Flavors of Change: Redefining Meat, Masculinity, and Mongolian

Khaliun Enkhbayar, ’24

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Flavors of Change: Redefining Meat, Masculinity, and Mongolian Identity

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Senior Thesis

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Abstract

There is a saying among Mongolians that Mongolia was built on the four hoofs of livestock. Following this sentiment, Mongolians take pride in being raised on "meat and milk." My thesis explores the multifaceted role of meat in Mongolia, tracing its significance at the intersection of social connections, gender dynamics, and national identity against the backdrop of rapid socio-economic transformations over the past century.

In my research project, I followed a thread of changes that Mongolians have come to accept as their everyday reality. The past 100 years have been characterized by a widespread shift from a nomadic to a sedentary urban way of life. Mongolia, as a nation, has gone through a massive transition to a market economy in the past three decades, after being a satellite to the USSR for nearly 70 years. This study aims to examine the contemporary role of meat in shaping national identity and the expression of masculinity among men from different age groups and backgrounds. By conducting interviews with five men from rural and urban backgrounds, as well as one herder woman, I uncover how post-socialist urbanization has removed many men from the very core of performing their masculinity - nomadic lifestyle and nomadic meat consumption.

A key dimension of this study revolves around a comprehensive analysis of the changing paradigms of meat and masculinity in Mongolia, weaving historical legacies with contemporary socio-cultural shifts. Through a multifaceted methodology, I aim to shed light on the intricate interplay between meat, identity, and gender within the nation's evolving landscape.
Acknowledgements

Spending a year, researching one topic, has been both fulfilling and challenging. Through the good and bad times, I had immense support from the people around me. I would like to take the space and time to acknowledge my gratitude to everyone who helped me complete this project.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Six Mongolian women in their early twenties share updates on their lives over lunch in New York. The chitter and chatter eventually flow into an inquiry about what meat they are using to cook when they are in America. A consensus is reached that the meat in the States is “undoubtedly flavorless” compared to what they grew up eating in Mongolia. The conversation livens up at the mention of a flavorful meat. A few of them start asking what meat in America would be a close substitute for the flavor. “I tend to stick to beef,” claims one of the women as she proceeds to explain that her mom cautioned her to not feed her boyfriend with too much chicken as it is treated with too many hormones. The underlying fear was that her boyfriend would lose his masculinity and turn gay if he ate too much chicken. Some of her friends are shocked by the statement, trying to make sense of how a chicken would turn a heterosexual man gay, while some add on to it by agreeing that chicken is, indeed, considered to be a feminine meat. Over lunch, chicken becomes feminine, while beef is prized as the masculine meat.

The concern about overconsuming chicken was published in an article titled “The looming danger of estrogen-treated chicken to Mongolian men” by Mongolia’s Department of Khuvsgul Province Local Property. The article starts by speculating how Thailand came to become a “country of men who look like women,” implying the abundance of ladyboys (Department of Khuvsgul Province Local Property 2016). The article focuses on men with feminine qualities who, for example, care a lot about clothing and fashion. The author raises a question of how a nation that once had strong warrior men came to “this state.” The answer provided in the article points to estrogen-treated chicken as the culprit. Furthermore, the article posits that recent scientific research also supports this link between estrogen-treated food and its effect on men’s bodies and minds. In a concerned and alarmed tone, the vignette of Thailand leads up to the statement that this could soon become the reality in Mongolia.
The article continues to detail the looming danger. The author includes a comment from an instructor at a workshop on nutrition and health, who warned: “After entering the human body, hormones are not excreted as excrement like food products. These hormones are injected into chickens and genetically modified. So, ladies, please avoid cooking with such chicken meat and giving it to your husband as much as possible. Even if their sexual orientation does not change, after eating the chicken they might start a brawl with you” (Department of Khuvsgul Province Local Property 2016). With this point, the instructor of the workshop seemingly implied that husbands could turn more feminine after eating chicken, leasing them to pick petty fights, which is not a trait valued in a traditionally masculine man in Mongolia.

The article continues, detailing how such a man whose male hormones are dominated by estrogen may exhibit symptoms, such as - loss of libido, and lack of self-confidence, even after dieting, excess weight will not decrease, weak shoulders, weakness, and fatigue. These symptoms are treated as mere physical. However, the article presents the most “terrifying” change followed by an overconsumption of a hormone-treated chicken is the change in sexual orientation of the man (Department of Khuvsgul Province Local Property 2016). This article which was published on the official website of a municipality in Mongolia reveals deeply ingrained ideas about what masculinity entails - virility, confidence, and strength. The article also reveals anxieties around how to protect and maintain Mongolian ideals of masculinity, in this case, by avoiding certain kinds of meat. In short, it implies that a man should avoid feminine meat, like chicken, to preserve his masculinity.

Another key point the article makes is that there should be more provision and control of the food health and safety standards on meat exports to ensure Mongolian men stay healthy and masculine. The author is suspicious of the current inspection procedures and notes:

Anything can be written on paper. Therefore, there is a need to carry out genetic analysis on imported chicken meat to determine whether or not it has been injected with hormones. Otherwise, men who don't want to be fathers
may increase like in Thailand (Department of Khuvsgul Province Local Property 2016).

The main exporters of chicken to Mongolia are its only two neighboring countries - Russia and China. Since the Mongolian meat industry is still heavily reliant on livestock herding, chicken is not a staple in Mongolian cuisine. Hence, the country imports its chicken from outside. It is interesting to note how the meat that is imported, which is suspected to be infested with masculinity-draining hormones, comes from Mongolia’s two neighbors that have enormous political and historical importance. On the other hand, the meat that comes from animals that were raised and herded on the Mongolian steppes - mainly beef and lamb - is considered to be the masculine food that supports men’s strength and virility.

This story about the fear that chicken will strip away a Mongolian man’s masculinity serves as a useful entry point into the complex web of connections between meat and masculinity in Mongolia. How is it that something as mundane as chicken becomes attached to femininity, while red meat is imbued with masculinity? This is one of the questions that my research explores. More broadly, this research project aims to understand the changing meanings of meat and masculinity in Mongolia over the past century, with a particular focus on the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary urban lifestyle. The thesis chronicles and analyzes the centrality of meat in Mongolian culture where legends hold that Mongols built an empire on “meat and milk” and examines how meat is being mobilized to construct a present-day national identity and new meanings of masculinity.

I argue that meat in Mongolia is not mere sustenance - it structures social connections and signifies power and dominance, sitting at the intersection of gender, kinship, and national identity. Nomadism and pastoral herding are the foundations of the ritualized everyday practices that sustain Mongolian meat and masculinity. However, the meaning of meat and nomadism in Mongolia has been going through waves of transformations in the past 100 years, as Mongolia survived a period of socialism before embracing capitalism in 1991. The socio-economic shifts of the past century have
shaken the foundations of Mongolia as a nation and spurred a rapid urbanization process creating a steep divide between the rural and urban populations. Change became an everyday reality. A divide was also created between men and women, as women came to overperform men in education and professionalism in post-socialist Mongolia.

Post-socialist urbanization has removed many men from the very core of performing their masculinity - nomadic lifestyle and nomadic meat consumption. For younger urbanite men, meat consumption and nomadism have come to be less founded in gendered ideas but more in practicality, as they embed themselves more into the urban lifestyle. However, displaced from their thrones of respect and authority, both Mongolia as a nation and the older generation of Mongolian men are clinging on to their relevance in modern discourse. To preserve their relevance, Mongolia and Mongolian men are reviving romanticized notions of nomadism, rooted in masculinity and authentic pastoral meat. Although the revival of the nostalgic past of the glory days of the Mongol empire helps Mongolia construct a unique national identity and cling to the idea of a powerful Mongolian man, it risks the danger of essentializing Mongolia to the outside world and for domestic cultural consumption.

**Methodology**

I was born and raised in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. Like many Ulaanbaatar natives, I have relatives across the countryside in Mongolia. Every other summer, my family would go on a road trip to visit relatives in different parts of Mongolia. The trips were a getaway from an urban jungle of Ulaanbaatar into the distant and sometimes unfamiliar customs of pastoral lifestyles out on the steppes. My understanding of a nomadic herding lifestyle and the relationship of herders and their livestock has been formed by these visits to my relatives when I would see and sometimes help them with animal husbandry work, like milking a goat. However, my favorite part of the trip
was always the food - fresh dairy products, nourishing soup, and - the star of the show - flavorful meat. For Ulaanbaatar residents, visiting family in the countryside is one of the only opportunities to eat fresh meat that was slaughtered, butchered, and cooked all on the same day.

Mongolian meat, fresh or not, has been the cornerstone of my diet my whole life until I left for college in the United States. Spending two years eating dining hall food, I craved one thing the most - the meat from back home. Meat was special in two ways - I could not pack it in my suitcase and bring it with me like other food I liked eating back home like dairy snacks, tea, and pastries. And the other reason that made meat so special was - every Mongolian I met in America said the same thing, that they miss meat from back home. The more comments I heard about Mongolian meat, the more I understood that what people missed about Mongolian meat was not just the flavor. I realized that Mongolian meat was packed not only with flavor but also with meaning. As I heard comments connecting meat to ideas of home, masculinity, and Mongolia as a nation, I became interested in following the thread of connection between Mongolian meat and all it symbolized.

For this research, I conducted an extensive review of existing literature, complemented by six in-depth interviews with people from a diverse cross-section of Mongolian society. I interviewed five Mongolian men and one herder woman in her 70s. This sampling includes individuals from both rural and urban settings, ranging across various age groups, as well as nomadic herders.

I asked my network to connect me with people who would be interested in being interviewed. The two herders, a 29-year-old man and 74-year-old woman, I interviewed were especially hard to get hold of. I found both of them through a referral and conducted the interviews through a phone call as I was in the United States during the interview process. Both herders live in the countryside and come from a middle-class background. The younger male herder lives in Uvurkhangai, a province located in the southern part of the country, while the female herder lives in Bulgan, a province in the north-western part of the country.
The other four interviewees are in their 20s and 30s. Two of them are college students, with whom I am acquainted with. One of them is a student at Swarthmore College. He was born in Sukhbaatar, one of the eastern provinces of Mongolia, and grew up there until he graduated from high school, although he used to visit Ulaanbaatar frequently, during school breaks or for educational purposes. Another young man whom I interviewed was born in Erdenet, one of the major cities in Mongolia aside from Ulaanbaatar. He also moved to Ulaanbaatar after graduating from high school and comes from an upper-middle class background. The other two men I interviewed are Ulaanbaatar natives. One of them goes to college in Tokyo and is currently living there, while the other one is an engineer-educated 32-year-old man living in Ulaanbaatar.

**Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews following a list of prepared questions about diet, meat consumption, meat customs, and roles around consuming and preparing meat. The questions

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1 Britannica. [https://www.britannica.com/place/Mongolia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mongolia).
were designed with the intent to get an insight into the patterns and differences of meat consumption for Mongolian men of different age groups. During the summer, I conducted three interviews. The rest of the interviews were conducted using Zoom and other online calling platforms from September through November. I also conducted an unofficial interview off the record with an anthropologist from Cambridge’s Center for Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies who is the lead researcher of an ongoing study on meat production and national sovereignty in Mongolia.

**Popular media analysis**

In addition to interviews, I also analyzed and examined popular media related to meat and masculinity. Forms of media include posters and non-academic articles from different periods of time which allowed me to gain a view into shifting ideas and attitudes from socialist period of the 1920s through 1990 and up until the current period. I also explored a cluster of digital media on meat and masculinity, including popular memes which display important representations of masculinity and diet in Mongolia. I found the memes on Facebook and Instagram, which are the most famous social media platforms in Mongolia. Another key digital media source I examined in the thesis is the video content created by ARTGER, a YouTube channel on Mongolian traditional cuisine.

**Literature review**

**Food and Sociality**

We eat every day but rarely think of the act of eating as a meaningful social ritual, intricately woven into our interpersonal connections. Food, specifically meat, is imbued with social dimensions that shape our relations to the world and to each other. Mary Douglas is one of the first scholars
who recognized the symbolic meaning of food. She analyzed the connections between food and societal beliefs and norms (1966). Douglas laid out the framework of classifying and categorizing foods as either clean or unclean, pure or impure, and how these categorizations are intertwined with broader belief systems, social structures, and perceptions of order and chaos. Later, Douglas took her insights about cultural constructions of pure/impure and applied them more specifically to analyze cultural ideas about food. Douglass proposed that food carries meanings that are mirrored in the patterns of social relations (1972). One of the core ideas of my thesis is that I argue that meat in Mongolia is not only sustenance, but it also structures social connections and serves to signify relationships of power and dominance. Meat brings together gender, kinship, and national identity in Mongolia.

Central to my understanding of eating habits creating and connecting different social groups is the concept of habitus by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus posits that social identity is created and reproduced through differences between groups and individuals (Bourdieu 1984). Different social classes compete for legitimacy by exaggerating their distinctions from each other. Following Bourdieu’s theory, groups exaggerate their differences and each views their own taste as superior to others.

Habitus guides our behaviors but also influences how we interpret and make sense of the world around us. According to Bourdieu, habitus encompasses a set of dispositions, preferences, and embodied practices that become ingrained in individuals as a result of their social and cultural upbringing (1984). Moreover, habitus is not static. It can change over time as individuals find themselves in a new social environment. However, unlearning the deeply ingrained habits, norms, and tastes is not a fast process. Habitus often persists even when individuals come to be associated with different social classes in different environments.
In Chapter 2, I use the concept of habitus to elaborate on how European Medieval writings played a crucial role in classifying Mongolians as barbaric and backward based on their “taste” in food. The writers exaggerated the depictions to the point where Mongols were scary and ruthless cannibals who had no mercy for any other groups. Such accounts based on longstanding stereotypes of nomadic people constructed Mongolia as a threatening nation, especially during times of heightened political insecurity. This Western framing of Mongolians and their diet as “the most hardy, ferocious, and belligerent of men” helped them estrange and dehumanize their war enemy.

A more recent trend that I highlight in my argument in Chapter 3 is how younger urbanite men are changing their attitude towards meat and nomadism. Their meat consumption and connection to pastoral herding is changing to be less founded in gendered ideas but more in practicality compared to older and rural Mongolian men. My argument highlights rural-to-urban transition in Mongolian men’s environments as a change in their habitus. As Mongolian men embed themselves more into the urban lifestyle, they are becoming less attached to traditional ideas of meat and masculinity. This pattern is reflected in how habitus represents the dynamic interplay between individual agency and societal structures. Men’s preferences in their meat consumption emerges from a complex dance between their personal taste and how this is shaped by the broader socio-cultural context they are embedded in.

Another aspect of my argument is to highlight the key role meat plays in Mongolian society in nurturing kinship connections of families and relatives separated between the rural and urban areas. My analysis of meat and kinship relations in Mongolia draws on Elizabeth Fox’s argument that livestock play an important role in keeping kinship relationships intact between rural and urban Mongolia (2013). According to Fox, meat is the basis for a wide range of social relations in Mongolia (2013). Her work is one of the first or possibly the only anthropological inquiries on the material manifestations of Mongolian kinship in meat. Fox analyzes meat as a liminal substance that is no
longer an animal but is also not a ready-to-eat food. This in-between position of meat gives it a fragile yet unknown potential as an important substance in keeping kinship relations intact (2013).

Like my argument that meat is more than sustenance, in Fox’s work, meat is not just a mere symbol, manifestation of social relations, or substance, but an active agent of social life. It draws a thread that connects the modernized nomads with their imagined ideals of nomadism. Fox grounds her work in the rural-to-urban migration process happening in Mongolia currently. In Chapter 3, I link her focus on urban migration to examples from my interviews to illustrate differences in the ways recent migrants or more urbanized men rely on the exchange of meat to enact kinship relations. In my analysis I add the perspective of how both masculinity and care are enacted through acts of meat sharing between rural and urban Mongolia.

**Masculinity and gender**

The second important theme of the main argument in my thesis is the connection between meat and gender, specifically masculinity. In my analysis of masculinity and gender, I rely on the concept of performing gender and performativity, coined by Judith Butler. Butler’s work elaborates on the idea that gender is not assigned at birth but rather socially constructed (1988). Instead of being a biologically determined disposition, gender is a continuous process of enactment, expressed in our actions, behaviors, and expressions. Following Butler’s theory of performativity, I examine how gender in Mongolia is produced and reproduced by individuals through their repetitive actions and behaviors that are founded in cultural norms. Such performances of gender allow for the construction and reinforcement of gender.

From this perspective, I examine the ritualized ways of performing masculinity in nomadic customs of Mongolian tradition. Moreover, I contend that the urbanization process which began after the fall of socialism has removed many Mongolian men from the very core of performing their
masculinity based on their nomadic lifestyle and nomadic meat consumption. To illustrate the performativity of masculinity, I also call on the concept of endo- and exo-cuisine coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). Exo-cuisine is mainly roasting done outside for guests and big groups of people and endo-cuisine is usually boiled and done domestically for smaller groups. The concept of exo-cuisine allows me to demonstrate that customary cooking occasions of Mongolian men are usually public and performative of their masculinity in Chapter 3.

Connecting Butler’s gender performativity and Bourdeiu’s concept of habitus, Carrol et al. use the “gendered habitus” to explain how “performative masculinity across various socioeconomic statuses and cultural dispositions pertaining to heteronormative positioning drive food choice” among young Australian male workers (2019, 2). The authors disrupted the binary between gender and class to reflect changing patterns of meat consumption in the modern world. Their study revealed that masculinity or work position alone is not enough to comprehend the multitudes of masculinities emerging within men, which precautions against homogenizing masculine men into a single group. Rather their analysis emphasizes the existence of microcultures of masculinity that require a more flexible approach to gender and class. The work of Carrol et al. became the foundation of my analysis of how Mongolian men, displaced from their thrones of respect and authority, are clinging on to their relevance by seeking new ways of performing masculinity in urban Mongolia.

An important dimension of masculinity is power and relevance. One critical aspect of my argument in the thesis is how both Mongolia as a nation and the older generation of Mongolian men are clinging on to their relevance and power in the contemporary context, using an exaggerated and romanticized display of nomadic masculinity. I ground this argument in Fiddes’ definition of meat’s symbolism - “what meat exemplifies, more than anything, is an attitude: the masculine worldview that ubiquitously perceives, values and legitimates hierarchical domination of nature, of women and
other men” (1991, 210). Fiddes’ argument of the masculine worldview is the framework I applied to the context of meat consumption in Mongolia.

Another work that influenced my understanding of the masculine worldview is by Nir Avieli (2013). His work pulls four concepts - meat, masculinity, power, and nationalism - into one coherent image. Avieli enters a conversation about how consuming meat represents the control and power of men over the natural world, combining the symbolic and nutritious sides of meat. Avieli theorizes more on the detail of the structural background of different ways of preparing meat, similar to my discussion of performativity of masculinity in an exo-cuisine. Particularly, he focuses on how grilling meat is one of the most prestigious forms of showing wealth and power as it is the most wasteful, and those who can afford to grill meat are showing off their privilege. I argue that Mongolian men traditionally perform their masculinity in a similar fashion, whereby engaging in an exo-cuisine - they show off their dominance and privilege.

Changes in Mongolia

Change is a connecting thread of the different parts of my thesis. Among the transformations that came in the past 100 years, the post-socialist transition has been a turning point in Mongolia’s trajectory. I assert that Mongolia is reviving romanticized notions of nomadism and the nostalgic past of the glory days of the Mongol empire to construct a unique national identity and cling to the idea of a powerful Mongolia and Mongolian men in a new age where the market economy and neoliberal globalization are bringing profound shifts to Mongolia’s economy, undermining the stability and the viability of nomadic livelihoods.

My focus of following the thread of socioeconomic changes was inspired by Højer and Pedersen’s work. Højer and Pedersen draw a vivid picture of Mongolians in the Post-Socialist period of the late 1990s and early 2000s (2020). In their ethnography, the authors depicted Mongolians as
lost in a period of transition, as they were experiencing profound changes following the collapse of socialism. Their characterization was not intended to imply passively following the change or being victimized by it but rather, Højer and Pedersen suggest that Mongolians were deeply captivated by the radical shifts occurring around them (2020). I build on their analysis of the ways Mongolians actively embody transition and change in my focus on the context of changing meanings of meat and masculinity. Starting in Chapter 2 and ending with the last chapter, the centrality of socioeconomic shifts to shaping changing meanings of meat and masculinity is integral to understanding how livestock herding, performances of masculinity, and national identity are evolving in modern Mongolia.

My thesis focuses on two important shifts that came in the past 100 years - the rural and urban divide and the reversal of gender advantages. To examine these two trends, I turn to Ariell Ahearn's work. Ahearn utilized a lens of absence to delve into the interplay of gender, urbanization, and masculinity in her research (2018). She examined gendered absence in Mongolian households, particularly during household division and mobility when the woman and children move to settled areas in search of education and employment. Ahearn situated her exploration of the gendered absence within the context of government policies, urban migration, and economic crises. I add to her discussion by contributing an analysis about the displacement of Mongolian men from their usual throne of respect. I further extend Ahearn’s argument to show how the displacement applies not only to separated rural households but also to rural-to-urban migrants in Ulaanbaatar. This shift is so profound that it has created a “reverse gender gap” in Mongolia - a phenomenon where women are becoming more educated compared to men in Mongolia.

On a larger scale, Mongolia is actively engaging in a nation-building project of establishing Mongolia’s independence on the international stage. Orhon Myadar has done extensive research on how this modern identity-making process is unfolding in Mongolia (2011). Her work established that
modern Mongolia is excavating its past to build its identity, romanticizing nomadism and ethnosymbols (Myadar 2011). I structure the core of Chapter 4 on Myadar’s argument and extend it to illustrate how Mongolian identity is being defined in relation to stereotypes of men from neighboring countries: notably South Korea and Russia. To do so, I put Myadar's argument in conversation with cultural anthropologist Frank Bille’s (2010) work on gendered nationalism in Mongolia, specifically concerning Sinophobic tendencies. Moreover, I support Myadar’s argument of Mongolia mobilizing nomadism and ethnosymbols to construct its present-day image with examples from the media that serve as a nexus of masculinity, meat, and Mongolia.

In explaining this national identity-building project, I suggest that the romanticization of nomadism essentializes Mongolia for both international and domestic audiences. To explain my point, I call on the concept of orientalism by Said. Orientalism, as explained by Edward Said, is the phenomenon of Western societies constructing, representing, and imagining the "Orient" or the East as inferior to Western civilization (1978). Said argued that the West has constructed a distorted and often dehumanizing image of the East, depicting it as exotic, backward, and irrational (1978). Orientalism is more than an academic theory, it uncovers the power dynamics that become the basis of oppression and alienation that is situated in the political, social, and cultural contexts of the West. The concept of orientalism helps me explain how present-day Mongolia is now, ironically, taking on the role of the Western civilization to exoticize itself and “Other” individuals who do not fit the stereotype of Mongolian-ness and Mongolian masculinity. Connecting sociality, gender, and national image, meat in Mongolia is undergoing a rush of transformations amidst socio-economic shifts and urbanization, prompting a revival of romanticized nomadism and risking essentializing Mongolia's identity.
Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 is a context chapter that chronicles the political and economic events that happened in Mongolia in the last century. I analyze how the back-to-back periods of immense transformations challenged Mongolians and how the people adapted to these changes. The chapter reveals how the changes of the past hundred years have created a gap between the rural and urban populations and also between men and women. Furthermore, I lay the foundation of the broad understanding of Mongolians embracing change and transformation as a way of life, which sets the stage for the detailed adaptations discussed in Chapter 3 on an individual and kinship level and Chapter 4 on a nation-wide level.

Chapter 3 is divided into two larger themes. The first theme is the explanation of the foundational concepts of the animal-to-meat chain and the structure and customs of ger, the microcosm of Mongolian society. The second theme explores how the changes introduced in Chapter 2 are mirrored in the evolving identity of a Mongolian man and their performed masculinity.

The final chapter takes a broader scope in understanding how the events analyzed in Chapter 2 are manifested on a macro-level of the entire nation. I analyze and contrast socialist and post-socialist nation-building projects and their focus and what role meat and masculinity play in them. I end the chapter with an example that brings all three together - meat, masculinity, and Mongolia.
Chapter 2 Lost in Transition: the Path to Modern Mongolia

Only three decades have passed since Mongolia transitioned to capitalism, following a 70-year dependence on Soviet rule. This chapter lays out the series of abrupt changes that happened to Mongolian people in the past hundred years. The evolving circumstances challenged the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Mongol people and the core of their identity, yet they have embraced change as a constant in their lives. Mongolians actively came to embody transition and embrace change as an integral aspect of their reality. The waves of changes have drawn a clear boundary between the rural and urban populations, while also reversing the gender gap between men and women. Despite these shifts, meat from livestock herding has remained central to the country's economy and culture. The next two chapters will expand on how the evolving essence of nomadism, meat, and masculinity spurred by these rapid changes are manifested in kinship, nation, and gender relations.

Herding in the Heart of Asia

Mongolia is the world's second-largest land-locked country, sitting in Asia's heart, that has a population of only a little over 3 million people, half of whom now live in the capital city - Ulaanbaatar. With its vast landscapes and nomadic heritage, Mongolia and its history were shaped by its pastoralist culture. Mongolians often say that the country was built on the four hoofs of livestock, illuminating the importance livestock play in their lives. Historically, five types of livestock referred to as the "tavan khoshuu mal" have been the cornerstone of Mongolia's livestock production and socio-economic fabric: these include horses, cows (including yaks), camels, goats, and sheep.
Herding the “tavan khoshuu mal” in Mongolia, one of the most sparsely populated countries with two people per square kilometer, calls for a certain degree of perseverance and self-sufficiency. Livestock are usually pastured throughout the whole year in the cold, dry continental climate of Mongolia. Nomadic families move around and spread out on the wide, wild steppes in search of abundant pasture lands. While most herders raise only a few hundred livestock to meet daily needs and sustenance, some are hailed as “myangat malchin” (herder who has at least a thousand livestock). Horses are indispensable in many ways, including as a key form of transport used in maintaining other livestock and commuting to town; camels are used to commute between pastures that are too distant from one another. Cows and sheep are milked regularly for dairy products, while their flesh provides the main sustenance in the Mongolian diet - meat.

The arduous process of herding alone does not show Mongolian people's deep-running relationship with their livestock. Livestock have been an essential foundation on which the Mongol Empire was built, providing meat and milk to sustain and bolster the army and the people. Historical accounts from European travelers testify to these facts.

2 https://mongolmedleg.org/5-hoshuu-mal/.
The Estranged Nomads

European travelers from medieval times drew a depiction of the dietary patterns of Mongolian people emphasizing scarcity, unconventional meat choices, and excessive alcohol and meat consumption. These biased depictions exaggerated differences and contributed to the portrayal of Mongolians as barbaric and uncivilized, perpetuating the essentialization of Mongolia.

The writings of European travelers were based on highlighting the differences between Mongolians and European diets. Eating, at its core, is an intimate social practice that structures and defines our social connections. Sharing food has often been associated with the expression of acceptance of others into your circle and acknowledging commonality between each other (Phillips 2013). On the other hand, Kristeva has shown that disgust or mistrust of certain kinds of foods is a fundamental form of abjection (1980, 9):

It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject by foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones.

Thus, the acceptance or rejection of offered food becomes the signifier of similarities or distinctions between people, forming the first step for either connection or alienation. Dietary preferences have come to define the boundaries between social groups and how they differentiate themselves from each other. A boundary between the Mongolian Empire and the Western civilizations was set following a similar pattern of emphasizing the differences in eating patterns.

European travelers since medieval times have been fascinated with documenting the supposedly “horrendousness” of the Mongolian diet. For instance, in the thirteenth century, at the peak of the Mongol Invasions - Mongolia stood as a feared enemy to the security of European lands. Contrary to the agricultural lifestyle of Western people, nomadic pastoralism was the main mode of
obtaining food in Mongolia. Giovanni da Pian del Carpini, an Italian bishop who became one of the first documentarians of the Mongolian diet, wrote about the abundance of livestock, but the absence of farm animals (Phillips 2013). Giovanni da Pian del Carpini emphasized food scarcity and impoverishment as one of the defining characteristics of the eating habits of the Mongolian people, despite the vast and large steppes of the empire:

Their food consists of everything that can be eaten, for they eat dogs, wolves, foxes and horses and, when driven by necessity, they feed on human flesh. For instance, when they were fighting against a city of the Kitayans, where the Emperor was residing, they besieged it for so long that they themselves completely ran out of supplies and, since they had nothing at all to eat, they thereupon took one out of every ten men for food. They eat the filth which comes away from mares when they bring forth foals. Nay, I have even seen them eating lice. They would say, “Why should I not eat them since they eat the flesh of my son and drink his blood?” I have also seen them eat mice (1966, 16-17).

Similar remarks were echoed by travelers like Marco Polo who served for Khubilai Khan, the ruler of the empire at the time (Philips 2013, 95):

Moreover I tell you that they eat all the marrows which are inside the bones. And they do this because they do not wish any atom of him to remain. For they say that if there were to remain there any substance that the substance would make worms, and the [worms] would die at for want of food. And they say that from the death of these worms the soul of the dead would have great harm from it and sin, and therefore they eat him all. And they have eaten him they take the bones and put them in a beautiful casket, and then carry them and hang them in great caves of the mountains in such a place that no beast or other evil thing could touch them.

Early European accounts focused narratives about Mongolian life on food scarcity. Authors highlighted Mongolians’ perseverance and ability to go on for days without eating or surviving on horse blood or dog meat, and even human flesh at times (Phillips 2013). Such narratives constructed an image of Mongolians as flesh-eating cannibals who consume unclean meats. Moreover, early European accounts of Mongolian life also tended to include a focus on Mongolian consumption of alcohol at abundant times, painting a picture of an inability to plan consumption appropriately, depending on availability or scarcity (Phillips 2013). Thus, European travelers’ depiction of Mongolia
and its people’s diet had a defining influence on Western civilization’s perception of Mongolians and their image. “Orientalism,” a concept coined by Edward Said, is a helpful lens to analyze the European perspective of Mongolians (1978). Orientalism implies the ideological basis of European colonial rule over the East (Said 1978). It reveals the power structures of Europe and the Orient: the West exoticizes the East and uses the differences in the culture to argue that the East is irrational, inferior, and barbaric (Said 1978).

At the center of European portrayals of Mongolian food culture was a sense of estrangement and exoticization, in line with Orientalism. Considering eating as a social practice of acceptance or differentiation, the European travelers' rejection of the Mongolian taste as crude or unclean demonstrated an attempt to alienate and dehumanize the population of Mongolia. The depiction of Mongols as beastly cannibals also contributed to targeting them as hardy and ferocious warriors who were a dangerous threat (Phillips 2013).

Another prominent consequence of this narrative developed by European travelers laid the foundations of a barbarian image that associated Mongols with characteristics traditionally attributed to “non-civilized” and “backward” cultures as constructed by the power relations ideology of the West. In these Eurocentric narratives, food preferences figure centrally as an image of exotic backwardness. Thus, depictions of diet became a tool for othering the Mongols.

The construction of superiority based on differences is also supported by Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Habitus (“a structured and structuring structure” implies that a “social identity is defined and asserted through differences” (1984, pp. 170, 172). Bourdieu’s theories point to how classes compete for legitimacy by exaggerating their distinctions from each other. Similarly, in his discussion of the “civilized body,” Elias also noted how “groups...exaggerate their differences and each claim them as models of superiority” (Elias 2000, 429–31). These early European travelers’ accounts exaggerated the differences not only in taste or lifestyle but also denied Mongols any sense
of personhood, carving out a dehumanizing portrait of a beastly enemy. This situation is emblematic of Charles W. Mills’ description of racism. Mills argues that racism creates a dichotomy of “us vs them,” “us” being white people, and “them” being everyone else (Mills 2014). Those who do not fall into the white or Eurocentric category are denied personhood and, thus, are only entitled to “subpersonhood” (Mills 2014, 33). The European accounts, thus, illustrate the kind of dichotomy Mills describes as central to racism, in which a European diet was aligned with humanity and full personhood, whereas the Mongolian diet is presented in exaggerated narratives as evidence of “backwardness” and of the “subpersonhood” of Mongols.

Regardless of the bias-ridden descriptions, the enduring reliance on meat and milk remains a distinctive feature of Mongolian cuisine today. Aside from the centrality of meat and milk in the diet, the barbaric image linked to Mongolians also persevered. However, I will argue in Chapter 4 that Mongolians themselves, not European travelers, come to carry out the essentialization and exoticization of Mongolia in modern times.

The Arrival of the Big Brother

The Russian “Big Brothers” came to “rescue” the “backward” Mongols from their “uncivilized” agony in the 20th century. After the revolution of 1921, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) took power in the country, asserting independence from the Manchurian colonial settlers with the support of the Soviet Union. Soon after, Mongolia established itself as a satellite of the USSR, inheriting the Leninist version of Modernism and Communist Internationalism (Sneath 2003). This meant that Mongolia's independence hinged on Soviet military support, which created a high level of dependence. The new political leadership of Mongolia remained deeply devoted to Moscow.
With the adoption of socialist ideology came state apparatus like the education system, health services, infrastructure, and industrialization. The state and its people were shaped by the USSR to become exemplary workers and socialists. The dependence on the USSR was not only political but also economic: more than 80% of Mongolian imports and 70% of exports were reliant on the Soviet Union in 1989 (Sneath 2003). In return, the Soviet Union's financial assistance amounted to nearly 30% of Mongolia’s GDP each year (Sneath 2003).

USSR’s influence extended to the livelihoods of rural herders as well. Before 1930, every herder household looked after their herd. However, 1930 marked the beginning of collectivization in Mongolia which lasted for over 30 years up until the 1960s. Collectivization meant that the MPRP controlled most of the country's resources, including livestock and the effort of herders who grew the herd. Buyandelgeryn noted that “Stalin also wanted to make Mongolia the Soviet Union’s meat supplier and closely watched the country’s policies on the increase of livestock” (2013, 104). The fall of the cooperatives took place due to democratic reforms that encouraged private ownership of livestock but the pastures remained state-owned. The livestock collectivization changed the composition of the “tavan koshuu mal,” making goats the most common livestock due to their highly valued cashmere. Shifting policies promoted a significant increase in the overall size of the herds as well.

The Stalinist regime in the 1930s set the tone for a forceful and violent beginning phase of collectivization. Eventually, collective farms became advantageous for many herders who had no financial security (Buyandelgeryn 2013). The collectives offered safety nets for many families. The harsh and cold climate of Mongolia has been a timeless threat to herders and their livelihoods. In the context of collectivization, the state took over the role of a protector against natural disasters. In the past, there was no centralized disaster relief; now, the state offered systemized support by brigades that were dispatched to handle emergencies immediately with the help of technology and
machinery (Buyandelger 2013). Included in the services were help in extinguishing steppe fires, assistance to herders to move to new pastures in case of flooding or other disasters, and provision of shelter from severe winter conditions (Buyandelger 2013).

Collectivization transformed traditional nomadic life. Instead of being responsible for all their livestock, each herding family's herd was now reorganized into specialized teams devoted to a specific type of animal or aspect of animal husbandry. There were sheep brigades as well as cattle brigades and even others specialized in raising pigs, which had not been common before. Although the state’s organizational system was intended to lighten the nomads’ burden, it also brought pressure on herders to meet their herding quotas. Thus, collectivization brought about a shift in the relationship between the herder and their herd: a transition from a relationship focused on co-existence and harmony towards one more focused on product and productivity.

The changes that came with socialism mirrored that of the post-colonial trajectories of many nations. As Sneath observes, “Modernist thinking arrived alongside certain notions of nationhood and nationalism in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but was largely confined to sections of the elite” (Sneath 2003, 40). Following this trend, modernism and reaching modernity and socialist ideals became a goal that the whole nation aspired to, “emphasizing progress in knowledge and societal improvement” (Sneath 2003, 40). Soviet funding empowered Mongolia's ambitious plan for modernization, which focused on urbanization. The urban population experienced rapid growth in just over 60 years. In the 1920s, a minority of the population lived in urban settlements, but the number skyrocketed to 57 percent by the late 1980s (Sneath 2003). The population of Ulaanbaatar (the capital city) experienced the biggest boom: starting with a little over 10,000 in the 1930s and escalating to over half a million by the 1980s (Sneath 2003). This growth represented nearly 25 percent of Mongolia's total population. Most of the city dwellers were still freshly out of rural parts
of the country, which meant that they still had a strong connection with rural Mongolia and its customs.

The newly “civilized” citizens followed the Soviet political culture, which tried to assimilate the Mongolian elite into the USSR's higher classes. Politics in Mongolia created a fusion of its own culture with that of the dominant patterns of the Soviet superpower. The dominant culture created two subsets of values which divided the country into modern urban elite versus the traditional rural nomads. Sneath characterized this new path as a “completely different series of values and dispositions coexisted” as they “both continue to exist within a wider cultural frame that them as complementary rather than contradictory” (2003, 43).

For 70 years, the Soviet Union has exerted a significant influence over Mongolia, shaping its political, economic, and social landscape in the 20th century. Mongolia developed a political and economic dependence on the USSR. Collectivization of livestock and the establishment of collective farms transformed traditional nomadic life, reorganizing herding practices and emphasizing productivity over co-existence. Soviet funding facilitated Mongolia's ambitious modernization plans, leading to rapid urbanization and a shift in cultural values. The urban-rural divide created by these changes fostered a fusion of traditional Mongolian culture with Soviet political culture. However, the Soviet dominance was not permanent.

**Life after socialism**

Although the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party was still in power well into the 1990s, that decade saw a large impact from the impetus toward democracy. 1991 marked the fall of socialism. Economic difficulties occurred as Soviet aid, which had accounted for roughly one-third of Mongolian GDP, gradually waned (Sneath 2003). In the wake of the fall of socialism structural reforms and austerity gave rise to high levels of unemployment, cut off exports from Mongolia, and
drove inflation through the roof. As a result, many resorted to survival tactics like engaging in “suitcase trade” with China and Russia, starting the rise of the informal economy (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023).

The democratic revolution introduced the market economy to Mongolia. The shift to new frontiers did not occur without barriers. Inflation reached levels never seen before: standing at 52.7 percent in 1991 and rising to 325.5 percent in 1992 (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2005). In 1998, 35.6 percent of the population still lived in poverty (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023). Many families struggled to navigate this shift, as the newly formed government was not ready to provide support. The capital city was flooded with unemployment, unmaintained infrastructure, and scarcity. An overall feeling of instability hung in the air.

Amidst this changing scene, attitudes and habits from the socialist regime carried over to the new market economy. For instance, Abrahms-Kavunenko notes how the influence of strong kinship networks and hospitality persisted in Mongolia in the context of new market dynamics (2023). In the early 1990s, the support system from kinship and friendship networks replaced the insurance from the state. This pattern continues to this day. The 70 years of socialism have ingrained an ideal of self-sufficiency and hospitality in Mongols, stemming from their pastoral nomadic heritage.

Some saw the rapidly changing political economy as an opportunity to venture into new businesses to capitalize on the emerging market economy. Many found a new niche for themselves while many failed to adapt. For instance, Abrahms-Kavunenko highlighted how her interlocutors described Mongolians as still not competent in understanding capitalism, even after 20 years had passed since the shift to a market economy (2023). She quoted how many Mongolians comprehend the concept of money – “stability to be its nature and wide fluctuation to be a treatable pathology” (Guyer 1995, 7). The transition to capitalism has been met with mixed reactions, with some seizing new opportunities while others struggled to adapt. This has exacerbated the class differences.
Three decades into the market economy, Mongolia continues to grapple with reconciling its socialist heritage with contemporary economic changes. Thus, the state of the Mongolian economic fabric is still in constant motion - it is attempting to reconcile some of its socialist-era practices with contemporary economic changes.

**Free yet unequal - Post-socialist Mongolia**

In contrast to the economic shock, the peaceful revolution set a hopeful tone for incoming freedom, which was not at the center of attention during the socialist era. This was especially true for young people who were curious about the culture in the neoliberal Western countries. With open arms, Mongolia invited the neoliberal West into its frontiers. Replacing the USSR, came neoliberal organizations to advise Mongolia on its issues, shaping its economic policies and trajectory of development. The neoliberal paradigms crowned organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) with the role of sketching the future of Mongolia’s socioeconomic policies aimed at catalyzing privatization. Moreover, “in accordance with neoliberal economic imperatives, taxes and barriers to trade were reduced” (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023, 28). The neoliberal agenda, as described by Abrahms-Kavunenko, had the expectation to eradicate the residue of socialism in a couple of years, which turned out to be an overly optimistic goal.

Following the turbulence of the 1990s, a glimmer of hope shined in the early 2010s as the poverty rate declined and the economy started to pick up pace. According to a United Nations report in 2007–2008, the poverty level of the Mongolian population was 35.2 percent, which was reduced to 27 percent by 2012 (UNDP 2016). Much of this shift can be attributed to the mining boom of the early 2010s, which happened thanks to the abundant natural resources, such as coal and copper. Mongolia utilized its resources for its foreign trade. As reported by the National Statistical Office (NSO), over 20% of the GDP has been made up of the mining sub-sector in the past several
years: it accounted for more than 90 percent of exports (Baatarzorig et al. 2018). As the economy heavily relied on the mining industry, its benefits tended to concentrate solely in Ulaanbaatar, leaving the rural population and those who relied on state-mandated jobs during socialist times neglected. The gains from the mining boom were kept mainly in the capital city as the government made no effort to redistribute the taxes collected from the mines to rural communities (Janes and Chuluundorj 2015). Hence, the transition from a planned to a market economy after the fall of socialism has given rise to growing inequality between the rural and urban populations.

In summary, Mongolia's transition from socialism to a market economy brought both hope and challenges. Shaped by neoliberal ideologies, the growing economy experienced a mining boom in the early 2010s, exacerbating the inequalities between rural and urban populations.

**Herders: Lost in the gap between rural and urban**

Disconnected from Ulaanbaatar, rural nomads were left unattended. Not only were they neglected but they also felt the consequences of modernization coming from neoliberal changes on their livelihoods. The new economic and political planning of the country gave less weight to pastoralism, compared to a socialist centralized economy in which herding was integral to exports. After the fall of socialism, livestock herding was replaced with mining as the most important national industry. Herders experienced deterioration in pasture and water resources which was caused by mining activities. As Abrahms-Kavunenko observed, the new roads and their dust act as barriers for herders in the present, figuratively and literally, as mining roads created more connecting points but also distance from the center of the nation (2023). The disparity between the rural and urban populations became even more pronounced.

The disparity was exacerbated by the discontinuation of the state assistance to herders that it used to provide under socialism and by degradation of pastures which made herders more
susceptible to damages from climate disasters. The harsh Mongolian winters when the temperature drops to freezing negative 40 degrees Celsius have always been a challenge for herders, but the past few decades have been marked by the effect of climate change as dzud, a natural disaster characterized by extremely cold winters following drought in the summer, occurs more often now.

Two winter dzuds left an irrevocable dent in the livelihoods of herder families. These two dzuds took place in 1999-2000 and 2009-2010, the latter one resulting in the biggest loss of livestock in recent history. According to the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Light Industry, over 8.1 million livestock were affected (2010). To put it into context, the number comprises 18.4% of 44 million livestock in the nation at the time (Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry 2010). The consequence was felt hard by more than two hundred thousand pastoral herders whose lives constituted approximately 70% of all herders and who inhabited the affected territories (Singh 2017).

Regardless of these challenges, Mongolia ranks high on its livestock per capita ratios in the world. Currently, there are nearly 70 million livestock in relation to a human population of 3.4 million, which makes the ratio nearly 20 to 1 (Asian Development Bank 2021). Pastoralism has retained its status as one of the core activities that support the livelihood of Mongolians living in rural areas. According to the Asian Development Bank, more than 60% of rural household’s economic stability and sustenance depended on pastoral activities in 2020 (2021). Caught in between tradition and transition, pastoralism and its significance face a test of time. As Mongolia still treads the delicate path of the market economy, the connection between herders and their livestock continues to serve as a reminder of the rich pastoral culture in Mongolia.
The new urban reality of Mongolia

The changing climate globally and in Mongolia, combined with the economic stress it poses as well as the unavailability of educational and labor opportunities in the countryside, have presented many modern nomads with no choice but to seek refuge from the harsh climate and search for job and education opportunities in the capital city. However, their destination was not as accepting as their aspirations to acclimate to it.

Over the past 30 years, the population of Ulaanbaatar has nearly tripled from around 560,000 in 1990 to 1.5 million as of 2016 (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2023). Unable to afford apartments in the center of Ulaanbaatar, migrants ended up settling in the outskirts of the city with their ger (traditional Mongolian yurt dwelling made out of felt). This cluster of gers has created what is called the “ger districts,” semi-urban settlements in the periphery of Ulaanbaatar. Today, more than 60 percent of Ulaanbaatar’s population lives in ger districts (Engel 2015), and in almost twenty years, the area of the ger districts has increased by 588 percent (Park et al. 2019).

Stranded from their usual way of life, ger district dwellers experience both physical and social exclusion. Physical in the sense that they are spatially alienated from the city by having to live at its periphery, cut off from essential infrastructures, such as running water, sewage, trash collection, and heating. Socially, the nomad migrants are often not recognized as true “Ulaanbaatarians” and experience adverse socio-economic realities compared to apartment residents. Research done by the World Bank in 2017 revealed that poor household settlements in ger districts around Ulaanbaatar had higher levels of poverty relative to the rest of the city’s population based on household surveys done by the National Statistical Office. A total of 47 percent of ger residents in Ulaanbaatar are living in poverty while only 15 percent of their counterparts living in apartments are classified into this bracket (Singh 2017). It is noteworthy that in the education dimension, more than half of ger district residents have never gone beyond primary education (Singh 2017). Furthermore, 98 percent of ger
district residents do not have their dwellings near any type of water supply, in contrast to 42 percent of apartment inhabitants (Singh 2017).

The results of urbanization in Mongolia have overcrowded the capital city, enhancing the rural versus urban differences. The formation of semi-urban settlements on the city's outskirts led to a physical and social exclusion for their residents. Besides the rural-urban gap, another set of differences emerged - this time, the gap was reversed, benefitting women and leaving men in the shadows.

**Reverse Gender Gap**

There is a growing trend among rural Mongolian families to prioritize their daughters' education by sending them to schools and universities in the capital city, as the sons get tasked to herd livestock in the countryside (Murakami 2022). Compared to the usual pattern in the rest of the world where sons are endowed with most support and resources in the family, Mongolia reversed the pattern from sons to daughters. The reversal in investment has led women to become more educated than men: females accounted for 62 percent of graduates from universities, colleges, and institutes (Adiya 2010). Moreover, Mongolian women have lower unemployment rates compared to men (National Statistics Office 2015). However, despite wearing all sorts of hats - caregiver, scholar, and worker - women continue to be under-represented in top level political positions and they also do not receive any tangible support from the government in Mongolia. Women make up only 17% of Mongolia’s parliamentarians and face a wage gap of around 12.5% (UNDP 2018). Despite their growing rates of educational attainment and levels of employment, women continue to face the threat of domestic violence - “1 in 4 women reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner” as noted in the National Report on Gender-based Violence in Mongolia (2017, 15). The culprits are the men who are often forgotten in the shadows.
Toxic masculinity, manifested in exaggerated masculine traits and their importance, is a menace to both men and women in Mongolia. Mongolians put a lot of emphasis on how real men should be tough enough, never show weakness, and have the power to survive with or without education or support. Young boys are taught that a man should never cry, and they grow up being told that they should not care about “trivial” things like their physical or mental health or that they should never complain. They are expected to be able to survive in various ways than women can - doing physical and manual work are some avenues (Cengel 2017). With a limited role to fulfill in the family that is not lucrative and diminishing educational and employment opportunities, men are increasingly becoming dependent on their wives financially and emotionally.

Traditionally, Mongolian men had the duty of providing for their families, but their growing dependence on women for financial resources makes them vulnerable to comments about their inadequacy as men. Feeling overshadowed and failed as a man, many Mongolian husbands turn to violence, alcohol, and other unhealthy habits to numb their pain with no other outlet. As Ayush and Kitahara have noted, “the prevalence of binge drinking in Mongolia was 39.7 percent in men and 15.1 percent in women — making it 2.5 times more common in men compared to women” (2018). Decisions to turn to alcohol and violence for an outlet undermine not only their reputations but also their lifespan. Men live 10 years shorter, on average, than women in Mongolia (United Nations Population Fund 2017).

In both education and life-expectancy, Mongolia is witnessing a significant shift in gender dynamics within families, with a growing trend of prioritizing daughters’ education over sons’. Benefitting this reversal, women are outperforming men in educational attainment and employment rates. However, despite their progress, women still face systemic barriers to political influence and power. As men struggle to adapt the changing gender roles, some are clinging on to traditional masculine ideas, like violence and aggression. In the next chapter, I will explore how some men look
for new ways of expressing their masculinity.

Conclusion

Mongolia has gone through rapid transformations as a country in the past century. Throughout all the shifts and turns, pastoralism and livestock herding have persisted as the foundation of the country's economy and way of life. The constant changes happening to the Mongol people tested their nomadic culture and its meaning. However, just like how nomads adapt from one settlement to another, Mongolians embraced transformation as an everyday occurrence rather than a short-lived phase in their lives. As Højer and Pedersen put it - “radical change became an omnipresent part of people’s lives” (2019, 4). Change has been so omnipresent that almost every aspect of Mongolians’ lives has been exposed to continual ruptures. Højer and Pedersen defined their state as “lost” in transition — “not so much in the sense of being mute victims of transition, but more in the sense of being overwhelmed, captivated and seduced by radical change” (2019, 4). While actively embodying transition, Mongolians are experiencing two significant changes - the first is the increasing rural and urban divide, while the second change is the reverse gender gap. The next chapter looks at how the embodiment of transition is reflected in the changing identity of a masculine Mongolian man and the nurturing role of Mongolian meat.
Chapter 3 Draft: From the Steppe to the City: The Changing Essence of Meat and the Performativity of Masculinity in Mongolia

Amidst the constant transitions in modern Mongolia, one thing remains constant - the centrality of meat in the Mongolian people’s diet. In the vast open Mongolian land, meat stretches beyond sustenance. It is manifested with cultural significance ingrained in the daily fabric of life and serves as a prized pleasure of life. The key role meat plays in Mongolian life is evident from how even the achievement of personhood is tied to being able to eat meat on the bone (Ruhlmann 2019). This chapter examines the gendered process through which an animal is transformed into meat and consumed as a meal. It also builds on the changes described in Chapter 2 and how they are reflected in the evolving identity of a Mongolian man and their performed masculinity.

This chapter then goes on to explore the complicated function of meat in Mongolian society, focusing on its structuring role in social orders, gender, and identity-building – both individual as well as collective. The multitude of meat’s roles in the lives of Mongolian people is supported by the everyday practices structured by the nomadic lifestyle in a ger. However, the post-socialist rapid urbanization process is increasingly leading to shifts in how meat figures in daily life, bringing with it shifts in gender roles and ideas of masculinity. Although the centrality of meat in a Mongolian diet has not been contested, urban lifestyles are leading to transformations in the widespread ideas of a masculine Mongolian man.

As women migrate to urban areas for education and employment, men are left to manage household and pastoral duties, reversing the structures of traditional Mongolian society where men once had more access to resources than women. This shift also prompts a re-evaluation of masculinity among younger urban men, who are embracing a diet and a lifestyle suited for urban living as they question traditional masculine ideals. The changes brought by urbanization are
reshaping societal norms and gender dynamics in Mongolia, reflecting broader shifts influenced by globalization and evolving gender dynamics.

**Ger: the microcosm of nomadic society**

To understand how Mongolians divide the labor of transforming livestock into meat, it is essential to turn to the spatial allocation of roles in Mongolian households. *Ger* (yurt, Figure 3.1) sits at the nexus of nomadism, kinship, urbanization, and gender. Ger has a dome-like shape and is covered with felt. As a structure that was designed to be warm, sturdy, and portable (to facilitate its transport from one settlement to another), *ger* is symbolic of the nomadic lifestyle. However, in the past few years, *ger*’s power as a symbol of the nomadic lifestyle has been shifting rapidly with the burgeoning of *ger* districts on the outskirts of the capital city.

![Ger](https://www.discovermongolia.mn/about-mongolia/culture-art-history/ger-mongolian-traditional-dwelling)

**Figure 3.1 Ger**.

Now, rather than an emblem of pastoralism, *ger* structures have come to be associated with a token of urbanization and urban discrimination of *ger* district residents who reflect Mongolians stuck in a liminal space between the urban center and the outskirts. The structure of *ger* is integral to the nomad’s spatial body management. *Ger* is the microcosm of Mongolian nomad society. *Ger* is also the reflection of the bigger picture of the universe or nature the nomads are living in. It is

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3 [https://www.discovermongolia.mn/about-mongolia/culture-art-history/ger-mongolian-traditional-dwelling](https://www.discovermongolia.mn/about-mongolia/culture-art-history/ger-mongolian-traditional-dwelling)
always built to face the south, and all the arrangements in it are made in relation to the south-facing entrance and hierarchical relationships in the family. At the center of a ger stand two poles, symbolizing the man and the woman of a ger holding up their household with equal strength and effort. However, the roles assigned to genders are unequal inside and outside a ger and do not reflect the equality that the two poles stand for.

The interior space of a ger is divided into designated male-female and junior-senior areas (Humphrey 1974). The duties of a woman are mostly contained inside ger: childcare, care for the elderly, household chores, and cooking. Their responsibilities outside ger include milking and looking after the livestock. Meanwhile “men's work generally involves a greater range of mobility and longer periods of time spent away from the home” (Ahearn 2018, 403). Men take over “herding large livestock, slaughtering animals, fixing equipment such vehicles, machines and wells, hunting, watering animals” (Ahearn 2018, 403).

Aude Michelet, a French anthropologist, has described the spatial orientation and labor division of ger more in detail describing how “the northern part of the yurt (boimor), farther from the door, is considered the cleanest/purest (ariun) and honorific (bündtei)” (2018, 6). The boimor is the place for the most sacred items of the household, like family pictures and religious objects. Just as with objects, people’s position inside a ger is relational to the person’s social status and the level of respect they are entitled to. With age, nomads are expected to become more peaceful and wiser, and to have attained self-control. Junior members of society are considered to lack these traits inherent to old age as they have not accumulated enough life experiences. Thus, they are required to respect those who are older than them. The head of the family is also entitled to respect regardless of their age. Only the head of the family or respected guests are allowed to sit at the boimor, whereas junior members of the family and women cannot sit higher than them.
There are also designated spaces inside a *ger* for cooking and cleaning. The eastern part of a *ger* is allocated for cooking, while the western area is for cleaning or other daily chores. Most of the time, the lady of the household is standing by the stove which is located at the center of a *ger*. Tending to the fire is one of the most important tasks for women, as it symbolizes the “perpetuation of the paternal line” (Ruhlmann 2019, 29). Mongolian families honor the fire spirit for protecting not only the household but also their herd’s prosperity. Aside from the symbolic meaning of fire, it is also what feeds and warms the family by allowing women to cook on it.

The spatial allocation of roles within Mongolian households, centered around *ger*, reflects complex dynamics influenced by nomadism, kinship, urbanization, and gender. The microcosm structured around *ger* shapes how and who participates in the production of livestock from an animal to meat.

**Animal-to-Meat Chain**

Situated in the microcosm of *ger*, Mongolian herders carry out the process of transforming an animal into consumable meat. The stages of the Mongolian "food chain" encompass several key processes, as documented by Ruhlmann (2019, 47)

1. Animal husbandry: This refers to livestock breeding and nurture.
2. Slaughter and milking: For meat products, animals are slaughtered, while the milking yields dairy products.
3. Raw material processing: the slaughtering of and carving up a carcass for meat; skimming milk. For dairy, curd is drained and churned after further processing.
4. Conservation and storage: meat is preserved by freezing, drying, and smoking; milk and dairy products go through freezing, fermenting, drying, or distilling.
5. Preparation: Meat sections are defrosted and cut and dairy products are portioned. Meat shares and pieces are cooked as necessary.

6. Presentation: Meat and dairy products, placed in the trays or on serving platters are organized into a meal.

7. Etiquette and service: served in proper manners to guests, and service protocols are observed.

8. Consumption: parts and pieces are consumed following the table manners.

9. Handling leftovers: leftovers are saved and stored, while waste such as bones, blood, and non-edible parts are rightly discarded.

Animal Husbandry

The chain starts with the raising of the livestock. The five types of livestock, the "tavan kboshnu mal," include horses, cows (including yaks), camels, goats, and sheep. The meat of the tavan kboshnu mal is classified into three categories according to its thermal properties: hot, warm, and cold. This classification impacts the patterns of meat consumption, mirroring seasonal weather patterns. In the cold season, for instance, Mongolians consume “hot” meats that warm their bodies, like horse meat to survive the freezing winters. Warm meat refers to mutton, whereas meat from cattle, goats, and camels is classified as cold and is preferred for consumption in warmer weather.

Among the interviewees, the two herders who talked to me emphasized the seasonality of their meat consumption and livestock handling patterns depending on the time of year. A 29-year-old male herder B from Uvurkhangai, a southern province of Mongolia, noted that his meat consumption is dependent not on taste but rather on what his body needs at different points of the season. Meat consumption is, thus, critical for a herder's physical survival out in the harsh steppes. He echoed how the thermal properties of the meat influence his diet, sticking to the “hot” horse
meat during the winter for warmth and heat and “cold” goat meat during the summers. “It is not like I would eat horse meat in the summer just because it tastes good,” exclaimed B to illustrate how not taste, but the thermal property dictates his meat choice.

Davaasuren, a 74-year-old female herder from Bulgan province, has also emphasized how the weather changes her choice of meat: “I will get cold if I do not eat horse meat in winter times.” For both Davaasuren and B, the only way of sourcing their meat is from their livestock. They both expressed how their herding duties are also tied to this seasonal character of consumption as they need to slaughter more animals in the fall to prepare for their winter meat reserve, idesh. Summers are one of the less busy months for Davaasuren and B. Because they are not occupied with the preparation of the idesh, most of the slaughtering in summer is for special occasion feasts, such as during the Naadam festival, one of the two most widely celebrated holidays in Mongolia. Aside from herding responsibilities, the warmer summer months are easier on the body, which according to Davaasuren and B, makes them need fewer calories to stay warm. Indeed, all my interlocutors agreed that their bodies need more meat in the winter to get through the cold while they naturally revert to eating less meat during the summer months, (with the exception of special occasions and summer outings with friends and family to the countryside). Despite the decrease in the amount of meat being consumed in the summer, they still eat at least one meat dish almost every day during the summer too.

Similar to B and Davaasuren, the four younger men who are living in urban settings highlighted the seasonality of their meat consumption. Tuguldur, an engineering-trained bachelor in his 30s, was born and spent his whole life in Ulaanbaatar. Like everyone else, Tuguldur’s meat consumption pattern is also seasonal. “My body asks for more meat during the winter. You get over the cold season by eating more calories,” he said during our interview.
Bilguun is a 22-year-old man from Erdenet, one of the only five major cities in Mongolia, who has been living in Ulaanbaatar since he graduated from high school. All his life, Bilguun spent time in urban areas. Bilguun’s all-time favorite dish is steak. He cannot go more than two days without eating meat but tries to reduce the frequency in the summer months. Despite his effort to cut down, he did admit that it becomes difficult when many special occasions come up in the summer when he cannot refuse meat when offered because that is “impolite” and he cannot be “picky.”

Javkhlan or Jawa is also a city-born and raised man in his twenties. He is a native of Ulaanbaatar who is now studying in Tokyo, Japan. Identical to Bilguun, Javkhlan told me that he could not go on for more than two days without meat. He described his family as a “classic Mongolian household who loves meat.” Jawa and his family “eat more meat in the winter because it is cold.” Hence, everyone, no matter if they are a herder or not, emphasized the seasonality of meat consumption in Mongolia.

Therefore, animal husbandry and meat consumption in Mongolia are deeply influenced by seasonal weather patterns of the country and the thermal properties of different types of meat. Mongolians, both rural herders and urban dwellers, adjust their meat consumption based on what their bodies need to endure the harsh climate, eating more meat in the winter and less in the summer.

**Slaughtering**

The next in the animal-to-meat chain comes slaughtering the livestock. Herders fatten the livestock for a few years so that the meat will have as much fat as possible. Slaughtering is done by men in the family as “they have the skills and the ability to take life from domestic animals by making their blood spurt from the body,” while women who are “life-givers” are not allowed to
partake in the slaughter (Ruhlmann 2019, pp. 48-51). The rules for slaughtering livestock were established in the 13th-century Mongol code of law, the Great Decree (*Ib Zasag*), which rules that “the slaughterer must open the animal's belly and squeeze its heart in the hand until the animal dies… The slaughterer must attach the animal's feet two by two in front and in back. The law forbids spilling any blood outside the body” (Ruhlmann 2019, 51). The prohibition on spilling blood is partly to avoid wasting any edible part of the sheep, as the blood is processed later into the intestines. This prohibition also reflects the respect Mongolians hold for nature - mountains and rivers that feed them and their herd. They do not want to taint the sacred ground with animal blood. For these reasons, the slaughter is sometimes done on the skin of another sheep that has been slaughtered before. After the slaughter takes place, women are responsible for collecting the blood and the intestines without tainting the ground. They take the blood and viscera and clean them to process the intestines.

When asked a question about who slaughters the meat they eat, all of my interviewees identified a male slaughterer. Among them, B was the only one who had first-hand experience taking the life of livestock. The other person with more familiarity with the slaughtering process was the female herder Davaasuren, although she was the only female interviewee. Davaasuren has never slaughtered a sheep because she is not allowed to as a woman. Her answer to the question was: “It used to be my husband who slaughtered it, but now the boys do it.”

Bayarjavkhlan, a student at an American liberal arts college, grew up in Sukhbaatar province of Mongolia. From an early age, he was exposed to herding traditions and grew up close to livestock, but he later moved to the capital city permanently after graduating from high school. Even in high school, he was a frequent visitor in Ulaanbaatar during his summer vacation. Before coming to college in the States, Bayarjavkhlan lived in Michigan with a host family for a year in a high school exchange program. For Bayarjavkhlan, the meat from his grandfather used to be butchered by his
grandfather himself, but as time passed Bayarjavkhlan’s grandfather assumed the role of overlooking the process and ensuring everything was carried out properly as younger men took over the slaughtering process. A similarity among these three interviewees is their closeness to the rural herding lifestyle. For them, slaughtering is a mundane part of life.

Slaughtering attains a more ritualistic meaning for my interviewees who all grew up in urban cities. The slaughtering process happens behind the curtains for them, as they are not in close proximity to herds from which their meat comes.

Bilguun does not have first-hand experience of ever herding or slaughtering an animal. Like Bilguun, Jawa has no experience of killing an animal for its meat. One of Jawa’s most prominent memories associated with meat is the times when his family would slaughter a sheep to make *khorkhog*, a traditional Mongolian barbecue dish. *Khorkhog* is made by grilling and steaming the meat by pouring water into a stack of hot rocks in a tightly enclosed container. Jawa described the usual assignment of roles as: “The men would slaughter and the women would process the blood and the intestines…You know, the usual roles.”

Tuguldur, too, recounted the festive memories of Naadam and summer outings when their family would either buy a slaughtered sheep to make *khorkhog* or visit herder families to eat *khorkhog*. In all of these instances, Tuguldur or his immediate family members were not the ones who slaughtered the animal.

Whether it be meat from the market or relatives, Bilguun, Jawa, and Tuguldur did not know who the slaughterers were. Livestock slaughtering is a special occasion for them, as they see it only during Naadam or visits to the countryside. Still, everyone whom I talked to, even if they never had first-hand experience with slaughtering an animal, knew the “usual roles” - which are the men kill and the women process the blood and the viscera.
The slaughtering of livestock in Mongolia is a gendered process that reflects the traditional understanding of gender roles in the society, as women being the life-givers and men having the ability to take lives. Both herders from rural areas and men living in urban areas know and adhere to the gender-based assignment of roles in livestock slaughtering. However, the significance of slaughtering changes for men as they accustom to an urban lifestyle. For herder men from rural Mongolia, livestock slaughtering is a mundane task, while slaughtering has become more of a distant spectacle for Mongolian men living in urban areas.

Butchering

The next process in the animal-to-meat chain is butchering. Butchering reveals a fundamental concept in Mongolian kinship classification. Bones represent the father’s side of the family, and blood is the maternal side of familial ties. Hence, why the handling of the blood is done by women in the family, and butchering, like slaughtering, is a man’s job. Men cut apart the slaughtered livestock at the joints and avoid breaking the bone - “To break them or to scratch them when eating would, by analogy, be tantamount to breaking one's family line, since descent is patrilineal” (Ruhlmann 2019, 52). Dismembering the animal without breaking the bones requires precise skills not sheer strength. Traditionally, Mongols consider butchering as a skill that any man of the household should learn. All of my interviewees echoed this sentiment when answering the question of who butchers their meat.

“I should learn to do it,” declared Bilguun after admitting that his father, not his mother nor Bilguun, butchers their meat because it requires a lot of strength. He then proceeded to clarify that he wanted to learn to butcher not because he is a man and he has to do it but because he thought it was a useful skill and said “I would not want to see my wife butchering a meat if I start a family someday.” Bilguun’s cautious clarification perhaps points out how he wants to not leave room for
any misunderstanding that he performs traditional masculine roles because he conforms to traditional masculine standards. His comment implied that he wanted to put his actions and desires outside the discussion of Mongolian men sticking to masculine norms.

Unlike Bilguun, Bayarjavkhlan proudly said how he, even as a kid, helped his city relatives butcher their meat when he was staying with them in Ulaanbaatar. He took over the role of the butcher because, he explained, “city folks do not know how to butcher.” Having grown up in the countryside, Bayarjavkhlan performed the traditional role of a man with butchering skills for families far removed from herding customs when he stayed with his relatives in the capital city.

Like slaughtering, the gender-specific division of tasks in butchering in Mongolia is based on the traditional division of gender roles, with men typically responsible for this task due to its association with strength and patrilineal descent manifested in the bones. However, there is a shift in attitudes among younger urban men in Mongolia, who see it as a practical skill to learn rather than solely a marker of masculinity, while other younger men from a rural background take pride in preserving and practicing traditional male butchering roles even in urban settings. Overall, the evolving attitudes towards butchering among Mongolian men underscore broader shifts in gender dynamics and masculine identity brought about by urbanization and changing cultural landscapes.

**It is not a meal if it does not have meat**

The butchered meat is either stored as idesh, air dried to make borts, or cooked into a meal. Cooking is a gendered process in Mongolian cuisine. Cooking that takes place inside the house is considered to be the role of women. The sharing of the cooked meal reflects kinship relations and social hierarchy of Mongolian society.

Regardless of what meal it is, the most important defining factor for Mongolians is whether it has meat. In short, for a meal to be considered a meal, it has to have meat. This kind of sentiment
is strong and widespread in Mongolia, particularly among herders. In fact, the two interviewees I talked to who are herders were most emphatic about this point. Comments testifying to the centrality of meat were made by the two herders among the interviewees. “It is not a meal if it does not have meat...If it does not have meat in it, that day’s meal is pointless” B summarized to me. In a similar vein, Davaasuren underlined the importance of meat in her diet by stating: “I feel like I have eaten only when I eat a meal with meat in it.” Put briefly, a dish is considered as a meal only if it has meat in it.

Although the rest of my interviewees who are more integrated into the urban lifestyle expressed their love of meat, their inclination was not as strong as that of B or Davaasuren. In contrast to the rural herders interviewed for whom a meatless dish is pointless, the younger urban men declared that they could go up to two days without meat at most. Jawa said, “I can skip meaty dishes on some summer days, but the longest I can go without meat would be two days.” So, not every dish has to have meat for them.

One of the simplest but most beloved ways of cooking meat for Mongols is simply boiling the meat on bones. Every one of my interviewees mentioned chanasan mah (boiled meat, Figure 3.2) as a dish they eat or cook. After boiling the meat, the broth can be used to make either a noodle or rice soup or bantan (Figure 3.3), a porridge-like meal made with flour lumps. The boiled meat is served on a big shared plate. The women serve the meal and tea with her right hand supported by her left hand at the elbow. The male head of the household, sitting at the boimor of a ger, is responsible for cutting the meat into pieces and making sure everyone gets their share.
How the share is distributed reveals the social hierarchy of the Mongol household. As Fiddes has pointed out, the symbolism in the way meat is distributed for consumption is powerful, and “what meat exemplifies, more than anything, is an attitude: the masculine worldview that ubiquitously perceives, values and legitimates hierarchical domination of nature, of women and other men” (1991, 210). Fiddes’ argument of masculine worldview is applicable in the context of meat consumption in Mongolia. The first share always goes to the head of the household, which he then

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4 Asashoryu [https://twitter.com/servis/status/670258254350389248]
5 David Dettman [https://twitter.com/asianmktspbilly/status/138539966078593443]
proceeds to offer to elders and guests. Among the elders and guests, the men will eat first and receive the most esteemed parts of the meat, such as the scapula. There is a Mongolian saying that the scapula (dal) is meant to be shared by 70 (also dal in Mongolian), meaning it is to be eaten by everyone. Although scapula is to be shared among everyone, the first pieces always go to older males. This was the most prominent tradition that nearly all of my interviewees said they followed.

Following the elderly and the guests, men will receive their share according to their age then women, also by the order of their age, and finally, children will eat their share. The masculine worldview establishes a hierarchy according to both gender and age. Hence, the order of Mongols’ meat sharing also showcases the masculine worldview of men dominating animals, women, and other men, in par with Fiddes’ argument.

The life conditions of herding livestock make red meat the default option for Mongolian diet. From those interviewed, B and Davaasuren were the only ones who exclusively focused on red meat when asked what their diet looked like. Meanwhile, the younger men had a variety of answers ready for this question. Although Bilguun’s favorite dish is steak, he said he tries to eat salads and other alternatives for health and nutrition benefits. Beef was not the only prized meat for him. When asked what type of meat he eats regularly, Bilguun said - “How can I forget my sweet chicken? I eat chicken 1-2 times a week too.”

Contrary to Bilguun, Bayarjavkhlan fervently exclaimed: “I hate, hate, hate chicken.” His reason for hating chicken was how it is perceived to be “a feminine meat by Mongolians” because they believe that it is overly treated with hormones that are unsuitable for the male body. Indeed, some Mongolian women are told not to feed their boyfriends and husbands with too much chicken because they might become too feminine. Such ungrounded fears reveal the perceived link Mongolians see between masculinity and meat, not just any meat but meat that is seen as more masculine - red meat like beef and lamb.
Hence, meat plays a central role in Mongolian cuisine and culture, particularly among herders, where a meal is considered incomplete without meat. This emphasis on meat is intertwined with traditional gender roles, with women typically responsible for cooking meat dishes inside a ger, while men hold authority over the distribution of meat within the household, reflecting a broader masculine worldview of hierarchical domination. In addition to the gendered preparation of the meat, Mongolians’ perception of certain meats is also gendered. Red meat is seen as more masculine, while chicken is associated with femininity. Such beliefs highlight meat as the intersection of gender and social hierarchy in Mongolia.

**Performativity of masculinity through cooking**

Cooking is not an exclusively female job - men also cook meat, but their cooking is an avenue to perform masculinity. Just like the division of duties in ger into inside (women) and outside (men), cooking is also divided into inside cooking and outside cooking in Mongolia. While women cook the staple everyday dishes inside ger or the house, men cook the ceremonial dishes or dishes for special occasions outside. Claude Lévi-Strauss defined these cooking differences into two categories: exo-cuisine (roasting done outside for guests and big groups of people) and endo-cuisine (boiled done domestically for smaller groups) (1966).

Mongol men perform exo-cuisine when preparing *khorkhog*, for example. *Khorkhog*, as mentioned above, is a ceremonial dish prepared during Naadam or other special occasions, usually in the summer. A group of men collect rocks, heat them up, and roast the meat on the rock. All of the cooking is done outside, which explains why this activity and festival takes place in warmer weather. Another dish that falls into the exo-cuisine category is *boodog*, a cooking technique used for goat meat or, occasionally, marmot meat. Men slice the goat or marmot open and stuff it with hot rocks, then grill the skin from the outside.
In contrast to endo-cuisine usually done by women individually in private most of the time, Mongolian men’s traditional cooking duties are performed in public places and in groups during social gatherings. The openness and public character of this type of cooking highlights the performativity of masculinity manifested in not only the symbolism of meat itself as a token of power, wealth, and domination but also traditions surrounding meat. Lévi-Strauss argued that exo-cuisine, meaning grilling or roasting, is the most wasteful way of cooking meat as it shrinks the concentration of the meat (1966). On the other hand, boiling, i.e. endo-cuisine, dilutes the concentration of meat with water. Therefore, grilling, with its effect of concentrating nutrition, taste, and value of meat, is a trademark for wealth and abundance, embedding it with power. Such performativity of gender was theorized by Judith Butler who challenged the idea of gender as an innate part of identity: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (1988, 527). Following this argument, masculinity is not a stable aspect of one’s identity but rather it is unstable and must be enacted through repeated performance to become naturalized as an identity. Then, the performance of masculinity in settings like grilling meat and engaging in exo-cuisine is what creates traditional Mongolian masculinity and maintains it.

The dichotomy of endo- and exo-cuisine is less pronounced in contemporary Mongolia, especially among younger generations. Men engage in not only performative grilling practices but also cook day-to-day mundane meals. Aside from B and Tuguldur, every interviewee cooked their own meals. In B’s case, being married removed his need to prepare everyday meals as this task was performed exclusively by his wife. For Tuguldur, living at home with his mother, everyday meals are mainly cooked by his mother. Jawa, Bayarjavkhlan, and Bilguun cook when there are no women to cook for them, but when their mothers are with them, the young men are not to be found cooking the meat.
Davaasuren’s account stood out from the answers by the male interviewees, as she was the only one who mentioned cooking to feed other people. As a mother and a grandmother, Davaasuren was concerned not only with who cooks the meat she eats but also with the meat her children and grandchildren eat. She is the main cook who feeds herself and her family, but her grandchildren, regardless of their gender, help her with cooking as they grow older. However, it is noteworthy that only boys helped with the cooking of everyday meals, not adult men in her family. Davaasuren’s thoughts on cooking extend beyond herself and reflect her role as a caregiver, a role traditionally automatically assigned to women. She told me, “I do not cook myself a meal if I am alone. I do not have the appetite. I only cook when my family and kids are with me.”

No one else among the interviewees talked about the caregiving aspects of cooking meat. Therefore, although the performativity of exo-cuisine is less salient in contemporary Mongolia, the traditional labor division of women as primary cooks of the meat is still in place.

In summary, meat is a cornerstone of Mongolian herding tradition and diet. Traditional gender roles are symbolized in and structured by the spatial division of the ger and the practices of slaughtering, butchering, processing, and preparing the meat. The whole process of transforming an animal into meat reveals a myriad of ways in which not only gender but also familial hierarchy and kinship relations are reproduced.

**Nurturing the body and kinship relations**

An important aspect of how meat reproduces kinship relations in Mongolia is through the sharing of meat between rural and urban families amidst rapid urbanization process. Meat as a family connector embodies complex notions of care, kinship, and identity.

One of the ways Davaasuren tends to her familial network is by providing even extended family with meat. The winter idesh prepared by herders like Davaasuren and B is often shared with
family and relatives residing in Ulaanbaatar. Meat from different provinces of Mongolia differs in flavor due to the variations in wild grasses and herbs across the Mongolian territory. Many Mongolians can tell the meat of their homeland from any other province’s meat. The meat from the homeland, nutag, is imbued with special significance. For many Mongolians who migrated to the capital, the nutag meat is one of the only material connections to home that they can regularly access from the crowded and bustling Ulaanbaatar.

Many residents of ger districts who are recent migrants from the countryside, keep their connection to their nutag through the idesh that their relatives and family send from the homeland. According to Fox:

…those in the ger district often seek out meat from as near to their homeland as possible, if not from their own relatives’ herds. This desire, however, goes beyond the matter of taste preference (although this is important): for consuming this meat is a means of continuing to nurture and constitute one’s body with the substance of the nutag (2021, 287).

Acquiring meat from one’s nutag depends on keeping good connections with the countryside relatives. This “places meat in an indexical relationship to the status of one’s ties to one’s nutag; those who have access to homeland meat have maintained relations, those who have maintained relations have access to homeland meat” (Fox 2021, 287). Meat takes on an additional layer of meaning when the urban relatives offer services or gifts in return for the meat sent from the homeland. The transactional relations that meat establishes are created when the family members living in the city send old clothes and toys to their rural relatives. Another way of “repaying” them is letting rural relatives stay over at their house when they come to the city either to visit family or for other business, like going to the hospital. It is not explicitly labeled as compensation for the meat, but there is a consensus that the generosity of the meat is being reciprocated by a different, more urbanized, type of generosity.
The relations of exchange that meat sustains in Mongolia engender quite different dynamics and meanings of meat than have been noted in other contexts. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) theorized that meat consumption serves as a marker of affluence and social status. Additionally, Bourdieu (1984) also highlighted how specific meat choices are embodied with not only economic but also cultural and symbolic capital. The taste differences are intentionally highlighted to reproduce class disparities. In the case of modern Mongolia, meat is not only a marker of social class but it has become a mediator through which Mongolians enact and consolidate kin relations between communities separated by the rapid urbanization process in Ulaanbaatar. More than reproducing different social classes, meat in Mongolia simultaneously draws the line between urban versus rural and blurs it by contributing to the survival of kinship relations in an age of migrations.

Accounts from interviews with herders and young Mongolian men revealed the significance of meat sharing as a vital connector of Mongolian society. More evidently, their participation in meat sharing across the country illuminates how meat is a fundamental aspect of kinship relations, as it fosters social unity in a country increasingly separated into urban versus rural. For instance, my interviewee, Davaasuren repeatedly mentioned that preparing idešib and slaughtering livestock, in general, is not a mere preparation for consumption but rather an opportunity to share it with her kids and relatives. Meanwhile, all of the interviewed men who live in Ulaanbaatar were on the receiving end of this process.

Bayarjavkhlan wistfully told me about the abundance of his childhood memories of living with his grandmother in the countryside. His grandmother who used to be a herder gave her sheep to her in-laws due to her old age which prevented her from taking care of them by herself. Bayarjavkhlan and his grandmother would get their meat from her in-laws who would send the butchered sheep to her ger. “My grandmother would never spare meat in her dishes and I later
realized that people in the city do not do that no matter how financially stable they are living,” he said with a reminiscing yet baffled tone.

Later, when Bayarjavkhlan moved to the province center, his family would get their meat from his grandfather who is also a herder. Every two weeks, they would receive meat from his grandfather that had been carefully slaughtered, butchered, and stored. Bayarjavkhlan remembered this time fondly: “I always used to eat fresh meat back then. The taste is undeniably different from stale meat - you can just feel yourself getting stronger after eating it!” Even after moving to Ulaanbaatar, Bayarjavkhlan continued to receive meat from his grandfather who personally made sure that the meat his grandson was eating was of the highest quality and freshness.

During the interview, Bayarjavkhlan remarked how he was just now realizing that the meat he receives from his nutag is imbued with so much care from his grandfather: “As I am sharing this, I am realizing how much care my grandpa put into the meat I would eat. He supervises the whole thing (slaughtering, butchering, packaging, and delivery) himself.” His comment is a testament to meat’s role in nourishing not only his body but also his familial ties with his grandparents in his nutag. Further, it is noteworthy how Bayarjavkhlan reflected on the care that was expressed through the actions of a male family figure like his grandfather. This is because in Mongolia care and nurturing are traditionally regarded as a female responsibility. In general, preparing, shipping, or delivering the meat is done by the men in the household. As Bayarjavkhlan’s reflection reveals, this process, one that is exclusively carried out by rural men, of preparing the meat is experienced as care by urban men who are on the receiving end. Hence, another trend that urban migration has initiated is men performing acts of care on a scale that is larger than domestic labor of care. In the past, slaughtering and butchering livestock for immediate consumption or for idesh for the immediate family were men’s responsibility. Now, on top of preparing meat for immediate family in their nutag, men are tending to meat consumption of non-immediate family too. This helps them ensure they
have connections in Ulaanbaatar. Rural Mongolians rely on this network to stay connected to urban resources, like a place to stay in the city, as noted earlier. This notion of care through meat is also related to the traditional masculine role of men providing for their families. However, tending to relationships in the family was a traditionally female responsibility. With urbanization and meat-sharing, this has become men’s job too. Thus, the new kinship relations spurred by urbanization have created new forms of care and made masculinity and care not mutually exclusive in Mongolia.

However, the less strong or immediate ties someone has with nutag or the countryside, the more impersonal the idesh received from relatives is to them. Although not herders, Bilguun’s parents send him meat from Erdenet which they get from someone else, either relatives or herders they know. Bilguun does not know whose livestock the meat is coming from nor he cannot tell the difference between grocery store meat in Ulaanbaatar, which he purchases from time to time, and the meat sent to him from Erdenet. His mom, on the other hand, often complains about the low quality of the grocery store meat in the capital city.

Like Bilguun, Jawa and his family get their meat from distant relatives in the countryside. He did not mention anything else about them other than the fact that he considers them to be “relatives.” Unlike Bayarjavkhan, Jawa appeared not as concerned about who was preparing his meat or where it was coming from. When Jawa is in Japan, he gets his meat from a Halal butchery. Similarly, Tuguldur noted that his father is more experienced in discerning which meat has better taste and quality and buys it at the market: “Dad is the one who usually buys meat at the market because he can tell which one is fresh and tastes better.” Tuguldur and his family do not receive meat from the countryside but almost exclusively buy their meat at the market. Although Tuguldur’s family does not purchase their meat directly from herders, they still follow the custom of storing idesh for the winter and eating fresh “wet” meat for the summer.
The three urbanites - Tuguldur, Jawa, and Bilguun - illustrate that the more embedded the interviewees were in the urban lifestyle in Mongolia or abroad, the blurrier their definition of nutag and the more indifferent they were about their source of meat.

To note, meat is not a mere sustenance for the body for modern Mongolians - it also nurtures kinship relations, particularly in the context of urbanization and migration that leaves families separated. Through the sharing of meat from one's homeland, Mongolians sustain not only familial bonds but also a sense of connection to their roots, transcending physical distances and societal changes. As meat becomes more than just sustenance, but a symbol of nomadism and also new forms of care, its role in Mongolian society reflects the evolving notions of kinship ties and gender roles amidst changing landscapes and lifestyles.

**Displacement and search for a new masculinity**

Amidst the storm of urban migrations in post-socialist Mongolia, herders are forced to live apart from each other to receive education and find job opportunities. How do gender and kinship roles change, when once-nomads find themselves outside *ger* with no livestock to herd, in the middle of the urban chaos of Ulaanbaatar, surrounded by skyscrapers and infrastructure? Ariell Ahearn has partially delved into this question in her study of absence resulting from the separations of rural Mongolian families. She examines how in post-socialist Mongolia, locally educating children has become an impossible task for rural families, as the dormitory system has broken down with the fall of socialism (Ahearn 2018). To access education, mothers, as primary caregivers, move to regional centers or even to the capital city with their children during the school season. Fathers stay in their pasture, looking after their herd. The absence of women from their *ger* reveals changing gender dynamics.
A certain type of role reversal happens, as the woman of the household moves closer to socio-economic opportunities, she steps into a complex web of social interactions in town centers and the city (Ahearn 2018). The traditional gendered division of labor in pastoral families is shaken by the absence of the woman. Ahearn's study focused on men who are dealing with the change by themselves without support, although many men who stay in rural areas to herd their livestock receive help from women from their extended families. In Ahearn’s study specifically, the man of the household, who was once the head of the family, was now left behind alone in a wild, wide steppe with no one to take care of him. He, himself, now had to do everything around the house - cooking, cleaning, herding. The man was tasked with double labor of the domestic chores but also the physically taxing livestock herding. Without the woman, the fire of the house was also left behind. The patrilineal line, symbolized by the fire of ger and traditionally tended by women to ask the fire spirits for protection and prosperity, was now left unattended.

Men interviewed by Ahearn expressed how lonely they felt as they experienced social isolation without the Lady of the ger (2018). The structures and practices that allowed them to perform their masculinities are now displaced with the women of the household. Ahearn argues that this situation “reflect[s] the ways in which mobilities are gendered in rural Mongolia” (Ahearn 2018, 412). In contrast with the spatial division of ger, in which women are tied to the domestic duties inside the ger, while men are more mobile and free outside the ger - the departure of women to urban centers ties the man inside the ger and sets the woman free to roam.

Displaced from their usual throne of respect, Mongolian men are reminiscing the “Mongolian masculinity…expressed in the context of relationships where men are centrally placed in social hierarchies through everyday practices of respect, rituals such as mountain worshiping ceremonies and the spatial organization of homes…Household splitting dis-places these ways of relating” (Ahearn 2018, 412). I further extend Ahearn's argument to say that this applies not only to
displaced and separated rural households in the countryside, where the man is left behind in the pastures and the woman moves to urban settlements, but also to rural-to-urban migrant families in Ulaanbaatar. Without their usual everyday practices of clear gender division in a ger and pastoral lifestyle, migrant nomad men and new urbanite Mongolian men are forced to pave a new way of performing masculinity.

A different trend of displacement is happening in the education system as women are becoming more educated than men in Mongolia, as evidenced by the reverse gender gap. Sons are asked to stay in the countryside in their pastures and look after their herd, as daughters are sent off to the capital to receive education. In a broader view, the rural has come to replace the “private” and the “domestic,” i.e. inside of a ger, while Ulaanbaatar has become the outside of a ger, the “public.” All the resources, wealth, and power are concentrated in the capital city - the masculine respect is spotlighted in the city. Rural Mongolia is falling behind as its status is becoming a mere mirage of nomadism and the “domestic” traditions of the country. It has no real power but still performs the essential functions of feeding the country with its beloved meat and performing the “caretaker” role of keeping kinship ties alive.

To sum it up, urban migration in post-socialist Mongolia disrupts traditional gender and kinship roles among herders, leading to a significant shift in social dynamics and masculine identity. As women move to urban centers for education and economic opportunities, men are left behind to manage both domestic and pastoral duties, resulting in a reconfiguration of gendered responsibilities and challenges to traditional notions of masculinity. This shift reflects broader transformations in rural-to-urban dynamics and underscores the evolving landscape of gender and power in Mongolian society.
A mismatch between urban life and traditional masculinity

Educated and employed, women are overpowering men in Mongolia today. However, it has not always been like this. After the transition to the market economy since the fall of socialism, women have been challenged in ways that men were not. The economic turmoil of the transition came with cuts in subsidies on which women relied disproportionately. In socialist times, women mainly worked in less profitable sectors, which left them vulnerable after the revolution. Many more women became unemployed than men (Basu 2018). These changes strained relationships between men and women in families, highlighting disparities in decision-making, responsibilities, and resources. However, as the urban-rural divide and the economic uncertainty increased, leaving men stranded with their herds in the empty steppe, women gained mobility, once a privilege exclusively linked to men. With mobility, came opportunities for gaining access to resources.

Mongolian women who are outperforming men, except in executive-level positions and politics, are having trouble finding eligible husbands. An article in *The Guardian* that covered this phenomenon characterized Mongolian women as “Too smart, too successful: Mongolia’s superwomen struggle to find husbands” (2018). The article talks about how for successful and ambitious Mongolian women, professional and educational achievements are becoming a barrier to marriage. Their social status sets them apart from less educated men who are often intimidated by their success, but women are often pressured by family and relatives to find a husband before the age of 30 (World Bank 2018). Mongolia’s “superwomen,” then, are in a double bind of being prioritized to receive education in the family but also expected to become a wife and start a family before the standard age of “expiration” - 30.

Not all men are being disqualified by Mongolian women. The already-married Mongolian men rely on their better-educated and employed wives as they reminisce about being the center of ritualized respect and importance. Dethroned and displaced, men in modern Mongolia are
struggling to hold on to the traditional Mongolian stereotype of a “real man,” formed by the relational repeated performative acts inside and outside a ger as well as out on the pasture. When nomads first move to the city, they are leaving behind the space and the context according to which they used to manage and regulate their bodies. Entering an unexplored territory, they are expected to unlearn the years of embodied taste and learn a completely new way to perform gender.

So, the transition to a market economy in Mongolia, coupled with changes in gender dynamics, has led to a situation where women are outperforming men in education and employment. However, this shift has created challenges for women in finding eligible husbands, as their success and social status can intimidate potential partners. Meanwhile, men, particularly those from rural backgrounds, are struggling to adapt to changing gender roles and societal expectations, feeling displaced from their traditional roles as the primary decision-makers and providers.

**A challenge to the carefree man**

The process of adjusting to the novelties of city life may take generations for men. They still attach “social capital to (hyper)masculinity, namely strong resilient bodies, wrestling, and the capacity to drink alcohol” (Billé 2010, 412). Yet, the taste and embodiment of a herding lifestyle are not suitable for the sedentary lifestyle of Ulaanbaatar. Perhaps, the aftermath of trying to hold on to it is seen in the life expectancy gap of 10 years between men and women in Mongolia.

According to the United Nations, an average Mongolian man can expect to live until only 66, not even 70, while women can expect to outlive them by nearly a decade (2017). Reports by international organizations and the popular media discourse on this gendered life expectancy gap identify diet and lifestyle as the main culprits. A World Bank study found that “Risky health behaviors — smoking, alcohol consumption, poor diet and lack of exercise, not seeking medical care, other risk-taking behaviors — were identified as the primary cause of the large difference in
mortality between men and women” (2020, 9). Of the men who were interviewed by the World Bank, 60 percent were smokers, alcohol consumption was common, and half admitted to not exercising regularly and having poor dietary habits (2020). Men in rural areas were more physically active, while younger men in urban areas were more likely to exercise compared to older men in urban areas and men in rural areas (World Bank 2020).

It is evident from the data that dietary choices changed with age - the younger generations were more likely to add healthy options like vegetables and fruits to their diet. Although they still consume meat regularly and consider meat to be a key ingredient in a meal, their attitude towards meat is diverging from the understanding that meat is the ultimate food for ‘real men’ towards a more practical consumption of meat, as a source of protein and flavor. Hence, the younger generation of Mongolian men are departing from the dominant discourse of masculinity being equal to tough men overeating meaty and fatty food and overdrinking alcohol. There is even a campaign intended to promote healthy habits among men by the largest pharmaceutical company in Mongolia: Monos.

The name of the campaign is “Khenegtei Er Hun,” meaning “Earnest Man.” The word “kheneggui” in Mongolian translates to “carefree.” Being carefree, like mobility, is another traditionally highly valued trait in Mongolian men. A carefree attitude implies not caring about ‘trivial’ things like health, both physical and mental. Men are expected to “suck it up” and carry on. Following these standards forces men to repress their emotions and revert to unhealthy outlets like alcoholism or even suicide. The numbers are devastating. The suicide rate per 100,000 male population in Mongolia was 30.7 as of 2019, while 5.4 per 100,000 female population for the same year (World Bank). Further perpetuating the Mongolian masculine standards, there is even a saying - “a man’s happiness is out in the wilderness.” This image of a carefree, mobile man is still romanticized in Mongolia as seen from the World Bank study findings: older men were less likely to consume fruits
and vegetables, nearly 60 percent of men reported seeking medical attention when ill, and 20 percent had never seen a doctor (2020).

Matching the above-mentioned findings, Bayarjakhlan’s transition from Sukhbaatar to Ulaanbaatar showcases a similar pattern. For Bayarjakhlan, vegetables and fruits were not a large part of his diet until he moved to the province center, where he had more access to these ingredients. As he got accustomed to the urban lifestyle, he mentioned how his dietary choices became increasingly influenced by conventionally agreed standards of a balanced diet. In Ulaanbaatar and the United States, he makes sure his vegetable intake is hitting his goal of a diet that is more suitable for an urban lifestyle.

Bayarjakhlan noticed the differences in diets for rural versus urban Mongolians from his experience living in both: “Rural folks eat more sugar, meat, and carbs…People in the city eat less meat.” The same comment was made by Davaasuren: “Both men and women from the city eat less meat, but in the countryside, even the children rush to eat more meat.” Proving their point, Bilguun in Ulaanbaatar and Jawa in Tokyo both mentioned how they make sure to include vegetables and fruits in their diet. In comparison, B, who is older than them and lives in the countryside, did not mention vegetables or fruits in his interview.

On top of prioritizing ingredient variety in their diets, two of the younger men I interviewed - Bayarjakhlan and Bilguun - go to the gym regularly. In fact, when asked what role meat plays in his diet, Bilguun highlighted that meat is a source of protein to him, which is necessary after heavy workouts at the gym. For him, meat's importance was grounded in a functional understandings of nutrition and calories. In contrast, the herders, B and Davaasuren, focused on more symbolic understandings of meat as the ingredient that makes a dish a meal in their answers, as mentioned above. Hence, the more urbanized a Mongolian man is, the more suited his taste becomes for an
urban lifestyle. The younger generation of men in urban areas is breaking the stereotype of a “carefree man.”

In this way, traditional masculine ideals in Mongolia, characterized by toughness, overconsumption of meat and alcohol, and a carefree attitude, are increasingly being challenged, particularly among younger urban men. This shift is driven by changing dietary habits, exercise routines, and attitudes toward health and well-being, which are influenced by urbanization and exposure to globalized notions of health. The transition to a lifestyle more suited for urban living reflects a departure from traditional notions of masculinity and a recognition of the importance of physical and mental health.

Conclusion

In summary, meat is the heart and soul of Mongolian cuisine. It is what makes a meal “worth it.” Besides the pivotal role of nourishing and adding pleasure to life during harsh winters, meat sustains kinship and gender relations in Mongolia, manifested in repeated mundane acts structured by the nomadic way of living in ger. The dietary customs of men and women of Mongolia reflect the performativity of gender which is expressed in their etiquette and designated roles. Nevertheless, the stability of these norms has been challenged by the post-socialist storm of change which started a process of rapid urbanization, forcing families to separate or relocate. As nomads left their ger to live in the city, their embodied taste and understanding of gender and kinship were displaced from their usual routines. The novelty of urban life is prompting men to confront and re-evaluate the standard qualities of a masculine Mongolian man, as they fall behind Mongolian women who are overperforming them in education and professional fields.
Chapter 4 - Romanticized Masculine Alter Ego: Excavating the Past for Stability

Socialism, and then democracy, came rushing into the lives of Mongolian people in a span of 70 years. This chapter elaborates on the changes that happened in Mongolia discussed in Chapter 2. It explores how the turn of events manifested on a larger scale - on a level of national identity. Mongolians who came to embody transition quickly adapted to their new reality of being a sovereign yet not completely independent country. Sandwiched between two political giants - Russia and China - Mongolia faced the need to carry out delicate diplomacy with both.

Recovering from 70 years of dependence on Russia and fearing a takeover by China, Mongolians are constructing a distinctly independent national identity, based on a romanticized vision of nomadism, herding, and masculinity. The process of seeking relevance and consolidating its national identity has encouraged Mongolia to look back at its history and “Other” different nations to highlight its independence through meat and masculinity. Ethnosymbols such as Chingis Khaan were revitalized to enhance national pride but have run the risk of oversimplifying identity - Mongolia is clinging on to performative nomadic masculinity to preserve its relevance. The modern discourse on Mongolian identity increasingly revolves around depicting Mongolia as a homeland of nomadic herders, drawn from an idealized historical narrative. However, this romanticized view of nomadism persists despite the near extinction of true nomadic lifestyle and pastoral herding.

As Mongolia navigates its role on the global stage, it continues to emphasize two central elements of its identity: masculinity and nomadic herding. However, these defining features confine Mongolian identity to rigid essentialized stereotypes. Nomadic herders are being reduced to a romanticized ideal of a vanishing pastoral lifestyle while being excluded from the advantages of modernity.
Erasing the past in socialist national identity building

Mongolia's transition from colonial rule to independence and subsequent socialist era marked by Soviet influence has left a lasting mark on its identity. Socialist efforts aimed to unify the nation by erasing class and cultural distinctions and promoting progress through a propaganda that depicted a harmonious blend of urban modernity (represented by men) and rural traditions (represented by women). However, in today's Mongolia, traditional gender roles are reversing, with women driving progress while men are safeguarding rural life. This reflects broader shifts in urban-rural dynamics and power structures.

Mongolia stands insecure in its independence as a newly established democracy with a track record of only 30 years, before which came 70 of dependence on the USSR and 200 years of colonization by the Manchu. After nearly 200 years of Manchu dominion, the “new communist Russia … progressively and promptly supported Mongolia's liberation from Chinese political and economic domination” in 1921 (Bumochir 2018, 362). However, Mongolia’s independence was recognized by the international community only after World War II at the Yalta Conference in 1945, where Stalin was one of the main negotiators for the country’s independence (Bumochir 2018). The newly formed state became heavily reliant on its dominant ally - the Russian Big Brother - akin to colonies on its colonizers (Buyandelgeryn 2013). Even right before the fall of socialism, more than 80 percent of Mongolia's imports and 70 percent of exports were with the USSR (Buyandelgeryn 2013). The Soviets were dictating the construction of everything: infrastructure, education, hospitals, and even the national identity.

The beginning of socialism in Mongolia came with a deliberate effort to diminish class and cultural distinctions to foster unity among the population. According to Kaplonski, there was not one single overarching national identity in Mongolia up until socialism, before the 1920s (1998). He further suggests that the flattening of the cultural and class distinctions was initiated because the
existing form of collective identity in Mongolia did not fit the Soviets' definition of a state (Kaplonski 1998). This process of shaping a shared national identity was based on rewriting history: “Written history shifted from being about rulers and people to being about a people—the Mongols” (Kaplonski 1998, 35). Kaplonski further argues that the nation-making project required an erasure of class differences, and he based his argument on Liah Greenfeld’s definition of national identity “as deriving from 'membership in a people' in which each member 'partakes in its superior, elite quality' with a resulting perceived homogeneity within the group” (1998, 36). Another line of erasure was actively being carried out as the Soviets instructed the destruction of religious and cultural archetypes: temples, lamas, and even the traditional script. Hence, with the establishment of socialism in Mongolia, came the flattening of class and cultural differences to enhance unity among the people.

During socialism, another connecting force for the people was the state-mandated goal of reaching progress and development (Sneath 2003). As part of the efforts to reach this goal, Mongolia adopted a local version of Soviet political culture by mixing it with Mongolian traditions to create a unique political identity. The new political identity represented a mix of Marxist, modernist, and urban ideals and saw Moscow as the political center (Sneath 2003). These ideals were spread with the help of the educational system, mass media, and administrative discourses. Together with the aspiration for progress and development, a rural-domestic set of values continued to thrive. An example of this can be found how herders were highlighted as important contributors to building the socialist state as they provide sustenance and resources for the industry. Seemingly antithetical to each other, the urban-centric and rural-domestic ideals provided a complimentary notion of the bigger picture the country was aspiring to.

The set of socialist posters shown in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 are examples of how the state was imagining a national identity that balanced both modernity and rural herding life. Both posters
depict drawings that harmonize herders and more modern professions, such as truck drivers and men in suits. Other prominent political symbols are also protruding through the posters: the scene from the 1921 revolution, figures of Soviet leaders like Lenin and Stalin, as well as the red Soviet flag. The first poster in Figure 4.1 says “Forward toward Socialist victory!” as the people stand united under the flag. Meanwhile, the second poster in Figure 4.2 reveals a landscape of an ideal society with modern urban buildings and factories but also the peaceful herd grazing beneath all the urban establishments. The inclusion of both the urban workers and the infrastructure they are building and herders with their herd emphasizes the complementary nature of the two and a vision of forward movement toward an industrial modern society.

Figure 4.1 Forward toward Socialist victory (1957)\(^6\)

\(^6\) Gombosuren B. (1957)
Another set of posters that reveal the urban-centric and rural-domestic spheres can be seen in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4. In Figure 4.3, two men, Mongolian and Russian, are shaking hands in the first poster as they stand in front of Mongolian and Soviet flags respectively. In the background, we can see tall buildings and cranes but also agricultural fields. At the top of the poster, a big white text says: “Soviet-Mongolian friendship is unbreakable!” Similar in message, but slightly different in style is the second poster of two women in traditional clothing, also Mongolian and Russian, standing next to each other in Figure 4.4. The Mongolian woman is offering tea and food symbolizing hospitality, while the Russian woman is offering bread, the people’s food in Russia. They are also standing in front of their respective flags. The text atop the poster on Figure 4.4 summarizes the Soviet-Mongolian relationship in three simple words: “Brotherhood Friendship Unity.” Unlike the posters in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, the set of posters in Figures 4.3 and 4.4 reveals a different layer in the urban-rural division. More than aspiring to highlight their complementarity, these two posters imply that men are at the forefront of establishing progress and development in Mongolia, while women safeguard the traditional ways of living, which should support the process of reaching modernity.

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7 https://www.instagram.com/mongolianvisuals/p/CLQlfY5BnTM/
Ironically, in today’s Mongolia, the inverse of this is happening, as evidenced by the reverse gender gap. Women are carrying the “progress” as they become more educated, while men are now the face of the rural herding lifestyle. As mentioned in Chapter 3, rural Mongolia inherited roles traditionally associated with "private" and "domestic" life, which were once confined to the inside of a ger. Conversely, Ulaanbaatar has transformed into the external counterpart of a ger, representing the

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8 https://www.reddit.com/r/PropagandaPosters/comments/bnovwc/1981_ussr_mongolian_friendship/#lightbox
"public" sphere. The resources, wealth, and power are all concentrated in the capital city, mirroring the traditional masculine authority in a Mongolian household. Related to this, the significance of the rural herding lifestyle is slowly being dwindled to only a symbolism of nomadic life and domestic traditions. Even without real influence, rural Mongolia continues to fulfill crucial roles in sustaining the country through food production and nurturing kinship bonds.

During the socialist era, efforts to forge a unified national identity involved flattening class and cultural differences, promoting progress and development, and balancing urban and rural ideals. However, in contemporary Mongolia, there is a reversal of traditional gender roles, with women assuming roles associated with progress and modernity while men are now the face of rural herding lifestyles. This shift reflects broader changes in the urban-rural divide and the concentration of resources and power in urban centers like Ulaanbaatar, indicative of the shifting dynamics of masculinity in Mongolia.

Exaggerated Fear of the Southern Neighbor

Despite the changing political landscape in Mongolia, the generation of Mongolians who experienced socialism still look up to Russia as “Big Brother.” In contrast, a strong animosity towards China persists even today. Frank Billé identifies the roots of this sinophobia in the USSR agenda from the socialist times when Russia exaggerated the threat coming from China to Mongolia to guarantee Mongolia’s political loyalty to the Soviet Union (2015). Eventually, this anti-Chinese attitude came to be a reason to bolster internal unity and homogeneity, as well as a national sense of collectiveness.

The contemporary Mongolian discourse of China reflects widespread rumors about the Chinese government’s alleged plans to take over the country. The accounts from interviews from Billé’s research on Sinophobia echo the animosity. Billé reported how the Mongolians he talked to
harbored suspicions of attempts by the Chinese to harm Mongolians by poisoning their food, diluting the gene pool by sponsoring Chinese men to father mixed-race children, organizing human trafficking of homeless children for organ trade, and many more (Billé 2010). These rumors reflect Mongolians’ fear that to maintain its independence, Mongolia must prevent Chinese involvement.

The enduring influence of historical dynamics continues to shape Mongolia's perceptions of its neighbors, particularly Russia and China. As Mongolia navigates its path forward, these historical legacies complicate Mongolia’s construction of power and masculinity in its national identity.

**Romanticized Nomadism**

Mongolia's quest for a post-socialist identity has been marked by a complex interplay of historical memory, cultural revival, and contemporary challenges. The existence of widespread Sinophobic rumors testify to how Mongolia still does not feel secure about its independence, even after a century. After the collapse of socialism in 1990, Mongolia no longer had a “Big Brother” who defined its identity. The seven decades of political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union have formally come to an end. Yet, the “Chinese threat” was still there. Beyond the threat from China, Mongolia also had to establish its presence on the global political stage as a newly formed democracy. It was no longer tied to the collective socialist ideals led by the Soviet Union. “National Immunity” became a widely used term as the country hurried to sculpt its identity that is protected from outside influences. Ethnosymbolism was employed as a means to strengthen national immunity by drawing upon historical myths, cultural heritage, and traditional symbols from the past to construct the modern nation-state.

In its search to reinvent itself, Mongolia looked back into its past. The focus landed on its traditional nomadic history that resonated with the country’s desire for authenticity, a part of its identity that only Mongolia can claim. The Mongolian nomadic identity was developed as a result of
a selective reimagining of historical memory, with a special accent on the Mongol Empire (Myadar 2011). The legacy of the Mongolian Empire became the highlight of this new nation-building project. Nomadism, herding, and the Mongol Empire were idealized as a symbol of freedom, mobility, and perseverance extending over the vast empty steppes of the country. This emphasis on free-roaming nomadic culture perpetuated the image of Mongolians as people, unconfounded by borders.

The romanticization of nomadism provided Mongolia with a distinctly Mongolian identity but it also came with its issues. A recent article in the New York Times posed the question “Why are so many millennials going to Mongolia?” The answer they provided revealed the same romanticization of the unbounded Mongolian steppes and its freedom: “In an era of Instagram tourism, some young people are searching for less curated travel experiences. So they’re flocking to the open spaces of this East Asian nation” (2023). The article goes on to talk about how millennials from countries like the US and England, who are overwhelmed by the overly curated travel experience, are flocking over to Mongolia for its rawness. Even in 2023, Mongolia is still exoticized by the West. Just like the medieval writings about Mongolia by European travelers, the New York Times article essentialized Mongolia as the empty land of nomads.

The romanticization of nomadic culture in Mongolia has not only perpetuated a distorted image of the nation but has also served as a strategic tool for cultural demarcation and differentiation. This essentialization and estrangement of Mongolia through the nomadic lens were noted by Orhon Myadar who put it this way:

“Serving the habit of outsiders to construct an imagined Other and the need of Mongolians for cultural demarcation, the Mongolian landscape and Mongolian herders have become a facade through which the portrayal of Mongolia as a 'nomadic nation' is widely constructed and perpetuated” (2011, 335).
The Mongolian government is also complicit in the essentialization of nomadic culture. The New York Times article mentioned how the government “has been trying to capitalize on this desire for less curated travel” (2023). The state invested in social media marketing showcasing the pristine landscapes of the country. Therefore, the romanticization of nomadism and herding traditions became a tool to attract tourists and Westerners who were yearning for an untouched nature that was almost like time travel. This approach also gave Mongolia the opportunity to distinguish itself from its two big neighbors.

Another way the past is being mobilized to construct the present Mongolian alter ego is through ethnosymbolism, a process through which myths, culture, and traditional symbols are used to construct the modern nation-state (Smith 2015). Myadar and Rae argue that ethnosymbols, like the romanticized image of Chingis Khaan, act as a connecting force that brings people together, offering a sense of order and meaning in an otherwise disruptive world (2014). They are used to construct and preserve group identity but also could be utilized to establish categories that dictate group boundaries for exclusion, defining who belongs and who does not (Myadar and Rae 2014). Due to this normative nature of ethnosymbols, Mongolian identity runs the risk of becoming too authoritative, requiring homogeneity as it is simplified to essentialized characteristics, leaving little room for individual reinterpretations. The potential of what "Mongolianness" can be is stripped of its diversity.

Presumably, the most prominent ethnosymbol that has been dug out of the past is that of Chingis Khaan. During the Soviet era, the founder of the Mongol Empire was denounced for his tyranny. However, post-socialist Mongolia has resurrected Chingis Khaan and placed him on the pedestal of national pride and identity. Political authorities and state agenda planned the revival of Chingis Khaan. The Khaan’s legacy became omnipresent, manifesting in cultural representations. A clear example of the centrality of Chingis Khaan’s figure is the monumental statue sitting at the
center of the Government Palace in Ulaanbaatar (Figure 4.5). The monument was built in 2006 for the 800th anniversary of Mongolian State. This underlines the state's emphasis on Chingis Khaan's lasting influence of his victories and the power of his victories. His warriorship, strength, and power are idolized as virtues in today’s Mongolia. Such values are manifested in the lingering ideals of masculinity that prize qualities akin to Chingis Khan's warriors: ferocious, tough, and courageous. By making Chingis Khaan the face of the Government Palace, the state is communicating masculinity and power as the signifiers of both past and present Mongolia. Chingis Khaan, who once conquered vast territories, thus helped contemporary Mongolia legitimize its authority and sovereignty.

![Figure 4.5 Statue of Chingis Khaan.](image)

Strength and resilience represented by Chingis Khaan serve as nostalgic ideals and solace for Mongolians in the middle of the political uncertainties in contemporary Mongolia (Myadar and Rae 2014). The government has even passed a law that requires the portrait of Chingis Khan to be placed inside the Government Palace, in the offices of all government organizations, and encouraging all Mongolian households to also place his portrait in their homes. Chingis Khaan's influence is not merely symbolic, it is also material - his face is printed on the local currency (Figure 4.7) and is featured on the label of a famous Mongolian vodka (Figure 4.6).
Such cultural representations of Chingis Khaan on everyday items perpetuate his significance in the national identity of Mongolia. Moreover, its nostalgic and traditional tone is contrasted with the socialist posters from Figure 4.1-4.2 and Figure 4.3-4.4 that convey a distinct message of modernity and progress complemented by herding customs. Portrayals of Chingis Khaan embody strength and instill intimidation through images of a once powerful and fearsome Mongolia from the past. It distracts from the country's actual political instability pressured by China and Russia - instead of focusing on an actionable plan to strengthen the country's independence, Mongolians are nostalgically reminiscing about the “good old times” (Myadar and Rae 2014). Myadar and Rae posited that:

The more insecure Mongolians feel and the more disenchanted with the reality of modern Mongolia they become, the more fiercely they cling to the image of Chinggis Khaan and the nostalgic ideal he personifies. The Great Khaan is where Mongolians fix their emotions, whether in the ritual of adoration or deification or in the form of ultranationalism” (2014, 574).

In essence, Mongolia grappled with an identity crisis, including concerns about Chinese influence, in the wake of socialism's collapse. Seeking authenticity, Mongolia embraced its nomadic past but faced challenges with Western exoticization. This representation is constructed both for

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10 https://whiskyauctioneer.com/lot/142662/chinggis-platinum-mongolian-vodka
11 https://www.arabnews.com/node/971376
external consumption and domestic cultural demarcation. Ethnosymbols like Chingis Khaan were revived to bolster national pride, yet risked oversimplifying identity. Increasingly, the contemporary discourse on Mongolian identity became rooted in the portrayal of Mongolia as a land of nomadic herders, stemming from a romanticized past. This romanticization of nomadism persists despite nomadism coming to the brink of perishing.

The tethered and scarred nomads

The free-roaming nomadic herding lifestyle has been going through a process of reconfiguration since socialism. Chapter 2 started the discussion on the collectivization process of herders during socialism. On top of collectivization, the decollectivization process that the herders went through post-socialism has set the stage for the unfolding of modern herding customs in Mongolia.

The influence exerted by the USSR on Mongolia extended deeply into the lives of rural herders, notably through the process of collectivization initiated in the 1930s and lasting for over three decades until the 1960s. Individual management of herds by each household came to a point of departure when the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) assumed control over most of the country's resources, including livestock and the labor of herders tasked with expanding their herds. Their responsibilities, pastures, and herding routes were carefully defined, leaving no room for the idealized version of free untethered nomads.

The motive behind collectivization was rooted in Stalin's ambition to position Mongolia as the primary meat supplier for the Soviet Union, leading to stringent oversight of livestock policies. The initial phases came with resistance and hardships, but collectives eventually came to provide a sense of financial security and security from natural disasters, like dzud, serving as safety nets.
The collectivization process reconfigured traditional nomadic practices, with herding families' livestock now organized into specialized teams focused on specific types of animals or aspects of animal husbandry, as seen in Chapter 2. More notably, collectivization brought about significant shifts in the relationship between herders and their herds. No longer solely based on coexistence and harmony, this relationship increasingly revolved around productivity and meeting state-mandated targets.

The decollectivization process began in 1991 with the privatization of collective assets and livestock (Buyandelgeryn 2013). It mainly aimed to liberate the Mongolian agricultural economy from its socialist foundations. In just two years, the process was largely completed, resulting in the majority of livestock (approximately 25 million animals, constituting over 95 percent of the national herd) and other agricultural resources becoming the private property of former members of the collectives (Myadar 2009). The rapid pace of the process points to how the decollectivization process was followed by significant appropriations which came with lasting repercussions.

The privatization procedure was not systematic but highly sporadic due to the lack of structure in Mongolia at that time. Decollectivization did not follow adequate legal frameworks, it lacked oversight and caused political conflicts between the collectives and the new government (Myadar 2009). The lack of a system resulted in a disproportionate share of collective assets ending up in the hands of a select few individuals, who had the privilege of information or network. The ones who benefitted were mainly those who had leading positions in the collectives before the fall of socialism. They managed to take hold of larger herds than those who were still lost in transition. Additionally, factories and machinery that once belonged to the collectives were now in the hands of the new urban “entrepreneurs,” leaving common rural herders with a few livestock at most (Myadar 2009).
A recollection of post-socialist rural Mongolia is tainted with images of emptiness, abandonment, and ruin (Myadar 2009). The physical remnants of communities that were left unattended testified to the devastation - empty buildings left abandoned, half-robbed, and in ruins. Not only physical disarray but also spiritual disorientation came as the socialist narrative of “collective” goals and “community of people” that had been nurtured and sustained over decades vanished. Without the guiding sense of belonging to a collective, the former collective members scurried to replace the stability provided by the collectives. Making matters worse, many non-herding members of the collectives became unemployed. Some of them turned to herding if they succeeded in acquiring livestock. Those who were too late to get livestock chose the popular path of migrating to Ulaanbaatar.

The feeling of instability was manifested in the herding practices post-decollectivization. As observed by Myadar, the shift to private herding practices post-socialism can be defined by a sense of "insecurity" linked with pasture management (2009). As noted earlier, pasture use was regulated and planned to prevent overgrazing by the state that established a meticulously calculated system ensuring equitable distribution of grazing land. However, with the breakdown of centralized pasture regulation during decollectivization, a fiercely competitive dynamic emerged, determining access to specific pastures (Myadar 2009). The privatization prompted herders to claim exclusive pastures that are the most optimal for winter campsites or pastures that have more water sources. Since everyone wanted the best pasture possible, most herders crowded in certain areas resulting in localized overgrazing and reduced mobility.

Therefore, the transition from socialism to post-socialism brought profound changes to Mongolia's nomadic herding lifestyle, emphasizing productivity and privatization over the harmonious relationship of herders with their livestock. Although the romanticization of nomadism in contemporary Mongolia is based on glorifying the freedom of nomads moving gracefully over the
vast steppes of the country, the current state of herding does not reflect this ideal. An increasing number of herders remain in one area throughout the year, sometimes because they do not want to lose their spot, which results in the overuse of certain pastures. Wealthier herders are more easily able to secure the most optimal pastures because they have more resources (Myadar 2009). Overgrazing of pastures is also further exacerbated by population growth, of both humans and livestock. This gap between the image of Mongolia as a land of free roaming nomads and its current reality underscores the complexities of modernizing herding practices amid rapid socio-economic change.

**Commercialization of herding**

Another shift that herding and nomadism are being tested with is that of commercialization of livestock and meat production. Meat export has been under the spotlight lately for a potential diversification of the Mongolian economy, which heavily relies on the export of coal and mining. Recalling from Chapter 2, over 20% of the GDP has been made up of the mining sub-sector in the past several years: it accounted for more than 90 percent of exports (Baatarzorig et al. 2018). The more the country has relied on mining, the more elite residents of the capital benefited as the government made no effort to redistribute the taxes collected from the mines to rural communities, giving rise to a growing inequality between the rural and urban populations.

The gap between Ulaanbaatar and rural Mongolia is evidenced by the poverty rate: the herder poverty rate is higher than the national poverty rate by more than 2% (National Statistics Office 2019). Meat from livestock and other livestock produce are the main source of income for herders. However, more livestock has not resulted in more income for herders. The poverty gap persists despite the increase in livestock over the past decade - the number has doubled, reaching more than 70 million (Gombodorj and Tumur 2020). A study by Gombodorj and Tumur sought to
explain this inconsistency (2020). They found that current meat exports do not support herder income, which is explained by the exclusion of herders in the export process and low export prices of meat (Gombodorj and Tumur 2020).

Historically, Russia and China - the two big neighbors - are the main export destinations for Mongolia. During socialist times, Mongolia was the main supplier of meat to Russia, as directed and visioned by Stalin. Today, rural Mongolia assumes the caretaker role of feeding the capital, but under socialism, it was the whole nation feeding its Big Brother - the USSR. Post-socialism, the main importer of Mongolian meat is now China, taking up more than 70% of Mongolian meat exports (Customs Office Mongolia 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Battulga - a former president of Mongolia - donated 30,000 sheep to China, as a sign of solidarity and support. The successful handover of 30,000 sheep from Mongolia to China gave hope for opening new export frontiers with its neighbor. Meat is not only the cornerstone of the Mongolian diet but is also a key tool in Mongolian international politics where it juggles to balance the influence of its two giant neighbors. Hence, meat, for Mongolia, is a way of nourishing and sustaining diplomatic ties with other countries on top of keeping kinship ties intact between the rural and urban populations.

Now, Mongolia is faced with the dilemma of either mobilizing meat as a way to diversify and strengthen its economy as a developing country, which would entail Mongolia industrializing the meat production process, or keeping its pastoral traditions in place and limiting its export potential. In order to increase its meat exporting potential, Mongolia is faced with the challenge of standardizing its meat by meeting the sanitary and health requirements, setting up meat factories, and industrializing the animal-to-meat process. Although the increase in exports is economically attractive at the national level, the financial gains of commercial meat production would not benefit herders, as seen from the current meat export practice today. This exclusion was experienced by B, the 29-year-old herder. Towards the end of our interview, B asked me why I was interested in the
symbolic meanings of meat. He suggested that I look into the economic realities of Mongolian meat as researching meat and masculinity does not have a direct impact on people’s, especially herders’ livelihoods. He pointed my attention to the gap between the price of cattle and the price of meat: the price of meat has been going up, while that of cattle has been fairly stagnant. He said: “I am selling a cow for the same price as I did 10 years ago, but the price of meat on the market has been going up steadily.”

For B to get a share of the increasing meat price, he would need to be directly involved in the industrialization of meat. Choosing this path would probably require him to abandon his herding position, but B, who studied geography and geology at the National University of Mongolia, proudly chose to become a herder. He values and cherishes the contribution he is making to preserving the herding culture. However, the process of industrialization means that herding will be vulnerable to extinction unless it serves the fetishized tastes of the few who can afford “pasture grazed” grade meat.

Currently, meat from herders’ stock does not go through a thorough inspection to be passed as a commodity. As repeatedly demonstrated, it has interpersonal and cultural meanings. All of my interviewees agreed that Mongolian meat has a distinct quality that makes it special from other factory-produced meat. B highlighted that because Mongolian tavan khoshuu mal grazes on the pasture and selectively eats the wild grasses and herbs, the meat acquires its distinct taste from it. Davaasuren, who is also a herder, echoed B’s sentiment: “Mongolian meat takes its taste from the nutrition acquired from grazing by the livestock. The nutrition from the steppes makes the Mongolian meat.”

The younger male interviewees living in urban areas were more reluctant to specify the reason why they thought Mongolian meat was different than other meat. Tuguldur did make a comment that resembled that of both Davaasuren and B - Mongolian meat derives its special taste
from the pasture-grazing, contrary to meat produced in factories - but he clarified that because he never tried meat from other countries, he could not say for sure. As for Bilguun, the tastes of Mongolian and American meat were drastically different: “There is no flavor in American meat…it tastes washed not fatty.” As someone who grew up close to herding and lives in America now, Bayarjavkhlan said: “There is no nourishment in American meat.”

Therefore, the prized quality of Mongolian meat that gives people “nourishment” and “strength” is at risk of being lost in the development of industrialized meat production. Following the loss of meat’s nourishing qualities, the relationship between herders and their herd is at risk of being reconfigured yet again. The desire to mobilize meat as an export product would put pressure on the herders to mass-produce meat to not fall behind the industrialization process. Mirroring the socialist pressure on collectives to reach meat quotas, the pressure is a looming danger for herders to commodify their herd. The relationship that was manifested in co-existence, respect, and traditions would thread a thin line between product and producer.

This looming threat was noticed by Bayarjavkhlan who pointed out the difference between cows at the factories in developed countries versus his grandfather's cows in Sukhbaatar. He mentioned the austere conditions under which cows in factories live: “Cows in factories live waiting to be eaten.” Compared to them, his grandfather's cows are “happy” and “eat and play” all day. Bayarjavkhlan even said that they resemble people when their emotions and characters shine through from time to time. Now, imagine these human-like cows in factories, living their lives waiting to become meat.

Of course, simplifying the situation to happy versus unhappy cows is unfair as commercializing livestock meat has further reaching implications that could improve the economy of the whole nation. Despite increased livestock numbers, rural herders continue to face poverty, revealing flaws in current export practices. Historical and diplomatic contexts further complicate
Mongolia's meat industry dynamics. To contextualize it once more, Mongolia now confronts a critical choice between leveraging meat production to enhance and diversify its developing economy or preserving its traditional pastoral practices and the special quality of its meat at the expense of export opportunities.

The choice between industrializing meat production for economic gain or preserving traditional practices reflects broader tensions between modernity and tradition. Yet, amidst this crossroads, the unique quality of Mongolian meat faces the risk of being compromised by industrialization. As Mongolia navigates this critical juncture, this dance between modernity and tradition is done at an international political level.

The Estrangement of Masculinity and National Identity

Post-socialist Mongolia's insecurity about its sovereignty is manifested in how it imagines men from neighboring nations and how Mongolia carries out its foreign policy as well, surpassing domestic concerns of national identity construction. Mongolia’s comparison of imagined masculinities among men from various nations, particularly those from China and Russia, potentially illustrates the intertwined nature of perceptions of masculinity and national identity.

Moving beyond the borders of China and Russia after establishing its democracy, Mongolia has been investing in a policy of “omni-enmeshment” (Reeves 2012). As defined by Jeffrey Reeves, “omni-enmeshment focuses on the management of a number of great powers through bilateral and multilateral cooperation and participation in regional and international institutions, the balance of influence can be directed against one country in particular and achieved through triangle politics, indirect military balancing and a sustained sense of deterrence” (2012, 608). The new strategy involved Mongolia strengthening its military ties with the US, Japan, and India. This has allowed Mongolia to form a political triangle that helped the country balance its relations with China.
Importantly, Mongolia forming new partners was not intended to signal hostility toward China but rather sought to diversify its foreign relations while maintaining cooperation (Reeves 2012).

The strategy of omni-enmeshment is also evident from the economic choices Mongolia reverted to post-socialism. Bumochir highlights capitalism as one of many of Mongolia’s efforts to solidify its independence (2018). He posits that Mongolian leaders “welcomed and attempted to use Euro-American-style capitalism to shield and prevent domination by its powerful neighbours” (2018, 359). More concretely, embracing globalization, democratic principles, and the market economy became avenues for Mongolian leaders to forge political and economic ties beyond Russia and China and to increase its political independence by cultivating a range of diverse relationships. Hence, capitalism serves not only as a neocolonial paradigm that benefits dominant international and financial entities, but it is also as a mechanism to consolidate the nation-state and foster Mongolian political sovereignty.

In this context, South Korea has emerged as a new prominent player on the stage of Mongolia’s foreign affairs. It is Mongolia’s fourth-largest trading partner (Lee n.d.). Given this new connection, cultural elements from Korea have been slowly entering the social scene in Mongolia. As Davaajav and Otgon have noted:

Nowadays, Mongolia cooperates with the Republic of Korea in all spheres of social life. Due to the intensive cooperation between the two sides, the influence of Korean culture in Mongolia is relatively large. This is due to the important role played by the “Cultural Wave” in Mongolia, i.e. television series, K-pop music, and Korean language education (2023, 1). Korean food, Korean convenience stores, and Korean beauty products have all become ubiquitous in Ulaanbaatar. The influence extends beyond the capital city, reaching rural Mongolia as well. Korean food is often an option even at local rural eateries. Herders can be found watching K-dramas on TV in their yurts, while their children listen to K-pop songs on their smartphones.
K-pop became a large part of the content youth consumed starting around the late 2000s. Korean bands and their music were especially popular among young Mongolian girls. However, today even men listen to K-pop groups, like Black Pink. Despite the popularity of K-Pop and Korean culture, there is a lot of stigmatization of Korean male artists who wear make-up and dress up in skinny jeans and what is considered to be “more feminine” clothes.

This imagined view of Korean men as “less masculine” is often used as a contrasting point for Mongolian men to showcase their “carefree” masculinity. Comments about how real men do not care about how they look go hand in hand with the critique of male K-pop artists. A Pinterest post (see Figure 4.8) encapsulates this contrast. The post is packed with imagined ideals of Mongolian masculinity and “othering” Korean men as the more “feminine type.” The Mongolian man in the collage resembles a herder who might be out looking after his herd. He is half-wearing traditional Mongolian clothing known as deel. From the snowy background, we can tell that it is winter. However, the man has taken off the upper part of his deel, revealing his bare chest while sitting on the snow, unbothered by the cold. His hairstyle is a buzzcut, and no signs of makeup can be found on his face. By sharp contrast, the Korean man in the picture is wearing modern child-like attire with a cartoon figure of Mickey Mouse and accessories, like a bracelet, which is commonly considered to be a feminine object - indicating his fascination with his own image. Moreover, he is taking a selfie in the mirror with his smartphone. His hair is dyed blonde and styled, and he is wearing eyeliner. Almost everything about their appearance is antithetical to each other. The comparison accentuates the marks of the Mongolian “carefree man” stereotype - unbothered, traditional, out in the wild.
A similar imagined archetype of a less masculine Chinese man is also prominent in Mongolian masculinity. As Billé has noted, the Mongolian perception of Chinese men is “couched in narratives of physical weakness and deficiency,” while “Russians are frequently perceived to be like Mongols (mongolkhund shig) because of their physical resilience and capacity to tolerate alcohol” (2010, 192). The contrasting imagined masculinities of men from different countries, especially that of Chinese and Russian men, reveals the interconnectedness of notions of masculinity and national identity. The Sinophobia caused by political concerns of independence is reflected even in the imagined masculinities of Chinese men. Chinese and Koreans are “Othered” as complete opposites of Mongolian men. When it comes to the Russian “Big Brothers,” Mongolians have a much more generous view of their masculinity, accepting them as “Mongolian-like.” This fondness for Russians is steeped with selective memory of history, as although Russians supported Mongolia in its quest for independence, it did cause irreparable damage to Mongolian culture and the livelihood of Mongolian people during socialism. This trend may be pointing to the tendency of Mongolians to outweigh the value of national independence in their remembrance of history.

12 https://www.pinterest.com/pin/674765956662008863/
In summary, post-socialist Mongolia's pursuit of sovereignty is seen in its process of constructing masculinity and national identity in comparison to neighboring nations like China and Russia. Through diplomatic strategies such as "omni-enmeshment" and economic policies favoring globalization, Mongolia aims to assert political independence while engaging in international relations. In the process, Mongolia established new relations with countries like South Korea but also stigmatized Korean men for being less masculine in contrast to Mongolian ideals of a masculine man. These perceptions of foreign men serve to draw the boundary of Mongolian national masculinity, highlighting the complex relationship between masculinity and sovereignty in modern Mongolia.

**Gendered Nationalism**

The interconnectedness of masculinity and national identity discourse in Mongolia is also evident from how Mongolian women’s sexuality and their reproductive powers are woven into the fabric of national security. In his discussion of gendered nationalism in Mongolia, Billé pointed out that:

> Attacks on national territory by bellicose ‘Others’ are frequently described through terms that have patent sexual connotations…the harnessing of female sexuality, and the controls and limitations imposed on the foreign actors who have had sexual relationships with ‘national females’ remains a core concern of most if not all, contemporary forms of nationalism (2014, 162).

Billé further goes on to point out that the distinction between the paternal and maternal lines determines the role of men versus women in nationalistic discourse. As seen in Chapter 3, this distinction was also important for a livestock butchering process. The paternal line represented the bones while the maternal lineage was embodied in the blood and the flesh. Consequently, women were not allowed to butcher or slaughter an animal but were responsible for processing the blood and the viscera to prepare the intestines. Billé argues that historically, ethnicity was considered to be
encrypted in the father's lineage because of its connection to the bones, while the female body was conceptualized as a vessel to carry this lineage, representing the flesh (Billé 2014). This put women's bodies at the center of the discussion of cultural heritage and ethnic identity.

In a case where Mongols envision their southern neighbor as a menace to their sovereignty and ethnic and cultural purity, in the nationalist vision, men emerge as protectors of independence and Mongolian women. On the extreme of this “heroism,” stands Dayar Mongol - a nationalist group of Mongolian men. They threatened to shave the heads (cut all hair off) of Mongolian women who had sex with a Chinese man, and the reaction from the media to this declaration was to blame “Mongolian girls who have ‘over-enjoyed’ their freedom” (Billé 2010, 191). Although the reverse gender gap in Mongolia reveals a pattern of women outperforming men in education and career achievements, women are still expected to put their “responsibility” to continue the Mongolian heritage over their desires and freedom.

**ARTGER: the Nexus of Meat, Masculinity, and Mongolian Identity**

So, what are the less extreme attempts by men to protect their national identity? One example is ARTGER, a popular YouTube channel with half a million subscribers starring Mongolian men in traditional clothing showcasing traditional cuisine, which can serve as the nexus of all the concepts that are integral to my thesis - meat, masculinity, and Mongolian identity. The hosts of the show travel around rural Mongolia to visit herder families and document their cooking process. The star of the channel is traditional meat dishes. Many of these videos start with the slaughtering and butchering - from the very beginning of the animal-to-meat chain. Then, the meat is prepared by either the channel hosts or the herders they are featuring in that episode. After the meat is cooked, everyone is filmed relishing the dish.
According to an interview with the creators of the channel, the intention behind their content is to make traditional Mongolian cuisine known to the world (South China Morning Post 2019). Both the creators of the channel and the article in the South China Morning Post (SCMP) emphasized how although Mongolian historical figures like Chingis Khaan are known widely, what he used to eat and what Mongolians eat today are rarely familiar to the rest of the world (2019). The content of the channel is entirely in English, whether it be the hosts speaking English or adding subtitles to the videos. In short, ARTGER was created to advertise Mongolian cuisine internationally. The nomadic herding lifestyle and Chingis Khaan are the focus of this presentation of Mongolia on an international stage, in alignment with Mongolia’s tendency to romanticize nomadism and the Khaan for the construction of its national identity. From the traditional clothing consistently worn by the hosts to an episode featuring Chingis Khaan’s favorite dish, the videos are steeped in nostalgia for nomadism and an imagined past when the gender relations were settled.

The imagined nomadic trope, as discussed earlier, runs the risk of essentializing Mongolia both for foreign consumption and the domestic narrative of Mongolian culture. The SCMP article is an example of this essentialization - the author uses words like “bizarre and exotic,” and even the host has made a disclaimer that the food he is showing might seem “terrifying” to some people and tried to dissipate their fear of the unfamiliar cuisine (2019). Although intended to demystify and promote traditional Mongolian cuisine globally, the channel is still reproducing the historical narrative of medieval European travelers who estranged Mongolian food and Mongolian people from the Western “civilized” world through the exaggeration of the differences and dehumanization of the Mongolian people (see Chapter 1). Ironically, Mongolians themselves are the ones who are carrying out the “othering” of Mongolia through an exaggerated difference of Mongolian cuisine from other nations’ today, not Medieval European writers from the 13th century. However, this time
- the differences are not mobilized to antagonize Mongols but to enforce its unique identity as a sovereign nation with its own culture and cuisine.

Figure 4.9 “Nargie’s Mongolian Cuisine: BOODOG (Real Mongolian Barbeque)”

The most-viewed video on the channel is an episode on Boodog, a popular choice of exo-cuisine (see Chapter 2) mainly prepared by men. The video shows the entire process from slaughter to consumption. The cooking is done by men, following the custom.

Figure 4.10 Eating Horse Meat - Mongolian Winter Survival Skills! Nomad Life

13 https://youtu.be/rPGq9YNZ6TU?si=0PhZgWO6h0gPc4-L
14 https://youtu.be/4PYC4QWwVVA?si=J4htWhV54jAzkwYh
Another popular video from the channel depicts the seasonality of Mongolian cuisine and Mongolian herders’ lifestyles. It shows a herder preparing horse meat in the winter. Horse meat was, indeed, highlighted by my interviewees as a staple for the winter diet in Mongolia. The title of the video hints at the harshness of the Mongolian climate and how central meat is for overcoming it with words like “Survival Skills.” Interestingly, the male herder who is the main character of this show cooks the meat himself inside his ger. In fact, the male hosts are also the ones who cook meat in many of their videos too. Men’s cooking on ARTGER is not contained to exo-cuisine - they engage in endo-cuisine too. The men on ARTGER are taking on both the masculine and feminine roles of meat preparation and consumption. However, despite cooking both outside and inside the ger, they are cooking for the public on a video. Thus, their preparation of the meat can still be considered “performative” of masculinity, as the cooking of the meat is accompanied by other ethnosymbols of nomadism like traditional clothing, and the slaughtering and butchering process.

Figure 4.11 Nargie’s Mongolian Cuisine: SHEEP HEAD (Genghis Khan’s Favorite Dish)15

An example of mobilizing ethnosymbols to represent Mongolian cuisine is seen in the episode on Chingis Khaan’s favorite dish - sheep head. Here too, the preparation of the sheep head

15 https://youtu.be/zV8LsTs9GlU?si=sa-pbKExPDsMHIJD6
is done by the hosts, but the highlight of the video is the consumption when the men sit down in front of Chingis Khaan’s portrait and devour the head.

Figure 4.12 Mongolian Wrestlers DEVOUR 100 Buuz (Dumplings) - Mukbang Style | Eat Like Mongols

Aside from ethnosymbols and nomadism, the center of the show is devoted to the masculinity of Mongolian men who can consume extraordinary amounts of meaty dishes. A popular corner of the show is called “Eat Like Mongols,” which features Mongolian wrestlers eating huge portions of traditional Mongolian food. A video of three Mongolian wrestlers finishing a plate of 100 Mongolian dumplings got over a million views.

Platforms like ARTGER serve as a means to protect and promote Mongolian national identity, rooted in Mongolian masculinity and cultural heritage. Although ARTGER aims to introduce Mongolian cuisine to the world while emphasizing aspects of nomadic life and historical figures like Chingis Khaan, it risks essentializing Mongolian culture for foreign consumption, echoing historical narratives of orientalism and “othering.” Through a blend of ethnosymbols,

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16 https://youtu.be/xTyNpYDu_Xs?si=J013c7aUVSivk19P
nostalgia, and performance of masculinity, ARTGER actively contributes to the ongoing construction of the new Mongolian masculine identity.

Eat Like Mongols

The “Eat Like Mongols” section of ARTGER revealed gendered ideas of meat consumption portions in Mongolia, implying that masculine Mongolian men eat huge portions of meat, significantly more than women. The comments from younger urban interviewees resonate with the widely held belief that men naturally eat more meat, with some attributing this to traditional gender roles and others linking it to national identity. However, rural herders' perception of meat consumption is less gendered. Their understanding of meat consumption is more based on lifestyle differences and location of residency rather than gender. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of attitudes toward meat consumption in Mongolian society, shaped by both cultural traditions and contemporary conversations.

When asked whether Mongolian men and women have different consumption of meat, all of my younger interviewees responded that women tend to eat less meat, highlighting that men consume more meat. They point out how this comes “naturally” and Bilguun included women's role as caretakers as to why they may eat less meat: “Women hold themselves back from overindulging compared to men. I wouldn’t be surprised if older women eat less meat as ‘caretakers’ and sacrifice their portion for their sons or husbands.”

Jawa's comment mirrored Bilguun’s as he also stressed that women willingly choose to consume less meat, compared to men: “Men tend to consume more meat and want to consume more meat… Generally, it is much more okay for women to consume less meat, they willingly consume less meat.” Moreover, for Jawa, eating a lot of meat was connected not only to his gender but also national identity. He differentiated himself from his friends from other countries with his
“Eating more meat is tied to my Mongolian identity. I eat more meat compared to my international friends because I grew up eating a lot of meat and it is a staple in our diet.”

Similarly, Bayarjavkhlan told me confidently that “men eat more meat, proportionally speaking. I do not know if the difference is statistically significant though, but I am sure the absolute value of the amount of meat consumed is larger for men,” contemplated Bayarjavkhlan. I followed up on his comment by asking how he feels about how some people say that real Mongolian men eat more meat. Interestingly, Bayarjavkhlan pointed out that remarks like these are made more by people who are “masculine” although both men and women say it. Reflecting on his personal experience, Bayarjavkhlan concluded that “there is a challenge all men face.” The challenge he mentioned was the struggle to eat the fat on the meat, especially when you are a kid. He shared how having to eat the fatty part of the meat was difficult for him, but he has grown to like it today. All of these comments reveal the widespread understanding of Mongolian men consuming meat more and having a larger appetite for meat, compared to women, which was conceptualized by the ARTGER videos of Mongolian wrestlers eating large portions of meat in their videos.

Contrary to this stance, the two herders I interviewed consider that men and women both eat comparable portions of meat in their diets. They shared with me that as a herder, regardless of gender, you have to eat a lot of meat as that is what the lifestyle requires when you are looking after livestock all the time. Nevertheless, a distinction was made by Davaasuren, but her differentiation focused not on gender differences but on distinction between rural versus urban populations. She argued that both men and women from the city eat much less meat compared to rural herders. Davaasuren laughed as she said, “Both men and women from the city eat less meat, but in the countryside, even the children rush to eat more meat.”
In short, urban men’s views on differences in meat consumption for men and women were much more gendered, considering men to eat more meat, while the rural herders did not see a difference for men and women but for the rural and the urban population in Mongolia.

Conclusion

Lost in transition post-socialism, Mongolia is excavating its history to build a distinct national identity that marks its independence and legitimacy as a sovereign nation. This process of identity consolidation is prompting Mongolia to mobilize romanticized nomadism and ethnosymbols as a way to distinguish itself from its two giant neighbors - Russia and China. Although nomadic herding is key to this constructed national identity, the reality of nomadism and herding has been going through a constant reconfiguration since socialist collectivization and post-socialist decollectivization, transforming the relationship between herders and their herd.

Nomadic herding is also facing new challenges in the face of pressures towards commercialization and industrialization, as Mongolia is tempted to increase its meat exports as a method to diversify its economy. Another prominent tool Mongolia is using in its quest for independence is an omni-enmeshment strategy in its foreign policy, which balances the influences of its partners. As Mongolia treads a path on the global scene, it sticks to its main two pillars of presenting strength - masculinity and nomadism. However, the two pillars become a trap of essentializing Mongolian identity as well as discriminating against those who do not fit the mold of Mongolianness or shake its stability.
Concluding thoughts

Like Mongolians who embraced change as a constant in their lives, I experienced waves of transformations in my understanding of meat and masculinity in Mongolia. My year-long journey through the intricate intersections of meat, masculinity, and Mongolian identity has revealed a narrative rich in complexity, resilience, and adaptation. From the foundational role of meat in structuring social connections and signifying power to the waves of transformation that have reshaped nomadic traditions in the face of post-socialism and market economy, the story of Mongolia is one of constant evolution amidst a storm of societal shifts.

Meat, as I argued in Chapter 3, nurtures not only the bodies of Mongolian people but also their connection to others and their identity. The centrality of meat has been a constant amidst the changing political and economic landscape of the country. Standing at the core of Mongolian people’s diet and social relations, meat structures gender and kinship connections in mundane acts of living and eating in a ger. However, the essence and the roots of meat’s role in Mongolian people’s lives is being tested for the past hundred years.

As sketched in Chapter 2, the dynamic landscape of Mongolian history in the past century, from socialism to market economy, started a process of rapid urbanization. The rapid urbanization process created two important gaps - a stark rural-urban divide and a reversal of the gender gap as women began to outperform men in education and professionalism. These two divides were integral in my argument (in Chapter 3) that the urbanization process has marginalized many Mongolian men from their traditional roles tied to the nomadic lifestyle and the consumption of pastoral meat. Removed from their traditional roles, younger urban men now view meat consumption and nomadic practices through a lens less rooted in gender norms and more focused on practicality within an urban context.
Paralleling these changes in expressing masculinity, a broader layer of identity construction is happening at a nation-level in Mongolia. Both Mongolia as a nation and the older generation of Mongolian men are grappling to maintain their relevance in contemporary discourse. To preserve their significance, Mongolia and Mongolian men are mobilizing romanticized depictions of nomadism, steeped in notions of masculinity and authentic pastoral meat. While this revival of the Mongol empire's glory days aids in constructing a distinct national identity centered around powerful Mongolian masculinity, it also exoticizes and estranges Mongolia's complex cultural past for both internal and external appropriation.

As Mongolia and Mongolian men navigate the complexities of modernity, it is standing at a crossroads. One way is to continue to romanticize nomadism and nomadic masculinity, although the essence of nomadic life is fading away. This path, as argued in Chapter 4, leads Mongolia to essentialize and “Other” itself, taking on the role of medieval European writers (Chapter 2). Further research could explore how this exoticization creates a normative mold of “true” Mongolian identity that could become a basis for discrimination of Mongolians who do not fit this stereotype. The second path asks Mongolia and its men to look forward to building its identity, not into its past. However, in redefining themselves, how can they balance influences of commercialization and globalization, without erasing their rich cultural past?

The story of meat and masculinity in Mongolia is not static but rather a dynamic tapestry woven through the threads of history, tradition, and adaptation. It is a story of resilience in the face of change and a testament to the enduring spirit of the Mongolian people as they forge a path forward into an uncertain future.
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