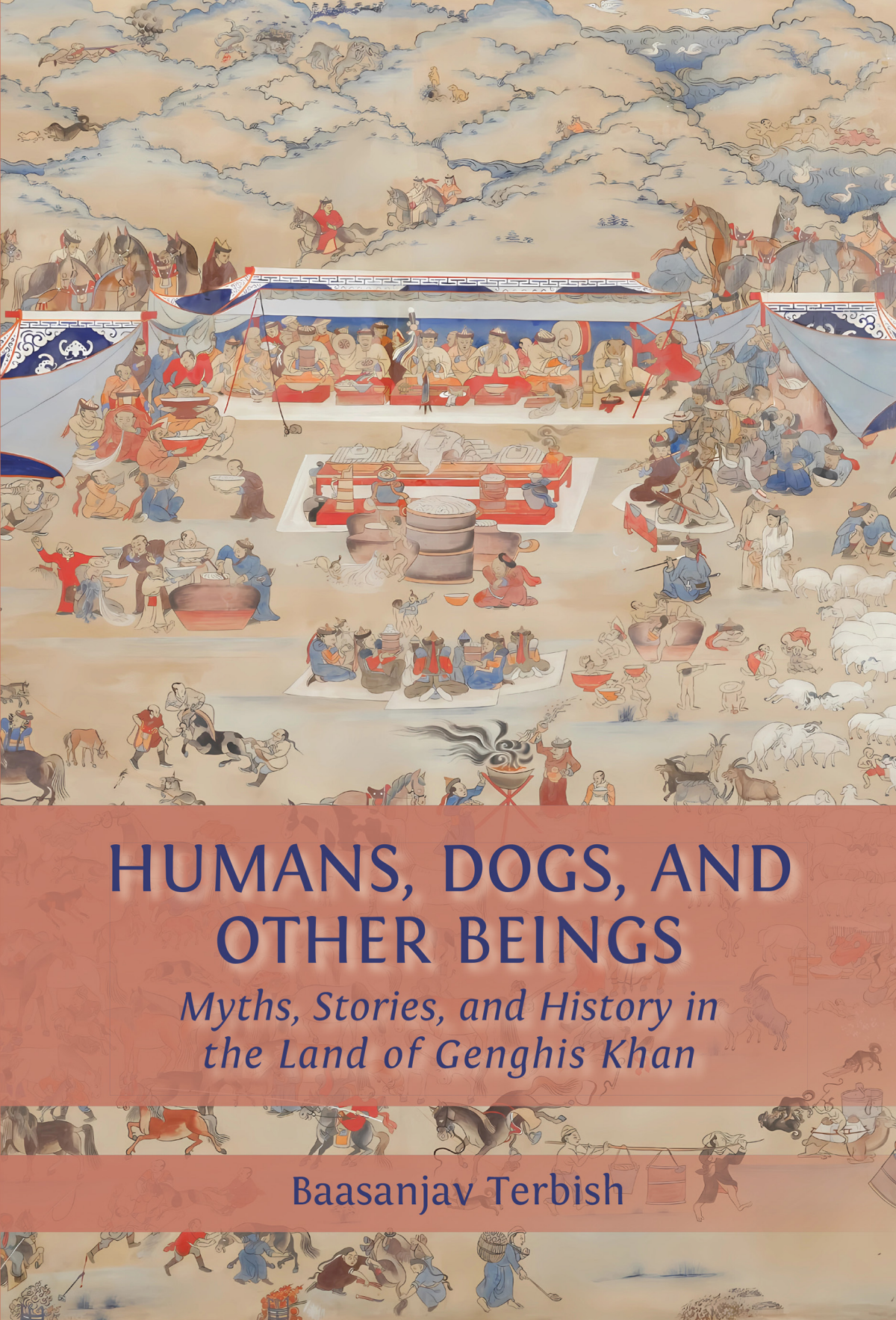

HUMANS, DOGS, AND OTHER BEINGS

Myths, Stories, and History in the Land of Genghis Khan

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4. The Cat

In the early 1980s, during the socialist era in Mongolia, a six-year-old boy named Tsolmon secretly accompanied his parents to visit an elderly Buddhist monk who lived alone in a *ger* near the Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar. Despite Mongolia's official atheism, many citizens had a secret fondness for religion and spiritual rituals, and for the socialist state to attempt to control the religiosity of its citizens was like herding cats. Tsolmon's family visited the monk at dusk to have a ritual performed on him. Inside the dimly lit *ger*, filled with the scent of juniper incense, Tsolmon sat in terror, remaining motionless throughout the entire ceremony. As the flickering light of the ghee butter lamps illuminated bowls of silver and brass, and colorful *thangkas* of Buddhist gods and demons danced in the shadows, the ancient monk recited strange incantations while repeatedly spitting on Tsolmon's face and occasionally moaning. To heighten the sense of dread, the interior was teeming with a dozen pussycats, purring and cuddling the old monk and slipping in and out through the rooftop hole into the darkness of the night. In everyday life, Tsolmon and his friends hounded down stray cats with sticks and stones, as that was the norm for how felines were treated then. However, Tsolmon's father saw these cats as special, believing they protected the venerable monk. Tsolmon's mother, on the other hand, was less impressed, convinced that these 'evil cats' were holding the elderly monk hostage. This story was recounted to me by my friend, Tsolmon.

Fast forward forty years, and the land of Genghis Khan has shed its socialist cloak. Religion is flourishing once again, people are embracing capitalist consumerism and immersing themselves in pet-friendly culture. There is a daycare center for pets and a few shops in Ulaanbaatar where pet lovers can buy special food, treats, and accessories for their kitties. However, one thing that hasn't changed is the mix of emotions

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people still hold toward cats. Many Mongols can still easily relate to the diverse and conflicting attitudes exemplified by the four individuals in this story: the old monk (representing a suppressed group practicing a forbidden worldview), Tsolmon's parents (communist citizens), and Tsolmon (a young boy learning to internalize the values of those around him).

This chapter discusses the world of Mongol cat, a subject no less controversial than that of dogs and marmots. We saw in previous chapters that the dog and the marmot underwent distinct treatments across different historical periods, their characteristics and images evolving with the changes in Mongol society itself. The cat is no different in this regard, embodying a unique fusion of images: it is like a good, bad, and ugly animal all rolled into one.

In a three-part analysis, this chapter explores the multifaceted image of cats. Part I recounts the image of cats in contemporary cosmology and their roles as protagonists in both ancient legends and modern *bolson yavdal* stories. Part II traces the chronology of the ever-shifting image of cats, spanning the pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist eras, each marked by diverse religious and political ideologies. The Conclusion summarizes and offers final thoughts on the topic.

To set the stage, let's make a brief tour, exploring how cats have been perceived across diverse cultures.

The Cat in Different Cultures

Similar to dogs, cats have been domesticated for millennia. Their story begins in a most exotic place: Cyprus, around 9500 BCE, known in Ancient Greek mythology as the realm of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, no less. A cat and a person were found buried side by side. Although we know almost nothing about the context and symbolism of this burial and the human-cat relationship in that society, Ancient Egypt provides the first clear glimpse of the cat's role and image. Here, cats take center stage with an entrance fit for a pharaoh's party. From around 2300 BCE, they started appearing as fancy amulets. Then, by 1950 BCE, felines were the celebrities of tomb walls, depicted alongside humans and doing everything from lounging like royalty to solo playing to indulging in some fine dining consisting of fish. But it didn't stop there. Cats went from being household companions to gods themselves. The male cats

began to be worshipped as one of the manifestations of the sun god, Ra, while the female cats were associated with the goddesses Hathor and Bastet, representing sexual energy, fertility, and motherhood.[1]

Now, fast forward to the Romans who were probably responsible for introducing cats to their imperial outposts, including Northern Europe.[2] Afterwards, the story took a dark turn with the rise of Christianity in Europe, which went hand in hand with suppressing pagan gods and goddesses and promoting anti-sex doctrine. Having fingers pointed at, cats were now labelled as demons, witchy sidekicks, and overall troublemakers. There circulated stories in medieval and post-medieval Europe of witches turning into black cats, heretics throwing wild parties involving kissing the anuses of giant felines, and cats bewitching and subverting unsuspecting humans. That they became associated with evil was like the kiss of death to cats. Disgusted and horrified, clerics and their flocks subjected cats, especially black cats, to horrendous treatment by catching, torturing, and throwing them onto bonfires, sometimes along with female mistresses accused of witchcraft. The cat's transformation from a divine figure into an evil being evokes parallels with the movie *American Psycho*, where the protagonist Patrick (portrayed by Christian Bale), initially seen as a successful and charming figure in society, descends into madness and is perceived as sinister and evil. This feline horror show persisted until the birth of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, a period that championed respect for reason and humanism. It was during this time that the cat gradually shed its diabolical religious skin, becoming the cute puss of today, although many in Western societies continue to harbor negative attitudes toward felines, a legacy of ancient beliefs and superstitions.[3]

However, not all cats had a rough time across Christendom. Take Russia, for example, a country where Slavic folklore incorporates Orthodox Christian values and shamanic beliefs permeated with nature spirits and magical animals.[4] The Slavs believed in a cat named Bayun meaning 'talker', a real chatterbox who could put humans to sleep with its stories or songs and even heal illnesses with magical purring voice.

1 Turner and Bateson, *The Domestic Cat*, 86-92.
2 Faure and Kitchener, 'An archaeological and historical review of the relationships between felids and people'.
3 Turner and Bateson, *The Domestic Cat*, 94-99.
4 Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia.*

Unlike their Western counterparts, Russian cats had a bit of a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality, balancing between luck-bringers and mischief-makers. They have been regarded as harbingers of luck, as possessors of worldly wisdom, as helpers and protectors of the hearth, on the one hand, and capable of stealing, lying, behaving in cunning ways, and serving evil entities, on the other.[5]

Another region where cats have fared better than their fellow felines in medieval Europe are countries along the Silk Road, the historical cat-friendly highway, where the earliest mention of domestic cats originates from Persia and dates from the sixth century BCE. Thanks to Islamic culture, in which cats are tolerated and to some extent even revered,[6] ancient settlements in Persia, Khorasan, and Khorezm served as refuges for domestic cats that were valued as mouse-catchers, among other characteristics. Further to the east, in Central Asia, the oldest known cat skeleton was found in the early medieval city of Dzhankent, Kazakhstan, dating from between the eighth and the tenth centuries CE,[7] around the time when Central Asian peoples began to convert to Islam. There is evidence that the Dzhankent cat was well cared for by its human owners who nursed it back to health after it had been injured. China, at the far eastern end of the Silk Road, couldn't resist the charms of these mystical creatures either. While endowed with supernatural abilities of the dark forces to shape-shift and communicate with spirits, cats also became guardians against evil spirits,[8] mousers par excellence, and symbols of fertility, longevity, and wealth.[9] They were the royalty of the pet kingdom pampered by the Chinese nobility and officials, even getting poems and paintings dedicated to their fabulous selves.[10]

Geographically speaking, the Mongols, whose country is today sandwiched between Russia and China and who in the past culturally enhanced the Silk Road, are well positioned—one could argue—to be cat-tolerant. Plus, their traditional religions, shamanism and Buddhism, not only don't have teachings detrimental to felines but are in general

5 Bresheva, 'Obraz koshki v mifologii'; Gou and Korovina, 'Image of cats in Russian and Chinese omens'.
6 Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 131.
7 Haruda et al., 'The earliest domestic cate on the Silk Road'.
8 Laukner, 'Die Katze in der Religion'.
9 Gou and Korovina, 'Image of cats in Russian and Chinese omens', 89.
10 Idema, *Mouse vs. Cat in Chinese Literature*, 35-55.

protective of animals. Culturally speaking, as a nomadic people who deal with various animals on a daily basis, the Mongols are also not predisposed to show cruelty to living beings. While the proverbial bird's-eye view of Mongol history and culture, involving geographical, religious, and lifestyle explanations, has some merit, the situation on the ground, from a cat's-eye view, is slightly more complicated than it seems. Cat-keeping is mostly an urban phenomenon, and Mongolia wasn't exactly a cat's playground in its nomadic days when there were no settlements around. Cats became a part of people's life only recently, during the era of state socialism marked by urbanization and modernity. That means today's attitudes toward these species were mostly formed during a time of complicated relationships between religion and atheism, traditional culture and modernity, nomadism and urbanization.

Part I

The Cat in Cosmology, Modern Stories, and Ancient Legends

This *bolson yavdal* story is rumored to have occurred in post-socialist Ulaanbaatar. One day a cat mysteriously appears inside a man's family *ger* on the outskirts of the city. To the astonishment of witnesses who cannot fathom how it entered, the feline slowly paces back and forth as if asserting its territory. Disgusted and suspicious, the father of the family opens the door to expel the uninvited guest, only to witness the cat leap out and vanish into thin air. Tragically, the following day, a child from the family passes away. Grief-stricken, the family concludes that the cat must have been a messenger from Erlig, the Ruler of the Underworld.

In the previous chapters, we explored Mongol cosmology and the idea of spiritual animals that occupy 'liminal spaces'. Such species are often believed to have originated from humans, are able to manifest themselves in either human or animal form, or are seen as capable of being reincarnated as humans or vice-versa. Sometimes such species figure in pairs as opposites. In Mongol cosmology, the cat and the dog are two such animals.

The Cat in Cosmology

In contrast to the dog, the cat isn't believed to have karma to reincarnate into Mongols. By residing inside human dwellings, unlike dogs that stay outside, the cat is physically the closest animal to humans. However, its behavior is as enigmatic and distant from humans as that of wild beasts. The cat, being physically close yet behaviorally distant, emerges as a paradoxical figure in the eyes and cosmological imagination of Mongols. If the dog represents what Mongols love, the cat embodies what they fear. In a way, the cat is the dog's opposite, just as love is seen as the opposite of fear.

In today's cosmology, the cat symbolizes one of the most personal and intense fears humans experience—the fear of death and the underworld. This is why Mongols also refer to the cat as 'the dog of the Ruler of the Underworld' (*Erligiin nohoi*)[11] and 'the animal of bad omens'. As a result, the cat is seen as a blood-curdling and eerie creature, towards which Mongols feel an instantaneous sense of aversion and hatred. While cats are rarely encountered in Mongolia, there exists a prevailing fear and suspicion surrounding them, including beliefs that cats harm young children or sleeping men—two significant categories representing the family's future and the authoritative figure in a patriarchal society.

As an 'impure' and 'dangerous' animal, the cat possesses spiritual powers that include hovering in an ambiguous space between the world of the living and the dead, casting curses, seeing ghosts and death, and entering people's dreams to foretell diseases, disputes, and misfortunes. Conceptualized in this way, the cat's 'otherworldly, cold' behavior and its proximity to human bodies becomes clear, explainable, and even manageable.

Of course, a fear of death doesn't have to be paralyzing, and all societies have mechanisms to deal with death, which is, after all, an inextricable part of life. In Mongolia divination and rituals related to life preservation are not only the domain of religious specialists but are also performed by ordinary people in their daily lives. To comprehend life, one must confront and understand death. Despite being 'the dog of the

11 In the myths of Mongol and Turkic peoples, Erlig is the shamanic God of Death and the Underworld. In Mongolia it was later incorporated into Buddhism and perceived as the Ruler of the Underworld.

Ruler of the Underworld', the cat's spiritual powers can be managed and harnessed to extend life or bestow blessings.

In Mongolia today, a common belief is that the more one fears or despises cats, the more potent their dark powers become in relation to that person. Conversely, respecting and caring for cats is believed to extend a person's life by safeguarding them from malevolent spirits or simply by allowing them to continue living. Many religious specialists, including monks and shamans, not only keep cats but also teach the general population to be respectful to felines and provide for stray cats, thus transforming their potential harm into blessings.

From what I've described, the Mongol cat can be likened to a magical creature known as the Boggart, featured in the *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* series. The Boggart is a being that takes on the shape of the viewer's greatest fears. The more someone fears the Boggart, the more powerful and menacing it becomes. The only method of overcoming this creature is to think of something that turns the fear into laughter.

While the Boggart is an imaginary creature, its resemblance to the image of the Mongol cat, also a product of cosmological imagination, is noteworthy. Both creatures illustrate the idea of fear influencing the power of a magical entity. In a broader sense, even though the *Harry Porter* series is a work of fiction set in a magical realm, much like any other well-crafted work of fiction it contains various creatures and themes that often mirror our real-world cultural experiences. This is not only because writers project real-world situations into their literary creations but mainly because what we call the 'human world' or 'human culture' is nothing more than a product of our collective imagination, encompassing imagined social structures, hierarchies, rituals, gods, magical animals, symbols, and histories. Since we perceive the world around us through human-centric cultural lenses, we don't see animals—or anything else for that matter—as they really are but as what we imagine them to be.

This inclination to find reflections of ourselves in the animal kingdom dates back to the earliest human records manifested through anthropomorphized animal figurines, petroglyphs, ancient rituals, and inscriptions. In Europe, for example, the recording of this reflective practice extends to the Middle Ages when Europeans began writing

down events and their thoughts in chronicles, charters, and manuscripts. The era also witnessed the flourishing of bestiaries—early compendiums of the animal kingdom embellished with earnest descriptions of magical creatures, some with half-human features, ranging from griffins to camel-leopards to dog-headed humans and mermaids. Compiled by the Church, these bestiaries aimed to serve as much as encyclopedias of the animal kingdom as moral guides, encouraging readers to seek human-centric characteristics and hidden moral values in the behavior and looks of animals. Blending folklore with heavy doses of religious morality and allegory, these bestiaries revealed more about the anxieties and concerns of their compilers than about animals, which frequently underwent transformations into unrecognizable creatures. For instance, beavers were portrayed as castrating themselves, serving as a cautionary tale for men about the importance of eliminating all vices if they desired to lead a life of peace and godliness. Mother pelicans were depicted as embodiments of self-sacrifice, believed to wound their breasts to nourish their chicks with their own blood, reminiscent of Christ's sacrifice for humanity. Even with the dawn of the Enlightenment, which marked a shift in natural history writing away from the shadows of the Church, the impulse to anthropomorphize animals and impose moral judgments persisted in Europe. Modern science and zoology didn't entirely eradicate these tendencies, as people continue to attribute anthropomorphic characteristics to animals.

As creatures imagined to be inherently tied to the underworld, cats in Mongol culture are thought not only to bite the hand that feeds them but also to harbor a wish for the death of their human caregivers. It is said that cats awaken three times during the night to check if their feeder has passed away, while dogs, in contrast, wake up three times during the night to ensure the safety and well-being of their owners.

To reiterate, all these negative characteristics ascribed to cats pertain to today's cosmology and are manifested in *bolson yavdal* stories that cover the socialist and post-socialist periods. This raises a question about the place and image of the cat in Mongol cosmology during the pre-socialist period. The answer is that the cat didn't feature much in pre-socialist cosmology. This was mainly due to the fact that felines were rare animals, primarily kept in Buddhist monasteries or Chinese dwellings, and they did not possess spiritual powers to play any prominent role

in cosmology. Cats were perceived as good, neutral beings, or even unknown animals devoid of spiritual powers, as will be discussed in the example of Buddhist legends and other folk genres that are much older than *bolson yavdal* stories.

Now, let's compare the bad, spiritual cats of *bolson yavdal* stories with the good or neutral 'earthly' cats of Buddhist legends and pre-socialist folk genres.

The Cat in Bolson Yavdal Stories

This story, rumored to have taken place in a provincial center, is about a cat that developed a habit of frequenting the local hospital ward. Nurses soon observed that whenever it lingers beside a particular bed for an extended period, the patient passes away the following day. Alarmed by the increasing death toll, the hospital personnel decide to keep the cat away from the hospital. Following this wise decision, the patients stop succumbing to the mysterious deadly pattern.

In another related *bolson yavdal* story, a nomadic family that has kept a cat in their *ger* to manage rodent infestations decides they don't need its services anymore due to the cat's laziness and neglect of its duties. Reluctant to take the feline's life but unable to secure it a new home, the family's patriarch takes the cat and sets off to a remote location, where he leaves it behind. Confident that the cat could never find its way back home and pleased to have resolved the issue so swiftly, the man returns to his family, only to discover the cat patiently waiting for him. Consumed by vengeance for the man's actions, the cat strangles him that very night. The following morning, the lifeless body of the man is found, with his eyes gouged out.

It would, however, be wrong to convey the impression that fear and strong aversion toward cats are universal in Mongolia, based solely on these and similar *bolson yavdal* stories. While it is common for people to shoo away uninvited stray felines from their *ger*s, Mongols don't necessarily always associate these cats with foreboding omens related to the well-being of their family members. Instead their primary concern often revolves around stray cats potentially carrying harmful microbes and diseases from the outside world.

Bolson yavdal stories tend to depict exceptional scenarios, serving various moralistic purposes. These include providing behavioral templates for individuals who possess sensitivity to supernatural beliefs and are particularly concerned about encounters with animals in spiritually dangerous places ('wrathful places', areas protected by exceptionally ill-tempered Buddhist deities, haunted locations), or animals behaving in unusual ways, or having unusual looks. In everyday life, it isn't uncommon for some families, who don't share beliefs in evil cats, to keep felines as cherished companions, while numerous temples have resident cats that serve as mouse-catchers, thus contributing to hygiene and protecting Buddhist scrolls and food supplies.

The Cat in Buddhist Legends

Unlike the laity who believe in *bolson yavdal* stories about evil and vengeful cats, monks tend to have a different attitude stemming from Buddhist teachings that accord equal value and respect to all living beings. Recall the story at the beginning of this chapter about an old monk who lived with a dozen of pussycats near the Gandan Monastery in socialist Mongolia. Hence the 'good cat' is the protagonist in Buddhist legends where it figures as a skillful mouse-catcher, or a naughty food thief, or an animal that just happens to live in human dwellings, which are essentially what cats do in temples. In comparison with modern *bolson yavdal* stories, in old Buddhist legends the cat is an ordinary animal without malevolence or dark spiritual powers. Let me provide several examples.

In the Mongol legend *The Gold Arab Belt*, the cat is portrayed as an intelligent animal, who learns from a parrot how to get monks bring meat into the temple to partake of it.[12] In this legend, the cat is akin to the archetype of a smart character in Western folklore such as the sly fox or the clever raven, both of which are often portrayed as using their intelligence to outwit others and achieve their goals.

In another legend, *Cat the Teacher*, which is widespread among various Mongol groups, the cat somewhat resembles Tartuffe, the fictional character from Molière's comedy *Tartuffe*. Like Tartuffe, who is a cunning imposter feigning religious piety to manipulate and exploit gullible individuals, the cat in this legend impersonates a holy Buddhist

12 Skorodumova, *Skazki i Mify Mongolii*, 95-96.

teacher in a monastery and enlists mice as its disciples, all while intending to exploit them. After each lesson, the cat keeps its focus on one unsuspecting disciple, and—hocus pocus—the disciple ends up on its dinner plate. This circus continued until one day, when the cat was caught red-pawed by the mice. Squeaking to each other, 'It is not a holy teacher but a monster!' the horrified mice dispersed in all directions, abandoning the monastery for good. The cat sometimes deceives not only mice but the monks as well. In another version of the legend *Cat the Teacher*, collected by the renowned Mongolist Boris Vladimirtsov,[13] the cat steals food from the monastery and consequently loses its tail. Hence deceitful people are referred to in Mongolia as 'a cat the teacher' (*muur bagsh*) or 'a cat the thief' (*hulgaich muur*).[14]

Acknowledging the place of cats and dogs in human settlements, the Buddhist legend *The Cat And the Dog*, which also has different versions among various groups in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Kalmykia, and Tuva,[15] explains why the cat inhabits a human dwelling, while the dog is always kept outside. According to the legend, the dog and the cat are sent by their human master to get hold of a precious object (a gold ring, a valuable casket, etc.). Whilst the skillful dog finds the object, it is the intelligent cat that delivers it to their master, thus earning a place inside the warm human dwelling. Misunderstood, the dog, by contrast, is left out in the cold, which fits the Mongol Buddhist tradition of keeping dogs outside the *ger*.

In the legend *Why Man Has No Hair*, which also has different versions, the Buddha creates humans and, before returning to heaven to fetch elixir, instructs a cat and a dog to protect the humans in his absence from the devil. While the Buddha is away, the devil distracts the two from their duty by giving a bowl of milk to the cat and a piece of meat to the dog and urinates on the humans and flees. Upon his return, the Buddha scolds the cat and the dog and commands the former to lick the hair off the bodies of the humans defiled by the devil. The cat licks the hair

13 Vladimirtsov, *Mongol'skii Sbornik Rasskazov iz Panchatantry*, 126-28.

14 Unlike in Mongolia, the Kalmyks in Russia, long exposed to Russian culture, have positive attitudes towards the cat. In Kalmyk folklore too, the cat is often imbued with even more positive characteristics than in Mongol legends. The Kalmyk cat protects babies, serves as God's dog, and protects precious sutras in monastic libraries. See Burykin, 'Koshka v fol'klore Kalmykov'.

15 Osor, 'Todaevan temdglsn "Noha mis hoyr" domgin tuskar'; Burykin, 'Koshka v fol'klore Kalmykov'.

everywhere except their heads, armpits, and genitals, which explains why humans have hair in these body parts.[16]

The Cat in Pre-Socialist Folklore

Apart from old Buddhist legends that depict the cat in a positive light (as a smart, naughty, and cunning animal), in Mongol folklore there is a special genre where animals are endowed with human language and are used as avatars to elaborate on human relations, values, and social issues. This genre includes the following sub-categories: legends concerning animals and hunters (*am'tny tuhai* ülger *domog*), short üge poems, and fairy tales about animals.

Mirroring values of the pre-Buddhist period, many legends concerning animals and hunters (*am'tny tuhai* ülger *domog*) can be described as animistic legends where there is no clear distinction between animals and humans. For example, in the legend *Seven Brothers*, collected by Grigory Potanin,[17] there are two groups of industrialists: the first group consists of a fox, a human, a dog, a marmot, a rabbit, a badger, and a cat; the second group consists of other animals. Whilst in Buddhist legends the cat figures as a good character, in animistic legends the cat is either a neutral animal or someone nobody really knows. Like in Buddhist legends, in this genre the cat is also an animal devoid of malevolence and spiritual powers. Thus, in the legend *Seven Brothers* the animals who are ignorant about the cat decide to invite it for a meeting in order to learn more about what kind of animal the cat really is. In this legend, the animals' ignorance of the cat stands for nomads' general ignorance of the feline.

Examples of short üge poems are given in Chapter 2 about the dog and in Chapter 5 about the camel, where dogs and camels are endowed with human language. To remind, üge poems feature animals, and occasionally inanimate objects, that adopt a human voice serving to allegorically depict the plight of commoners trapped in impoverishment or subjected to the indiscriminate power of their overlords. Moreover, as illustrated in the works of monks such as Agvang-Khaidub (1779-1838)

16 Hangin et al., 'Mongolian folklore', 73-74; Nassen-Bayer and Stuart, 'Mongol creation stories', 324-25.

17 Potanin, *Ocherki Severo-Zapadnoi Mongolii*, 178-79.

and Ishisambuu (1847-96), üge could be employed to chastise the hypocrisies prevalent among the servants of Buddha.

Animals also speak in various fairy tales composed by individuals seeking to address social issues and problems without explicitly naming the culprits. These fairy tales share similarities with üge poems, the main distinction being that the former are written in prose, whereas the latter are written in short poetic monologues. One such fairy tale is called *The Pekingese, the Cat, and the Mouse* composed by a man called Genden, who lived at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and was from the banner of Hurts Vang of the Setsen Khan *aimag*. In his fairy tale, which became popular among the Mongols and was even printed in 1923 in the capital city, the three animals, all of whom live in a Buddhist temple and can speak human language, are used as avatars to criticize certain corrupt practices taking place within the monkish community in the Setsen Khan *aimag*.[18]

These genres—Buddhist legends, animistic legends, and poems and fairy tales about animals—mirror how cats were imagined, treated, and with whom they were associated in Mongolia before the advent of socialism. Broadly speaking, cats were kept as mouse-catchers in Mongol temples and Chinese warehouses and dining halls. By contrast, nomads who migrated seasonally by following their herd animals didn't keep cats, as they were impractical for the nomadic lifestyle. The cat's traditional image as a low-profile animal and its absence from daily nomadic life partly explain the small number of folk or animistic legends about cats. This contrasts with the manul, a native species of wild cat that plays roles in legends and holds a distinct place in cosmology.

The Manul

'Manul' or 'mani' is a species of wild cat native to Mongolia. Its scientific name is 'Pallas's cat', named after the German naturalist Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811) who first described this species for Western audiences. The size of a domestic cat, the manul, however, isn't your average kitty. It has dense grey fur with recognizable patterns, short legs and claws, and ears set low and wide apart. It has a short face, giving it a flattened look.

18 Tsendiin, *Hav, Muur, Hulgana Gurvyn Ülger*.

Its pupils are circular rather than vertical as in domestic cats. Spread across Central Asia, the manul is a solitary and elusive animal that lives in caves, rock crevices, or marmot burrows. Mongols don't keep them as pets not least because they don't adapt well to captivity and die quickly. Whilst today normally not hunted, manuls often fall victim to inexperienced hunters who mistake them for marmots. They are also incidentally caught in traps meant for other critters like hares and foxes.

Despite its vulnerability to traps and human habitat, in cosmology the manul is a powerful animal in its own right. The term 'manul' or 'mani', according to Potanin, is related to Mani, or 'Mother Nature' in Altai legends; thus the word evokes the idea of 'the creation of the world and all us humans in it'. In legends, the manul has seven sons, including a cat, a badger, a wolverine, a leopard, a lynx, a pig, and a tiger. Among many peoples—including Yakuts and Buryats, who are historically and culturally related to Mongols—seven is a revered number and in legends is often associated with the origin of groups. So, the manul is a proud father in the legends and the progenitor of one wild family tree.

The manul's seemingly fearless and relaxed behavior has also become part of its legendary reputation. Hunters observed the manul's tendency to watch them without displaying fear, a behavior that baffled them and led to various interpretations. Legends suggested that a fleeing manul posed an ominous threat to the hunter, who might face death if he failed to kill it. This belief gave rise to ritual practices: after killing a fleeing manul, the hunter would skin it and recite an incantation, holding the skin with both hands and uttering, 'Give me some good fortune and health from the grey skin of the manul' (*manuulynhaa ereenees hurai*, *hurai*, *hurai*).

Being baffled by the behavior of someone who doesn't exhibit fear while attacking others who show fear and run away is a stereotypical chimp behavior, which once again reveals to whom Sapiens is closely related, especially on an individual level. What sets us apart from chimps, however, is human culture, which justifies this predatory instinct by creating a sugar-coated justification that by running away, the manul somehow poses a lethal threat to humans and therefore must be caught and killed. Like many other human activities, the act of killing becomes ritualized—in this case by marking the conclusion of the killing with chants offered to the supernatural who listen to human prayers and whims, and suspend natural and physical laws to accommodate these entreaties.

Part II

The Origins of Cats in Mongolia and the Evolution of Their Image

Here are excerpts from the dairy of a Mongol man who keeps a cat at home:

> We've recently welcomed our third feline companion into our home. My daughter arrived, hugging an adorable kitten with a coat that resembled tiny prickles. We named it Zaraa or 'Prickly'. This cherished member of our family tends to spend most of its day lounging around the house, but come the night, it eagerly seizes any opportunity to latch onto a protruding leg or arm under the blanket... Hedgehog requires no concern when it comes to outdoor excursions. Simply open the door, and it willingly heads out. Mongols will never approach a cat, let alone try to snatch it... However, there was one unfortunate incident when someone callously kicked Hedgehog like a ball. The distressed feline returned home, yowling and covered in dust, with blood droplets from its nose. Fearing the worst, we hastily placed Hedgehog in a bag and rushed to the vet, only to discover that it had three of its ribs broken... There are numerous benefits to having a pet cat. It is believed that their presence is beneficial for those with cardiovascular issues and high blood pressure, particularly when stroking their backs... Moreover, cats possess an innate ability to detect underground movements, making them the first to sense an impending earthquake. This instinct can be a valuable asset, potentially saving a household from disaster... Many Mongols are disgusted by the fact that cats never fully domesticate in the manner of livestock... Among the Felidae family, only cats exhibit an aversion to water. Attempting to give them a bath results in anxiety-induced urination. Nevertheless, cats meticulously groom themselves, cleaning their faces and paws regularly... Cats are weird creatures, neither entirely ignorable nor effortlessly lovable. Nowadays, some seek feline companionship in response to rumors of imminent earthquakes.[19]

This was penned by a journalist named Gangaa in his article titled 'The repulsive green cat runs across the road'. Published online on March 25, 2010, the article vividly captures the ways cats are perceived and treated in today's society.

19 Gangaa, 'The repulsive green cat runs across the road' *Baabar*, March 25, 2010, http://www.baabar.mn/article/1659.

In the previous part, we explored seemingly inconsistent images of cats held by various groups in Mongolia's recent history. This include modern lay Mongols' intolerance of cats (as attested to in modern *bolson yavdal* stories); monks' traditional tolerance of cats (as seen in old Buddhist legends); pre-socialist nomads' ignorance of cats (as attested to in ancient animistic legends about humans and animals); and some pre-revolutionary Mongols' use of cats in moral stories (as shown in moralistic fairy tales). This variety can be explained, as alluded to before, by the fact that the image of the cat has several layers constructed in different historical periods and has different—shamanic, Buddhist, folk, socialist, post-socialist—influences. Let's now dissect this complex image further and trace its evolution in different historical periods in Mongolia.

The Origins of Cats and Settlements in Mongolia

In contrast to manuls, domestic cats exhibit a diverse range of colors from black to grey to fawn, but modern Mongols collectively label them as *nogoon muur*, meaning 'green cats', due to the green hue of their eyes. Another notable distinction between cats and manuls is the former's unsuitability for thriving in Mongolia's harsh climate without the provision of human shelter. This raises questions about the origin and history of settlements in Mongolia and their potential role in sheltering cats.

Before the establishment of the Mongol Empire in 1206, the region that is now Mongolia was inhabited by various nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. Archeological research indicates that some of these groups left behind settlements, with one of the best-known and last being Karabalgasun, believed to have been abandoned in the tenth century CE, that is three centuries before the rise of the Mongols.

The first settlement among the Mongols emerged only after the establishment of the Mongol Empire as a necessity of running a rapidly expanding empire. The foundation of the capital of Karakorum was laid around 1220 by Genghis Khan himself, but the city was primarily constructed during the reign of his son, Ögedei. As the Mongol territories expanded, Karakorum became a major site for world politics and a significant commercial hub along the Silk Road. The imperial

capital was truly a melting pot of ideas, religions, peoples, goods, and more. It was surrounded by 'twelve heathen temples, two mosques, and one church', and was 'not as big as the village of Saint Denis', according to William of Rubruck, who visited the city in 1254. Unlike other cities along the Silk Road, Karakorum was not occupied permanently but was used by the Great Khan and his court on a seasonal basis because the Mongols still pursued their nomadic lifestyle. They moved between seasonal pasturelands and used the capital city to receive foreign emissaries, store goods and tributes, conduct commerce and diplomacy, and house the accompanying bureaucracy, servants, and artisans.

The central attraction and pride of the city was the Silver Tree, which decorated the courtyard of the opulent imperial palace. Designed by the enslaved Parisian goldsmith Guillaume Bouchier, the Tree was a large sculpture made of silver and other precious metals. Its branches were weighed down by silver fruit, and four golden serpents coiled around the trunk, while an angel holding a trumpet adorned the top. Upon the Great Khan's command, this automaton would spring to life: the angel would raise its trumpet to his lips and sound the horn, whereupon the mouths of the serpents would gush alcoholic beverages into the large silver basin at the base of the Tree for the guests' enjoyment. Although historical documents or archeological finds confirming their existence in Karakorum have yet to be discovered, three factors suggest that cats may have been present in the city to witness this spectacular sight as well:

1. Absence of religious obstacles: Mongol shamanism never contained negative rulings or taboos associated with cats. This means there were no religious obstacles to keeping cats in the city.

2. Attractiveness of cats as rodent controllers: Settlements like Karakorum, with their permanent structures such as homes, temples, and palaces, as well as grain store houses and gardens, would have been irresistible to rodents. Cats, being natural mousers, would have been invaluable for controlling these pests.

3. Historical encounters: During their military campaigns from Europe to China, the Mongols encountered cats in countless settlements. Many artisans, builders, and slaves brought to construct Karakorum and serve

there came from cities along the Silk Road, where cats were commonly used as mousers. As the Mongol Empire expanded, Karakorum became one of many cities under Mongol rule, suggesting that cultural exchanges between these cities could have included the sharing of cats and other useful animals. Given this historical context and the prevalence of cats in other Mongol-controlled cities, it is reasonable to assume that cats were also present in Karakorum.

Following Kubilai's rise to power who moved the imperial capital to Dadu (present-day Beijing), Karakorum was reduced to an administrative center of Mongolia, a province of the Yuan. Despite its downgrade, the city saw expansion eastwards in the first half of the fourteenth century. Following the fall of the Yuan, Karakorum served as the capital of the Northern Yuan until it was razed to the ground in 1388 by invading Ming troops. The consequent return of the Mongols to a full-time nomadic way of life following the destruction of the only settlement in the entire country likely led to the disappearance of domestic cats. As far as we know, cats didn't hold any companionship role or spiritual significance for the nomads, which would have been primary reasons for Mongols to keep these species in their *ger*s, which apparently was not the case.

The first mention of cats in Mongolia in that period is associated with the spread of Buddhism. Cats made their appearance in Buddhist legends and literature that were translated from Tibetan into Mongolian. As discussed earlier, in the post-Yuan period the conversion of the Mongols into Buddhism began in the sixteenth century. By 1575, a Buddhist temple had been erected on Altan Khan's land (in today's Inner Mongolia). In 1640, the Halha Mongols and Oirats adopted Buddhism as the state religion and forged a political-military alliance.

This event was preceded by another noteworthy event a year earlier, when in 1639 Halha nobles elected Eshidorji, a four-year old son of a Mongol Tüsheet Khan of Genghis Khan's Golden Lineage, as the spiritual leader of the Halha Mongols. The boy was later recognized by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Buddhist scholar Taranatha and was bestowed the name of Zanabazar (in Sanskrit 'Jnanavajra'). In Mongolia's history, he is also known as the first Javzandamba Hutugtu. During the 1639 ceremony, Zanabazar was gifted 108 disciples (*shabi*) and several *ger*s. With these, he established his nomadic palace-monastery, named Urga (Örgöö), meaning 'palatial *ger*', or Hüree,

meaning 'a circle' (due to the arrangement of the *ger*s in circles). For several decades, this palatial *ger*-monastery on wheels roamed the Mongolian steppe, similar to how nomadic bands of magicians and circus performers traveled across Europe, setting up shows in different locations. However, in 1706, Urga settled permanently on the banks of the Tuul River, gradually evolving into the country's most significant religious and cultural center.

Nascent settlements in Mongolia received a boost following the country's incorporation into the Manchu Qing Empire in 1691. This watershed event opened the gates for waves of Chinese men to migrate to Mongolia. Given Urga's growing status as the epicenter of social and cultural life, it naturally attracted most of these men, who built Chinese-style mud houses and opened shops, warehouses, brothels, and dining halls that drew in rodent populations. While the exact timeline of cats' emergence in Urga and other smaller settlements around the country remains unknown, by the time the living god Javzandamba Hutugtu returned as his eighth reincarnation in the second half of the nineteenth century, Urga had already been sheltering cats.

The Bad Cat in the Socialist Period

While limited urbanization preceded the onset of socialism in Mongolia, the victory of the People's Revolution in 1921 marked a subsequent expansion of settlements. During this period, cats became associated with urban environments, their image shifting to that of a 'dirty animal' as they adapted to modern urban infrastructures such as sewage systems, heating pipes, and Soviet-type buildings with stinky basements. These places became the primary habitat for stray cats, not only in Ulaanbaatar (previously Urga), which experienced a construction boom after World War II, but also in the new industrial townships of Bor-Öndör, Darhan, Erdenet, and others that sprang up across the country.

As feline populations increased, their treatment and quality of life significantly worsened under state policies. Stray dog and cat-killing campaigns, implemented in the name of public hygiene, reflected broader anxieties about control, disease, and cleanliness in rapidly urbanizing spaces. These campaigns often inspired children and teenagers, who organized brutal pet pogroms in basements and on the streets. Recall Tsolmon's surprise at seeing cats peacefully living in an old monk's *ger*

near the Gandan Monastery—a stark contrast to how Tsolmon and his friends typically treated felines.[20]

In addition to being viewed as filthy, cats came to be regarded—strange as it may sound in an atheist country—as 'spiritually dangerous' animals symbolizing death. This feline symbolism arose not from the industrial-scale extermination of cats during pest control campaigns but from the traumatic events when the murderous regime targeted its own citizens by the thousands in the name of cleansing society of counter-revolutionary 'human scum'. These brutal measures may have created order among the frightened populace, but they also led to the proliferation of incredible *bolson yavdal* stories about ghosts and evil cats that continue to circulate to this day.

The image of the evil cat, a messenger of the Ruler of the Underworld, emerged during the socialist period against the backdrop of state-sponsored violence and its lingering memory. This prompted people to seek explanations for the unexplainable and the hidden, trying to make sense of their lives under a new regime that had disrupted the old cosmological order. Historically, matters concerning death and misfortune fell under the purview of religious specialists. However, their near extinction as a social class under socialism necessitated that a new explanatory framework be found to link life, death, and the afterlife within the context of state violence.

In the anthropology of memory and traumatic events resulting in mass deaths, ghostly manifestations have been explained in post-socialist Mongolia[21] and elsewhere[22] as materializations of traumatizing events or disrupted memories. In a society like Mongolia, with a long tradition of anthropomorphizing animals to express human emotions,

20 In the late 1930s, nearly all monasteries across Mongolia were destroyed, with only a few religious structures spared. However, in 1944, there was a partial revival of Buddhism when the state reopened the Gandan Monastery, or what remained of it, as a 'life museum' in Ulaanbaatar, staffed by five dozen monks. This reopening aimed to showcase socialist Mongolia as a democratic nation where individuals had the freedom to choose their religious beliefs, among other liberties. Placed under the watchful eye of the secret police, monks were allowed to preserve some aspects of their monastic lifestyle. Some mostly elderly monks continued to care for cats, offering them shelter from the harsh realities of a socialist world hostile to stray animals.

21 Delaplace, 'Chinese ghosts in Mongolia'; Delaplace, 'Parasitic Chinese, vengeful Russians'; Solovyeva, 'Faces of Mongolian fear'.

22 Carsten, *Ghosts of Memory*; Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*.

anxieties, and social issues, it was no coincidence that an animal would emerge to mirror a new form of socialist violence, much like the mass appearance of ghosts did. That this role fell on the cat was not surprising for the following interrelated reasons.

First, the cat was historically associated with monasteries, that is, spiritual realm. Second, the manul has been associated in legends with (the lack of) fear, omens, and death (hunters had to kill a fleeing manul, on pain of death). Cosmologically speaking, the domestic cat, the wild manul's legendary 'son', was best placed to inherit some of its 'father's' characteristics during a time of cosmological disruption and be reimagined as a being which causes fear and brings about death. Third, a belief in omens (*yor*, *beleg*) as reflecting anomalies in cosmological order, which does not necessarily require the involvement of gods, makes it possible to think about abnormal changes in society as omens. The emergence of the cat as an exceptionally 'ominous animal' in socialist Mongolia, where religion was officially banned but omens tolerated, also fits this way of thinking. Fourth, according to lay Mongols, the cat is a paradoxical animal which is both close to and distant from humans; this potentially allows the cat to be used as a conceptual tool to think about death as something that is both an inseparable part of life and so different from life. Fifth, in Buddhist legends the cat and the dog are perceived as opposites (the former lives indoors, the latter outdoors; the former is cunning, the latter is gullible). Since the dog signifies life's joys such as prosperity, love, loyalty, and kinship (as when deceased relatives are believed to return to their family as dogs), it did not require a great leap of imagination to label the cat, when it acquired negative spiritual associations, as 'the dog of the Ruler of the Underworld' and see this species as embodying the opposite values.

These five interrelated reasons, in my view, help explain how the cat—originally an 'earthly' creature with a great talent for 'mouse-catching deeds' and devoid of any spiritual powers—acquired paranormal powers in modern *bolson yavdal* stories, where it is associated with death.

Here, I wish to make one point clear: in all the cat-related *bolson yavdal* stories that I came across, the cat does not represent the cannibalistic socialist state, the murderous secret police, or the executed monks. Rather, the cat, as a messenger of the underworld, embodies a particular concept or fear—the horror of the suddenness and dark mystery of death, a grim reality under state socialism. To remind, the cat in this

role emerged alongside a multitude of ghosts[23] against the backdrop of a cosmological order turned upside down by mass traumatic events perpetrated by the atheist state.

Aside from the Buddhist establishment, another group historically associated with cats was the Chinese, who during the socialist period came to be viewed by Mongols with suspicion, fear, and incomprehension (see Chapter 2). One *bolson yavdal* story, which recounts a case that allegedly occurred around the 1920s, is representative. In the story, a Chinese man lives alone with a cat who happens to be the reincarnation of his deceased father. The man's usual meal is 'Three Squeaks', a Chinese dish that involves live baby mice. The name comes from the sounds the mice make during the eating process. The first squeak occurs when the diner picks up the baby mouse with chopsticks, the second when it is dipped into a vinegar, and the third when it is bitten and chewed. One day, the 'Three Squeaks' enthusiast hears from his friends about Mongolia and decides to try his luck in the new place. In Urga, he finds employment in a Chinese dining hall where he lives in a back room. His hard work and the cat's ability to keep the kitchen free of mice make him a valued employee, and for a time, the man and the cat enjoy a peaceful life. Both are well-fed and sheltered, and their bond remains strong. However, this happy life was not to last. One day, the Chinese man brings home a Mongol woman (a person who belongs to a people who reincarnate into and from dogs) to live with him. The cat is angry with the foolish choice of his 'son'. Unable to contain its anger, the cat one day attacks the man, scratching his face. In the chaos, a cook from the dining hall rushes to the man's aid and kills the cat, unaware that it was the reincarnated father of his colleague. Stricken with grief, the Chinese man blames himself for not revealing the cat's true identity to his co-workers.

What is interesting about this and similar *bolson yavdal* stories is that they are set within a relatively recent past and describe fears that today's Mongols can understand and identify with. To the best of my knowledge, there are no ancient legends of this kind in Mongolia, which suggests

23 In Mongol worldview, ghosts (*bug*, *chötgör*) are believed to be the souls of deceased people who stayed on earth, unable to transition to the afterlife or get reincarnated. The reasons for souls getting stuck on earth are many, including a tragic or violent death.

that stories about the Chinese reincarnating into felines and vice versa were likely invented during the socialist period when Mongolia, under Soviet pressure, promoted Sinophobia.

In socialist Mongolia, the image of the evil cat with supernatural powers was, of course, not an official view. Officially, the cat was just a biological species in the same way as death was taught to be a biological termination of one's life with nothing waiting beyond it. In kindergartens and secondary school curriculum, as I can attest from my own childhood experience, the cat appeared as a character from fairy tales and legends. Many people who grew up in socialist times remember two such popular legends, namely *Cat the Teacher* (*Muur bagsh*) and *The Wealthy Cat* (*Bayan muur*). As the names suggest, the former depicts a monastic cat and the latter a fat cat. Owing to the politicization of every aspect of life, including education and literature, these legends were supposed to be taught to children as a critique of pre-socialist society in which the monks (cats in temples) exploited and tricked the people (mice) while the wealthy enjoyed life at the expense of the poor. No wonder, many *dacha*s on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar that stood out by their size and expensive exteriors, typically owned by corrupt apparatchiks and party functionaries, were euphemistically referred to as 'cat houses' and were suspected of being hideouts where their owners engaged in debauchery and other anti-ideological activities.

The Good Cat Under Socialism

The cat in socialist Mongolia was an ambivalent animal reflecting social tensions, people's innermost fears, prejudices, and sometimes even aspirations. Among various groups, it evoked a host of feelings, mostly negative. That said, whilst historically, tolerance and affection towards cats were expected on the part of Buddhist monks, in the socialist period such tolerance characterized Soviet specialists who arrived in Mongolia in their thousands accompanied by their pets.

The lion's share of cats, both feral and domestic, lived in Soviet neighborhoods in Ulaanbaatar and other settlements built by Soviets across the country. From their Soviet colleagues, some Russophile Mongols not only learnt to tolerate cats but also welcomed felines into their flats, similar to how they opened their doors to dogs (see Chapter

2). Mongols openly began keeping cats in small numbers, not only in Ulaanbaatar, but occasionally cats could be seen in nomadic camps in the countryside. Nomads who led a semi-sedentary lifestyle, such as those working as guards in collective farms or those who migrated less and spent more time in a single pastureland, as well as some elderly individuals without children, were known to keep cats as mousers and companions.

As previously noted, Russians have traditionally viewed cats as both bringers of luck and mischief-makers, capable of cunning behavior and serving malevolent entities. During the socialist period, Mongols also adopted various Russian superstitions, including the belief that a black cat crossing a road is a bad omen. Hence the modern expression *har muur güilgeh* ('to make a black cat run across'), which means 'to spoil one's day or business'.

My Childhood and Teenage Years

I'd like to share a childhood and teenage memory from the years 1985 to 1993. Our family lived in a small settlement called Bor-Öndör, located in Hentii Province, for five years. After that, we relocated back to Ulaanbaatar, where I attended school for the remaining three years before completing my secondary education.

Constructed by the Soviets, Bor-Öndör was home to Soviet and Mongol miners and specialists, along with their families, most of whom were employed by the newly established fluorspar mines on the outskirts. The mining company founded in 1973, had forty-nine percent of its shares owned by the Soviet government and fifty-one percent by the Mongolian government. My father served as the representative of the Mongolian government in this joint venture.

Bor-Öndör comprised two distinct districts: a cluster of five-storey Soviet-style houses and a *ger* district. The modern houses were occupied by Soviets and a small number of Mongols, while the majority of Mongol toilers lived in the traditional *ger* district. Nestled in the middle of the settlement was a Soviet military garrison, like a bear camping in a marmot colony. As my father held a position of authority, our family lived in a modern building and my siblings and I attended the local Soviet secondary school while taking occasional classes in the

Mongolian language and literature at the Mongolian secondary school. This circumstance allowed me to bridge both Soviet and Mongol worlds, gaining insights to compare these two distinct social environments.

Soviet imperial ideology was supposed to be inclusive of all socialist peoples, fostering a sense of unity under the shield of communism in opposition to the capitalist world. This ideology also had a missionary quality, aiming to spread the 'religion' of communism and was framed through the metaphor of familial ties. The Soviet Union was portrayed as the wise 'elder brother', responsible for the protection, cultural development, and well-being of its socialist 'younger siblings'—the other nations within its sphere of influence. Nothing symbolized this Soviet position better than the iconic fraternal kiss, epitomized by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Instantly recognizable for his thick eyebrows, Brezhnev would greet leaders of fraternal countries with a long kiss on the mouth—especially those with whom he felt a close connection or those whom he wished to impress. This imperial missionary position, sealed with a kiss, served as a justification for the Soviet Union's domination of countries like Mongolia—a relationship symbolically affirmed by Brezhnev exchanging mouth kisses with Mongolia's leader, Tsedenbal, during his visit to Mongolia. The propaganda kiss was every bit as passionate as a 'French kiss'—or, some may argue, a 'bonobo kiss'—the only obvious difference being the absence of active engagement of the leaders' tongues. Not that Brezhnev needed to win Tsedenbal over with his passionate embrace, as Tsedenbal was already enchanted by his Russian wife, Anastasia Filatova, widely regarded as the *de facto* co-ruler of Mongolia and a KGB agent.[24]

Despite the romantic intertwining at the highest echelons and official propaganda singing an ode to the eternal love and loyalty between the two brotherly nations, the Soviet Union behaved like a disciplinarian empire builder ready to chastise and browbeat Mongolia for every transgression, whether real or imagined. This relationship, rooted in hierarchy and power disparity, resulted in Soviets and Mongols in Mongolia inhabiting separate worlds that temporarily intersected in the workplace through

24 Initially praised by the People's Revolutionary Party as a stable genius, Tsedenbal later became a liability for the Soviet leadership when he revealed his sharp tongue and erratic behavior, criticizing the Soviet Union. This ultimately led to his downfall in 1984.

formal interactions. This was particularly evident among members of the respective proletariat. Beyond the confines of work, the two groups seldom socialized, and this segregation was reinforced by distinct institutions and infrastructures, including separate living arrangements, schools, shops, transportation, social clubs, and so on.

Let's take the school as an example. The Soviet school in Bor-Öndör was typically off-limits to Mongol children, and I only knew a few other Mongol kids who attended, mainly those with high-ranking officials as parents. Two of such kids were the offspring of the Mines Director, the most obese man in the settlement. Strutting around like North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un, he was known for his authoritarian leadership, gluttony, and a penchant for surrounding himself with minions ready to construct a mini-cult of personality around him. His nickname was 'The Piglet', underscoring his potential for further growth, both physically and politically, given his ambitions and marital status. In socialist Mongolia, there was a joke about securing a successful career by marrying a Russian woman. The Mines Director, who happened to have a Russian wife, was a walking embodiment of this joke, prompting many to speculate that his appointment to the post was not due to his working his butt off but influenced by his auspicious marriage.

Speaking of Kim Jong Un, whenever I watch short videos or documentaries about North Korea these days—where half-starving people enthusiastically cheer, jump, clap, and otherwise display child-like, exaggerated loyalty to their morbidly obese leader—it brings back memories of socialist Mongolia, a mirror image of the Soviet Union. In Mongolia, leaders were similarly welcomed by the toilers in choreographed fashion, though not to the same extreme as in the Hermit Kingdom. During public meetings, the Mongol toilers rejoiced at the sight of their leaders like Pavlovian dogs salivating at the sound of a bell. When North Koreans excitedly express, in front of cameras, that they believe their impoverished Fatherland is the best country in the world, or that their totalitarian dictator is their national treasure, I don't see it as mere pretense because saying otherwise may have lethal consequences. I know that many North Koreans mean what they say, as many *Homo Sovieticus Mongolicus* felt the same way about their country and leadership during the socialist period. Despite enduring an erratic authoritarian leader like Tsedenbal and facing low living standards,

many Mongols praised him as 'the best leader of the Party and state' and genuinely believed their country to be the second-best in the world, only behind the Soviet Union. These examples illustrate the power of state propaganda and storytelling in authoritarian states.

If we are to return to Bor-Öndör, the segregation between the Mongol and Soviet worlds extended to two sets of shops, each catering to their respective groups. Besides the Soviet military shop exclusively serving Soviet military personnel, there were three Soviet civilian shops, brimming with an array of goods imported directly from the Soviet Union, that stood as emporiums of plenty, tantalizingly out of reach for ordinary Mongols. The only locals who could shop at these revered Soviet institutions were holders of special IDs, typically senior management or workers in strategic industries, such as chefs employed in the local sanatorium. Both my father, serving as Mongolia's representative, and my mother, a chef at the sanatorium, were proud holders of these coveted IDs. In contrast, there was a single Mongol shop that displayed a mere selection of essentials (meat, milk, millet, etc.), echoing the simplicity of daily necessities against the backdrop of the Soviet extravagance. It was a common sight to witness Mongol workers politely beseeching Soviets or their influential compatriots in front of these Soviet shops to purchase items unavailable in the Mongol shop.

Transportation further accentuated the segregation and power disparity. Soviets had their own buses, separate from those used by Mongols. Soviet buses were more comfortable and less crowded, in stark contrast to the overcrowded conditions endured by Mongol commuters, who, particularly during rush hours, resembled sardines packed in a tin.

Whilst Soviets could go into and use any Mongol facility at any time, rarely doing so except out of curiosity, the reverse was prohibited for ordinary Mongols. Soviets generally enjoyed better facilities, more food variety, better clothing, higher salaries, and better living standards compared to Mongols. After all, as bringers of superior socialist culture to Mongolia, the Soviets were 'givers' and the Mongols were 'recipients' and were supposed to behave accordingly. This cultural and social segregation between the Mongols and Soviets, with all its ensuing consequences, was not unique to Bor-Öndör but was replicated across the toilers' and herders' paradise on the steppes.

Humans are xenophobic beings who instinctively categorize humanity into 'us' and 'others'. The former comprises individuals who share common language, customs, norms, and history. The latter refers to everyone else. 'Us' is often associated with the notion of superiority, while 'other' is usually perceived as inferior and avoided. The reinforcement of this division—'us'/'superior' versus 'other'/'inferior'—by political, social, cultural, and other arrangements only tend to amplify xenophobia. No wonder, given the situation in socialist Mongolia, many Soviets, instead of embracing Mongols with a bear hug, viewed Mongols as 'others' and considered themselves socially superior, smarter, more hygienic, and fashion trendsetters. These sentiments were often sheepishly acknowledged by Mongols themselves. Holding a condescending view of the Mongols, many Soviets also saw Mongolia as a second-rate country, enduring their time there only because it allowed them to earn more money than in the Soviet Union. In other words, despite the beautiful ideology of enlightening the Mongols and helping them build communism on the steppes, ordinary Soviets were interested in little except enriching themselves.

In Bor-Öndör in the apartment block where our family lived, the basements served as a refuge for cats and even housed a pregnant dog who soon delivered a noisy litter of eight puppies. Amongst these furballs, I discovered my Sharik, who stood out among his dark-furred siblings as the only one with a gold-hued coat. My elder sister named him Sharik, and we embraced him as our 'pet'. My sister and I spent our days playing with Sharik and ensuring he had enough to eat. During a distressing dog-killing campaign, we provided refuge for the entire canine family in our kitchen, protecting them from harm until the campaign's conclusion. I actually knew Sharik's grandmother, a dog called Tsyganka, meaning 'Gypsy' in Russian, who lived in the basement and was fed by the dwellers of our apartment block. Tsyganka gave birth to several litters, but only two of her daughters from the same litter stayed with their mother. One was Berta and the other Linda, names given by local Russian children. Berta was Sharik's mother.

Just like any other apartment block, ours had its share of feline residents. Most Russian children knew the local cats' genealogies well just as they knew those of yard dogs. Whilst most of these cats called the stinky basement home, some lucky cats found a place inside the

cozy flats, cared for by Soviet puss lovers. One of our neighbors even had a chubby pet marmot that spent most of its time in a small, dark box throughout the year. Another neighbor kept guinea pigs, which became the main attraction for the local cats whenever they were taken out for a stroll around the playground. Most residents in our apartment were fond of cats, regularly providing them with milk and spoiling with delicacies, exclusively found in the Soviet shops. This included slices of sausage—a source of joy and delight cherished by all carnivorous Mongols. When Soviet specialists who kept cats returned to the Soviet Union, they often left their feline friends behind, contributing to the growing population of stray cats.

In comparison, the Mongols, both young and old, held a negative attitude towards cats, to put it mildly. Except for a few Mongols who were puss lovers, most adults openly avoided felines, while children chased them with sticks and stones, much to the horror of the Soviet onlookers. Pussycats and stray dogs sought shelter not only in apartment basements but also in various buildings under construction, frequently used by teenagers, toilers, and Soviet soldiers as romantic rendezvous spots with girls. These unfinished structures were often littered with mattresses and the walls were invariably marked by graffiti depicting oversized genitalia. This choice of location was driven by an acute housing shortage, where entire families, sometimes consisting of three generations, shared a single flat or lived in cramped *ger*s. With no hotels or other places to meet up with their girlfriends, such buildings were also the only available option for testosterone-fueled Soviet soldiery.

During the summer holidays, Soviet children usually travelled to the Soviet Union and returned in autumn for the beginning of the school year with stories about their mind-blowing experiences in their home country—the best place in the entire world, no less. These stories often left me envious in much the same way that Facebook photos of perfect holidays posted by acquaintances leave many people feeling jealous these days. In contrast, my summers were spent in Dundgobi Province with my paternal aunt's family, where I was exposed to the harsh realities of rural life—an experience I thoroughly enjoyed, even as the stories of my schoolmates sounded captivating. In moments of conflicting emotions, I instinctively knew that the comfortable lives or holidays of Mongol

bureaucrats or Soviet specialists could never compare to the exhilarating thrill of galloping on horseback across an endless semi-desert, or the moments of a bond with nature, or the serenity and peace of nomadic dinners around a flickering fire.

While originally absent in the semi-desert, cats managed to find their way into the administrative center of Dundgobi Province, notwithstanding the prevailing disdain for them among the local population. My aunt's *ger* there was occasionally raided by feline thieves who stole dried meat and other provisions from the wooden shed used as a storage facility. Following such incidents, my aunt had little to say but to mutter, 'These thieving cats, these feline teachers!' alluding to the legends *Cat the Thief* and *Cat the Teacher*, which were popular among Mongols of all ages. The feline population must have been small, as I never personally saw one, but I heard stories from others who had. However, after Sharik arrived to live with my aunt, the feline visits to her wooden shed came to an end, bringing great joy to my aunt.

In the summer of 1990, our family returned to Ulaanbaatar, where it became evident that being born as a cat in the capital city, especially in a Mongol neighborhood without the mitigating influences of Soviet puss lovers, was one terribly unlucky fate. In our neighborhood, cats never dared to venture outside during the daytime because the mere sight of a cat would prompt children and teenagers alike to assault them with whatever happened to lie around on the ground—iron bars, bottles, pavement stones. Occasionally, I would come across dead cats sent to the afterlife in the most gruesome way. Although many hated and feared cats, there was one particular sadistic teenager in our apartment block who derived pleasure from torturing felines or any other living beings. Last time I heard of him, he was said to be running an illegal brothel and mistreating prostitutes. To compensate for his sickly-looking stature, he resorted to filling his penis with Vaseline to enlarge it, which often leads to complications and can eventually result in the need for prosthetic testicles. This practice of penile augmentation, which became popular in Mongolian national prisons, is said to have been adopted from the Soviet penal system. Next time you come across a Mongol thug flaunting his pumped-up manhood in a sauna

or a public bath, you'll know that the marketed appearance doesn't necessarily reflect the product's quality.

In Ulaanbaatar, along with one of my siblings, I attended Mongolian Secondary School No. 23 located in the city center. My other siblings went to typical Soviet schools. In just three or four years, some of my siblings had to change their Soviet schools three times due to the exodus of Soviet specialists, who, having failed to build a communist paradise in Mongolia, were returning home in large numbers. Consequently, schools that their children attended had to close and merge, reflecting this political-demographic change.

Initially established to cater to the children of residents in the neighborhood, many of whom were high-ranking bureaucrats, Secondary School No. 23 gradually transformed into a quasi-elite institution and was designated as a 'special school'. Despite our family living on the outskirts of the city—due to our father's insistence, who had a sentimental attachment to our apartment block—these secondary schools situated in the city center accepted my siblings and me. Our father's ability to pull strings made it possible. During the socialist era, a significant number of teachers at my secondary school were Soviets instructing Mongol children. However, by 1990, the majority of the teaching staff were already Mongols. Eventually, the remaining few Soviet teachers also left the school for good to return to their home country, which was in existential turmoil. Many of my classmates were from privileged backgrounds, with parents serving as directors of institutes, Mongolian ambassadors, Party functionaries, university lecturers, and suchlike. This starkly contrasted with the children in my proletarian neighborhood. Some of my classmates had domestic cats, highlighting the disparities in lifestyles, hobbies, and values among different social classes.

The Cat Today

The two preceding chapters discussed how the dog and the marmot, both of whom had their spiritual significance denied during the socialist period, reemerged from the ruins of state socialism with their powers reinstated. These two species did not merely regain their powers and revert to their pre-revolutionary forms or images; they

met the post-socialist challenges equipped with new supernatural characteristics. In contrast, the pre-revolutionary cat had never been associated with spiritual powers, but ironically gained them during the socialist period. Today, the cat is a multifaceted creature and remains a controversial species, evoking fear, suspicion, disgust, love, and even veneration. People either love or hate the feline, choosing to keep it as a companion or seeking to avoid it for a variety of reasons, some of which would not have crossed the minds of citizens during the socialist period.

Many modern Mongols dislike cats for various reasons. One is the cat's famously indifferent attitude, nicely captured in the English nursery rhyme 'Pussycat, Pussycat', about a cat who visits the grand Queen's palace but, instead of being impressed, goes about its usual business—chasing a mouse. Unlike dogs, who happily cozy up to important humans, cats are seen as individualistic animals that often give people the cold shoulder. For Mongols who love their loyal dogs and value hierarchy and obedience, cats come across as too aloof and not very dog-like.

In pre-revolutionary times, cats were cared for by Buddhist monks, who were expected to feel compassion toward all living beings, regardless of whether they cozied up to humans. During the socialist period, some Mongols welcomed cats into their homes by emulating the Soviets. In post-socialist Mongolia, many cat enthusiasts have embraced felines with a previously unfamiliar neoliberal mindset, influenced by an ideology that champions individualism, self-reliance, consumerism, and skepticism toward traditional institutions and conventions. Neoliberalism also encourages its adherents to form their own opinions on various matters.

Despite these lofty ideals, humans, as social beings, are never isolated in their worldview formation but are influenced by their environment, which today is shaped by social media, the advertising industry, and multinational corporations, among others. What neoliberal consumers really need to do is make up their minds about whom they choose to follow.

In this neoliberal context, consumerism and the practice of keeping specific pets serve as a means of self-expression and identity construction for many Mongols aspiring to be perceived as 'modern', 'unique', and 'sophisticated'. Brands like Hello Kitty and pet food

producers, symbolizing modern Western values that equate pets with family members, exert influence on Mongol cat lovers, many of whom subscribe to the online culture of following both domestic and foreign influencers like pop stars, talk show presenters, top models, and famous academics. For example, one of Mongolia's most prominent superstars and national treasures, singer Bold—known for his signature move of covering his private area with his left hand when dancing in public or in front of cameras—is famous for keeping pussycats at home and sharing their pictures on social media, garnering thousands of 'likes'.

Over recent years in Mongolia, distinct consumer tribes have emerged based on shared consumption habits and interests, providing a sense of belonging to an 'imagined community' and defining their identity accordingly. An example of such a consumer tribe is the fanbase of popstar Bold. Another example is cat lovers.

Corporations, brands, social media influencers, NGOs, and news outlets play a significant role in shaping public opinion on cats and various other topics. They do this by disseminating information, framing narratives, and influencing discourse. This creates a platform that both promotes and counters anti-feline sentiments, encouraging certain lifestyles, such as cat rejection or cat ownership.

Notwithstanding, the cat-loving movement has made considerable progress, leading to the establishment of the Mongolian Cat Federation (MCF). In 2016, the MCF organized the first cat show, *The Cat is Beautiful*, in Ulaanbaatar. At this event, attendees had the opportunity to marvel at fifty breeds of pussycats and receive professional advice from veterinarians. Additionally, they were given the chance to spend their money on luxurious toys and accessories to spoil their four-legged, purring sweethearts—something that would have made Christian Grey, the main character of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, green with envy.

Shifts in social attitudes towards cats have also manifested in the way cats are being named and the cosmological role they occupy. Traditionally, cats were not bestowed with personal names and were not considered beings closely connected to Mongols in the cycle of reincarnation. However, in the present day, domestic cats not only bear names like Yagaan ('Pink'), Tazhii ('Fatty'), Tom ('Big'), Zaraa ('Prickly'), or foreign names such as Emma, Lucy, Lily, but many cats also carry distinctly Mongol human names, both male and female, including

Dulmaa, Sambuu, Jonon, Galsan, and others. This reflects a new belief that cats have the ability to reincarnate into and from Mongols. In this regard, the modern cat mirrors the traditional dog by adopting more canine-like and, therefore, human-like qualities in the eyes of Mongols.

That said, due to an overwhelmingly negative image ascribed to the cat in the socialist period, and because the cat is still a rare animal in Mongolia (the implication being that the majority of the population learn about the cat's characteristics from moralistic *bolson yavdal* stories or hearsays rather than from firsthand experience), today the cat is predominantly perceived as a dodgy animal than a docile and friendly species. Even individuals, particularly those of middle age or older generations, who keep felines at home for companionship, describe the cat, as articulated by journalist Gangaa, whose dairy opens this section of the chapter, as a 'weird animal that you can neither hate nor love'. The following comments on Gangaa's article exemplify the prevailing attitudes towards felines in contemporary Mongolia:

> Comments:
>
> It is cute only when it is a kitten, but when it grows up it is really ugly.
>
> When foreigners see a green cat cross the road, they all go like 'wow what a cutie!' But when Mongols see one, we go like 'what an abominable green cat! Look at how it looks scornfully with its wolf-like eyes!'
>
> Once a cat was lying across the entrance to our house. The local kids could not get in because they were afraid of it.
>
> My fellow Mongols, we should love cats. That it is a bad omen when a cat crosses a road is just unsubstantiated gossip. Animals that come to your home can be a reincarnation of your deceased relatives. They long for their families and try to come back even if it means they turn into cats.
>
> I used to be afraid of cats so much that I always went around them if I saw one. But now (that I have read this article) I won't be afraid anymore.

Broadly speaking, today the cat embodies oppositional qualities: it both curses people and heals people (from cardiovascular diseases and hypertension); it brings death to humans and protects people from

malevolent spirits and ghosts; it is a polluting animal and a pure animal which provides emotional companionship; it brings misfortune and good luck; and it is both an ugly animal and a cute being. All these ideas, as we have seen, derived from pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist periods.

Conclusion

Mongols believe that a negative attitude towards the cat has been part of 'Mongol tradition and culture'. Those who hold this view find wisdom in 'traditional knowledge', and those who love cats tend to lament this view as outdated. Despite what many people think, the evil cat isn't an ancient image but was created as recently as the socialist period.

The cat's image is multifaceted. In pre-socialist society, the cat was a good and powerless animal (for the monks, as attested to in Buddhist legends), a human avatar in political fairy tales based on Buddhist legends, but mainly an unknown animal (for the nomads, as described in animistic legends). In the socialist period, it turned into a bad and ugly spiritual being (as recounted in *bolson yavdal* stories). Today it is a good, a bad, an ugly animal or a mix of all, mirroring the post-socialist liberal consumerist society with its multiplicity of choices, opinions, memories, and values that people have the freedom to choose, share, promote, or decline.

The cat also serves as a compelling example of how an animal can rapidly transform from an obscure and unfamiliar creature to a recognized and integral part, if not of daily life, then of cosmological imagination. Today, the cat is intertwined with beliefs in reincarnation concerning the Mongols.

The cat's multifaceted image also reflects a broader historical process. In the annals of Mongolia's history, momentous social and cultural transformations stand out as exceptional occurrences. Examples include the establishment of the Mongol Empire in 1206, the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, the official conversion of the Mongols to Buddhism in 1640, the submission of the Halha Mongols to the Manchu Qing in 1691, and the People's Revolution in 1921. Between these historical milestones, social and cultural change unfolded gradually over centuries, meaning that ideas about animals, much like anything else, remained fixed

for long periods. However, in the last century, the pace of change has accelerated to the point where social order has become dynamic and flexible. For example, a woman born in 1910 during the last days of the Manchu Qing Empire would have spent her childhood in the independent Mongolian theocracy under the Javzandamba Hutugtu (1911-24) and witnessed transformative changes during her working life under socialism (1924-90), unparalleled in previous generations. Had she lived longer, as is common today, she would have seen the collapse of socialism in 1990, marking the onset of a new liberal democratic era in Mongolia's history. In other words, during her lifetime, she would have witnessed four different regimes.

These socio-political transformations were made possible by the emergence of modern technologies in communication and transportation such as the telegraph, radio, telephone, television, trains, cars, and airplanes. Our imaginary woman would have been born into a world where the only modes of transportation were horses or camels and family life revolved around candles. She would then have spent her adulthood riding public buses and using electricity to watch television as it transmitted news about a Mongol cosmonaut's historic flight aboard the Soviet Soyuz rocket into the cosmos for the glory of the socialist Motherland.

These new technologies not only caused cultural disorientation and dislocation and undermined social structures, creating revolutionary situations, but also made mass surveillance, social control, connectivity, mass education, and propaganda more effective. The twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and liberal democracies would not have been possible without these technologies.

Generation Z (individuals born from mid-1990s to the early 2010s) has encountered changes even more radical and swift than the generation of their parents. Just think of ground-breaking developments since the mid-1990s that have transformed our daily lives—the advent of internet, portable gadgets such as smart phones, social media, E-commerce, advances in genomics and biotechnology, blockchain technology, self-driving vehicles, and AI. Still in their infancy, these new twenty-first century technologies have already seamlessly woven themselves into the fabric of our cultural existence, reshaping the way we think, communicate, work, relax, envision the future, and interact

with the world. As they become more complex and integrated into our daily lives, these technologies are bound to make social structures even more flexible and create even deeper cultural disruptions.

In the past, life was much more predictable and settled, taking centuries to witness any discernible social or cultural change or technological breakthrough. The further we go back in time, the longer it took for changes to occur, spanning millennia and tens of thousands of years. In contemporary times, by contrast, each passing year is transformative, making any attempt to define the characteristics of modern Mongol society, or any society for that matter, akin to describing the ever-changing color and texture of an octopus seamlessly adapting to its surroundings as it swims through the ocean. Given the fluidity of the modern era, it is unsurprising that the cat symbolizes a multitude of qualities and ideas simultaneously for a variety of audiences. Throughout history, time has been a crucial factor in allowing ideas, such as those about animals, and norms to settle. Yet, in today's world, the relentless pace of change prevents any possibility for ideas, norms, and identities to solidify and ossify as a tradition. This dynamic churns out a multitude of lifestyles, value systems, knowledge systems, belief systems, identities, and more, colliding with each other and with those from the Cold War era and preceding periods. It is not only the cat that has been attributed a multitude of qualities. As shown in the previous chapters, dogs and marmots also exhibit multifaceted characteristics.