Policy makers and academics alike have long wanted to know why some nations build and sustain democratic societies while others do not. Social scientists working on this question frequently start by creating typologies of democracy, e.g., electoral, liberal and capitalist democracy. They then tease out causal factors and descriptors that they use to slot nations into one category or another (Diamond 2008, 20–38; Lipset 1959; Schmitter 1995, 15–22; Schumpeter 1947, 269). While valuable in focusing our attention on an issue of great import, these studies exhibit certain problems. Based on the assumption that democracy is everyone’s goal—that democracy is a universal good valued by all (Diamond 2008, 5–14, 33–34)—and that all nation-states can be placed along a continuum from non-democratic to democratic, the typologies are teleological, exhibiting a tendency to replicate the colonialist schemes of nineteenth-century unilineal cultural evolution. And by using broad, overarching definitions of democracy derived from multi-nation databases such as Freedom House or the World Values Survey, analysts obfuscate the causal factors and mechanisms of democratization. These problems can be reduced or even eliminated by applying an anthropological, micro-level approach to the study of democracy.1 While context-rich anthropological analysis lacks the power of cross-cultural comparison for defining so abstract a domain as democracy, it is most useful for delving beneath the surface to find how people of one society actually view democracy. Findings from such a study can then be tested cross-culturally.

Employing an anthropological approach, I went to Mongolia to learn how everyday people interpret democracy, that is, their understanding of and attitudes toward the concept. Mongolia provides an excellent case study because the government and people seemed to transition away from Soviet socialism toward capitalist democracy so rapidly. Starting in

1 The micro-level approach is sanctioned by anthropologists and political scientists, e.g., Burawoy and Verdery (1999) and Petro (2004).
In 1990, Mongolia underwent government reorganization from one-party rule to liberal democracy principles of individual rights and freedoms, rule of law, equality, and popular sovereignty. All of these are stipulated in the 1992 Constitution. Between 1990 and 2003, citizens elected parliaments and presidents four times and held demonstrations whenever they felt their new democracy was being challenged. The country peacefully transferred power from the Communist Party (MPRP) to a Democratic Coalition in 1996 and reinstated the MPRP (now called ‘the former Communist Party’) in 2000. Demonstrators held peaceful protests (Kapłonski 2004, 53–70). Such structural change demanded cognitive shifts on the part of citizens. Therefore, interviewing Mongolian citizens seemed warranted.

While analyzing the interviews, I noticed that many research participants associated certain democratic ideas with their perception of economic risk. That is, those who talked about the benefits of democracy were often optimistic about the economic future of their country, their family, and themselves; those who said that Mongolia had not or could not reach the democratic ideal (however they interpreted it) were often concerned about the future. And while many talked about risk perception and economic rights together, a very few linked risk perception with political rights. A good number of respondents said that the major responsibility of government is to help citizens prepare for entry into the market economy, thereby increasing their chances of succeeding in this brave new world. And some added that government should also take care of those who need help to survive in the new economy. But very few connected active citizen participation in governance with risk.

This chapter describes Mongolians’ changing interpretation of democracy and perception of economic risk between 1998 and 2003, demonstrating their association with quotations and statistical analysis drawn from interviews. I suggest that Mongolians perceive economic risk as both positive and negative rather than just negative. And their interpretation of democracy—the rights and freedoms they emphasize and their interpretation of government and citizen responsibilities—frequently correlates with their views on economic risk.

Those who have read Mary Douglas and Ulrich Beck will not be surprised by my findings. Douglas (1992, 13–16, 31–36) describes the influence of political structure on risk perception; my study concerns the associa-

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2 Risk perception is a term used extensively by Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) and again by Douglas (1992). It is found in the social psychology literature (see Joffe 2003).