

# Global Hip-Hop and Youth Cultural Politics in Urban Mongolia

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One of the most geographically remote nations in the world, Mongolia has been affected by many of the same cultural flows that have transformed youth culture throughout the world during the twentieth century. Since the 1960s, the nation's youth have been in contact with various forms of Western commercial popular music. When hip-hop emerged from the Bronx in the 1980s, it spread throughout the United States and then on to other nations. It took root in Mongolia as well, arriving in the mid- to late 1990s. Since the early 2000s it has become one of the most important mainstream musical and cultural forms.

On the surface, the progress of rap and hip-hop culture from New York City to Ulaanbaatar appears simply to be the result of the forces of globalization, the integration of capitalist markets that allows the free movement of commodities from one part of the world to another. Yet as Appadurai reminds us, the process is considerably more complex, involving the movement of people, money, ideas, media and technology—all of which are “fluid, overlapping, and disjunctive”<sup>1</sup> in ways in which no one dimension is paramount over nor controlled by any one monolithic entity or system. But when dealing with complex cultural forms, it is important to ask not only *what* is being created but also *how* it is being re-

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Disjunctures and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 2:2 (1990), 7.

ceived. While both Mongolia and the United States have hip-hop cultures, the different ways each of them is conceived can help us to better understand Mongolia's relationship with the processes of cultural globalization.

This study examines the development of hip-hop in the context of an emerging popular music industry in Mongolia over the period of approximately forty years. From this perspective, hip-hop appears to be no mere imitative or derivative form of Western popular music, but rather one that has been skillfully appropriated by media-saturated Mongolian youths and adapted to specific conditions of their local context in urban Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's sprawling and densely populated capital city. While Mongolian hip-hop bears clear similarities with the 'gangsta' rap traditions of the United States, a closer look shows that it is much more abstract than may at first be apparent. Tricia Rose has offered valuable frameworks for the study of hip-hop within African American contexts, but the studies by scholars such as Tony Mitchell and Ian Maxwell, who have examined hip-hop outside of the United States, offer especially useful sources for this analysis. While Mongolian rappers are interacting with the transnational hip-hop scene, they are also responding to the popular musical scene in their own nation in ways that are rich with new ideas about being young and Mongolian in contemporary Mongolia.

## WESTERN-INSPIRED POPULAR MUSIC

Western-inspired popular music genres have a long history in Mongolia. Russian and Soviet forms of popular culture were introduced to the country following the People's Revolution of 1921, which soon brought Mongolia into the orbit of the Soviet Union. Throughout the twentieth century, genres such as circus and film music, ballroom dance, and jazz held an important place in the newly developed national media, a network of newspapers, radio, film, and (later) television that the state expanded into the farthest reaches of the Mongolian countryside. Other important forms of popular culture included professional folk music, music theatre, and a uniquely Mongolian form of popular song known as "com-

posed” songs (*zokhiolyn duu*).<sup>2</sup> Each of these genres was integrated into the nation’s newly developed schools of music and closely controlled by state-run cultural organizations, often in close cooperation with musicians, composers, and producers from the Soviet Union.

Restrictions on travel and trade that were maintained by the Soviet-backed ruling party, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP), effectively isolated the country from the cultural influences of nations outside of the Soviet world. But even so, by the 1960s, elements of the mainstream musical culture of the non-Soviet West began to find their way into the hands of Mongolian youths. These included vinyl LP records and recorded audio tapes featuring the music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Smokie and other Western popular music groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which were often smuggled into the country in their luggage by the children of Mongolian diplomats posted abroad or musicians returning from foreign tours. These cultural materials were then circulated in decidedly illicit ways, frequently passing among youths (primarily in Ulaanbaatar) through hand-to-hand networks, not unlike those described by Ryback<sup>3</sup> and others in parts of the former Soviet Union. Many Mongolian youths were fascinated with the new sounds that these groups were creating and the new forms of youth culture they represented. A thriving underground market in popular material culture grew up in the period, which beyond musical recordings included the distribution of Western styles of clothing (particularly blue jeans), magazines, posters, and jewelry.

At first suspicious of this music and the global or “capitalist” systems that had brought it to the doorstep of their nation, the

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<sup>2</sup> *Zokhiolyn duu* is a hybrid genre featuring newly composed melodies that are modeled after folk song melodies and accompanied by small ensembles or orchestras.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); and Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

leaders in the MPRP soon came to realize that they could not stop this movement of Western material culture by banning it or violently suppressing it. Thus they chose to appropriate it into the national culture, but on the Party's own terms. Starting in the early 1970s, the Party formed and managed a number of so-called *estrad* ensembles (the Russian word for staged entertainment), two of the first being Cultural Jewel (*Soyol Erdene*) and Rich Mongolia (*Bayan Mongol*).

These were groups of Mongolian artists performing Western-inspired popular music in a "socialist" style. While Cultural Jewel on-stage--with a drummer, one to two electric guitarists, a bassist and a lead singer--resembled its Western counterparts, the cultural setting in which the group worked was entirely different. As a state-managed ensemble, this and other such ensembles were assigned specific places within a hierarchy of other state-run organizations directly linked to the Ministry of Culture. The Party provided them with regular salaries, access to musical instruments and training, and organized regular concerts, recording opportunities, and tours throughout the Mongolian countryside and to other socialist "brother" nations. In exchange, these artists and groups had to go where the Party wanted them to go and to do what it wanted them to do: they were expected to wear the stage uniforms the Party created for them, to perform the repertoire the Party gave them, and even to cut their hair as the Party directed.

By the 1980s *estrad* music formed an important part of the nation's cultural mainstream. Especially popular were sentimental love ballads and those that drew upon more traditional themes, such as songs that praised the beauty of the Mongolian landscape. Artists were also provided with songs that glorified the nation's development and the wisdom of the Soviet leaders. But the Party's official legitimation of Western-inspired popular music proved to be a double-edged sword as artists increasingly began to challenge the Party's authority to control the entire political and artistic space within the realm of popular culture. In the mid-1980s the lead singer of the group Cultural Jewel, D. Jargalsaikhan, felt that the time was right to defy Party rules and sing a song he had written about Chinggis Khan, a subject that was still largely considered to be taboo in public discussion. The song praised the spirit of the



great khan, asking him to forgive the Mongolian people for forgetting about him for so many years. In singing it at a public concert, Jargalsaikhan was not only expressing his deep convictions about this powerful symbol of Mongolian identity, but also playing to the growing nationalist sentiments of his Mongolian listeners.

The band Bell (*Khonkh*) also played an important role in this regard. It was led by two young Mongolian classmates who had just returned from journalism school in Russia. The group's most famous song, "Sound of the Bell" (*Khonkhny duu*), calls on people to wake up to the dawning of a new day. Its melody was taken up and sung by protesters during the street demonstrations and protest rallies that took place outside government buildings between 1989 and 1990.



The group Khonkh performing during one of the pre-democracy protest rallies in 1990. *Courtesy Peter K. Marsh*

Another of the group's very popular songs depicts the confusion, if not desperation, of Party members who are watching the growing political protests from their office windows:

*The city looks very beautiful. If you look through the window,*

*people walk purposefully on the streets. Through the window,  
life seems pleasant. Send a message, girl: All is fine, all is right.  
Please take this down, write it down. Tell them not to demand  
any more.*<sup>4</sup>

The song resonated with a widespread sense of unease about a national leadership that many felt to be out of touch with the everyday lives and problems of its citizens. Its popularity also reflected the rise of an independent-minded generation of artists who sought to claim the realm of popular culture for themselves. Mongolian *estrads* groups were no longer merely imitating their Western idols nor passively glorifying state ideology. They instead had mastered their Western genres and the technical skills needed to produce them and were increasingly appropriating them to speak to the situations in which they found themselves. The important role that the group Bell played in helping to focus the sentiments of the pro-democracy demonstrators demonstrated the emerging maturity and growing authority that popular music was attaining in the period, trends that would continue without pause into the post-socialist era.

## MONGOLIAN POP FINDS ITS OWN VOICE

Popular music around the time of the so-called democratic revolution of 1990 was frequently rife with political ideas and criticism. This was a time, Jargalsaikhan says, “when politics was in the air we breathed.”<sup>5</sup> But following the rapid introduction of market economic reforms and the successful completion of the nation’s first multi-party election, youth interest in politics faded fast. A contributing factor for this was the severe economic downturn that accompanied the sudden end to generous Soviet subsidies, coupled with the economic shock therapy advocated by the World Bank. Mongols suddenly faced not only the disappearance of many social services they had come to rely upon, but also a steep de-

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, “A Mongolian Rock Group Fosters Democracy,” *The New York Times* (26 March 1990), C11:1.

<sup>5</sup> Jargalsaikhan, in 1999 interview.

cline in their living standards. For many in this period, even finding enough food to eat was difficult. Mongols had finally won the right to speak their minds and to travel freely, although few had the resources to do so.

Despite the difficult economic situation (and likely in part because of it), Mongolian popular culture expanded dramatically in the first half of the 1990s, fueled in large part by the sudden availability of communication and recording technologies. Several new independent media and broadcasting companies began operations in Ulaanbaatar, including a number of privately owned television and FM radio stations, bringing real competition to the still state-run and still largely centralized Montsame news service and Mongolian Radio & Television. Satellite and cable TV entered the market by the mid-1990s and quickly gained popularity in the urban areas. Some of the more popular ones included the MTV and MTV-Asia channels. Computer centers also began to open around the city that offered Mongols access to computer games and the Internet as well as to training in how to build websites and use advanced computer software. Such developments gave Mongolian youths for the first time direct access to the transnational flows of popular culture. At the same time, young people were gaining access to relatively inexpensive technologies that allowed them to record, mix, and master audio and video recordings, which in turn allowed them to begin creating their own songs and videos at levels of quality and control that were unavailable to earlier generations of popular musical artists. These new technologies allowed artists to not only consume the “global” popular music but also interact with it at a local level.

Mongolian popular music itself became increasingly diverse throughout the 1990s as artists began to experiment with the new genres that they were hearing in the international media, including pop ballads, boy and girl bands, and rock music. Some of the most famous artists included the pop singers Jargalsaikhan, Sarantuya, and Ariunaa (who has been dubbed the ‘Madonna of Mongolia’); boy bands like Camerton and girl bands like the Spike Girls. Hurd and Kharanga also achieved a great deal of popularity as “heavy metal” and “hard rock” groups, respectively. While these performers were usually inspired by well-known Western artists and



groups, each developed their own unique musical and presentational styles.

Typically, few popular musical artists perform cover versions of Western popular music since most say that Mongolian audiences prefer their artists to create uniquely Mongolian forms of these Western genres. For the artists, this means finding a stylistic balance between the two. As in the socialist era, songs about finding love and happiness have continued to be favored song themes. But many artists have also continued to draw upon traditional themes, such as love for one's parents, the beauty of the Mongolian landscape, or the wonders of the Mongolian horse. It is common for artists to create songs that blend the sounds of traditional Mongolian folk musical instruments and singing styles. At the same time, they have also become quite sophisticated at understanding the wishes of their audiences, and many are wary of moving too far towards the "traditional." The members of the rock band Hurd explained to me that most bands have two kinds of song repertoires. For audiences consisting of foreigners or older generations of Mongols they perform songs that are "more traditional" or that romanticize Mongolian culture, but for their young Mongolian fans, they perform songs that are instead closely inspired by the Western rock bands they idolize, which for Hurd means songs styled after the famous heavy metal bands Black Sabbath and AC/DC.<sup>6</sup>

Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, Mongolian popular music has followed cultural trends that we can call cosmopolitan.<sup>7</sup> By the 1970s, the ruling MPRP insisted that its artists produce uniquely Mongolian forms of music that could stand as "Mongolian" contributions to the much larger Soviet "international" world of popular music. In this way, Mongolian artists have been dealing with the issues of the globalization of popular music for decades, although the "global" in this sense was limited to the world of the Soviet Union and its satellites. In the post-socialist era, Mongols have continued to create hybrid forms of popular

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<sup>6</sup> Hurd, in 1999 interview.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Marsh for a discussion of cosmopolitan cultural trends in Mongolian music.



music that is fashioned after Western popular song genres and yet uniquely Mongolian in sound and style. When Mongols ask foreign visitors how their music compares with Western popular music, one gets the sense that they would like to hear their music compared seriously with the “best of the West.”

## GROWTH OF A POP MUSIC INDUSTRY IN THE 1990s

By the late 1990s, popular musical artists were not only beginning to find their own individual voices, but also to conceive of themselves as a distinct community. When the Mongolian government declared 1998 to be the “Year of the Youth,” a year-long celebration of Mongolia’s young people and their potential, many of the leading Mongolian popular music artists of the day gathered to sing the song commissioned by the government for the event, “The future begins today” (*Ireedui onoodroos ekbhelnee*). The song was structured in a way that allowed individual artists and groups to take turns singing verses, with short musical breaks made to accommodate changes in genre style; the chorus refrain was then sung by all the performers in unison. The artists lined up on stage in a long row, stepping forward into the spotlight to sing their own verse. The song and its accompanying video proved to be very popular with people throughout the nation and they were subsequently broadcast on local and national FM radio and television broadcasts throughout the year. The song’s overall effect was to present a musical community that, despite its diversity of individual styles, was united in its goal of celebrating the nation’s youth, not unlike the effect the 1985 song “We Are the World” had in uniting leading Euro-American singers toward the goal of fighting hunger in Africa.

Other important steps toward founding and unifying this community involved the creation of organizations that helped to legitimize its practices. The establishment in 1997 of an annual year-end music awards ceremony called Pentatonic, which its organizers now market as the “Mongolian Grammys,” allows this emerging industry to recognize and reward the performers, producers, and production companies that have achieved popular success

within it. This is a process that, as with its American counterpart, has helped to define the popular musical mainstream in Mongolia. The formation of the Mongolian Singer's Union (*Mongolyn duuchny kholboo*) in 1998 has also assisted in this process. The organization seeks to organize professional singers throughout the nation, to lobby the government on important issues (their efforts contributed to the Ulaanbaatar city government's decision to build the multi-stage "UB Palace" in 2002), and to assist singers in the countryside.<sup>8</sup>

The increasingly formalized ways in which the business of popular music was run in this period was encouraged in large part by the young industry's growing ties with big business. By the late 1990s, popular artists and bands were finding eager sponsors from among many of the new emerging businesses of post-socialist Mongolia, including luxury clothing (principally cashmere wool) manufacturers; alcoholic breweries (principally the several highly successful joint ventures between German and Mongolian beer manufacturers established in the period in Ulaanbaatar), importers and upper-class bars; and luxury car distributors (the local Mercedes-Benz distributor was one of the most generous). Other important sponsors included media companies that were, in this period, in the process of consolidating into a few large private entities. Since then they have come to control most of the important radio and television stations and national and urban newspapers. These sponsors financially supported artists in the production of their CDs and music-videos and the organization of their concerts and tours. In turn they benefited from their name association with those that became successful. An extreme example of this came in the late 1990s when the popular heavy metal band Hurd signed a sponsorship deal with the Erel Company of Mongolia, one of the largest of the domestic mining companies. Soon thereafter the band was renamed Erel-Hurd.

The presence of these sponsors also points to a deeper social transformation that has been occurring in Ulaanbaatar since the mid-1990s. Though a large percentage of Mongols continue to live

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<sup>8</sup> Hurd and Jargalsaikhan, in their 1999 interviews.

in relative poverty,<sup>9</sup> the overall growth of the national economy in the past decade has helped many achieve a higher standard of living. Mining, tourism and trade are just some of the major new sectors of the nation's economy. The recent boom in the markets for new apartments, cars, and electronic goods in Ulaanbaatar is a sign of an emerging middle class with cash to spend on goods, luxuries, and entertainment. Mongolian popular musical artists have found many new venues to perform with the opening of night clubs and bars that cater to the middle and upper classes. The "classless" society that was said to exist during the socialist era is now becoming increasingly divided between the relatively rich and poor sectors of society.<sup>10</sup> While there are many who are benefiting from the new opportunities in the Mongolian economy, particularly Mongolian entrepreneurs and the highly educated, there are many more who are not or cannot, particularly those in the public sector. Even university professors and medical doctors working in public institutions continue to earn an average of \$100 a month in salary, and often less in the countryside.

The relative appearance of wealth in Ulaanbaatar, however, continues to be a driving force in the rising number of people who are migrating from rural areas to the capital city, where most seek jobs and the services and amenities located there.<sup>11</sup> Many, however, end up in the sprawling *ger* districts on the edges of the city. These are named after the traditional round tents (*gers*) in which nomadic herder families live in the countryside. Many new immigrants to the city set up their *gers* and surround them with a wooden fence, making a small family compound (*khashaa*) that is attached to other such compounds. Many of the residencies in

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<sup>9</sup> The latest measurements by the United Nations Development Programmes state that 35.6% of the population in 1998 was living below the poverty line (UNDP 2003: 12).

<sup>10</sup> The UNDP found that the Gini-coefficient, a measure of income inequality, increased by 42% between 1995 and 1998, showing "that the income distribution is becoming more unequal in Mongolia" (UNDP 2003: 26).

<sup>11</sup> Joerg Janzen and his co-workers found that most people immigrated to the city from rural areas in search of an improved standard of living and better access to employment, medical services and schools. See their *A New Ger-Settlement in Ulaanbaatar: Functional Differentiation, Demographic and Socioeconomic Structure and Origin of Residents* (Ulaanbaatar, 2002), 18.



these districts lack electricity and running water, and other social services like schools and medical clinics are in short supply. Most families living there sold their domesticated animals before coming to the city with the hope that they would find jobs to support themselves, but levels of unemployment in these districts remain high, as do levels of crime. Despite the population density and high levels of poverty, the *ger* districts are not widely considered to be ghettos or slums among Mongols in Ulaanbaatar, as similar places might be in other parts of the world. But there is a growing stigma among wealthier city residents towards those who live in some of these districts. Popular musicians, for their part, remain well aware that many of their fans come from poor households, whether or not they live in the *ger* districts, and thus they try to keep the costs of their concert tickets and CDs low, typically around US\$3 to \$5 a piece.

Another sign of the growing influence of mainstream popular music is the close relationships that exist between artists and leading politicians and political parties. Political leaders are well aware of the potential political power of popular music. More than a few in the current generation might even have participated in the public demonstrations more than a decade ago. In each of the national elections for both the Parliament and Presidency since the late 1990s, the main political parties have drafted popular music artists into their campaigns; some demanding that artists sign contracts that require them to work exclusively for a specific political party. The appearance of pop stars and groups at campaign rallies and in political campaign advertising has become a common part of the political scene in contemporary Mongolia. Some artists have even begun to actively campaign in support of particular candidates and parties, sometimes even composing campaign theme songs.

Mongolian youths of the past several decades have shown themselves to be keen observers of Western and “global” popular cultural styles and fully capable of appropriating and adapting them to their own musical and artistic worlds. Since the late 1980s popular musical artists have taken advantage of the economic, political, and technological changes that have come to Mongolia and established the basis for a powerful popular music industry. Popular music in this country has developed hand-in-glove with emerg-



ing entities in the worlds of the mass media, business, and politics, each “scratching the other’s back.” This industry also has grown in parallel with an emerging middle class in Ulaanbaatar. It is now as integrated with the nation’s superculture as it was at the height of the socialist era, one difference being that now many of the formerly rebellious youths who chafed against the Party’s attempts to control their art are themselves its representatives, and like the Party leaders they served, these industry leaders have much at stake in maintaining its conventions. But as in youth cultures throughout the world, where one finds accommodation to mainstream authority, one will typically also find subcultural resistance to it. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, “*rep*” and “*hip hop*”, terms the Mongols themselves use, have emerged as both a reaction against the conventions of the popular musical mainstream and expressions of self-identity from a new generation of Mongols seeking to make their voice heard in the youth cultural scene.

## RAPPERS AS THE ‘BAD BOYS’ OF THE MUSICAL WORLD

The first popular group to rap in their music was Black Rose (*Khar Sarnai*). The group, consisting of two brothers, burst onto the scene in the early 1990s with their loud, raw, and beat-heavy music, wild hair, face paints, fantastic costumes, and vigorous dancing. Describing their music as “techno-rap,” the two singers commonly traded raps with each other over heavy house beats. The pair would often shout their lyrics at their audience in guttural and growling voices. Their songs were typically fast-paced and on stage the duo would constantly move about and dance, thrusting their fists and legs into the air. While many of their songs dealt with love, the duo described them as love songs that were “more realistic” than those common to the mainstream ballad singers. Their songs also often touched on taboo themes: one early hit for the group described a man’s love for a prostitute.

In their musical, lyrical and presentational style, Black Rose signaled a clear break from the refined, well-quaffed and well-behaved ballad singers who dominated the musical mainstream throughout the era of socialism and into the 1990s. In challenging

the Mongolian pop song conventions of the day, the group was seeking to clear a space for a new subcultural musical style. Although influenced by the Western “techno” and “rap” artists they had experienced through the media, they sought to create and market a new musical voice that they felt to be particularly well suited to the cultural and political landscape of their homeland.



The “techno-rap” group Black Rose (Black Rose 2001).

The duo described themselves in the late 1990s as nationalists who wanted their music and dance to instill within young Mongols a feeling of pride in their nation, its history, and traditions. They accomplished this by actively mixing Mongolian folk musical, song and dance traditions and traditional song themes with hip-hop,

techno, and house beats. The group's attempts in the late 1990s to establish a nationalist-oriented nationwide youth organization shows that their "play" with these Western cultural forms was also an engagement with the very serious business of cultural politics in the nation in that period. Many hip-hop artists today do not consider Black Rose to be a part of the early history of rap in Mongolia, labeling their style as "techno." But in its popular mixture of music, dance, and performance art, as well as its cultural outspokenness, the group clearly did help a rising generation of Mongolian performers to conceive of popular music in new ways.



The group Tatar (Tatar n.d.).



A number of self-described *rep* groups had formed by the late-1990s, but it was not until the early 2000s that the genre really began to catch the public's eye. Most of the first groups to gain popularity then, including Digital, Ice Top, Montarep, Lumino, and Tatar, remain some of the most popular and established groups today, though there are now at least ten other groups working in Ulaanbaatar. Of these only one, 3 Girls (*3 Okhin*), consists of women rappers. In Mongolia, as in other parts of the world, rap is a largely male activity, although women nearly always appear as back-up singers on recordings and supporting actresses in videos. The Mongolian artists interviewed for this study were quick to list the international artists and groups that inspired them, some of the more influential being Eminem, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dogg, MC Hammer, and Wu-Tang Clan, as well as some well-known non-American groups like the French rappers MC Solaar and IAM and even a number of South Korean and Japanese rap groups.

Through their "street" clothing, body movements and gestures, jewelry and forms of bodily ornamentation, Mongolian rappers and hip-hop artists show their allegiance to their idols as well as their determination to bring hip-hop to Mongolia in their own unique ways. They also show the degree to which they are interacting with the master narratives about the origins and development of hip-hop that have accompanied the song form to the country. Tricia Rose writes that as hip-hop spread and took root in different parts of the United States, it retained the "larger forces that define hip-hop and Afrodiasporic cultures," including its articulation of "a sense of entitlement and pleasure in aggressive insubordination."<sup>12</sup> That Mongolian rappers have eagerly taken up this sense of entitlement and insubordination is evident in most of their rap concerts, videos, websites, CDs and other forms of public display.

For example, many revel in "gangsta" or "bad boy" imagery. Like their international counterparts, Mongolian rappers prefer "street thug" clothing, typically ranging from loose-fitting sports-

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<sup>12</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 60.



wear (usually bearing the icons of American sports teams) to tight-fitting leather jackets and pants. Many wear large pieces of jewelry, such as rings and chain necklaces, and commonly bare body piercings and tattoos. Most wear baseball caps (worn backward or to the side), but some shave off their hair completely. The rappers bounce and sway to the beats of their music on stage and in their videos, and typically use hand signals and gestures seen in Western rap videos. In each of these ways, Mongolian rappers are both aligning themselves with international hip-hop customs while also



The group Lumino in hip-hop style (Lumino 2003).

defining their style as different from the love ballad, boy band, and rock genres of the Mongolian popular musical mainstream.

The “insubordination” of these Mongolian hip-hop groups extends to their use of obscene language, graffiti, and provocative storylines for their videos and CDs. Mongolian rappers’ heavy use of swear words in their lyrics has led to the rise “parental advisory for explicit content” labels<sup>13</sup> similar to those in the United States that artists are required to place onto their CDs. Rather than being ashamed of these labels or hiding them on the back sides of their CDs, however, most groups show them on the fronts of their CDs as if they are badges of honor.

Graffiti has also emerged as another form of insubordination broadly associated with hip-hop in Mongolia. While many instan-



Graffiti images associated with hip-hop groups in downtown Ulaanbaatar.

*Courtesy Peter K. Marsh.*

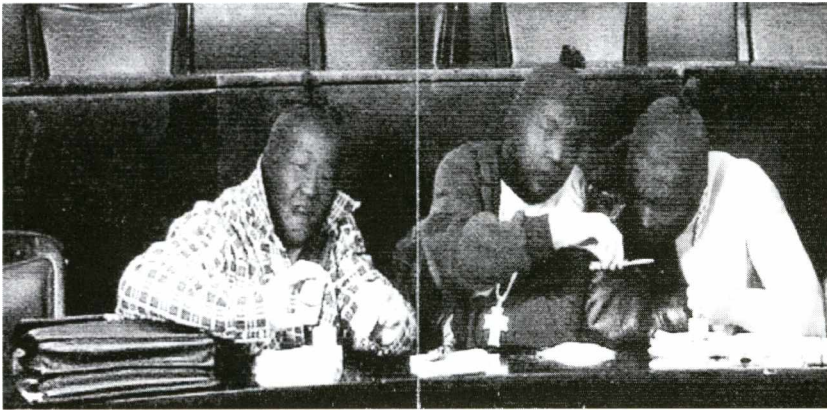
ces of graffiti throughout Ulaanbaatar appear to be spontaneous and illicit, such as spray-painting the names of hip-hop groups on the sides of buildings, some of the more significant forms of graf-

<sup>13</sup> In Mongolian, *tüümeᠨ nīitsekhüüts kbelleg aguunlagdaw*.

fiti appear to be meticulously planned. A clear example of the latter is found on a long concrete wall overlooking an unused lot in downtown Ulaanbaatar, just across from the city's central square.

Images associated with six different hip-hop groups have been painted onto the walls in graffiti style. Members of some of these groups said that these groups recently banded together to hire a local artist to make these paintings. One of these paintings, however, is an advertisement for a local sports bar painted in graffiti style, suggesting that they all could have been done with both financial support from local businesses and the approval of local authorities.

In a similar way, groups are often provocative in the images they use to accompany their CDs and songs. In their 2004 CD "New Life," which features the logo of a marijuana leaf, the group Ice Top includes a photographic spread in the liner notes featuring band members dressed as thieves meeting after a heist. While some are counting stacks of American dollar bills, others appear to be sniffing cocaine.



The group Ice Top dressed as thieves (Ice Top n.d.).

In 2002 the Mongolian government tried to stop the airing of a music video of their song "Follow Me and Have Fun" (*Namaig da-gaad tseuge*) by the group Lumino. Shot in a strip club, the video featured band members rapping while Mongolian women in thongs lay on tables and danced around them. Soon after its rel-



ease, the Mongolian Minister of Justice labeled the video “pornographic” and ordered it banned from being broadcast on those television stations closely allied with the ruling political party. As might be expected, the Minister’s denunciation helped to boost the sales of the group’s CD and enhanced the ‘bad boy’ image of this and other rap groups. The song eventually became one of the group’s biggest hits and went on to win the Best Song of the Year award at the music industry’s Pentatonic awards ceremony later that year. The group’s re-release of the video in 2004 featured the words “censored” in English flashing on various parts of the screen, as if the group was thumbing its nose at the Minister’s attempts to ban it.

Other key elements of global hip-hop that Mongolian rappers have picked up on are the ideas of the “crew” and “neighborhood.” Rose explains that American rappers employ the symbolic language of the “ghetto” by referring to their band members as their “crew.”<sup>14</sup> She describes crews as a “new kind of families forged with intercultural bonds that ... provide insulation and support” not unlike the social networks within gangs.<sup>15</sup> They share a body of codes, from tattoos, piercings, haircut, and clothing styles to body movement and hand gestures that signify their identity as belonging to a particular gang or neighborhood. Mongolian rappers tend not to have as highly defined a system of identity markers, but they do commonly portray themselves as having a “crew,” and some even use this word in their band’s name.<sup>16</sup> Groups commonly like to portray themselves as a part of a community or neighborhood of friends. One recent video by the young group Snep Crew opens with the artists breakdancing on a street in front of upper-middle class homes in Ulaanbaatar, surrounded and being urged on by their friends sitting nearby on the ground and on parked cars.

The scenes change to an outdoor courtyard where they play basketball, a sports hall where they box, a room in a house where they “scratch” LP records, and an abandoned building where they

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<sup>14</sup> Rose, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> “BAT and The Crew” and “Snep Crew” are the best known examples of this practice.



breakdance. The overall image is of a community filled with young people living in one close-knit “neighborhood,” all having a good time through dancing, listening to and making music, playing



Breakdancing on the street, from the video “Jin tan” (Snep Crew 2004).

sports, and “hanging out” together. For other rappers, however, the “neighborhood” that their crew passes through has more in common with the stereotypical “hoods” found in Western ‘gangsta’ rap videos, such as abandoned factory sites, an old train yard, or dilapidated buildings.

Setting their videos in such blighted and post-industrial parts of Ulaanbaatar reflects the wish of many groups to address the darker sides of growing up. Many songs deal with the problems of finding love, creating one’s own identity, and figuring out one’s own way in the world. While love is a common theme in all popular music, most Mongolian hip-hop songs about love are “harder” and “darker.” Many deal with the pain of love, though often from a man’s point of view, given that the majority of rappers are male. The song “Someone’s” (*Khüniikeli*) by the group Lumino features one of the singers rapping to his friends about how he tried to win the heart of the woman he truly loved, only to find out that she “belonged” to someone else.



The group Lumino, from the video “Khüniikh” (Lumino 2003).

A song by the group Digital, “Only One Life to Live” (*Gants l amidarch ükhne*), has the rappers struggling with deeper questions about how one should live one’s life:

*In life, all people are growing up and falling down,  
So what are we to do with our lives?  
Some people drink a lot, others study a lot,  
But what are they really reaching for?  
Life is difficult to understand.<sup>17</sup>*

Some groups take this idea of “harder” and “darker” further, seeing hip-hop as a medium for criticizing larger social problems in their society. A number of rappers said they were attracted to hip-hop because of the freedom that the genre gave them to express their ideas, hopes, and fears. While most groups continue to rap about love and the problems of growing up in Mongolia, many do see in hip-hop the opportunity to express their frustrations

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<sup>17</sup> Digital, “This Is Life” (2003).

with larger problems in their society. The rapper Batorgil, from the group Ice Top, is clear about this:

Our society is very dirty<sup>18</sup> and we can easily reveal these things through our hip-hop art. There are many people who are angry and anxious, and we can give them a voice. But pop-rock [singers] always sing about love. Pop-rock cannot raise these problems in our society.

The rapper BAT emphasizes the idea that rap allows people to speak about their world in realistic, rather than romantic, ways:

On both [of my previous] albums, I rap about the country—and I don't mean about how beautiful it is because we have mountains or whatever. I don't do that. I just speak about what I see, you know. Too many people are asking for money. Too many people are drunk or homeless. And I also talk about what the government, these 76 [parliamentarians], are doing.<sup>19</sup>

There are some groups that have created songs that criticize specific types of bad behavior or difficult situations in Mongolia. In its song "A Growing Flower," the group Digital chastises people for treating street children badly. "Their condition is not their fault," they rap, "their parents are at fault for not thinking about their children's future." The group War & Peace takes on the larger question of the insensitivity of the nation's leaders to the suffering of the poor in its song, "A Letter to Our President":

*The government spends four years doing nothing. They never do the things they promised. I have seen your smiling face on television and read what you've written, but there is little that you have implemented. Do you run the country from your black glassed windowed cars? From behind the windows, the poor Mongolians won't be seen.*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Bokbir* means dirty but also "not fair or straight" and commonly referring to corruption.

<sup>19</sup> Batbold, in 2005 interview.

<sup>20</sup> Dain ba Enkh, "Neg Chig" (2002).



Such political criticism, which has politicians seeing the life of the citizens through tinted windows, is reminiscent of that voiced in the protest songs by the group Bell. In a recent song, the group Tatar blames the rich in general for the plight of the nation's poor:

*The rich ones with money live like in Heaven  
They just play with their money and their girls and  
Use their money to play with other people.  
But the other ones, on their birthdays, must drink alcohol and water  
When their kids come home from school, they must eat just bread  
and sugar  
Why is it this way? Would you say that this is an equal society?*<sup>21</sup>

In rapping about the inequalities of life in contemporary Mongolia, these hip-hop groups appear to exemplify the sense of entitlement and insubordination that Rose identified in rap music as it spread to communities around the United States. Yet despite such apparent similarities, Mongolian rap developed in a very different cultural world than did rap of the American inner cities. The “neighborhood” of New York City bears little in common with that celebrated in the raps and videos of Mongolian hip-hop groups, and one of the key differences is the absence of institutional racism and discrimination.

## RAP AND RACE IN MONGOLIA

Rose describes how the ghettos emerged in the 1970s as the city underwent a period of rapid socio-economic transformation. In this period, shrinking federal investment in the city, the decline in the availability of affordable housing, and a shift in the job market away from blue-collar manufacturing positions and towards white-collar, hit the city's new immigrant communities and its poorest residents hard.<sup>22</sup> Long-existing racially and ethnically mixed communities, particularly African-American and Hispanic communities, experienced the rapid disintegration of the communal bonds and social services that had long held them together, a

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<sup>21</sup> Tatar, “Second Album” (n.d.)

<sup>22</sup> Rose, *op. cit.*, 30.

process that was made worse by the city's "renewal" projects in the same period, which transformed the physical landscape of these communities and forced many people to leave their homes. The destruction of these communities contributed to the emergence of profound social problems within them. For many people on the outside looking in, these neighborhoods became "ghettos," places of "violence and danger" that "consumes the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color."<sup>23</sup>

Rose goes on to describe how for the people in these troubled communities, hip-hop provided a means of reclaiming their physical neighborhood for themselves. Rapping about the everyday lives of the people in these spaces through their songs, showing the "hood" and the people who live there through their videos, and "tagging" locations as their own through their graffiti were just some of the ways in which these people could affirm their experiences and identities as residents of the ghetto. Using the "ghetto as a source of identity," Rose says, "undermines the stigma of poverty and social marginality" for the people who live there and gives them back a sense of pride and ownership.<sup>24</sup> It also allowed them the opportunity to critique the larger society for marginalizing them and their communities.<sup>25</sup>

In Ulaanbaatar, however, no such "ghetto" exists. While there are some areas of the city, for instance the *ger* districts, that are often perceived as more dangerous than others, there are no parts of the city that are widely associated with people of a particular racial, ethnic, or socio-economic class. And while some members of the new wealthy class are increasingly choosing to isolate themselves from others,<sup>26</sup> most Mongols of all socio-economic classes continue to live in relative proximity with each other. The mythic "class-less" society of the socialist era still weighs heavily in Mongols' perception of their nation.

But the belief that Mongolia is racially and ethnically homogeneous is also widely held. While there are racial and ethnic minori-

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> This is particularly noticeable in the recent trend to build expensive condominiums behind large walled and guarded compounds.

ties living and working in the country,<sup>27</sup> Mongols can claim no contemporary geographical or historical continuities with racial oppression and difference as experienced within African-American communities. Yet so pronounced is this aspect of racial oppression in the discourse of global rap that some Mongolian rappers are tempted to create a historical link with it. The rapper “Skitzo” (Ankhbaatar) from the group Lumino tried to do this when he described how Mongols and African-Americans both share a similar history of oppression. “Just as the Blacks suffered under years of slavery at the hands of colonial masters in the U.S.,” he says, “so too did the Mongols suffer, first under the Manchus and then at the hands of the Communists.”<sup>28</sup> This view is both historically problematic and not widely shared among other Mongols.

The absence of a “ghetto” and any realistic historical connections with racial or ethnic oppression in Ulaanbaatar shows the problems that Mongolian rappers have had in appropriating this global popular song genre and mapping it onto the landscape of contemporary Ulaanbaatar. While they may shoot their videos in marginalized, desolate, or long forgotten locations throughout the city, they are typically generalized or virtual “hoods,” bearing few identifying markers as to where they are or whose neighborhood it is. In this way, as Rose pointed out, these “ghetto” locations become mere symbols of the “authentic,” a way for rappers to show their “‘authenticity’ and hipness.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Mongolian rappers may closely imitate the ‘gangsta’ looks, gestures, and bodily movements associated with African-American rappers, but they do little to communicate to their Mongolian audiences what they mean and why they are using them. It is as if, after appropriating a global song form deeply invested with the discourse of race and ethnicity, Mongolian rappers have completely “erased” race and ethnicity from it.

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<sup>27</sup> The Kazakhs are the largest minority in the country, but they only make up around 6% of the total population and nearly all live in the far western province of Bayan-Ölgii.

<sup>28</sup> Ankhbaatar, in 2004 interview. The reference to the Manchus indicates the period when “Outer Mongolia” was a part of the Qing Manchu Dynasty (1691–1911).

<sup>29</sup> Rose, *op. cit.*, 11.



It is because of this apparent disconnection with race that some have dismissed the entire phenomenon of rap as foreign to Mongolia. The singer Jargalsaikhan believes that rap can in no way grow in the same soil of racial oppression and poverty in Mongolia that existed in the ghettos of the United States:

Rap music is the music of the ghettos of New York City and places like that. These kids [Mongolian rap artists] grew up in nice homes and were all well-educated. They have no roots in the conditions of life that created rap—like racism, discrimination, and a hard life. The blacks could sing this music because their blood was boiling.<sup>30</sup>

He adds that he's been to the United States and "seen the ghettos" of the American East where "people are always shooting each other and doing drugs,"<sup>31</sup> and insists that such conditions just do not exist in Mongolia.

The Mongolian rapper BAT furthers this characterization of Mongolian rappers as merely imitating African-American culture in ways similar to how actors play roles in movies:

They must think, if we can't sing like gangsters, then let's pretend we are for our albums and videos. These guys, they dress like this here, but when you meet them on the street, do they dress like that? No! They're just middle class guys who live with their mom and dad!<sup>32</sup>

As these views indicate, the ongoing debates about the authenticity of rap often rest on fairly essentialized views about the nature of both global rap and the experience of African-Americans in the inner city of New York. To dismiss Mongolian rap as inauthentic, however, because it cannot claim any direct connection with these experiences is also to dismiss the experience of the Mongolian youths who feel rap to be both authentic and real in their home country. Ian Maxwell (2003) writes of a similar

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<sup>30</sup> Jargalsaikhan, in 2004 interview.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Batbold, in 2005 interview.

situation in his study of rap in Sydney, Australia, where, as in Mongolia, he found hip-hop being maintained in communities of (often white) youths who likewise could not claim to share in “a discourse of historical continuity” with African-American rappers. Yet to label that their rap as inauthentic is, as Maxwell sees it, to ignore “genuine, phenomenological subjects, furnishing themselves and their practices, with narratives and knowledges that *they experience as genuine, as real.*”<sup>33</sup>

It is in such settings that Rose’s framework for the study of hip-hop as defined by the experience of Afrodiasporic cultures breaks down. We need instead to turn to the views of scholars who have studied the appropriation of hip-hop in contexts outside of the United States. Tony Mitchell finds that as hip-hop became truly global, its roots in the African-American experiences of American inner cities became less important. While hip-hop traditions as appropriated by different peoples and cultures around the world remain “undoubtedly initially influenced by U.S. hip-hop,” he says, “they represent a continually shifting, heterogeneous, and complex music scene in which hip-hop is displaced and often de-lyricized. In the process it becomes a more amorphous, abstract, and atmospheric cross-genre musical practice, engulfing a wide range of home-grown musical and lyrical influences.”<sup>34</sup>

While Mongolian hip-hop shares many similarities with American ‘ganstarap,’ it also has become, as Mitchell suggests, more of a hybrid genre that makes use of “home-grown musical and lyrical influences.” Its emphasis has become “more amorphous” and “abstract.” The elements of entitlement and aggressive insubordination that are evident in it have little to do with expressions of frustration of people experiencing racial oppression and poverty, and more to do with youths seeking to create a unique identity for themselves within a larger world of musical expression, one which many feel does not reflect their own unique experiences with the world into which they are growing up. Tony Mitchell found that in other parts of the world, hip-hop has become “a vehicle for global

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<sup>33</sup> Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip-Hop Down Under Comin’ Upper* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 47. Italics in the original source.

<sup>34</sup> Tony Mitchell, “Another Root—Hip-Hop Outside the USA,” 16.

youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identities,”<sup>35</sup> and in a number of ways, this appears to be the case in Mongolia.

## HIP-HOP AND THE VOICE OF A NEW GENERATION

A number of Mongolian rappers generally confirmed the characterizations made by Jargalsaikhan and BAT that most of them are neither poor nor racially oppressed. Rapper “Skitzo” describes the members of his group Lumino as being “all from good homes; we’re not from the ghettos like the blacks of the United States.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, many of the rap artists and groups now working in Ulaanbaatar do appear to come from the emerging middle class in society. Most have graduated from high school, some from college, and more than a few have studied art or music or traveled to the United States or Europe. Some have told me that becoming a rap artist is not something the poor in their society can do because they would need to have some capital to first create their product. One singer told me that he had to sell his car to help his group raise the money it needed to produce their first run of CDs.

Yet most of these rappers also draw a clear distinction between U.S. hip-hop and the rap music and hip-hop culture that they are seeking to create in Mongolia. Their goal, many say, is to show people that Mongolian rappers are not the thugs and criminals they may portray in their videos, but rather, as “Skitzo” puts it, that they are “real artists who lead stable lives and are part of professional bands.” Mongolian rappers want their subcultural art to be taken seriously by the musical mainstream, and thus they were pleased when the Pentatonic music awards included hip-hop for the first time as one of the awards categories in 2001. That same year the Mongolian Hip-Hop Association, which seeks to promote Mongolian hip-hop domestically and internationally, received official recognition from the government. In the past few years, hip-hop has become one of the most important new markets to emerge in the popular music industry. “Now,” says rapper

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ankhbaatar, in 2004 interview.



Batorgil of the group Ice Top, “there is no large show in Ulaanbaatar that will not include at least one hip-hop group. We stayed firm to our desire to bring this art to Mongolia.”<sup>37</sup>

Just as importantly, the rappers see themselves and their audiences, most of whom range in age from their teens to early twenties, as being of a distinctly different generation from those singers and audiences that make up the musical mainstream in the country. The rapper Batbayar from the group Digital expresses his sentiment about his relationship with those of “socialist era” generations, including his parents:

I got into rap because to me it was a way to express myself in a free way. My parents used to prohibit me from going to see hip-hop shows and hip-hop art. This was just after the socialist era, but people like them still had a socialist mentality. I didn’t listen to my parents but instead followed my own ideas. It’s been 10 years since I got involved with hip-hop and I’m proud that I can now make a living as a rap artist.<sup>38</sup>

“Skitzo” explains how his generation has grown up in a very different kind of world than did those in the generations that preceded them:

We want to show the older generations, those in their 30s and 40s, that we are different from them. These were the generations brought up in the socialist era. These people were all taught the same things and boiled in the same sauce. Our generation likes songs that touch on reality and don’t just talk about romantic love. Our generation is just now opening its eyes to see the whole world, not just Mongolia. We [Mongolian rap artists] have started a revolution in our country and we’re changing the way young people are thinking.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Batorgil, in 2005 interview.

<sup>38</sup> Batbayar, in 2005 interview.

<sup>39</sup> Ankhbaatar, in 2004 interview.

## CONCLUSIONS

While Mongolian rappers may borrow freely from American 'gangsta' rap traditions, what this study shows is that they subsequently use these cultural materials in entirely unique ways. Mongolian rappers are not seeking to fight against institutionalized racism and poverty, as Rose found in the rap of the American inner cities. Nor are they using the genre as a weapon of social protest against a powerful state government, as Michael Bodden found in the youth musical cultures of Indonesia in the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Mongolian rappers sing about poverty and governmental corruption, but most of their songs touch on themes such as their desire to achieve personal and artistic freedom, to look at the realities of love and life with open eyes, and to be engaged with the world at large.

Rap in Mongolia is most strongly connected with a segment of the youth who have used the medium as a vehicle for defining their generational distinctiveness. These youths have effectively used rap as a means of opening spaces for their voices in the nation's popular culture and creating opportunities for them to express those traits that they believe define their unique experience in the world. In the process, they have also changed the nature of the musical mainstream. While there is still debate among some of its leading figures about the authenticity of Mongolian hip-hop, others are now embracing it. Some of the most famous Mongolian ballad singers, including Ariunaa and Sarantuya, now frequently include rapping and breakdancing in some of their songs and concerts, often inviting hip-hop groups to share the stage with them.

At the same time, in closely associating their identity with the global images of hip-hop, Mongolian rappers have also been stating their affiliation with global youth cultural movements. As this study shows, Mongolian youth are neither passive consumers nor unfortunate victims of some monolithic global cultural imperialism emanating from the West. They have their eyes sharpened and their ears pricked to pick up on interesting cultural materials wherever they originate, be they from the ghettos of the United States

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<sup>40</sup> See his "Rap in Indonesian Youth Music of the 1990s: 'Globalization,' 'Outlaw Genres,' and Social Protest."

or a recording studio in Seoul, and they have shown themselves quite adept at appropriating these “global” materials and adapting them to their own local contexts. As the quality of their art demonstrates, Mongolian rappers are interacting with the global culture with a high degree of sophistication.

Despite its ability to rework local identities and affirm global youth affinities,<sup>41</sup> however, Mongolian rap continues to remain largely confined to the nation’s borders. This is because the global flow of culture continues to move primarily in one direction, from the “developed” nations towards places like Mongolia. Mongolian hip-hop artists express frustration over their limited opportunities to contribute their own unique forms of hip-hop to the transnational Hip-Hop Nation. This has been a situation experienced by Mongolian popular musical artists for the past several decades. When they speak of gaining access to international markets, they are not necessarily speaking about the United States or Europe. With the development of MTV-Asia and VH1-Asia music channels in the mid-1990s, the Asian continent has emerged as an important market for popular music in its own right. Most Mongolian popular music artists include stops in Asia during their international tours and a few have even appeared on the Asian music channels. But so far none has been able to break into the popular culture world of either the developed East or West, suggesting that despite reaching even the most isolated places on Earth, these cultural flows continue to reflect some of the profound inequalities of the global marketplace.

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