

Mongolian Culture and Society in the Age of Globalization

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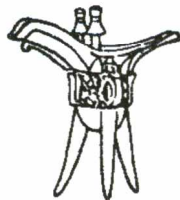
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by
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Preface

One of the most ubiquitous terms used over the past dozen years or more has been globalization, but there is no consensus as to its precise meaning. Instead we have been witnessing an ever growing number of definitions and descriptions offered by experts in such fields as economics, politics, anthropology and sociology. If they agree on anything at all, it seems that globalization has come about largely as the result of three factors: the end of the so-called cold war, the emergence of a new economic world order, and the ubiquitous use of electronic communications. As a result, what we have seen so far is that most studies of globalization have focused primarily on the phenomenon's political and economic modalities in general and almost always within the framework of "country studies." It was this dual emphasis both on political and economic events and on states that peaked my curiosity.

My initial surmise was that most writers on this subject may have been so impressed with the three main causes of globalization, itemized above, that they restricted their search for the effects of globalization to the same political, economic and technological arenas. This interpretation made me uncomfortable because one must assume that most of these writers are sufficiently knowledgeable so as not to confuse cause and effect and to know that a broad-gauged force like globalization is, by any measure, most certainly impacting all realms of human activity, including culture and society. One must, therefore, posit that there is some powerful

force that is skewing research into globalization toward the political and economic. Indeed, we do not have to look far to find that force. It emanates from governments and some private organizations who offer substantial incentives in the form of grants, awards, memberships in “think tanks” and so on for work on political and economic subjects while doling out only a relative pittance for studies dealing with culture and society.

Moreover, even without such incentives it is almost always easier and less time-consuming to gather any kind of data within one country rather than within an area that straddles national boundaries. A key question, therefore, is whether research into an ethnic group’s culture and society should always be at the country level and below. The temptation to do just that is great because of the just mentioned relative ease of gathering data and the fact that in many cases cultures and societies do coincide with political entities. Japanese culture and society are confined to Japan’s political boundaries, and the same holds true for scores of other cases. But not for all; there are many ethnic groups that straddle state boundaries whose cultures and societies ought to be studied as single entities. Such an approach makes eminently good methodological sense because it also carries with it an additional benefit. Given the unquestionably great impact of governments and their policies on culture and society, as mentioned earlier, a study of globalization’s impact on any culture and society in two adjacent states raises the possibility of not only reaching the primary goal of gauging the effects of globalization but also of getting at least a preliminary idea of the degree to which governmental policies influence the forces of globalization.

Mongolia is an excellent choice for studying the impact of globalization on culture and society for several reasons. One is that it is perhaps the most prominent case where a large cultural area is divided into two separate states. I will elaborate this point in my introduction. Another reason is presented by Shagdaryn Bira’s chapter which goes back 800 years to the time of the Mongolian empire. Within less than one generation following its political birth in 1206, Mongolia became a world power. Several key elements of globalization today, such as the relatively free movement of goods, extensive cultural interchange over large areas of the

globe, and the creation of a written language to serve as the official form of communication, were part and parcel of the Mongol world empire as well. This fact reminds us that globalization is not a brand-new phenomenon in human history and practically commands us to compare the two historical periods.

Finally, Mongolia is a good choice because of its enduring special relationship with China. In both historical periods, and indeed throughout recorded history, China's role has been of paramount importance to Mongolia because of its size and propinquity. In the political and military arenas, the differences between the two eras could not be starker. In the thirteenth century China was one of the five constituent parts of the Mongol world empire,¹ having had for the first time in its long history every square inch of its territory conquered by an outside force. Today, China governs half of ethnic Mongolia's territory and two-thirds of the world's Mongolian population.² It seems, therefore, highly advisable to include China in any investigation of Mongolian culture and society.

Having convinced myself that the time was ripe to start research on globalization's effect on culture and society and that ethnic Mongolia is one of the best places to start such research, I invited several Mongolists to join me in this new endeavor. I chose 2005 for our conference because it was the eve of the 800th anniversary of the creation of the Mongolian state and also the thirtieth anniversary of Mongolian Studies at Western Washington University. Much to my satisfaction, six Mongolists accepted my invitation, and we spent two memorable days last August intensively discussing globalization in Mongolia and critiquing each other's papers. The result of that conference lies before you.

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¹ The four other parts were Chagatai in Central Asia, the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Golden Horde in Eastern Europe, and the Mongolian homeland.

² One could also include the rapid rise in China's present economic dominance, but I do not think the economic differences between the two historical periods are as dramatic as the political and military ones.

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