

*Mongolian Folk Music and Cultural Change*  
Professor Peter Marsh, Music Department, CSU East Bay

How does folk music effect, and reflect, social change in twentieth century Mongolia? Travelers visiting Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, in 2009 are often surprised at how modern and bustling it is. Travelers to the city one century earlier, however, when it was called Urga, would have seen a completely different place. It was a place then largely disconnected to the rest of the world. Mongolia was entirely traditional even in the early twentieth century. A number of factors led to the transformation into this modern incarnation, most especially the People's Revolution of 1921, a coup organized by Mongolian partisans backed up by the Soviet Red Army. Mongolia then became a Socialist Republic and a political satellite of the Soviet Union.

Music and visual art played an important role in shaping this transformation. Not only art was used politically, so was music. This will be discussed, as well as how music may be used to teach history. To understand music is often thought to require specialized knowledge. This may be because people see music as being not as representational as the visual arts. However, a great deal can be learned about music without specialized knowledge.

The ways in which art has been used politically has been much noted, particularly the ways in which states have used art to promote a change in social and cultural attitudes. The image of "Rosie the Riveter" from the *Saturday Evening Post* from May 20, 1943, by Norman Rockwell sought to convey the idea that women were ready and capable to work in the factories while men were fighting the good war. She has big muscles, a huge power tool, and denim overalls. Also, Rosie was chosen since it was an average name. She represents the Common Woman. The diminutive ending "-ie" in her name makes her less threatening. She has a dirty face, dirty hands. Her feet are sitting on a copy of *Mein Kampf*. This artwork was part of a campaign that meant to change social attitudes. It was considered desirable by the powers that be for the rest of society to accept her.



We saw this a few decades earlier in Russia: the founders of the Russian revolution were determined that Russia would no longer be controlled by an aristocratic elite. The revolutionaries were influenced of course by Marx's ideas. Marx believed nations progressed in phases from very simple to complex forms. He identified these five different stages:

- 1.) Primitive communism
- 2.) Slave society
- 3.) Feudalism
- 4.) Capitalism
- 5.) Dictatorship of the Proletariat
- 6.) Communism



Figure 1 - "Long live our sublime socialist Motherland. Long live our great Stalin!" (1935)



Figure 2 - "Bypass Capitalism ..." 1920s

According to Marxist theorists, Russia at the time of the Revolution was going through the stage of Capitalism and was building Socialism. By the 1930s, Stalin in particular wished to speed up the process. He needed the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union to think of themselves as Workers. Lenin and the other leaders of the Revolution knew the power of art to effect social change and used poster art to its full advantage as propaganda (*figure 1*).

The Soviets still thought of Mongolia as in the stage of Feudalism, so it was possible as well as advantageous, in Soviet eyes, to assume the Mongolians could skip past Capitalism and proceed directly into Socialism (*figure 2*). An image of a herder represented All Mongols, who saw themselves as herders: they were now, collectively, a *Mongolian nation*. This is a new phenomenon, and it is one of the very greatest importance. The Mongol rider is carrying the Mongolian flag. This is an idealization promoting a notion that the Mongolians should understand themselves as constituting a (reasonably unified) nation.

There are new ideas afoot in such imagery, not only Marxism or the idea that "we Mongolians are now part of a nation." Now there is also a concept of time, progress, linear time rather than cyclic time. In traditional Mongolian thought, history moved in cycles rather than linearly. However, this was new: time could be divided now into past, present, and future. Now progress could be conceived. This is a product of the European Enlightenment filtered through Marxism. A fundamentally, radically different concept of culture was created in Mongolia.

This art and the piece of work shown before it (the airplane poster with the names of Soviet greats written on the wings – *figure 1*) are examples of Soviet Socialist Realism. By the 1930s the Soviet Union made it mandatory that *all* Soviet art had to be Social Realist in style, depicting the lives of the workers in realistic form, and that the art had to be understandable and relevant to the workers. The experimental arts of the early twentieth century that had been so popular in Western Europe were seen as bourgeois and

decadent by Soviet leaders. They believed instead that art should promote the socialist mission.

This is the case with the visual arts. But can we see music as a method for effecting social change? Now, obviously Bob Dylan made music that changed a culture; but often people talk about his lyrics rather than about the music itself.

Going into the Revolution, where were the Mongolians in terms of music and art? The economic, geographic, and social context of pre-modern Mongolia is what is interesting. The northern part of Mongolia consists of grasslands, ideal for herding animals. Like Montana or Wyoming, it is not fit for intensive agriculture, but best suited for raising animals. Mongols gather in round tents in encampments. The Russian word is “yurt” and the Mongolian word is “ger,” a round and portable felt-covered tent.



In a photograph of Mongolians playing music, one has a handmade fiddle whose strings are made from the tail hairs of a horse; another (or the same!) horse is present in the photograph. Other fiddles are also present. Music making is often centered in the *gers*, or tent homes, themselves. There is no real standardization here in

the crafting of these fiddles. But this pre-modern era, the traditional era, of art ended in the decades following the People’s Revolution when Soviet leaders sought to modify and modernize traditional art forms. One strategy to do this was by taking art out of people’s homes, and putting it on public stages.



In a photo of young boy with fiddle and female dancer, we see a very different environment than was typical in the traditional era. The performers are present on a theatrical stage. They are performing before an audience. Their performance is not impromptu, unlike the previous photo of Mongolian herders in front of their tent. A performance of this nature implies a stage, the necessity of being on time, and the separation of an impromptu home performance from a real staged theater performance. Someone has overseen this, produced it. There is evident a growing

specialization as well: the boy plays the fiddle, the female dances. They are wearing costumes that are stylized. A stage delineates what is art and what is not. A stage breaks things apart. It elevates certain activities. In the Soviet period, the growth of schools, education, and lessons on how to play these instruments becomes much more specialized and standardized.

Russian teachers had already come into Mongolia from the beginning, but by the 1950s and 1960s Russian teaching in Mongolia had expanded considerably. There were also many Mongolians being trained by Russians. A new kind of culture was being taught here. As an example, Italian-trained Russian violin makers were brought in to show the Mongolians how to make their fiddles to be as solid as European violoncellos.



In a photo, a Mongolian folk orchestra seems to be a hybrid between a European orchestra and Mongolian folk instrument group: it is a huge ensemble, and enormous horse-head fiddles play the role of standup bass. The musicians play newly-composed folk music as well as the overture to Bizet's opera *Carmen* and a transcription of Enesco's "Romanian Rhapsody."

An instructive contrast is most readily audible when we aurally compare:

- a) a very traditional Mongolian tune for the horse-head fiddle, playing a song about a black horse: "The Black Stallion Zhonon of the Khalka Mongols."
- with
- b) A song by the "Mongolian State Morin Khuur Ensemble."

The second piece is more organized, has driving percussion, and relies on a big orchestra. It has a hummable melody, whereas the first did not, and was more abstract. The amount of virtuosity is different: showmanship becomes more important in the second piece, which features a large group of people working absolutely together, with very fast, technically demanding passages which require rehearsal times and a conductor. The first piece is one that the Mongolian Everyman could try to play; the second is not. A person operating an instrument in the new musical culture usually needs to be a highly trained

specialized performer to play the second piece. It is also the music *of the city*. For a city is required to support the institutions and to pay for the orchestra. These are professional musicians who do not herd yaks and do the duties of traditional nomadic herder, but rather receive a salary from the government to perform and practice their music in public.

This idea of developing a full “folk orchestra” comes out of Moscow in the 1950s. It shared a similar repertoire and similar sound with other national folk orchestras formed throughout the world at this time. The instruments and melodies, however, are distinctly Mongolian.

What started off as a political initiative has become widely accepted in Mongolian national culture. A traveler arriving in the airport in Ulaanbaatar today and saying that he wants to hear traditional Mongolian folk music will be taken to a theater that features one of these modern folk orchestras.

In 1990, Mongolia ended its ties with Marxism and adopted a market economy and multi-party government. Surprisingly, however, the Mongolians continued to perform this type of hybrid, modern folk music. They maintained the idea of a modern progressive culture. We could say that by 1990 Marxism had failed in its political goals but had succeeded in its cultural goals -- although one might argue that it was simply the modernity that stayed, regardless of whether it was Marxist or not.