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Changes in Identity: How Mongolian Musicians and Performers have Responded to Geopolitical Transition

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Changes in Identity: How Mongolian Musicians and Performers have Responded
to Geopolitical Transition

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Nomadism, Geopolitics, and the Environment
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Abstract

During Mongolia's socialist period, traditional forms of Mongolian music were deliberately altered as the government, heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, attempted to modernize Mongolian culture. Throughout this period, traditional instruments were modified, the types of music that could be performed were strictly censored, and the structure of performances was set to strictly mimic those of Western orchestras. After Mongolia's Democratic Revolution of 1990, the artistic freedom of Mongolian musicians has greatly increased, but even now, socialist cultural policies are deeply intertwined with Mongolian musical culture. Why is this the case? What is the common perception among performers about the influence of the Soviet Union on Mongolian music? What does the term "Mongolian music" actually mean to performers, and what do the different understandings of this term represent? By interviewing performers of Mongolian music in Ulaanbaatar and Dornogovi aimag who were educated or employed during both the socialist and current periods, this project examines the impacts of socialist control on the lives and decisions of performers, as well as the trajectory of future Mongolian music. The ethnographic study finds that, although the ideological impacts of the socialist period continue even to this day, Mongolian musicians and performers define 'Mongolian music' as something that transcends even the most persistent of socialist cultural policies. As such, these performers serve as a key example of the complexity with which rapid geopolitical change impacts cultural practices, beliefs, and identity.

Key words: Anthropology, ethnomusicology, socialism, censorship, Mongolian music, culture

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Key Terms

Aimag	Province, administrative subdivision
Socialist Cultural Policies	Soviet-influenced policies of modernist advancement and collective identity
Cultural “Soft” Propaganda	State-sponsored media, such as musical performance, that disseminates nationalist sentiments
Spectacle	Ceremonial public display or performance

Introduction

In 1921, after having defeated Chinese invading forces with the help of the Russian Red Army, Mongolia followed Russia to become the second nation in the world to convert to a communist regime (Embassy of Mongolia, 2018). Aside from the rule of Chinggis Khaan, this period is generally considered to be the beginning of Mongolia's global relevance. It is, of course, the time during which Mongolia's modern geopolitical relationships with its powerful neighbors China and Russia began to form, but it was also a time of great transition for the citizens of Mongolia. In the decades between 1924, when the Soviet Union essentially took control of Mongolia's new governmental structure, and the early 1990s when the nation's democratic revolution occurred, nearly every aspect of Mongolian life and culture was impacted by the newly formed communist regime, inextricable from the influence of the Soviet Union.

Aside from the collectivization of livestock herding, in which control of herds was taken away from individual herders and given to the government (Broughton, 1994, p. 190), some of the most notable impacts of the socialist government were its changes to culture, specifically music. During the Great Purge of Mongolia in the 1930s, Buddhism, the predominant religion of the nation, was greatly repressed: all high- and mid-ranking lamas were either killed or imprisoned, their instruments were seized, nearly all monasteries were destroyed, and folk-religious rituals were banned (Broughton, 1994, p. 190). Although music itself was not banned, the ways in which it could be played were widely regulated. In order to redefine the cultural identity of Mongolia so that it

fit the Soviet ideals of ‘multiethnicization’ and modernism, Western-styled orchestras were formed, harmonic solo instruments were redesigned to function in a group setting, and anything representing past traditions or differences was reprocessed to fit Soviet standards of modernization and progress (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 127). Tsetsentsolmon noted that, in the time following Mongolia’s democratic revolution, great emphasis has been placed on rebuilding pre-socialist national cultural values, especially in relation to Mongolian music. This has manifested in several ways, but perhaps most notably in the creation of a new State Morin Khuur Ensemble in 1992. Even in the most optimistic sense, however, given that it was still structured in the style and tunings of a Western orchestra (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 127), the creation of this ensemble can be understood as both a sign of progress in artistic freedom and as a sign of the long-term impacts of the Soviet Union on Mongolian national music.

This study originated out of a curiosity about the ways in which the Soviet-influenced cultural policies of modernist advancement and collective identity during the socialist period are still prevalent in the current day, both in the present opportunities and institutions that remain, and in the attitudes and memories of the musicians and performers trained during the socialist period. In the current era of Mongolian history, the constructed binaries between Western classical music and traditional folk music are far less concrete. For this reason, current musicians can experience much more variation in the music that they play and the ways in which they can express themselves, but what are the real differences between the institutions, practices, and overall zeitgeist of Mongolian

national music that existed during socialism and those in the present day? What was it like to be a performer during socialism, and what is it like to be a performer now? What kinds of factors, either calculated or not, have influenced aspiring musicians when choosing their craft or genre of music, both then and now? Although much is known about the concrete impacts of the Soviet repression of art and culture in Mongolia, many of the human aspects and details of this era are missing, and this study aims to find and examine them through a critical lens.

Ethnographic interviews were chosen as the primary form of data collection for this study because of their deeply intimate nature. Because this study draws its conclusions from the personal experiences and motivations of a select group of musicians and performers educated in the socialist period, ethnographic interviewing is the only appropriate method for data collection. One example of a successful study of ethnomusicology in Mongolia is Carole Pegg's *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities*, which argued that Mongolians express and transform features of their identities by frequently evolving traditional musical forms of performance (Pegg, 2001). Throughout her time in Mongolia, Pegg interviewed over one hundred eighty people of diverse backgrounds, eventually publishing a book of more than four hundred pages. This is a truly impressive feat, and Pegg's work is still used as a reputable source about Mongolian musical culture, but its content was gathered in the 1990s, not even ten years after Mongolia's democratic transformation. For this reason, certain aspects of Pegg's work lack the context necessary to view the Mongolian post-socialist period in a more complete light.

Although this study lacks both the geographic range and the numerical capacity of Pegg's, it uses ethnographic methods to critically examine the lives and experiences of Mongolian performers and musicians during and after the socialist period. This study does not intend to provide a comprehensive history of Soviet impacts on Mongolian folk music, but rather of the impacts on the musicians themselves. How do they identify themselves and the music that they play? How do they pass on their legacy to future generations of musicians? More than thirty years after Mongolia's democratization, enough time has passed to achieve a greater understanding of the long-lasting impacts of socialism and Soviet cultural policies on Mongolian folk music performers.

Historical Background

Why is it important to study Mongolian folk music at all? What can be gained from critically examining the impacts of Soviet cultural policies on Mongolian musicians, so many years after those policies lost their cultural relevance? The short answer to these questions is that, simply put, these Soviet cultural policies have not lost their relevance. Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon addresses the legacy of these cultural policies in her article, "Music in Cultural Construction: Nationalisation, Popularisation and Commercialisation of Mongolian Music." Tsetsentsolmon argues that the musical culture of Mongolia's post-socialist period can be recognized as the "continuation, transformation and, in some cases, the amplification of the statesocialist culture-building process, designed to be 'national in form and socialist in content', so as to become *nationalist in form and commercial in content*" (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 137).

Tsetsentsolmon is essentially arguing that, during the socialist period, traditional cultural practices were intentionally altered by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) in order to appeal to national traditions while overcoming the perceived cultural backwardness of the nation and attempting to construct a new, inherently socialist culture (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 122). During the era following the democratic transition of the 1990s, attempts to reclaim Mongolian musical culture have continued to follow the same guidelines set forth by the socialist government, simply with an emphasis on capitalism and democratic national pride, rather than socialist pride, therefore classifying current Mongolian musical culture as "nationalist in form and commercial in content". As such, post-socialist musical culture is not at all dissimilar to that of the socialist period (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 137).

To establish a common socialist culture during the socialist era, the MPRP constructed the ideal of Mongolian folk music, also known as national music. Folk music in Mongolia was promoted as an ancient, vulnerable tradition, so the socialist government resolved to promote its well-being through the state-funded "collecting, redefining and reconstructing [of] musical instruments," especially the *morin khuur*, or horse-headed fiddle, and the *huuchir*, or two-string fiddle (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 123). Moreover, a series of cultural institutions was established to proliferate and promote the practice of folk music throughout the nation, increasing the amount of attention that the music, as well as the national identity that it represented, received from the public audience (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 123). At the same time, in an effort to 'advance' what the MPRP called

“multiethnic art”, the socialist party sent musicians and performers from all backgrounds to every corner of the nation in order to collect “folk songs as ‘raw’ materials to be processed,” “developed”, and “enriched” through classical musical methods (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 124). With clearly emphasized traditional ethnic backgrounds, but revised and ‘modernized’ methods, the folk music of Mongolia’s socialist period truly exemplified the popular ideal of ‘national in form, socialist in content’.

Although it is true that Mongolia has worked tirelessly to separate itself from its socialist past in the several decades that have passed since the democratic transition, Tsetsentsolmon argues that the national musical culture of the democratic period has not forgotten its socialist roots. This is especially true given the competitive and often arduous conditions inherent to any market economy, but particularly that of Mongolia in the 1990s. In this period, when it appeared that commerce was the only means of survival, many musicians initially quit their craft in favor of a more profitable practice (Wickham-Smith et al., 2021, p. 168), and this flight of musicians under the capitalist system contributed to the state-funding of the arts, a system greatly reminiscent of that of the socialist era, as the new government realized that artists would need financial support in order to continue their practices.

Moreover, just as the MPRP used Mongolian folk music to promote its own ideals of what a national culture should be during the socialist period, the new government of democratic Mongolia saw folk music as an opportunity to culturally return to the ‘unscathed’ past of pre-socialist Mongolia. After the

ending of the socialist period in the early 1990s, the new democratic government adopted an attitude of intense nationalism in order to construct a new, post-socialist national identity, and a necessary facet of these nationalist tendencies was the revitalization of national history and culture (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 127). For many people, creating a post-socialist national identity meant overtly separating the new nation from the past ideals of the socialist period. For this reason, throughout this period of nationalism, cultural values such as the legacy of Chinggis Khaan, traditional Mongolian script, and traditional folk music that may have been repressed during Mongolian socialism received major funding and attention (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 128).

A vital figurehead of Mongolia's nationalist attempts to return to pre-socialist culture has been the *morin khuur*. On April 20, 1992, Mongolia's first democratically elected president Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat declared the *morin khuur* to be the *Töriin khan khuur*, or State Sovereign Fiddle, a title which declared the fiddle to be "an essential element of the cultural heritage of the Mongolian people" (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 120). As previously mentioned, shortly following this decree, the government established the State Morin Khuur Ensemble on July 9, 1992 (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 128). A resounding symbol of the nation's cultural revival, the ensemble was formed in the same manner as a Western chamber orchestra, with the same instrument design, technique, and tuning as was imposed during the Soviet cultural policies of the socialist period (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 128). As of 2011, the State Ensemble has prided itself upon its ability to perform the work of international composers such as George

Gershwin, Michael Jackson, and Louis Armstrong during its commercial concerts, with co-founder Jantsannorov stating that the ensemble had been experimenting with the ability of Mongolian instruments to successfully perform “more complex international music” (Tsetsentsolmon, 2015, p. 131). Although in this case, the desire to perform international, mostly Western music likely stemmed from the capitalist desire to draw profit from the cross-culturalization only possible during post-socialist Mongolia, it is, in practice, quite similar to the promotion of European classical music fundamental of socialist-era Soviet cultural policies.

In sum, although post-socialist Mongolia has taken significant effort to differentiate itself from the cultural practices imposed upon the nation during its socialist period, notably through its promotion of national folk music, the musical culture of the current era can easily be traced back to Soviet cultural policies. National music, especially that of the *morin khuur*, has been imperative to nationalist sentiments of a post-socialist identity, but the ideal of national folk music was essentially invented by the MPRP only during the last century. Furthermore, while it was subjected to great revision, the *morin khuur* was actually promoted during the socialist period, as Carole Pegg described in *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities*, “first [as] a symbol of ethnicity and then of a national socialist identity” (Pegg, 2001, p. 287). Although it has evolved, national folk music is still wielded as a state-funded tool of identity promotion, and its practices maintain the same Western influences as were introduced through Soviet cultural policies.

Theoretical Framework

It has been established that the musical teachings of the socialist period are still relevant, but why is that? There is no single correct answer to this question. The political and musical culture of any nation are both complex, vaguely defined concepts, and understanding the ways in which they interact with each other is not an easy task. This is especially true in Mongolia, a nation which has experienced several political systems and ‘cultural revivals’ in the last century alone; however, the fact that multiple cultural revolutions and one major political revolution have occurred in just one human lifetime may actually provide a partial answer to the question posed above.

In the 1990s, the same humans who lived their lives under socialism, were taught their artforms under socialism, and had only experienced socialist policy were put in the position of attempting to completely rework the systems of the nation. For this reason, understanding the human experiences of the musicians and performers under socialism is vital in understanding the link between Soviet cultural policies and Mongolia’s current musical culture. The importance of human experiences and memories in the formation of musical culture is precisely why ethnographic research is the best method of data collection for this research project.

In “The Value of Ethnographic Research on Music: An Introduction”, authors G. Curran and M. Radhakrishnan describe music as something intimately related to the heart of a culture, explaining that “music continues to remain a core expression of and means for performing cultural identity both within groups and to a broader world” (Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021, p. 103). A study of culture

is, essentially, a study of people, and as such a culturally entwined practice, music cannot be studied separately from the cultural and historical context surrounding it; therefore, the authors emphasize that studies of music must address the importance of the personal relationships and responsibilities of its practitioners through ethnomusicology (Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021, p. 106).

The importance of understanding personal relationships and experiences becomes especially integral in the study of cultures currently experiencing a state of transition. As a culture evolves, Curran and Radhakrishnan note that members of that culture often respond to the seemingly inevitable change by expressing idealized memories of some untainted, abstract past to which to aspire (Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021, p. 109). This idea is particularly relevant in Mongolia, where post-socialist insecurity and nationalist sentiments brought both a mass resurgence of so-called ‘pre-socialist’ practices and beliefs and a deep nostalgia for the apparent simplicity and development of the socialist period. Under the same logic expressed by Curran and Radhakrishnan, the only way to truly understand this phenomenon is through the ethnomusicological study of Mongolian musicians and performers during and after socialism.

Of course, to ethically begin such a project, one must acknowledge the limitations of the fields of ethnographic research and ethnomusicology, a feat that French ethnomusicologist Laurent Aubert expertly described in his 2007 book *The Music of The Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age*. The book begins with a reminder that at this point in time, it is impossible to truly separate the global from the local in terms of music, and that it would be

disingenuous to pretend as though it were. The second chapter, “Shared Listening”, speaks to the value of applied ethnomusicology, stressing that while music and the ways in which it is performed can say a lot about a specific culture, tradition itself is an amalgamation of connected but separable processes. As such, one culturally connected group does not linearly correspond with one style of constant, never-changing music. The seventh and eighth chapters, “The Invention of Folklore, or the Nostalgia of Origins” and “World Music: The Last Temptation of the West”, respectively, serve as a warning against the common mistake of Western researchers to portray any non-Western music as fundamentally other, grouping all of that music together under the name “world music” (Aubert, 2007, p. 56). Creating a strict dichotomy between Western and ‘world music’ only reinforces the conceptions that Western music is the baseline to which everything else must be compared and that all non-Western music is inherently the same.

With a study based around understanding the impacts of Soviet cultural policies on musicians during and after the socialist period, this is not something this project takes lightly. In this study, the characterization of Western versus traditional Mongolian musical practices stems only from the importance that the Soviet Union placed on the Westernization and modernization of Mongolian culture during the socialist-era restructuring of Mongolian culture. Because Western ‘advancement’ was the ideal on which most of the concrete changes to music and performance were based, examining the ways in which musicians and performers have responded to its presence is necessary to understand the full scope of the impacts of geopolitical changes on Mongolian citizens.

Methodology

Location

This study took place in Sainshand, the capital city of Dornogovi aimag, and Ulaanbaatar city. The city of Sainshand was chosen as a location of significance due to its religious and cultural history. More specifically, the city is known for the success of its theater, also known as *Saran Khukhuu*, which drew many successful artists to the city during Mongolia's socialist period. Even now, although the theater struggles to attract young musicians without the incentives that had been available during the socialist period, Dornogovi is known for its artistic prowess (S-1). Interviews were also conducted in Ulaanbaatar due both to the city's status as the center of government, and thus to its proximity to socialist influences, as well as to its musical relevance. Conducting interviews in Sainshand and Ulaanbaatar allowed the study to capture the perspectives of both rural and urban musicians and performers and to provide a more complete understanding of the research questions.

In Dornogovi, most interviews were conducted in the capital city of Sainshand at the homes or workplaces of the participants; however, several interviews took place with participants who lived outside of the city, either at the researcher's hotel, for participants who chose to travel to Sainshand, or over the phone, for informants who were not able to be physically present for the interview. All of the interviews were conducted over an eight-day period from November fourteenth through November twenty-first. In addition to this week of first-hand data collection, between one and two weeks were entirely spent

researching relevant historical and theoretical information. This period included reading historical records and ethnographic research of similar focus, creating and revising a specific collection of interview questions, as well as listening to and observing Mongolian folk, classical, and contemporary practices and performances.

Although this study was conducted as broadly as possible, its range certainly could have been improved by allowing for the possibility of follow-up interviews. Sadly, given the month-long time constraint of the project, as well as the fact that only three days were spent in Sainshand, it was not possible to conduct follow-up interviews. Moreover, although location and lifestyle diversity were achieved by conducting interviews with local residents of both Dornogovi province and Ulaanbaatar, more diversity could have been achieved by speaking to musicians and performers from a greater range of aimags with more varying histories of socialist involvement.

Participants

In total, twenty-five participants were interviewed. Twelve of these participants are currently living in Sainshand and surrounding areas of the Dornogovi province, and thirteen participants are residents of Ulaanbaatar. Although a slight majority of informants were interviewed in Ulaanbaatar, having a nearly equal number of participants from both locations was an intentional decision to promote a diversity of educational and cultural backgrounds. Several interviewees were young enough to have received the majority of their education after Mongolia's democratic transition, but most musicians and performers chosen

for this research were at least fifty years old. This was, again, an intentional decision to ensure that performers were old enough to have been either educated or employed under Mongolia's socialist system.

The birth years of participants ranged from as recent as 1982 to 1938, but most informants were born between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Although their careers ranged from medical doctors to music teachers and even to contortionists, state-honored singers, and members of contemporary folk-rock bands, all of the participants were involved with Mongolian music and performing arts in some way, and even those that did not currently classify themselves as musicians and performers carried valuable insights about the musical education of the socialist period, as well as the career opportunities available to classically-trained musicians during the nation's democratic transition.

Interviewees were selected in both Sainshand and Ulaanbaatar through the recommendation of contacts in both locations. Upon completion of each interview, informants were asked if they knew of any other people that could potentially add to the study, and this is how the majority of the participants were found. Work, family, and personal networks, as well as the social networks of the local translator were invaluable to the completion of this study.

To avoid revealing the names or personal information of the participants, a code was created based on the location and order of the interviews conducted. For example, the first person interviewed in Ulaanbaatar is referred to as UB-1, while the second and third are referred to as UB-2 and UB-3, respectively. This code was also used for informants from Sainshand, beginning with S-1 and following

the same pattern. Appendix One contains a complete chart of informant codes and additional relevant information about each informant.

Measures and Procedures

Data was collected through thorough interviews with each of the twenty-five participants. The average interview lasted between approximately forty-five minutes and one hour, with the shortest interview, which was conducted during one performer's fifteen-minute break from rehearsal, lasting only ten minutes, and the longest interviews lasting more than two hours. Participants were asked a collection of pre-arranged, open-ended questions about their lives, histories and experiences with music, and opinions about the impacts of socialist policies on music in Mongolia. These questions are shown in Appendix Two. Specific follow-up questions arose depending on the experiences, expertise, and time limitations of each interviewee, and for this reason, no two interviews consisted of exactly the same questions. All interviews, except for one that was conducted completely in English, were completed with the help of the same translator, a decision which ensured consistency in translation and analysis.

Data Analysis

Detailed notes were taken during every interview, recording specific quotes, life experiences, non-verbal cues, and opinions about socialist policies from each informant. With the consent of participants, an audio recording was also taken to capture anything that was missed during the note-taking process. The notes and transcripts collected were used to compare themes, experiences,

and key words that were common among multiple participants. Any consistencies found between participants were analyzed for greater meaning.

Positionality

For complete ethical transparency, it is important to address the positionality of the researcher of this study. As a musically trained third-year student from a liberal arts college in the United States, a nation with a centuries-long history of democracy and a free market economy, there is not much that the researcher holds in common with the participants of the study, who are all over the age of forty and were educated during Mongolia's socialist period. While it would certainly be valuable for someone who has lived under more similar circumstances to the participants to conduct this kind of research, there is some merit to examining the impacts of socialism from a completely fresh perspective so that past experiences or memories cannot have any impact on data analysis. Moreover, the musical training of the researcher allows for a greater technical understanding of the stories and experiences shared by the participants.

Perhaps most importantly, this study must explicitly address the researcher's nationality. It is reasonable to assume that, because the researcher is a citizen of the United States, the history of tension between the United States and Russia may have negatively tainted the researcher's perspective of Mongolian socialism and any of its cultural policies due to Mongolia's proximity to the Soviet Union as a socialist state. This bias would completely alter the results of the study; however, since the researcher is not old enough to have lived through the anti-Soviet sentiments of the Cold War, anti-Soviet and anti-socialist bias

should not pose an ethical dilemma to this research. Even so, great care has been taken throughout the duration of this study to be critical of any inherent biases that may be at play.

Ethics

At the beginning of each interview, participants were given an oral synopsis about the nature of the study, which explained that participation is voluntary, their identities would remain anonymous, and that their answers would contribute to a larger study about the impacts of the socialist period on musicians and performers in Mongolia. Due to the forecasted bounds of this study, ten written consent forms were printed for informants to sign, detailing all matters of consent that had also been explained verbally. Four interviews were conducted virtually, one participant chose not to sign the consent form while still consenting to the study, and approximately ten extra interviews took place within a timeframe during which it was not possible to obtain more consent forms. For these reasons, only ten out of twenty-five participants signed the consent form, but each gave full verbal consent to all measures of the study.

Aside from the disparity in access to written consent forms for some participants, the actual contents of the study did not produce any major ethical concerns. For most participants, recounting memories of their training and careers under Mongolia's socialist government did not produce any distress; in fact, most appeared enthusiastic to share their upbringings and experiences. There were, of course, moments during which some interviews began to breach more difficult topics, but it was explicitly mentioned during the consent process that informants

did not have to speak about anything that they did not feel comfortable disclosing. As such, participants could easily change the topic of discussion at any time. To ensure ethical practices in human subjects research, this study was also examined by a Local Review Board before any data was collected.

Results

Although this study does not take the exact form of a traditional ethnography, its purpose is to draw meaningful conclusions about the impacts of the socialist period on musicians and performers who were educated and employed during that time. Therefore, in order to draw these ethnographic conclusions, the data must be classified into different categories demarcating the common themes presented by the informants of the study. While the experiences and beliefs of every individual informant may not be explicitly mentioned through this system of organization, data from every interview has been taken into account during the creation of these classifications. Categorizing results into themes of perceptions of the impacts of socialism, post-socialist changes, and the meaning of ‘Mongolian music’ allows the reader to understand the overarching impacts of the cultural changes that took place under the socialist period.

Impacts of Socialism

I think because the socialist period was so glorified through all of the movies, music, and literature, this whole industry is used for propaganda purposes. So even nowadays, people talk about the artists and musicians of the Golden Age, and when they refer to the Golden Age, it’s the socialist period. (UB-2)

As alluded to by UB-2, a professor at the National University of Mongolia, when asked about their perceptions of the impacts of the socialist period, most informants spoke highly about the artistic changes that occurred at the hands of the new government system. Although opinions of the overarching impacts of socialism were, in most cases, quite complex, and nearly all avoided presenting their opinions quite as explicitly as stating “I prefer socialism” or “I

like democracy” (S-4), many informants felt that socialist policies had “a really positive influence” (S-8) on musical culture in Mongolia, and several even felt that the musical culture of the socialist period was of a higher quality than it is in the current era.

S-8, a singer who spent the majority of her career at the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater in Sainshand, spoke very highly of the socialist period. Having grown up in a rural aimag of Mongolia far from the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, S-8 credited the start of her career to the pervasive nature of the Ministry of Culture, a branch of the socialist government that visited even the most remote aimags to conduct exams and recruit artists. After being recruited and trained by the ministry’s programs, she spent the rest of her career at the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater in Sainshand. Although S-8 did not think that the art and music of pre-socialist Mongolia was “poor or primitive”, she felt that “everyone experienced cultural growth and development” during the socialist period (S-8).

The concept of cultural development was quite prevalent among informants of this study, and it was often tied to the idea of Soviet and European involvement. For example, S-7, a *morin khuur* player and teacher who spent most of his career performing at the Sainshand Theater, had extremely positive impressions of the impacts of the socialist period. He stated that “quite a high jump of development happened” during the socialist period when “Mongolia met European culture” (S-7). While he also did not say anything negative about the musical practices of pre-socialist Mongolia, he felt that the nation should continue

to “learn from the world level” of European music by developing national art and European classical music side by side (S-7).

S-6, a teacher of piano, accordion, and *morin khuur* at the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater in Sainshand who graduated from the University of Art and Culture in Ulaanbaatar, felt that during socialism, music “progressed” in many positive ways at the direct hand of the Soviet Union. During his education, he recalled that most of his teachers were either Russian or had graduated from musical schools in Russia before returning home to Mongolia (S-6). To S-6, Mongolian musical culture is solidly based on Soviet Culture, even today.

Some interviewees agreed that the socialist period ushered in an era of development, but had slightly more complicated feelings about the process through which that development occurred. Born in 1940, UB-3 is a university-educated, state-honored worker of art and culture who spent twenty years working as an actor and organizer at the cultural palace of Dornogovi aimag before founding the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater in Sainshand. As a self-proclaimed artist of the Golden Age, He felt that the nation made significant progress in classical art during the socialist period. According to UB-3, this era brought “one hundred percent educational progress among the whole population,” increasing national literacy, knowledge of classical music, and theoretical techniques. Like S-7, he credited socialist cultural policies with bringing Mongolian art to the “world level” (UB-3), but he noted that the other side of this coin of development was the lack of artistic freedom allowed by the state. “Society was blocked, isolated in one big box” (UB-3) under the ideological control of one uncompromising

political party. International relationships with nations outside of the Soviet Union's socialist bloc were forbidden, and artists would be punished for thinking differently from the government standards of appropriate socialist culture (UB-3).

State-honored singer and author S-2 echoed the sentiments of UB-3. Born in 1938, S-2 grew up playing the *aman khuur*, or jaw harp, Mongolian national instruments such as the *yochin* and *yatga*, and the Russian mandolin before spending her career singing at the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater. Having spent the entirety of her career in Mongolian folk music, S-2 believed that development to art did occur during socialism, but was less enthusiastic about that development than informants such as S-7. She felt that national songs were developed and that opportunities for musicians increased, but that folk art such as long song, or *urtyn duu*, was "almost lost" because anything that was connected to old tradition and religion was repressed by the government (S-2).

Quite frequent among the recollections of participants was the concept of *cenzur*, or censorship. Under the socialist regime, stylistic and musical decisions were met with the harsh scrutiny of the national government. S-10, a professional poet and author who received her education during the last decade of Mongolia's socialist period, explained that, while the government encouraged the expansion of Mongolian performing arts, the content of the art needed to meet extremely harsh criteria in order to be deemed appropriate for public consumption. Poetry faced especially harsh censorship due to its ability to directly express the individual thoughts of its author to a public audience, but S-10 noted that all forms of art were affected by state *cenzur*.

S-11, a professional musician of the *limbe*, Mongolia's national flute, who is currently working to pass on the UNESCO-certified skill of circular breathing to young musicians of rural Mongolia, recognized that the socialist period had positive impacts on the development of classical musical methods in Mongolia, but felt that socialist-era artists lacked artistic freedom. "Society lived in a vacuum, blocked by *cenzur*" (S-11). During socialism, public concert programs needed to be approved by a commission of the communist party (S-11). These commissions, which S-11 was quick to note had not even been educated in music, encouraged political songs while prohibiting any expressions that contradicted Soviet-based socialist ideology from reaching a public audience.

Although *cenzur* was mostly mentioned with regard to public performances, socialist censorship of musical content began as early as childhood for students in professional training. UB-1, a *morin khuur* instructor at the Children's Palace, a prominent socialist-era art institution for children, recalled that during his own childhood education, all students were compelled to learn the piano and all boys learned Western acoustic guitar. Outside of these requirements, children were allowed to explore a variety of musical instruments and styles, but never those that contradicted socialist ideology (UB-1). Students who were caught playing rock music, for example, were expelled from the institution (UB-1).

To fully gauge collective understanding of the impacts of socialism on art and culture, interviewees were asked to recall their perceptions of pre-socialist musical culture. Two of the most common threads that emerged from this line of questioning were the remembrance of pre-socialist religious and folk musical

practices and the concept of development, or lack thereof. Several informants mentioned the importance of Buddhist chanting and instrumentalism in the history of Mongolian musical practices. According to professional musician and teacher of the *limbe* S-11, religious music and dancing were extremely common, as was folk art. Before the socialist period, every family owned a *morin khuur* and *limbe*, and *urtyn duu* was present at every celebration or event (S-11).

S-5, a famous *urtyn duu* (long song) singer from the central region of the Gobi Desert, was one informant who did not have entirely positive memories of the socialist period. Although she managed to forge a successful musical career, folk music practices such as *urtyn duu* that were considered to be too long and “primitive” (S-5) for the modern socialist culture were not supported by socialist institutions, and S-5 was frequently asked to shorten or revise the songs that she sang. Even so, she believed that the level of artistic expression in Mongolia drastically improved from the level of art development present before the socialist period. Although folk and religious music existed before socialism, S-5 felt that the government “answered the instrumental needs of the artists”, providing opportunities and techniques that had previously been impossible.

Former actor and organizer of the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater UB-3 also noted that performances of folk music at small events and festivals were frequent before the socialist period. Even more than these small folk events, however, UB-3 revealed that the first spectacle performances in Mongolia had originated during the pre-socialist period from the combination of Buddhist and European influences made possible by the artistic freedom and intellectual exchange

brought by the Silk Road. However, due to the centuries of Manchurian control preceding the socialist period, Mongolia found itself in a state of intellectual isolation, in need of a change in ideological and technical scenery (UB-3). This, he said, is why socialism was “necessary for future progress” (UB-3).

Post-Socialist Changes

Just on the border between socialism and democracy, training happened on inertia. Society was bankrupt. Teachers became very poor, and they just worked to survive based on the old education system. Moving into a new society happened slowly. (UB-6)

There is a common assumption, especially among audiences who have never personally lived through something seemingly as life-changing as a political revolution, that such a massive political, economic, and cultural shift would completely and immediately overturn a society. It is easy to assume that, as soon as the direct control of the socialist government was dissipated, a new, post-socialist culture of freedom and cultural reclamation would immediately have replaced the outdated teachings of the previous era.

As mentioned by UB-6, a composer and musician of contemporary Mongolian folk-rock music, change in the new democratic era happened slowly. Although he did not begin his formal musical training until 1989 and the democratic revolution occurred while he was still studying, UB-6 did not feel as though his professional training differed strongly from that of musicians who had graduated in the years before the transition. Of course, young musicians were strongly impacted by the “explosion of information” brought about by the end of the socialist period, but change to the culture of professional music in Mongolia happened much more slowly (UB-6).

In fact, the earliest changes to post-socialist musical culture were not initiated by a desire for musical freedom or cultural reclamation, but, rather, by the lack of funding and human resources caused by the national economic insecurity brought about by the burgeoning market economy. UB-9, the head of faculty of singers at the Mongolian State Conservatory, a public artistic and musical teaching institution for students between six and eighteen years old, recalled that the initial period of transition between 1990 and 1995 was one of the most difficult periods for Mongolian musicians and artists in modern history. Society was on the verge of bankruptcy, and many musical schools were forced to close because they could no longer financially support themselves (UB-9). With the economic future of the nation appearing bleak, many professional musicians and performers left their craft in favor of commerce, hoping to be able to provide a comfortable livelihood for themselves and their families (UB-9).

Even now, thirty years after Mongolia's democratic transition, Mongolian artists and institutions are still reeling from the sudden revoking of national financial support for the arts (S-1). S-1, a pensioned musician who spent her entire career at the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater and continues to work part-time at the institution due to its lack of employees, noted that although the state continues to fund Mongolian artists and institutions, rural theaters and artists have had a particularly difficult time adjusting to the transition between socialism and democracy. During the socialist period, musicians were given subsidized housing and appropriate salaries from the government to live in Sainshand and work at the theater (S-1). This policy allowed even rural institutions such as the *Saran*

Khukhuu theater to attract the nation's top musicians, but now that it is no longer in place, she said, all the best musicians go to Ulaanbaatar, where they can receive a more adequate salary for their work (S-1). Because of this, the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater, which boasted a staff of twenty-six musicians during the socialist period, now has only seven working musicians (S-1). Although she felt that the ending of the socialist period brought more options to musicians across the nation, S-1 was adamant that the sudden political transition brought great financial turmoil, particularly to rural artists.

According to *morin khuur* player and teacher S-7, after democracy, "everything in Mongolia lost direction". S-7 and S-11, both music teachers in Mongolia's new democratic era, mentioned a decrease in the quality of musical education after the end of socialism. Although folk art has achieved a level of attention and development that was not possible under the socialist government, institutions have become much more lenient in their standards of acceptance (S-11). Under the capitalist system in which schools accept direct payment from their students, S-11 asserted that it is easy to graduate as long as one pays. With this change, more and more students are graduating at a lower level of skill and appreciation for the technical expertise of socialist musical styles (S-11).

Although none of the above testaments were exactly optimistic, each expressed hope for the future. S-1 predicted an increase in folk art opportunities, while S-11 asserted that education and school programs will only improve with time and UB-9 was adamant that the nation "did not lose the conditions for future development". While many of the artists educated and employed in the socialist

period have expressed frustration with the changes that have occurred in the last decades since Mongolia's democratic transition, most also expressed threads of optimism and hope.

UB-4, a *morin khuur* musician and *khuumii* singer at the State Morin Khuur Ensemble who graduated from the Mongolian University of Arts and Culture in the 1990s, believed that the acceptance of democracy brought a necessary awakening of folk art. Although he believed that the continued studying of classical music is necessary to develop other styles of music in the future, he asserted that this awakening of folk is what "makes culture more colorful today".

Born in 1960, UB-8 is a state-honored jazz and contemporary singer who began professional training at the Children's Palace when she was only eight years old. At the Children's Palace, she was enrolled in what she described as a "communist-oriented ideological program" that specialized in songs about the socialist party, the nation, and Vladimir Lenin. Although she possessed fond memories of her socialist-era career, she recalled that every concert program needed to be approved by the Ministry of Culture, and that she was not allowed to deviate from the Ministry's list of approved songs. When speaking about the democratic transition, UB-8 stated, "freedom for artists became like fresh air for everybody". With the freedom to choose, artists could finally find their own voice (UB-8).

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the future of Mongolian folk and national music, and although perspectives about the decades since the ending of the socialist period were mixed, projections for the future of music in

Mongolia were unanimously positive. Perhaps the most prevalent goal for the future among the participants of this study was the hope of international recognition of Mongolian culture. UB-7, a former assistant flutist at the *Saran Khukhuu* theater in Sainshand felt that, before the democratization of Mongolia, the international community did not know about the *morin khuur* or *urtyu duu*. With the expanse of information and technology now available to Mongolian musicians, however, these folk art traditions have become “Mongolia’s name card” (UB-7). In the future, Mongolian folk music will only gain more popularity as it enters Western radio stations and films, and the rest of the world realizes its value (UB-7).

For UB-13, a teacher and director of national arts at the Mongolian University of Arts and Culture, the future of Mongolian folk music will usher in a new era of international involvement, beginning with contemporary folk-rock band The HU. UB-13 felt that the future of Mongolian music will be positive precisely because Mongolia possesses the European techniques and styles leftover from socialist cultural policies that are necessary to explain Mongolian music to the rest of the world. With their combination of traditional Mongolian folk instruments and singing and Western instrumentalization and styles, The HU “gave folk music a chance to survive” (UB-13).

‘Mongolian Music’

[Mongolian music] has many different features, and, compared to the socialist period, we would see many different flowers in the garden. During the socialist period, the gardener was only one person, and that was the Communist Party. What kind of flower should be planted? How closely should it be nurtured? What kind of flower should be plucked out? All of this is at the decision of the

gardener, but nowadays we have many gardeners. The artist himself is a gardener. Political parties and foreign NGOs are gardeners...And the future of Mongolian music will be defined by the relationship between all of these actors. (UB-2)

As shown above, political anthropology professor UB-2 viewed the concept of Mongolian music as a garden of flowers, growing at the hands of multiple actors. With all the geopolitical changes that the nation of Mongolia has experienced in the last century alone, and all of the gardeners to which the flowers of music have been exposed, one may pose the question of identity. What does it mean to be Mongolian? What does it mean to play 'Mongolian music'? What makes that music fundamentally Mongolian? How does a nation that has experienced so much politically charged cultural change forge its own musical identity? How do musicians decide what makes a piece of music fundamentally Mongolian? Can music with external cultural influences be considered Mongolian? These are precisely the types of questions that were asked to the participants of this study, and their answers felt significant enough to warrant their own section of discussion.

Although UB-2's statement was meant to convey the idea of Mongolian music as something that evolves as an exploration of the present condition of the world, and is therefore confined and controlled by its surroundings, his usage of the metaphor of music as a flower is, in many respects, representative of the broader conception of Mongolian music and its relation to nature among musicians and performers in the current era. As stated by retired state-honored opera singer UB-10, "The definition [of Mongolian music], in our eyes, is melody connected with nature."

When state-honored singer and author S-2 was asked about her ideas of Mongolian music, she mentioned “peace and space”. The example that she provided of this definition was long song, or *urtyn duu*. “[*Urtyn duu*] is the imagination of a green field, a big space...It is like the mind on horseback” (S-2). According to S-2, the roots of Mongolian music are inextricably connected to nature, and the only way to truly understand that music is to view it through the lens of nature. “Even in modern times,” she said, “each Mongolian performance always includes nature” (S-2).

“You can feel nature from our art” (UB-6). Composer and folk-rock musician UB-6 stressed not only nature, but the expression of traditional musical methods such as *urtyn duu* as the definition of Mongolian music. In his perspective, these traditional methods were created as a bridge between nature and human expression (UB-6). He stated the following:

Through long song, you can explain cosmic feeling. There is no expression of nature like the long song. It is an explanation of the human soul...but to understand the long song, you cannot be human. You must think about yourself as a part of nature. But in a settlement lifestyle, a person is limited, blocked, boxed. That is why a person from a city may not understand at first. But if you think about nature, without boxes, without walls, without limit, if you feel yourself to be a part of nature, the long song and your soul will be combined. (UB-6)

Of similar importance to nature in participants’ understandings of Mongolian music is the expression of nomadic lifestyle. Having grown up in a nomadic family in eastern Mongolia before leaving the nation to study music in Bulgaria, opera singer and teacher UB-9 placed great value on his nomadic upbringing, emphasizing nomadism and the transferring of tradition as the two

most vital aspects of Mongolian music. “Among nomadic people, everything that is learned transfers from generation to generation” (UB-9). UB-9 explained that, to breed animals, nomadic communities used music. To ease the birthing process for female livestock and aid in the development of a mother-child relationship, herders used special songs, and these songs were passed from family to family, generation to generation. “That,” he explained, “was the basis of national art” (UB-9).

Retired singer S-8 described her conception of Mongolian music simply as “nomadic lifestyle”. When asked to elaborate, S-8 stated the following:

[Nomadic lifestyle] is why people are seeing such a wide connection to nature. They are expanding their nomadic lifestyle through the music and instruments. So that is the difference between Mongolian people and other nations. This is a nomadic lifestyle, people try to communicate with nature and express their feelings of nature through the instruments. So that’s the Mongolian definition. Nomadism.

For S-8, the nation’s long history of nomadism has provided the necessary link between humanity and nature that has made Mongolian music so unique.

S-11, a professional *limbe* player and teacher, also differentiates Mongolian music from other cultures by its proximity to nature and nomadism. Through the connection of human life and nature made possible only by the nomadic lifestyle, he asserted that Mongolian music could accurately convey the human condition in a way that no other type of music could. “The world is saying that Mongolia is a very primitive and poor country, but it’s not” (S-11). Gesturing down at the *limbe* in his lap, he said, “Even this flute can imagine and explain all conditions of human life. Like birth, like happiness, like working with animals,

you know, you can explain with this instrument. It's not a primitive culture” (S-11).

UB-12, a music teacher at the Mongolian University of Education who has been performing and teaching for nearly forty years, defined Mongolian music as a “national form”, something that is deeply personal to Mongolian lifestyle and history. This music “explains an open, green field, a Mongolian human being, and the beauty of Mongolian nature” (UB-12). To UB-12, “Mongolian music is the open soul of a Mongolian human”.

Similar to UB-12, retired flutist UB-7 felt that Mongolian music had a national form that set it apart from every other nation’s music. As a fundamentally nomadic nation, UB-7 said that the most vital aspects of Mongolian music are the traditional techniques such *urtyn duu*, *morin khuur*, and “story tales” that originated as ways of expressing nomadic identity. He explained that all three methods, but especially *urtyn duu*, originated in direct relation to nomadic lifestyle in order to explain nature (UB-7). “Natural pictures like the sun rising, a green field, domestic animals, and the people breeding the animals, and living in a *ger* are all very peaceful” (UB-7). For that reason, they need their own methods of artistic expression, and these methods are what constitute Mongolian music.

According to state-honored singer UB-8, the *morin khuur* is the single most important factor of Mongolian music, followed by *urtyn duu*. To UB-8, Mongolian people are inseparable from nature and nomadism. Therefore, Mongolian music must be explained by nomadic methods. “This is our pride” (UB-8).

Whether through connection to nature, nomadism, or historical differentiation, one of the most prevalent themes in definitions of Mongolian music is its individuality from any other nation in the world. *Morin khuur* teacher UB-1 described Mongolian music as “traditional”. According to UB-1, Mongolian music is not similar to any other type of music due to the specific tempos, pentatonic scales, and tones that arise even in contemporary Mongolian music that are traditional only to the nation of Mongolia.

A summation of informants’ ideas of Mongolian music can best be provided by the words of the former director of the *Saran Khukhuu* Theater and current director of the Dornogovi Aimag Museum, S-3. S-3 explained that Mongolian art is an expression of nature because Mongolian people are, themselves, extensions of nature.

Through the nomadic lifestyle, we are connected with nature...Even the *morin khuur* is based on animals. From this kind of lifestyle, we have a specific culture and art. If Western people or people from different countries try to learn this art, they will not do better than Mongolians. But Mongolian men or Mongolian artists can learn different cultures more quickly and adopt it. They have specific skills to learn any music. (S-3)

When she was asked why Mongolian were so unique in their musical skills among the world’s population, S-3 stated:

Firstly, a Mongolian man is natural. They are not affected by a different way of civilization. Secondly, for Mongolians, there is nothing which is not life. Mongolians are communicating with surroundings and nature like they are human beings. For example, animals are not just animals. Mongolians communicate with them like human beings... Everything in nature is life. It’s not physical. In that way, communication between Mongolian men and nature is art... Our real life is art. That is why we are different from the rest of the world. (S-3)

Discussion

Limitations, Strengths, and Recommendations for Future Research

While consistent efforts were taken to decrease any possible limitations of this study, the four-week time constraint and the language barrier between the researcher and participants both inhibited its possibilities in some ways. The fact that a translator was used means any direct quotes or vocabulary choices analyzed in this study may have slightly different meanings and connotations in Mongolian than they do in English. Without questioning the skills of the translator, it is also possible that mistakes may have occurred, or important pieces of information were missed during the translation process, simply due to the quantity of information being shared in the span of each interview, potential mistakes which could decrease the validity of this study.

Moreover, the time constraints dictated by the nature of this study have greatly impeded its possible scope. Twenty-five participants, while reasonable for a month-long project, is quite a small sample of the total population of musicians and performers in Mongolia. A larger pool of participants from a larger variety of locations throughout the nation would have allowed for a more comprehensive examination into the impacts of the socialist period on the lives and perspectives of Mongolian musicians and performers.

In the future, similar studies conducted by a more seasoned, Mongolian-speaking researcher could greatly contribute to the anthropological understanding of the impacts of the socialist period on musicians and performers in Mongolia. With more experience and, ideally, much more time to complete the study, future

researchers would be able to interview a more diverse group of people from a greater variety of locations, and, therefore, obtain a more representative understanding of socialist impacts than was possible in this study. To increase accessibility of information and transparency of analysis, future researchers would benefit from publishing their findings both in Mongolian and in English so that informants of the study may have the ability to review its results, a feat that was, unfortunately, not possible to accomplish for this study.

All of this being said, this study does possess its own unique strengths, the most significant of which is, arguably, the time in which it took place. After thirty years, enough time has passed that the impacts of a new form of government and its following changes in cultural practices can fully be understood on the lives of current musicians, but the period of socialism is recent enough that most of those musicians who were active during that era are still alive and possessing the capacity to speak coherently about their experiences.

Summary and Explanation of Results

The widespread impacts of Mongolia's socialist period on the perspectives of the nation's musicians and performers are undeniable, but what exactly is their significance? What do informants' ideas of the evolution of music actually mean, what do they imply about the future of Mongolian music? Although all of the interviewees possessed their own, often complex memories and perceptions of Mongolia's socialist era, impacted by their age, experiences, and artistic values, several consistent themes emerged from the data.

Perhaps most striking in participants' perceptions of the impacts of socialism on musical culture were the concepts of development and cultural progression. Although many recalled that there "wasn't any choice" (S-3) due to the harsh censorship that they experienced at the hands of the state, informants felt that the final result of the often-difficult socialist cultural policies was positive. Informants did not believe that the music of pre-socialist Mongolia was necessarily bad, but they credited the socialist period for elevating national music to a "world level" (S-7, UB-3).

Although one may expect that post-socialist cultural change was immediate and intense, early in the aftermath of Mongolia's transition to democracy, change occurred slowly. With an economy on the brink of total collapse, teachers and educational institutions did not have the capacity to embrace the possibilities of artistic and ideological freedom; in fact, many musicians were forced to leave their artistic fields entirely in favor of commerce. When effects of the ending of the socialist period finally did reach Mongolian musicians and performers, its impacts were somewhat controversial. There are some who believe that democracy brought ideological freedom and a new color to existing cultural practices, while others believe that the influences of the market economy have decreased the value of Mongolian art and artists as a whole. Regardless of their opinions about the last several decades since the end of the socialist era, however, participants believe that the future of Mongolian musical culture will be a good one. By adapting traditional folk music with the strong baseline of European classical musical knowledge leftover from the socialist

period, musicians believe that the future will bring positive global recognition to Mongolian musical culture.

In recent history, the music of Mongolia has been impacted by multiple political revolutions and regimes. The interplay between various sources of power has caused some musical forms to have been celebrated while others were ignored or even persecuted. Yet, when participants were asked to define their own conceptions of Mongolian music, their answers were nearly universally related to the innate connection between humans and nature, the nomadic lifestyle of Mongolia, and the musical techniques that have allowed artists to express these intimate connections.

Cultural Development during the Socialist Period

The word ‘development’ was mentioned in relation to the influence of socialist cultural policies in twenty out of twenty-five interviews. It is important to acknowledge once more that a translator was used to collect these interviews and that interviewees’ responses were originally in Mongolian; with this, it is possible that informants’ original wording did not carry the exactly the same connotations as its English counterpart. Even if this is the case, however, the meaning behind the word remains. While it may, on a surface level, appear simply to be an innocuous piece of vocabulary used to describe the changes to music that occurred during the seventy years of socialist leadership, the word ‘development’ implies an innate statement of value. With the use of the word ‘development’, the broader implication is that, although Mongolian musical culture existed before the socialist period, the influence of socialism somehow increased its value,

developing Mongolian musical culture into something greater, more complicated, and more fit for a ‘world level’.

Today, the word ‘development’ is almost always used in the context of some external, generally wealthy nation or organization deciding that the culture, economy, or lifestyle of another nation is, in some way, unfit and in need of improvement and believing that they can “improve the lives” of its citizens through “sheer goodwill” (Doane, 2014). Although in many cases, these external groups believe that they have the best intentions in mind, viewing a nation as either culturally ‘developed’ or ‘undeveloped’ not only severely oversimplifies every aspect of the so-called ‘undeveloped’ nation, but places the ‘developed’ savior nation in a position of fabricated moral superiority (Doane, 2014). Within this dynamic, the savior nation then obtains the power to impose its own ideas of development onto the ‘undeveloped’ nation without any self-awareness or concern for cultural compatibility (Doane, 2014).

This passage is not meant to claim that the participants of this study were intentionally disparaging pre-socialist musical culture and practices in any way. Rather, the widespread usage of the word ‘development’ in relation to musical culture is, in itself, a relic of socialist cultural policies. During the socialist period, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party “incorporated goals and objectives into the program directives, which would have resulted in building ‘an equal classless society’ through breaking ‘the vestiges of the past’, i.e. basic principles of socio-political and economic system of Mongolia during the feudal epoch” (Rodionov et al., 2018, p. 1). Under the influence of the Soviet Bolsheviks, the

socialist government attempted to ‘modernize’ the culture of Mongolia by introducing cultural practices such as classical music and European opera, and “eliminating negative aspects of human nature” by repressing cultural practices such as Buddhism that did not fit with the ‘developed’, modern society that they were trying to create (Rodionov et al., 2018, p. 1).

Of course, the impacts of the socialist period are much more complex than simple cultural repression or forced modernization. It is true that the changes that occurred during the seven decades of socialist control have allowed Mongolian musicians and performers to receive international training and recognition. According to some participants, it is even true that the musical techniques provided during the socialist period are precisely what have allowed Mongolian artists such as The HU to introduce Mongolian folk music to an international audience. In many ways, Mongolian musical culture has evolved since the beginning of the socialist period, and many of the changes that occurred can easily be interpreted as positive. The ubiquity of the concept of cultural development in the minds of the musicians and performers of the socialist era, however, is highly indicative of the lasting impacts of socialist ideals of modernization on Mongolian musical culture, even after more than thirty years of democracy.

Post-Socialist Self-Definition

As previously mentioned, a majority of the participants of this study described the socialist period as a complex, but overall positive force of change to Mongolian musical practices. State censorship, or *cenzur*, was inescapable for

professional performers, and musicians did not possess the same artistic freedom that is possible today, but artists still felt that the socialist period increased the nation's musical abilities and global relevance. As such, when participants were asked to define their conceptions of 'Mongolian music', it would be reasonable to presume that responses would reflect the impacts of socialism, but the opposite is true.

Seventeen out of twenty-five interviewees mentioned the relationship between Mongolian people and nature in their definitions of Mongolian music, while eleven mentioned nomadism and livestock herding as the root of Mongolian traditional musical practices. Many of these interviewees also felt that Mongolian musicians and performers were unique in their abilities among the musicians of other nations precisely because of the relationships between herders and their nature. To succeed as a herder, especially during the difficult birthing season, it is necessary to be able to communicate with one's livestock (UB-7), and the best way to do this is through music. Although nearly every nation or ethnic group has arguably developed a rich culture of art and music, the difference between Mongolia and these nations is that Mongolian art developed as an innate feature of everyday life (UB-3).

Although the socialist cultural policies of the last century changed nearly everything about Mongolian musical culture, the definitions of Mongolian music all allude either to pre-socialist musical practices or to the aspects of Mongolian life that could not be changed by socialism. This act of self-definition is not a rejection of socialism or an attempt to return to a simpler, untainted past, as

suggested by Curran and Radhakrishnan. Socialist impacts are clearly recognized by the musicians and performers of the current era; rather, identifying Mongolian music as something that is deeply natural and connected to a nomadic lifestyle signifies a sense of musical identity that cannot be altered even by the most drastic external impositions or governmental regimes.

This, in combination with informants' emphasis on cultural development, however, paints a picture of deep complexity when analyzing the true impacts of the socialist period on the identities and perspectives of Mongolian musicians and performers. For the Mongolian artists who were trained and employed during the socialist period, the only types of music that can be considered fundamentally 'Mongolian' are the traditional musical practices connected to nature and nomadism that had been passed down from generation to generation for centuries before the socialist period. Yet, these same artists found it to be nearly impossible to separate the socialist ideals of development, modernization, and 'world levels' of talent from contemporary Mongolian musical culture, believing that continued development and acceptance of modern musical practices is the best way for Mongolian art to reach a global stage.

These discrepancies in identity do not negate the work of musicians in the post-socialist era to embrace the roots of Mongolian traditional music, nor do they erase all of the positive impacts that the socialist period had on Mongolian musical culture. They are, instead, indicative of the fundamental complexity of geopolitical change. Individual musicians and performers in Mongolia did not have any influence in the political decision to adopt a socialist government, nor

did they, in any real sense, have a say in the socialist period's ending. When the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party was the only gardener nurturing the flower of Mongolian music, artists were subjected completely to its Soviet-influenced cultural propaganda. When the socialist government lost power and the free market, contemporary Western musical influences, and competing political parties suddenly entered this garden, artists were forced to adapt to an entirely new system of power and all of the cultural changes that followed. In the decades that followed this shift, Mongolian musicians and performers have carried conflicting ideas of their own experiences and cultural identities, but this is to be expected from those most fundamentally impacted by the shock of geopolitical change.

Conclusion

If music is “a core expression of and means for performing cultural identity” (Curran & Radhakrishnan, 2021, p. 103), and it has been established that the musical practices of Mongolia’s new era of democracy do not differ strongly from those of the socialist period, then one must critically analyze the enduring effects of the socialist period on the cultural identity of the musicians and performers who were trained or employed under that system in order to understand the broader impacts of socialist cultural policies on Mongolian culture. Through a total of twenty-five interviews in Dornogovi aimag and the city of Ulaanbaatar, the goal of this study was to do just that. Throughout the data collection process, participants explained their perceptions of the impacts of the socialist period, the changes that occurred in the decades since the beginning of democracy, and their definitions of the concept of ‘Mongolian music’.

The findings were that, simply put, musical culture is not some inalterable force of a given population. Although it is arguably impossible to define exactly what makes up a musical culture, as stated by Laurent Aubert in *The Music of The Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age*, musical tradition and identity are fundamentally impacted by a myriad of changeable factors such as physical location, political history, and institutions of power (Aubert, 2007, p. 10). Moreover, humans are not infallible. They are extremely susceptible to cultural propaganda and the influences of power that they experience, even when the ideas of those forces are competing, so much so that even the smoothest of

political or cultural transitions are burdened by the enduring baggage of the human condition.

A 2022 study has shown that exposure to only one piece of “soft” propaganda such as a politically-charged song or performance creates noticeable impacts on average citizens for as long as a week (Mattingly, 2022, pg. 1584), so one can only imagine the lasting impacts on those musicians and performers who were employed by the state for multiple decades to disseminate such propaganda. Although more than thirty years have passed since the ending of Mongolia’s socialist period, unlearning the ideas that have been spoon-fed to the population for decades takes time, and the ripple effects of the competing systems of power and cultural influence that the nation has experienced in the last century alone have expanded into all aspects of Mongolian culture. While occasionally contradictory, the perceptions of socialist impacts on musical identity among the Mongolian artists of this study who have experienced both the socialist and democratic periods are acutely representative of the process with which populations slowly adjust to the competing cultural forces of sudden geopolitical change.

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Appendix One: Informant Chart

Location code	Date	Location	Birth Year	Career
UB-1	11/14/22	Ulaanbaatar	1975	Morin Khuur instructor at the Children's Palace
S-1	11/15/22	Sainshand	1961	Musician at the Sainshand Theater
S-2	11/15/22	Sainshand	1938	State-honored singer and author
S-3	11/15/22	Sainshand	1970	Manager of art at aimag museum
S-4	11/15/22	Sainshand	1951	Doctor and hotel owner
S-5	11/15/22	Sainshand	1960	Singer and theater director
UB-2	11/15/22	Sainshand (Virtually)	Not disclosed	Professor and researcher
S-6	11/16/22	Sainshand	1969	Music teacher at <i>Saran Khukhuu</i> Theater
S-7	11/16/22	Sainshand (Virtually)	1965	Morin khuur player and teacher in Dornogovi aimag
S-8	11/16/22	Sainshand (Virtually)	1957	Singer
S-9	11/17/22	Sainshand	1955	Professional painter
S-10	11/17/22	Sainshand	1969	Director of Sainshand Library and writer
S-11	11/17/22	Sainshand	1960	Music teacher in Dornogovi aimag
S-12	11/17/22	Sainshand (Virtually)	1964	Dancer at Sainshand theater
UB-3	11/18/22	Ulaanbaatar	1940	Actor, TV producer and organizer

UB-4	11/18/22	Ulaanbaatar	1979	<i>Morin khuur</i> musician and <i>khuumii</i> singer at the State Morin Khuur Ensemble
UB-5	11/18/22	Ulaanbaatar	1960	Teacher of contortionism
UB-6	11/19/22	Ulaanbaatar	1982	Folk-rock musician and composer
UB-7	11/19/22	Ulaanbaatar	1944	Flute and piano player and teacher in Russia
UB-8	11/19/22	Ulaanbaatar	1960	State-honored jazz singer
UB-9	11/21/22	Ulaanbaatar	1977	Head of Faculty of Singers at the Mongolian State Conservatory
UB-10	11/21/22	Ulaanbaatar	1952	State-honored opera singer
UB-11	11/21/22	Ulaanbaatar	1955	Teacher at Mongolian State Conservatory
UB-12	11/21/22	Ulaanbaatar	1958	Music teacher at the Mongolian University of Education
UB-13	11/21/22	Ulaanbaatar	1975	Teacher and director of national arts at the Mongolian University of Arts and Culture

Appendix Two: Interview Questions

- To start off, can you tell me a little bit about your history as a musician or performer?
 - What year were you born?
 - How old were you when you began playing music?
- Do you play music with an organization or as a freelance artist?
 - (If with an organization) How did you find this organization and why did you choose it over other organizations?
 - (If as a freelance artist) How did you begin playing as a freelance musician? Do you have another career, as well?
- How were you introduced to music as a child?
 - Were any of your family members artists or performers?
 - If so, what did they play?
 - How were they taught?
 - Were you encouraged by your family or teachers to begin playing music or did you decide on your own?
 - How were you taught and who was your teacher?
- What instrument or instruments do you play?
 - Why did you decide to play this instrument?
 - Are there any instruments that you cannot play, but wish that you could?
 - What are they?
- Can you describe what you remember about musical education in schools when you were a child?
 - What styles of music were most commonly taught in schools?
 - Were there any types of music that were not allowed to be played?
 - If so, what types of music were they?
 - What reasons were you given for these restrictions?
- Can you describe the professional opportunities available to musicians during the socialist period?
- What professional opportunities are available to musicians now?
 - How do these opportunities differ from those that were available during the socialist period?
- How do you think that socialism has impacted music and performance in Mongolia?
 - How are these impacts seen today?
- How was music played in Mongolia before the socialist period?
- What is your perception of the role of the Soviet Union in influencing music in Mongolia?
 - For what reasons do you believe that the Soviet Union would want to make these changes?
- How has folk music in Mongolia changed since the Democratic Revolution in the early 1990s?
 - How do you feel about these changes?

- Many scholars cite the Westernization of music as one of the most influential impacts of the socialist regime in Mongolia. For example, ensembles were reorganized to mimic European orchestras and instruments such as the *morin khuur* were altered to appear more like the Western cello.
 - How do you feel about this claim?
 - What are your experiences with the Westernization of music in Mongolia?
- How do you define 'Mongolian music'?
 - Are there multiple types of Mongolian music?
 - What makes this music fundamentally Mongolian?
- In your experience, how does folk music impact the sense of national identity of Mongolia?
- In your opinion, what is the future of Mongolian national music?
 - How do you predict that it will grow and evolve?
 - Why do you think this?