

MONGOLIAN ART UNDER SOCIALISM: SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE¹

Abstract

This essay explores state/people relations in matters of identity-making in a socialist context. In the construction of identity at any level lie public and private influences and how history impinges on what I call 'identity fertility'. This essay takes as its study the selective appropriation of artworks (or details of them) on Mongolian postage stamps. With art a dominant part of the public culture of socialist states, it could be officially argued that the works functioned as a means of glorifying the achievements of the proletarian masses. I propose that in philately, the bureaucratic elite deliberately sought to reify or exoticise traditional nomadic life as a means to not only assert a robust identity outside one claiming to be 'socialist', but also to return that back to the people through symbolic appropriation. Visual means subsidised by the state for expressing forms of identity are neither simply driven by bureaucratic power, nor do they ideologically bypass individual agency in the process of identity-making. Public and private wisdoms associated with lived experiences and knowledges that are grounded in the pathology of a long history of nomadic pastoralism are both implicitly and explicitly associated with identity formation. The cultural politics underlying measures for establishing a fertile identity as Mongol cannot be critically thought about at a purely elitist, institutional level.

Key words: identity fertility, art, socialism, symbolic appropriation, cultural identity, cultural politics, Mongol *zurag*, nomadic pastoralism, public, private.

Glossary

<i>Airak</i>	fermented mare's milk
<i>Alkhan hee</i>	commonly used decorative meander pattern
<i>Bogd Gegeen</i>	'Supreme Holiness'
<i>Ger</i>	round, felt-covered, collapsible mobile home
<i>Golomt</i>	central 'paternal' hearth of the <i>ger</i> around which ritual and tradition is emphasised
<i>Ikh Khural</i>	'big meeting'—parliament
<i>Khadag</i>	ceremonial length of silk often seen draped on objects considered sacred, as well as presented to people held in esteem to this day
<i>Morin khuur</i>	horse-headed fiddle—a traditional Mongol musical instrument
<i>Tavaan khoshuu mal</i>	The descriptive way Mongols refer to their 'land of the five snouts', the domestic Mongol animals—horse, yak/cattle, camels, sheep, goats
<i>Soyombo</i>	Mongolian national symbol composed of abstract elements such as the sun, moon, triangles, bars and circular <i>arga bilig</i> , also known as the <i>yin-yang</i> composite motif of two fish
<i>Thangka</i>	an ancient (often said to originate in Tibet) complex form of painted or embroidered artwork on cloth, usually with Buddhist themes but sometimes including ethnic folk elements.
<i>Tsagaan idée</i>	very hard milk curds eaten in summer
<i>Uurga</i>	long pole with a noose at the end used by herders

Introduction

There are contradictions and ambiguities in state/people relations in matters of identity-making through visual art in the first socialist state formed after the Soviet Union (SU) — the Mongolian People's Republic (1924-1990; MPR; БНHAУ). In relevant literature on socialist art practice the relationships between political agendas, art and cultural identity are problematic (Bown 1991, 1992). Most studies describe the concept of socialist realism as a dominant part of the public culture of socialist states (Bonnell 1997; Brooks 1994; Lahusen & Dobrenko 1997; Ryan 2003). As an official ideological agenda the emphasis was on standardisation, conformity and mass glorification (Kagarlitsky 1988; Bonnell 1997). Art workers considered to be digressing from this public propaganda function of art were regarded as subversive capitalists or nationalists and often severely dealt with (King 1997; Morse 2001; Wallach 1991). This paper thus has two purposes. Firstly it examines how officially authorised symbolic appropriation of ideas about identity may expose the dialectical contradictions of art in service of the utopian 'common good' in the MPR. Secondly, I will propose that the bureaucratic elite deliberately sought to reify or exoticise traditional nomadic life as a means to not only assert an identity outside one claiming to be socialist, but to also return that back to the people through symbolic appropriation in philately. To demonstrate this I will examine the selective appropriation of one artwork and details of another on Mongolian postage stamps issued under a Marxist-Leninist banner.

The problem

Arising from this essay's purposes is the interesting problem of understanding if, how, why and in what ways the strengths and weaknesses of cultural values and beliefs attached to identity are defended in and through state-funded philatelic symbolism. In the context of the MPR it would not be unreasonable to think that Soviet advisors' guidance might have blurred the authorial identity of philatelic discourse.² In that stamps of the MPR were an early outcome of Soviet influences, it helps to briefly mention philatelic discourse in the SU. There, between 1921 and 1939, philately as a public discourse was constructed to reject elements of bourgeois capitalism and in particular, to project the merits of stamp collecting as an aid in studying history. That is, philately was 'a primary historical resource' (cited in Grant 1995, p. 491) in order to 'know better [their] friends and especially [their] enemies' (p. 492).³ Stamps were

officially nominated as promoting and mythologising the objectives and outcomes of socialist revolution in order to enhance an identity complementary to that of individual members of the socialist fraternity. As an 'aim-oriented activit[y]' this form of historical inquiry, 'the exchange and consumption of meanings within a given socio-cultural [and political] configuration' (White 1987, p. 209) differs radically from that which seeks to reflect on appropriated symbolisms and their complexities. Above and beyond meaning exchange and consumption at either global or local levels are their implicit and explicit contexts, the 'ifs' of symbolic appropriation and how these are affected and effected by cultural politics and goals for identity.

The international reach of philately through collectors has placed increasing socio-cultural and socio-political pressures on world as well as local images of identity stability (MacKay 2005; Nelson 2001). David Held and Henrietta Moore (2008, p. 5) suggest that 'cultures are involved both in sustaining strategies of action and in developing new ones'. Contestation in cultural transformation 'is true not just of elites ... but of workers, entrepreneurs, consumers and ordinary people of different ages and backgrounds across the world' (Held & Moore 2008, p. 7). In the case of Japan, for instance, Hugo Dobson (2002) found that big businesses, regional politicians, counter-elites and various bureaucratic institutions were at times influential in the decision-making process of stamp designs and the appropriation of cultural themes. In effect, this form of appropriated power (Ziff & Rao 1997) creates competing zones of socio-cultural as well as political differences (Deans 2005). East German philatelist, Horst Hille (cited in Myers 2000, p. 39), explained that 'on the one hand the critical appropriation and further development of the classical humanist legacies, and on the other the wealth of newly produced scientific, spiritual-cultural, artistic values' supported the amorphous nature of in-ness or out-ness (Ziff & Rao 1997) competing on the stamps of the two German states. But grounded in a long history of lived experiences of nomadic pastoralism, the possibilities of local Mongol rationale, part of which is continuity in cultural values and meanings, as well as the people's knowledges and beliefs at top-down as well as bottom-up levels, cannot be excluded from analysis.

The balance of power between the Mongol herder and the centre in fact remained (as it continues to do) with the herders and their animals. Despite a command economy

(where production is centrally controlled), change in traditional patterns of animal husbandry, moves away from barter/exchange practices and goals to sedentarise contemporary Mongols into purpose-built settlements (collective farms) and industrial towns, herders remained major holders of economic power (di Campi 1996, p. 93). Art, and stamps, are part and parcel of any community and postal imagery, as in other circulated state-subsidised symbolism (currency, for example: Creighton 2000; Notar 2002), is often associated with hierarchal powers and influences (Dobson 2005; Evans 1992; Frewer 2002; Myers 2000). Dobson (2005, p. 56), for instance, claims that ‘tracing the stamp design decision-making process in a totalitarian state is a relatively uncomplicated business because of the concentration of power and the obvious political messages emanating from the regime’. However, in my view this is problematic in the Mongolian socialist context.

Firstly, the statement accepts the concept of totalitarianism as one in which surveillance and force act as principle deterrents for any form of socio-cultural or social-political opposition. Secondly, it does not distinguish between totalitarian dictatorship and totalitarian regimes. Thirdly, because it is referring to philatelic art/design, the symbolic possibilities of social and/or cultural transformation are assumed invalid. I argue that it is important to recognise the paradoxes of both identity-making as well as identity-seeking at all levels of society — in any context. In critical terms, philatelic images cannot guarantee consistency in symbolic value or meaning production across audiences (Gelber 1992; Grant 1995; Reid 1984). Nor do they necessarily symbolise a conscious act of visual indoctrination. At all levels of society, more than one interpretation or understanding may be held (Deans 2005; Jeffery 2006). Analysing the philatelic appropriation of works by Mongol artists helps to explain the way day-to-day activities, as cultural symbols, are meaningful for the Mongolian people. The significance is that within the overall production of MPR stamps, the predominant theme of local artworks concerned their domestic animals.

I begin by defining my approach to matters of identity. I explore how, in a culture with a background of a centuries-old nomadic herding lifestyle, we find inherent tensions underlying historical realities and the appropriation of symbols representative of forms of the MPR’s supposed atheistic, sedentary, agricultural, industrial socialist identity. Then, in a brief background to art practice as it developed in the MPR, I

identify the complexities found within hierarchal relations and identity formation. Those complexities are again embedded within historic nomadic discourse and the Mongols' relationships with their animals and the natural environment. Based on face values, the analysis of the first philatelic examples show that for those at home, the assertion of a positive, visual statement concerned inextricable historical connections between the animals and the day-to-day lives of Mongol people. Additionally, the influences of the Mongol form of Tibetan Buddhism are manifest in contemporary Mongol art. I will suggest that for those abroad, the imagery in the second example may ambiguously provide evidence of one of the 'spiritual' aspects of inherited fertility of Mongol cultural identity. In both examples, the artistic expression of ideas reinforces a robust, historic identity through either recollection or day-to-day lived experiences.

The Identity Fertility (IF) Factor

In large part due to the mechanics of global processes, symbolic articulations of forms of identity in philately manifest as socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural phenomena (MacKay 1988, 2005; Altman 1991). However, to suggest that individuals are limited in autonomy or agency for comprehending meaningful relations with others is to deny the influences of the necessities of lived practices and the beliefs and values attached to them (Hutchinson 1999, p. 399). In the construction of identity under any circumstances and at any level lie public and private influences (Firth 1973; Sperber 1975) and how history impinges (Clifford 1988, 2001; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Thomas 1995) on what I call 'identity fertility'. I define identity fertility (IF) as 'that by which subjective and objective values and meanings synthesise to reinforce cultural symbiosis over time' (Reid 2009, p. 23). Identity fertility does not deny that cultural identity is continually in reproduction. Rather, as an analytical mechanism the IF Factor gives impetus to understanding entanglements or encounters that may contest both pre-existing ideas of self as well as their renewal or re-emphasis in another historical context. That is, consideration of all the 'ifs' — the hows, whys and ways the appropriation of contemporary Mongol art on stamps may have been influenced by the fluidity of history during identity-making processes — is necessary for understanding Mongol identity fertility.

Mongol animals and art

The use of animals in Mongol art has its origins in rock art, which came to be classified by archaeologists and known world-wide as Animal Style in the art of Central Asia (Bunker 1970, 2003; Watt 2003; Jacobson 1992, 1999). It has been conceived that the manifestation and development of Animal Style and artistic formulation of heroic epics of the Turkic peoples were analogous processes (Jettmar 1967, p. 231). Animals, figures and other totemic motifs visually represented everyday life — *ger*⁴ carts, nomadising, hunting and herding — as well as the natural and supernatural world (Bunker 2003, p. 8; Uranchimeg 2002, pp. 156-57). On material artefacts, similar motifs recorded the importance of animals and their involvement in the cultural events of communities in the region (Bunker 2003, pp. 15, 29). Along with material artefacts, stelae and petroglyphs, rock art was a means of the story-telling of vital features of nomad historical experience — what Lévi-Strauss (1963) might characterise as ‘being good to think with’. Artistically, an analogy may be drawn with Picasso’s adoption of cubism as a method of representing life — he painted as he ‘thought’. Like any material archaeological finds, stamps are dated artefacts offering visual records of social, cultural, economic and political history.

Berrocal and Garcia’s (2007) study within the field of anthropological archaeology warns that overgeneralising meaning-making outside historical contexts is inappropriate, inconclusive and misleading. In tracing the use of any symbols in (philatelic) art practice we are also dealing with dynamic, contextual and competitive socio-cultural as well as political environments. A connection may be drawn between the elite appropriating the five Mongol domestic animals (Fig.1a-b) as totems of Mongolness on stamps with Bunker’s (2003, p. 32) idea that artefacts served two main purposes for herders and hunters. Firstly, they were totems of the owners’ traditional heritage and secondly, they gave visual form to the supernatural world that guided their lives. In that Mongolian motifs have been described as based ‘not on common ethnicity, but on a charismatic style associated with pastoral nomadism and shared beliefs’ (Atwood 2004, p. 17), it is still important to acknowledge that dialogic relations between art, artist and viewer must vary across time under the influences of cultural politics.

At the same time there are inalienable forms of knowledge that do not require explanation. That is, it is not about thinking what symbols reappropriated across time might actually 'do' in a particular context but how they may be thought about and valued during processes of identity-making. Since the third millennium BCE:

the flourishing of an artistic style [left] an indelible impression in the arts of nomadic societies in Eurasia through all subsequent periods, and that was absorbed into the decorative vocabulary of works of art in agrarian societies whose domain bordered their lands. (Watt 2002, p. 3)

Mongolian art historian/critic, Uranchimeg (2002, p. 3), believes that 'the ancient people painted more than what they simply saw ... [it] can be regarded as [their] meditation ... about the world'. Thus it is necessary to directly juxtapose contemporary Mongol artists' perceptions of Mongol identity against bureaucratic powers of choice: the Mongols' relationship with their animals, knowledge of their cultural environment, how this heritage has been utilised in Mongol art practice against the appropriation of that art for use on stamps of the MPR.

Organisation of Depictive Art

Under the Organisation of Depictive Art founded in the 1940s, the official view of Mongol art practice was that the 'creative initiatives of painters, sculptors, and craftsmen [should be] of great assistance in having them master the methods of socialist realism in their works and in raising their skills and capacities' (Shirendev & Sanjdorj 1976, p. 667). Artists of the MPR were only recognised as such (and therefore fêted and funded) if they were members of the Union of Mongolian Artists (UMA) founded in 1942. In that the strengths in surveillance of art production in the MPR varied slightly across time according to political whim, the philatelic appropriation of artworks could be significant to cultural politics. This meets Kristi Evans's (1992, p. 750) deduction that 'the emphasis lies on the issuing agency that authorises the stamps as currency'. For this study, Evans's assertion (1992, p. 750) that philatelic artists' roles are insignificant is less agreeable, to the extent that authorities, in selecting the works of artists for reproduction on stamps of the MPR, still made politically expedient decisions. In his essay, 'The problem of oppressive cultures', Kok-Chor Tan (2008, p. 138) raises a valid point as to whether we can take 'all cultural claims at face value [and that we should] determine whether these are

truly culturally based claims or whether they are ideologically and politically “constructed” ones’. With these foci in mind, the use of two artworks is examined — including the themes under which they were catalogued — to question the limitations and extent of bureaucratic power and under whose jurisdiction this may have been deployed.

Animals and artistry

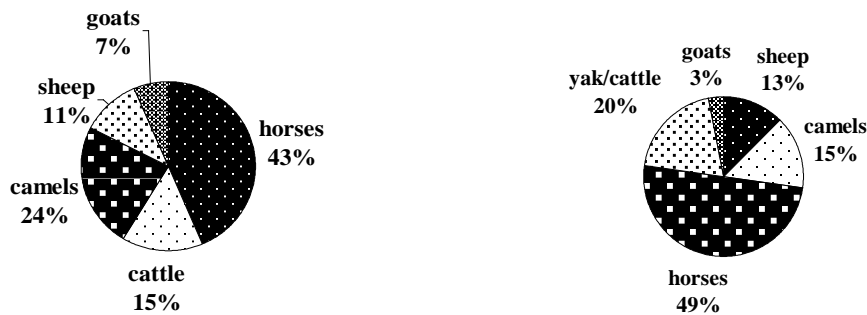


Fig.1a. Animals on stamps 1924-1990. Fig.1b. Animals on stamps with theme of art.

Figures 1a and 1b above are strikingly similar in revealing the culturally accepted hierarchy of the five domestic Mongol animals or ‘snouts’. In addition, from Table 1 below it can be seen that with the exceptions of Cuba and Czechoslovakia, the MPR was on a par with other socialist countries in the issue of stamps with the theme of art works, which likely arose in response to collectors’ fads or through promotion by the Universal Postal Union (UPU). Contemporary Mongolian artworks depicting animals and then philatelically appropriated were listed in the Stanley Gibbons 2007 stamp catalogue under themes such as ‘Mongolian paintings’ (1968, 1975), anniversaries of the Cooperative Movement (1969, 1989), works held in the National Gallery (1972), ‘International Children’s Day’ (1974) and ‘Agriculture paintings’ (1979). With few exceptions,⁵ one or more of the five animals were the dominant symbols. The ones to be analysed here were issued for the ‘International Decade for Women’ in 1981.

	Yugo	Rom	Pol	N Viet	N Kor	Hun	GDR	Czech	Cuba	Bulg	MPR	#
YEAR												
1955							6					6
1956							6					6
1959			5				5					10
1960								1				1
1962	6											6
1966		6			3	7		5	4			25
1967	5		8		3	7	12	5	14	6		50
1968	5	6	26	5		14	6	5	7		7	81
1969			8			7		5	14	9	8	51
1970	6	6	8			7		5	14			46
1971			8					5	21	18	4	56
1972	6		8		5			5	7		8	39
1973			5				6	6	7	6	5	35
1974	4				9		9	5	11			38
1975	6				25			5	5		7	48
1976	6		10		14		6	4	11	10	6	67
1977							6	5	12			23
1978					3			5	5	12	3	28
1979						7			6	4	7	24
1980								6	6			12
1981								5	6		7	18
1982		4					6	5	6			21
1983	5	4						5				14
1984		6						5				11
1985		4						5				9
1986		6						5	6			17
1987				6				5		6		17
1988								3				3
1989								3	5	4	7	19
1990		6						4	20			30
Total	49	46	86	11	62	49	59	117	187	75	69	890

Table 1. Stamps issued in socialist countries with ‘art’ as the theme.⁶

Legend:

Yugo	Yugoslavia	Hun	Hungary
Rom	Romania	GDR	German Democratic Republic—East Germany
Pol	Poland	Czech	Czechoslovakia
N Viet	North Vietnam	Bulg	Bulgaria
N Kor	North Korea	MPR	Mongolian People’s Republic

Five stamps of this set of seven constitute important examples of Mongol *zurag* (literally Mongol ‘painting’) which occupies a special place in contemporary Mongolian art practice. The special interest lies in that Mongol *zurag* was first advanced by Buddhist iconographer Balduugiin Sharav (1869-1939). Sharav became known for his extraordinary ability to adapt his skills in many other ways under the expectations of socialist art production, including the first portrait of Lenin by an

artist from the Asian region. As a genre, the style and method of Mongol *zurag* is now identified as distinctively related to the Mongol people's identity (Tsultem 1986; Uranchimeg 2000, 2002; Inada, Tanaka, Ushioshoji & Yamaki 2003; Chabros 1991; Berger, Bartholomew & Bosson 1995). In Mongol *zurag*, natural mineral pigments (including those made from precious stones) are worked onto a fabric medium, a method used earlier for painted Buddhist *thangkas* so that they may be rolled and easily transported without damage. Apart from at times not fully covering the surface with paint, one of the most prominent characteristics of traditional Mongol *zurag* is the lack of shadow and perspective. With a raised line of horizon, often the entire surface is filled with vignettes, delineated by the suggestion of mountains or hills (sometimes with the addition of clouds) as well as the daily activities across the full spectrum of nomadic Mongol life. As a style, post-1990, Mongol *zurag* has become highly symbolic of Mongol art tradition as well as a specialised genre.

Returning to the set of stamps, the two lowest values (and therefore for common use), subtitled 'Mongolian women in everyday life', are details from Tserendashin Davaakhuu's (1944-2001) *Our collective farm*, painted in 1979.⁷ Because it is a collective farm in lush surroundings, the emphasis of sheep over cattle and yak numbers, and the lack of camels, is understandable. The highest percentage remains with horses. Men bring foals to their mothers to begin the milking process by women. 'White food' (*tsagaan idee*) is drying on the tops of *ger* decorated with the iconic Mongol *alkhan hee* meander pattern — its meaning, long life and prosperity. According with tradition, sheep and goats are herded by children and yak and cattle graze and rest together. Sheep are clipped and felt made by hand. Horses are chased and lassoed with the *uurga*, the long pole with a noose at the end. The men smoke a pipe and wear snuff pouches. Even if not taken, the exchange of snuff is still a traditional greeting between Mongol men. And open *ger* doors provide a clear view of the central *golomt* or hearth. On the one hand, as an artwork it could be ideologically justified as an 'ethnographic' representation. On the other hand, it emphasises the historic realities of nomadic life.

Even the ritual event of *Naadam*, the historically famous competitive Mongolian 'three manly games' of wrestling, horseracing and archery, is depicted. *Airak* is being consumed at a family gathering where the bard playing the *morin khuur* extols good

fortune at a child's first haircutting ceremony — the child has the little tuft of hair symbolically left for those who could not attend the ritual. Socio-economic developments include motorbikes, a pale blue *Zabog Ikhcnu Lenina* (Zil130) soviet truck and a Land-rover, power pylons and buildings. Children are dressed in Western fashion. Yet with the horizon depicting a static built environment, one has the impression of it being at a distance, of something marginal to the daily lives of the Mongols. Despite the symbolic inclusion of progress in 'Our collective farm' the work overwhelmingly articulates tradition over development. The detail selected for the stamps (Fig. 3a-b) symbolically confirms the fertility of a very specific form of Mongol identity — mobility, self-sufficiency and survival as pastoralists.



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b

Fig. 3a-b are details appropriated from Tserendashin Davakhuu's *Our Collective Farm* (1979). Sizing arbitrary. Images courtesy Robert Schrijvers (2008). Also available at http://www.geocities.com/robert_erin/mongolstampissues.html.

The detail is appropriated from the mid-lower, right-hand portion of the original work, immediately below the hair-cutting ceremony. It has then simply been vertically divided into two. Given that the highest value of the set of stamps appropriates Sengetsohio's 'Pregnant woman' and because the stamps were issued to commemorate women's roles in society more generally, in the Mongol context even the hair-cutting ceremony may have been suitable. The family ritual has traditionally been to celebrate children reaching the age of three, in surviving life from birth in the harsh conditions that prevailed for the pastoralists. Instead, situated in front of the *ger*, the emphasis is on one of Mongol women's roles in daily nomadic or semi-nomadic

life, the milking of cattle and goats. Of interest is that a motor bike (top left, Fig.3a) and a Landrover (centre right, Fig.3b) are barely noticeable. Furthermore, along with the *ger* itself historically being symbolic of Mongol mobility (Stronach 1993), the *uurga* carried by the horseman (Fig.3b) is also a powerful symbol of Mongol herding life. To this extent it was removed (along with the five animals) from the MPR state arms in 1961 (by which time ‘socialism’ was officially thought to have been achieved) and replaced with just a rider (read ‘worker’). Ambiguities and contradictions are embedded in the depiction of a supposed sedentarised, collectivised society of the MPR in the late 1970s.

I suggest that the choice of the detail described above was thought about, at the bureaucratic level of cultural politics, in the processes of identity-making. At one level, philatelically regulating/manipulating the totemic use of the five domestic Mongol animals in the context of the artwork adds considerable tenor to claims of cultural, social and economic independence as much as identity fertility. At another level, the use of the artworks could be ideologically justified under the vague epithet ‘socialist in content, national in form’. That is, vernacular sentiments and loyalties could be utilised to support the soviet ideal of friendship and cooperation in the form of the SU’s dependence on the MPR for meat, animals and animal products. Whilst the symbolic appropriation of animals could be justified as representing the ‘common good’ of society in the MPR, it none-the-less was a strategic bureaucratic response to the potency of Mongolness.

Artistry and ambiguity

Before moving on to the next example and to further contextualise the connection between ambiguity and philatelic appropriation in the MPR, a brief mention of Buddhist art as it developed in Mongolia is necessary. Buddhism is thought to have been first officially adopted as a Turkic-Mongol court religion in the sixth to seventh centuries. During Chinggis Khaan’s expansion of the Empire in the thirteenth century the Tibetan form conflicted with Chinese Taoist infiltration. Following his grandson, Khubilai Khan’s Yuan dynasty in China (1206-1368), Buddhist patronage strengthened as well as coming under the further influences of Indo-Tibetan forms. Under the Qing dynasty (1636-1912) and at the instigation of the first incarnate leader, the Jibzundamba Khutugtu (*Bogd Gegeen*), Zanabazar, the Mongolian style of

Buddhist art reached its peak. As a style, it is now recognised as unique as well as having had considerable influence in the region (Tsultem 1989; Urgamal 1995). From this background it can be expected that during the development, various inherited symbolic elements of beliefs (and values) would have synthesised to suit local practices. One artwork appropriated for use on stamps demonstrates this.

In contrast to the form of Mongol *zurag* described above, Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem's (1923-2001) clear, brightly coloured *The call* (Fig.4a) is full of symbolism that can also be interpreted in so many ways. It was issued in 1975 as a souvenir sheet (and therefore not for common circulation) corresponding to the set catalogued as 'Mongolian paintings' mentioned above.⁸ The decorative style in which the horse is depicted is very similar to that found on *thangkas* and as one of the 'Eight symbols of good fortune', sometimes called the 'Eight treasures' (and depicted on Mongolian stamps after 1990). The white conch, glowing centrally to the work, is also in this group and emblematic of the voice of Buddha spreading in all directions, the symbol of a prosperous voyage. The conch is often featured attached with red ribbons possessing the efficacy of a charm. Here they are blue, perhaps to be recognised as *khadag*, often given to special people before long voyages. The fiery background, in traditional Buddhist colours, also incorporates the Chinese *ruyi* fungus-style clouds familiar to Tibetan, Chinese and Mongol art.



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

Fig. 4a is appropriated from N. Tsultem's, *The Call*, sometimes called *Appeal*.

Sizing arbitrary. Image courtesy Robert Schrijvers (2008). Also available at http://www.geocities.com/robert_erin/mongolstampissues.html.

Fig. 4b is N. Roerich's *Red Horseman* also known as *King of Shambhala*. Sizing arbitrary. Image courtesy Don Croner (2008). Also available at <http://www.shambhala.mn/Mongolia/roerich.html>. See also www.doncroner.com.

In my view, however, Tsultem's work shows the influences of Russian artist, Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), who had considerable impact on early artists of the MPR. At least two factors need to be considered. Firstly, with Tsultem having a monastic upbringing as a child, it seems reasonable to assume he would have had some familiarity with certain symbols. Secondly, Roerich made a long expedition through India and Inner Asia, producing a series of seven works called *Maitreya* between 1925 and 1926 (McCannon 2000). *Maitreya* is not only a Sanskrit word meaning 'loving kindness', but also generally accepted across the Buddhist pantheon as the Bodhisattva who will appear on earth in the future. Deeply interested in Asian spiritual beliefs and culture, on September 9, 1926 Roerich presented *The great horseman (Rigden djapo—Shambhala ruler; also titled King of Shambhala)* to the MPR government (Fig.4b). Now owned by the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Art in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, it is titled *Red horseman*. In the lower section of the work the *Ikh khural* is depicted meeting at the base of the sacred Bogd mountains skirting Ulaanbaatar to the south.

One of the curators at the museum told renowned Shambhalist, Don Croner, that the renaming of the work to *Red Horseman* was because 'the Shambhala mythologem was verboten during communist rule' in Mongolia (Don Croner 2008). Of the Shambhala myth, Croner explains that on a Shambhala *thangka* (which in his view is the best he has ever seen) also held at the museum, the warrior on a blue horse is understood in Mongolian tradition as:

General Hanuman, leader of the armies of the last king of Shambhala. According again to the Mongolian tradition General Hanuman will be the last incarnation of the Bogd Gegeens of Mongolia.... According to Tibetan tradition the warrior ... is the 25th King of Shambhala. (Don Croner 2008)

Because the last King of Shambhala is usually shown on a blue horse, Croner believes changing the horse's colour to red was a means for Roerich to ingratiate himself with the new regime as much as to honour the then newly renamed city of Ulaanbaatar, the name itself translated as Red Hero or Red Warrior. When contrasted with Tsultem's work, the equestrian metaphor becomes evident in the symbolic narrative of warrior/leader, conceptually linking with tensions between repression and freedom present in the country at the time.

The national *soyombo* symbol and vertical script featured on the flag of Tsultem's work, as well as the rider's uniform, symbolically suggest the People's Revolution,⁹ that this is one of the revolutionary leaders, perhaps even the most famous of them, General Damdinii Sükhbaatar (1893-1923). After his early death, Sükhbaatar was eulogised for leading successful campaigns for autonomy from the Manchu-Qing and the expulsion of the Chinese (1921) prior to Mongolia becoming a People's Republic in 1924. In so far as Tsultem's work may represent the unsettled period of the Revolution, it none the less exploits Buddhist iconographic symbols for a symbolic narrative concerning emancipation from some form of socio-politically and morally/spiritually based turbulence. Also sometimes referred to as *Appeal* and considering Tsultem's symbolic portrayal that symbolically conflates the themes above, it may equally have been a way to ambiguously expose the people's anxieties during and after the devastating 1930s purge of the monastic population at Stalin's insistence (Kaplonski 2002; Sandag & Kendall 2000; Levytsky 1974). Both in theme and artistic execution, *Appeal* and *Red Horseman* are similar. Within the metaphor, however, there exist fundamental characteristics deriving from the historicity of Mongol identity and its link to spiritual beliefs and values and — intended for world view. Thus by asking if, how, why and in what ways a fertile identity as Mongol is artistically reinterpreted reveals the complex dialogic relations between the fundamental categories of agency and society, between cultural politics and ontological assumptions that may influence identity-making under a socialist banner.

Speaking on behalf of the people

During nearly seven decades of development, underwritten by Marxist-Leninist doctrines, of subtle, covert philatelic reference to an identity outside these constraints, those in power communicated to both the domestic and international sphere on behalf

of the Mongol people a very different kind of identity. In a slightly different context in regard to the global transmission of people's rights to representation and the 'half-life of heritage' as a 'mine to embrace', Homi Bhabha (2008, p. 43) writes:

Cultural memory ... is only partially a mirror, cracked and encrusted, that sheds its light on the dark places of the present, waking a witness here, quickening a hidden fact there, bringing you face-to-face with that anxious and impossible temporality, the past-present.

Between 1924 and 1990 Mongol cultural heritage and the beliefs and values attached to day-to-day lived experience were, for better or for worse and publicly as well as privately, an embraceable symbolic 'mine'. Dan Sperber (1975) and Raymond Firth (1993) determined that private and public understandings of symbols and meaning-making may be limited only by the scale or degree to which one is given precedence over the other. For example, in the MPR, revolutionary themes, social developments and urban or industrial scenes were indeed the subject matter for artists. There are many marvellous artistic renditions, exceptionally loyal to socialist academic conventions, of explicit socialist-styled 'utopian' developments that could have been selected for use on stamps. But they weren't.

The idea of utopia has been viewed as 'an image of another universe, different from the universe one knows or knows of' (Bauman 2008, p. 317). In addition, 'it does not offer a meaning to life [but rather] helps to chase the question of life's meaning away from the mind of the living' (Bauman 2008, p. 317). In artistic terms, for WJT Mitchell (1986, p. 2) images are 'prison houses which lock away understanding of the world [in a] process of ideological mystification'. In the MPR context, running parallel to themes of development were the tensions between inalienable nomadic pastoral knowledge and interpretations of what constitutes progress by the people themselves. Thus the cultural politics underlying measures for establishing a fertile identity as Mongol cannot be critically thought about at a purely elitist, institutional level. At all levels of society, people have autonomy in deciding the extent of their attachment to certain symbols at certain times.

Conclusion

As an analytical tool, the IF Factor makes significant concessions for individuals' bottom up notions of identity, in that even at an elite level, subjective views of identity fertility may deflect and/or subvert official ideologies. When cultural symbols are artistically rendered, an understanding of them cannot simply be reduced to the belief that they are only representative of the ideological visions of those in power, as Denis Cosgrove (2006, 1984) and Stephen Daniels (1993) have argued in a European/Western context. In the elitist appropriation of works rendered by Mongol artists of the period, within a variety of philatelic themes the domestic animals dominated. At times, both the ambiguous title of the work itself and that under which it was catalogued may have conflicted with or conflated notions of the Mongol or socialist other. By questioning if, how, why and in what ways nomadic historical experience may have been thought about when selecting the works of artists on MPR stamps, I hope to have established that the selective process by the postal institution gave considerable value to tradition over development as it was rendered by artists of the period. In that visual association remained with the people's cultural, social and economic life, identity fertility as Mongol was asserted. On the one hand the bureaucratic elite could ideologically justify the choice of imagery as conforming to the expectations of socialist realism. On the other hand, the state spoke on behalf of the people to express, perhaps even reify, a robust nomadic Mongol heritage.

¹ This paper is adapted from my doctoral thesis, *Stamping identity: dialogic, symbolism and the other in Mongolian philately*, submitted to Curtin University of Technology, Perth, WA, Australia, November 2008. My thanks to Robert Schrijvers and Don Croner for their permission to use the images.

² See Grant 1995 for a thorough examination of the complex political problems in philatelic discourse in the early period of the Soviet Union.

³ Some collectors 'sought to demonstrate that philately, far from being a bourgeois hobby, was in fact a revolutionary one and argued that Marx and Engels not only condoned stamp collecting but actively encouraged it. Their proof consisted of quotations from two letters from Engels to Marx in which Engels referred to some stamps he had included for the benefit of Marx's daughter' (Grant 1995, p. 490).

⁴ See glossary for Mongolian terms used in this paper.

⁵ This in itself is important because of the selected works and themes. Generally, the world-wide issue of stamps with the theme of 'art' appears in the early 1960s, and as a worthy research topic for tracing the broader relationship between cultural politics, collectors' fancies and the administrative/promotional role of the UPU, is beyond the scope of this paper. It is nonetheless significant that in contrast to the overall production of stamps, those concerning local artworks on MPR philately primarily concerned the theme of animals. Themes such as wrestling or lake views and so on are therefore not part of this analysis but are included in the statistics of Figure 2.

⁶ Note the gaps between 1956-59; 1962-66, with the year 1961 also missing. There were no 'art' issues by these countries for those years.

⁷ For this see Inada, Tanaka, Ushiohoshi & Yamaki 2003, p. 117, Pl. 78.

⁸ The lower two values of the set of seven concerned animals and the upper four were catalogued as 'Woman adjusting headdress', 'Woman in ceremonial costume', 'Woman fetching water' and 'Woman playing Yaga (musical instrument)'.

⁹ Compare, for example Alexander Apsit's famous *To horse, proletariat!* lithographed poster of 1919. This can be found in S. White 1988, p. 31, Pl 2.18.

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