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## The Pastoral Home School: Rural, Vernacular, and Grassroots Literacies in Early Soviet Mongolia

In the second half of the twentieth century, official government reports of the socialist Mongolian People's Republic tightly restricted the scope and definition of literacy before and after the 1921 People's Revolution. On the one hand, pre-socialist literacy was reduced to a period of illiteracy, backwardness, darkness, and primitiveness (Bawden 1968, Luvsanbaldan and Shagdarsuren 1986, Natsagdorj 1981). This dark period of pre-revolutionary illiteracy was represented statistically: according to many official sources, only one percent of the population before 1921 was literate (e.g., *Cultural Policy* 1982, p. 17, Gataullina 1977, p. 505, UNESCO 1971, p. 3). On the other hand, in the socialist period, literacy was recontextualized as a hallmark criterion of the narrative of socialist progress. The only literacy events and opportunities that were publicly and officially sanctioned were those orchestrated by the socialist government, the Revolutionary Party, as well as international Soviet organizations such as the Union of Revolutionary Youth and the Young Pioneers. This form of state literacy was legitimated by the fact that it was both official and pragmatic. By 'official,' I am referring to reading and writing practices that were sponsored by large, central, and dominant institutions; by 'pragmatic,' I am referring to the belief that reading and writing activities need to lead to a desirable personal end or social good; for example, the functional literacy definitions popularized by UNESCO in the 1970s categorized individuals to the extent they could fulfill certain document-based responsibilities in a society, such as finding employment or filling out paperwork (Hamilton

2012, p. 31); these types of definitions often assume a causal relationship between literacy and social mobility and other such social benefits as democratic institutions (Street 1995, p. 29, pp. 43-44), a relationship that has been disputed by many historians (e.g., Graff 2011, p. 72).

In this article, I examine oral history data from the University of Cambridge Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia and argue for the possibility of Mongolian home schooling as an unofficial and non-pragmatic pastoral literacy that fell outside of the Buddhist Church and state secular educational opportunities during the first three to four decades of the Mongolian People's Republic. Mongolian pastoral home schooling endured into the second half of the twentieth century until most reading and writing activities became standardized and formalized by the mass, compulsory education system of the socialist Mongolian state. I recontextualize Rinchen's (1964) pre-revolutionary category of home schooling by importing the concepts of rural, vernacular, and grassroots literacy from literacy studies, which enable Central Asian and post-Soviet researchers to see beyond Soviet cultural models that promoted technologies of control and of forgetting, strategies for separating the pre-socialist, rural past from the socialist urbanizing present and idealized urban future. Instead, these rural, vernacular, and grassroots perspectives allow us to recognize literacies that were highly decentralized, local, isolated, unstable, ephemeral, and temporary and that, moreover, lacked an authoritarian center. In short, this concept of pastoral literacies may offer historians, anthropologists, and language researchers a perspective with which to represent more ethically and accurately the literacy practices of non-urban, non-sedentary, and non-elite groups in Mongolia and throughout Central Asia.

In the literacy history of the Mongolian People's Republic, counter-narratives to the official literacy representations of the Revolutionary Party were, paradoxically, widely available as memoirs, biographies, and primary-school textbook entries. Sambuu's (2010) memoir, for

example, juxtaposes his tedious secular writing and reading instruction during the pre-revolutionary Autonomous Period with the rich environmental and pastoral training he received from his father (p. 28). Damdinsuren (1990), emphasizing the nature of his grandfather's literacy being passed on to this father and then on to himself, frames a pre-revolutionary secular literacy practice in terms of a cultural tradition (pp. 5-8). D. Natsagdorj's biographer links the precocious national poet to his father's written and oral linguistic abilities (Sodnom 1966, pp. 36-37).

Similarly, the biographer of Sukhbaatar, the symbolic founder of the modern communist state, stresses the link of literacy from father to son. Sukhbaatar's father dramatically announces:

“Father and son have the same fate; we two are literate people” (Natsagdorj 1981, p. 107). A primary school reader in the 1980s, furthermore, includes a text that narrates the quasi-religious context surrounding Sukhbaatar's father's presentation of his son to his teacher, Jamyan, a Buddhist Church official. Sukhbaatar's father presents Jamyan with a ceremonial scarf and implores his son to study well (Luvsanjav 1984). Though these narratives about pre-socialist literacy were available to a wide Mongolian public, they do not need to be read as direct challenges to the official metanarrative that the Revolutionary Party was the one and only genuine literacy sponsor: audiences could easily balance the socialist formula reducing pre-socialist literacy to backwardness and oppression with the imperative that their revolutionary leaders and party intellectuals needed to be highly literate.

Although not a part of the simplified official representations of pre-revolutionary literacy, Rinchen's (1964) historical account emphasizes the languages, scripts, literacies, and educational models that existed in Mongolia during the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty. He references Kovalevsky's nineteenth-century taxonomy that traced the four sources of Mongolian literary culture to the indigenous Mongolian language, a religious culture coming from India and

translated through Tibetan, Chinese philosophical and political terms, and, finally, European influences (p. 29). Rinchen then describes three educational models that correspond to these linguistic and cultural sources. First, Buddhist schools, the most prolific of the literacy sponsors in pre-revolutionary Mongolia, focused exclusively on the reading of Tibetan religious texts (p. 29); second, state schools, in which Manchu and Chinese were studied, prepared students for scribal service positions within the Manchu colonial administration; and, third, Mongolian language schools, which for the most part manifested themselves as home schools. Rinchen's inclusion of home schooling—a secular educational possibility that falls beyond dominant religious and state authorities—is especially important for the purposes of this study. Rinchen acknowledges how home schooling included women, who were excluded from the other educational models (p. 31), and how it enabled young men to avoid serving in the Manchu administration.

After the 1990 democratic reforms, historians have rejected the reductive tendencies of official socialist Mongolian reports and have constructed literacy taxonomies based along an axis of secular (i.e., scribal and administrative) and religious institutions, though largely ignoring Rinchen's home school category. Recognizing the dominant role of Tibetan literacy sponsored by the Buddhist Church, scholars concede that, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, despite social reform ideology flowing from China and, afterwards, Russia, the secular learning opportunities in Mongolian were haphazard, ineffectual, and unfairly directed towards elites. Kaplonski's (2004) rhetorically-purposeful weak phrasing summarizes the scholarly consensus: in the pre-socialist period, 'functional literacy apparently remained rather uncommon' (p. 101). Although it is uncertain what Kaplonski means by 'functional,' he assumes that literacy is dependent on formal education institutions; according to this perspective, the lack of evidence

supporting the existence of robust educational institutions in pre-socialist Mongolia suggests that literacy practices were not socially and culturally significant. Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) underscore this dependence on formal education and official literacies in their five-part taxonomy of Mongolian educational history, which consists of Buddhism, Manchu colonization, Autonomous Period scribal literacy, socialism, and post-socialism (pp. 28-47). Their taxonomy fails to recognize literacies that fall outside of these formal, official categories. Though Kapišovská (2005), depending heavily upon Rinchen's literacy history, does not develop the significance of her point, she recognizes the possibility of an informal, secular, and self-motivated group of 'passively literates,' who were interested in reading folk literature and may have hidden their literate repertoires from higher authorities hoping to recruit more scribes (p. 58).

*Rural, Grassroots, and Vernacular Literacies*

In literacy studies, the focus on literacy practices, in which experiences with written texts are situated in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts, has stimulated ethnographic studies and additional theorizing about the ways in which everyday, non-elite experiences are marginalized, ignored, discredited, or unfairly represented. By juxtaposing these non-elite practices with dominant and privileged literacies, researchers have been able to reveal the unequal social structure and distribution of cultural power that produces certain identities and representations and legitimates particular assumptions and activities. For the purposes of analyzing historical literacy practices in Mongolia and Central Asia, a rural literacy perspective is the most productive of these different critical approaches. Theorizing rural literacy reveals the urban bias and cultural chauvinism that determined the ways in which Soviet policymakers talked about reading and writing in Central Asia and the immense Russian rural periphery. In

contemporary academic conversations, which have regrettably focused mainly on literacy practices in the United States and other developed nations, rural literacy practitioners are concerned about an unethical and unsustainable urban/rural binary that divides educational policy into two categories, privileged urban zones and marginalized rural spaces. According to Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007), the metaphors and images that researchers use to depict literacy practices are already infused with an urban bias: metaphors of the city associate reading and writing with culturally vibrant and diverse communities (p. 17); on the other hand, images of the countryside represent these spaces as devoid of culture or as terrifying for urban dwellers (e.g., Green 2013, pp. 19-20). An extreme example pertaining to Mongolia is from Nambariin Enkhbayar, the prime minister in 2001, who judged the entire pastoral economic system and traditional, rural-based way of life to be a deficit, a drag on modernization and development, and advocated a plan to urbanize the entire population within thirty years (Endicott 2012, p. 90).

In addition to a rural literacy perspective, researchers from literacy studies and sociolinguistics have defined several ways to talk about everyday, informal, local, and peripheral literacy practices. Barton and Hamilton's (2012) 'vernacular literacy' consists of 'practices [that] are essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their purpose in everyday life' (p. 247). Though Barton and Hamilton do not address the representations, practices, and policies that mark conflicts between urban centers and rural peripheries, their theories are still strongly grounded in conceptions of space, between homes and local communities as opposed to the more formal and official spaces of institutions and other higher-scale orders. These vernacular practices, which consist of ways for organizing, communicating, documenting, and making sense of everyday life, may be

represented as unimportant and unsavory by dominant institutions; oftentimes, they may be ignored.

A final theory, Blommaert's (2008) 'grassroots literacy,' complicates the two previous models. Grassroots literacies emerge from local contexts (i.e., outside of or away from powerful institutional centers) and are practiced by non-elites who have little knowledge of distant genres and whose writing is non-standard, heterographic, and inconsistent (p. 7). Blommaert's emphasis on movement complicates the spatial logic of rural and vernacular literacies. In a highly globalized world and within complex, superdiverse urban spaces stratified in terms of social class, ethnicity, race, and immigration status, the movement of groups of people, technologies, and texts, from one local space to another, or across different scale levels, means that, from the perspective of a literacy researcher or sociolinguist, it is impossible to make stable predictions or generalizations about texts, events, or the values attributed to them. Blommaert's point is that people's linguistic repertoires are not neatly embedded in urban centers or in rural peripheries, nor in homes and communities as opposed to formal institutions and other centers of social and cultural power. Rather, language is in constant movement in and out of these spaces. An individual's repertoire may possess agency (i.e., 'voice') and status in certain local contexts, yet once it is moved to a new context or level, it may bear the marks of grassroots writing and mark the writer as an outsider. In Blommaert's theory, these moves from one context to another are rarely neutral shifts; they imply, rather, a movement away from one center to another, which may possess different assumptions, values, beliefs, and normative expectations about language.

Mongolian pastoral literacies share an affinity with these theoretical models. By focusing on pastoral literacies, we recognize how productive differentiations between countryside and urban identities were in the twentieth century, and, furthermore, how anxieties about the

weakening effects of cities strongly marked political and folk discourse. Similar to vernacular literacies, pastoral literacies occurred largely in the Mongolian traditional home, or *ger*, and were acquired alongside (i.e., not in contrast with) oral folk genres and everyday folk instruction in animal husbandry and folk knowledge or commonsense (*khar ukhaan*; literally, ‘black knowledge’). Additionally, it is unwise to ignore Blommaert's arguments to pay attention to movement and to ‘polycentricity,’ his term emphasizing the fact that linguistic repertoires possess different ‘centers,’ different ways of valuing and validating how successful particular reading and writing events have been. For all three literacies, we need to be wary of importing them as universal, stable, and unproblematic theories to Mongolia, a country with a vastly different history of urbanization and far different cultural models associated with the *ger*, the *nutag* (‘birthplace’ or ‘homeland’), the city, and abstract national identity.

Most importantly, movement is what distinguishes ‘rural,’ in which the non-urban periphery is sedentary, from mobile ‘pastoral’ literacies; in fact, the mobility of the Mongolian nomadic herders' economic and cultural lifestyle complicates a simplistic urban-rural binary. According to Sneath and Humphrey (1999), the dimension of sedentarisation versus mobility does not necessarily parallel the dimension of urbanization versus de-urbanization (p. 210). In fact, at least for pre-socialist Mongolian aristocrats and wandering Buddhist monks, mobility allowed them to associate themselves with urban cultures (p. 209), a process of urbanization that indexes the degree to which people are integrated in ‘city activities and culture’ and are ‘subject to the socio-economic influences of towns and cities’ (p. 180). Sneath and Humphrey write, ‘Contrary to stereotypes of pastoralists, mobility encourages advanced and specialized knowledge and is not a bar to acquisition of urban culture, while sedentarisation of herders may lead to isolation and “de-urbanism” of culture’ (p. 179). In other words, mobility allows us to not



only challenge negative assumptions about nomadic herders but conceptions of the rural and urban that are overly static and autonomous of each other.

*Technologies of Forgetting and Controlling*

The historical claim that literacy was severely reduced by the urban bias of Revolutionary Party elites warrants more development. The privileging of the urban over the pastoral was not so neat, consistent, and successful. Urban elites, many of whom studied in the Soviet Union, used several strategies when confronted with the pastoral: they repressed traditional folk practices, such as *ovoo* worship and the rendering of ancestral genealogies (Sneath and Humphrey 1999, p. 124, Empson 2011, p. 46); linked pastoral areas to Ulaanbaatar and aimag centers by distributing newspapers and setting up radio broadcasting (Morozova 2009, pp. 126-127); created cults of national reverence by promoting pastoral poetry (Campi 2006, p. 72); and recontextualized ‘indigenous ideas,’ such as authoritarian styles of leadership (Morozova 2009, p. 134, Sneath and Humphrey, p. 120), to accommodate Soviet Mongolian values and practices. Many studies have established that the Mongolian socialist state was far from hostile to the rural sector and, in fact, developed the rural infrastructure far more intensively than the post-socialist governments since the 1990 democratic reforms (Endicott 2012, p. 76, Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe 2006, p. 13, p. 45). Additionally, the memoirs and biographies of Revolutionary Party elites and intellectuals consistently established their ethos and authority by demonstrating how much they and their families were aligned with the traditional pastoral identity and, moreover, emphasizing their poverty (e.g., Damdinsuren 1990, p. 8); after all, an authentic member of the ‘common people’ class could own only so large of a herd of domestic animals. Other studies demonstrated how the Revolutionary Party recruited much of its leadership from rural areas across Mongolia to strengthen its national legitimacy (Ginsburg 2000, p. 260).

My point is that Revolutionary Party elites inherited from Soviet Bolsheviks specific technologies of control and forgetting that transformed the poor, semi-nomadic ‘common people’ (*ard tüimen*), who, a decade before the 1921 People’s Revolution, made up close to 90% of the population (Baabar 1999, p. 167). Literacy became an ideological field. As Revolutionary Party leaders and administrators—including librarians, teachers, propagandists, health workers, and others—inherited the scientific, high-modern, and urban-centered assumptions from the Bolsheviks, they were to make the *ard tüimen* the center of power for the authoritarian state, the new rural proletariat. Consequently, state administrators wielded these powerful technologies of control and forgetting, which had been brutally employed in Soviet Russia, to transform the countryside, in the form of collectivization movements, and the herder, in the form of mass literacy programs; in both cases, the authoritarian state made the countryside and the common herder far more efficient, ‘urban,’ sedentary, centralized, and governable.

The technologies of control involved, according to Scott’s (1998) theorizing of authoritarian Soviet states, efficient administrative bureaucracies underwritten by an ideology of high modernism flowing out of urban institutions towards the rural periphery (pp. 4-5). These procedures focused upon making ‘illegible’ and uncontrollable subjects—such as nomadic pastoralists—within authoritarian states far more governable, ‘legible,’ and sedentary (pp. 1-2). Moreover, these efficient administrative procedures were implemented alongside ‘technologies of forgetting,’ which, according to Buyandelger (2013), included state violence, the suppression of violence, and the fabrication of new memories (pp. 70-71). In both cases, the urban center was key in the administration of this modern authoritarian state (e.g., Scott 1998, pp. 72-73); in Mongolia, the centripetal administrative structure meant that rural administrative units (as well as individuals) did not communicate with each other horizontally; instead, they communicated

vertically with the party, government, or union institutions in Ulaanbaatar, which then communicated vertically with Moscow (Humphrey and Sneath 1999, p. 197).

Although it is far beyond the scope of this article to detail how the technologies of control and forgetting were used by the Soviet Mongolian state, the most significant point is how they constituted the techniques of mass literacy instruction, which, by the late 1960s, helped define the Soviet Mongolian citizen: a man or woman who identified with the socialist state and the Soviet Union and who, importantly, read and wrote in the ways circumscribed by the state. In terms of literacy development, these technologies included the destruction of unapproved texts and the persecution or execution of intellectuals, journalists, and educational authorities, including Rinchen, Damdinsuren, L. Tsend-Ochir, Navaantseren Gonjov, and many others. Reports document the destruction of pre-revolutionary texts and include narratives of civil servants burning books or ripping out pages and throwing them into the wind (Namkhainyambuu 2000, p. 46) as well as family members destroying or concealing personal genealogy charts (Empson 2011, p. 46) and religious or other old texts (Bawden 1968, p. 87). Another example is the most important piece of language legislation in the twentieth century, the official transition from the traditional *Mongol Bichig* script to Cyrillic in the 1940s after an earlier attempt, in the 1930s, to shift to the Latin alphabet. The decision was justified partly on the grounds of scientific high-modernism: the traditional *Mongol Bichig* was too variable to translate scientific and technical terms, too opaque in its reproduction of contemporary Mongolian speech, and too difficult—or inefficient—to learn quickly (see Kapišovská 2005, pp. 72-73). A new, revolutionary script, in order to facilitate the technologies of control, needed to facilitate fast instruction, efficiently and consistently reproduce technical vocabulary and concepts, and accurately and transparently communicate the verbal ideas of one worker to another. In order to

function as a technology of forgetting, the Cyrillic script legislation needed to render the writings of Buddhist intellectuals unreadable to a large number of Mongolians (see Morozova 2009, p. 106). Given the interests of this article, Soviet Mongolian historiography was a key, hegemonic technology of forgetting. It represented literacy before 1921 in its symbology of ‘darkness’ and ‘backwardness’ as well as its ubiquitous one percent statistic, shrouding a variety of literacy practices that had been in place, in some form, since at least the beginning of the thirteenth century. After the 1921 People’s Revolution, these technologies insured that only literacy practices and opportunities that were sponsored by the Revolutionary Party, Soviet organizations, and the government ministries were recognized as legitimate.

These Soviet technologies present challenges to historians of literacy who are attempting to see beyond official and formal representations. Furthermore, because pastoral literacies existed outside of such dominant institutions as the Buddhist Church, there were no institutional reasons to copy, collect, preserve, and archive their traces. A recurring problem for historians of education and literacy, the cultural importance of these non-elite, everyday materials is only significant to outsider anthropologists or literacy specialists—not to the pastoral writers and readers themselves (Rogers and Street 2009, p. 8). Such written traces, to add to our challenges, may not have been understood as independent, complete products but temporary literate practices that culminated in oral practices, such as ceremonial speeches or the reading aloud of poetry and stories. Finally, these traditional texts may have been produced on materials that quickly degraded or for which other practical uses were found. Unfortunately, faced with these types of archival challenges, literacy researchers admit that it is impossible to fully capture the complexity of the literacy practices in the specific historical period they are interested in (Rawski 1979, p. 1).

To render pastoral literacies in the early socialist period more visible, this study examines oral histories from the University of Cambridge Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia, which consists of 917 interviews and 600 participants born between 1911 and 1978. Twelve interviewers, from 2008 through 2011, conducted the oral histories, which were then transcribed. Despite the fact that the University of Cambridge Oral History did not explicitly focus on literacy, home schooling, or formal education, I was able to identify relevant oral histories by searching for particular keywords and phrases, which included, among others, *bichig* ('writing'), *geriin surguuli* ('home school'), *üseg bichig* ('literacy'), and *khar ukhaan* ('commonsense'). I then closely analyzed these interviews, searching for literacy narratives, moments in which participants explicitly talked about language and literacy and mentioned early literacy and educational experiences, literacy opportunities, teachers or other influential agents or sponsors of reading and writing, as well as formative texts and materials. Afterwards, I coded these literacy narratives according to whether they depicted home schooled reading and writing experiences, and I narrowed the number of participants down to 21. These participants reflect a range of pastoral literacies that preceded, in most cases, their official, formal, and urban literacy experiences; at times, they may reflect stories or attitudes about the writing or reading abilities of fathers or other elder relatives or local exemplar figures. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the participants were born between the 1920s and the 1940s; for those born in the 1950s and beyond, the cultural models that enforced mass, compulsory literacy education made these pastoral literacy narratives more difficult to imagine. The vast majority of the participants also share the dominant Khalkha ethnic identity, comprising 76% of the University of Cambridge Oral History sample and 79% of the population, according to the 2010 Census. Although the term pastoral literacies may be elastic enough to depict the practices of most minority ethnic

groups, future histories need to ascertain how the literacy practices differ specifically for groups such as the Buriyats or Kazakhs who have far different intellectual histories.

The oral histories present interpretation challenges for researchers. In many cases, participants build narratives from a historical distance of seventy years or more and, moreover, attempt to reconstruct a distant psychological period of their childhoods (see Kelly 2005, pp. 720-721). Researchers relying on oral histories need to be cautious about assuming they are recovering empirical facts about these distant literacy practices, events, and texts; rather, they need to be aware about how more recent and dominant literacy practices, such as those flowing from the West since the 1990 democratic reforms, mediate these memories of distant experiences. For example, several participants, such as M $\ddot{o}$ ng $\ddot{o}$ n Yampil (male participant, b. Gov-Altai, 1920) and Navaan Namsraijav (female participant, b. Bulgan, 1926), were still contending with ideological battles that frame historical attitudes about socialist Mongolia and their present, situated experiences in free-market, post-socialist Mongolia. Instead of viewing these participants as na $\ddot{i}$ ve subjects who reveal a pure and authentic set of facts about earlier literacy practices, we need to see them as rhetorical beings, who are presenting themselves in particular ways and for particular purposes and audiences. Yampil articulated the historical claims of the Revolutionary Party and the ways in which it represented literacy. In the period around the 1921 People's Revolution, according to Yampil, there were no schools and cultural institutions; in the countryside, there were so few literacy resources that no one was available to read the letters that soldiers sent home. For Yampil, the new Latin or Cyrillic alphabets brought culture to Mongolia. In contrast, Namsraijav rejected the Soviet Mongolian claims that no formal education system existed before the 1921 People's Revolution, referring to the large number of Buddhist lamas who were literate in Tibetan as well as the pre-socialist educational experiences

of individuals who would become party leaders. For participants like Yampil and Namsraijav, there is still something quite important at stake in telling these histories and recounting these particular versions of literacy. They are not recovering literacy practices from the past as much as reconstructing them.

### *Reconstructing Pastoral Literacies*

Luvsan Pürevdorj's (male participant, b. Govi-Altai Aimag, 1939) literacy narrative is representative of the pastoral home school literacies that existed alongside the official literacy campaigns and the development of the state school system during the first three decades of the Mongolian People's Republic. Pürevdorj was born towards the end of the most violent of the political and anti-Buddhist purges, and his teacher was his father, who was literate in *Mongol Bichig*, learned Cyrillic in the early 1940s, and taught several older people in the countryside. Because of his herding responsibilities for his family, the poor reputation of early herder collectives, and his family's unwillingness to move to an administrative center, Pürevdorj did not participate in state socialist education of any sort until he was twenty years old. Despite his lack of formal education, Pürevdorj describes his childhood as one rich in literature. Although books were exceedingly difficult to obtain in the countryside, his family was proud of their copy of Damdinsuren's collected works, and Pürevdorj recalls reading such 'strange and surprising stories' as 'Two White Things,' 'Wrestler Gombo,' and 'Toli Gengen.' At age twenty, he entered the Military College (*Tsergiin Deed Surguuli*), where he began his first formal training experience: after taking a placement test on 'state information' (*uls töriin medleg*), he qualified for officer preparation school, where he trained for three to four years; after that, he entered the Military Academy in the Soviet Union, where he studied for five additional years.

Pürevdorj's brief narrative provides us with the structure of his pastoral literacy. It is centered within the Mongolian home, or *ger*; highlights an intimate and almost exclusively male teacher-student relationship; focuses itself around a canon of folk, historical, and Buddhist texts; and interacts, in several ways, with official, dominant literacies. The last feature is especially important and serves as a hedge against overly romantic accounts, which may be useful for post-socialist traditionalists yet hold little value for historians of literacy and language. These pastoral literacies were rarely pure. The teachers, for example, may have been trained as Buddhist monks, pre-socialist scribes, or, as was most likely the case of Pürevdorj's father, as rural Revolutionary Party *ard tümen*. The official literacies of the socialist state, moreover, eventually supplemented—or dominated—these initial pastoral home school literacy learning opportunities. Pürevdorj's lack of involvement with formal education until he was twenty was rare.

Examples of the complicated interaction among pastoral and official literacies include the literacy narrative of Jamba Pürevdorj (male participant, b. Bulgan Aimag, 1925), who as a child learned *Mongol Bichig* from a literate neighbor. Having received his father's permission, the neighbor volunteered to teach J. Pürevdorj *Mongol Bichig* from the time his family had moved to their winter camp until the following spring. Afterwards, at the age of 11, J. Pürevdorj attended a primary school for six months, though he was unable to continue to middle school because he had family herding responsibilities. J. Pürevdorj claims, consequently, to have learned *Mongol Bichig* at home and the new script—in this case, Latin—at primary school. J. Pürevdorj also briefly experienced literacy instruction at a local Buddhist temple, the Khandchin Van Khuree, in which he saw Buddhist novices holding sacred texts and then writing silently on individual ash boards with reed pens. Baljinnyam Choijamts (male participant, b. Zavkhan Aimag, 1929) also participated in a range of literacy instructional experiences, both unofficial and official. His



literacy narrative begins when he was six years old, when he studied Tibetan reading (*Tövd nom zaalgakh*) under the guidance of a Buddhist monk. According to Choijamts, he quit after confronting his teacher with the linguistic contradiction that he was experiencing: his teacher read to him in Tibetan, yet then spoke to him in Mongolian. The following year, Choijamts was taught by two aristocrats (*khokhi taij*), one who lived close to his family's winter camp and the other who was a neighbor close to his family's summer camp. Both teachers taught him *Mongol Bichig* and basic mathematics. By the age of eight, Choijamts considered himself literate in *Mongol Bichig*. He then began to attend a state primary school, when he was eleven, after his family moved to Ulaanbaatar.

Despite these examples, which show learners moving through pastoral, state, and Buddhist literacies, the category of pastoral literacy does hold together—allowing us to recognize it across time and across the vast distances of the Mongolian steppe—if it is centered within the *ger*, the traditional Mongolian mobile pastoral home.<sup>1</sup> The *ger* becomes the core of the definition of pastoral literacies, those informal, immersive, and everyday experiences with writing and reading that are interwoven with oral practices, *khar ukhaan*, and folk pedagogies related to acquiring pastoral knowledge and that build and maintain a ‘traditional’ Mongolian herder identity linked to the birthplaces (*nutag*), camps, geographical features, neighborhood groups (*khot ail*) and other concrete, local ways of talking about birthplace and homeland. This pastoral home school education, most importantly, is constituted by a personal and paternal teacher-student relationship. The curriculum, the instructional and learning practices, and the physical materials related to literacy learning also help shape pastoral literacy; yet, because of the fact that many of these same curricular, pedagogical, and material features exist in the official literacies of the socialist Mongolian state as well as in Tibetan Buddhism, they do not

help to delineate pastoral home school literacies as completely separate, independent, and authentic.

In literacy studies, there is nothing surprising about the home as the centering domain for language and literacy acquisition. Scholars have examined such home and community literacies as a methodological interruption to earlier studies that focused far too much on formal education and upon definitions of literacy that failed to recognize the important contributions that were made by domains outside of schools on the development of learners' linguistic repertoires (Barton and Hamilton 2012, Fishman 1987, Heath 1983). Yet, a simple correspondence between Western capitalist homes with Mongolian pre-socialist or socialist *gers* is problematic. For one thing, the one-room *ger* is both a public and a private space. The front right side of the *ger* served as a meeting place for extended family members, friends, official representatives, and strangers. Shirendev (1998), born in 1912, in his autobiography published at the beginning of the post-socialist period, reminisces about the oral genres that constituted *ger* communicative practices outside of official sources:

As far as the ordinary people and the young were concerned, as there was rarely any other news, they had to take an interest in such matters as religious events, celebrations, meetings, prayers, rumors about the lords and poor people, thieves and swindlers, stories told by parents and other people in the household, guessing games, folks songs and morinkhuur music. [...] The old tales, legends, and riddles were an interesting way of passing on information and understanding about ancient history and biography. (p. 14)

Similarly, Ambaselmaa (female participant, b. Töv Aimag, 1931), speaking about the 1930s, lists the oral genres interwoven into *airag* (fermented mare's milk) drinking parties, which consisted

of 20 to 30 neighbors in the local area and included folk stories, poems, epic poems (*tuuli*), jokes, long songs, and folk finger games (*khua* and *dembeedekh*).

My intention with the two examples above is not to contribute to the platitudes about the inherent orality of nomadic people (Lewis 1968) nor to consider how orality helped Mongolians carve out alternative spaces beyond official, dominant discourses (Humphrey 1994, Kaplonski 2004) but to support the potential for pastoral literacy practices within the Mongolian *ger*, a space where out-of-the-ordinary oral genres existed and one that acculturated children. The *ger* was seen by several University of Cambridge Oral History participants as a space for primary instruction and acquisition of traditional Mongolian values and *khar ukhaan*, which children were expected to ‘feel’ and embody. For example, a relatively stable spatial logic inside the *ger* served important pedagogical purposes. Children learned and embodied which side of the *ger* was the ‘female’ one or the ‘male,’ as well as which section of the *ger* was the intimate, personal space for the family and which section was reserved for visitors, strangers, or more distant relatives. Another example of this spatial logic was that it played a role in how hierarchies of age were internalized. According to one male anonymous participant (b. Bayanhongor Aimag, 1948), the traditional spatial order of the *ger* dictated the seating order of the family’s children, with the oldest at one end and the very youngest sitting on the mother’s bed. Genden Sedjav (male participant, b. Zavkhan Aimag, 1938) relates his literacy learning experience with *khar ukhaan*. In addition to *Mongol Bichig*, Cyrillic (i.e., ‘new writing’), and mathematics, Sedjav's teacher, a sick uncle convalescing at the family home, taught him a rhetorical *khar ukhaan*: ‘[W]hat words to choose, when and where to speak to people, this was the type of commonsense [*khar ukhaan*] that I learned.’ Additionally, Sedjav learned a maxim about the importance of eloquence and audience awareness: ‘If someone says something poorly, he will be understood poorly.’

Beyond the centering role of the Mongolian *ger*, the literacy narratives demonstrate the importance of the teacher-student relationship and local, authoritative literate exemplars. Several participants describe their fathers' literacy, including Batbayar Mavgan (male participant, b. Arhangai Aimag, 1931), who depicts his father as embodying the ideal, organic relationship between literacy and the work of the semi-nomadic Mongolian herder. Mavgan reports, 'Then while [my father] was herding sheep, he would go around writing in the snow with his finger the words that he had learned.' In his oral history, Mavgan defines a pure, indigenous Mongolian pedagogy based upon this teacher-student relationship of ceremonial exchange and service; moreover, this pedagogy is holistic, impacting the real, daily lives of traditional herders. According to Mavgan, its opposite is found in the pedagogical systems of the Soviet Union and the West, which emphasize highly formalized, mass, and impersonal teacher-student relationships based upon monetary exchange and that characterize knowledge as distant from the necessities of the herder lifestyle.

Into the late 1950s and 1960s, as Yondonrinchin Chagdarsumberel's (male participant, b. Arkhangai Aimag, 1952) literacy narrative asserts, it is still possible to come across literacy learning experiences that were primarily cultivated informally at home. Chagdarsumberel identifies his father as an aristocrat (*töriin daamal*) before he then describes his home schooling, which he frames self-consciously as 'traditional' (*ulaamjaltai*), referring to Damdinsuren's own account of how *Mongol Bichig* literacy was an inheritance from his father and grandfather. From the age of three, Chagdarsumberel learned *Mongol Bichig* and Tibetan, and he reports reading many stories and legends. Importantly, Chagdarsumberel suggests a natural, essential connection between aristocratic identity and literacy, one that Naidan Suuri (male participant, b. Bulgan Aimag, 1929) repeats when he speculates whether his aristocratic lineage enabled him to master

the three scripts—*Mongol Bichig*, Latin, and Cyrillic—faster than others. Additionally, Chagdarsumberel’s emphasis of his sister’s active role in his literacy development disrupts the usual patriarchal teacher-student relationship. In fact, Chagdarsumberel’s sister’s role as home school literacy teacher may forecast the socialist urbanization of the Mongolian countryside in the 1960s, which includes widespread collectivization programs and aimag-wide cultural campaigns focusing on adult hygiene, health, literacy, and political indoctrination. Though more research needs to be conducted on how literacy has been represented along gendered lines in Mongolia, from that time, the traditional nurturing role of women became associated with reading (e.g., see literacy images in *Socialist Mongolia* 1986).<sup>2</sup>

The University of Cambridge Oral History participants’ literacy narratives illuminate little about the concrete, daily practices of literacy instruction. Given the prevalence of authoritative teaching models and alphabet-based curricula in Buddhist, pre-socialist scribal, and socialist literacy classrooms, it is difficult to imagine the *ger*-based pastoral classrooms being much different. Based strongly around the authority of the literate teacher, traditional pedagogy followed an additive curriculum, in which teachers began with letter-sound correspondences and gradually moved towards syllables, words, and sentences. Though it describes a pre-socialist context, Shirendev’s (1998) biography provides one possibility of what a pastoral home school pedagogy might look like. Shirendev's father, who taught *Mongol Bichig* to his own children as well as those in the community, started with a single word as well as spelled-out numbers, which his children copied and he corrected. He taught the letters for the vowels and several consonants separately, then showed how to join the letters together to make words and then how to join words together to make sentences. Sambuu's (2010) experience of learning to write in pre-revolutionary Mongolia was similar. A local scribe taught him a sequence of letters, then words

that contained two letters, and then words that contained three letters. Sambuu read, letter by letter, texts such as *Key to Knowledge* and *The Story of the White Birds*, though without complete comprehension; on his own, he copied out sections from *Key to Knowledge* and repeated the strokes (p. 29). Traditional teaching practices, in which teachers stand alone at the front of the class and write down examples of what students should quietly copy down, do not differ dramatically from those in the socialist period. According to Pürev Nyamsuren (male participant, b. Bulgan Aimag, 1936), his father, in the early socialist era, began a writing classroom by writing ‘a’ and ‘b’ on the board several times. Namkhai Tsend-Ayush (male participant, b. Töv Aimag, 1945), who was taught by a wandering teacher lama before he entered a formal state school, also learned *Mongol Bichig* in a strictly sequential fashion, learning first the different shapes of ‘a’ as the initial letter in a word, in the middle, and at the end.

Largely because of their canonical status in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we have a much better idea about the types of texts that were used for pedagogical purposes in these pastoral home school contexts. Until the political and anti-religious purges in the 1930s and the Cyrillic language policies in the 1940s, Tibetan and Indian Buddhist texts served an additional centering role, connecting local spaces as well as generations of learners and story tellers across time. Before the 1921 People’s Revolution, pastoral learners copied from Mongolian block-printed books and manuscript sutras that had been translated from Tibetan, including the *Golden Light Sutra* (Altan Gerel), the *Moon Cuckoo*, *The Magical Corpse*, *The Tale of the 32 Wooden Men*, as well as many others (e.g., see Shirendev 1998, pp. 17-18). Damdinsuren (1990) lists the books that he could access at home and in the neighboring *gers* as *An Ocean of Stories*, *A Drop from the Spring* and its commentary, the *Panchatantra* poems, the *Subashid* and its commentary, the Ushaandar epic, the Monk Molon stories, *Lumbumgarva*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Key to*

*Knowledge*, and the *Snow Bird*. Describing a ubiquitous pre-revolutionary home schooling education (*geriin khümüüijil*), Tsend-Ayush imagines one way these texts were used: children arrived home from their herding, grabbed the one Buddhist text their family possessed, and participated in highly oral lessons with their parents. Children were expected to memorize the text, and to do so for pedagogical reasons—not for the purposes of indoctrination (*munkhruulakh*, ‘to stupefy’). Again, it must be emphasized that texts from the Indian and Tibetan traditions were highly dangerous for pastoral home school teachers and learners beginning from the mid 1930s. In this period, as Luvsan Pürevdorj suggested above, the socialist realist fiction of Damdinsuren and others began to replace this now suspect traditional canon. Secular pastoral poetry, folk songs, newspapers, and textbooks also represented key reading genres.

Beyond the copying of shapes, letters, letter sequences, words, and sentences, there were few expectations that home school learners would produce independent texts or recognizable genres. According to the pre-revolutionary learning experiences reported by Sambuu (2010), he attempted to transcribe the ‘official language people spoke’ (p. 36) and copied parts of texts (p. 29), a practice that would continue with Soviet secular adolescent texts into the 1960s (Sandag Punsaldulam, male participant, b. Hövsgöl Aimag, 1952). Shirendev (1998) provides one of the few examples of an important genre, the ‘felicitation,’ which his older brother would write down and then practice and memorize in order to recite at opportune ceremonial occasions, such as at a wedding or the erection of a new *ger* (pp. 32-33). Similar traditional genres, such as speeches of praise (*magtaal*), puzzles, and wise sayings or proverbs (*züir üg*), may also have served important pedagogical roles. Sacred equivalents of these genres existed in the Buddhist Church (Heissig 2000). A final productive genre may have been genealogy charts (*ugiin bichig*),

important for Buriyat writers, which enabled them to make visible their relationships to ancestors (Empson 2011, pp. 63-64). Tsend-Ayush's account of a home school education provides a rare example of the specific writing prompts to which learners were asked to respond, including writing about the herd's water supplies, the learner's personal food and drink, or about 'your child's future destiny' (*chini khüükhed yaaj yavakh zayaa töörgiin tukhai*). It is uncertain, given the fact that these writing prompts contrast so drastically with the alphabetic curriculum that Tsend-Ayush described earlier, to what degree he had experience with these types of writing themes or whether he imagined them as a pre-socialist pastoral ideal.

The material conditions of literacy also serve as a reminder about how difficult it is to completely disentangle pastoral home schooling from Buddhist and socialist literacies. Before World War II, paper, notebooks, pencils, ink, and ink pens and brushes were rare and expensive and not available for mass consumption (Ambaselmaa). Instead, students and teachers in home schools used thin wooden boards, blackened with stove soot and smeared with grease and covered with ashes. Students then used a sharpened stick to trace over the ashes, marks which then could be easily erased (see Jamba Pürevdorj; Möngön Yampil). A technology imported from Tibet (Kara 2005, p. 216), these ash boards persisted into the socialist era and were used in both official and informal contexts. When *Mongol Bichig* was reintroduced officially in the early 1990s into state schools, some language teachers taught their students how to create their own ash boards (Ramsay 2013, p. 46), suggesting a close link between *Mongol Bichig* and this traditional writing technology. Ink was produced in home schools by mixing stove soot with sugar (Ambaselmaa) and, before the widespread availability of notebooks and paper in countryside markets, learners tore off the edges of newspapers as a source for writing.

### *Conclusion*



Using interviews from The Cambridge University Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia to construct literacy narratives, this study examined them according to rural, vernacular, and grassroots approaches, allowing readers to glimpse the home school literacy opportunities that existed beyond those of the Buddhist Church and those of the socialist government and Revolutionary Party. By the end of the 1930s, the Tibetan Buddhist Church ceased to be a dominant literacy sponsor, even though traces of Buddhist literacy practices continued to circulate in Mongolian homes and formal socialist classrooms. By the 1960s, the socialist state made pastoral home schooling more difficult to practice and less imaginable and visible. In its place, youth-oriented socialist institutions, including widespread nurseries and kindergartens, primary-level boarding schools, and the Young Pioneers became the dominant domains to acculturate children into the values of modern Mongolian socialist society, one in which reading was extremely important.

Pastoral literacy, this article has attempted to show, offers Central Asian researchers a new perspective to see beyond Soviet and post-socialist cultural frames and historiographies. When taking on a pastoral literacy perspective, researchers look for alternatives to urban and institutional centers and pragmatic purposes for reading and writing. Yet, these new vantage points also invite certain constraints and risks: pastoral literacies are difficult to access and to represent and, if researchers are not careful, the representations of these literacies can become quickly romanticized. As became apparent in Mongolian home schooling, these unofficial pastoral literacies did not travel far beyond the home or *nutag*. They promised no economic benefits and, because of their reliance on ephemeral technologies such as the ash board, left few traces; home school teachers preserved no textual canon; teachers and learners left few, if any, textual materials; to the extent that they produced original texts, learners may have performed

these texts orally and failed to preserve written versions. Furthermore, pastoral home schooling maintained exclusive patriarchal social relationships and were difficult for many Mongolians to gain access to; moreover, these pastoral literacies offered little ‘empowerment’ to individuals or access to powerful cultural resources. Finally, although pastoral literacies may have supported individual or family-level identities, they did not contribute to a larger, national or regional identity. Indeed, Central Asian researchers need to be cautious with generalizing an essential and necessary connection between herder identity and literacy.

To the extent that we argue for an essential link between pastoralists and literacy, we begin to romanticize these literacies and home school practices. A romantic account, for example, surfaces in the UNESCO proposal to designate Mongolian Calligraphy as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (*Mongolian calligraphy* 2013):

Mongolian calligraphy is a 1000 years-old writing system that vertically connects continuous strokes together to create a word. Letters of Mongolian script have been created and taught by nomads from generation to generation. [...] Ancient nomadic Mongolians roamed in their vast territory and used simple oral descriptions to convey knowledge to each other. [...] A herder mother could teach to her son on the pasture that letter ‘ba’ is depicted as ‘stomach and bow,’ while letter ‘a’ is depicted as ‘a tooth.’ This kind of oral depiction of letters was very useful during long dark winter nights when herders and their children could not enjoy sufficient light to do classes at home. They relied on oral stories, oral teachings and memorizing abilities to convey legends, knowledge and culture. (p.

4)

The romanticism lurks in the UNESCO proposal's timeless and ahistorical depiction of *Mongol Bichig*, its intimate association with the nomadic herders' lifestyle, and the scene of mothers nurturing their sons through a fusion of orality and literacy. In this case, this proposal's dependence upon these romantic literacy and teaching scenes may have been instrumental in its successful outcome. UNESCO, quite possibly, privileges literacy beliefs and practices that depict timeless traditions, contribute to a stable identity, and offer highly accessible possibilities, which was hinted at by the literacy role of the herder mother—one that was not emphasized in the literacy narratives. In short, it is important for Central Asian scholars to see beyond the cultural models that frame the ways they imagine literacy; yet, it will come to no surprise that they must continue to historicize these alternative, unofficial, and local literacy possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The physical structure of the *ger* was a common place to house schools and temporary literacy courses before the construction of permanent schools, libraries, and cultural centers. Shagdar Luvsandorj (male participant, b. Dornogovi Aimag, 1932) describes his state school in 1940 as a one-room *ger* without any tables and chairs; children kneeled or squatted on the ground with a board resting on their knees that would act as a notebook. Moreover, 'red *gers*' were the name for temporary and mobile socialist ideological centers, which also served as spaces for literacy classes. The key distinction is that, in the context of pastoral literacies, the family *ger* represented a personal space for the teacher and learners; it was not sponsored by the Revolutionary Party or any of the other local socialist organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Despite Rinchen's (1964) emphasis on the fact that pre-revolutionary home schooling enabled literacy opportunities for women, few of the University of Cambridge Oral History female participants recounted initial literacy learning experiences outside of formal education settings (for one exception, see Rentsen Riimaa, b. Arkhangai Aimag, 1921).

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