CHANGING SOFT POWER DYNAMICS IN MONGOLIA

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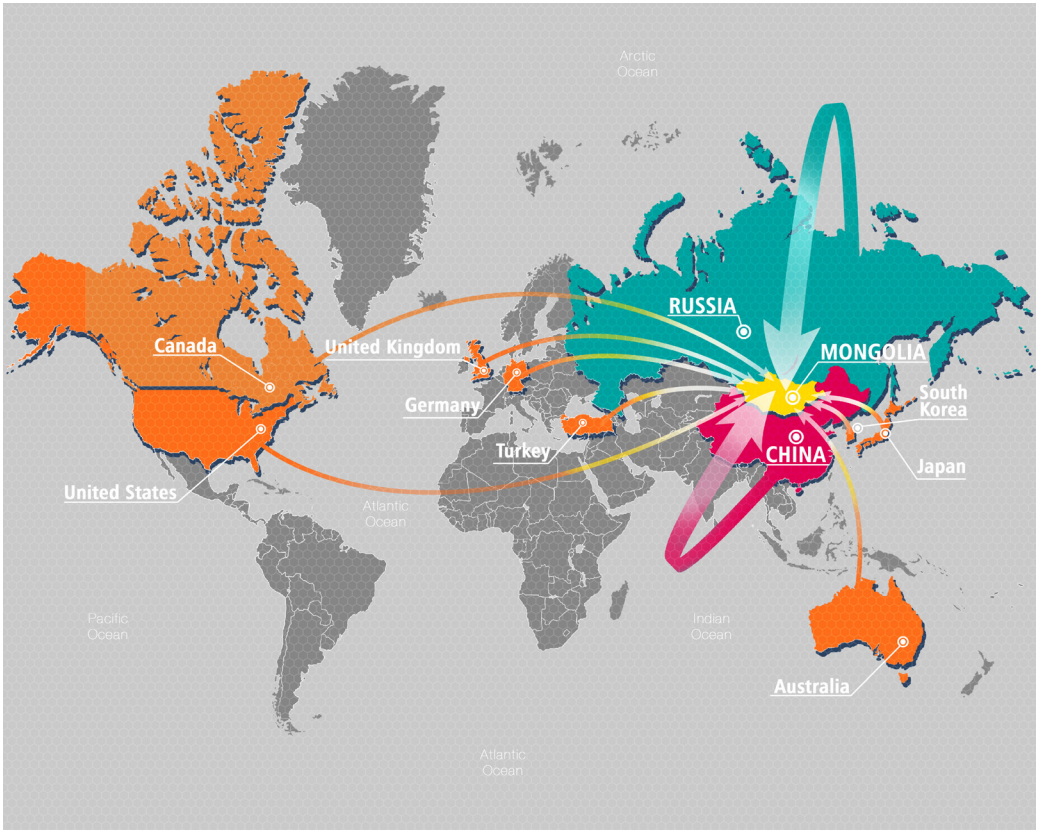

CHANGING SOFT POWER DYNAMICS IN MONGOLIA

Many Mongolian parents seek all possible opportunities to educate their children in the English-speaking world, mostly in North America, Europe and Asia (Australia and Singapore). English has become the favourite language among youth, and Chinese is the second most-studied language. Korean movies are the most watched, while Chinese and Russian movies still attract some viewers. But this was not the case during the socialist period of the 1940s–1980s. The choice of language was Russian because studying in Russia or knowing the language was the primary criterion for social and professional advancement. Television programmes, books, journals and newspapers in the Russian language were considered a luxury for many Mongolians who had no access to other soft powers. The country was closed off from any type of soft power from China—a sworn enemy at that time—and, of course, the Western countries that were the geopolitical competitors of the Soviet Union. A few Mongolians studied in Central and Eastern Europe, but only those approved by the Communist Party and secret service travelled to other parts of the world beyond the Soviet Union. As a result of the geopolitical ease between the great powers (China, Russia and the United States) in the late 1980s, Mongolians became open to the influence of all types of soft power from all countries capable of projecting them. The soft power influence of third neighbours have collectively increased enormously in Mongolia, while the Chinese soft power has gradually gained ground. These changes are due to the decline of the Russian soft power.

This paper explains the changing dynamics of soft power in Mongolia: why and how Western soft power succeeded, why Chinese soft power is slowly growing and why the Russian soft power has declined.

Mongolia at the receiving end

Soft power is not clearly defined and is still a debated concept in international relations literature. Most scholars accept Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as the opposite meaning of hard power: "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants".[1] The concept was introduced during the 1980s, when scholars were increasingly hopeful about peace and interdependence. In the international relations literature, soft power is examined from the perspective of great or major powers, and scholars have debated how these States competitively use soft power to change the behaviour of secondary and small States.

Despite disagreements on what elements should be considered as soft power and how to examine their influence, creative researchers recently designed frameworks to measure soft power and rank the major powers.[2] The most common categories in these rankings include culture (education, arts, way of living, language, etc.), government (political values, foreign policy, etc.) and business (technology, goods, products, economic models, etc.). Because the concept is fluid and inclusive, it is impossible to present comprehensive research on soft power or debate which major power has relatively effective influence over the foreign policy behaviour of secondary or small States like Mongolia.

Mongolia is only at the receiving end of soft power. The country has limited soft power to change the behaviour or attitude of other States. Nor can it escape or fend off the projection of soft power by any major power, especially in today's increasingly connected world.

In this paper, we centre our thesis on the role of the political and cultural

aspects of soft power. The examination of the Mongolian case is intriguing for two reasons: (i) Due to the geopolitical competition between the great powers, it was under the influence of the Soviet hard and soft power. And (ii), because of the Soviet decline, it became open to soft power from all major powers.

Western soft power

As a result of Mongolia's opening to the outside world, political and economic reforms and the pursuit of its Third Neighbour Policy since 1990, the collective influence of Western soft power has gradually increased in Mongolia. Although the third neighbours are not defined and are debated among Mongolian scholars, it includes mostly English-speaking countries or those with strong connectivity with these countries. They are the countries under strong influence or connections with Anglo-American or Western European culture and lifestyles.

The third neighbours have had a strong impact on Mongolia's democratic development. Even though dissenting views were marginalized and even persecuted during the socialist period, the communist regime was dismantled in 1990, when the first-ever multiparty election was successfully and peacefully concluded. Since then, Western liberal democratic ideas—freedom of expression, religious and economic rights, elections and civil society—have been diffused into Mongolia through Mongolians who have studied in Central and Eastern Europe. They have also permeated through the engagement policies of Mongolia's third neighbours, such as the United States, Germany and other Western democracies.

At the same time, the United States and donor countries, led by Japan,

have imposed a non-reversal of democratization for Mongolian political leaders as a conditionality for their economic and humanitarian assistance, such as in the 1990s.[3] Despite some deficiencies, especially the rule of law, the political values or orientation of liberal democracy have been accepted as new norms by political leaders and most of the citizenry. A regular, peaceful and open election has become the only way of transferring power between political leaders. Since 1990, Mongolia has held eight parliamentarian elections and presidential elections peacefully. This is a key criterion for electoral democracy.

Human rights are respected and protected in Mongolia relatively well, at least in comparison to its neighbouring countries and former communist authoritarian regimes in Central, Northeast and Southeast Asia. It is quite safe to conclude that the influence of Western soft power regarding political values has been successful, and Mongolia is now regarded as a like-minded State by Western developed democracies, along with India, Japan and South Korea. In fact, Mongolia's stance in the international arena, such as within the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the ASEAN Regional Forum, is often aligned with the other democracies, except on the issues involving its two big neighbours.

The diverse cultural elements of Western soft power have become popular over the past three decades in Mongolia. Before the 1990 opening, only a few privileged or authorized persons (diplomats, athletes, artists) had an opportunity to travel to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, while the rest of the population held extremely negative views of these countries. And yet, songs of the Beatles, ABBA and other rock bands became quite popular among closed circles

as well as in the discotheques. Jeans were the most expensive item on the black market.

Since 1990, Western culture (language, arts, movies, songs, goods, brands, lifestyles, religion) has been gaining attraction in Mongolia through three major routes. The first route has been all types of exchanges, such as education or training for Mongolians abroad, subject-matter experts and volunteers in Mongolia and humanitarian assistance projects. These exchanges, mostly funded by the third neighbour governments, have become instrumental for Western soft power entering Mongolia.

The second route is the media and movies. As the party-censorship system for information and media was dismantled, Mongolians gained increased access to Western television programmes and arts. This access was further accelerated as the country's internet connectivity improved along with the development of social media. And the third major route is through the growing Mongolian diaspora communities. Since 1990, Mongolians have slowly begun to migrate, mostly for economic reasons, to developed countries. Mongolian communities in North America (Canada and the United States), Europe and Asia have had a substantial role in promoting Western culture back home.

According to our 2021 youth public opinion survey, Western soft power is highly popular among Mongolia's youth. More than 70 per cent of young Mongolians (aged 18–35 years) have positive images of Germany, Japan, South Korea and the United States, according to the survey, entitled How Do Mongolian Youths Respond to International Relations and Foreign Policies?[4] The survey findings also emphasize that soft power projections from foreign countries through music, films and other arts are having no-

table impact on Mongolian youth. It is common for youths to keep up to date on British, American and Korean movies and music and to learn those languages. Among the survey responses, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States were the more popular countries to study in, while Japan and South Korea were the top Asian countries where young Mongolians want to study. In terms of movies and media content, American or English-language and Korean content were highly popular, followed by Japanese food and media. After the Mongolian language, 35 per cent of young Mongolians reported through the youth survey that they receive international news in English—a strong indication of how popular the English language is in the country.

In the 2000s, before the mining boom in Mongolia, many Mongolians went to work in South Korea, and their remittances became an income source for many households. As of 2020, the largest Mongolian diaspora, at 40,000 individuals, lived in South Korea.[5] Through people-to-people exchanges and other official exchanges between the two countries, Korean cuisine and media content are favoured by Mongolians.

Japan began receiving many workers from Mongolia recently; a Japanese government scholarship is one of the prestigious awards among top Mongolian students when they finish high school.

The collective influence of soft power from third neighbours has had a strong role in changing Mongolians' political orientation and values as well as impact on their daily lives through television programmes, lifestyles and the arts. The connectivity with Western political values and culture adds a distinction to Mongolia's identity in comparison to its neighbours and increases Mongolia's international connectivity. Politically, the gov-

ernments of Japan and South Korea now see Mongolia as a potential mediator on the Korean Peninsula issue in Northeast Asia.

Resisting Chinese soft power

Despite traditional resistance to Chinese influence, Chinese soft power has been gaining ground in Mongolia. But just as there is global concern for Chinese political, economic and cultural influence, there is a wariness of the Chinese soft power influence in Mongolia. Unlike the Western soft power, Chinese soft power seems to be based on economic development and material well-being rather than the political value of Chinese culture.

Despite a brief period of amicable relations from 1950 to 1962, anti-Chinese attitudes were institutionalized during the 1960s–1980s through the use of negative ideas, images and theories of a Chinese takeover or threat based on recent memories of its colonization of Mongolia and irredentist claims about a lost territory.[6] Even though Sino–Mongolian relations were normalized in 1989, Mongolian political elites did not deconstruct the institutionalized anti-Chinese attitudes; rather, major political statements often contained policies directed at restricting Chinese influence in Mongolia. If the anti-Chinese attitudes served the purpose of the Soviet military presence in Mongolia during the Cold War, they have also resonated with Western anti-Chinese rhetoric and attitudes since the 1990s.

Since 1989, China has gradually increased its soft power in Mongolia, starting with free visas. The travel patterns of Mongolians have changed dramatically, especially after Russia imposed a visa requirement on Mongolians (which they lifted in 2014) while China offered Mongolians 30-day visa-free travel. The visa-free travel arrangements have benefited Mongolians in sev-

eral tangible ways, allowing them access to foreign embassies not represented in Ulaanbaatar and facilitating the import of goods from China.

Another effective use of soft power has been the preferential access granted to Mongolians for Chinese medical facilities. As the public health system continues to struggle in Mongolia, Chinese medical facilities have become hugely beneficial for Mongolians with urgent medical needs. Because of cost, distance, visa hurdles and linguistic challenges, few Mongolians can seek medical services in India, Japan, South Korea, Thailand or even the United States, making the Chinese medical facilities highly attractive.

As China began to strategically promote educational programmes, annual scholarship numbers for Mongolians grew substantially. For instance, under the 2013 Strategic Partnership Action Plan, China pledged 1,000 scholarships annually, and one fifth have been for undergraduates. This makes studying in Chinese competitive with other schooling opportunities for children who could not afford the cost of education in English-speaking countries or far away in Russia. As a result, Chinese schools are becoming the choice of many young Mongolians, as indicated in the 2021 youth survey and in other statistics. And the number of Chinese private schools in Ulaanbaatar is also on the rise. There are three Confucius Institutes and more than ten Chinese cultural centres and Chinese language classrooms[7] in Mongolia. Confucius Institutes are usually established next to universities, such as the National University of Mongolia, the Mongolian State University of Education and Khovd University. The number of Chinese scholarships to Mongolian secondary school graduates has been increasing. By 2021, more than 10,000 students (unofficial number) had studied in China.[8]

Chinese dramas and movies appear frequently on television. Within the framework of cultural relations between the two countries, China freely offers 25 of its best movies, dramas and television shows to Mongolian programming.

The increasing travel volume between two countries for the previous factors along with general tourism is enabling the Chinese soft power to gain influence. Especially in the past ten years, travel between Mongolia and China has increased tremendously. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese travellers accounted for around 30–40 per cent of tourists visiting Mongolia.[9] Vice versa, around 80 per cent of all Mongolians who travel abroad go to China every year.[10]

From the economic side, China is Mongolia's top trade partner and second-biggest investor. Chinese direct investment accounted for around 30 per cent of total foreign direct investment into Mongolia as of 2020 (at US$6,358 million).[11] China is a vital partner for Mongolia. China accounts for 80 per cent of Mongolian exports and more than 30 per cent of its imports. During the COVID-19 pandemic, every Mongolian felt that the *urd khil* (which means southern border in Mongolian) is important for their everyday life. A little delay or interruption at the *urd khil* due to the COVID-19 restrictions directly and immediately affected everyday consumer product access in Mongolia. The growing economic relations between the two countries has opened the door wider for developing greater soft power influences.

Declining Russian soft power

There was a time when Mongolians looked at Russia as its big brother. During the years before the 1990s, Russian influence was powerful, both

in hard and soft power. Mongolia was dependent on the Soviet Union politically and economically. The Soviet Union maintained a military presence in Mongolia until Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to withdraw at the end of the 1980s. The Soviet Union at that time and now the Russian Federation see Mongolia as a buffer State between China and other big powers, such as the United States. Mongolia's geographic location increases its geostrategic importance. Economically, major income sources, such as the Erdenet copper mine, and other strategic facilities, such as railways, have Soviet participation and influence in their origin.

Even cultural ties were strong between the two countries. Russian literature was the most read among Mongolians. Studying in the Soviet Union was the guarantee of life well-being, at least before the 1990s. Almost anyone who had a chance to study in a Soviet school or learn Russian found it gave them a big chance to change their life trajectory. In those years, most Mongolian professionals trained in the Soviet Union. They came back and worked in their respective field. Through them, people-to-people exchanges and other cultural elements came to Mongolia. The generations born in that period have strong nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

Not many foreign television channels could stream into Mongolia before the 1990s. Only a few Soviet channels were on household televisions. And the Soviet TV programmes, movies and songs thus had huge influence. Buildings constructed during those years in Ulaanbaatar all reflected Soviet architecture. To this day, a Russian or Mongolian visiting the other country most likely would feel a similarity between the architectural appearances.

After the 1990s, Russian interest in Mongolia loosened, allowing for Mon-

golian interests to diversify through changes in international relations. Russia kept its hard power interest towards Mongolia. Russia still considers Mongolia as a buffer State against China and other powers, such as the United States. Russia still has heavy influence over Mongolia's electricity and fuel supply. For instance, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, Russia interrupted its fuel supply for a few days last year. Those few days of interruption caused temporary chaos in September and October in Mongolia, indicating the retaining degree of hard power influence.

But unlike the hard power factors, Russian soft power influence lost its pre-eminence among Mongolians. The Russian language became no longer a priority to learn, and Moscow lost its appeal to parents wanting to send their children for studies. As the Russian interest in Mongolia loosened, its soft power influences were replaced by the Western soft powers. The Russian visa restriction until 2014 pushed Mongolians to choose visa-free China as a transit country to visit other countries or to do business. In 2014, Russia finally allowed Mongolians to travel or transit without a visa for up to 30 days.[12] But the damage was done. The bureaucratic and old-fashioned system of Russia took away its cultural shine among Mongolians.

Since Putin's visit to Mongolia in 2000, Russia has increased the number of students studying in Russia. By 2021, there were 4,000 Mongolian students studying in Russia; every year, Russia offers 550 scholarships for Mongolian students.[13] But that is significantly less than the number of scholarships that China offers. The weak economic relations between the two countries have also slowed the soft power influence. Russian direct investment accounts for around 1 per cent of total foreign direct investment in Mongolia. Trade between the two countries is quite low, with Rus-

sian imports accounting for only around 1 per cent of Mongolian total exports, and imports account for around 30 per cent, which usually consists of fuel, of Mongolia's total imports.[14]

Due to the absence of soft power policies in the past ten years, the Russian soft power influence has not easily recovered in Mongolia. Mongolians' political values have changed to democratic and pro-Western and away from the Russian authoritarian and anti-Western stance. The older generations who studied in the Soviet Union or who had a strong affection for Soviet culture retain strong affection towards Russia. But the young generations differ from their parents' and grandparents' generations. They have been more exposed to Western culture and Western values.

In 2021, Mongolia and Russia celebrated 100 years of diplomatic relations. But the Russian soft power influence that formed in the first 70 years of that relationship has gradually waned with its fans due to a lack of cultural exchanges and soft power policies in Mongolia, such as promoting Russian education or the Russian language.

The Ukraine war will have major effects on Russia's soft power in Mongolia. It will divide the public along several lines. During the Soviet period, many Mongolians studied and lived in Ukraine, and many Ukrainians, including President Zelensky's parents, were among the specialists and soldiers who worked and served in Mongolia. Many Ukrainians along with other Soviet nationals fought and some lost their lives in the Khalkyn Gol Battle in 1939. Of Mongolia's six presidents, one was educated in Russia and one in Ukraine. Some Mongolians will divide because of their news sources: Those who learn about the world events through Russian television programming and websites will buy the Russian justification for the

war. Others who rely on English sources will see things in parallel with the Western view. But there are many other Mongolians who only know the Mongolian language, and nowadays they mostly rely on social media and street rumours and follow whatever seems logical to them. Without doubt though, the Ukraine war will impact Mongolian's views and attitudes towards Russia.

Conclusion

Change in international relations in the 1990s made Mongolia open to all countries' soft power. From the Mongolian point of view, Mongolia is not yet a country to use its soft powers to gain what it wants. It remains at the receiving end of navigating the soft power influences of other countries to make them mutually beneficial.

Since the 1990s, Western soft power factors have landed well in Mongolia. They have increased people-to-people exchanges, media content (such as TV shows, movies or dramas) and diaspora communities. The official exchanges and growing economic relations have created a smooth entranceway for the soft power influences. Western democratic values and cultural attractions have strong impact on Mongolians today.

The Chinese soft power influence is gradually increasing. Visa-free travel access and increasing the people-to-people exchanges and the number of students studying in China support the soft power policies. Being the top economic partner has helped increase the exchanges between the two countries.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia kept its hard power factors,

such as fuel and electricity supply, and its participation in major strategic projects, such as railway infrastructure. But Russia loosened its interest economically and culturally in Mongolia in the 1990s. The decreasing number of people-to-people exchanges and students studying in Russia have not helped the situation. Since Putin's visit in 2000, Russia has tried to increase its scholarships for Mongolian students and other factors to support its soft power. But after a decade of that loosened interest, the Mongolian attraction to Russia has indeed waned. Younger generations have diverted their attention to other powers.

Endnotes

1 Joseph S. Nye, "Soft power: the evolution of a concept", *Journal of Political Power* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572.

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5 According to the *Ikon News* (18 February 2020, see https://ikon.mn/n/1srf) citing the South Korean immigration authority, there were 48,185 Mongolians in South Korea in 2019 (the pre-pandemic year). The Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged 42,000 Mongolians living in South Korea during her statement to the Parliament on 18 January 2022 (UBN News, 18 January 2022, https://ubn.mn/p/23323).

6 National films, drama and literature were used to introduce negative images of China and the Chinese people. A Mongolian national film studio was established in 1954, and its production increased in the 1960s as Mongolian producers graduated from studies in the Soviet Union. Only one movie, "Ardiin Elch" ("People's Envoy"), depicted a positive image of the Chinese settlers in Mongolia. The movie was produced at the height of friendly Sino–Mongolian relations in 1959. Movies, documentary films, dramas, literature and patriotic songs all painted an evil image of the Chinese people. See Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "Anti-Chinese attitudes in post-communist Mongolia: the lingering negative schemas of the past (UBC, Master's Thesis, Vancouver 2011). Available at https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/24/1.0078410/1.

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10 Ibid.

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