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Mongolia's Golden Ages: A Brisk Gallop through Changing Representations

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Summary

"Golden Age" is a trope commonly applied to periods of outstanding prosperity. Concerning Mongolia, it is likely to conjure up images of Genghis Khan[1], the Mongol Empire, and the Pax Mongolica. Surprisingly, though, there exists (at least so far) no globally recognized Mongolian equivalent to such widely established concepts as the Danish, the Polish, the British, or the Dutch Golden Age. At the same time, however, it has recently become popular for political observers and journalists alike to predict the coming of a Golden Age, since Mongolia's economy, due to its abundance of natural resources, currently features one of the highest growth rates in the world.
The motif "Golden Age" had found its way into Mongolia as early as in the 15th–16th century through eschatological literary texts of Chinese and Indo-Tibetan origin. Their partly apocalyptic images, and the inherent ideas of unceasing decline that accompany them, would in the 20th century largely vanish under socialist rule. Yet, even then evoking a Golden Age proved to be convenient for legitimizing political authority. In postsocialist Mongolia today, the designation "Golden Age" (*altan üye*) is explicitly applied to an epoch that from a typical "Westerner's" perspective would hardly qualify for the awarding of such a grandiose label. This essay offers a brisk gallop through changing representations of the trope "Golden Age" in different Mongolia-related contexts. By experimentally identifying narratives and language-games against the backdrop of shifting perspectives in historical and prophetic thinking, I intend to explore what possible kinds of motivation keep inspiring its use.

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Grand narratives and language-games

The trope "Golden Age" has had a colorful history of usage in different parts of the world, and its meaning is just as pluricentric. Irrespective of the cyclical or linear nature of underlying time concepts, Golden Ages typically bear mythical dimensions. Four brief examples might serve as illustrations: In ancient Hindu philosophy, the historical process is imagined as a cycle of reoccurring ages (Sanskrit: *yuga*) commonly depicted as the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages, which oscillate

1 The spelling of Mongolian words follows the established convention widely accepted in the English-language literature; names and terms in quotations and references remain in their original form. Classical Mongolian is represented according to the internationally used Petersburg transliteration; for reasons of simplification, this is done without diacritics.

between longer enlightened eras of creation and shorter dark times of decline. In China, the historical period of the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1046–256 B.C.)[2] is considered the Golden Age due to the expanding economy and civilization of the time. Along with enthusiastic artistic and intellectual experiments (some featuring utopian dimensions) went an intense reassessment of traditions with the birth of important philosophical schools such as those of Confucianism and Daoism, which continue to influence China to this day (cf. Graham 1989). Another example are the famous inscriptions on the steles that were erected in the 8th century by the Orkhon Turks in the territory of what later became part of the Mongol heartland.[3] The content of the inscriptions, featuring the legendary origins and rise of the Turks, is not only evocative of a Golden Age but also shows that the historical process was imagined as a repeating cyclical movement between rise and fall.[4] In contrast, ancient European notions — which are the basis of many of the 20th–21st century historical images favored by Mongolians today — usually employ linear conceptualizations of time. The Greek and Roman mythologies imagine a period in the past when all social and natural relations existed in an ideal condition, in other words when war, crime, and vice were unknown and all beings lived an idyllic life in peace, equity, prosperity, and happiness. Land ownership did not exist and jurisdiction was unnecessary, since everyone would always act honestly and in the proper manner.

A flawless fairyland described in this way is likely to remind those who grew up in a socialist country of the utopia of Communism. Being a secular myth, it has always been depicted as the ideal of an immaculate, classless society. While in the earlier European history of ideas Golden Ages usually belonged to the (often imaginary) past, in the realm of Socialism — including therein Mongolia — an equivalent was envisioned for the future, as promoted through the Marxist model of unidirectional historical progress. The image of this long-term utopia was supposed to serve as a promise, yet in practice its permanent "Parousian delays" (Riegel 1993: 336)[5] en route toward this worldly paradise justified the countless deficits experienced in the present. Interestingly, the Marxist (originally Hegelian) philosophy of history followed in the footsteps of Christian eschatology, which imagined world history as salvation history with an ultimate purpose: "In the Enlightenment, with its belief in progress, salvation history was secularized and became the triumphant march of human reason through history" (Ankersmit 1994: 152).

In general, whether or not there is meaning in history remains controversial, and the question as such tends to become particularly acute during times of change and crisis. Mongolia is no exception: After the dissolution of Socialism in Mongolia,

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2 The beginning of the period is sometimes also dated to either 1122 or 1040 respectively.

3 The area is now registered as a UNESCO world heritage site (Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape, *Orkhon khöndiin soyolyn dursgal*).

4 The cyclical structure was first understood and explained by Kormushin (1981: 143f.).

5 In German: "Parusieverzögerungen."

coping with the present was first and foremost a matter of coming to terms with a particular past that had due to ideological constraints long been denied the status of a Golden Age: the era of Genghis Khan. The Great Khan had been dismissed as a member of the exploitative class, as a feudal warlord who had mindlessly overrun large parts of Eurasia. After 1990 a powerful Genghis Khan cult, initiated by Mongols but to a large degree embraced and promoted by foreigners, reverted to the other extreme: looking at the Mongol Empire through rose-tinted glasses has generally become fashionable ever since, and the glory of the Mongol Empire is now reimagined as possessing the fictitious attributes of a mythical Golden Age.

Initially — that is, in the perestroika era — meant to criticize the denial of the Great Khan, such excessive glorification has increasingly developed traits of ethnic nationalism.[6] After postsocialist Mongolia ditched her famous "bypassing capitalism" narrative,[7] having been rendered useless in 1990, the invention of a new narrative was driven by the intense desire for the country's visible historical significance in a multipolar world. Having abandoned the grand narrative of Marxist theory, the role of the Mongols in world history under Genghis Khan and his successors — even though it did not qualify as a universal metanarrative like the previous one — bore at least the potential to reach out beyond the merely local relevance of *petits récits*. The fascination with the excessive evocation of the Mongol Empire's glory, shared by both Mongolians and foreigners alike, suggests a kind of ex post facto teleology in which Genghis is celebrated as a forerunner of modernity, capitalism, and even democracy itself.[8]

In sharp contrast to such recent manifesto-like claims, Jean-François Lyotard had stated that under postmodern conditions "the grand narrative has lost its credibility [...] regardless whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1984: 37). In view of collapsing horizons, the metanarratives of legitimization — such as that of Marxism — are no longer suitable. Narrative authority is rather to be found in what Lyotard called, with reference to Wittgenstein, "language-games," which are locally relevant and do not have (or need) a universal basis (1988: 151ff.).

In his book *History and Tropology* on the philosophy of languages, Franklin Rudolf Ankersmit investigates "the problem of how language might account for a complex reality in terms of texts" (1994: 3) and states that philosophy has received "the task of developing a *descriptive metaphysics*" (Ankersmit 1994: 2, italics in original). Obviously, presuppositions about history are bound not only to individual views but also to discourses, which reflect the spirit of a given time period. In a plea for

6 For Inner Mongolia, see Bulag (2002: 234ff.; 2012).

7 Cf. Stolpe (2008: 246ff.).

8 Telling bestseller examples published in English are: P. Sabloff (2001): *Genghis Khan. Father of Mongolian Democracy*; J. Weatherford (2004): *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*; J. Boldbaatar (2006): *The Role of Mongolians in the History of the World and Region*.

"a *rapprochement* between philosophy of history and aesthetics" (Ankersmit 1994: 102, italics in original), Ankersmit notes that:

> Unlike the vocabulary of description and explanation, the vocabulary of representation has the capacity to account not only for the details of the past but also for the way these details have been integrated within the totality of the historical narrative. (Ankersmit 1994: 102)

Today, Mongolian ideas of a "Golden Age" mostly lack historical skepticism as would be found in the ancient notions of decline. However, this has not always been the case. In her book on political prophecies in Mongolia, Alice Sárközi reveals that in early Mongolian literature the future was mostly depicted "as a tragic one" (1992: 7). Tracing the origins of eschatological literature back to China and the "Indo-Tibetan culture complex" (Sárközi 1992: 17), the author shows that the "characteristic feature of prophetic literature — the unceasing decline of humanity — was also familiar to the Mongols at an early time" (Sárközi 1992: 9) and that:

> Ideas concerning the end of the world spread to Mongolia from Tibet as well. In Tibet the pre-Buddhist conception of time — as the Tun-huang texts prove — supposed that humanity lives in three great chronological cycles following one another. The first cycle is the epoch of happiness, the golden age, that began with the creation of the world. [...] The second cycle is the epoch divided into three periods, each worse then (sic) the previous one. It is the progressive degeneration of belief when people turn away from religion and abandon its practices. The third and last epoch is the age of calamities, which is the worst of all. (Sárközi 1992: 11)

Up to the early 20th century, the genre of eschatological literature served not least as a means of religious legitimization for political authority.[9] When a secularized salvation history took over in Mongolia, the image of a Golden Age was for much the same reason solely projected into a future yet to come. Despite this ideological reallocation, the relational character of the trope still invites a turning back into notions of decline. As we shall see later, today its usage is supposed to challenge the authority of contemporary historical narratives. The question that arises is: In Mongolia-related contexts, does the trope "Golden Age" qualify as a language-game (*Sprachspiel*) of representation in the sense of Wittgenstein's (1953) modes of discourse — where the meaning of words emerges in their usage, situated in specific linguistic practices that reflect changes in the social and political contexts? The potential representational scope of "Golden Age" will be explored in the next section.

Shifting perspectives

Whether or not a period qualifies as a "Golden Age" obviously depends to a large extent on the perspective taken. Thus, the first critical question to be asked is: A Golden Age for whom? A prime example of this relevancy of the perspective is

9 On the role of religious (i.e. Lamaist) influence on the Mongolian conception of history, cf. Heissig (1954) and Kollmar-Paulenz (2005).

the vast transcontinental Mongol empire that was established by the Chinggisids. From a Mongol point of view, this period may appear as a Golden Age due to the enormous increase in power and prosperity experienced. In contrast, those conquered by the Mongols are naturally in complete disagreement with this verdict; for them, the invasions by these allegedly bloodthirsty barbarians heralded — with reference to the Christian apocalypse — a Dark Age. Meanwhile, traveling merchants, envoys, and missionaries (such as Marco Polo, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, or William of Rubruck), especially those operating far away from the battlefields, would have deemed the Pax Mongolica (*Mongolyn enkhtaivan*) a Golden Age. Until the Mongol Empire fragmented, the Pax Mongolica guaranteed a political and administrative stability that fostered trade, cultural exchange, communication, and infrastructure (*örtöö*)[10] and thus promoted confidence. Legend has it that in the heyday of the Mongol Empire a maiden carrying a nugget of gold could have traversed without fear the vast realm stretching from Eastern Asia to Eastern Europe, a territory that included large parts of the reestablished Silk Road routes.

Gold would function as a symbol of power and greatness already in medieval times; it appears 33 times in the "Secret History of the Mongols" (Boldbaatar and Choimaa 2011: 111). Whether the Yuan Dynasty (1272–1368) with its upswing in cultural exchange and trade is considered a Golden Age[11] or not, gold was a symbol of status and power for the imperial rulers and their entourage. The Yuan elites were famous for wearing robes in the imperial color gold as a symbol of political success. Relatively little is known about gold extraction in the Mongol realms during medieval times;[12] according to Thomas T. Allsen (1997), however, the trade system for gold brocade was highly developed within the Mongol Empire. A certain type of textile made of silk and gold was called *nasíj* and known as "tartar cloth" (Allsen 1997: 2ff., 107ff.), often being decorated with golden dragons (Allsen 1997: 107) as monarchic symbols. There even existed a "Gold Brocade Office" or "Gold Thread Office" (Allsen 1997: 38, 44, 96) responsible for teaching the Chinese to make *nasíj*.

Related to the historiographical dimensions of representation, Rolf Trauzettel mentions that in Buddhist universal history writings of the 1330s, rulers of the Yuan Dynasty were, in contrast to Chinese emperors, included in the Buddhist salvation history (1986: 218). Later, the decline of the empire became a recurring topos in the opening sections of the Mongolian chronicles of the 17th century.[13] Once united

10 The term *örtöö* in short refers to the network of travel routes based on horse relay stations established in medieval times in order to administer the Mongol Empire. Originally, they were called *Khaany zam* (way(s) of the Great Khan). Cf. Stolpe (2008).

11 The heyday of cultural exchange and trade cultivated by the Mongols during the 13th and 14th centuries is aptly depicted as "Das (lange) mongolische Jahrhundert" by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (2011: 60ff.), since it certainly possessed the characteristics of a Golden Age.

12 For an analysis of archival material and accounts by travelers of the period, see High and Schlesinger (2010).

13 For example, see *Erdeni tunumal neretü sudur*, Verse 12; transcription by Kollmar-Paulenz (2001).

under a single political authority with the Yasa (*ikh zasag*) as the Mongol code of law, the empire — and, with it, the Pax Mongolica — fell into decline as a consequence of rivalry, greed, corruption, and decadence. Such normative interpretations, linking the end of the empire to degeneration, became an established part of historiographical discourses. Decline appeared to be inherent to Golden Ages, and decadence is considered inherent to decline.

Local historiographers had obviously been aware of these potential dangers. We can find a genealogical and didactical extension of the Mongol Empire, which indicates the political purpose of a tacitly imagined Golden Age: Genghis Khan and his successors in the imperial clan of the Chinggisids (i.e. the *Borjigid*) established what came to be called "the Golden Lineage" (*altan uruγ/urag*), a principle of legitimization that was genealogically affiliated to the Indian Sakya clan. The famous 17th century Mongolian chronicle known under the short title *Altan Tobchi* ("Golden Summary")[14] is a compilation of older sources, with the Secret History of the Mongols being the most important.[15] Beginning with a partly mythological genealogy, the *Altan Tobchi* is not only a chronicle but also a didactically arranged code of conduct. It hands down the wisdom of Genghis Khan (*Chingisiin bilig*) as well as later added parts of state ideology, such as the "Two Orders" (*khoyor yos*), directed at the Mongol nobility. Likewise, from the chronicle *Erdeni-yin Tobchi*, written by Sechen Sagang in 1662 and influenced by Tibetan texts, Alice Sárközi found that "an important motif of prophetic literature, i.e. the heavenly support of the ruler, was known in the early Mongolian historical works" (1992: 9).[16] If one were to identify a Golden Age of Buddhist conversion in Mongolia, Altan (the "Golden") Khan of the Tümed (1507–82) played a central role not only with regard to the promotion and dissemination of Buddhism among the Mongols, but also for the establishment of strong ties between the sacral and the secular spheres of regency — achieved by bestowing the title "Dalai Lama" on the Tibetan Sodnomjamts (Sonam Gyatso) in 1578.

At the state level, the Golden Lineage has been used to create a community of Mongolness based on this very line of descent (*mongol ovogton*). 700 years later, after centuries of discord and fragmentation among the Mongol elites, this pattern of legitimization was finally actualized — with an interesting twist — in 1911 by the enthronement of the 8th rJe-btsun dam-pa Khutukhtu, *Bogd Gegeen*, as Khan of the Mongols, who represented religious as well as secular power:

> He was accorded the reign-title "Exalted by All."[17] This was not meant to show deference to any as yet unknown democratic principles, but was rather a conscious appeal to the legendary past of the Mongols as seen through Buddhist eyes. "Exalted by All"

14 The full title of the *Altan Tobchi* by Luvsandanzan is known as the *Golden Summary of the Principles of Statecraft established by Ancient Khans*.

15 Cf. Heissig (1959: 53).

16 For a more comprehensive analysis, see Kollmar-Paulenz (2010).

17 In Mongolian: "*Olan-a ergügdegsen*."

> had been the name of the mythical first king of India, from whom seventeenth century lamaist chroniclers, intent on providing Genghis Khan with a lineage theologically more acceptable than the primitive zoomorphic legend that his ancestor had been born of the union of a wolf and a hind, had ingeniously traced his descent. The new reign title looks very much like a subtle claim to legitimacy by association, and its doctrinal and national overtones were bound to have some persuasive effect.
> (Bawden 1968: 195–196)

Udo Barkmann (1999: 97) has indicated that this was also a move to realize the claim to ruling authority by restoring the Golden Lineage backward through the first rJe-btsun dam-pa Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar. The latter was a son of the Chinggisid Tüsheet Khan, and thus the Bogd Gegeen, who via a sequence of reincarnations could be linked up with the Golden Lineage. Here we find another attempt to enhance the Mongolian present of the early 20th century with historical significance, which at the same time represents the wish for a future renaissance of power.

Today, many people both in and outside Mongolia claim to be direct descendants from the Great Khan on their paternal side. Even those who had lost the historical evidence for their clan affiliation (due to the ban on its use under socialist rule) choose to make reference to the Golden Lineage as "symbol(s) of Mongol identity" (Pegg 2001: 21), which is why about 60 percent of the population has registered under the prestigious clan name *Borjigin* since the ban was lifted in the 1990s. The heartfelt wish for historical significance seems, also on the individual level, to represent a longing for a meaningful present and future.

A more far-reaching dimension is represented by the worship of the Maitreya Buddha (*Maidari*), which was (and still is) very common in all parts of Mongolia.[18] *Maidari* is regarded as the future Buddha of this world, who is supposed to follow the historic Shakyamuni. He awaits his rebirth in the Tushita Heaven and is, according to Patricia Berger, "a millenarian figure whose coming signals the beginning of a new age" (1995: 62). After 1657 a Maitreya festival was annually performed at every monastery until the early 20th century: "Soon the significance of this rite, with its message of a new age, had caught on throughout Mongolia" (Berger 1995: 63). But the expected arrival of *Maidari* on Earth was not the only imagination of a future Golden Age:

> [The Gelugpa] also promoted other visions of utopia, most notably the kingdom of Shambhala, described in the *Kalachakra* (Wheel of Time) *Tantra*. […] The Kalachakra literature reveals that Shambhala will have thirty-two kings in all […], and that the reign of the thirty-second king will bring an apocalypse and the dawning of a new age of universal enlightenment. (Berger 1995: 63)

Lately, the imagined past appears to be far more in the focus than the mythical future is: more and more Mongolian scholars aim to extend the fame of the Mongol Empire backward into the time of the Hunnic Empire in the 4th century B.C.,

18 I am grateful here to K. Kollmar-Paulenz, who drew my attention to these circumstances and provided valuable comments on other aspects of this section.

with Attila being the precursor of Genghis Khan. This way of interpreting history is — with regard to its scope of reference — clearly a postsocialist phenomenon. Its advocates typically refer to the Russian neo-Eurasianist Lev Gumilev, whose works became popular in the perestroika era. The Mongolian philosopher Khavkh describes Gumilev's "Theory of Cosmic Energy" as follows:

> The Mongolian nation as yet has twice experienced such a boost of energy, both times reaching a maximum of strength and conquering half of the world. […] Thus, Chinggis Khan's 13th century Mongolia would be a repetition of the Hun Empire [sic] in the 4th century B.C. (2012: 50)

Nomadic empires keep inspiring an agglomeration of quasi-historical thinking. This leads us to the second question: At what point in time is a given period deemed to be a "Golden Age"? In his apt critique of Deleuze and Guattari's "nomadology," Uradyn Bulag challenges this "pro-empire theoretical movement in the West" by stating that: "Empires, once denounced and overthrown, have now struck back; they are re-imagined as a cosmopolitan space without borders, imbued with hospitality, welcoming and hosting strangers" (2012: 37).

Our contemporaries of today are not the first to see the Mongol Empire as a Golden Age; it has happened before, with the degree of similarity in underlying reasoning remaining to be ascertained. In contrast to the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), wherein Genghis was long a persona non grata, the Chinese neighbors decided at a certain point to conjure up, for political reasons, a favorable image of the Mongol Empire:

> In the early 1960s at the height of the ideological tensions with the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) openly defended Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire, celebrating them for sweeping away all the petty kingdoms lying between China and Europe, thereby spreading Chinese civilisation to Europe, including Russia. […] *Pax Mongolica* was appropriated as *pax Sinica*. (Bulag 2012)

Obviously, coming to terms with a challenging present was the driving force behind the creative and positive reinterpretation of a period of the past that, from the perspective of China's ideology of its day, would otherwise have been more liable to negative evaluation. Depicting the mighty Mongol Empire as just another manifestation of China's superior self, turning on the (Soviet) Russian enemy of the day, illustrates how political agendas may constitute quite bizarre shifts in historical representations. Sinicizing Genghis was, of course, not in accordance with the perspective of the Mongols themselves. But there has always been potential for Mongolization: the literary genre of the so-called *bensen üliger* ("booklet stories"), which appeared at the end of the 19th century in Inner Mongolia as a new form of rhapsodic poetry orally reproducing written Chinese knight novels, would find its own way of describing a Mongol Golden Age. Although, according to Merle Schatz (2012), their plot is mostly set during the years of the Tang Dynasty (608–907) or Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), in two cases the *bensen üliger* deal with the evolution of the Yuan Dynasty — featuring either its founder Khublai or his predecessor

Ögedei Khan respectively. The latter *üliger* refers to the Golden Lineage and describes the rise of the Yuan as being the end to disorder and the beginning of a delightful era of peace and prosperity (Schatz 2012: 1–2, 361ff.). In the more recent past, the fear of the powerful neighbors finds expression in tales that exist also exclusively in Inner Mongolia and always set out from the evocation of an initial Golden Age-like ideal condition: In the fables of "*altan unag,* golden pony" (sic; Bulag 2012: 49), lush abundant grasslands thus contain "treasures represented by golden ponies that peacefully graze the pasture but disappear when there is turmoil" — and sometimes they are "stolen by an alien, usually Chinese, and sometimes yellow-haired Russians" (Bulag 2012).

Today, yet another surprising frame of reference can, when it comes to the question of what qualifies as a Golden Age, be identified in the context of the contemporary Mongolian state: in 2005 and 2006, when I did field research on the mid-1950s to 1989 cultural campaigns undertaken in the Mongolian People's Republic, many of my interviewees from the older generation mentioned an era that they called the "Golden Age of Socialism" (*sotsialismyn altan üye*). When I asked exactly which period they meant by this Golden Age, and for what reasons they identified it as such, they consistently referred to the 1960s and 1970s as a time of flourishing prosperity. When looking back, those two decades are widely remembered as an era that positively affected the lives of ordinary people for socioeconomic progress was then at its peak in the MPR. However, this postsocialist perception — as expressed from a retrospective point of view — was not premised on any longing for return. In contrast to the Golden Ages of mythical times, which naturally lack living witnesses, my respondents were instead assessing the historical development process as a lived experience.

In order to understand their way of comparing the promises of the present with those of the past, let us take a look at the underlying historical narrative of the MPR. During the socialist era, official historiography grounded Mongolia's path from "nomadic feudalism"[19] straight into Socialism on a narrative tailored to fit — the aforementioned one of so-called "bypassing capitalism" (*kapitalismyg algasch/algasaad*). This narrative is a perfect example of what Arjun Appadurai (1997) has called an "ideoscape," in other words an essential component of the way that the world is imagined. Yet, as usual, reality could not live up to ideology. However irreversible the historical process had been heralded to be, in the Mongolian case it would prove to be by no means unidirectional in the same manner as prescribed by Marxist-Leninist dogma. After Mongolia had finally landed in Capitalism, some elderly people jokingly told me that the prevailing economic and social crises just proved that nobody could get away with skipping a social stage predicted

19 The term "*kochevoi feodalizm*" was originally coined by the Russian mongolist Vladimirtsov (1934), who was not himself a Marxist dogmatist.

by Marx himself, and now Mongolians would have to make up for their irregular development path.

While the denial of large parts of Mongol history under socialist rule can best be characterized by what Christian Giordano and Dobrinka Kostova have aptly called "selective destruction" (2002: 78), the dominating postsocialist logic of historical interpretation found it "necessary and desirable to recreate the conditions of the pre-socialist era as if socialism had never existed — or as if it existed only outside the 'correct flow of history'" (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 78). In response to this logic, the "bypassing capitalism" narrative was not entirely abandoned in post-socialist Mongolia — in fact it was used to criticize the present condition by invoking a Golden Age vis-à-vis the recent past.

A few years later in 2011, by when I had almost forgotten about the "Golden Age of Socialism," the trope reemerged in a most unexpected context: when visiting a couple in Ulaanbaatar, both in their early fifties, they introduced me to their favorite TV program: *Altan Üyeiin Duunuud* ("Songs of the Golden Age"). It turned out to be a popular show broadcasting hit songs that featured singers and music bands of the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s. By those who were young prior to the perestroika era, these decades were not only remembered as periods of prosperity but also specifically as times when a special kind of easy listening music (*estrad*) was in full swing. This coincides with the decades during which the intended formation of a socialist national identity reached its peak, and in the domain of music "a centralized vision of Mongolian culture" (Pegg 2001: 250) was established by means of houses of culture, clubs, and mobile ensembles. Usually, the music of *estrad* is rather European in style while the themes of the songs remain close to those of Mongolian classics, being about such things as the mother, the homeland, the beloved horse, or — to a lesser degree — the beloved person. However, *estrad* did not have an easy entry into the mainstream: "In the mid-1960s, the Party considered pop music to be ideologically unsound" (Pegg 2001: 282). In 1967 the formation of only two bands — "*Soyol Erdene*" and "*Bayan Mongol*" — was allowed, with their musicians being paid by the state (Pegg 2001).

So, what kind of music is played during the 15-minute broadcast "Songs of the Golden Age"? Along with the aforementioned *estrad*, we find something that is known in Mongolia as *zokhiolchdyn duu* ("songs of writers/authors"), most of which feature a good-looking person fervently performing popular themes. While the video clips shown are vintage (mostly black-and-white pieces dug out from the archives), the enthusiastic host of the show appears in the style of a colorful, present-day moderator. By her, some performers are oddly announced either as *khödölmöriin baatar* ("hero of labor") or as *gav"yat jüjigchin* ("merited/distinguished performer"). To my astonishment, the audience in no way seems to take this as a parody. Instead, they obviously pay tribute to generations of singers, performers, and theatre and movie actors who were the first of their respective kind to be seen as

professionals in the modern sense of the term. In contemporary Mongolia, these celebrities are widely known as *altan üyeiinkhen* ("Those of the Golden Age"/"Golden Agers").[20]

In this context, "Golden Age" refers to a period when performing arts and the introduction of new music styles were at their peak. The trope is used as a synecdoche, its selective reference being directed at the joyous aspects of life in the socialist era. This usage of the trope is primarily appealing to the generations who were young in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. What evokes nostalgic memories in them is likely to be regarded as odd — if not disconcerting — by people who have not shared their experience. In a way, this can be seen as a discourse of its own, an alternative evaluation of the past that attempts to regain cultural space during a zeitgeist when the dominant historical discourse would certainly classify the era of socialism as a Dark Age and potentially denigrate its more cheerful facets.

This particular use of "Golden Age" could well be interpreted as a language-game, one which illuminates the rules of a certain practice of retrospection that is inaccessible for those who would frame this view as one of "otherness." The case emphasizes Lyotard's (1988) assumption that a language-game does not need any universal basis to be legitimate as long as it is itself consistent. The example shows that the trope "Golden Age" is from the Mongolian perspective not confined to being used to represent national identity but can just as well serve as an identifying code for the experiences of different generations. In Mongolia, the 1960–1980 period of economic upswing came along with a creative energy in the performing arts that, according to my respondents, very much resonated with other social spheres as well.

In a recently issued interview[21] featuring the famous *ardyn jüjigchin* ("actor of the people") A. Ochirbat,[22] the journalist B. Delgerkhishig asserts that even younger Mongolians would be downright worshipping "The Golden Agers of cine-film and screen" (*kino delgtsiin altan üyeiikhen*) as people who are today on the "Red List" (*ulaan nomond orson khümüüs,* referring to the Red List of Endangered Species).[23] In response, A. Ochirbat states that nowadays it has indeed become fairly difficult for the younger generations to find access to the brilliant oeuvre of these Golden Agers. Finally, the aging author (who these days mainly appears in advertising commercials) comes to the conclusion that every epoch has something golden to offer (*üye bolgon alttai baidag*), it just needs to be detected. The question of how this resonates with today's representations of the zeitgeist shall be explored in the concluding section.

20 Cf.: http://www.drama.mn/content.php?pagename=vvsel_hugjil (accessed: 2013-03-16).

21 Online version of the newspaper interview available at: http://www.sonin.mn/news/culture/12895 (accessed: 2013-03-05).

22 A. Ochirbat played a prominent role in *Tungalag Tamir* ("The Crystal Clear Tamir River," 1973), one of the most famous movies released during the era my respondents had termed the "Golden Age of Socialism."

23 In Mongolian, it literally reads "The Red Book."

Gilded metaphysical optimism

Today, Mongolia's expected economic boom seems to offer manifold golden opportunities indeed.[24] In the early years of this millennium, Mongolia has typically been represented — by foreigners as well as by Mongolians themselves — as a postsocialist "model democracy," particularly as contrasted to the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. While some accounts written by foreigners tend to praise the 1990s as already a gilded age of liberation, Mongolian citizens themselves would — even in retrospect — hardly describe the first years of postsocialism as an era of upswing. On the contrary, the early "age of the market" (*zakh zeeliin üye*) of the 1990s has widely been perceived as a dreadful time due to the collapse of the economy, an increasing loss of social coherence, and the downgrading of the country to Third World status.[25] It is only recently that Mongolia has entered a promising era of (prospective) wealth. This move into the focus of the global economy is due to the country's abundance in natural resources, among which the precious metal gold plays a key role. Whether or not the gold rush of the present will lead to a true "Golden Age" — and if so, for whom — is hotly debated.

Finally, one more question remains: Can a "Golden Age" be predicted beyond religious prophecies vis-à-vis the remote future? Theoreticians dealing with "cultures of remembrance"[26] are likely to discard this option and treat Golden Ages as enclosed symbolic worlds of meaning, which are restricted to images of the past. Predicting the future is always highly speculative, as illustrated above by the example of a communist utopia. As part of a grand narrative — whether mythical trope or secular promise — the imagination of a "Golden Age" (in this context, one yet to come) served as a compass to ideologically frame people's lives within the realities of Socialism as being part of an epochal change.

The question of whether or not the future can be imagined as a "Golden Age" suggests recalling the essential core elements evoked by that trope, which is nowadays most widely understood as a general idea: Golden Ages typically start with a dynamic and innovative departure that releases creative energy that then reaches out into diverse areas of society, crosses borders (of social spheres and/or states), and sparks off considerable changes. They strongly appeal to people with creative ideas and potential, whose far-reaching influence provides the vital spark for further innovations. Golden Ages and their guiding figures are vanguards by nature; however, the danger of decadence (inevitably to be followed by decline) is always looming.

In the realm of linear time conceptualizations the "Golden Age" trope usually solely refers to unprecedented historical situations. From a global perspective, Mongolia's

24 This is also applicable to the tourism sector, where the "Golden Hordes" (Turner and Ash 1975) of international tourists are increasingly choosing Mongolia as a destination to visit.

25 For examples from ethnographic fieldwork, cf. Sneath (2003).

26 In German: "Erinnerungskulturen." (Berek 2009, particularly: 39).

mining boom of today cannot, however, be described as historically unprecedented. The awareness of potential dangers is clearly reflected in the current lively debate on the pros and cons of building an economy on the basis of mining. The main concern currently expressed is the danger that the country could become a victim of the "Dutch Disease."[27] Inside Mongolia, the question of distributive justice and the problem of corruption is, especially among high-ranking politicians, the object of evermore heated debates. Does harking back to history in such matters lead the discussion any further forward? According to High and Schlesinger (2010), who have examined the current mining boom from a historical perspective, the politics of mining were closely connected to rulership even as early as the Qing period. An equally close connection to rulership, I would suggest, applies for certain prophecies as a means of legitimizing authority. However, the Mongolian "rulers" of today — or at least the country's democratically elected politicians — now have to navigate different challenges: increasing income inequalities, high rankings on international corruption indexes, and decreasing voter participation, which collectively raise the question of whether Mongolia's economic development might be in the process of becoming detached from its social development.

In light of these challenges, Mongolia's optimistic dreams of wealth and ceaseless prosperity — accentuated by latent popular hopes for a Golden Age to come — express a new-found self-confidence after the past disappointment of Mongolia's downgrading to Third World status in the early 1990s. No wonder that the redemptive expectations associated with the current gold rush appear as an attempt at self-renewal, being correspondingly backed up by images of historical greatness and power. Emphasizing the historical significance of the Empire and the "eternal spirit of Genghis Khan" (Weatherford 2004: 266) obviously gives voice to the deep and dear wish for a renaissance of the country's political importance in the near future. Even though grand universal narratives have lost their power of conviction in the postmodern era, Lyotard's plea for *petit récits* — which are supposed to be focused on local contexts — does not, at least in Mongolia-related contexts, appear to be appealing for the construction of a vision of future greatness and global significance.

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27 The "Dutch Disease" manifests itself in the decline of the goods-producing sectors due to an increasing exploitation of natural resources, which leads to a trade surplus. This is followed by an upgrading of the national currency and, consequently, by problems in the sale of export goods other than mineral resources.

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