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ARTICLE

Constructing Cultural Greater Mongolia: A Multivocal Nationalist Discourse in Online Space

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Abstract
This study explores the evolving discourse of Mongolian nationalism in online spaces, with specific attention to representations of Mongols beyond Mongolia's borders. While the historically dominant, exclusive Khalkha-centric nationalist discourses continue to occupy a strong presence in cyberspace, Mongolian nationalist discourse has witnessed a shift toward a more inclusive, yet largely depoliticized, cultural Greater Mongol narrative. This narrative reimagines cross-border Mongols as members of a shared ethnic community. The research explores how the Mongolian state and Mongolian nationalist elites curate this cultural Greater Mongol discourse to position the Mongolian state as the historical and cultural center of the Mongol world. It contributes to a better understanding of the complex and dialectical transformations of nationalist discourses in contemporary Mongolian nation-building.

Keywords: nationalism; transborder ethnicity; multivocality; representation

Multivocal nationalist discourse regarding transborder co-ethnics is continually reconfigured in response to changing socio-political premises within nation-states. Existing studies show that host societies' nationalist narratives about their transboundary co-ethnics often shift from initial enthusiasm to negative or mixed attitudes, largely as a result of the inadequate or unsuccessful integration of return migrants in recipient countries (Tsuda 2009; von Koppenfels 2009; Song 2009; Diener 2005). Unlike states with significant return migration, such as Germany, Korea, and Kazakhstan, Mongolia has not experienced substantial ethnic kin immigration, while its cross-border co-ethnic population exceeds that within its own borders[1]. As such, Mongolia's evolving and multivocal nationalist discourse toward transborder co-ethnics constitutes a distinctive and understudied case.

As an emerging mining-dominant economy, Mongolia has undergone rapid social transformation over the past two decades. Together with its growing status as the linguistic and cultural core of the wider Mongol world, these socioeconomic and cultural changes have reshaped Mongolia's attitudes towards transborder Mongols and, in turn, resulted in its reinterpretation of key cultural and historical symbols central to national identity. The growing prominence of a Greater Mongol cultural nationalist discourse concerning cross-border Mongols since the 2010s epitomizes the shifting contours of nationalist discourse in Mongolia. This narrative seeks to forge transboundary cultural alliances and reconstruct a shared co-ethnic identity among Mongols and Mongolic peoples across state borders. Distinct from the early twentieth-century political aspiration for

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pan-Mongol unification, the largely depoliticized cultural nationalism envisions an imagined transborder ethnic community under the ethnonym, known primarily as Mongol *tuurgatan* (literally "Mongol walled-tent dwellers").

Indeed, today's Greater Mongol cultural nationalism has its precedent. Examining Mongolia's nation-building project in the early 1990s, following the collapse of socialism, Uradyn Bulag (1998), conceptualized the Greater Mongol cultural sentiment as a depoliticized cultural formation. Following Bulag (1998) this study understands the cultural Greater Mongol discourse as shaped by sentiments that are "economically and culturally oriented, legitimizing all kinds of interactions, with perhaps a primordial appeal" among Mongol communities across nation-state borders (Bulag 1998, 62).

Building on this framework, we examine how the contours of this cultural Greater Mongol discourse have evolved and how its relationships with exclusionary Khalkha-centric narratives have been renegotiated in contemporary Mongolia. It further analyses how, since the post-2010s, the Greater Mongol cultural national sentiments have been celebrated, coopted, and legitimized by the state; and how the Mongolian elites who embrace cultural Greater Mongol aspiration reengineer and curate the depoliticized Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse to construct the Mongolian state as the historical and cultural center of the transborder Mongols in the tale of historical progressiveness. The study ultimately argues that the state-endorsed and ostensibly depoliticized Greater Mongol cultural nationalism is, in fact, deeply political, insofar as it extends Mongolia's soft power, while shielding the country in engagement with politically sensitive issues regarding its co-ethnic kins.

To this end, we first provide a historical overview of the transformation of Greater Mongol nationalism and the evolution of Khalkha centrism, which is Mongolia's territorialized nation-building project, followed by a brief introduction to the research methodology. We then present our analysis of the multivocal online discourse surrounding cultural Greater Mongolism — specifically Mongol *tuurgatan* narrative — in the last two decades, before concluding with a discussion of the study's broader implications. Online media discourses on Mongol transborder cultural cooperation provide a crucial lens for understanding how the ideal of cultural Greater Mongolism (Mongol *tuurgatan*) is framed, curated, sanitized, and disseminated in contemporary Mongolia.

Early twentieth-century Mongolian state-building and the failure of political Greater Mongolism

To situate Mongolia's Greater Mongol cultural nationalist discourse within the broader Mongol world, it is necessary to revisit the historical trajectory of pan-Mongol nationalism and the subsequent process of Mongolian nation-building. As a legacy of unfulfilled political aspiration for pan-Mongolian unification, the Greater Mongol cultural sentiment has been retained among Mongols as a means of negotiating the realities of separation imposed by state borders.

As the land of Mongolia is landlocked between Russia and China, the Mongols' ambition to be united within a Greater Mongol state was repeatedly thwarted by the geopolitical ambitions, power dynamics, and pursuit of regional primacy of its two giant neighbors (Liu 2006). Following the collapse of the Manchu Qing Empire (1636–1912), the Bogd Khaan government (1911–1919), a newly established theocratic regime, proclaimed Mongolian independence in late 1911 and strove to build a Greater Mongol state encompassing Mongol-inhabited territories formerly under Qing rule (Ookhnoi 2013). From the 1910s onward, a segment of Inner Mongol and Buryat nationalist elites also initiated political movements championing varying objectives, including autonomy, independence, and Greater Mongol unification (Liu 2006; Atwood 2002; Jagchid 1999; Narsu 2020; Linkhoeva 2021).

However, the 1915 Treaty of Kyakhta, a tripartite agreement among Russia, Mongolia, and China, effectively aborted Mongolia's declared independence. Under the terms of the treaty,

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Mongolia proper is partitioned into Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia. Outer Mongolia is reduced to a mere autonomous entity under the suzerainty of the Republic of China, while Inner Mongolia is absorbed into China with only limited guarantees of political autonomy (Cheng, Bulag, and Selden 2023, 320). The Mongolian Revolution of 1921 subsequently established de facto sovereignty, aided by the Soviet Red Army. Mongolian independence was further solidified with the proclamation of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) in 1924 and its eventual recognition as a de jure independent state in 1946.

Nevertheless, until 1990, the MPR was subsumed as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, deprived of full political autonomy, even as the Soviet Union protected Mongolia's formal independence against potential Chinese aggression (Myadar and Rae 2014). As Myadar (2017a) claims, the Soviet policies in Mongolia were effectively colonial, subjecting the country to decades of political hegemony, economic extraction, societal restructuring, and cultural erasure. Meanwhile, under the Soviet shadow, Mongolia was transformed from a largely impoverished pastoral society to a high modernist country (Myadar 2017a). Following its democratic transition, the country adopted its current official name, Mongolia, in 1992.

The establishment of MPR on the territory of former Qing Outer Mongolia did not signal the disappearance of pan-Mongolist political ideals among Mongolian elites. As Sandagjav (2025, 2026) notes, during the 1920s, MPR intellectuals actively engaged in writing to advance an MPR-centered Greater Mongol nationalist narrative, including Mongols beyond the state's territorial boundaries. Political elites within the MPR also harbored hopes to integrate Inner Mongolia into the Mongolian state, particularly in the 1920s and 1940s, with the backing of the Soviet Union (Liu 2006). However, this political pan-Mongolism was eventually quashed following the Yalta Agreement and subsequent Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in 1945, which cemented Inner Mongolia's status as part of China (Atwood 1999). The failure of pan-Mongolism has exerted a lasting influence on contemporary Greater Mongol cultural discourse. In the aftermath of this historical retreat, a territorialized nation-building narrative — Khalkha centrism — moved to the center of nationalist discourse, a development to which the following section now turns.

Khalkha-centric nation-building and the exclusion of transborder co-ethnics

Landlocked in a fragile geopolitical position, Mongolia's exclusionist nationalist discourse, centered on the Khalkha majority, was largely shaped by the hardening of the border during the Sino-Soviet split from the 1960s to the 1980s (Bulag 1998). Following a brief episode of Sino-Mongolian socialist friendship (1949–1964), the Mongol cultural and linguistic interactions and cooperation across the Sino-Mongolian border gradually came to a halt (Wang 2021; Sorace and Zhu 2022). As Mongolia aligned itself firmly with the Soviet Union, Sino-Mongolian relations rapidly deteriorated (Gu 2019). These tensions, compounded by the stationing of Soviet troops in Mongolia in 1967, led to the near-complete suspension of cross-border interactions, which only began to recover in the 1980s and accelerated during the 1990s (Rossabi 2005). Across the Soviet-Mongolian border, connections between Mongolians and Buryats were also discouraged from the 1930s through the late 1980s (Namsaraeva 2012, 143). Under Russian imperial rule and successive Soviet ethnic policies, the Buryats and Kalmyks developed distinct ethnic identities separate from those of the Mongols (Chakars 2014; Terbish 2023). Nevertheless, a Greater Mongol cultural inclination has persisted among the segments of the Buryat and Kalmyk populations (Namsaraeva 2012; Terbish 2023).

Amid a shifting geopolitical landscape shaped by the Sino-Soviet rift, Mongolia embarked on an exclusionist nation-building project that Bulag (1998) characterizes as the construction of a "Khalkha-centric nation." This process of Khalkha-centered ethnic hierarchization gradually took shape through state-led ethnic classification beginning in the 1930s. Initially, the creation of Mongolia's ethnic identity constituted a core component of the socialist nation-building process, in which newly defined collective identities of nation and ethnic groups were imposed to replace

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traditional notions of class and locality (Bulag 1998, 29). Within this framework, the Russian concepts *narodnost* (ethnic group/nationality) and *natsiya* (nation) were translated into Mongolian as *yastan* (ethnic group/nationality) and *ündesten* (nation), respectively (Bulag 1998, 31). Consequently, the Mongolian population is categorised into more than twenty *yastans*, mirroring the Soviet model of multiethnic nation-building. Among these, Khalkha, constituting 79 per cent in the 1989 census, occupied a dominant position (Sneath 2010, 253). From the 1970s onward, smaller *yastans* were encouraged to merge with the dominant Khalkha *yastan* to consolidate a socialist Mongol *ündesten* (nation). As a result, an ethnic hierarchy has emerged, in which Khalkha identity has come to be perceived as more genuine or authentic, at times even equated with the Mongol nation itself, thereby marginalizing other *yastans* (Bulag 1998, 31–37). Khalkha-centric nation-making, unfolding amid deep-seated Sino-Mongolian antagonism, also inflicted significant repercussions for transboundary Mongolian relations. As Bulag (1998) notes, from the period of the Sino-Soviet split onwards, the Inner Mongols, as subjects of the Chinese state, were increasingly represented in Mongolian state propaganda as assimilated hybrids whose cultural authenticity and political loyalties were regarded as suspect (Bulag 1998, 184–185).

The collapse of socialism in the 1990s created an ideological vacuum and heightened Mongolia's sense of vulnerability following the loss of Soviet patronage. In this context, Mongolia turned to an authentic and purist representation of ethnic and historical heritage to rebuild a post-Soviet national identity (Bulag 1998; Myadar and Rae 2014). Within this discursive regime, Greater Mongol sentiment espoused by transborder Mongols was often undermined by the humiliation of exclusive, chauvinistic Khalkha-centric nationalist narratives prevalent among Mongolian citizens, primarily the Khalkha majority. As Bulag's work (1998) demonstrates, in the early 1990s, Mongolian nation-building was largely structured around boundary-making practices revolving around questions of inclusion and exclusion, as well as notions of purity and hybridity. In this framework, Buryats were frequently regarded as fundamentally Russian, while Mongols in China were viewed as hybrid or "half-breeds" (Bulag 1998; Myadar and Rae 2014). Surely, such prejudice against Inner Mongols was further reinforced by the prevalence of Sinophobic sentiments in Mongolia (Billé 2014).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that during this period, dominant Khalkha-centric nationalism coexisted in a complex relationship with Greater Mongol cultural nationalist discourse. The fierce debates over purity or hybridity in the early post-socialist years of 1991 and 1992, as observed by Bulag (1998), revealed the entanglement and negotiation between exclusionary, purist Khalkha-centric narratives and the Greater Mongol cultural sentiment, which expresses solidarity with the so-called "non-pure" Mongol groups. In the 2000s, Khalkha-centric nation-building further territorialized the Mongolian national identity within the existing state borders by mobilizing symbols of "authentic" Mongolness, including language, race, land, Buddhism, and the legacy of Chinggis Khan (Myadar and Rae 2014). This territorialized construction of national identity excludes Mongols and Mongolic people residing in China and Russia (Myadar and Rae 2014).

Yet, as Myadar and Rae (2014) aptly state, such territorialization also generated bifurcation and contestation, as the transborder Mongols lay claim to the same symbolic resources. As Bulag (1998) further stresses, the symbolic repertoire of exclusive Khalkha-centrism substantially overlaps with Greater Mongol cultural identity, allowing these symbols to be mobilized by "all sides to argue for the greater inclusion in the limited space of Mongolness" (Bulag 1998, 63). These studies thus reveal the dialectical and intertwined relationship between Greater Mongol cultural sentiment and Khalkha-centric nationalism within the Mongolian border. They also imply that the relationship between these two competing streams of Mongolian nationalism undergoes transformations as their shared symbols (for example, Chinggis Khan and blood) are rearticulated and renegotiated at different historical junctures. Building on this insight, we examine Greater Mongol cultural nationalism in online spaces over the last two decades to elucidate the contemporary rearticulations of Mongolian nationalism.

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Digital ethnography

For this study, we adopt a digital ethnography approach to explore discursive practices across online platforms in Mongolia. The methodology of digital ethnography encompasses various analytical frames, historical sensitivity, and attention to local meanings and lived experiences associated with digital media use (Coleman 2010). The first author has conducted long-term observation of online platforms in Mongolia since 2015. In addition, as Inner Mongols with a sustained interest in Mongolia's representation of, and policy towards, transborder Mongols such as ourselves, we bring an informed and reflexive positionality to the analysis.

Drawing on this extended engagement, we identified, downloaded, and coded policy documents and online media items that represent Mongols beyond Mongolia's border, spanning the period from 2007 to 2025. The dataset includes news reports, interview articles, and documentary materials published on Mongolian websites, as well as television programs and user-generated content, such as posts and comments, circulated on social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube.

The dataset shows that Mongol *tuurgatan*-related activities, as well as a wide range of cultural, sporting, and academic collaborations and events, have primarily been organized by non-state professional associations operating in relevant fields, often in partnership with local state institutions, private companies, and individual actors. Identifying the precise funding sources for these Mongol *tuurgatan* initiatives and collaborations is challenging, owing to the prevalence of informal fundraising practices and the limited budgetary transparency of both state and non-state partner institutions. Nevertheless, the data reveal a visible state presence and influence across many of these Mongol *tuurgatan* events and collaborative efforts. The findings further indicate that the principal advocates, organizers, and participants in Mongol *tuurgatan*-related activities are predominantly drawn from the cultural, sporting, and academic sectors. In the analysis, we specifically select media content and mediatized public figures that are well-known or influential within the Greater Mongol cultural sphere, as they are prominently represented in our collected data. Simultaneously, our data demonstrate that, beyond the elite-led advancement of cultural Greater Mongolism, there is a notable degree of grassroots engagement with this multivocal nationalist expression on social media platforms (see also Munkherdene forthcoming). Before moving on to the substantive analysis, the following section briefly dwells on several lexical considerations.

The etymology of Mongol *tuurgatan* (literally "Mongol walled-tent dwellers") appears to derive from the widely known indigenous Mongolian term *iskhei tuurgatan* ("felt-walled tent dwellers"), which connotes the people of the grassland or nomadic pastoralists. The appearance *of iskhei tuurgatan* can be traced to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the famous thirteenth-century Mongolian chronicle. By the early twentieth century, Mongol *tuurgatan* had come to denote Mongol identity alongside a range of other indigenous designations (see Lhamsuren 2006). As Lhamsuren (2006) argues, the term Mongol *tuurgatan*, together with Mongol *ugsaatan* (ethnic group), functions as an inclusive concept encompassing all ethnic Mongols within and beyond Mongolia's borders. By contrast, Mongol *ündesten* refers exclusively to citizens of the Mongolian state (Lhamsuren 2006, 56).

The preference for the term Mongol *tuurgatan* appears to reflect Mongolia's effort to depoliticize transborder ethnic cooperation among Mongols and Mongolic peoples within the broader Mongolian cultural sphere. Compared with *ündesten* (nation or nationality) and *ugsaatan* (ethnic group), both of which are bounded by nation-state frameworks and closely tied to national identities, Mongol *tuurgatan* functions as a more flexible and expansive category. It also serves as an inclusive designation capable of accommodating the diverse ethnic identities, linguistic traditions, and cultural heritages of Mongolic communities, including Buryats, Kalmyks, and Turkic Tuvans in Russia. Nevertheless, while bearing in mind the inclusion of other Mongolic peoples under the rubric of Mongol *tuurgatan*, our analysis focuses primarily on Inner Mongols. This emphasis reflects the empirical reality that Mongolian media discourses on cross-border

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Mongols and Mongol *tuurgatan* center on Mongols in China, the largest group of transboundary Mongols, while also engaging noticeably with other Mongolic populations.

Discourse of cultural Greater Mongolism

Since the 2010s, the popularization of the term Mongol *tuurgatan* by Mongolian nationalist elites imbued with Greater Mongol cultural sentiments has signified the resurgence of nationalist discourses that foreground the cultural unity of Mongols across state borders. Mongolia's post-socialist decolonial nation-building efforts, accompanied by the country's increasingly secured status as the cultural nucleus of the Greater Mongol sphere, have facilitated the revitalization of the inclusive, cultural Greater Mongol discourse.

The post-socialist decolonization effort has reanimated the historical narrative that valorizes the antiquity and glory of the Mongol state (Kaplonski 2004). In this process, nationalist historiography has progressively replaced the Marxist evolutionary framework developed under Soviet influence (Lan 2025, 279–82; Kaplonski 2004). In contrast to socialist-era historiography, which largely excluded transborder Mongols, post-socialist historical discourse reintegrates them into the national narrative (Ookhnoi 2013). The revival of Greater Mongol historical memory, further enabled by the economic boom experienced in Mongolia since 2011, has thus necessitated new ways of imagining Mongols who fall outside the boundaries of the modern nation-state (Sandagjav 2025, 146).

Culturally, Mongolia has also emerged as a center, and even a perceived "sanctuary," of Mongolness among Mongols in China and Russia, many of whom are often inundated by anxieties of cultural assimilation as minoritized ethnic groups within their respective states (Bulag 1998, 2003; Nowicka and Zhanaev 2017). A growing body of scholarship reveals that Mongolian pop culture, including literature, music, cinema, art, cuisine, and fashion, has become immensely popular in Inner Mongolia and Buryatia, especially since the 2000s, as transnational Mongol cultural and linguistic exchanges have bourgeoned (D'Evelyn 2014; Jankowiak and Shurentana 2016; Baioud 2021; Nowicka and Zhanaev 2017).

On the part of the Mongolian state, transboundary Mongol cultural exchanges and collaborations have likewise been acknowledged and actively coopted. Since the 2010s, policy documents concerning Mongol *tuurgatan* have been intermittently issued by the state (Parliament of Mongolia 2011, 2020). The state articulates objectives that include expanding partnerships with Mongol *tuurgatan* communities abroad and supporting the preservation and development of their language, culture, and traditions. In addition, a range of Mongol *tuurgatan*-themed events have been incorporated into state-sponsored cultural agendas, including the "Mongol *Tuurgatan* Festival," the "Altargana Festival," and the "International Mongol *Tuurgatan* Children's Festival." While the Mongolian state formally endorses Greater Mongol cultural sentiment and funds various cultural initiatives, mass media and digital platforms play a vital role in popularizing and circulating the cultural imaginaries of Greater Mongolism.

In the following, we illustrate how the Greater Mongol cultural discourse circulates within online spaces. We shall first demonstrate that the cultural Greater Mongolism in Mongolian media space centers on the reestablishment of transborder Mongol co-ethnic identity by foregrounding common genetic and cultural ties, often framed through the myths of Chinggis Khaan's lineage. We then examine how Mongolian media coopt and amplify romanticized and nostalgic voices of cross-border Mongols to construct Mongolia as a homeland and symbolic center of Mongols. Finally, we argue that the Mongol *tuurgatan* narrative's propagation of "the Mongolian state as the historical and cultural core of the Mongol world" is closely intertwined with developmentalist ideology and functions as a vehicle for extending Mongolia's soft power. Nevertheless, the depoliticized cultural Greater Mongol narrative, in the end, remains a deliberately curated political act. Let us unpack these arguments in the following sections.

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Common Chinggisid descendants

Within Greater Mongol cultural discourse, and in contrast to the exclusionary Khalkha centrism, the transborder Mongols are celebrated as brothers and sisters, sharing cultural and lineage ties tracing back to Chinggis Khaan. In fact, from the early twentieth century, Mongol ethno-nationalistic elites strove to construct a modern political community based on shared descent from Chinggis Khan, adapting aristocratic notions of polity as a template for national identity formation (Sneath 2010, 252). In the post-socialist period, the Mongolian state re-glorifies Chinggis Khan as a key figure in constructing the Mongolian national identity, marking a sharp departure from socialist-era critiques of his conquests and imperial expansion (Myadar 2017b). As Myadar (2017b, 841) underscores, in this sanitized version of remembering and forgetting, the Mongolian state is represented as "Chinggisid Mongolia" by the national elite, thereby legitimizing the state and its power. Park (2003, 150) similarly observes that Mongols in Mongolia, specifically Khalkhas, generally perceive themselves as belonging to a single fictive kinship rooted in Chinggisid lineage, an identity largely shaped by Mongolian nationalism. While Khalkha-centric nationalist discourse upholds Chinggis Khaan as a symbol of Mongolian statehood and independence (Myadar 2017b), Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse reimagines him as a shared ancestor of all Mongolic peoples, transcending the territorial boundaries of the contemporary Mongolian state.

Arguably, this competing Greater Mongol cultural narrative is advanced to embrace and validate the transborder Mongols' veneration of Chinggis Khaan. In China, where Mongols constitute a minoritized ethnic group,[2] Chinggis Khaan has been revered by Mongols not only as a central figure of ancestral and religious belief but also as a symbol of Mongol culture and ethnic identity (Bilik 2013; Khan 1995). Similarly, among Mongolic groups in Russia, including the Buryats, Chinggis Khaan has been reclaimed as a focal figure in post-Soviet ethnic revitalization. Some Buryat elites, in particular, have sought to assert their historical connection to Chinggis Khaan, claiming his lineage and ancestral ties to Buryat lands (Amogolonova and Skrynnikova 2006).

The reverence for and connections to Chinggis Khaan among these transborder Mongols are widely portrayed in Mongolian online media, reinforcing Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse. Such representation abounds, for instance, in one of the popular television programs, *Mongol Tulgatanii Zuun Erkhem* ("Hundred Eminent Figures of Mongols"). The interview program features the life stories of distinguished Mongols from diverse fields, fostering a sense of national pride among the Mongolian public. The program is hosted by esteemed cultural figures, such as the poet Bavuugiin Lkhagvasuren and the composer Natsagiin Jantsinnorov, both vocal advocates of transborder Mongol cultural unity and well-known among cross-border communities, particularly Inner Mongols. The show is also closely associated with Mongolian political elites. For instance, Khaltmaagiin Battulga, then a parliament member and later elected President of Mongolia (2017–2021), served as a host. In line with the program's ethos of cultural solidarity, six cross-border Mongols, including four from China, one Buryat, and one Kalmyk Mongol from Russia, were invited as guests. During his appearance on the show, for example, the Inner Mongol scholar Borjigin Gerelt explicitly invoked his Chinggisid lineage and articulated a deeply affective attachment to Chinggis Khaan's birthplace:

> [According to Mongol custom,] one should not take away the pebbles of Mongol *nutag* (land). Thus, in *Deluun boldag* (the commonly recognised birthplace of Chinggis Khaan), I picked up a leaf from the ground [instead of pebbles] and kept it in my wallet for ten years [as a memento]. In the end, the leaf is worn down to powder. I had carried a leaf from Chinggis Khaan's hometown for a decade (Hero Entertainment 2016a).

This media representation of an Inner Mongol voice simultaneously performs multiple discursive functions. On the one hand, it foregrounds the historically nostalgic and romanticized attachment of cross-border Mongols to Chinggis Khaan. On the other hand, by granting visibility and legitimacy to such expressions, mainstream Mongolian media actively acknowledge and circulate the idea of a shared Chinggisid ancestry that transcends contemporary state borders.

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Moreover, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse employs kinship metaphors to underscore a sense of transborder ethnic unity, grounded in an imagination of shared Chinggisid descent. In contrast to the rigid, consanguineous notion of purity promoted by Khalkha-centric nationalism, the Mongol *tuurgatan* narrative frames transborder Mongols as *akhan düüs* (brothers and sisters), bonded by shared Mongol blood (*tsus*). In modern Mongolian discourse, the term *tsus* has been semantically extended beyond biological kinship to denote racial and ethnic unity, a conceptual shift shaped in part by Russian kinship metaphors introduced during the socialist period (Park 2003, 144).

Simultaneously, the Mongol *tuurgatan* ideal reworks traditional Mongolian kinship symbols, bones (*yas)* and flesh (*makh*), to encompass Mongols beyond Mongolia's borders. In Mongolian cultural idioms, patrilineal descent is metaphorically associated with bones, whereas matrilineal descent is linked to flesh (Park 2003, 144). This extended kinship metaphor is frequently employed in Mongolian media, where Inner Mongols, Buryats, Kalmyks, and other transborder Mongols are poetically referred to as "pieces of precious flesh and noble bones" (*alag makhny tasarkhai*, *altan yasny khelterkhii*), a proverbial phrase traditionally used to address members of aristocratic lineages (UBS TV 2024).

Going beyond the celebration of a common genealogy, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse, at times, strategically reframes transborder Mongols as keepers of authentic and ancient Mongolness. This representational move stands in sharp contrast to Khalkha-centric nationalist discourses that denigrate Inner Mongols as hybridized or culturally diluted subjects. This inversion is clearly illustrated in an interview with the composer and prominent advocate of Greater Mongol cultural unity, Natsagiin Jantsannorov,[3] who explicitly juxtaposes Mongolia's cultural transformations with the imagined authenticity of Inner Mongols. Reflecting on the latter, he remarked:

> For now, Inner Mongols' mind (*oyun ukhaan*), psychology (*setgel züi*), and cultural conscience (*soyolyn medremj*) remain intact, like virgin soil (*ongonooroo baina*) [compared to the Mongols of Mongolia]. This is extremely valuable for our (Mongolia's) art, culture, and other aspects [of national heritage] (Önöröö 2012).

Along similar lines, the Mongol *tuurgatan* narrative portrays transborder Mongols as steadfast custodians of Mongol heritage, resisting cultural erosion despite the assimilatory ethnic policies of China and Russia (Bulag 2003; Baioud and Khuanuud 2022; Graber 2016). This sentiment is vividly captured in a Mongolian citizen's reaction to a television program showcasing Inner Mongols' efforts to preserve their identity: "Aren't they [Inner Mongols] awesome? They preserved their Mongol heritages within that giant thing (state) named China (*khitad gedeg tom yumny dund*)" (Mongol TV 2016). Through such portrayals, transborder Mongols are framed as cultural sanctuaries of authentic Mongolness, simultaneously admired and pitied as communities enduring threat and oppression, thereby foregrounding a shared cultural nationalist sentiment across state borders.

This rhetoric of Greater Mongol cultural solidarity is particularly evident in the ideal of *the Khamag Mongol* (Whole Mongols), a prominent example of a transborder cultural initiative launched in 2013 by Mongolian singers S. Javkhlan and G. Erdenechimeg. The project brought together artists from Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva under the banner of preserving Mongol heritage and fostering unity through music (Önörtokhtokh 2013). Its main organizer, S. Javkhlan, a well-known singer from the non-Khalkha dörvöd *yastan* in Uvs province, later served as a member of the Mongolian Parliament from 2016 to 2020. Expressing the cultural ideal underpinning *Khamag Mongol*, Javkhlan stated:

> The homeland (*nutag us*) of these people has belonged to Mongols since antiquity. It is the Mongols' beloved homeland. Let us keep our traditions alive wherever we live. Let us remain close to one another. In Chinggis Khaan's time, the whole of Mongolia (*khamag mongol*) was united in territory; today, we are united by the spirit (*oyun sanaa*), customs, music, and culture (Ganchimeg 2013).

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Beyond reconstructing a transborder co-ethnic community through shared bloodlines and cultural heritage as descendants of Chinggis Khaan, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse also coopts and amplifies the romanticized and nostalgic imaginaries of transborder Mongols, specifically their perception of Mongolia as the homeland (*nutag*) of all Mongols, a theme to which we now turn.

Mongolia as the homeland of all Mongols

The imagination of the Mongolian state as both an ancestral homeland and a cultural sanctuary is especially evident among Mongols in Inner Mongolia and Buryatia (Bulag 1998; Namsaraeva 2012). Within the Greater Mongol cultural discourse, this nostalgic attachment kept by cross-border Mongols is actively coopted to reinforce Mongolia's symbolic centrality in the wider Mongol world. This inclusive narrative stands in sharp contrast to Khalkha-centric nationalism, which has historically rejected and invalidated transborder Mongols' emotional and cultural attachments to Mongolia. Whereas Khalkha centrism has been marked by anxieties over being "contaminated" by supposedly hybrid and interstitial (*erliiz*) Mongols (Bulag 1998), the Greater Mongol cultural narrative reframes these very populations as legitimate co-ethnics who behold Mongolia as their homeland (*nutag*). A prominent example is the representation of Chi Bulag, a renowned Inner Mongol musician and reformer of the *morin khuur* (horsehead fiddle) (see D'Evelyn 2014). In a 2017 interview on the documentary-style television program *Mongol Tulgatanii Zuun Erkhem*, Chi Bulag stresses this sentiment as follows:

> Mongols around the world miss Khalkha Mongolia (Mongolia) as their *nutag* (homeland) and Ulaanbaatar as their *nutag* (hometown). There is only one Mongolia in the world. (Independent) Mongolia will become prosperous and developed if Mongols around the world love it as their *nutag* (homeland) (Hero Entertainment 2017).

The use of the word *nutag* is analytically significant in this context. In Mongolian, *nutag* carries layered meanings, referring not only to one's birthplace or country of origin but also a dwelling place and, more broadly, the pastureland associated with an individual or a community (Bulag 1998, 173–175; Bumochir 2019). As a spatially fluid concept, *nutag* operates across multiple scales, ranging from a localized homeland to an expansive national territory (Namsaraeva 2012, 142). In independent Mongolia, *nutag* has further evolved to symbolize the people and sovereignty of the state itself (Bumochir 2019, 163).

Importantly, *nutag* has also acquired a more abstract and delocalized meaning among some transborder Mongols, specifically Inner Mongols. As Bulag (1998, 175) stresses, while *nutag* historically referred to their immediate homeland within China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, it has also come to include independent Mongolia as a symbolic homeland, a shift often evinced in songs and verses (Bulag 1998, 175). This symbolic reorientation is grounded both in historical nostalgia for Chinggis Khaan's Great Mongol State (*Ikh Mongol Uls*) and in contemporary anxieties associated with minoritized existence within the nationalizing, Han-centric Chinese state (Bulag 1998, 2003; Baioud and Khuanuud 2022; Baioud 2025a, b). A comparable romanticized imagination of Mongolia as an alternative homeland has also been identified among certain Buryat communities in Russia, despite their distinct ethnic histories and identities vis-à-vis Khalkha Mongols and other Mongolic groups (Namsaraeva 2012, 159).

These transborder Mongols' sentiments, which treasure Mongolia as the spiritual homeland of all Mongols, are further saturated and valorized in Mongolian online media through the portrayal of Tenger, a renowned Inner Mongolian singer and Chinese state artist. Tenger is also a proponent of cultivating transboundary cultural bonds among Mongols (see Baranovitch 2009). His appearance on the Mongolian television program *Mongol Tulgatanii Zuun Erkhem* in 2016 offers a revealing illustration of how such sentiments are mediated and amplified. His emotional attachment was represented as follows:

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> I am a Mongol from Inner Mongolia and a Chinese citizen. We [Mongols] miss (independent) Mongolia very much. The farther one is from one's *nutag* (homeland), the more one longs for it. We Inner Mongols feel this deeply. [In our hearts], the *Ar Mongol* is like a "backing mountain" (*uul shig tüshigtai*) to us. Mongolia is like a "mother" (*eej*). Sometimes, we are at ease simply knowing that [independent] Mongolia exists. We are proud that there is a Mongolia in the north supporting us (Hero Entertainment 2016b).

The metaphors of Mongolia as a "backing mountain" (*uul shig tüshigtai*) and "mother" (*eej*) are deeply embedded in Mongolian cultural expressions, as these tropes are commonly found in traditional lyrics and poetry about familial attachment and bonds to the homeland. Nevertheless, the Mongolian media's representation of the Inner Mongol cultural figure, and others, as individuals who regard independent Mongolia as the symbolic homeland of all Mongols, risks obscuring the strategic and situational nature of transborder Mongols' identity practices. Transboundary Mongol intellectuals and cultural figures such as Tenger do not simply inhabit a singular, romanticized Greater Mongol identity. Instead, they actively navigate and negotiate multiple, nested identities within their respective nation-states (for example, China), while simultaneously engaging state institutions to secure political recognition, cultural resources, and institutional concessions (Baranovitch 2009; D'Evelyn 2014; Atwood 1994).

Kaufmann (2017), revising Gellner's (1983) conceptualization of national identity, argues that national identity is not only a vertical organizational phenomenon orchestrated, controlled, and coordinated by the national elite in the modern state. But it also operates horizontally, emerging through peer-to-peer flows and feedback rather than solely through top-down state direction (Kaufmann 2017, 12). In this formulation, "individuals in civil society, more than state elites, become the repository of national identity," giving rise to multivocalism in which multiple, sometimes competing national identities coexist and interact within the same nation (Kaufmann 2017, 21). In a similar way, emotions, discourses, and rituals flow horizontally across state borders among Mongols, contributing to the construction of the Greater Mongol cultural narrative. In Mongolian media spaces, the claim that "Mongolia is the center of all Mongols" is not only voiced by transborder Mongols. Mongolian elites who espouse a Greater Mongol cultural sentiment also actively reinforce this discourse, incorporating cross-border Mongols into the imagined community of Mongol *tuurgatan*.

The Mongol *tuurgatan* imaginaries represented in media spaces, however, are marked by an inherent tension. On the one hand, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse deliberately flattens the multifaceted and situational identities of transborder Mongols (for example, Tenger). On the other hand, by focusing almost exclusively on transborder Mongols' romanticized and nostalgic attachments to Mongolia, it culturalizes and deflects attention away from politically sensitive issues. The limits of these transborder imaginaries are explored further in the following section, as we examine the dynamic, dialectical relationship between Khalkha-centric nationalism and Greater Mongol cultural nationalism.

The boundaries of cultural Greater Mongolism

Today, many Mongolian citizens, predominantly Khalkha Mongols, perceive themselves as a "guardian nation" residing at the *gal golomt* (hearth) of the Great Mongol State, imagined as inherited from Chinggis Khaan's thirteenth-century empire (Bulag 1998, 71–77). This sense of custodianship is conveyed through expression *gal golomtoo sakhij baina* ("guarding the hearth"), a phrase widely employed by Mongolian elites and politicians to assert Mongolia's central status within the wider Mongol world.

Nonetheless, Mongolia's claim to political and symbolic centrality is not primordial but historically produced. It was constructed as late as the early twentieth century, following Mongolia's declaration of independence and the rise of nationalism that encompassed all Mongolian regions

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(Bulag 1998, 76–77). As Bulag (1998, 77) also notes, Mongolia's status as the only nation-state in which Mongols constitute both the titular and majority population has enabled it to be tacitly recognized by transborder Mongols with Greater Mongol sentiments as the *gal golomt* of the wider Mongol world.

However, the Mongolian state's claim to centrality within the Mongol world has long sat uneasily alongside the exclusionary impulses of Khalkha-centrism. Indeed, the same symbolism of the center (*töv*) and *gal golomt* (hearth) was appropriated by the Khalkha-centric socialist nation-building project from the 1960s onward (Bulag 1998). As Bulag (1998) argues, the Khalkha-centric invocation of *gal golomt* served a dual purpose. It conferred historical legitimacy upon Khalkha dominance within the Mongolian border, while simultaneously aligning with Soviet geopolitical imperatives by severing cultural and affective ties with transborder Mongols during the period of Sino-Soviet rivalry (Bulag 1998, 77). In this configuration, the Khalkha-centric nationalist narrative, despite utilizing the shared symbolism of *gal golomt* (hearth), reinforces exclusion along rigid nation-state boundaries rather than establishing an inclusive center-periphery relation with Mongols beyond Mongolia's borders. As Myadar and Rae (2014) stress, this territorialized and exclusionist nation-building project was, in essence, driven by the anxieties of a small state, seeking security and distance from the perceived and material threats posed by its two powerful neighbors, China and Russia.

However, this exclusionary logic has increasingly come into tension with post-socialist Mongolian elites' efforts to reimagine Mongolia as the cultural and historical nucleus of all Mongols. To manage this contradiction within the nationalist discursive regime, an inclusive Mongol *tuurgatan* (cultural Greater Mongol) discourse has ascended to counterbalance, supplement, and partially reconcile the chauvinistic tendencies of the Khalkha centrism. This reconfiguration marks a departure from the dynamics observed by Bulag (1998) in the early 1990s, when Khalkha-centric nationalism often eclipsed the Greater Mongol cultural sentiment.

Reflecting on the fierce debates over national symbols and emblems between 1991 and 1992, Bulag (1998, 260) has argued, "Mongols are now facing a choice between a purist, racialised nationalism, inherited from certain Soviet discourses of nationalism (Khalkha-centrism), and a more open, adaptive nationalism accepting diversity, hybridity, and multiculturalism." Rather than resolving this tension, contemporary Mongolian nationalism continues to be constituted by the dynamic coexistence and shifting configurations of these two competing nationalist currents, whose relative prominence varies across historical and political contexts.

Today, a Greater Mongol cultural nationalist discourse, that is relatively tolerant of diversity and hybridity, is not only permitted but at times actively celebrated in Mongolia's public spaces, as our analyses have shown. This openness is inextricably tied to Mongolia's growing confidence in its role as a cultural center of the wider Mongolic world, as well as to its continued adherence to developmentalist ideology. As Munkherdene (2018) notes, an evolutionary and teleological developmentalist narrative, rooted in the socialist period, remains one of the dominant frameworks through which contemporary Mongolia imagines national progress and state legitimacy.

This developmental aspiration is clearly reflected in the elite articulation of the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse. In response to a media prompt asking what Mongolia should do as "the center of all Mongols," Nationalist commentators and public figures' comments are exemplified as follows. "Mongolia should be strengthened (*khüchirkhegjikh yostoi*) (Badamgarav 2016). … If Mongolia is strong and prosperous, ten million Mongols (*all* Mongols) would be proud of her, and she will attract the hearts of them (*mongol uls sain baij, ter arvan saya mongolyn bakharkhal baij, zürkh setgeliig tatana*)" (MNB 2016). In these formulations, the positioning of Mongolia as the *gal golomt* of all Mongols is inseparable from a teleological belief in linear development, in which economic growth and state capacity serve as the moral foundations of cultural leadership.

Nevertheless, the Greater Mongol cultural nationalism operates within inherent limits. Given the historical legacy of failed Greater Mongol political aspirations and Mongolia's fragile geopolitical position between two major powers, both the state and nationalist elites emphasize the

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depoliticized nature of cross-border cultural cooperation. After all, Pan-Mongolism has long been perceived as a politically precarious ideology, one that risks provoking suspicion from Mongolia's two powerful neighbors (Bulag 2020). However, the depoliticization effort, despite granting a relatively safe space for cultural cooperation across borders, simultaneously constrains the scope of Greater Mongolism by circumscribing what can be publicly acknowledged and represented.

Although officially framed as efforts to promote cultural interaction among cross-border Mongols, the rhetoric of isolated Mongolian politicians has, at times, extended beyond mere cultural and linguistic collaboration. For instance, on 28 December 2011, during a ceremonial speech convened at the Mongolian parliament marking the centenary of Mongolia's declared independence, then-President Tsakhia Elbegdorj publicly called on transborder Mongols to return and contribute to national development, encapsulated in the slogan "Let us become many" (*Oluulaa boltsgooy*) (Youtube 2011). However, as Bulag (2020) observes, such rhetorical appeals to greater Mongol unity are often populist in nature, primarily aimed at electoral mobilization rather than the implementation of concrete policies. Despite their symbolic and emotional significance, these or similar political statements have seldom been translated into substantive legislative measures (Bulag 2020).

This limitation is evident in institutional cultural practices. During our visit to the Chinggis Khaan National Museum, one of Mongolia's most prominent cultural venues and tourist attractions, we observed that Chinggisid lineages originating in Inner Mongolia received minimal representation, despite their historical presence within Mongolia itself. One notable absence is the Borjigin royal lineage of the Üzemchin left banner in Inner Mongolia. This group relocated to independent Mongolia, taking half of the banner population with them, in the fervor of post-Second World War pan-Mongol unification (Arvijih 2004). Ultimately, it is Mongolia's delicate geopolitical positioning, combined with the arbitrariness of national borders, that sets the discursive limits of Greater Mongol cultural nationalism. This helps explain why, despite the vigorous promotion of cultural Greater Mongol unity, Mongolia consistently shies away from politically sensitive issues involving transborder Mongols. In this sense, depoliticization is not a neutral strategy but an inherently political act.

Conclusion

The Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse is a carefully depoliticized, nation-state-centric expression of Greater Mongol cultural nationalist sentiments. As an inclusive cultural nationalist narrative, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse strategically reformulates the Greater Mongol ideals of Mongolian nationalism from the first half of the twentieth century, while simultaneously mitigating the exclusionary and xenophobic tendencies historically associated with Khalkha-centric nationalism. These two streams of Mongolian nationalism: territorialized and exclusionary Khalkha centrism, on the one hand, and border-transcending Greater Mongol cultural nationalism, on the other, exist in a dialectical relationship rather than in a simple opposition.

Although the two discourses draw upon overlapping symbolic repertoires, such as Chinggis Khaan, blood, culture, and tradition, their interpretations of these symbols diverge and are marshaled toward different political and ideological ends. As Myadar and Rae (2014, 574) point out, "as Mongolia's political landscape and social order change, these markers will continue to be renegotiated and rearticulated with the shifting power arrangements reflecting the priorities of the state and ideological pursuit of the nation of that particular moment." Our analysis demonstrates how these shared symbols are resignified within the discursive field of Mongol *tuurgatan*. Crucially, this resignification neither negates nor supplants Khalkha centrism. Instead, the two nationalist currents coexist and are continuously reconfigured in response to changing socio-political conditions and national interests.

The post-2010 period, marked by Mongolia's economic growth and post-socialist decolonial nation-building efforts, has provided favorable material and political conditions for the ascendance

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of the Mongol *tuurgatan* narrative. In this context, Mongolian nationalist elites who espouse Greater Mongol cultural sentiments have increasingly adopted this inclusive discourse to counterbalance, supplement, and partially reconcile the exclusionary logic of Khalkha centrism, which was intensified during the turbulent post-socialist transition of the 1990s.

This study has further shown that the discourse positioning Mongolia as the cultural and historical center of all Mongols is not produced solely through top-down state narratives. Instead, it is shaped through multivocal and horizontal processes within broader Mongol communities. As demonstrated in Mongolian media and online spaces, some cross-border Mongols actively contribute to the saturation of the perceived central status of Mongolia. These transboundary imaginaries resonate strongly with the aspirations of Mongolian nationalist elites, producing a mutually reinforcing discursive formation. At the same time, the Mongolian state selectively coopts, sanitizes, and curates Mongol *tuurgatan* discourses to foster a sense of transborder Mongol solidarity and to extend Mongolia's soft power beyond its territorial borders.

However, despite its transboundary cultural framing, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse eventually encounters the hard limits imposed by the nation-state system. Political-administrative identities continue to prevail over border-transcending cultural affiliations. As a small state occupying a precarious geopolitical environment, Mongolia's overt engagement with politically charged pan-Mongolism risks provoking suspicion and resistance from its two giant neighbors, China and Russia, both of which govern substantial Mongol minority populations. Nevertheless, despite these structural and geopolitical constraints, the Mongol *tuurgatan* discourse offers a sense of recognition, emotional belonging, and cultural connection for some transborder Mongols, who are segregated along state borders and compelled to constantly realign their political loyalties.

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Notes

1 While Mongolia's population is approximately 3.6 million, an estimated 6.3 million Mongols reside in China, alongside around 450,000 Buryats and 160,000 Kalmyks in the Russian Federation. In China, the Mongol population predominantly resides in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, whereas Buryats and Kalmyks mainly live in their respective republics, Buryatia and Kalmykia, within the Russian Federation. At the same time, despite the absence of separate statistics on ethnic Mongol and Mongolic immigrants in Mongolia, their number appears to be small, as immigrants from China and Russia together accounted for only 0.78 percent of Mongolia's population in 2025 (Immigration Agency of Mongolia 2025).

2 According to the 2020 census, the Mongol population of Inner Mongolia comprises approximately 4.2 million, accounting for around 17 percent of the total population of 24 million. The Han Chinese constitute the overwhelming majority, accounting for 79 percent.

3 As a renowned composer and former politician, Natsagiin Jantsannorov is a key initiator of transborder Mongol cultural cooperation beginning in the 1980s and later emerged as a prominent advocate of cultural Greater Mongolism. In post-socialist Mongolia, one of the earliest events explicitly framed around Mongol *tuurgatan* was the Long Song Competition of Mongol *Tuurgatan* (*Mongol tuurgatany urtyn duunii uraldaan*), organised in 1991 by Jantsinnorv under the sponsorship of the Mongolian president. In 2007, he founded the Mongol *Tuurgatany* Culture and Research Foundation (*Mongol tuurgatany soyol, erdem shinjilgeenii san*), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting cultural exchange across Greater Mongolian regions, and served as its first president.

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