

A Chicken Is Not a Bird, Mongolia Is Not Abroad: Late Socialist Mongolia in the Soviet Geographical Imagination

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Abstract. As the Mongolian People’s Republic became increasingly important to the Soviet Union’s foreign policy goals in the second half of the twentieth century, many Soviet specialists found themselves living and working in Mongolia for considerable amounts of time. Though this was technically a foreign posting, those specialists often did not consider it as such. As a then-popular saying put it, “a chicken is not a bird, Mongolia is not abroad” (*kuritsa ne ptitsa, Mongolia ne zagranitsa*). In this paper, I will use Soviet accounts of life in late socialist Mongolia to interrogate Soviet ideas of “the abroad”, placing Mongolia in a broader imagined geography of the socialist world and beyond. After surveying the meanings that the idea of “the abroad” (*zagranitsa*) held for Soviet citizens, I will show that Mongolia was simultaneously too familiar and too foreign in all the wrong ways to be classified as true *zagranitsa*. Drawing from the memoirs of Soviet expatriates living in a country that was separated from the USSR by an international border yet hauntingly familiar, I will explore the ways in which Soviet citizens’ imaginations of foreignness and distance diverged from those imposed by officially designated borders.

Keywords: Mongolia, the USSR, ‘the abroad’/ *zagranitsa*, Soviet influence

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«Курица не птица, Монголия не заграница»: советские мемуары о жизни в позднесоциалистической Монголии

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Аннотация. Поскольку Монгольская Народная Республика стала крайне важной для международной политики Советского Союза во второй половине XX в., многие советские специалисты жили и работали в Монголии значительное количество времени. Хотя это было международным назначением, для этих специалистов оно не являлось таковым: как говорилось в популярной на тот момент поговорке, «курица не птица, Монголия не заграница». В этой статье используются советские представления о жизни в позднесоциалистической Монголии для исследования советской идеи понятия «заграница» и включения Монголии в более широкое географическое представление социалистического мира. Вслед за исследованием понятия «заграница» в представлении советских граждан, показано, что Монголия была одновременно очень знакомой и очень иностранной и не совсем подходила под понятие «заграница». Используя мемуары советских экспатриантов, живших в стране, которая была отделена от СССР государственной границей, но все же была очень знакома, проанализировано, насколько представления советских граждан о загранице и дистанции отличались от представлений, навязываемых официальными границами.

Ключевые слова: Монголия, СССР, «заграница», советское влияние

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As the Mongolian People's Republic became the most common destination for Soviet economic, technical, and military advisors in the 1960s, many of those Soviet citizens began to think of the USSR's oldest satellite with a remarkable familiarity. To them, and to many other Soviet people living in the regions near the Soviet-Mongolian border, Mongolia came to seem more like an extension of the USSR than a foreign state. This familiarity produced a popular adage that claimed: "a chicken is not a bird, Mongolia is not abroad (Russian: *kuritsa — ne ptitsa, Mongoliia — ne zagranitsa*).^{*} This saying, which sometimes substituted Bulgaria or another particularly familiar socialist republic for Mongolia, appears quite bizarre at first glance. In many ways, Mongolia was very much abroad. Soviet specialists and tourists who traveled there had to secure the necessary permissions from the Soviet and Mongolian governments, cross a border staffed with guards and customs officers, and live by the laws of the Mongolian People's Republic once they got there. At the same time, the fact of being located across an international boundary did not in itself qualify Mongolia as *zagranitsa*, and in this paper I will show that the MPR was in fact the least likely of the USSR's socialist neighbors to be included in that category.

Indeed, after several decades of the USSR's near-total isolation, the abroad assumed almost mystical qualities in the minds of many Soviet citizens. Alexei Yurchak defines the idea of *zagranitsa* in the Soviet geographical imagination as "an imaginary place that was simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic", a "Soviet imaginary 'elsewhere' that was not necessarily about any real place" [Yurchak 2006]. As we shall see, Mongolia failed to conform to this vision by virtue of both its familiarity and its foreignness. On the one hand, the Soviet project of Mongolia's socialist development produced environments, patterns of social relations, and problems that were familiar to Soviet people, more so than those in any other socialist country. On the other, the ways in which Mongolia remained foreign to the Soviet gaze made it seem backward and even revolting rather than alluringly exotic. Where the Soviet travelers to socialist Eastern Europe saw peripheries that appeared more advanced than the USSR's supposed metropole, those who went to Mongolia often came away with a view of the MPR as a place whose inhabitants needed to be tutored rather than emulated. This perspective stripped Mongolia of the veneer of mysteriousness and unattainability that characterized the *zagranitsa*, rendering it familiar enough to be informally referred to as the USSR's "sixteenth republic".

^{*} This saying appears in several sources used in this paper, occasionally even in the title. See S. A. Panarin [Panarin 2014], M. Prozorova [Prozorova 2020].

Mongolia's initial foreignness

Before there was a well-defined concept of the abroad in Soviet discourse, socialist Mongolia was in fact completely foreign to any Soviet visitor without a background in its history, culture, or language. Despite Russia's distinguished pre-revolutionary tradition of Mongolian studies and the Soviet government's desire to carry on with serious academic study of the region, early attempts to accumulate new knowledge on Mongolia were fraught with problems. First, there was the question of priorities and limited resources. The Bolsheviks' general attitude toward academic learning emphasized pragmatic applications over knowledge for the sake of knowledge, often privileging economists, agronomists, and public health experts over philologists and scholars of religious studies. Since money for academic projects was particularly hard to come by in the 1920s, one official vowed to evaluate the work of Soviet expeditions in Mongolia "on the basis of the possibility of using their results in creating the plan of economic development for Mongolia and in the work of the government of the Mongolian People's Republic" [Yusupova 2006]. Those whose work was deemed irrelevant would be denied funding. As the Soviet government tightened controls over foreign travel in the late 1920s, the reality of Mongolia's status as a foreign country became more apparent than ever. In addition to the scholars who could not justify the usefulness of their work, those branded as "politically unreliable" were also denied permission to conduct research there [Yusupova 2006: 147–148].

To those who did manage to secure funding and get across the border, Mongolia appeared a far cry from the familiar sights and sounds that greeted Soviet specialists less than half a century later. The Mongolian language, though infiltrated by new political terms borrowed from Soviet official speech, was still written in the distinctive vertical script, and thus completely impenetrable to Russian speakers with no prior knowledge of it. The country's capital and site of the largest concentration of foreigners, renamed Ulaanbaatar in 1924, was similarly unfamiliar. Not only were the city's layout and appearance unlike that of any Soviet city, its population was also cosmopolitan and decidedly foreign. In Ulaanbaatar, Mongolian lamas, herders and revolutionaries lived alongside Chinese laborers and artisans, Tibetan merchants, and Russian emigres from the pre-revolutionary times.* And, though Mongolia is commonly acknowledged as the Soviet Union's earliest satellite, in the 1920s the Soviets still had to share space and influence with other foreign actors, including the American Museum of Natural History expeditions led by Roy Chapman Andrews [Bashkuev 2014]. Thus, though Soviet specialists did much work in this period, studying, among other things, herd management, social relations, and diseases common among the Mongols, Mongolia re-

* On "native Russians" and Tibetan merchants see [Mikhalev 2008: 8]; on the Chinese population in Ulaanbaatar see [Panarin 2014: 6]

mained a distant and foreign place to most Soviet citizens. This would change in a rather dramatic fashion in the decades following the end of the Second World War.

Mongolia as familiar space

Soviet influence over Mongolia grew steadily after the initial intensive contacts in the 1920s, with the Soviet government involving itself heavily in the collectivization campaign of 1930–1932, the purges of Mongolian political elites, Buddhist clergy and ethnic minorities in the late 1930s, and the border conflicts with Japan at Khalkhin Gol in 1939. The Mongolian government, in turn, supplied arms and other goods to the Soviet war effort during the Second World War and eventually joined the Red Army's invasion of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia in August 1945. The real height of Soviet influence in Mongolia, however, would not come until the Sino-Soviet split necessitated an increased Soviet presence in Mongolia's buffer zone. By 1966, Soviet specialists in Mongolia accounted for three quarters of all Soviet specialists working abroad [Mikhalev 2010: 131]. Starting in 1967, the USSR also accumulated a large military presence in Mongolia, complete with several armor divisions and aviation units. This movement of people and technology was accompanied by intensive construction, which transformed Mongolia beyond recognition. In Ulaanbaatar, the "Russian quarter" where the city's pre-revolutionary Russian diaspora tended to concentrate, was largely supplanted by new housing units and the attendant infrastructure built for the incoming Soviet specialists. In addition to the development of a familiar cityscape in Ulaanbaatar, the increased Soviet presence necessitated the construction of garrison towns around the newly established Soviet military bases in rural Mongolia and housing for Soviet specialists in the Soviet-built industrial towns of Darkhan and Erdenet [Mikhalev 2008: 10–11].

The influx of Soviet civilian and military specialists into Mongolia, along with the construction boom that accompanied it, created a physical and cultural space of unrivaled comfort for Soviet citizens living abroad. By catering to most of the specialists' needs while simultaneously excluding most if not all Mongolians, these spaces created Soviet enclaves within Mongolian cities.* The military garrisons, with their largely self-sufficient organization and restricted access for all outsiders, repeated that pattern. Thus, it was quite possible for a Soviet specialist to spend their entire term in Mongolia socializing only with other Soviet citizens, shopping at Soviet stores, frequenting Soviet cultural institutions, and interacting with no Mongolians save for those they were sent to advise. Even those who did venture out of the Soviet enclaves,

* On the exclusion of Mongolians from spaces meant for Soviet specialists, see A.V. Mikhalev [Mikhalev 2015: 104–105]; S. A Panarin [Panarin 2014: 71–72] and N. L. Zhukovskaya [Zhukovskaya 2001: 131].

either by choice or by professional necessity, could do so with relative comfort. At the height of Soviet influence in Mongolia in the second half of the 20th century, the vast majority of Mongolians in the MPR knew some Russian. Many of them had studied in the USSR, adding another layer of familiarity [Mikhalev 2015:103]. This was especially true for the credentialed professionals that the Soviet specialists tended to work alongside. Other signs of foreignness witnessed by Soviet visitors in the 1920s had long been removed by that time. Most of the lamas were repressed in the 1930s, the Chinese laborers pushed out in the 1960s, and the local Russians thoroughly marginalized by Soviet propaganda as supposed descendants of anti-Bolshevik Cossacks. Even the Mongolian language, converted to the Cyrillic script in 1946 and peppered with Russian loan words, was considerably friendlier to Russian speakers than its version from the 1920s. Beside the ease with which Soviet citizens could now interact with their Mongolian hosts, many of the cityscapes they lived and worked in were also quite familiar, as the new Mongolian housing blocks and public buildings closely resembled their Soviet counterparts.

Potential foreignness rendered harmless

Despite the general familiarity of the Soviet specialist's life in Mongolia, there were some signs that could have potentially marked the MPR as a place that was foreign enough, and thus part of the mythologized "abroad". First, there was the border with its customs checkpoints. Any Soviet citizen who forgot that they were in a foreign country would be reminded of that fact upon their return journey to the USSR. In fact, the Mongolian customs officers were apparently so strict that returning specialists took to concealing any and all goods they took away from Mongolia, including the ostensibly legal ones [Panarin 2014:73–74]. At the same time, this was a peculiar border landscape, with its relatively few border posts overseeing large lengths of territory and a very sparsely guarded stretch of border with the Tuvan ASSR. Because of this, unauthorized border crossings with the purpose of selling moonshine or stealing livestock became common, especially in the 1980s and 90s, when governmental controls relaxed even further. As one Russian scholar has put it, "the real status of [Mongolia], its place in the system of international relations, did not give Siberians a sense of living on the border, did not form the attendant mentality, and did not create any significant problems." [*Stabil'nost' i konflikt v rossiiskom prigranich'e* 2005] This situation stands in particularly stark contrast with the Sino-Soviet border point located in Zabaikal'sk, less than 50 kilometers away from Mongolia, which was heavily guarded and equipped with elaborate detection systems [Urbansky 2020: 218–222]. While the Soviet-Mongolian border did materialize at certain crossing points, it was neither consistent nor particularly forceful in its separation of the two countries, further contributing to the image of Mongolia as an extension of Soviet space.

Perhaps the most significant argument for the inclusion of Mongolia in the Soviet idea of “the abroad” is its place in the history of Soviet consumption practices. Because of the well-documented and widespread shortages of consumer goods in the Soviet Union, acquiring scarce products became an indispensable part of Soviet foreign travel. Even Soviet tourists, whose itineraries generally focused on cultural programming and whose spending of foreign currency was sharply limited, found ways to buy beyond the official limit, either by selling their own valuables for currency or by bartering with the locals [Gorsuch 2006:217–221]. Soviet specialists were considerably better positioned in the quest for scarce goods, as their salaries for time spent abroad were paid in special “checks”, which could be used in place of cash at dedicated foreign-currency stores, either in-country or upon return to the Soviet Union. These stores carried a variety of goods unavailable to Soviet consumers without access to checks, and those lucky few who did have such access were able to buy all sorts of desirable goods, from refrigerators to cassette players to cars. Mongolia was very much a part of this system of exchange and acquisition, with two significant caveats.

First, whereas purchasing scarce goods in other socialist republics usually involved buying from local sellers who had access to products unavailable in the USSR, this was not so in Mongolia. Though Soviet specialists did purchase some goods from Mongolian vendors, such as hand-woven rugs, leather coats and colorful postage stamps (which, as it happens, were usually printed outside of Mongolia), most of their desires were fulfilled within the confines of special stores run by other Soviet citizens [Rekubraskiy 2020]. In theory, these stores were only open to select categories of specialists with proper authorization, but in practice they often granted access to all Soviet citizens and refused access to all Mongolians, with the exception of the highest of elites [Panarin 2014: 70–72]. In this way, most Mongolians were excluded from economic practices that brought both profit and prestige to people in other Soviet satellites.

Second, Mongolia struggled with scarcity even more so than the Soviet Union. Several Soviet memoirists recall that regular Mongolian grocery stores were often virtually empty, and even basic supplies like canned stewed meat were only available in Soviet stores [Panarin 2014: 70–72; Zhukovskaia 2001: 133]. Many Mongolians were able to supplement their diet with gifts of meat and milk products from their relatives in the countryside, but as the economic situation began to worsen in the 1980s, even milk became scarce. Sergei Panarin recalls lines of small Mongolian children standing in front of Soviet special stores with empty milk cans, begging the Soviet citizens passing by to buy them milk, only to be ignored or even angrily dismissed [Panarin 2014: 72]. Beyond access to basic foodstuffs, Soviet specialists possessed goods that were readily accessible in the USSR but scarce and desirable to Mongolians.

The most significant of these were chrome leather boots issued to the Soviet military, which servicemen happily exchanged for Chinese goods. Some Mongolians were apparently also eager to exchange tugriks for Soviet rubles at a favorable rate, much in the same way some Soviet citizens exchanged foreign currency on the black market [Georghis 2010]. Such interactions were unfamiliar to visitors from the USSR, who more often found themselves in the role of *seekers* of scarce goods, rather than their *bearers*.

The foreign specialists were not oblivious to their economic standing vis-à-vis the Mongolians, of course. Official Soviet rhetoric concerning neighboring socialist states was uniform in casting them as, “a younger and less advanced version of the Soviet self,” in Anne Gorsuch’s phrasing [Gorsuch 2006: 207]. But, where Soviet travelers to Eastern Europe often experienced cognitive dissonance after encountering standards of living higher than those in the USSR, those in Mongolia found that the official narrative coincided with their own observations. Unlike the Soviet Union’s more prosperous and more “advanced” satellites, Mongolia offered no model of cultured consumption. Yet again, it resembled Soviet realities, or perhaps even something more backward, rather than the mysterious and surprising “abroad”.

Mongolia as the wrong kind of a foreign place

While many sights and experiences in late socialist Mongolia were not at all surprising to a Soviet observer, there were still ways in which Mongolia was decidedly foreign. These markers of foreignness did not necessarily register Mongolia as part of an imagined Soviet “abroad”. In fact, they did the exact opposite, because in Soviet eyes Mongolia was foreign in all the wrong ways. While Soviet rhetoric on “fraternal nations” was decidedly anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, Edward Said’s classic characterization of imperial Orientalism rings true in this case. The image of the Orientalist speaking for the Oriental Other “in the sense that what they might have to say, were they to be asked and might they be able to answer, would somewhat uselessly confirm what is already evident: that they are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves” applies to the Soviet “progressor” just as much as it does to the British colonial administrator [Said 1979:34–35]. Anti-imperialist in form, the Soviet project of economic, cultural, and military development in Mongolia was nevertheless predicated on the idea of the course of history as a linear progression. In this vision of inevitable linear movement from one stage of socioeconomic relations to another, Mongolia was still considered a feudal society, backward by default. Only help from the more advanced Soviet Union would allow it to escape feudalism and launch itself into a socialist stage, bypassing capitalism altogether. Such rhetoric was paired with more tangible signs of Mongolia’s backwardness in relation to both the USSR and socialist

Eastern Europe. For instance, it was not included into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance as a full-fledged member until more than a decade after the Council's founding [Mikhalev 2015: 103, 106]. The view of Mongolia as an essentially backward society allowed many Soviet specialists to perceive their work as a part of a larger civilizing mission. It also led at least one Soviet expat to characterize Mongolians as “children of nature, ripped away from their traditional lifestyle and thrown into ‘civilization’.” [Prozorova 2020]. Armed with a sweeping theory of historical progress, Soviet specialists convinced themselves that they knew both where Mongolia has been and where it was going.

If the Soviet government's official rhetoric on Mongolia's development was carefully considered and backed by theory, individual accounts of Soviet encounters with Mongolia are often cruder. Soviet memoirs often point out the Mongolians' supposed neglect of personal hygiene, lack of basic manners, and unappealing (and potentially unhealthy) food.* In doing so, they reverse another dynamic typical of Soviet travelers' interactions with the “abroad” — that of implied Soviet cultural inferiority and the potential for embarrassment that came with it. While Soviet tourists in Eastern Europe were often warned against dressing unfashionably and appearing in an unflattering light to their more sophisticated hosts, in Mongolia it was the Soviet citizens who saw themselves as bearers of culture, and it was the Mongolians who were potentially embarrassing [Gorsuch 2006: 221–225].

Mongolia's Demi-Sovietism

In the conclusion to her article on Soviet tourism in Eastern Europe, Anne Gorsuch proposes a view of Eastern Europe as “demi-Soviet”, a “‘paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion’, Soviet but not Soviet” [Gorsuch 2006: 225–226]. This model fits Mongolia just as well, with the important distinction of Mongolia's *other*, non-Soviet part appearing in the Soviet imagination in a decidedly negative light, in contrast to Eastern Europe's positive otherness. To put it differently, if the ostensibly “non-Soviet” parts of socialist Eastern Europe made it more appealing than the USSR proper, Mongolia's “non-Soviet” parts made it less appealing. Where Eastern European satellites defied their official characterization as “younger siblings” to the USSR, tested Soviet citizens' sophistication, and invited Soviet visitors to pursue locals in the hope of acquiring scarce goods, Mongolia appeared to do just the opposite. To Soviet eyes, it appeared easily explainable by the Marxist historical paradigm, economically deficient even in comparison to the USSR, and culturally backward. In this sense, Mongolia was not just an extension of Soviet space,

* M. Prozorova, “Kuritsa — ne ptitsa”; S. A. Panarin and N. Zhukovskaya don't subscribe to such views, but quote other Soviet specialists who did — see N. L. Zhukovskaya [Zhukovskaya 2001: 139] and S. A. Panarin [Panarin 2014: 72–73].

but the antithesis of everything *zagraniṣta* stood for in the Soviet geographical imagination.

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