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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

On China's Cartographic Embrace: A View from Its Northern Rim

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Abstract

Although relations between China and Mongolia are good, with no outstanding territorial disputes, Mongolia continues to view its southern neighbor with considerable anxiety. Numerous paranoid narratives circulate, hinting at China's alleged malevolent intentions, and many Mongols are convinced that China is intent on a takeover. This article argues that this anxiety is located in two particular cartographic gaps. The first is the misalignment between People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC) maps, namely the fact that Taiwanese maps include Mongolia within the boundaries of China. For the majority of Mongolian viewers who do not read Chinese, this constitutes a clear case of cartographic aggression. The second gap is found in cultural-historical maps of China that portray large swaths of northern Asia as regions formerly inhabited by Chinese. While neither map constitutes a political claim, the Chinese cultural imaginary each portrays posits Mongolia as "not quite foreign." Rather than "cartographic aggression," the term "cartographic embrace" may be a better designation here. Even if Chinese cartographic practices do not index intent, for countries like Mongolia—whose political existence is founded on separation from China—cultural "embrace" can be even more threatening.

Keywords: Mongolia, cartography, anxiety, Sinophobia, mapping, individuation, paranoia, territorial disputes

The danger as seen in this discourse was not of a heroic confrontation with a masculine other, but that the feminine other would completely dissolve the masculine self of the Sikh. "With such an enemy," said one warning, "even your story will be wiped out from the face of the earth."

—Veena Das, *Life and Words* (2007)

Introduction

Since the term "cartographic anxiety" was first coined, independently, by geographer Derek Gregory and political scientist Sankaran Krishna in 1994, it has been eagerly taken up by numerous scholars. The term has continued to resonate in multiple contexts as a useful

theoretical handle denoting the gap between cartographic representations and political claims (Painter 2008; Pickles 2004; Ramaswamy 2002). Similarly, the related terms “cartographic violence” and “cartographic aggression” evoke claims made by neighboring states to territories perceived to be an inalienable part of the nation. If these terms sound somewhat hyperbolic, their legal ramifications and potential military consequences are frequently all too real.

In 2010 the Indian government threatened to sue Google for incorrectly depicting its international boundaries around the provinces of Jammu and Kashmir (*India Today* 2010). India is, in fact, extremely sensitive about all graphic representations of its borders, to the extent that all published maps of the country require a legal disclaimer, such as “the external boundaries of India as depicted on this map are neither correct nor authentic” (Kabir 2009, 9). Anxiety about borders is not specific to India, however. Another famous diplomatic dispute was set off in 2012 with the release of China’s new passport, whose design featured a watermarked map of China that contained Taiwan and disputed territories claimed by India, as well as a vast stretch of the South China Sea that included islands claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries (Fisher 2012). In anger, Vietnamese border officials refused to stamp the new passports, while India decided to stamp its own version of the map on visas issued to Chinese citizens.

These reactions are testament to the sensitive nature of political cartography. Mapping, as J. B. Harley (2001) and other geographers have shown, has long been a powerful tool of control and domination. As European colonial powers penetrated deeper and deeper into the Asian, African, and American continents, physical occupation was paralleled by cartographic representation. In fact, maps frequently anticipated empire insofar as they were used in colonial promotion, with lands being claimed on paper before they were effectively occupied (Harley 2001, 57). Not only does the map precede the territory (Baudrillard 1981); cartography constitutes, in fact, the only way in which the nation can be apprehended. The nation-state, too vast to be taken in by the senses, can be visually represented only through the map—and more precisely through its outline. As a result, the nation’s contours—its “logomap,” in the felicitous phrasing of Benedict Anderson (1991)—has extended well beyond a question of branding (figure 1);¹ it has become a full-fledged fetish.



Figure 1. A bottle of Italian limoncello in the shape of the country. Photo by the author, 2014.

Repetitive educational and commercial practices are crucial to the project of successfully familiarizing national subjects with the logomap, and this is especially true for recently created nations that seek to project an organic, transhistorical identity.² In the 1920s, school exercise books in the Republic of Ireland (then the “Irish Free State”) had maps of the country on the cover, as an everyday reminder of the shape of the nation (MacLaughlin 2001). The national map has also been a constant and central feature of Turkish political culture since the establishment of the republic in 1923 (Batuman 2010, 220). Detached from the field of official cartography and reproduced as a pop-culture image, the Turkish map has become “open to a new iconographic field through the new signs and symbols attached to it” (Batuman 2010, 222).

Unsurprisingly, a nation’s citizens learn to form a strong affective bond with their logomap, and they may come to see the familiar contour as a visual extension of their civic identity (Billé 2014). The nation’s outline, as guarantor of the continued existence of the polity, is thus invested with enormous symbolic significance. As a result, even tiny specks of land, too barren or too distant to hold economic or material value, have been the focus of long-standing and frequently violent altercations. A Sino-Russian territorial dispute over a couple of small

uninhabited river islands in the Heilongjiang/Amur River plagued the two countries' relations for decades and nearly led to an all-out war in the 1960s. When the conflict was finally resolved in the early 2000s, largely to China's advantage, it was described in China as the reinstatement of the nation's proper shape—the tip that had been missing from the cockerel's crest (*The Economist* 2008).

Countless other examples of cartographic violence could be given, to the extent that every state is subject to “cartographic anxieties” of some kind. In fact, one might say that “cartographic anxiety” is at the core of the modern nation, since borders—as currently conceptualized—are comparatively recent. Up until the mid-seventeenth century,³ nations were articulated on ties of fealty between persons, rather than on an unambiguous mapping of space. As such, monarchs and rulers generally showed little interest in uninhabited territories (Winichakul 1994). In the contemporary understanding of space, by contrast, “state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory” (Anderson 1991, 19). Gradually, the “medieval frame of mind” gave way to a more abstract notion whereby “space could be referenced to a geometrical net of lines of longitude and latitude and could thus everywhere be accorded the same importance” (Woodward 1991, 87, in Traub 2000, 49). The homogenization of territorial authority—and its attendant elimination of non-territorial forms of organization—has been heavily reliant on the ossification of political boundaries as well as a novel concern for borders.

The case analyzed here is somewhat different, insofar as the border between China and its northern neighbors is not subject to contestation. China recognized Mongolia's independence as early as 1949, and by 1962 all territorial disputes between the two countries had been resolved.⁴ And yet, although several decades have elapsed, Mongolia continues to view China with considerable anxiety. Numerous paranoid narratives circulate, hinting at China's alleged malevolent intentions, and many Mongols are convinced that China is intent on a takeover (Billé 2015). If such fears are less virulent in Russia, the presence of Chinese there also tends to be equated with a Chinese master plan with the ultimate goal of (re)colonizing the Russian Far East. Focusing in particular on the Mongolian case, I argue in this article that this anxiety is located in two particular cartographic gaps. The first is the misalignment between People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC) maps, namely the fact that Taiwanese maps include Mongolia (and parts of Russia) within the boundaries of China. For the majority of Mongolian

viewers who do not read Chinese, this constitutes a clear case of cartographic aggression. The second cartographic source of anxiety is found in cultural-historical maps of China that portray large swaths of northern Asia, including Mongolia, as regions formerly inhabited by Chinese.

While neither map constitutes a political claim, the Chinese cultural imaginary portrayed by both posits Mongolia as “not quite foreign.” This liminality is experienced by Mongols who travel to China, where their foreignness is frequently questioned and where they are occasionally invited to “come back” and “rejoin the motherland.” The term “cartographic embrace,” rather than “cartographic aggression,” may be a more apt designation here. While these forms of Chinese cartography do not index aggressive intent, for countries like Mongolia—whose political existence is founded on separation from China—this warm “embrace” can be even more threatening. In fact, the softer China’s approach, the more menacing it appears.

Cartographic Blurs

For a state to be recognized as such and to be respected by the community of nations, it is imperative that it hold the full panoply of state symbols, such as a flag and an anthem. Perhaps even more crucial is that it have well-defined and unambiguous borders. Only then does a state become cohesive and coherent. The logomap—the visual representation (or “face”) of the nation—is therefore reproduced ubiquitously, not only in state media but also in all kinds of cultural forms. Popular non-state-sanctioned usage of the logomap, to promote tourism and for other cultural and commercial motives, reinforces the imagery and thereby bolsters the visual power of the logomap, but it can also unwittingly undermine it. No longer the sole domain of the state, the logomap can be reappropriated, reproduced, and reinvented. It can also be modified, for reasons ranging from humor to nationalist revanchism. Greatly facilitated by new digital technologies, alternative maps can be designed, reproduced, and disseminated quickly and cheaply. These parallel cartographies can pose problems for their respective states, even—perhaps especially—when they appear to support and extend state narratives. In a study of Turkish nationalism, Bülent Batuman gives the example of various “appropriated maps” produced digitally by ultra-nationalist individuals “through the reworking of random maps found on the Internet” (2010, 230). The most modest versions of these nationalist maps incorporated northern Iraq, all of Armenia, as well as Cyprus and the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. Bolder versions extended as far as Azerbaijan in the east and included parts of Greece in the west.

The borders of all nation-states, as they are currently conceptualized, are relatively recent. One does not need to go very far back in time to encounter unrecognizable shapes and uncanny logomaps alongside the official and familiar contours of today's world maps. In fact, one of the reasons logomaps are ubiquitous is precisely because they were so recently constructed. Parallel to the logomaps we are accustomed to, one can still find older shapes and outlines, as well as what I call "phantom territories," which extend beyond current borders. Unrepresented and unrepresentable in official state narratives, these phantom territories nonetheless continue to exert a strong affective force: not merely a historical overlay on contemporary political divisions, these overlapping cultural realms can mold understandings and even shape cultural practices (see Billé 2016).

One place where these complex dynamics are especially visible is along China's borders. In recent years, as discussed at the beginning of this article, China has used maps to project a geopolitical footprint that infringes on many of its neighbors to the south and southwest. By contrast, its borders to the north with Mongolia and Russia were settled amicably—in 1962 and 2004, respectively—and largely to China's disadvantage (Hyer 2015). In the case of Russia, China relinquished potential irredentist claims to more than 3.4 million square kilometers of land that had been part of the Qing empire at its height in the early nineteenth century; in the case of Mongolia, recognition of the latter's independence has meant the loss of half of the culturally Mongolian lands held by the Qing.⁵ Yet both polities continue to be extremely wary of China's intentions. The vast Russian Far East (RFE) region remains economically underdeveloped, with Moscow unwilling to open its borders to Chinese migrant labor and continually delaying the erection of a bridge across the Amur River that separates it from China. Russian media frequently suggest that the Chinese have already settled much of the region, as a long-term strategy to reintegrate it into the Chinese nation. In Mongolia, anxieties with regard to Chinese intentions are extensive and far more prominent. Rumors are rife that the Chinese government is planning an imminent takeover, that underground tunnels are spirited away Mongolia's natural resources, and that Chinese vegetables are purposefully being poisoned to annihilate the Mongolian nation (Billé 2015).

China's territorial hunger in the south, particularly in the South China Sea, has undeniably been a cause of concern for both Russia and Mongolia. As they watch China develop into a formidable powerhouse, they worry, understandably, that with increased power and self-

assurance, China may decide to revisit its past territorial agreements with its northern neighbors. I want to suggest, however, that these anxieties are not reducible to current economic and geopolitical trends. They are also found in cultural misalignments and, specifically, in China's cartographic and lexical practices. The fact that these anxieties precede China's rise by several decades and that they have surfaced recurrently, even at times when China was in a position of weakness, suggests as much.



Figure 2. Stamp produced to celebrate the “Treaty for Relinquishment of Extraterritorial Rights in China,” a bilateral treaty signed by the ROC with the United States and the United Kingdom on January 11, 1943.

As mentioned above, an important source of anxiety for Mongols is the coexistence of two different political maps of China—the versions produced by the PRC and the ROC. Many of my Mongolian interlocutors were not aware of the historical specifics whereby Taiwan's Republic of China continues to claim territories formerly included in the Qing Empire, such as parts of contemporary Russia, Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Burma, as well as Mongolia in its entirety (figure 2).⁶ They rarely made a distinction between the two governments, and any Taiwanese discursive or graphic claim to Mongolia was simply read as imperialist, pan-Chinese intentionality. In the early 1990s, a world globe produced in Taiwan led

to a veritable outcry in Mongolia. Sold in a number of European toy shops, it included Mongolia within the borders of China (Baabar 2006, 164). Several years later, the Taiwanese globe was still regularly cited as proof that China had never really accepted Mongolia's independence and that it planned to take it back.

If the PRC is not making claims to Mongolia—and one might argue that the ROC is no longer really making any, either—relations between the two countries remain fraught. Mongolia certainly qualifies as a territorial phantom for China: as the homeland of the Yuan rulers, Mongolia has strong historical associations with China and was tied for centuries to its destiny. Mongolia features prominently in the Chinese discourse of “national humiliation” (国耻) centered around those peripheral lands lost to foreign nations through a series of unequal treaties. In a recent study of this political discourse, political scientist William Callahan shows that although the notion of “national humiliation” does not necessarily represent dominant Chinese views, it nonetheless continues to “animate official, scholarly, and popular understandings of national territoriality in China” (Callahan 2010, 121). In this particular set of textual and cartographic narratives, national humiliation maps indicate, often in red ink, the treaty ports, massacres, and other traumatic wounds inflicted on the Chinese geo-body. As such maps illustrate, these lost lands extend far in all directions, though not all losses have been perceived as equally significant. Some, like Taiwan or the disputed islands in the South China Sea, are akin to open wounds. Mongolia, an “accepted” loss, nonetheless remains entangled in narratives of loss in the popular imagination. This loss regularly finds expression in informal conversation, and occasionally in more formal settings as well. In the 1980s, for example, the following story circulated in Chinese classrooms:

Japan, with its silkworm-like shape, ate away [Outer] Mongolia during the Second World War. Before the war, the geographic shape of China had looked like a type of leaf silkworms eat. After the war, the geographic shape of China resembled a cockerel, which meant that it would “conquer” Japan like a cockerel that eats any type of worms for lunch.⁷

At the same time, the position of Mongolia in the popular Chinese imaginary is liminal at best. Time and time again, when I talked about my research on Mongolia when traveling in China, my interviewees were unsure whether “Outer Mongolia” was independent or a part of China—a response Mongols have also reported having on their visits to Beijing. In part, this

confusion can be attributed to a lack of knowledge about the country, and to a lack of interest.⁸ It is also due to the elastic usage of *Menggu* (Mongolia) to refer to both the independent Republic of Mongolia and the Chinese autonomous province of Inner Mongolia, depending on context.⁹ But it is also linked to the entrenched notion that historically Chinese lands remain somehow Chinese, and that it is only because of historical circumstances that they have fallen outside of the Chinese nation.

The anxieties felt by China's neighbors are also tied to that country's historical view of itself as a set of nested cultural realms, from a cultural center located in the North China Plain extending outward in an "ever-widening series of concentric borderlands" (Potter 2007, 240). The formation of the Chinese state has, in fact, often been described as a process of gradual outward expansion, with China slowly incorporating lands on its margins via the Sinification or "cooking" (*shu* 熟) of surrounding barbarian groups. The line between self and other lacks firmness and clarity and is potentially subject to contestation and revision. It is largely because of this ambiguity that the presence of Chinese residents immediately arouses fears of "silent Sinification" (*сплошная китаизация*) in Russia and "spontaneous Sinification" (*аяндаа хятадчлах*) in Mongolia.

Chinese lexical practices do nothing to assuage these fears. The informal continued usage of the name "Outer Mongolia," an old colonial category from the Qing period, to refer to the independent Republic of Mongolia constitutes a great irritant for Mongols. While on the surface the term appears to exclude the Mongolian Republic from China, it remains heavily Sinocentric in that it defines the independent republic as a negative space with respect to China. By being part of a lexical twin set (inner/outer), it also ties Mongolia to China through a mirror structure that blots out—if not cancels—the apparent exclusion. It posits Mongolia as beyond China's borders but also suggests it is a potential extension, a Chinese phantom that could be reawakened and reintegrated.

This particular framing is not exclusive to Mongolia. Recently some Chinese nationalists have begun referring to China's lost territories in Manchuria (now the Russian regions of Primorsky Krai and parts of Khabarovsk Krai, Birobidjan, and the Amur Oblast) as "Outer Manchuria" (*Wai Dongbei*). While this name has not yet gained wide acceptance, it is an interesting development insofar as it is constructed on the same model as "Outer Mongolia" (*Wai*

Menggu), thus suggesting that this vast territory was previously an integral part of China, on a par with Mongolia. The “outer” element (*wai*) echoes a territory inalienably part of China, bringing the two parts into dialogue and hinting at a primordial unity. In effect, therefore, *Wai Dongbei* extends the Chinese northeast to encompass the territory lost to Russia with the signature of the Convention of Beijing in 1860. These lexical aspects are an apt illustration of the phantoms referred to earlier, in that they seek to culturally appropriate territories that are not included within the polity but continue to harness affective power through nationalist narratives. By prying open the gap that is found between political and cultural footprints, these naming practices shed light on the desired—but ultimately unattainable—fiction of the nation as an ethnically and culturally bound entity.

As discussed in the introduction, Chinese territorial extensions have been the focus of much media attention in recent years, particularly in the South China Sea, where expansive activities have grated against other states. Terraforming—the creation of islands from reefs just below, or flush with, sea level—has been used to produce terrestrial footholds to stretch the skin of the nation further to sea. Although China is not the sole nation involved in terraforming, and is in fact a latecomer to this practice, its island-building exercise has far outpaced similar efforts in the area (Watkins 2015).¹⁰

The above situation creates a complex cartographic case: simultaneous with its rhetoric of a “peaceful rise” and its efforts to resolve outstanding territorial issues with its neighbors to the north, China is attempting to expand its territorial footprint to the west and south. As a result, what China presents to the world is a logomap in flux, a shape lacking firm anchor points and always liable to seep out and encroach on its neighbors. This aggressive stance combines with a powerful cultural force that has shaped the cultures of its peripheries for millennia. For countries such as Mongolia, whose political existence is predicated on separation from China, this tension between formal political recognition and informal cultural embrace can lead to serious “cartographic anxieties.”

Individuation

The date of Mongolia’s “people’s revolution,” 1921, marks its separation from China as well as its birth as an independent country.¹¹ Until that time, Outer Mongolia had been an outlying province of the empire—with loose social ties to Han China but nonetheless firmly

within the Chinese cultural realm. Virtually all the manufactured goods found in the country hailed from China, against which were traded animal husbandry products, and it was also from China that Mongolia's most popular beverage, tea, originated.

The year 1921 marks an important caesura for Mongolia's geopolitical alignment. Having become the second socialist nation in the world, Mongolia entered the Soviet sphere of influence, initially to the exclusion of much of the rest of the world.¹² For a long time, the only diplomatic ties Mongolia had with foreign countries was with the Soviet Union. Moscow was keen to hold Mongolia as a satellite and to disentangle it from Asia, and from China in particular. Commercial connections to China were inhibited and then gradually suspended altogether. Chinese imports, which had a near monopoly in Mongolia before the revolution, had fallen to a few percentage points a decade later.

Mongolia's revolution was both political and cultural. Taking its cue from Moscow, the new Mongolian government carried out extensive propaganda campaigns against religious practices that were accompanied by a great deal of violence, including mass killings of Buddhist lamas and the destruction of most Buddhist temples (Kaplonski 2014). The decades from the Mongolian Revolution until the end of the socialist era in 1989 saw a complete cultural reframing of Mongolian practices decried as "feudal," uncivilized, and fundamentally at odds with modernity. In particular, Western notions of health and hygiene were imparted to Mongols to transform them into proper socialist citizens. These efforts were intensive and very broad, ranging from issues of biomedical practice and cleanliness to mothering and domesticity.

These transformations affected Asian practices most of all. Socialist political culture framed Asia as backward and stagnant and associated ideas of progress with European intellectual culture; as such, Asian elements within Mongolian culture were perceived with considerable ambivalence and much effort was expended to eradicate them.¹³ Ideas of modernity inculcated through formal education and propaganda campaigns were lastingly fused to Russian (i.e., European) high culture.¹⁴ Some of the first buildings erected in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, were crucial state constituents—like the parliament, designed in part to be used as a theater (Forbáth 1934, 151), or the post office—but they also included other communal spaces such as the cultural center (*соёлын ордон*) and cinemas—a blueprint typical of Soviet/Russian urban modernity.

In contrast to the imposition of European cultural forms such as ballet and opera, native cultural forms like overtone singing (*хөөмэй*) and, especially, practices that tied Mongolia to China and the rest of Asia were actively discouraged by the socialist government. It is testament to the success of these extensive propaganda campaigns that many Mongols today feel a closer affinity to the West than to the rest of Asia—to the extent that the term “Asian” (*Азийн*) is frequently used to refer to Asia to the exclusion of Mongolia. Mongols may not be Europeans, but they are certainly not Asians either.

After decades of intensive propaganda during which China was consistently depicted by the Soviet Union as both dangerous and “backward,” changes to mentalities have been slow. In spite of China’s meteoric rise, Mongols continue to perceive China in very negative terms, as a country that is “dirty” and “lacking culture” (Billé 2015). The fact that Mongolia’s status as a modern (read, “Western”) nation is contingent on the exclusion of China (as well as Asia) from its cultural narratives is evident in the process reinventing Mongolian culture that has characterized the post-1989 period. Aspects of Mongolian culture that had no overlap or counterpart in Chinese culture were enthusiastically rediscovered after the Soviet Union imploded. For example, nomadism—in idealized form if not in practice—was an ideal vehicle for tourism and for a brand of idyllic romanticism targeted at foreigners. Nomadic yurts (*зэр*), traditional coats (*дээл*), overtone singing, and the horsehead fiddle (*морин хуур*) took center stage, replacing the ubiquitous images of socialist modernity such as apartment blocks, factories, and modern citizens in professional uniforms or on public transport. Genghis Khan (M: Chingis Khaan), unmentionable for decades, was suddenly omnipresent as the great Mongolian hero—more about him later. But the presocialist elements that were perceived to be too Chinese or Asian never reappeared. The constant reiteration that chopsticks, for example, are something “Asians” use has suppressed presocialist Mongolian histories and rendered invisible some of the artifacts on display in museums. Despite these efforts to remain culturally distinct from China, common elements remain. The principal event in the Mongolian calendar—the lunar new year, or “white month/moon” (*Цагаан сар*)—shares the same origins as the Chinese New Year. Similarly, several dietary items and recipes straddle the Sino-Mongolian divide, such as *tsuivan* (*цуйван*, a noodle-based dish) and dumplings (*buuz* [бүүз] or *bansh* [банш]), but Mongols have consistently and vehemently rebuffed any suggestion of such connections.

Although rumors of Chinese malfeasance that circulate in Mongolia point to Chinese aggression and violence, the danger residing in Mongolia's southern neighbor appears to be of a different nature. In fact, the anti-Chinese sentiments that prevail in Mongolia are not found on the other side of the border. While most Chinese may not hold Mongols in particularly high regard, neither do they harbor antagonism toward them. As mentioned previously, in general the Chinese do not show much interest in their northern neighbor, and when they do it is principally for the exotic nomadic experience it represents. In other words, Mongolia is largely imagined as a remote and pristine backwater historically connected to the homeland, not as an enemy. The relation between the two countries is, if anything, akin to that of an overprotective mother and her child, insofar as—in an echo of the embracing cartographic practices described earlier—Chinese attitudes exhibit a lack of firm boundaries. More often than not, Mongols in China are met not with aggression but with the mildly curious “Oh, is Mongolia an independent country?” or, even worse, the pitiful “Mongolia is quite poor. Why don't you come back?” The danger that China represents for Mongols is therefore not one of violent confrontation but one of a soft embrace, a “feminine other” capable of swallowing and dissolving the self; not the danger of a physical conflict but of a quotidian inexorable peace (see epigraph by Veena Das at the start of this article).

I need to qualify my equation of “China” and “mother” here, as it is not one with which most Mongols would agree. The Mongolian culture, language, and way of life are, of course, in no way derived from China's. In fact, the two countries are, in many ways, complete opposites. Linguistically, Chinese and Mongolian are totally unrelated; Chinese culture is sedentary, while Mongolian culture is nomadic; and the two main religions of Mongolia—Tibetan Buddhism and Siberian shamanism—are also not shared with China. The way in which China's relationship with Mongolia recalls a maternal one is that Mongolia has had to define itself in opposition to its neighbor to ensure its autonomous identity, a process that recalls individuation. However, like an overprotective mother, China has failed to acknowledge these efforts and to take them seriously.

As mentioned previously, paranoid rumors of Chinese malfeasance are prevalent in Mongolia. One of the first utterances one is likely to hear upon arriving in Mongolia is “We Mongols hate the Chinese.” As I have argued elsewhere (Billé 2015), these statements are less a symptom of genuine hatred than a speech act of disengagement and uncoupling. And while it can be considered “hate speech,” it is not actually a discourse addressed to the Chinese. In fact,

because anti-Chinese statements are delivered in Mongolian—and to some extent in English—Chinese people in Mongolia are not always fully aware of them. An elderly Chinese woman I interviewed spoke very little Mongolian, despite having lived in Mongolia for several decades. Because her knowledge of Mongolian is limited, and because she socializes mainly with other Chinese, playing mahjong or watching Chinese television, she seemed blissfully unaware of the current prevalence of anti-Chinese narratives there. This anti-Chinese discourse, while seemingly against the Chinese, is in fact primarily directed at fellow Mongols (see Billé 2015). As utterances emphasizing the differences between Mongols and Chinese—and indirectly Mongolian alignment with Western culture—these statements are also directed at an imagined Western audience. It is therefore not coincidental that anti-Chinese speech is readily audible to Western visitors to Mongolia, and that it is also communicated in English, notably through hip-hop. For much of the twentieth century, Mongolia’s status as a modern nation was contingent on its separation from China. Despite China’s rapid development in the last couple of decades, this cultural benchmark has remained the same. Being confused for a Chinese, or being perceived to be Chinese-like, is something that must be avoided at all costs.¹⁵

A Mongolian interpreter working for the U.K. border agency related an incident to me that perfectly illustrates this situation. She was hired to interpret for a young Mongolian woman who had been arrested and was extremely agitated. “I expected that this young woman would be distraught about finding herself in jail given that her English was limited,” the interpreter related. “However, the first thing she blurted out when I met her was that people kept referring to her as Chinese, and she wanted me to inform them that she wasn’t.” Countless other examples could be given of the anxiety experienced by Mongols about being perceived as Chinese.

This anxiety is complicated by the fact that the two populations are not easily distinguishable from each other physically. During my fieldwork in Mongolia’s capital, Ulaanbaatar, I was told time and time again that Mongols and Chinese looked completely different from each other. Yet suspicions about the “real Mongolianness” (*ЖИНХЭНЭ МОНГОЛ*) of a particular person came up repeatedly in conversation. Any positive statement about China or about a Chinese person immediately drew doubts as to that person’s ethnicity. The assumption remains well entrenched that someone of unblemished Mongolian heritage will never be supportive of China and, conversely, that a positive assessment of China can only mean that the

speaker must be part Chinese. Ethnic anxiety thus operates similarly to cartographic anxiety. Officially, the line is unambiguously marked, but in reality it is fuzzy, overlapping, and labile.

In the Russian Far East some of the anxieties are comparable, although they are predominantly territorial rather than ethnic.¹⁶ Officially, Russian reluctance to build a bridge across the Amur River is due to security concerns, as doing so would facilitate the movement of Chinese troops across the border in the event of a conflict. However, if one considers that the river is frozen solid for several months every year, and that it would therefore be extremely easy for troops to move across it, it seems that the main issue is symbolic rather than pragmatic. It is also a response to a cultural view that sees China as a country in continual expansion, with borders that are always subject to renegotiation. Russian reluctance to erect a bridge, despite significant losses of potential revenue, makes sense when China is conceptualized as a country in flux, with unstable borders. Perceived spatially as a liquid, China threatens to break out and seep into its neighbors; securitizing borders is therefore of paramount importance.

Unsurprisingly, the Russian towns located at, or near, the Chinese border all feature military-themed statues and architecture that insist on Russia's historical presence in the region, despite an official narrative emphasizing Sino-Russian collaboration and friendship. The border is also lined with exclusion zones (*приграничные зоны*) and “restricted access” zones (*зоны ограниченного доступа*), which vary in width between three and sixty miles.

Russian anxieties are thus primarily territorial but, as in Mongolia, they are also ethnically marked. The museum of Blagoveshchensk, a Russian town where I have carried out field research, describes at length the Manchu, Evenki, and other ethnic groups in its history of the region prior to the arrival of Russian settlers, but makes no mention of the Chinese. Yet most of the major Russian cities in the region, such as Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Ussuriisk, emerged around 600 A.D. as Chinese settlements (Alexseev 2006, 111). Traditionally, the Chinese name for Vladivostok was Haishenwai (海参崴),¹⁷ Khabarovsk was called Boli (伯力), and Blagoveshchensk was known as Hailanpao (海兰泡). In contemporary Chinese official documents, these cities are now referred to by their Russian names—that is, Fuladiwositouke, Habaluofisike, and Bulageweishensike—but these transliterations have not wholly displaced their former names; in informal conversation, older Chinese names often resurface. These older names index the enduring national “body map” held by some Chinese, who are imagined by the

Russians of the Russian Far East as remembering the exact location of the old ginseng patches abandoned by their ancestors and yearning to reclaim possession of them (Alexseev 2006, 111).

Concluding Remarks

The main strategy adopted by Mongols in response to what they feel is a lack of rigidity on the part of China has been—as I have discussed above—to stress differences as well as a total lack of cultural overlap. To date, Mongolia has registered fourteen items of “intangible cultural heritage” with UNESCO, including the horsehead fiddle (*морин хуур*), Mongolian calligraphy, and the traditional *Naadam* festival. However, the inclusion of the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia within China means that China has also laid claim to traditional Mongolian cultural features. A case in point is overtone singing, which China listed among a number of cultural heritage artifacts in an application submitted in 2009–2010. UNESCO’s decision to list it as one of China’s intangible cultural heritages led to a veritable outcry in Mongolia, which abated only after Mongolia submitted its own request. This unique singing technique now has two entries on the UNESCO register: under both China and Mongolia (Higgins 2011). Recently, another cornerstone of Mongolian culture, the traditional Mongolian saddle, became another bone of contention when China attempted to register it as one of its intangible cultural heritages (Zoljargal 2013). Rightfully or not, Mongols have perceived these applications as a Chinese cultural power grab.

From a Chinese perspective, the inclusion of Inner Mongolian cultural artifacts and traditions is a way of giving more gravitas to the millions of Inner Mongolians and thereby recognizing and reinforcing the country’s multiethnic nature. But for Mongols across the border, these attempts blur the line that separates them from China. So steadfast are Mongols in their desire for complete separation that they have rejected their co-ethnics across the border. Seen as Sinicized and no longer genuinely Mongolian, the Mongols of Inner Mongolia are generally perceived as even worse than the Han. I have never come across maps depicting the two Mongolias together in a larger would-be Greater Mongolia, and even the most staunchly nationalist Mongols do not argue for reunification. Outer Mongolia may be a phantom territory for China, but Inner Mongolia certainly isn’t one for Mongolia.



Figure 3. The Genghis Khan Equestrian Statue, 34 miles east of the capital, Ulaanbaatar. *Source:* Photo by Steffen Wurzel (Wikipedia).

Especially distressing for Mongols has been China's recent cultural appropriation of the historical figure of Genghis Khan as an Inner Mongolian and, by extension, Chinese hero. While many Inner Mongols have bitterly contested this move (Billé 2009), the inclusion of Genghis Khan as a Chinese hero nonetheless provides them with a full participating role in the creation and development of a Chinese multiethnic nation. For Mongols in the independent Republic of Mongolia, no such silver lining exists. After having been violently suppressed for decades, the figure of Genghis Khan reemerged at the end of the socialist period as the central organizing node for a reimagining of Mongolia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Genghis effigies were suddenly everywhere, from vodka bottles to a giant statue in the middle of the steppe (figure 3), and countless places have been named after him, notably the capital's international airport and central square. The founder of the Mongol Empire, the largest contiguous empire in history, Genghis Khan stands for masculine values of valor, heroism, and strength; he therefore constitutes the perfect vehicle to counter alleged Chinese designs on the country. China's claim to Genghis Khan is thus nothing less than national emasculation. Here again, what we have is not a dispute for sole ownership, but a denial of difference. China's claim is not one of violent dispute, but one of encompassment and unity. By claiming that Genghis Khan is both Mongolia's and China's, China blurs the line Mongols are so keen to accentuate.

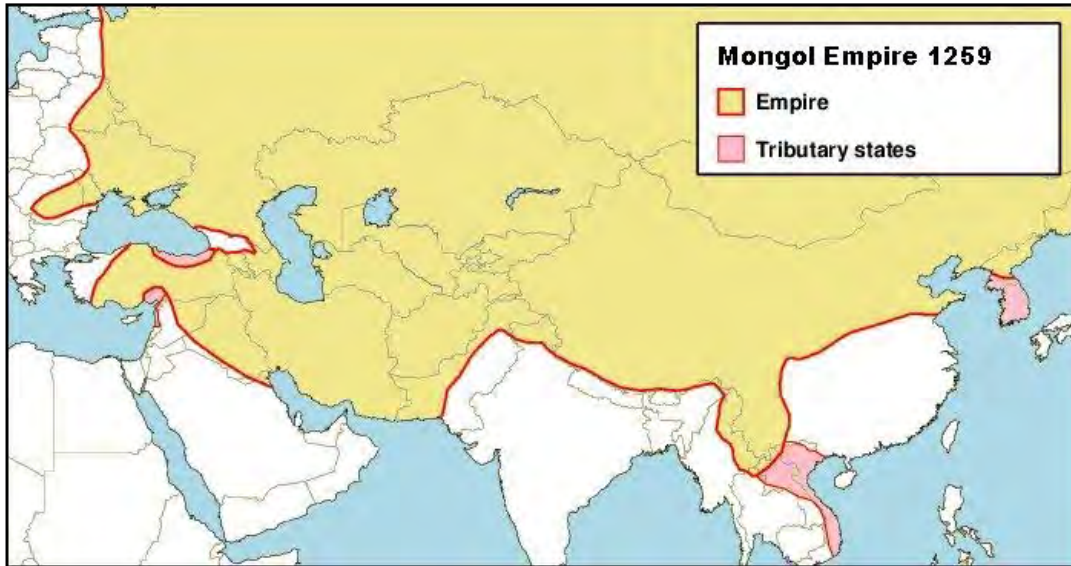


Figure 4. The extent of the Mongol Empire after the death of Möngke Khan. *Source:* Keith Pickering (Wikipedia).

What I have described so far is a process whereby China continually disrupts the fantasy of dislocation so eagerly pursued by Mongols. However, this account portrays Mongolia as merely reactive to the embrace of its southern neighbor. The situation is in fact more complex, in that Mongolia also makes cultural, historical, and territorial claims that extend well beyond its borders. Part of Mongolia's postsocialist identity has been to portray itself (primarily to itself) as a cultural center alternative to China. This has taken numerous forms, such as the prevalence of maps of the Mongolian Empire that show Mongolia extending from the Pacific in the east all the way to Hungary in the west and to India in the south (figure 4). Postsocialist narratives have also posited Mongolia as the genetic fount of much of East and Central Asia through the phenomenon of the so-called "Mongolian spot"—a birthmark most Mongols are born with and that is also prevalent in Japan, Korea, Siberia, and parts of Central Asia (see Billé 2015, 100–105; Keevak 2011). Positioning Mongolia as the original homeland of all of these populations—while excluding China from this Eurasian superset—seeks to give larger significance to this sparsely populated country landlocked between two geopolitical worlds.

These alternative Mongolian cultural/genetic maps, overlaid on the political outline, create a cartographic blur that resembles the Chinese case discussed earlier. In both situations we see a tension at work between "containment"—where borders are unambiguously defined—and

“aggrandizement”—whereby nation-states seek to project an image beyond those borders: a territorial footprint that impinges on that of others. In that sense, Mongolian narratives are not altogether different from Chinese ones. Indeed, in a fascinating echo of Chinese claims that “Mongolia used to be part of China,” Mongolian nationalists’ retort is that it is in fact China that used to be part of Mongolia.

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Notes

- 1 On the use of logomaps for the purpose of commercial and cultural branding, see Francaviglia (1995).
- 2 Nation-states with well-established and unquestioned borders do not feel the same need for constant visual reiterations. In the United States, the flag is frequently used as a potent—but territorially disembodied—referent.
- 3 The consensus in international relations is that the Treaties of Westphalia (1646–1648) marked a turning point in the organization of political authority in Europe. More recent scholarship has challenged these views, arguing that the treaties did not usher in fundamental changes and that the evolution was far more gradual (Branch 2014, 125).
- 4 For a detailed overview of the demarcation process of the Sino-Mongolian border, see Hyer (2015, 161–179).
- 5 China has retained the lands to the south, administratively known as the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR, 内蒙古自治区).
- 6 In recent years, Taiwan has bent to the demands of reality. It opened an informal embassy in Mongolia in 2002 and “simultaneously excluded Mongolia from the purview of its Mainland Affairs Council, in effect recognizing Mongolia’s sovereignty” (Lewis 2010). Mongols wishing to visit Taiwan now must obtain visas “which were not necessary so long as Taipei regarded Mongolia as one of its (temporarily) lost provinces” (Lewis 2010). At the same time, Taiwan still has not formally dropped its constitutional claims to Mongolia, making the situation extremely ambiguous.
- 7 As recounted by a Chinese friend who attended school in Guangzhou in the 1980s.
- 8 Although my Chinese interlocutors were generally well informed about European geography, a good number, many of them university students, were far less sure about northern and eastern neighbors such as Mongolia or Kazakhstan.

- 9 When differentiation is required, Neimeng(gu) 内蒙(古) (Inner Mongolia) will be contrasted with Waimeng(gu) 外蒙(古) (Outer Mongolia), or even Mengguguo 蒙古国 (the country of Mongolia).
- 10 Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan have all expanded islands in the Spratlys as well, but at nowhere near the same scale as China (Watkins 2015).
- 11 The Mongolian Revolution of 1921 was, in many respects, the final stage in a chain of events that began in 1911 and marked Mongolia's historical movement to independence.
- 12 Initially, apart from the Soviet Union, only the short-lived Soviet satellite of Tannu-Tuva (1921–1944) recognized Mongolia as an independent state. Its assimilation into the Soviet Union in 1944 left Mongolia isolated diplomatically.
- 13 This cultural hierarchy, firmly embedded in socialist ideology, also affected Chinese culture itself. See, for instance, Kraus (1989).
- 14 I am equating Russian and European cultures here, but the relation between the two is rather complex. In reality, the interstitial position of Mongolia on the East-West cultural spectrum is a reverberation of Russia's own liminal position, neither fully European nor fully Asian. Russia's colonial incursions into Central and East Asia were in fact partly meant to rehabilitate the country and elevate its status in the eyes of Europeans. The use of Asia as a terrain onto which political and cultural aspirations could be actively projected was made explicit by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the late 1880s: "In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans" (1993, 1374).
- 15 Ironically, Mongolia has played the same role in the Chinese cultural imaginary. Mongols, like China's other minority groups (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), have typically been described in terms of their traditions, music, and clothing, unlike the Han, who stand as the unmarked, "civilized" majority. Indeed, the Han will often say that they are the only nationality without music or national costume (Hansen 2005, 12; see also Joniak-Lüthi [2015] on Han self-representations). The Mongols have occupied a particular place within Chinese society as nomads associated with horses (see He 1989, 111, and Billé 2015, 110–112).
- 16 Most inhabitants of the Russian Far East are ethnic Russians who have settled there from other parts of western Russia or from Ukraine, but the population also includes many indigenous populations, such as Buryats, Mongols, Evenki, and Nanai. While the Russian population, unlike that in Mongolia, is phenotypically distinguishable from the Chinese across the border, the fact that many businesses in the Russian Far East are officially registered in the name of a local Russian but are in reality operated and owned by a Chinese individual creates similar tensions as in Mongolia—namely that the line between "Russian" and "Chinese" is far more ambiguous than it might seem.
- 17 The name Haishenwai (海参崴, "Sea Cucumber Cliffs") emerged in the eighteenth century, when the area was visited by *shenzei* (参贼, ginseng or sea cucumber thieves) who illegally entered the area seeking ginseng or sea cucumbers. During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Vladivostok appears on maps as Yongmingcheng (永明城, meaning "City of Eternal Light").

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