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During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

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❄ Chapter 10 ❄

**Hybridity and Vitality of Culture:
Mongolian Traditional Performing Arts During and
After the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Akira Kamimura

Introduction

On 28 January 2020, I arrived in Ulaanbaatar from Beijing. It was quiet, with no Covid-19 bans or tests. After the plane landed at Chinggis Khaan International Airport, a dozen Mongolian inspectors wearing protective suits boarded the plane and took the temperature of the passengers. The previous day, the government of Mongolia had adopted 'Resolution No. 30' about measures to control the new coronavirus. This closed all the schools and other facilities, including museums, libraries, event venues, restaurants and bars. Three days later, on 1 February, the government prohibited foreign citizens from entering Mongolia from China and, on 23 March, all regular international flights and trains were cancelled. Thus, I came to stay in Mongolia until December 2020.

The government's anti-Covid measures affected Mongolian traditional customary life. Before Tsagaan Sar (White Lunar New Year) in February, the government conducted an extensive campaign urging citizens to refrain from visiting each other and encouraging the traditional Tsagaan Sar greetings to be held electronically, which they referred to as *tsakhim zolgolt* on social media. During the New Year festival, the government prohibited public celebrations and travel between provinces and the capital. Eventually, summer came. The 2020 National Naadam festival differed from previous years. The government broadcast a pre-recorded video clip on television instead of a live performance of the opening ceremony at the National Sports Stadium. The performances in the video clip impressed people much more than the previous live ceremonies and positively changed attitudes toward the traditional performing arts. This virtual opening ceremony on TV (also referred to as *tsakhim neelt*) led to a series of dance challenges, inspiring many Mongolians in the country and abroad to perform traditional ethnic dances and post the clips on social media. I call this

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the ‘Dance Chance’ challenge phenomenon, after the name of the contest on social media. The Covid-19 pandemic changed how Mongolian people perceive and practise traditional performing arts.

Traditional performing arts are part of Mongolian national identity. These include the telling of epics, throat singing and playing the horse-head fiddle, the *Morin khuur*. During the process of building a nation-state in the socialist era (1924–1992), traditional performing arts were established as an integral part of the new socialist national culture, resulting in a hybrid of European and Mongolian traditions. Kamimura (2001) discusses epic telling and Mongolian *khöömii* (throat singing), as well as Marsh (2009), the horsehead fiddle, and Shimamura (2017), the Mongolian traditional costume, *deel*, illustrating the hybridity of modern Mongolian culture. ‘Hybridity’ refers to the nature and degree to which cultural items are apt to be combined with external elements to produce hybrids. ‘Vitality’ is the ability to survive or remain vigorous. My research in Mongolia suggests a high positive correlation between hybridity and vitality, though one must not ignore the possibility that hybridity may not be a positive (Kraidy, 2005: 6).

As a point of comparison, in Japan, some local festivals with a long history are disappearing due to declining participation and a shrinking, aging population, particularly in rural areas. The recent Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the pace of change in this process. For example, the ‘Sominsai’ festival’s thousand-year history at Kokuseki-ji Temple, Iwate Prefecture, ended in February 2024. In the festival’s main event, men in loincloths vie and struggle for wooden charms. Curiosity in this as a ‘naked festival’ attracted a vast number of spectators. Residents, devout Buddhists, lead a life in strict discipline for days before the event. They thought introducing outsiders would jeopardise the purity of the tradition, so they ended the festival. However, other festivals have undergone minor changes and continue with outside participation. ‘Hybridity’ may bring the tradition into question. How ‘hybridity’ and ‘vitality’ are related, and the consequences of their interaction, are of vital interest to this research.

This chapter explores the background, process and aftermath of the Covid-19 ‘Dance Chance’ challenge phenomenon. It shows how Mongolian traditional performing arts were developed and produced new hybrids in the contemporary digitally connected world during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. It also describes how traditional performing arts reflect Mongolian political and cultural policies aimed at forming a national identity and reveals how hybridity and vitality are reflected in the Mongolian performing arts.

Mongolian performing arts during the socialist and post-socialist era

Since the People's Revolution in 1921, the performing arts have played a significant role in Mongolia. Under the Bogd Khan regime (1911 to 1924), the country was still a feudal and religious state. The eighth incarnation of the Jebtsundamba Khutagt, the spiritual head of the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia and the highest lama, was elevated to Bogd Khan (theocratic ruler) when Mongolia declared independence from China in 1911. With a low literacy rate and an administrative system inherited from the Qing Dynasty, Mongolia at the time of its independence was not yet a nation in Anderson's sense of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). Moreover, modern mass media that mobilise the masses as a nation, like newspapers, did not exist in Mongolia, which means there was no Anderson's (1991) 'Print Capitalism'. Thus, to foster national solidarity following the People's Revolution, in place of the newspaper, revolutionary songs were composed and sung by the People's Army based on the lyrics and melody of old folk songs. These publicised the purpose of the revolution, and played an essential role in increasing military discipline and morale (Batsüren and Enebish, 1971: 10–11).

The movement to organise amateur performers spread from the military to the whole country. In the early 1920s, the first clubs were established in the capital and local centres for people's cultural and enlightenment activities, such as theatre, dance and sports groups (Natsagdorj, 1981: 134–136). Since the mid-1930s, in the process of expanding the movement and constructing clubs and theatres around the country, performing arts transformed their nature through their style. An essential shift was that songs, music and dances, which had previously been performed in the confined spaces of the *ger* (tent home), came to be performed on stage. Many professionally trained performers guided amateurs at the newly established clubs and theatres.

In 1940, when the remnants of the old feudal system were completely eliminated, and the Party regime was consolidated with the victory in the 1939 Khalkha-gol War between USSR-Mongolia and Japan-Manchukuo, the construction of socialism was declared as a national agenda. After World War II, the amateur performing arts movement changed its character from revolutionary and enlightenment activities to mass movements to create a new national culture, and many amateur performance contests came to be organised (Kamimura, 2001: 106). Activities of amateur performing arts circles at regional clubs and 'red corners' (spaces for social activities including performing arts) of local centres became more regular, and the number of participants increased. It was crucial to create a new performing art with 'revolutionary (socialist/internationalist) content' from traditions with 'ethnic forms' (ibid.: 106–107). The shift to performance on stage also led to an 'improvement' in musical instruments.

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In the 1960s, Denis Yarovoi, a Soviet violin maker, changed the material and structure of the horse-head fiddle. He adopted a wooden plate for the front part of the resonance box instead of animal skin and made f-holes to resonate well in large halls and have a stable pitch (Enebish, 1991; Marsh, 2009).

Kamimura (2001) describes the development of the modern Mongolian *khöömii* from the earlier tradition, following the introduction of the European chorus into Mongolia. Badraa (1989: 17) writes that today's *khöömii* style, in which a singer sings the whole melody of a song in throat singing, had never been seen until the early 1950s. Singers used to chant one verse praising the masters of mountains and rivers of their homeland in a harsh voice and then sang one phrase of *khöömii*. A unique innovation happened in the first half of the 1950s. At an event held in Ulaanbaatar in 1954, M. Tsedee (1924–2005) sang a *khöömii* part of a three-part chorus song, which D. Luvsansharav (1927–2014) composed by arranging the praise sung before telling an Altai-Uriankhai epic. He learned the choral method under a Soviet music teacher's guidance and taught it at the Khovd Opera House from 1952 to 1954 (Jantsannorov, 1996: 78). G. Chimeddorj saw Tsedee singing *khöömii* at the event and was so impressed that he learned *khöömii* and created the modern Mongolian *khöömii* style, which involves singing only a melody line of a Mongolian folksong without voicing the lyrics. In short, the original 'syntagmatic' sequence of praise and *khöömii* was transformed into a 'paradigmatic' chorus, and then the *khöömii* part became independent solo singing (Kamimura 2001: 108). This case illustrates how the introduction of European music culture into Mongolian tradition led to the formation of a hybrid and new tradition.

Marsh (2009) points out that Mongolian political and intellectual elites who studied in socialist countries, particularly the USSR, and became 'cosmopolitan' but remained 'nationalist', played a significant role in the creation of a new culture, developing Geertz's (1973) argument of 'essentialism and epochalism' in decolonised new states' nationalism. The tendency of Mongolian elites to challenge the global standard with their local items is apparent. N. Jantsannorov, twice state-honoured music composer, told me that his interest since the socialist era had been how Mongolians could adapt to a globalising world while preserving their language and culture. The purpose of establishing the Morin-khuur Orchestra in 1992 was to explore the potential of the instrument in European classical music (23 August 2020, personal communication). As for Mongolian heroic epics, Rinchen (1966) writes that they should be translated, printed and published to occupy one corner of World Literature, which would be a pride of the nation. Geertz (1973: 273) wrote, '[T]he desire to become a people rather than a population, a recognized and respected somebody in the world who counts and is attended to, is, short of its satisfaction, apparently unappeasable.

At least it has nowhere yet been appeased.' This desire of the elites has fostered modern Mongolian cultural hybridity.

It was in the early 1980s that an alternative trend appeared. Badraa coined the term '*yazguur urlag*' ('traditional folk art'), which literally means 'root art' because *yazguur* signifies 'root' or 'origin.' 'Although people's works of art change with the historical development of society and accept to some degree a kind of innovation, I call those that retain elements more traditional than modern innovations as "*yazguur urlag*"... In English, they could be called "authentic folk art"' (Badraa, 1998: 31). The opposite concept of 'authentic folk art', 'fakelore', was first introduced by Richard M. Dorson in his 1950 article in the *American Mercury*. It was a response to 'the growing popularisation, commercialisation, and resulting distortion of folk materials' (Bendix, 1997: 190). During the Cold War, it was also applied to the ideological manipulation of folklore in communist countries (ibid.: 193).

Kamimura (2001) cites several reasons behind this shift in the 'traditional performing arts' concept. One reason is the rapid changes in Mongolian society. Accelerating modernisation and urbanisation during the socialist era meant that the urban (settled area) population exceeded the rural by 1979. The 'traditional culture' that had been a 'thing in itself' to most Mongolian people changed into something else they needed to review. The 'authentic' performing arts imply 'rooted in the land,' and amateur performing arts movements came to search for their own 'roots' (ibid.: 110). However, the system in which Western-styled, educated musicians in the capital are considered professionals and local traditional performers are considered amateurs, with the former 'guiding' the latter, was further strengthened. This led to traditional performers' complaints and frustration, and obstacles to passing on the local traditions to the next generation.

At a meeting (14–15 March 2006) of the UNESCO Morin Khuur project, for which I worked as an international consultant, a dispute broke out between 'professionals' and 'non-professionals' over whether musical notation should be adopted in teaching and training activities or not. Some 'professionals' argued that knowledge of notes would enable learners to go beyond their locality and learn any world music easily. 'Non-professionals' objected to them, saying, 'Using notes and an equal temperament scale would omit nuances from their local traditional *morin khuur* music.' A famous *ikel* player overtly complained that 'professional' players always stole or 'appropriated' their local traditions and made money without returning any to local people. Although the UNESCO project focused on diversity, safeguarding local traditions and transmitting them to the next generations, most 'professionals' appeared to have a negative perception of spending money on preserving local traditions as they thought the quality of

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performances by local traditional players was not good enough and officials, even the Minister, claimed, 'It is useless to spend money on "dying" local cultures.'

Opening ceremony of Naadam Festival

The literal meaning of *naadam* is 'games', and the tradition of holding ceremonial games comprising the 'Three Manly Sports' (*Eriin gurvan Naadam*) – wrestling, archery and horseracing – dates back to the sixteenth century (Galindiv and Ösökhbayar, 1977). Naadams were held as a prayer for the Jebtsundamba khutagt's long life, and during the Chin dynasty, local naadams were dedicated to local mountain and river deities. In the socialist era since 1924, the primary purpose of the State Great Naadam was to celebrate the victory of the 1921 revolution, and now 'to symbolise Mongolia's independence, sovereignty, national unity, statehood' (The Law about the State Great Naadam, 4th Article). Since 1925, the State Great Naadam has been celebrated on the 11th of July every year as the 'People's Festival'.

Before 2020, the opening ceremony of the State Naadam Festival was held at the National Stadium in Ulaanbaatar. In the Soviet era (up till 1991) its main programme was socialist-styled mass games. In the early 1990s, the management of the festival opening ceremony was outsourced. Since 2013, it has featured Mongolian pop music, such as the rock song '*Tolin khöl*' by the band named Kharanga. It is expected to contribute to forming the national identity and promoting international tourism. In 2015, the Prime Minister, Ch. Saikhanbileg tried to invite Jennifer Lopez for a million-dollar reward, expecting an increase in foreign tourists.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, B. Baatar of the Hero Entertainment Studio produced the first festival concert without spectators. The production was undertaken at the thirteenth-century Complex in Erdene soum (county), Töv aimag (province), about 100 kilometres east of Ulaanbaatar. During the opening ceremony video, famous pop and rock singers performed. The programme included hard rock band The HU's song, two Kalmyk songs – a folk song, '*Sharka Barka*', and a famous Kalmyk song, '*Eej mini*' (My mother) – as well as '*Jurai Gelden*', a Khoton ethnic folk song, '*Yookhor Khatarish*', a Buryad folk song, and '*Tolin khöl*.' The singers and dancers wore traditional Mongolian *deels*, and the video showcased the nomadic life of old Mongolia on the steppe. Apart from some criticism of one performer singing a sorrowful Tuva folk song, '*Kongurei*', with a smile, people accepted the performances with high praise.

‘Dance Chance’ challenges and flash mobs

This Naadam opening video impressed O. Erdene-Ochir, an international dance master of competition Latin dance, president of the ‘Royal Dance Mongolia’ dance school and managing director of Dance Chance in Mongolia. He was born into a ‘dancer’ family and grew up in Khövsgöl *aimag* until he entered the National University of Mongolia Law Department, Commerce and Business. His mother and elder sisters are famous dancers. In 2020 he founded and continues to operate the NGO ‘Dance Chance’, which is a community and movement whose motto is ‘Dance will open all the opportunities (chances).’ He said, ‘In 2014, we, 24 Mongolians, participated in a European dance festival. After watching various dance groups from around the world perform on stage, I realised how to attract the spectators’ attention and got the hang of entertainment’ (Erdene-Ochir, 31 August 2022).

On 13 July 2020, he posted a video clip on Facebook during a trip to western Mongolia. It was the clip for their first dance challenge, ‘Dance Chance Challenge 1– Sharka Barka by Erdene and Khaliun’. Erdene included three elements in the clip: first, a Kalmyk folk song, ‘*Sharka Barka*’, which was one of the items in the video of the Naadam 2020 opening ceremony; second, the style of ‘Kiki Dance Challenge,’ originating from the Canadian singer Drake’s ‘In My Feelings’ (2018); and third, the environmental setting of the countryside. In the clip, Khaliun gets out of the car and dances according to the melody of the Kalmyk folk song along a country road on the summer green grassland, and Erdene joins her. The car follows their moves, and the camera shoots them from inside the car through the open door.

After the government lifted a strict Covid-19 ban around Naadam in July 2020, many urban residents made trips to the countryside by car, boosting domestic tourism. Because the borders were closed due to the pandemic, Ulaanbaatar’s wealthier residents sought to replace the loss of travel abroad by visiting the Mongolian countryside during the best season. Covid-19 had not spread in Mongolia then. Around the Naadam festival, so many city residents were travelling in the countryside that most of my friends did not answer my calls. This boom in internal tourism led them to recognise the value of their country’s natural beauty and pastoral culture.

Erdene said he had always wanted to make a clip like this. When he watched the 2020 Naadam video on TV, he thought, ‘This is the song.’ He prepared the shooting for a couple of days before the trip and took ten takes on the site. After he posted the clip, they continued travelling in areas without a mobile phone signal. Three days later, they were in Yaruu *soum* centre, Zavkhan *aimag*, and found it had gained over 20,000 views on Facebook. He quickly gained ten times more followers on Facebook than when he had posted only Latin dance

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clips. The number of followers increased from 10,000 to 4,280,000 in the two years after this post. He said, 'While the market for Latin dance is tiny and limited to only European-style celebrations, such as the New Year, Mongolian ethnic dance has many more opportunities, such as weddings and Naadam festivals.' His followers actively participated in the dance challenge and posted various performance versions on Facebook. Soon, the wave became worldwide, reaching Mongolian people living abroad, many of whom yearned to return home to Mongolia but could not as most international flights to Mongolia had been cancelled. Another reason for gaining followers quickly was the simple, easy-to-learn choreography, which incorporated elements of Mongolian dance. He promptly posted two more clips in the same style on Facebook, organising the Dance Chances: Dance Chance Challenge 2 '*Jurai Gelden*' (19 July 2020) and Dance Chance Challenge 3 '*Khatarish*' (29 July 2020).

In the Dance Chance Challenge 'Sharka Barka', participants posted various clips, such as those by the Mongolian ballet dance, an army team, the famous Kalmyk singer Bembeeva and others who contributed from Seoul and Australia. For the second '*Jurai Gelden*', clips were posted from Uvs province and Shibuya, Tokyo. Some Mongolian student groups in Japan had posted flash-mob Mongolian ethnic dance clips on YouTube before the pandemic. Erdene organised eleven Dance Chance challenges. From the sixth challenge, they collaborated with government organisations or at the request of commercial companies. For example, 'Dance Chance Zaisan Star shopping mall' merged Latin dance and flash mob performance style. Erdene says, 'I accept only the request of companies or organisations, the business of which is correct (*zöv*) and appropriate (*eyetei*) to the society, such as selling milk, dairy product *aarts* or mineral water. I refuse those companies that sell alcoholic drinks or carbonated or sugary drinks for children.' He did not think that dance challenges would be their primary activities. He organised the last five challenges in response to requests and has rarely organised new ones since the international dance contests restarted after the pandemic.

The enthusiasm for Dance Chance Challenges generated by social media has continued and involved local communities. Since February 2022, when all pandemic-related bans were lifted, people have become more active in club activities, particularly those related to Mongolian ethnic dance, at their workplaces and schools. Dance schools gained new students and people had more opportunities to participate in dance recitals and events. This shows the increase in people's interest and participation in traditional culture. The number of Facebook Group Dance Chance Challenge members is more than 11,000 at the time of writing.

‘Khamag Mongol’: expanding national and multi-ethnic identity

There are some prototype models for the 2020 Naadam Opening video, one of which is the ‘Khamag Mongol’ (All Mongols) project video (2 March 2013). The project was launched in 2013 on the initiative of singer S. Javkhlan. Famous singers from Mongolian peoples around the world participated in the project. They appealed to unite Mongolian peoples under the slogan ‘Mongolian peoples, Brothers! Unite Together!’ The video, a kind of homage to ‘We Are the World’ (1985), or ‘We Are the Mongols’, illustrates the concept. A Tuvan singer, Kalmyk singer, Buryat singer, Inner Mongolian singer and Javkhlan take turns appearing on horseback and singing a song, with lyrics by Javkhlan and music by D. Jargalsaikhan, leader of a rock band ‘Chinggis Khan’. In the last part, they sing together around a fire hearth, then ride horseback and bow to the Chinggis Khan statue in Sukhbaatar Square. In between, studio recording and project meeting scenes are inserted. A clip of Kalmyk singer Gilyana Bembeeva singing ‘Sharka Barka’ was also produced for the project, which is also one of the prototypes of the Naadam 2020 video in terms of singing and dancing in the grassland. Javkhlan himself mentioned that his project had inspired the Naadam Opening video and Dance Chance Challenges in the YouTube clip of ‘Khamag Mongol-2’ (20 November 2022).

Samandyn Javkhlan, one of Mongolia’s most famous singers, comes from Bökholmörön *soum*, Uvs *aimag*, and belongs to the Dörvöd, a minority ethnic group in western Mongolia. His homeland borders the Tuva Republic of the Russian Federation. In Uvs *aimag*, many ethnic groups live together, such as the Bayad and Khoton, which may have influenced the development of his identity. He is known as a zealous nationalist, often making public remarks about Chinggis Khan as a great ancestor who united the Mongolian peoples; he also tends to wear an unusual Khünnü (Xiongnu)-style *deel* with a straight band without a collar at official places and went to parliament on horseback when he was a member of parliament (2016–2020).

In Mongolia, Gellner’s principle of nationalism – ‘the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (Gellner, 1983: 1) – was applied to cultural policies, as discussed earlier. The state borders of Mongolia have limited the Mongolian national identity, and mentioning commonality with Mongolian peoples around the world might have been harshly criticised as Pan-Mongolism during the socialist era. Thus, Mongolia’s national identity has been shaped within its territory, involving the homogenisation of domestic culture and the differentiation from foreign cultures. In this process, Modern Mongolian Khöömii, which had to be distinguished from Tuva *khöömei*, came to be known as ‘*khöömii*’, rather than ‘*khöömei*’.

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Recently, however, as seen in the video clip above, they have come to emphasise ties with all Mongolian peoples. Mongolian identity appears to be shifting or expanding beyond Mongolia, possibly extending to the territory of Chinggis Khaan's Mongolian Empire, while still entangled with the existing national identity. The 'ABOUT' section of the YouTube clip of the project closing ceremony in September 2013 says, 'The descendants of Genghis Khan, living in the territory of Mongolia, China, and Russia, gathered on the same stage in Ulaanbaatar, a project called "*Khamag Mongol*" – "All Mongolia". The ideological inspirer and initiator of this project is the honoured artist, the golden voice of Mongolia, the singer Samandyn Javkhlan' (2 August 2015). The project reflects diaspora sentiments inspired by Chinggis Khaan's great empire, although it did not include the Kazakh people. In addition to this project, some recent developments in Mongolia reflect the expanding national identity. At the 2011 Naadam Festival opening ceremony, Ts. Elbegdorj, the president of Mongolia, officially celebrated the 2,220th anniversary of the founding of the Xiongnu state for the first time in Naadam history.

As nationalism has changed, the search for authenticity in culture has shifted. While the first 'Folk Traditional Performing Arts Festival' in 1983 tried to find local long-held traditions as authentic culture, since then, the legitimacy of authenticity has come to be sought in 'reconstructed' history. In the interview 'The Xiongnu Bielgee Dance Has the Possibility to Appear on the World Stage' by Montsame, M. Möngöntsetseg, a dance teacher and researcher, identified a Turkic word in the eleventh century as an equivalent to the current Mongolian '*büjig*' and said, 'People think "*bie bielgee*" dance is of western Mongolia. Actually, it is the dance (*büjig*) of all Mongolians' (Bolor, 2020). It is generally accepted that the modern Mongolian traditional dance was developed from variations of the Western Mongolian ethnic dance '*bie bielgee*' with the guidance of Soviet dance teachers (Dolgorsüren, 1962; Nanjid, 2017). Möngöntsetseg denied it with the ancient Turkic word and asserted that the recently reconstructed 'Xiongnu Bielgee Dance' can be globally accepted like The Hu (a worldwide famous Mongolian hard rock band), whose name derives from the Khünnü (Xiongnu) Empire.

On the other hand, the local traditions on which modern culture could be based are fading away; some are deterritorialised from the local context and reterritorialised into new forms of nationalism in these narratives. Most young Mongolians do not hesitate to wear Western Mongolian ethnic costumes, even Kazakh ones, though Kazakhs are usually considered to be different people from Mongolians. Such a nationalist field led Erdene's Dance Chance Challenge to the next but conventional stage.

Nomads World Cultural Festival: realistic re-experience of the virtual world

Mongolia has a long-term development policy, 'Vision-2050', which aims to establish Mongolia as 'a leading country with a preserved nomadic civilisation, based on national mentality, heritage, culture and mindset, and centred on the creative Mongolian citizen'. The first Nomads World Cultural Festival, 'Nomadic Mongolia-2018,' was organised in 2018 in the area of Hui Doloon Khudag in Ulaanbaatar. The government decided to organise the festival every two years but could not in 2020 due to the pandemic. Two years after Naadam 2020, the Nomads World Cultural Festival took place on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar from 12–14 August 2022. Various performers, selected from 21 provinces and nine districts of the capital, participated in this festival, as they had in previous performing arts contests and festivals in the socialist era. The main ceremonies were held in the open field, and performing arts activities and exhibitions were organised in the open air and in traditional *gers* erected for each province on the grassland on the northern bank of the Tuul River. About 23,500 people visited the festival.

This festival was a realistic re-experience of the virtual ethnic world of the Naadam opening video and Dance Chance Challenges. All visitors were strongly encouraged to come wearing traditional Mongolian costumes, like an anime cosplay event. They were also urged to actively participate in various activities, such as archery and knucklebone shooting. *Deeltei Mongol* festival (Mongolians wearing *deel*) is another participatory festival that has been organised since 2007, with participants wearing a *deel*, but held in the central Sukhbaatar square of Ulaanbaatar, where the metropolitan government has organised various festivals under the slogan 'City of Nomads' since 2023. Among these festivals, the 'Nomads World Cultural Festival' in 2022 most successfully incorporated people's re-evaluation of and desire to participate in national and ethnic culture following the pandemic.

The third festival in 2023 was held on 18–20 August in Taij Khaikhan, Nalaikh District, Ulaanbaatar. This festival emphasised the twentieth anniversary of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage and had an international scope, coinciding with the government's declaration of 2023–2024 as the 'Go to Mongolia Year' with the aim of increasing the number of international tourists to Mongolia to one million a year. Representatives from various countries with nomadic cultures were invited to participate in the festival, and around 63,000 visitors attended. The festival's homepage says, 'Its goal is to promote and celebrate the uniqueness of Mongolian culture and its nomadic heritage on the global stage'. Here, we see the same thinking that has been passed down since Rinchen's argument concerning the Mongolian heroic epic (Rinchen, 1966), which directly links the value of culture

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to international recognition. Mongolian national pride should be guaranteed by foreigners' evaluation.

In addition to the nationwide cultural festivals, ethnic group-level festivals have also been held in Western Mongolia, which is renowned for its rich ethnic diversity. These festivals, such as the *Tonjoo* Zakhchin Cultural Heritage Festival and the Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days held in the summer of 2022, showcase the unique traditions, customs and arts of the ethnic groups in western Mongolia. The Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days took place near Tolbo Lake in Bayan-Ölgii *aimag* on 25 and 26 July 2022. Uriankhai and Tuva are two minority ethnic groups in western Mongolia that have lived side by side for centuries, but have regarded each other as distinct ethnic groups, particularly since the mid-twentieth century. These events reflected the unique identity of Western Mongolian ethnic groups, while the main events of these two festivals also took place in the open air.

Mongolian traditional performing arts or culture are critical resources to mobilise people, not only for the government but also for individual politicians. For instance, two members of parliament initiated the Uriankhai, Tuva Cultural Heritage Days in 2022, and some politicians intended to boost their popularity ahead of the general election in 2024 by using internet content showing ethnic performing arts. The Minister of Culture would not escape criticism for using cultural events during her tenure to increase her chances of election to parliament in 2024.

Hybridity as trans-contextual bricolage

In the hybridisation process, a cultural element is de-contextualised from its original culture and re-contextualised within a new one. However, not all original contexts disappear; some contexts are referenced, adopted or implanted into the new culture along with the cultural element, as cultural elements function as nodes of contexts, influencing related contexts and thereby modifying or replacing previous ones. The extent to which the original context is adopted depends on the power disparity between the two cultures, which means that cultural hybridity studies are related to the topics of colonialism and diaspora (see Young, 2005; Pieterse, 2009). Some essential contexts of a minor culture element are 'bleached,' leading to what is known as cultural appropriation. Kraidy (2005: 9) argued that 'hybridity is fully compatible with globalisation' and proposed a framework called 'critical transculturalism'. However, as discussed earlier, the processes of cultural hybridity are complex, intertwining domestic and foreign contexts while simultaneously generating new ones, which is a function of

‘open-ended ongoing mixing’ (Pieterse, 2009: 57). Therefore, cultural hybridity can be understood as trans-contextual bricolage.

The video titled ‘*Dance Chance UID 100 jiliin oi. Flash Mob*’, shot on 28 June 2021, was made for the 100th Anniversary of Mongolia’s earliest established ex-state department store. Nomin Co., the owner, requested Erdene to introduce the store, which had reopened after a fire damaged the building on 7 June 2020, showcasing each floor. He only arranged the dancers’ positions and took just one take. In this video, Erdene combined the elements of flashmob dance and commercial purpose seen in ‘*Dance Chance Zaisan star shopping mall*’ (18 September 2020), and the music and song of ‘*DANCE CHANCE – Erdene and Khaliun – Evtei Mongol*’ (11 February 2021). For copyright clearance, Erdene and Khaliun remixed the music, sang the vocals themselves and combined three songs from the Naadam 2020 opening video and the first three ‘Dance Chance’ challenges into a single sequence. The success of the dance challenges led to a commercial version, the above clip titled ‘Zaisan Star Shopping Mall’, which combined the Latin dance and flashmob. The reward for the clip ‘State Department Store’ was three million Tugrik (approximately 1,000 US dollars), which covered the salaries of junior instructors at the dance school.

The internet served as the infrastructure or medium for the dance challenges, acting as a trans-contextual bricolage by mixing previously disparate cultural elements and people. Mongolia has a relatively high rate of internet usage, and many Mongolians are accustomed to watching and producing content on social media. Some herders choose to move to locations with better mobile phone signals to stay connected. The government also encouraged people to use the internet to minimise human contact and avoid gatherings during the pandemic. Although the disparity between settlement centres with internet access and rural areas without mobile phone signals was evident during remote learning, most herders, who usually reside in areas without internet, become active social media users when they stay in the centres. As well as the internet, the ‘Domestic Tourism Boom’ was one of the direct contexts of the first Dance Chance Challenge, ‘Sharka Barka’.

This clip, ‘State Department Store’, carries numerous historical contexts. One of these is the ‘All Mongols’ project clip, which marked a new trend in the ‘expansion’ of Mongolian nationalism and inspired the Naadam 2020 opening video. The web of these contexts can be traced back to revolutionary songs, continues to knit together and self-propagate through foreign and domestic powers as well as micropolitics, and culminates in the identity politics that have become prominent in contemporary Mongolia.

Conclusion

The Naadam 2020 opening ceremony video, produced as a government anti-pandemic measure, inspired Erdene to organise dance challenges. The sense of stagnation caused by the pandemic and the government's strict anti-pandemic policies led to the rise of his dance challenges. For Mongolian people living abroad, as Mongolia was safer than other countries before the explosive spread of the Omicron variant in the second half of 2021, those who had lost their jobs and felt it difficult to make a living there wanted to return home but could not do so. The Mongolian ethnic dance challenges were outlets for their longing to return home. Government measures to cut the movement of humans, livestock, and goods generated various detours, reconnections, and new connections as people adapted, rejected, and reacted to them. The dance challenges were one of those detours. Erdene merged various elements into his dance clips, and his followers performed and posted many variants from their locations and local contexts, showing a high level of 'hybridity'.

This hybridity of Mongolian 'traditional' performing arts is rooted in the socialist era, based on and intertwining with the contexts of the legacy of socialist cultural policies. From the early 1920s to the 1930s, the performing arts were the weapon of revolution and, after World War II, a means to create a 'new' culture appropriate to a socialist nation-state under construction. Although an alternative trend to evaluate and authenticate 'old' cultural elements was introduced in the early 1980s, it could not become prominent. The target of the search for authenticity of culture shifted from actual but 'dying' local traditions to reconstructed historical and archaeological sources.

The Nomads World Cultural Festival in 2022 was a tangible re-creation of the virtual ethnic world of the 2020 and 2021 Naadam opening videos and Dance Chance Challenges. The emotional reactions of people captured on the internet during the pandemic were shaped into government-organised festivals designed to foster and preserve national cultural pride and promote its uniqueness internationally. Since the end of the socialist era, these two domestic and international goals have been closely linked by the idea of measuring the value of ethnic culture through international recognition. Increasing global recognition, a longstanding desire of Mongolian cultural elites during the socialist era, also serves an economic purpose as part of the policy to expand international tourism and promote the export of Mongolian cultural content. This desire, along with their longing to retain a distinct Mongolian identity in the face of globalisation, drove the creation of cultural hybrids.

Over the last decade, the government has attempted to trace the state's origins to the Xiongnu Empire. They have also utilised traditional Mongolian performing arts for this purpose. The national development plan reflects the

idea that Mongolia should be the leader of the former nomadic world ruled by Chingis Khaan, the distant successor of Xiongnu, the first nomadic state in world history. The identity of the Mongolian people is no longer locked within the state's borders as in the socialist era, but it has expanded to include the nomadic world as their territory, while holding a solid national identity. Now, they can include the cultural elements in the wider area as part of their own culture if they want.

The Covid-19 pandemic made the Mongolian people rediscover their country's nature and ethnic culture, and it became an incentive for them to participate in ethnic performing art activities. Those activities were confined to a virtual space on the internet during the pandemic, but since then, most ethnic cultural events have been held in the open air. G. Enkhbat, director of the National Centre of Cultural Heritage, explained this as being 'to display the harmony between nature and human beings'. Mongolian traditional performing arts, going back and forth between reality and virtuality, between the present and the past, entangling various elements and contexts, are producing new hybrids today.

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