

Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia

Review >
Mongolia

Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia examines the political manipulation of history in post-socialist Mongolia. Shifting memories of the historical figures Chinggis Khaan, Zanabazar and Sühbaatar illustrate the role academic and popular historiography play within contemporary Mongolian nationalism.

by Irina Morozova

Kaplonski's book belongs to the current wave of anthropological studies on historical imagery and the popular interpretation of historical symbols. Based on data collected during several years of field research in Ulaanbaatar, the author provides insight into the ideological mixture that inhabited the minds of urban intellectuals at the dawn of democratic reforms in the early 1990s.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first two provide the reader with theoretical background, description of fieldwork methods, the main concepts on social memory and nationalism, and terminology. In chapter three, 'Democracy comes to Mongolia', Kaplonski addresses the political history of Mongolia in its transition from socialism to what is often believed to be a democratic society. The main hypotheses on the historical symbols of Mongolian

democracy appear in chapter four. Chapter five, 'The icebergs of history', overviews the role of historiography in shaping Mongol identity over the last one hundred years. Chapters six and seven are crucial as they discuss modern interpretations of three historical figures: Chinggis Khaan, Zanabazar and Sühbaatar. The final chapter summarizes the hypotheses of the book.

Nutag and uls in Mongol identity

Kaplonski rightfully points out the importance of *nutag* (birthplace) for Mongol identity. He argues that *nutag* has become inseparable from the *uls* (the state and its people) and demonstrates the importance Mongols attach to historical personalities who have contributed to the *uls*. The author becomes so concerned with proving the *nutag-uls* linkage between Chinggis, Zanabazar and Sühbaatar that he overlooks other features of identity.

Kaplonski fails to address traditional epic and Buddhist concepts of historical time, even as he quotes from Caroline Humphrey's 'exemplariness' of Mongolian historical personalities and the inspiration individuals can draw from them. According to traditional epic and Buddhist concepts, the past is not a closed period. Although Mongolian academics may see a great historical figure as 'a boundary marker, initiating a new era in history' (Kaplonski, p. 120), most ordinary people perceive a holy image surviving the centuries, capable of reincarnation. The turbulent history of the 1910-1920s provides illuminating cases of such manifestations of historical imagery.¹ Other epic elements of Mongolian historical consciousness, such as the cult of *baatar* (hero), also remain neglected by the author.

Mongolia's heroes

As the author points out, Chinggis never vanished from Mongolian consciousness. During the socialist period his image was kept alive in written sources and unofficial narratives, and acquired additional nationalist meaning. Mongols never identified with Chinggis' tyrannical features, but emphasized his achievements as a political leader – the consolidator of the scattered Mongolian tribes. In the Buddhist historical tradition, the focus was put on Chinggis as lawgiver. I would argue, however, that Chinggis' military conquests and imperial legacy are also matters of national pride, evidenced by some peculiar moral justifications for his brutality.²

Emphasizing Buddhism (suppressed during socialism) was part of the search for a new national identity in the early 1990s. As Kaplonski points out, the image of Zanabazar – the first Mongolian 'Living Buddha' – is associated with the establishment of Buddhism in Mongolia. In socialist times, Zanabazar was exhibited to the outside world as a cultural figure, a gifted Mongolian artist and intellectual of the seventeenth century. The author highlights the dilemma posed by the great Zanabazar's surrender to the Manchus. However, post-socialist Mongols tend to justify this with the *longue durée* in mind.

As Kaplonski explains, Sühbaatar gained popularity among Mongols as a fighter against the Chinese and as the commander-in-chief of the Red Mongolian Army. Contemporary Mongolian historians have re-evaluated Sühbaatar and, based on recently available archival data, concluded that his role in the 1921 revolution was no greater than that of other leaders such as Soliyn Danzan and Dogsomyn Bodoo. At the same time, contemporary Mongolian historians attribute, erroneously, 'democratic' credentials to these early revolutionaries; Kaplonski exposes their political motivation. The next question the author could have asked is whether contemporary Mongolian historians' perceptions of democracy are comparable to Western ones.

The book's weaknesses derive, first, from the narrowness of the geographical scope of Kaplonski's nevertheless

impressive field data. The author is aware that Halh nationalism is not representative of Mongolia, let alone Mongolian peoples living in China and Russia. Second, while the author addresses the creativity of the Mongolian intelligentsia, other, especially rural, social groups are absent. And finally, as Kaplonski's achievement is his comprehensive knowledge of works by Mongolian historians, it is especially regretful that he seems to be unfamiliar with a number of important works on and around his topic by Russian, German and French scholars.

Despite these drawbacks, the book contributes to our understanding of the recent history of Mongolia and brings innovative research methods to Mongol studies. The book should be especially thought provoking to a Mongolian audience. ◀

- Kaplonski, Christopher (2004) *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: the Memory of Heroes*, London and New York: Routledge-Curzon, pp. 234, ISBN 0-415-30798-8.

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Annual celebration of the *Naadam* nomadic festival, July 2003. The horse cavalry represents the army of Chinggis Khaan; the nine banners, the nine Mongolian tribes united by him.

Photo by the author

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- 1 Yuzefovich L. (1993) *Samoderzhets Pustyni. Fenomen Sud'by Barona R.F. Ungern-Shtenberga*. Moskva
- 2 Khara-Davan, E. (1991) *Chingis-khan kak Polkovodets i ego Nasledie*. Elista