6

Retrieving the Muted Subject in the Early Socialist Ecumene
The Example of the Mongolian Scholar Mergen Gombojab

Caroline Humphrey

> 'Is that fire smoking?' said Horace Lamb.
>
> 'Yes, it appears to be, my dear boy.'
>
> 'I am not asking what it appears to be doing. I asked if it was smoking.'
>
> 'Appearances are not held to be a clue to the truth', said his cousin. 'But we seem to have no other.'
>
> —Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant*

In November 1924, a group of young Mongolians made their way across the steppes from the Mongolian capital, Niislel Hüree, to the border with the Soviet Union. Here, at the Russian border town of Kyakhta, they could find no transport for their onward journey. One of them later recalled that their leader, Mergen Gombojab[1] with a person called Petrov,[2] had to undergo the highly annoying – especially for a Mongolian used to riding – disruption of walking on foot several times back and forth the six kilometres to the Russian military garrison of Troitskosavsk in order to hire horses and two carts to carry them and their luggage.[3] After a rough cart journey over several days through snow and wind, the group reached Verkheneudinsk where they could catch the Trans-Siberian train to Moscow, and then take another train on to their final destination. These young people had just become students, sent by their new socialist government to Leningrad. There they were to study a range of subjects and become the first generation of Mongolians educated in the methods of modern European sciences and humanities. I mention the halting, laborious and unevenly speeded journey as an analogy for the path of the transformation they were making in their lives. Gombojab (1906–40) was a particularly vivid

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case in point: he was leaving behind a childhood as an aristocrat and the inheritance of a high post in a hierarchical Buddhist theocratic state. Only two years earlier he had made the radical decision to reject this status and embrace the vision of an egalitarian socialist future for himself and his country.

This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of the 'international socialist ecumene', to use Susan Bayly's felicitous phrase. Most of the literature on this theme has been written by historians, and Bayly's work (2004, 2007, 2009) is notable for her anthropological approach that examines contrasting and interacting moral traditions and the importance of memory and affect in transnational movements. Much of her work concerns Vietnamese students in the USSR and the ways in which their enlightening experiences impacted on their lives after they returned to Vietnam and were remembered by their descendants. This chapter will perforce have to adopt a different focus, however. This is because the Mongolians and Buryats I discuss were involved in international education at an earlier and far more brutal period, the 1920s–30s rather than the 1960s–70s, and because many of them, including Gombojab, were to fall victim to the Stalinist purges. Gombojab, an extraordinarily precocious, gifted youth, was only thirty-one when he was arrested in 1937; he had no old or even middle age in which to reminisce to descendants. Furthermore, much key documentation, such as his culminating academic work and correspondence, has disappeared. He was among an important group of scholars and national activists whose names for decades could not be mentioned in public; their contributions to Mongolian culture were silenced. Although a substantial literature has now appeared around the most prominent Buryats, Gombojab remains a subject more difficult to trace, as can be seen from two collections of articles about him (Tamir and Aira 2016; Khishigt 2017) in which he is glimpsed through gaps and shadows and by brief notes and traces he left behind. The intellectual exchange in which such subjects engaged can be perceived only indirectly. Nevertheless, I believe Gombojab's story is significant. By tracking the passage of one man through utterly dissimilar politico-ideological 'imperial' situations – the Mongolian theocracy and early Soviet radicalism – this chapter shows the distinctive demands that each made on its subjects. It attempts to trace how this man, as an example of one trans-political subject, represented *in and through his own person* the effects of the contradictory intellectual currents that swept back and forth at the time.

In respect of anthropology, this story epitomises a particularly sharp series of ideological transformations and reversals experienced by transcultural actors inspired by socialism at this epoch-changing time. The problem is the muting that enveloped people such as Gombojab. In what follows, I have chosen not to discuss his interrogation reports, although they contain lengthy statements he is alleged to have made, because they were composed by the investigator and signed by him under duress.[4] Rather, I adopt the approach suggested long ago by Jean and John Comaroff (1992) when they debated how anthropologists can write about the silenced subjects of European colonialism. They wrote:

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> For the poetics of history lie also in mute meanings transacted through goods and practices, through icons and images dispersed in the landscape of the everyday. … At its best, anthropology has never been content to equate meaning merely with explicit consciousness.[5]

The opening up to social mobility across Eurasia brought about by the demise of the Chinese Qing Empire in 1911, the downfall of the Russian Tsarist Empire in 1917 and the neo-imperial advances of the Japanese in the same period has been extensively studied. The Mongolian cultural region, which found itself embroiled in all three processes, also has its own large literature. Apart from general histories (Bawden 1968), this includes studies of international relations (Kotkin and Elleman 1999), new forms of post-imperial governance (Sablin 2016), the political role of Mongolian and Buryat intellectuals (Rupen 1964), close-grained border history (Urbansky 2020), ethnicity, nationalism and intellectual life (Tolz 2008, 2009), biographies of Buryat Soviet spies (Atwood 1994) and accounts of ethnic political leaders (Ulymzhiev and Tsetsegma 1999; Sablin 2022). These works mention the multiple travels of individuals and groups in relation to the themes mentioned above, but few of them make this cross-Eurasia journeying central to their discussions. An exception is an important paper by Vera Tolz (2015), who brings to attention the theme of 'transcultural mobility', which she discusses in relation to the influence of nationalist political ideas held by Buryat intellectuals from colonized Siberia, above all the well-known activist Jamtsarano, on the imperial cosmopolitanism of the Russian intelligentsia.

It is the suggestion of this chapter that the idea of transculturality could nevertheless do with further examination in relation to the practices and structures of power at the time. To what, indeed, does the term refer?[6] Is transculturality to be seen as movement, influences, exchange and so on taking place between 'cultures' seen as separate wholes; or as Stephen Greenblatt (2010) maintains, are cultures themselves to be understood as inherently changeful, such that 'cultural mobility' is a constituent element of life in any case? Greenblatt argues that cultures, however they have come to be made up of inherited and in-mixed elements, at any one time are almost always nevertheless apprehended by those inside them as local and rooted. Mobility is often seen as a threat to traditions, convictions and rituals and therefore is frequently hidden or downplayed in the public discourse about 'us'. What needs to be studied are the literal exigencies of travel, the physical, infrastructural and institutional conditions of movement; only then will it be possible to grasp 'the more metaphorical movements: between center and periphery, faith and scepticism, order and chaos, exteriority and interiority' (2010: 250). Greenblatt's manifesto argues for the need to account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraints. He also calls for attention to be given to the ways in which cultures, ignoring the mobility inherent to them, take pleasure in the localness, in '*this* way of doing something (cooking, speaking, making love, dancing, wearing a headscarf, etc.) and not *that*' (2010: 252). If one adopts this view, 'transcultural

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mobility' can no longer be imagined as a vague vision of freely circulating travellers. Here I attempt to describe the actual conditions of early socialist international movements, how they were conceptualized by the actors involved, and what these considerations imply for these actors' political subjectivity.

Piecing together the episodes of Gombojab's short life is instructive in this regard. It lays bare the specific arrangements that operated within the 'international socialist ecumene', which I suggest can be considered as itself something like a globalized political 'culture' that extended to socialist enclaves within capitalist countries (Goebel 2015; Fowler 2007). Although Gombojab's adult life was dominated by these early socialist imperatives and control of mobility, as a person he also traversed between and within cultures in the more usual 'rooted' (ethnic, linguistic, cultural) sense referred to by Greenblatt. He could hardly have been more mobile. His almost incessant journeys spanned from his homeland in the far reaches of the Mongolian steppes to Leningrad, Shanghai, Ulan-Ude and Paris. This chapter aims to examine mobility and self-transformation between and within 'cultures' imagined in these two ways, the political-ideological and the ethnic-national. Caught between them, Gombojab repeatedly had to remake himself, to take up cultural elements with which to represent himself in public, but also to decide on one or two that presented himself for himself.

Moving between Disbanded Empires

Most of the people who crossed the Russia–Mongolia–China borders in the early twentieth century were undocumented refugees fleeing from revolution and civil war, but a few who also left Siberia were well-educated and politically adept Buryats – a people who were citizens of the Russian Empire but linguistically and culturally part of the Mongolic world. Buryat ways of life had become considerably Russianized, the diverse groups combining in various ways Mongolian-type transhumant pastoralism and Buddhism, indigenous shamanism and ritual customs with Russian patterns, such as settled farming, conversion to Christianity, interaction with the Tsarist administration, and education (for a few) in Russian-language schools. In other words, the Buryats were long since multicultural by reason of their geo-political location and imperial incorporation. In the 1920s, they were the first people sought to be guides and interpreters for Russian political activists and the trade, military and scientific expeditions going into Mongolia, or to be sent as spies into Mongolian regions of China. Several talented and energetic individuals among them became major national intellectuals and political leaders in the 1920s, only for almost all of them to perish in the Soviet purges of the late 1930s. Mergen Güng Gombojab was more simply an academic who shared that tragic fate, but his life shifts were far more sharply drawn than those of the Buryats. He was brought up in a remote and rural Mongolian homeland and he chose to throw over its entire apparatus of political status, social hierarchy and cultural and religious habitus in favour of a vision of a life as a scholar in a progressive, modern, urban society.

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This personal transformation happened at a time of massive political and cultural turmoil. But it would be a mistake to assume that civil war and the military incursions into Mongolia from China and Russia meant abandonment of old governmental practices for control of the population. After a 'people's' Mongolian government was established in 1921,[7] new Soviet procedures were added by incoming Buryat politicians in the following years as increasing attempts were made by Comintern and other Soviet agencies to impose their policies on Mongolia. Before long, the politics of this era morphed again: the crucial leftist 7th Party Congress of 1928 ousted the gradualist and religiously tolerant Mongolian ruling elite and soon the somewhat independent, class-based, post-national vision of global socialism promoted by Comintern was also to falter as the organization became ever more directly a tool of Russo-Soviet foreign policy (Sablin 2016). Mongolians found they had escaped from Manchu-Chinese imperialist-colonialism only to fall by the late 1920s into the grip of Soviet revolutionary imperialism. Not all of the earlier Russian habits of governance were abandoned after the Soviet agencies superimposed their vision of modern society and honed new techniques of governance in Mongolia. As regards mobility, these techniques included the record of official domicile and property, the passport, the visa, the official travel assignment (*komandirovka*), numerous registration forms (*anketa*), and the accounting and reporting procedure (*otchet*) for those travelling. To these can be added the interrogation (*dopros*) of suspicious individuals by guards of internal borders and security services. The combination of these strictures – or Soviet cultural practices – dictated, but also limited, and thus provided an infrastructure for, the experience of mobility in the early socialist ecumene.

In the case of scholarly international travel, the operation of these state-imposed techniques was mediated in practice by the flexible and varied social relations of those involved. True, these relations were invariably ranked, with academic directors, expedition leaders, professors, and heads of delegations assigned charge of 'assistants', 'students', 'guides', 'interpreters' and 'ordinary members' of groups, but the relationships could nevertheless be very varied. The leader or professor not only relied on the practical help of assistants and students but in some instances owed important discoveries or essential academic tools to them, which might or might not be acknowledged. Sometimes, the people became close and dear friends whatever the hierarchical distance between them. One observation made here is that such complex relations obtained not only in the cases that are more widely studied, the exploration-cum-scientific expeditions sent from metropolitan Russia to Mongolia (Shearer 2019), but also in the groups travelling in the reverse direction: in the cohorts of 'students' or 'assistants' who were dispatched out of Buryatia and Mongolia to work with professors in the academies of the capitals.

This chapter does not attempt anything like a fully fleshed out biography of Gombojab, for reasons mentioned earlier. In the confines of a short chapter, it is only possible to address a few of the 'transcultural situations' in which he was involved. I have chosen to focus on two of them: the brief period in 1923–24

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when Gombojab transformed himself from a hereditary duke to a student dispatched to Leningrad, and the phase in 1926–30 when he experienced life in Western Europe only to be sent back to a suddenly more oppressive socialist environment. After a thumbnail sketch of Gombojab's life, the chapter first describes the governmental techniques that framed his travels and then discusses the ways in which we can begin to perceive the personal metamorphoses of a man whose voice we will never hear.

Mergen Gombojab: An Outline of His Life

Figure 6.1. Mergen Gombojab. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

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Gombojab was born in 1906, the eldest son of Mönh-ochir, who was the Mergen Güng ('Wise Duke'[8]) and ruler of the Banner (domain) of the same name in Sain Noyon Khan Aimag in northwest Mongolia.[9] The family's noble status of *taiji* was documented from the seventeenth century, but Mönh-ochir traced descent from the Golden Lineage (*altan urag*) of Chinggis Khan, a far older ancestry. Around 1912, the new theocratic ruler, the Jebtsundamba Hutugtu, awarded him with the hereditary titles of Güng (duke) and Mergen (wise), as well as the privilege of wearing a one-eyed peacock feather on his hat, in recognition of his sagacious, loyal and efficient rule (Tamir and Aira 2016: 18). Gombojab's well-educated father sent the young boy to study with the best minds of region, including the famous and progressive-minded reincarnate lama, Darba Bandid. The precocious boy learned to read Mongolian, Tibetan and Manchu, and by the age of ten was also studying Chinese. However, Gombojab was to become an orphan, as his mother died when he was only ten and his father a few years later. In 1920, when he was fourteen, a marriage was arranged for him with Tuvaansüren, daughter of a neighbouring aristocrat. She was already pregnant, and the couple were soon to have further children in rapid succession. By the age of twenty, Gombojab was the father of five children.

Just before Mönh-ochir died, he transferred the duke title and the post of Banner ruler (*zasag noyon*) to Gombojab. Soon a revolutionary People's Party cell was founded in the main monastery of the Banner with the progressive Darba Bandid's blessing. Gombojab joined it, took part in debates and committees and was elected a representative of his Banner. He then took the opportunity to be sent as a delegate to Niislel Hüree (present Ulaanbaatar) for a meeting of the Youth Revolutionary League. Once in the capital, he was so active in Party and League politics that he had no time for the usual life of a young man (Tamir and Aira 2016: 36). In 1924 he was one of only two Mongol nobles to renounce his title, seal of office, and post of Banner ruler (Batbold 2015: 211).

Gombojab also became a pupil (in Mongolian, a disciple, *shabi*) of Tseveen Jamtsarano, the Buryat intellectual who was Managing Secretary of the new Scientific Committee[10] that was later to become the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Jamtsarano was an extraordinary and brilliant scholar but also a pan-Mongolian nationalist activist. For this reason, he was shunned by the government in the USSR, but he became an important political actor in Mongolia, 'commanded' there by Comintern as their Far Eastern Secretary (Khamaganova 1998). With Jamtsarano's encouragement, Gombojab was sent in 1924 to Leningrad to obtain a general higher education. Being evidently very talented, he soon established good relations with Russia's leading orientalists, such as Boris Vladimirtsov and Nicholas Poppe. His wife Tuvaansüren again became pregnant and went back to Mongolia. But Gombojab stayed, and from Leningrad he took part in expeditions to photograph and collect ethnographic materials in Buryatia and Mongolia. In this period, the Mongolian Scientific Committee also sent him to Hohhot, Beijing and Shanghai in China to collect manuscripts for the new state library. In 1927, the Committee sent him to Paris, via Germany, to study with the well-known orientalist Paul Pelliot. In 1929, however, following

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the 'left turn' in the USSR, the 7th Party Congress demanded the recall of all the Mongolian students in Western countries. Gombojab was forced to return to Mongolia without finishing his studies. He is recorded as having 'nothing', no property at all at this time; he became a student under the aegis of the Scientific Committee. At the same time, Jamtsarano, being a national-minded moderate, lost his leading role in Mongolia and was exiled[11] to the Soviet Union as a lowly scholar in Leningrad. Gombojab, as a known associate, was exiled in 1929 to Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. Here he worked as assistant to the Buryat scholar Bazar Baradiin. He was the main compiler of a Buryat orthographic dictionary, which aimed to clarify how the language should be written in the 'new' (Latin) script, and a primer for learners (Khishigt 2017: 19). He also accompanied the Russian linguist and ethnographer Poppe on trips to various parts of Buryatia to collect oral texts and document shamanic rituals (Poppe 1983: 98–101). In 1933 Gombojab was called back to Ulaanbaatar to work on translations of Russian and world literature into Mongolian and take part in a commission working on an explanatory terminological dictionary that aimed to help clarify translations between radically different languages and cultures (Poppe 1983: 24).

In Ulan-Ude Poppe had learned in 1930 that a purge was impending in academic circles in Leningrad, and he did not want to be away during such a critical event. As an important professor he must have been able to arrange for a transfer back to the city. His memoir (1983) details the difficulties of his lengthy journey from Siberia and the harrowing purge of academicians that soon followed. In 1934, Gombojab, who had remarried to Oyun-Bilig, a progressive-minded young Buryat scholar, was sent to Leningrad a second time, now as a research student to work under Poppe's supervision (Khishigt 2017: 16). He was assigned the task of editing, translating and analysing the 'White History' (*Tsagaan Teüke*). This was an immense and responsible task, as the manuscript was not only one of the most important of early Mongolian religious histories, said to have been composed at least in part by Emperor Hubilai, but it was also full of disputed passages, additions and redactions. Over the next few years Gombojab accomplished most of the work and even had a signed contract with a publisher. But the book never saw the light of day and Gombojab's text was lost or destroyed.

In 1937, Gombojab was arrested and accused of belonging to a Japanese-sponsored anti-Soviet, Buryat nationalist and spying conspiracy headed by Jamtsarano. He was interrogated and signed a report admitting the numerous charges. His mentor Jamtsarano meanwhile suffered a parallel fate and similarly signed a confession. Both men were imprisoned while cases were prepared against them, and around a year and half later were interrogated again. This time, they separately denied their earlier confessions, which they said had been signed under conditions of torture, deprivation of sleep and physical beating. The denials were not accepted. Gombojab was condemned to eight years' imprisonment, and he died in 1940 in, or on the way to, the Sevvostlag camp in far north-eastern Siberia.[12] His second wife, Oyun-Bilig, was exiled from

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Leningrad with their two young children. After many travails she ended up living in the Bashkir area on the Volga, and many years later she went to live in Mongolia (Poppe 1983: 89). Gombojab was posthumously rehabilitated in 1956.

The *Komandirovka:* Travel Assignment in the Socialist Ecumene

In this section I focus on the travel assignment (*komandirovka*), which was specific to Russian and Soviet governmental practice and may be unfamiliar to some readers. It took the form of an authoritative order document that could extend its jurisdiction beyond Russia's borders. Inherited from Tsarist practice, it became a universalized and Sovietized version of the same procedure, now employing an 'international' rather than 'imperial' language. The *komandirovka* became the key to the organization of official travel, both within and beyond the country. A Soviet citizen designated for a foreign *komandirovka* had to obtain a formidable range of attestations beforehand, without which they could not travel.[13] When the order was finally issued, a bureaucratic sequence would follow: the advance of funds, the foreign passport, the visa, the residency questionnaire (*anketa*) and the accounting report (*otchet*). Discussion of the *komandirovka* enables me to disarticulate generalizing and flattening terms, such as 'traveller' or 'migrant', as well as 'native assistant' and 'student', and to show how mobile persons were pegged to state and party institutions, assigned ranks, and thereby differed among themselves.

It was by means of the *komandirovka* that appointees, instructors, agitators, spies and research workers flowed out from Moscow, 'the Red Capital of the Great Bolshevik Republic', and delegates, cadres and students travelled in the other direction to attend congresses and receive education and instructions (Fowler 2007: 63). They would come to join new schools, such as the Sun Yat-sen University of the Toilers of China, renamed in 1928 Communist University of the Toilers of China, or the School of Living Languages of the East in Leningrad, to which Gombojab was sent in 1924. The system extended far beyond the USSR to all the regions of Comintern activity. It was the infrastructure that made possible the emergence of revolutionary and communist nodes in the far reaches of the socialist ecumene.

The Soviet action-category of *komandirovanie* can be translated as an act of 'assignment' (of someone to carry out a task), although that English expression does not convey all its meanings. Almost all Gombojab's journeys, both in-country and international, were missions assigned to him by one authoritative institution or another. The concept of the *komandirovka* was weighty and omnipresent, for it referred to an essential administrative technology: the delegation of a particular task in some distant place to a particular person on behalf of a state body. Such a journey had to be undertaken within given dates, was paid for by the sending organization, and its fulfilment was 'overseen' by, and in an overarching sense was the responsibility of, the official signing the order. In the 1920s, the 'imperial' aspect of the *komandirovka* was that the receiving

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organizations, especially if lower in status, were not necessarily informed of the arrival of the travellers; in fact, an indeterminate range of 'all civil and military persons' were 'invited' to give every possible assistance to the traveller in accomplishing the assignment.[14] A provincial body could write to a higher body to request that instructors/specialists be commanded to them. It was also possible for an employee to request an assignment. But such pleas might or might not be granted. One of the few surviving documents written by Gombojab was one such request to the heads of the Scientific Committee in Ulaanbaatar, begging to be sent to Leningrad to continue his studies.[15] This was turned down; he was sent to Ulan-Ude in Buryatia instead. In principle, the individual(s) named had no part to play in the drawing up of the order.[16] If the person concerned was a party member, Leninist discipline made the assignment obligatory.

There is a difference between the connotations of the Russian term and its Mongolian translation. The Russian, which derives from French *commander* or German *kommandieren*, retains a sense of the compulsory, just as the Russian word *komanda* refers to military and other obligatory commands. Even today, model samples of a *komandirovka* document usually begin in capital letters with the word 'ORDER' ('*PRIKAZ*'). The semantic background of the Mongolian translation for 'sending on assignment', *tomilon yavuul-*, lacks the same political-military edge, and links rather to other words with the root *tomi-*, referring to ideas of defining or formulating (a task). Be that as it may, with the advent of inter-governmental agreements between the Soviet Union and Mongolia from the mid-1920s, as well as the activities of political parties and the Comintern, all of which could authorize such official journeys, it became difficult to travel without the legitimating documentation. Inside Mongolia certain kinds of non-formalized travel were well understood, such as the seasonal movements of herders, traders going to marketplaces, or pilgrims attending holy sites; but otherwise, travellers on their own account were likely to be arrested as suspiciously unexplained, as possible spies, thieves or bandits. It is interesting that in the uncertain and dangerous environment of 1926, when Gombojab was sent to China to collect manuscripts for the Scientific Committee, the authorities explained that it was necessary for his travel documents to 'double' the guarantees of his authorization; this was done by using both the old Qing-era method of the seal (*tamga*) as well as the hand-signature of the secretary of the Committee, Jamtsarano. Gombojab and his colleague Bat-Ochir were allotted 18,000 Mexican dollars from the Mongolian commercial bank for the ninety-day trip. They overspent because they hired an expensive motorcar for the return journey from Hailar; they had to face a difficult accounting confrontation on their arrival home (Khishigt 2017: 26–27).

Of course, some people had to, or wanted to, travel without a *komandirovka*. But in an era when it was illegal for a Soviet citizen to cross the border without permission, such a journey was possible only for locals who could do so undercover. As an example of the system and its loopholes, let me quote from Poppe's memoirs describing a journey he took in 1926 on the reverse route from Gombojab's mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

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> I was officially notified by the chairman of the Mongolian Commission of the Academy of Sciences [in Leningrad] that I would be sent to the Mongolian People's Republic to conduct research. This was a happy event. I had been very anxious to travel to Mongolia ever since that Commission had been established … In May 1926, Vladimirtsov, Alekseev and I went by train via Moscow to Verkheneudinsk (now Ulan-Ude), the capital of the Buryat Autonomous Republic in Eastern Siberia. There we spent a few days and were joined by our Buryat student Balji Bambeev. Saddles had to be purchased because in Mongolia one could only get Mongolian saddles which were rather uncomfortable. After buying a few saddles, we took a riverboat up the Selenga River towards the Mongolian border. After 36 hours we arrived at Ust'-Kyakhta and from there we went by horse-drawn coach to Troitskosavsk, a rather old and large town. Bambeev temporarily left us there, for he had reason to cross the border illegally. During the civil war he, like many Buryats, had fought as a Cossack officer on the anti-Communist side. For this reason, Bambeev could not obtain a Soviet travel passport and an exit visa. When on the following day the three of us had crossed at the checkpoint and moved into the Mongolian border town Altan Bulag, Bambeev was already there waiting for us. He had managed to slip across the border undetected, only about 300 or 400 metres from the checkpoint. If he had been detected the punishment would have been severe because he carried a pistol. (Poppe 1983: 85–86)

Note that the members of this small research group had different status. There were the three Russian scholars from the metropolis and the Buryat student. It is probably fair to say that *komandirovka* missions, which usually travelled as groups, were always differentiated among themselves. In any Soviet delegation, one was chosen to be the *starosta* ('senior', 'leader'). In the group of Mongolian students with which this chapter began, Gombojab was that leader (Mo. *darga*), while the mission overall was probably in the charge of the mysterious Petrov (see note 2).

Mediating Mentors and Their Circles

In drawing attention to the *komandirovka* I do not intend to convey an impression of lack of purpose or capacity to affect the circumstances – briefly 'agency' – of those travelling. Their agency can be understood as both official and personal. First, the travellers in most cases probably shared the goal of the assignment and can be understood as the bearers of institutional agency. Even if they were personally doubtful or were acting under false pretences, the *komandirovka* itself gave them a certain power to act, to proceed, to expect respectful treatment and certain dues *en route* and at the destination. But along with that officially given efficacy, the person on such an assignment took with him/herself something different, the wider purview of their own political aims and convictions. For the young Gombojab these were formed in the orbit of dominant, inspiring and independent-minded mentors, notably the Darba Bandid, the Buryat nationalist Jamtsarano, the meticulous Parisian orientalist Pelliot, and the scholarly and increasingly anti-communist Poppe. Each of these men

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provided him with separate networks of support, warmth and comradeship. Importantly, Gombojab was evidently an appreciated and agentive actor in these networks, as this chapter will show.

Vera Tolz (2015) has written illuminatingly on the different and even opposed viewpoints that had to be 'reconciled' by transcultural actors such as Jamtsarano. She terms these 'imperial cosmopolitanism' and 'national particularism', the former perspective being involved in Jamtsarano's representative role and intelligence activity on behalf of both the Tsarist and the Soviet governments and the latter in his ardent devotion to the Mongolian national cause and his scholarship on Mongolian and Buryat culture and Buddhism. He achieved a certain reconciliation during years 1906–late 1920s. This was when Jamtsarano was able, besides his scholarly work, to set up a modern school system in Mongolia, establish the first newspapers in the country, become a Comintern agent and founding father of the Mongolian Revolutionary People's Party, establish the Scientific Committee, and take high positions in the Mongolian government. Railing against the colonialist 'expeditions' that hoovered up artefacts, specimens and ancient documents and took them back to the Russian capital or sold them abroad (Shearer 2019), Jamtsarano insisted that all such valuable items should be kept in Mongolia. Now that Ulaanbaatar was an independent capital, he held that its new institutions were themselves justified in gathering such items from Mongol sources inside China, a task he assigned to Gombojab. Tolz (2015) argues convincingly for Jamtsarano's powerful agency also in the Russian metropolis. He was able to convince the leading scholars in Leningrad of his vision of the intrinsic value of the Mongolian culture and the need to preserve the national autonomy of the Buryat-Mongolians living in the Soviet Union. For perhaps the first time, an indigenous person was able to influence the conception of a subject population held by some among the former colonial masters. However, these professors themselves soon lost influence. In Mongolia, Jamtsarano's 'reconciliation' fell apart after 1928 when he was accused of being a 'right deviationist' and propagandist of Buddhism. He was demoted, and eventually expelled from Mongolia to Leningrad (Tolz 2015: 729; see also Rupen 1964: 183–224).

For Gombojab the diverse cultural worlds to be accommodated were even more extreme, as mentioned earlier. They spanned from the Mongol aristocratic and Buddhist environment of his childhood and his tuition under Darba Bandid Lama, via the Russo-Buryat-Soviet tutelage of Jamtsarano and Poppe, to the completely European academic world of Pelliot. I conceptualize each of these four mentor figures as nodes in separate networks of intellectual and personal influence, which only in some instances overlapped with one another. The substance of the relationships in each of these networks differed and changed over time, but all were *sui generis*, individual, comradely, sometimes competitive, and even intimate. Essentially, these were relations that had their own ways of being alongside, and to some extent within, the party and state structures. At times in the early 1920s these networks were able to perform as *drivers* for institutional mechanisms like the *komandirovka*, such as when 'uncle Tseveen' (Jamtsarano)

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signed the documents that propelled Gombojab on his travels. But even when, as was later the case, these people and their coteries failed and had to submit to governmental swings in policy, they remained a source of help and moral support for Gombojab. It would thus be mistaken to attempt an analysis of him simply as an individual; it was because he was entwined in relationships both institutional and personal that he was able to wind his transcultural path through the increasingly grid-like structures that developed with Stalinism.

Ideational Threshold: From Noble Disciple to Student Leader

In order to be able to interpret the clues to Gombojab's changing attitudes, it is necessary first to outline the politico-intellectual background. The aristocratic-cum-Buddhist world in which Gombojab grew up was not as rigid as its fantastically elaborate and expensive rituals appear to suggest. Even this remote Mongolian district was not a monotone isolate but already a place of cultural mobility in the Greenblatt sense. Near his father's encampment was the Rashaant Khüree,[17] the monastery of the Darba Bandid, a distinctive and important figure in the turbulent religious politics of the early twentieth century. Matthew King (2019b) has argued convincingly for the cosmopolitan character of the 'Buddhist commonwealth' that criss-crossed the boundaries of the late Qing and Tsarist empires. Although ordinary monks were forbidden to travel from their monasteries without explicit permission for a given number of days' leave (Sobkovyak 2020), high-ranking polyglot scholar-lamas were masters of both physical and cultural mobility (Humphrey and Ujeed 2013: 118). Based in monastic colleges (*datsang*) of the vast Inner Asian Buddhist ecumene, they visited one another's monasteries often at great distances. Their writings elaborated not only cosmologies but also more practical geographies of Asia and beyond. These masters had long been using logical debating contestations to query received truths and confront them with new, externally demonstrated facts about the world.

Agvaanchoijirdondüb (1870–1928), Gombojab's teacher, was the 17th incarnation of the Darba Bandid. He was an example of the transcultural in his very essence, since it was held that in his previous incarnations he had lived in India, Nepal and Tibet as well as Mongolia. Along with his studies of the spiritual continuity of his lineage, in his present life as a lama of the reformed Gelug tradition, the 17th Darba Bandid became aware of the need for this-worldly reversal of degradation. He was concerned about the imperial political structures that he felt had caused monastic and societal decay. When the 13th Dalai Lama fled from the British invasion of Tibet to Urga in 1904, Darba Bandid was among the high-ranking lamas who became his constant companions and debating partners (King 2019a: 56). The pitting of Russian against British imperialism ('the great game') must have been central to their discussions. And then, in 1921–22, Darba's home, Rashaant monastery, saw desperate battles between White and Red troops spilling over from the civil war in Russia (Baabar 1999: 213). In Niislel Khüree, a city criss-crossed by envoys, traders, missionaries and

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travellers from across Asia and Europe, there was a ferment of intellectual debate among the Mongolian clerical and lay elites.

By the 1910s–20s, Buddhist leaders were aware of both the anti-religious policies of the socialists and the ineluctable power of the revolutionary movement. The progressive among them, contesting the counter-discourse of conservative Buddhist thinkers (King 2019a), became convinced that the religion could be saved if it was cleansed of worldly concerns, worship of deities, ritual extravagance and the retinues of lazy, hanger-on lamas and returned to its original state of purity as a moral philosophy. In its original godless form, Buddhism would be compatible with atheist communism and furthermore it could ascribe to the same social reforms. Darba Bandid was one of the leading lamas to adopt this position. The following words are ascribed to him: 'Mongolia can no longer adhere to the old teachings. We must go by the example of other countries of the whole world. In this way we should educate boys and girls in learning' (Tuyaa 2014). When the new Scientific Committee was founded in 1921, Jamtsarano made a special visit to Rashaant monastery to invite the Darba lama to join in its work, and it was at his request that the Darba Bandid was to write a moral treatise for post-revolutionary life. This was welcomed by the government and published in 1923 as 'Pure Principles of Conduct for the People' (Tuyaa 2014). Darba wrote that the selfish nobles and lamas of the Autonomous Era (1911–21) had not cared about the sufferings and poverty of ordinary people. The new socialist policy was 'like a vision of rainfall coming to fishes beached on the jagged earth of a dried-up lake' (Myagmarsambuu 2017: 76; Bawden 1968: 270–71). In 1923, the Darba Bandid was so highly regarded that his name was suggested for prime minister when the incumbent died (Myagmarsambuu 2017: 77).[18] Under the tutelage of this compelling lama, the boy Gombojab became his 'intimate disciple' (Tuyaa 2014). He thus joined an unofficial Buddhist network of personal relationships that was progressive, transnational and agentive. It was Darba who advised Gombojab to leave the countryside and embark on a new life.

Meanwhile, there was a purely political push. In 1921, the new People's Government needed to extend its rule into the countryside and explain its policies to the herders. A scribe called Dorjpalam was sent for this purpose to the main 'urban' site of northwest Mongolia, the vast and powerful Zayayn Gegeen monastery. Here, Darba had taken over as managing Khambo Lama, as the resident reincarnation was absent or incapacitated. Dorjpalam arranged many audiences with Darba and his assistant lama Batsuur, explaining that the party and government were supporting democracy and secular education, and notably also, despite the ominous news from Russia, religion. Shortly a party cell was founded in the monastery with Batsuur Lama and Darba Bandid among the members. The opening ceremony was a religious service with prayers for the success of the party's work. A ritual mandala was constructed, to which local lords and officials bowed and made offerings of money and grains. Soon Lama Batsuur was chosen to be both leader of the party committee and the representative of the People's Government in the whole province (*aimag*) (Tamir and Aira 2016: 27). A party cell was established in nearby Rashaant in 1922 and the

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young duke Gombojab, aged seventeen according to party records, became a member. These were transitional years in his life; by the following year, 1923, a full transformation of his social personhood had taken place.

However, we have no evidence of what he thought, said or wrote at this period. This chapter therefore turns to the signs and traces of the 'mute meanings' referred to earlier. I will focus in turn on the presentation of self, first through the materials of social appearance (clothing, hairstyles, grooming etc.), second through naming, and third through self-reflexive photography.

Material Evidence: Attachment and Illusive Appearance

Figure 6.2. Tuvaansüren. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

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Before Gombojab set off for the capital, local records from late 1922 indicate that he headed a traditional herding household consisting of himself aged seventeen, his wife Tuvaansüren aged seventeen, a younger brother Wanchinbazar aged fifteen who was a training as a lama, and four still younger brothers. Not rich, they had sixty-three horses, twenty-two cows and 337 sheep and goats (Erdenbat 2017: 204). The move to the city in 1923 and to Leningrad in 1924 saw an extraordinary transformation in the persona they presented. This can perhaps best be seen by comparing photographs of Tuvaansüren before the journey, then in the capital, and then during her brief stay in Leningrad. In 1921–22, the shy-looking aristocratic girl was encased in embroidered silks, precious stones and silver jewellery, her long hair fashioned into the wide curved 'horns' of the Khalkha Mongol style for married women (Bold 2017: 236). A year or so later, as young moderns in the capital, both she and Gombojab had cut their hair short and were wearing plain unisex belted gowns (though Tuvaansüren could not resist a jaunty hat).

By 1924–25, she had become the seemingly confident, beautiful, short-haired, woman again wearing the plain Mongolian gown that signalled revolution seen in Figure 6.4. But did this represent an inner transformation? In Tuvaansüren's case, actually not. According to her present-day descendants, she wept every day in Leningrad. She took her sable furs and jewellery with her

Мэргэн гүн Гомбожав, эхнэр Туваансүрэн нар

Figure 6.3. Gombojab and Tuvaansüren, Niislel Hüree, c. 1923. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

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Figure 6.4. Tuvaansüren in Leningrad, 1924/25. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

to Russia, though she lost almost all of them when she was tricked by fellow students into handing them over one by one to pay for promised train tickets back to Mongolia. She was unable to study. It was Gombojab who rejected her and their children, saying that if she wanted to remain dim and uncultured (*kharankhui büdüüleg*) she could do so, but he did not want to be with her in that case.[19]

The Soviet photograph of Tuvaansüren is misleading in one sense, but it is worth pursuing the matter of clothing further, for it was not a primarily aesthetic nor a personal matter. Rather, it consisted of elements that demonstrated the social meaning and even the purpose of the person so dressed. This was true of both the 'traditional' Khalkha dress worn by Tuvaansüren and her Soviet guise. The former should not be seen as timelessly archaic; in fact, it was a contemporary fashion, differing from those of other regions and other periods, bringing together culturally diverse Mongol, Chinese, Manchu, Tibetan, Daoist and Buddhist elements to form a particular, instantly recognizable, style of the time. In the countryside it would not have been a choice to wear such a costume. Rather, as Atwood (1996: 106) writes, Mongolian dress represented 'a virtually iconic ideal of womanhood, largely abstracted from personal beauty or

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individual fashion sense'. It was the visual face of the presentation of self as defined by social position, above all ethnic group and class. For a woman *not* to wear her jewellery would be inauspicious, indecorous and disrespectful. The correct clothing was a necessary equipment, without which one could not function socially as a woman (Atwood 1996: 107). In the cosmopolitan capital the plain unisex belted gown signalled support for the revolution, but throughout the 1920s women of even quite ordinary families still wore their hair glued into the great Khalkha-style horns seen in Figure 6.2. The issue here concerns emotional attachment. Tuvaansüren continued to yearn for her former status and cling to its material signs. For this, she was rejected by her husband and attacked on her return to Mongolia.[20]

Signalling an Intentional Personhood

Gombojab, by contrast, seems to have used clothing in a different way, not just as a face adapted to the socio-political world but also as an intentional choice indicating his personal take on his surroundings. On arrival in the capital in 1923 he abandoned the brocaded silks, embroidered boots, the long hair plaited into a queue, and the stylish hat denoting noble status of his early youth. The Scientific Committee where he took up work as student-assistant in 1924 was one of the key sites of cultural conversion in Mongolia. A place of hybrid transition, it was housed in a former prince's palace, a wooden Chinese-style building with upturned eaves and latticed windows, along with two Russian-style buildings and a yurt-like structure. Its book collection consisted mainly of sutras and works in Chinese (Ma 1949: 123–24). Gombojab's decision to cut his hair and don the plain Mongol robe was adapted to the new socialist dress code, as can been seen from a 1922 photograph of workers wearing such robes and Russian flat caps sorting out books at the Committee (Batsaikhan 2011: 190). Any such choice was an acute political marker. In 1922–23, the Revolutionary Youth League (RYL), which was closely aligned with Comintern and far more radical than the party, had already embarked on what the Chinese agent Ma[21] calls a class-based 'reign of terror', sentencing certain lords and noble-origin lamas to death (Ma 1949: 113). However, during this period, national Mongol interest, rather than class, was still the key; even the RYL's main stated aim was Mongolian independence, and it disavowed explicit Soviet-style communism (Ma 1949: 114). Jamtsarano was determined to uphold and preserve Mongol culture. The country did not have a national library or museum and one of Gombojab's main tasks in 1924 was to assist in gathering precious books and objects with which to set up such institutions.

Once he arrived in Leningrad a year later, however, Gombojab abandoned all signs of Mongolness and adopted fully European clothing. This was not 'socialist worker' or shabby 'student' garb but the smart suit, with white shirt and tie – even an elegant moustache – that placed him in the educated Soviet

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upper echelons with which he (unlike his wife Tuvaansüren) identified in this period. There is some evidence that this was his personal choice, for he separated himself from the other Mongol students. Most of the Mongolian students in Leningrad were housed in a dormitory attached to the Buddhist temple in Leningrad, which had been constructed in 1913–15 at the insistence of Agvan Dorzhiev, the Buryat lama who became the representative in Russia of the 13th Dalai Lama. This accommodation aimed to preserve something of a Mongol atmosphere, to support the students and shield them from 'culture shock'. As a result, they remained detached from the city's life, similarly to the micro-enclaves of ethnic populations that occurred in Paris which was such a magnet for world revolutionary activists in this period (Goebel 2015: 41–42) and to certain isolated and discriminated ethnic cohorts in 'the Red Capital' Moscow (Fowler 2007: 71–73). But Gombojab's situation was different. He went to live with Nicholas Poppe, in the home of a worldly intellectual.[22] He taught Poppe Mongolian, while Poppe taught him Russian (Poppe 1983: 89). This exchange arrangement was almost certainly put in place by the coterie of Buddhist intellectuals and scholars accreted around Jamtsarano. Gombojab remained the leader of the students, but he was now drawn into the arcane world of Altaian linguistics, ancient Mongolian chronicles and Buddhist philosophy that fascinated his mentors.

After two years in Leningrad, Gombojab was selected to take part in the Mongolian educational venture in Western Europe.[23] Some thirty-five teenage children were sent to Germany to study subjects ranging from tanning and textiles to geodesy and middle-school general education. Five of the latter were sent onwards to the lycée Michelet in Paris (Rupen 1964: 207; Wolff 1946). Gombojab's assignment was both to study linguistics under Paul Pelliot and to take care of the boys at the lycée. He travelled via Germany on a separate *komandirovka* from the Scientific Committee in the company of Jamtsarano's wife, Badmajab (her presence certainly another successful coup by the coterie). Serge Wolff, mentor of the German contingent, wrote:

> These two arrived at the same time and were particularly intelligent and interesting people. Gombojab must have been in his twenties; Mrs. Badmajab was older. He was the son of a Mongolian prince, and one could feel a certain dignity in his manner. Whether or not it had anything to do with his aristocratic background, he impressed me by his bearing, intelligence, and charm. His companion was also no ordinary person. Both came to study language and, I believe, philology; but unfortunately, they soon moved to Paris to begin their studies. (Wolff 1970: 75)

Gombojab wore an elegant Holmberg hat with a wide ribbon for his visit to Germany. By this time, he engaged easily with foreigners, unlike the reticent Mongol students. He spoke to Wolff interestingly about his homeland and showed him photographs of Mongolia (Wolff 1946: 84). He may have taken these pictures himself, as he was an enthusiastic photographer, and here we may recall Wolff's comment:

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Figure 6.5. Snapshot taken in the 1920s of Gombojab, Badmajab and Serge Wolff in Berlin (Bold 2017: 234). Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

> Whenever a Mongol of some standing arrived in Berlin a leather briefcase had first to be bought; secondly, a gramophone; and, finally, fulfilling the highest ambition, a camera. (Wolff 1946: 83)

During his two years in France, Gombojab 's academic abilities greatly impressed Pelliot.[24] Meanwhile, his 'cultural mobility' seems to have taken on a new lease of freedom. One summer, he simply refused to be bound by the task of caring for the Mongol schoolboys in Paris, borrowed money, and set off for 'French villages', ostensibly to better his language, but in fact for a holiday in transnational, mixed company.

Badmajab similarly took the chance to experiment. In one photograph she poses dressed in a man's suit with shirt, tie and Holmberg hat. Gombojab's embrace of Europe included a visit to England, officially for medical treatment, but more likely as an opportunity to explore, meet people and find out about another way of life (Purevzhav 2016: 158). His openness can be compared with the more inward and homeland-focused stance of Natsagdorj, another older

Figure 6.6. Gombojab with friends in France, 1927. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

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student of noble origin among the contingent in in Germany. Natsagdorj was later to become Mongolia's great national poet, but in Germany he was a reluctant student who did not learn the language well and went home before the allotted time (Wolff 1970: 85). He, unlike Gombojab, wrote an account of his journey, titled 'Notes on the Trip to Berlin'. This, written in verse, uses traditional poetic forms to describe an itinerary of landscapes and places, but it mentions almost no non-Mongol human being (Marzluf 2021: 54).

Photography and Self-Depiction

Gombojab's interest and ability in photography has already been mentioned, and there is also evidence that he took up its possibilities for self-conscious self-portrayal. The boys in Paris seem to have been largely neglected by him, but in a letter home one of them commented that he had taken them out to buy a camera and then spent time while they all photographed themselves (Tamir and Aira 2016: 67).

A year after the Paris sojourn had ended in the disappointment of the enforced return to Mongolia followed by the 'exile' *komandirovka* to grim socialist Buryatia, Gombojab was taken on ethnographic fieldwork to Buryat

Figure 6.7. Gombojab in Buryatia, 1930. Courtesy of the descendants of Mergen Güng Gombojab.

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villages as assistant to Poppe. He was photographed in a moodily romantic pose wearing a by no means everyday Buryat gown and nonchalantly tilted fox-fur hat. On inspection, this image looks like a studio photograph. In field photos of such expeditions Gombojab usually wore his 'I am an academic' urban suit even in the steppes and he never returned to live a Mongol herding life. We can deduce that having a photograph taken in Buryat national dress was a performance, an exercise in fleeting self-representation.

In all the photographs known to me, there is something self-assured and stylish about Gombojab's demeanour. Perhaps this posture was due to consciousness of his noble birth, which neither he nor the people around him ever forgot; perhaps it was a habitus, persisting through all the changes, originating from the dash and bravura proper to the young male aristocrats of his early youth.

The Name as a Sign

The domestic legend among Gombojab's descendants through his first wife Tuvaansüren is that he was a Mongol nationalist.[25] The family suggestion is that this emotional attachment came to eclipse the pro-Soviet stage of his transcultural odyssey, linking him to his Mongolian identity wherever (Paris, Ulaanbaatar, Ulan-Ude, Leningrad) he was stationed. I propose to investigate this question through examination of one of the most crucial of signs: how Gombojab named himself. The name in Mongolia has particular significance, first because it has meaning, usually designating some desirable quality or moral virtue, and secondly because the individual given such a name is socially expected to exemplify, or at the very least attempt to live up to, this quality (Humphrey 2006). Each child was given a single name, usually prefixed for social recognition by the father's name. Gombojab is a Buddhist name of Tibetan origin meaning 'refuge/defender of the faith'. There is no evidence that Gombojab strove to take refuge in religion, but in Soviet and European environments it was essential to have at least two names, and the surname he chose, Mergen ('wise person'), was a matter over which he had control.

The flipping of names/identities was true of all the transcultural Mongols and Buryats moving between countries in this period. Returning to life on *komandirovka* – and this was almost all of Gombojab's adult life – existential questions always hung over the mandated travellers since they journeyed as 'delegates' (or in some other official capacity), not as themselves. The *komandirovka* was regularly used by government agencies to send people under assumed names, especially if they were engaged in spying. Tseveen, whose surname (father's name) was Jamtsarano, for example, was primarily a scholar and activist, not a professional spy, but he also engaged in intelligence work under the name Semen Begzeev, as numerous *komandirovai* documents issued to him in that name testify (Ulimzhiev and Tsetsegma 1999; Tolz 2015: 738). It

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would be wrong to assume the conventional idea of a radical dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' identities, however, since it is apparent that our subjects had a hand in crafting their official name-persona. Jamtsarano must have chosen the strangely un-Russian sounding name Begzeev himself. Only he among the Comintern officials is likely to have known that his father's name, Jamsaran, is the Mongolian name for the Buddhist deity called in Tibetan Begtse.[26] Jamsaran/Begtse is a fierce god of war, depicted with bloodshot eyes, fangs and a sword. Was Jamtsarano smiling when he invented this Comintern alias for himself?

After Gombojab was dragged back from France into the Soviet environment, other episodes suggest the non-linear and personally fraught nature of using names to signal loyalties. This can be seen in the case of Gombojab's second wife, a linguist like himself. She was a western Buryat called Aggripina Nikolaevna Borzhonova, but when she was sent on *komandirovka* to Mongolia in 1928 she had rejected this Russianized identity, making a 'contrarian' cultural shift in the Soviet imperial context. She changed her name unofficially to Oyun-Bilig Borsonii (roughly 'Endowed with Intelligence, daughter of Borson'). This swing seems to have been transformation enough in her case. According to family memories, after the couple were sent to Leningrad, around 1935, Gombojab, probably sensing danger, as academics were already being arrested, tried to persuade Oyun-Bilig to emigrate to France. But she by now had two young children and was settled in the city. She refused to leave.[27]

Gombojab's own choice of 'Mergen' as his surname for use in Russia, rejecting the Mongol custom of using the father's given name – in his case Mönh-ochir – can be understood in the context of the political freedom to which he had been exposed in France.[28] Back in Leningrad in the 1930s he was to shock the members of a seminar, according to memories handed down about one of his fellow research students. This student was Namsraijab, a beautiful Buryat girl who had gone to Moscow in the late 1920s full of hope. She told her daughter: 'It was the end of NEP.[29] At the time, we lived "by Trotsky", Stalin hadn't yet appeared, and Trotsky held the minds of the youth. We often saw him on the square. In those days everything was simple, there were no guards'. This joyful period gave way to a time of anxiety and hunger. Namsraijab continued: 'We were terribly frightened of being bourgeois. There were horrific punishments for being bourgeois. We were taught, don't try to dress well, don't save money, don't do anything, just work hard and be loyal. Modesty in everything. God save you if you wore something "not right", something that might draw attention. That's how I was brought up in an arche-communist family'. In 1936 Namsraijab enrolled in a special postgraduate course for Mongols in Leningrad. She recalled: 'There were only four students, one of whom was Mergen Güng Gombojab. We were being schooled in Marxism-Leninism. Gombojab asked, "Can I go out into the street and shout 'Down with Soviet power'? Well, that's natural, isn't it? In Paris I could. But here, would that be possible or not?" The other students were terrified at these

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questions and kicked him under the table to keep quiet. The teacher was also appalled and did not know what to reply. When the repressions happened in 1937, the inquisitive Gombojab was arrested and sent to Siberia.'[30]

We cannot know the meaning of Gombojab's reckless questions at the seminar (was this dare-devil provocation, naivety, or real political indignation?). But one thing seems clear: Gombojab could now see 'the Soviet culture' from outside. Elements of it, such as the traditions of linguistic scholarship, had become part of him; but as he journeyed further, newly accreted experiences in Paris had the effect of reframing the remainder, casting it into the shadows of repression. After this, some kinds of reverse mobility were no longer possible for him. The name he chose, 'Mergen' (wisdom), is the sign by which we can deduce the attitude he took to the twists of his fate.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that 'transcultural mobility' took distinctive forms in the early socialist ecumene. Neither the 'subaltern' literature nor that concerning 'the colonial subject' of European imperialism are adequate guides to a situation in which revolutionary governments and Comintern were, for all their top-down ruthlessness, trying to elevate as quasi-equals peoples such as the Mongols and Buryats. The descriptive trope of 'flows' of recruits and migrants from the former colonial peripheries to the Red Capital is correct as a broad generalization, but it does not do justice to the actuality of sudden jumps, compulsion, hesitation, disguise and backtracking among the people involved. The image of 'cross-cultural mediators' is similarly under-informative. Gombojab could be considered one such mediator between 'Mongolia' and 'Russia'. But looking more closely, how much sense does that idea make when each of the two cultural entities was in a ferment of change and when the mediators were on state-ordered commissions to accomplish pre-set tasks on behalf of their own country? To approach this situation, I have argued that it is essential to understand the operation of the *komandirovka* system that was so integral to socialist institutional mobility. In that system, individuals perforce acted not on their own account but as envoys. Willingly or not, they were obliged to fulfil assignments not of their choosing. When the entire political discourse was ringing with the word 'task' (*zadacha*), both national and individual,[31] perhaps an appropriate new term for such people, and deserving of further research, is 'the entasked'. Sent to some destination, their 'transculturality' might in some cases simply not happen, as with poor Tuvaansüren sobbing over her jewels in Moscow, or it could be partially refused, as in the example of the poet Natsagdorj for whom Red Moscow was one thing but capitalist Germany was a step too far. In contrast with them, Gombojab certainly seems to have been a person who embraced the multiple identities of transcultural existence. But the question is: how can we know this?

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The brutal unidirectional political environment had the effect of muting or smudging the spontaneous expression of thoughts by almost everyone. Until the Stalinist repression silenced him too, Jamtsarano was an extraordinary exception, since his high position in Mongolia allowed him to be outspoken, and his publications, notebooks and correspondence have survived. Far more people were like Gombojab. I have attempted to do justice to him through an ethnographic look at mundane *practices*, which offer a closer understanding than an analysis in terms of categories such as 'post-imperialism' or 'nationalism' and is less prone to *parti pris* analysis of people whose own positionality was so malleable. For this kind of subject, for someone like Gombojab who was far from alone in being largely silenced, who kept no diary and wrote no memoir, appearances become very significant. I am only half-joking when I say that perhaps the hats they wore are more informative than what these people are alleged to have said or thought. And even if we knew absolutely for sure that Gombojab made that outburst at the seminar in Leningrad, that would also be a momentary sign, one among so many others.

Before his suffering and tragic death in the Gulag system, there was one lighter incident in the last years of Gombojab's life which is worth noting for the irony we can retrospectively see in it. He took a bit-part as an actor in the first feature film to be made in Mongolian (Saruulbuyan 2017). This was 'A Mongol Son' (*Mongol Khüü*, 1936[32]) jointly directed by Ilya Trauberg and T. Natsagdorj. It tells the story of a rough herder boy who is tricked into believing in the glamour of a foreign world (China), is determined to go there and manages to evade the border controls during a tempestuous sandstorm, only to be disillusioned when he discovers the degenerate brutality of Chinese warlords, cheating hucksters and Japanese imperialists on the other side. Parts of the film were shot in Leningrad. Gombojab was asked to provide ethnographic advice concerning the authenticity of the scenes and the language. How bitterly ironic, though, that the role he played was the Mongolian border-guard, whose job it was to prevent the Mongol Son from going off to seek adventure in a foreign land.

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Soviet and post-Soviet provincial economy and society; Buryat and Daur shamanism; trade and barter in Nepal; environment and the pastoral economy in Mongolia; the history and contemporary situation of Buddhism in Inner Mongolia; and urban transformations in post-socialist cities (Buryatia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine). She has written on inequality and exclusion; theories of ritualization; the politics of memory; naming practices; ethics and conceptions of freedom. Recently she has completed an international research project on socio-economic interactions on the Russia–Mongolia–China border. Recent publications include: *A Monastery in Time: The Making of Mongolian Buddhism* (Chicago, 2013); *Trust and Mistrust in the Economies of the China-Russia Borderlands* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018); and *On the Edge: Life along the Russia-China Border* (Harvard University Press, 2021, with Franck Billé).

Notes

1. In contemporary Cyrillic script the name is transliterated Gombozhav, but I retain Gombojab as a transliteration of the Mongol script that he himself used. For consistency I do the same for other names of people of his generation.
2. The man who helped see the group through the border may possibly have been Feodor F. Raskol'nikov, known by the alias 'Petrov', who took over from Shumyatskii as head of the Comintern Far Eastern section in 1922. He was in charge of the Mongolian Revolutionary Youth League of which Gombojab was a member (Dashdavaa and Kozlov 1996; Fowler 2007: 68).
3. Batdorzh (2017: 141) quoting the oral account of Namnandorj, who was one of these students.
4. Gombojab was accused of spying on behalf of a counter-revolutionary nationalist group headed by the Buryat Tseveen Jamtsarano (Zhamtsarano) and backed by Japan. The interrogation reports of Jamtsarano and Gombojab are discussed in Khishigt, Myagmarsambuu and Dashnyam (2016: 56–69). See also Tamir and Aira (2016: 127–44).
5. Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: 35–36), quoted in Donham's discussion (2001: 139) of the relation between history and anthropology.
6. I refer here to usages, as in Tolz (2015), of 'transcultural' as more or less synonymous with 'cross-cultural' or 'inter-cultural', rather than connoting the creation of an independent new 'transcultural' subject. See discussion in Marotta 2014: 90–95.
7. This government was led by the Mongolian People's (later Revolutionary) Party and had needed Soviet help to wrest power from a Chinese incursion aiming to re-establish colonial control. However, its titular head was still the Buddhist reincarnation, the Jebtsundamba Hutugtu, and many of the ministers were lamas and (former) nobles. The Hutugtu died in 1924 and was not replaced by a new reincarnation. The Mongolian government was then dominated by incomer Buryats of moderate and all-Mongolian nationalist bent. These leaders were only removed at the end of the 1920s following the 'left turn' under Stalin in the USSR.
8. The word *mergen* formerly meant both 'archer' and 'wise'. A family legend, apparently untrue, holds that the title was given to Gombojab's distant ancestor because he was a skilled warrior archer who had saved the Qing ruler from attacking enemies (personal communication, Tuyaa Shagdar).
9. Gombojab's birthplace is now called Rashaant Sum in Khöbsgöl Aimak.

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10. I use this term because it has become established in the literature about Mongolia. It is not an exact translation, however, of the Mongol *nom bichgiin khüreeleng*, literally 'scripture and writing circle'.
11. The word 'exile' is used because Jamtsarano had become a Mongolian citizen and was being expelled from his adopted country.
12. Jamtsarano died in 1942 in the Sol'-Eletskii prison camp.
13. These were attestations from the legal authorities that the person was not under legal investigation, from the financial organs that they had paid their taxes, from the police that there was no objection to them leaving the country, and two further documents concerning the financial status of the destination organization and the relation of the citizen to secret inter-state correspondence (Zhabaeva 2016: 227).
14. This can be seen from the numerous *komandirovka* documents issued to Jamtsarano in the early 1920s (Ulymzhiev and Tsetsegma 1999: 152–64).
15. Although the letter is dated April 1928, a time when Gombojab was still in Paris, it only makes sense for the request to have been made after his recall to Mongolia and Jamtsarano's expulsion to Leningrad. Handwritten in neat Mongolian script, it says that he wishes to go to Leningrad because 'uncle Tseveen' (Jamtsarano) is there and together they could produce valuable scholarly work (Saruulbuyan 2017: 198).
16. Contemporary *komandirovka* documents sometimes note in small type that the named sendee has been informed about the arrangement and sometimes include space for this person's signature, but that was not the case in the early Soviet era. See *komandirovka* attestations in Russian and Mongolian issued to Zhamtsarano when he was travelling under the name Begzeev (Ulymzhiev and Tsetsegma 1999: 152–64).
17. This was a large monastery with over 1,000 lamas and the main built structure in the area.
18. Being the incarnation of a deity, Darba Bandid was held by Mongols to have powers to read minds and foresee the future.
19. Sükhee Dolgorsüren, personal communication. When she returned to Mongolia, Tuvaansüren was destitute and she was forced to abandon her then youngest child, named Mart, under a prayer-wheel at Gandan monastery. He was rescued and adopted by a party official. Gombojab's other children were handed over, as was often the custom among nobles, to be cared for by foster parents, in one case by an ordinary serving herder family. Tuvaansüren rapidly remarried Eldev-Ochir, an influential party man.
20. In 1926 Tuvaansüren was accused at a meeting of the Youth Revolutionary League of being an unredeemable 'feudal'. The accuser asked the League to expel her and to tell Eldev-Ochir to divorce her. He however defended her (Tuyaa 2014). But that marriage too fell apart and Tuvaansüren married a third time and had three further children. She lived under a cloud as a former *taiji* (noble) and ended her days as a housewife living in a plain *ger* (felt tent). She never figured among the fashionable 'city girls' (*hüree hüükhnüüd*) who had sophisticated attributes such as playing the piano or having travelled abroad. Sükhee, personal communication.
21. Ma Ho-t'ien was a political agent sent to Mongolia by the Guomindang government to investigate the new regime. His account of his journey in 1926–27 provides a detailed description of what he saw and is one of few external first-hand accounts of the situation in the country.
22. Poppe was a Russian of German descent. His early childhood was spent in China, he received an excellent and broad education in St Petersburg under German teachers, and the family spent their summers in Finland. Here he discovered strong resistance against Russian domination (Poppe 1983: 23–27).
23. The aim of the venture was not to bypass Soviet Russia, to which many more students were sent, but to acquire specialist training and to equip Mongolia with essential technology for modernity, such as a typeface for the Mongol script and tools for cartography.

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24. As part of his mission to Paris, Gombojab had been entrusted by the Scientific Committee with a rare manuscript of the Mongolian chronicle *Altan Tobchi* to take to Pelliot as a gift to aid in the professor's transliteration of the *Secret History of the Mongols*. Evidently Gombojab rapidly made a favourable impression. Pelliot's main interest was the methodology of historical philology and comparative linguistics, and the new student assisted the professor in his work with Mongol texts (Purevzhav 2016: 162). Pelliot did not know the living language and worked with dictionaries, grammars and bilingual texts (Atwood 2013: 438). After Gombojab's sudden departure, Pelliot wrote two letters to Mongolia requesting his return, extolling his talents, the great improvement of his French, and the prospects for his Chinese and Turkish. 'We could write a general history of the Mongolian written language if he could stay for a further three or four years near me. Send him back!' Pelliot urged (Purevzhav 2016: 158–59).
25. Sükhee, personal communication. Some of the family speak of Gombojab as foolish to have been deceived by the glowing promises of Soviet socialism, for which he paid with his life.
26. I am very grateful to Ayur Zhanaev for elucidating for me the rationale behind the 'Begzeev' alias.
27. Personal communication, Dolgorsürengiin Sükhee.
28. Having lived in Paris for over two years, staying in hotels and with families, Gombojab must have known about the boiling street protests by Chinese, Peruvians, North Africans, Vietnamese and others in the city (Goebel 2015: 49–52, 122–27). He would have seen with his own eyes that personal and civic liberties were incomparably greater in Paris than they were in the Soviet Union.
29. NEP, the New Economic Policy (1921–28), when Lenin relaxed extreme communist measures and allowed commerce and entertainment to flourish.
30. All quotations in this paragraph are from Andrei Yan (2017).
31. For example: 'Before us', proclaimed M.M. Sakh'yanova, 'before the group of Buryat-communists (Bolsheviks), stands a task of great importance, the task of struggling not only for the power of the Soviets but also for that of the 3rd International [Comintern], for the victory of the worker is only possible on a world scale, not limited to a national framework'. Quoted in Varnavskii 2003: 153.
32. This film, with its joyous and defiant depiction of Mongol life in the 1930s, fell victim to Soviet anxieties concerning the legacy of Chinggis Khan and was shelved for many years (Saruulbuyan 2017: 193).

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