse. It represented someone who pioneered and directed the benevolent regime, of which the subjects of the state were to be constantly reminded. It immortalized the god-like figure who stood there to witness the progress that society was making. His enormous size suggested that he was not only greater than life, but also hegemonic.⁵ Therefore, passersby would be subtly reminded of their inherent subordination, not only to this concrete image but also to the ideological pursuit of the state represented by the statue.

As a public site, however, the statue served purposes beyond a mere plot to express political ideology. Rather, it became an integral part of Ulaanbaatar's urban space as the statue occupied this particular space for nearly six decades. In the post-socialist era, however, the statue no longer delivered the state's vision and ideology, thus it became victim to the state's efforts to cleanse the city landscape of the remnants of the socialist period. To revisit Foucault's dramatic visualization of a tortured body in his prologue to *Discipline and Punish*, Lenin's body (in statue form) was used as an instrument for the wider purpose of disciplining the subjects of the state beyond the mere moment of the statue's destruction. The dishonoring of Lenin's body under the public's watchful gaze served to express the state's new ideology and to desecrate the embodied expression of the old.

Chinggis Khan monument

While old symbolic landscapes are fading from Ulaanbaatar's urban space, new expressions of the state ideology have victoriously asserted their presence. Among these expressions, Chinggis Khan has become the most preeminent symbol of post-socialist Mongolia. While the central square was named after Sukhbaatar until recently, Chinggis Khan had already begun to assert his presence in the space long before the name change when a massive statue of him replaced Sukhbaatar and Choibalsan's mausoleum, which once stood seemingly immortal and permanent. This massive statue of Chinggis Khan was erected in 2006 in commemoration of the 800 year anniversary of the establishment of the Great Mongolian State and the proclamation of Chinggis as the 'universal' Khan (fig. 2).

To say that Chinggis' image is *everywhere* in today's Mongolia is hardly an exaggeration. Chinggis Khan 'lives' in every imaginable form in Mongolia, from billboards to rock bands to vodka bottles. He has become the most prominent symbol of national grandeur, culture and identity.⁶ Given his ubiquity, the project of constructing a national identity does not *appear* to have been top-down, carefully engineered by the state, as was the case during the socialist era. Instead, the nation *seems* to be reinventing itself rhizomatically, at least on the surface. The Deleuze and Guattarian 'rhizome' metaphor represents a model that extends in all directions with multiple non-hierarchical and disorderly entries and exits. The metaphor aptly captures the chaotic articulation and appropriation of Chinggis Khan in post-socialist Mongolia.⁷

However, unlike rhizomes, these articulations are not necessarily independent discursive circuits detached from the core ideological generator: the state. The state's role has in fact been monumental in producing and inscribing the Chinggis-rooted national identity. By the time the Soviets left Mongolia, the epistemological vessel of Chinggis Khan among the general public was increasingly depleted owing to Soviet-dictated policies. One such policy was to teach in schools that Chinggis Khan was a ruthless feudal leader and thus an undesirable and inappropriate figure in Mongolian history.⁸ Therefore, each generation under the socialist state of Mongolia was removed further from the legacy of Chinggis Khan, not only temporally but also ideologically. As a result, Chinggis Khan and his empire's legacy became "distant and vague memories".⁹

Therefore, the new Mongolian state assumed a central role in generating and propagating a new epistemology of Chinggis Khan and remolding the public psyche to the renewed version of this highly contested historic figure. Though one of many, the Chinggis monument in front of the government building is particularly important in understanding the state's role in inscribing a Chinggis Khan-centered national identity. The monument is also an example of the memorialization of Chinggis Khan by the state, which inscribes his image not only in public minds but also in the material urban space.

In articulating the state's vision, the statue is strategically situated in the focal point of the government building. By visually and physically centering Chinggis Khan, the statue is not to be seen as a mere architectural ornament but rather to be treated as the undeniable symbol of the state. Furthermore, the monument is positioned above and over, which denies the viewer the transcendent position.¹⁰ The spatial hierarchy between the monument (by extension the state) and the viewer only highlights the inherent binary between the state and its



Fig.2: The statue of Chinggis Khan. (Photo by Michael Kohn)

citizens. The sheer size of the monument makes the gazed upon feel particularly insignificant. Additionally, the way that Chinggis Khan is depicted in this monument signals the visual narrative the state produces – one of governance rather than of conquering. Here, Chinggis Khan is seated authoritatively and dressed in traditional costume without the usual décor of armor or weapons. This monument sits in sharp contrast to other Chinggis monuments elsewhere, including the Chinggis monument in Ordos (Inner Mongolia, China), a forty-meter high stainless steel Chinggis monument on the eastern steppe of Mongolia, and the equestrian Chinggis monument that was exhibited at Marble Arch in Central London – both of which depict him as fierce and 'warrior-like', on horseback in full armor. By shying away from such a war nexus, this particular monument intends to narrate the allegorical focus of Chinggis' leadership of his people, rather than his conquering of other lands.

The statue is accompanied by two smaller statues, of Ögödei Khan and Khubilai Khan (Chinggis Khan's son and grandson respectively). Though Chinggis Khan produced numerous direct descendants,¹¹ the state's choice of Ögödei and Khubilai, two of Chinggis' descendants considered the most successful, suggests that the state is interested in only the selective legacy of Chinggis Khan. The monument is obviously not "an audible part of policy talk".¹² Rather it silently but effectively inscribes political rhetoric to the subjugated gaze. Munkh-Erdene argues that the Chinggis monument serves as a tool to illicit loyalty to the Mongolian state.¹³

The demand of subjugation and loyalty is most 'readable' during state official ceremonies where elite members of the state, along with other dignitaries, offer ceremonial tributes to the monument. The amount of respect displayed during such ceremonies conveys an utmost veneration to this beautifully crafted colossal bronze. Such a spectacle by the elites 'flags' appropriate behavior to those subjected to this visual reign (with the state in the background literally and metaphorically). Michael Billig uses the term *flagging* to imply a constant reminder of nationhood.¹⁴

Foreign dignitaries are treated to this elaborate ritual as well. Official delegates to Mongolia often join the heavily choreographed ceremony of paying respect to the Chinggis monument. Extending Ippei's assertion that Chinggis' name is used as a political and cultural resource in and out of Mongolia,¹⁵ this ritual is demonstrably used as a political narrative for post-socialist Mongolia's ideological undergirding, rooted in the fame and glory of Chinggis Khan.

Conclusion

The decision to change the central square's name was not a simple process of changing names on a city map. Rather, it has deep implications in channeling the state ideology through the city's urban space. It is an example of the state's selective use of history, and state-driven forgetting or remembering. Chinggis' image is not inscribed on an empty landscape. Instead, the expression of the Chinggis-centered state ideology has displaced, altered or removed the existing iconography from the urban space. Moreover, changing the urban iconography and symbolic landscape has not been a simple aesthetic

and architectural expression, but has served as an arena to express the state ideology regardless of the public perception of the meanings attached to the symbols and iconography from the previous regime.

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- Chinggis Khan's name is spelt differently depending on the language in which it is written and on conventions of transliteration. Among the most common are Chinggis, Genghis, Genghiz or Jengiz. For the purpose of this paper the Mongolian transliteration is used.
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