Introduction

David Sneath

Professor, Mongolia & Inner Asia Studies Unit, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
ds114@cam.ac.uk

In his 1995 work *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Prasenjit Duara describes the ways in which ‘historical narratives appropriate dispersed histories according to present needs’ and argues that by attending to the very process of appropriation we can ‘recover a historicity beyond the appropriating discourse’ (Duara 1995: 5).

Several of the articles in this issue try to do just this, offering striking new readings of historical sources. Munkh-Uchral Enkhtur’s paper on the Mongolian national hero Ard Ayush (‘Ayush the Commoner’) reveals the ways in which Soviet-era history constructed a narrative of exemplary class struggle from a complicated, convoluted set of historical events. Ayush was one of a group of nobles and commoners involved in a lengthy legal dispute with the ruling lord of their banner during the late Qing and Bogd Khaan periods. The figure that emerges from this re-examination is not a revolutionary firebrand but a tough and stubborn litigant who becomes, almost literally, a whipping-boy for the higher-ranking aristocratic participants in the decade-long legal battle. Despite the horrific physical punishments meted out to Ayush and other commoners in the dispute, the legal action against the ruling lord was pursued by several noblemen (*taijnar*) alongside Ayush, until the (thoroughly aristocratic) Bogd Khaan Ministry of Justice finally ruled in their favour in 1917. These events could have been read as a story of personal courage, common cause and bitterly held grievance within the confines of a ranked aristocratic society. But in the Mongolian People’s Republic of the 1930s, Ayush’s status as a commoner, along with his remarkable fortitude and courage, provided the raw material for his portrayal as a hero in a notional struggle against feudal oppression. Furthermore, Munkh-Uchral Enkhtur argues, these sorts of narratives helped the state-building elite construct the concept of a ‘national people’ (*ard tümen*) from earlier notions of commoner (*ard*) status. The enduring importance of this national people, as the core political principle of the state, helps explain the continuing currency of Ard Ayush as a heroic historical

everyman, long after the collapse of the state socialist system that originally lionised him.

Di Wang's paper casts much further back in time to re-examine the thirteenth century classic the *Secret History of the Mongols*, and to draw out the images and narratives of the noblewomen of what became the imperial dynasty. Crucially, Di Wang treats the *Secret History* as a rhetorical work, a selective narrative that reveals something of the values and purposes of its author(s). Just as twentieth-century histories provided exemplars such as Ayush, this thirteenth-century chronicle has its heroes and, as Di Wang shows, its heroines. The figures of Hö'elün, mother of Temujin (Chinggis Khan), and his wife the Lady Börte stand out as central themes in the work, and Di Wang makes use of a close reading of the text and comparison with other contemporaneous sources to illuminate the ways in which some aspects of these royal women were foregrounded while others were obscured or omitted. This exploration offers an enriched context for the interpretation of a historical source such as the *Secret History*, so that we can recognise something of the discursive work that the narrative performs. Rather than sacred myth or plain fact, we find a courtly and dynastic document, reflecting complex agendas as well as striking rank- and gender-specific normativities. In the *Secret History* narrative, a brave mother and a wise wife are key ingredients of Chinggis Khan's success, and they serve the function of exemplary role models for the readers of the work and the dynasts of the future.

The particular 'appropriating discourse' that concerned Duara, of course, was not what Anderson (1991: 19) termed the dynastic realm, but that of the nation state. This is powerfully illustrated in Elza Guchinova's paper, which traces the differing historical representation of the mass deportation of the Kalmyk Mongols to Siberia in the wake of the Second World War. The Kalmyk Khanate had been established in the lower Volga region during the seventeenth century and incorporated into the Tsarist Empire in the eighteenth. The Soviets founded the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast in 1920, which became the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1935. Following the German invasion of the USSR in the Second World War, much of Kalmykia was occupied by the invaders in 1942, and the Wehrmacht recruited some Kalmyks to fight against Soviet forces. In retaliation, Stalin ordered the Kalmyk population deported in late 1943 and dissolved the Kalmyk ASSR. In 1956–8, Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation reforms re-established the territory, albeit as the Kalmyk Autonomous Region within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic rather than as an Autonomous Republic. Kalmyk people could, at last, return to their homes. Elza Guchinova tells something of the tragic story of this mass

deportation and examines the ways in which the episode has featured in various historical narratives both within and outside Kalmykia, including theatrical productions on the subject. In particular, she notes the powerful influence of Soviet and Russian nation-state politics, and how the trauma of the past has been recast in recent years so as to promote images of unity and solidarity within Russia's contemporary nationalist popular culture.

Another sort of historical re-examination is presented in Kenneth Linden's exploration of wolf-hunting in the Mongolian People's Republic. Here we are reminded that 'dominant discourses' need not be those of professional historians. Internationally, if not domestically, popular representations of 'the wolf' within 'Mongolian culture' have reflected romantic narratives such as Jiang Rong's fiction *Wolf Totem*, invoking primitivist, essentialist images of ancient nomadic animism, nature-worship and exotic spirituality. In this imagination, wolves have been respected, even worshipped, by Mongols as sacred animals since time immemorial, their lives linked in mystical ways with those of human steppe-dwellers. Kenneth Linden carefully dismantles these misconceptions, showing something of the richness, diversity and ambivalence of historical Mongolian attitudes and practices towards wolves, beginning with Pre-Revolutionary representations of wolves as a menacing threat to livestock, as well as a source of value in the important fur-trade of the Qing era. Wolf-hunting became increasingly coordinated and professionalised during the Mongolian People's Republic, but this did not represent a radical break with long-standing attitudes and practices that reflected the threat wolves pose to livestock. Indeed, one of the many complaints that present-day pastoralists make about the collapse of the old state-planned collective system is that wolf numbers are not as effectively controlled as they were in the past. This analysis allows us to see Mongolia as a fully modern and modernist place, with a range of more and less positive public perceptions of wolves, but all reflecting familiarity with long-standing discourses of agricultural efficiency and environmental management.

The importance of livestock also features in the next paper, but in this case as a source of food. Liz Fox explores the ramifying meanings and associations of meat in Mongolia in the light of anthropological accounts of matrilineal descent spoken of in the idiom of 'flesh and blood' (*mah tsus*) and patrilineal descent referenced in terms of 'bone' (*yas*). Attitudes towards meat and relatedness are explored through an ethnographic account of a family's trip to get meat from relatives in a rural district. Here we see not just the ways in which significance can be attached to meat as representing, or even constituting, familial relationships, but also the striking contemporary importance of

notions of *nutag* ('homeland'), archetypically the rural district from which a family is thought to have come. Liz Fox notes the way in which *nutag* is more relation than location; a site for often fraught practices of belonging, family attachment and – in the case of meat supplies – provisioning. Narratives of the *nutag* often invoke valorised images of natural beauty and spirituality, so that meat consumption can stand for a connection of person with place, a link with the sacred landscape of the national and subnational homeland.

Contemporary notions of 'nature' (*baigal*) in Mongolian public culture, and the diverse invocations of environment as a source of moral authority, are examined and analysed in Elizabeth Turk's paper. Rather than assuming continuity with Buddhist notions of 'sacred landscape', or presenting attitudes towards 'nature' as a product of 'religion', Elizabeth Turk shows that many of the roots of current ideas about nature lie in the Soviet period, when Russian and international thought gained powerful currency. Furthermore, rather than a sacred landscape as an aspect of a specifically religious cosmology, *baigal* is frequently spoken of as itself agentive and active in human health and well-being. The notion of the natural world as, potentially at least, a source of harmony, health and healing is itself 'good to think with'; a sort of conceptual or cosmological resource that, Elizabeth Turk shows, can be used to offer a powerful critique of the social disorder of contemporary, market-economy Mongolia. To describe these widespread views, however, is not to claim them as necessary features of a single national or traditional 'culture'. As in other places, attitudes towards 'nature' vary in Mongolia and, as historical products, they remain dynamic, subject to change and new styles of deployment in the future.

In the final paper of this issue, Mungunchimeg Batmunkh examines one of the most divisive differences of opinion within the Buddhist establishment of Mongolia, the Shugden controversy. Within the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism headed by the Dalai Lama, the veneration of the fierce protector deity Dorje Shugden is thought to date from the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso in the seventeenth century. Although considered a relatively minor deity until the nineteenth century, the practice of Dorje Shugden was promoted in the 1930s by influential supporters of a purist Gelug revival movement (Dreyfus 1998). The eclectic current Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, however, advocated toleration, and in the 1970s he set his face against Dorje Shugden, who was said to have caused the premature deaths of Gelug lamas who practised the teachings of other schools of Buddhism. Following the revival of monastic Buddhism in Mongolia in the 1990s, the disputed status of Dorje Shugden became a divisive issue

within the religious establishment. Most monasteries have followed the Dalai Lama's instructions and discontinued Dorje Shugden practice but in three, Amarbayasgalant, Tögsbayasgalant and Delgeriin khiid, his veneration continues, as Mungunchimeg Batmunkh describes. The dispute is further complicated by the international entanglements of the two sides. Devotees of Dorje Shugden are said to be supported by the Chinese state, as a tactic to undermine the Dalai Lama, while their opponents can be accused of favouring the authority of Dharamshala over long-established practices within Mongolian Buddhism. As ever, the past remains alive in Mongolia; and its interpretation is disputed and intertwined with present and future concerns.

References

- Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Dreyfus, G. 1998. The Shugs Idan affair: history and nature of a quarrel. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21(2): 227–70.
- Duara, P. 1995. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning narratives of modern China*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- Jiang, R. (2008). *Wolf Totem* (trans. H. Goldblatt). New York (NY): Penguin Press.