

# Chapter 1

## Exemplars and rules

### Aspects of the discourse of moralities in Mongolia

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It is not an immediately easy task to locate ‘morality’ in Mongolian culture. There is no single term in Mongol that corresponds with the European concept, which itself is complex even in everyday usage. I shall adopt a base-line understanding of the word ‘morality’ in this paper, referring to the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities. The combination of terms used by the Mongols to translate the European idea, *yos surtakhuun*, seems to be of rather recent origin. I shall argue that each of these two terms does, however, denote an area of moral activity which is important in Mongolian culture. *Yos* means the commonly accepted rules of order, reason and custom, while *surtakhuun* (literally ‘those things that have been taught’) refers to personal ethics. The two are not unconnected, but I shall argue that, as practices of evaluating conduct, they work in different ways. Through living in Mongolia and talking with Mongols I became aware that, while they of course do have rules, for them the more important arena of morality appears in the relation between persons and exemplars or precedents, that is the general sphere of *surtakhuun*. The concern here is with cultivation of the self as a moral subject in relation to individually chosen ideals. Morality in this sense is not simply the affirmation of existing cultural ways of life; there needs to be a social space for deliberation about ways of life, amid the pressures that circumscribe the instantiation of personal ideals. The suggestion here is that this is successfully achieved primarily in the discourse of exemplars, despite the fact that Communist governments have attempted to hijack exemplary precedents to their own ends. The sophistication of the relational space constructed in the indigenous discourse of exemplars has enabled Mongols to withstand simplistic party-inspired variants, as will be described later in the paper.

In their emphasis on the exemplar-focused way of thinking about morality, the Mongols can be aligned in a very general way with the Chinese, for whom, especially in Confucian traditions, a prominent discourse of historical exemplars counteracts the learning of right conduct through performing ritual and etiquette. The contrast that I have drawn emerged from considering morality in Mongolia, and I subsequently became aware from the work of Foucault that a distinction somewhat like it could be seen even more broadly as characteristic of morality in general. Foucault (1987:29) writes: ‘Every morality, in the broad sense, comprises the two elements... codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation’ (by the latter term he refers to moral practices of the self).<sup>1</sup> Foucault likewise suggests that moralities of different societies will vary in their emphasis on one or another of these modes. Whether it is right to divide moralities in general in this way may be a matter of debate, but it does seem significant that in this case a distinction arising from native categories meets theory arrived at on a different basis and in a different context. Thus what this paper attempts is an initial discussion of the ways in which the unfamiliar moral world of the Mongols can be understood, in the hope that this may illuminate the constructions of morality more generally.

To give an idea of what I mean by an exemplar, I shall immediately describe one such case. A Mongolian friend of mine, living in Inner Mongolia, which is a large province of China, had fallen in love. The object of his affections was a young Chinese girl from a very influential family. But the question of marriage with her was a moral dilemma for him. The Mongols in this region are culturally hard-pressed, outnumbered ten to one by a huge population of Chinese, and in danger of losing their language and identity. To marry a Chinese, especially someone from an important family, is not only to take the radical step of betraying one’s ancestors, of extinguishing the possibility of contributing to the Mongol nation by having ‘pure Mongol’ descendants, but is also a step into the camp of those—in some sense contemptible collaborators—who ‘side with the Chinese’ and thereby advance their careers. However, in the end, my friend decided to marry the girl, and taking this decision he thought to himself, ‘The great Emperor Chingghis Khaan, in his strategy for Mongol greatness, married princesses of different nationalities.’ And he told me that he thought he could, by thinking of his marriage in this light, become a better person, and overcome in himself the belittling divisiveness of ethnic exclusivity.

I suggest that using an ideal exemplar like this can be contrasted with the moral issues raised by following rules. The matter is not simple, however, as the idea of ‘rules’ is used in several senses by anthropologists and philosophers. Writing of social rules in general, Wittgenstein noted how they could in principle, in the abstract as it were, always be misunderstood, and he stressed the unarticulated, perhaps even unarticulable, nature of the understanding necessary to follow rules or directions: “‘Obeying a rule’ is a practice’, he wrote (Wittgenstein 1973:202), and ‘My reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reason’ (Wittgenstein 1973:211). If Kripke interprets this to mean that the background knowledge necessary to follow a rule consists of *de facto* links, such that we are conditioned to react in this way, Taylor (1993:47–48) argues against this that the background is an *understanding*, a ‘grasp on things that, although unarticulated, may allow us to formulate reasons and explanations when challenged’.<sup>2</sup> Taylor goes on to question the supposition that rules are always explicit representations, or rather, he writes that it does not matter much whether they are or not. In either case, what we are dealing with is understanding located in practices and largely unexpressed.

This understanding is more fundamental [than formulated representations] in two ways: first, it is always there, whereas sometimes we frame representations and sometimes we do not; and, second, the representations we do make are only comprehensible against the background provided by this inarticulate understanding.... Rather than representations being the primary locus of our understanding, they are similarly islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp on the world.

(Taylor 1993:50)

Taylor uses Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus* to argue that it is an intellectualist mistake to see consciously laid-down rulings as the effective factor in ‘following rules’. This is a mistake equivalent to ignoring the difference between a two-dimensional map of a terrain and our situated, embodied familiarity with the land which allows us to make out way around it.

The problem with such an argument as regards morality, however, is that it seems resigned to the givenness of social structures and inherited practices (a point to which I shall return). Furthermore, this particular discussion of Taylor’s makes no contribution to the problem of the explicit rulings of political powers which might violate ordinary

people's ways of life, nor to that of the wider forces of social change or domination that operate behind the backs of the followers of rules. In effect Taylor is using Bourdieu's argument against the distortion created by anthropologists' models, presented to readers as 'rules' which 'they', the studied people, follow, to slip sideways into the idea that it makes little difference whether *indigenous* moral ideas are expressed overtly or not, and hence whether they are discussable by the people or not. But the effect of this is to glide past Bourdieu's discussion of power (let alone that of Foucault or Habermas).

At first sight, however, an approach like that suggested by Taylor might seem appropriate for the case of the Mongols. They make a distinction between rules as socially accepted customs (*yos, zanshil*) and as edicts (*zarlig*) of temporal rulers. However, there is a certain cosmological elision between the two, which suggests that both can be taken by Mongols to be largely concerned with power, and there seems to be a sense in which both are thereby removed from the sphere of morality as conceived by the Mongols. From the seventeenth until the early twentieth century the successive edicts through the centuries of khans or feudal rulers curiously took the form of specifying the different penalties applied to various social categories for not observing them. Rather than saying 'It is forbidden to steal', such a law would state that if a noble of such-and-such a rank steals horses he must repay X times the number, if a commoner steals horses he must repay Y times the number, and so forth. Rulers regularly let off people from such penalties on account of some counterbalancing positive service they had performed (Jagchid 1988:58). This then was a world of temporal and historical give-and-take, an arena of contingent actions, with very little accent on general values of 'right' or 'wrong'.

The same can be said, perhaps more controversially, about religious customs (*yos, zanshil*) in the context of shamanism and the respect paid to objects in nature. Accepted rules such as 'You must not wash in rivers' contain some idea of polluting flowing water, but even here the ways that Mongols talk about this show that the action can be considered as much dangerous as wrong. If you pollute the water, the river spirit will take revenge and punish you, so it is better not to do it; or alternatively, people might say that you would be lucky to get away with it. The spirits of nature, existing in trees, mountains, rivers, springs, etc., are known as *ezen* (lord, proprietor). This is the same term as that used for temporal rulers, ranging from the Bogd Ezen Khaan (the Manchu Emperor) and in later times, more colloquially, Communist rulers, to local chiefs, officials and even household heads.

What is unclear is whether all these rulers are understood to have the right to rule, thus delineating a moral universe, or whether the fact of there being rulers is seen simply as part of the general, amoral inequality of the way things are. It seems to me that both understandings are available in Mongol culture. Let us look first at the idea that there is a moral sense of the rightness of the *order* of power. In the allusive way that Mongols often talk about such matters I have to admit that in some respects they do seem to bear out Taylor's idea of following rules based on a background understanding that is principally embodied rather than rationalized. An example of this is the following saying, which alludes to the order of power as intrinsically ranked:

If there are two people one of them is senior

If there is one person his hat is senior

(Gaadamba and Tserensodnom 1967:8)

One might imagine this to be ironic, were it not for the fact that Mongolians do in fact pay respect to hats—the hat being the material objectification of the idea of ‘above humanity’ in the vertical cosmology that places the person under heaven. In the seventeenth-century chronicle *Altan Tobchi* we read:

Holy Chingghis Khaan spoke in reverence to Heaven on high [the sky], ‘You have made me, by means of your own government, so powerful that there is no-one other than I who is powerful on the face of the earth. Only my hat is above me.’ So saying, he took off his hat, placed it on the seat of honour, prostrated himself before it, and drank wine that day until he was very hot. Thus did Chingghis speak to his brothers and sons, after granting them subject people, instructing them (*zarlig bolugsan*) on the support of nations and the gist of government in summary.

(Okada 1993:231–232)

This passage establishes precisely that continuity between human and ‘natural’ powers alluded to above, and shows how the sense of ‘above’ is physically expressed in Chingghis’s prostrations. The language used (‘holy’, ‘respectfully’, ‘honour’) indicates an implicit moral evaluation.

More equivocal, however, is the following saying:

Man follows customary rules [*yos*]

[As] dog follows bone

(Gaadamba and Tserensodnom 1967:9)

This saying plays with the two meanings of ‘follow’, which, in Mongolian even more clearly than in English, combine ‘submission’ with ‘going after’. The sense here *is* perhaps ironic, since it seems to mock people in the enjoyment and satisfaction that they take in following rules. The analogy is with an ‘embodied’ *habitus* so deep that it is virtually an instinct, and the sense is conveyed—since people, after all, are not dogs—that things should not be this way. There should be reasons for following rules; or, to put this another way, as some Mongols have explained to me, the idea of ‘rules’ (*yos*) contains the idea of reasons. This sense of *yos* appears, for example, in the sentence, ‘Ene xün yosoor xeldeg xün’ (This person gives reasons for what he says). *Yos*, in this way of thinking, are not simply there to be followed unconditionally, but have to be learned, together with their reasons. The process of learning implies acquiring an explicit rational understanding which can be argued for and debated. In a Buddhist religious context this is particularly developed in *nom xeletsex*, the regular disputations about sacred texts by lamas learning them. I was told that learning *yos* in this sense implies discovering and explaining the intrinsic patterns of the way that things ideally are, providing one’s understanding of these patterns as reasons in one’s argument. To illustrate this idea indirectly I was given an example, namely the intricate grain of wood, which should be studied before one cuts it, and which gives a reason for cutting it in a certain way.

The complexity of the relations between the various ideas briefly outlined here runs against any orientalist tendency to construct Mongols simply as ‘despots’ on the one hand, or thoughtless followers of prevailing political hierarchies on the other. Historically it seems that the value of ‘reasonableness’ as applied to the cases of actual rulings was mostly forced negatively into the open by the abuses of power by rulers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were a number of petitions of grievances submitted by serfs about the intolerable activities of local lords, presented to higher princes in the hope that the rules would be correctly applied from the senior level. Most of these were complaints about local rulers’ demands for payments or services in the guise of legitimate taxation when they were in fact used to cover the ruler’s personal debts. ‘Reasonableness’ in these practical documents refers to the justification of actions in terms

of publicly well-known norms of taxation and the separation of state ('official') business from that of the princes acting as private persons. In the midst of the flow of detail about numbers of sheep and ounces of silver, moral ideas like 'justice', 'right', 'loyalty' and 'truth' occasionally make their appearance:

When we spoke to Jayisang [an official] Shagdar about the tax I was the only one who argued with him. People who have good connections with Jayisang Shagdar would never complain about him. Is this oppression of the humble people supposed to be only my concern? In spite of the injustice of the penalty inflicted on me because I protected the loyal people, I believe I did right, didn't I? Even though I was dismissed from my office, I am still a citizen of the district. I dare to say that our people cannot stand it any longer if the taxes remain this way. The people suffer as much as I do, but they are afraid to say anything. I am inflamed with indignation and must make this accusation and let the truth be known at any risk, even if it costs me my head. Therefore, I beg of you my great lords and honourable superiors, to give me orders and I will follow them.

(Rashidondog and Veit 1975:9)

However, despite this evidence that moral arguments surfaced in public life, it still seems to me that this was not the main arena of morality for the Mongols. My reasons for this conclusion require referring again to ideas held in the past which nevertheless still have salience today. For one thing, the public arena revealed by some of the eighteenth- to early twentieth-century petitions of grievances as a space for disagreement about values (what it is to be just, for example) could shrink to something virtually devoid of moral content if people simply reckoned that rules should be followed and the 'dogs following bones' attitude prevailed. In most of the documents individuals simply compared conduct to a set of unquestioned rules. For another, even if questions of justice, right, etc., were sometimes raised, such discussions were constantly undercut by another simultaneously available view which saw powers as inevitably pitted against one another. In this view the notion of a morally ordered universe was virtually absent. In this case it was not that social institutions and laws themselves were regarded as immutable. On the contrary, they could be seen as passing affairs. However, there always would be rulings of some kind, and this was because the exercise of power of differently situated beings, with

their own necessities for reproducing their existence, was seen as part of nature (the way things are). Thus to summarize, the very same action, a ruler's excess, could be seen in moral terms, but it could alternatively be seen as both inevitable and arbitrary. The world might be peopled by seniors and juniors, and 'rightly so', but this idea was countered by another which acknowledged that any kind of existence had its own force of being, and that each of these existent beings would exercise its own ('amoral', we could say) conflictual power. Among human beings this could appear as 'rebelliousness' and 'punishment', but such actions could simply be seen as akin to the clashes among beings in the world in general. The result of this way of thinking was that Mongols before the Communist period could punish a mountain, for not bringing rain in the way that it was supposed to do, in much same way that they could punish a man for not delivering state dues.

There are, however, domains, notably kinship, where following rules seems to have an irreducible moral aspect. To be in the right, one has not only to respect one's senior kin, but to feel this respect. However, kinship is also the domain of the power of the lord of the household (*ger-iin ezen*) and so here the overlapping between the arbitrary 'way things are', the right 'way things should be' and the ethical 'way I should be' is at its most dense. Between these three aspects, which conflate the rulings given by the household head with the accepted customary behaviour of gendered and hierarchized persons and with the interiorized self-awareness of values attributed to actions, there is a great density of possible dilemmas. However, even in kinship the idea of a rule does not offer much discursive space, since the subject is constantly tripped up by the flat-like nature of one or another ruling. Such a space is opened, by contrast, in the idea of the exemplar.

Implicit in the above discussion is the weighting given by Mongols to personal, as opposed to impersonal, social values. I having been using the term 'morality' at the most pared-down level, to refer simply to evaluation of actions, that is, judging them better or worse. But the very great difference with the European concept is that for Mongols the core of morality is primarily referred to the self, adjudicating one's own actions as good or bad *for oneself*, whereas in the West at the very least a sympathy for others has been considered by most recent philosophers as a *sine qua non* for entering in the world of morality (Williams 1993: 12). In Mongolian culture it is your responsibility to improve yourself—at the very least to place yourself rightly in the world—before addressing the lives of others (the sense in which this can be regarded as moral is also discussed in Humphrey 1992). Altruism is also a value for

the Mongols, but particularly among those with a Buddhist education it tends to be seen as an outcome of the cultivation of virtues in the self. In general, perhaps it can be said that social values, such as justice or altruism, are weakly internalized, compromised, as I have suggested above, by the existence of alternative understandings of how the world works. It is impossible to deal adequately with this subject here, that is in a paper more concerned with locating the moral discourse of the Mongols than describing its content. However, it does seem important to point out that even communist ethics, which was notably inspired by social values, was also assimilated by the Mongols to their preference for the morality of the self, resulting in images of a world inhabited by people ‘good-in-themselves’. This is illustrated by the final words of the autobiography of Academician Shirendev, who was for much of his life in charge of propaganda for the Mongolian government:

Kind-hearted ones,  
 Let us make this a country of good workers;  
 If flowers can adorn the wide world  
 Then good people can decorate the nation.

The social rules discussed above can be contrasted with universalized ethical precepts, which appear in the Mongolian context in both Buddhism and in communism. As Carrithers (1992:92–116) has pointed out, precepts, which he associates with the rather patchy appearance of generalizing paradigmatic thought in any culture, are not free-floating and timeless, however abstract they may appear, and they must be understood in the form of discourse and social context of their appearance. The point to be appreciated here is that in Mongolia, unlike in Europe, in practice almost no space is given to general ethical precepts as emanations of God or society. Rather, such precepts tend to be *authored*, and they then appear in relationships as tied to the personalities of both the mentor and the follower. So what I am arguing is that precepts tend to be assimilated into the exemplary mode. Therefore, rather than contrasting precepts and moral stories, as Carrithers does, I attempt, as a first step, to try to understand the nature of exemplary morality by employing the tactic of contrasting it with Western moral rules.

European rules and codes, such as the Catholic catechism or the French and American constitutions, have at least three characteristics:

- 1 They are the same for everyone, or for everyone of a designated category; they suppose the sameness of the subject, i.e. human equality, or they are designed to promote such equality.
- 2 Rules and codes must be in principle consequential and consistent, such that if you obey one rule you do not thereby disobey some other rule in the code.
- 3 The discourse of rules aims at maximum clarity, eliminating ambiguity, such that the subject knows immediately what is a right action and what is wrong.

None of these characteristics apply to morality by exemplars, and with this realization we step into another world.

The device of clarification by negative contrast with European moral rules suggests three conclusions about the ethics of exemplars: (a) it constructs a particular kind of individuality, or culturally specific concept of the person (cf. Jacobson-Widding this volume), which relates in a very interesting way to assumptions of individual difference and social hierarchy; (b) it contributes to the crystallization of a variety of different ‘ways of life’ (cf. Archetti this volume), which acknowledges rather than denies social conflict; and (c) it requires that the subject do some ‘work’, that is ponder the meaning of the exemplar for him- or herself, and in this sense exemplars as moral discourse are open-ended and unfinished. Everything I have said here implies that, as far as ‘the ethnography of moralities’ is concerned, we can only proceed rather cautiously as people from outside, since the mode of exemplars is interiorized and subjective, permeating someone’s action in general rather than single acts, and thus the ‘case’ that I gave at the beginning should be seen as a somewhat artificial example for the sake of exposition.

Let me, however, proceed to elaborate the three points summarized above.

1 In Mongolia exemplars are not the same for everyone, but chosen by subjects in their own particular circumstances. How does this actually work? Everyone, at some time in their life, should have a ‘teacher’ (*bagshi*). This applies to a herder or clerk just as much as to someone with religious concerns like a Buddhist monk. A person with no teacher is ‘no-body’, Mongols said to me. Teachers are often Buddhist lamas, but they can also be inspired women, scholars, statesmen, or indeed anyone who is held to have perfected an admired quality. The teacher is someone who advanced and improved him- or herself in relation to some moral principle, such as ‘bravery’, ‘purity of

thought' or 'compassion'. In the case of religious people, behind the teacher there may lie a saint or god, to whose qualities the teacher also aspires. However, this does not amount to a genealogy of teachers, unlike in the case of a Buddhist reincarnation. The reincarnation is different from the exemplar, because the new incarnation *is* (in a sense) the earlier one, whereas the relation with a teacher or exemplar is dyadic, implying difference of status between the two and mutual obligations that are in fact different on either side.

The first thing to point out is the extraordinary variety of these teachers, ancestors and gods that stand in a teacher-like relation to the subject. And someone is not, of course, limited to having only one exemplar in their life. A Mongolian friend of mine, an admirer of Chingghis Khaan, was a little shocked to find that in a composite portrait, a friend of his had joined together in one frame a picture of the great warrior and the friend's own teacher, a still-living master of *chi-gong* (a kind of magic of vitality widely practised in China). This was shocking not because the two exemplified such different qualities (that was only to be expected), but because Chingghis in his view was too great to be amalgamated with the *chi-gong* master. The portraits should have been separate and in some way hierarchically marked.<sup>3</sup> A Mongolian household then invariably has an altar, or honoured space, where the representations of the exemplars are placed. These altars are as diverse as the people in the family are diverse, and people will point out: this is my father, this is my teacher, that is the god that my husband worshipped when X happened, this is the saint that I particularly revere, and so on.

A Mongolian child is not given a definite exemplar to follow (in contrast to the case of rules, which are taught to children by their parents). Rather, a young child is exposed to a great variety of moral stories and precepts and he or she then develops as a personality to the point where a teacher or an exemplar can be intentionally chosen. Thus, the subject in the morality of exemplars is already someone, already a moral person. In principle people are held to have individuality even from birth, although the accomplishing of moral qualities has yet to happen, since Mongols are born already marked as people. They emerge from a given *töröl* (kin-group), on an astrologically marked day (which also has qualitative implications), they are washed at birth with the water of the birth-place, and then they are nourished by its special air, water, milk and meat, and they are given a name which must not be the same as that of any known person—all of which establishes people as different and perpetuates this difference in the course of life.

If these differences of social origin and symbolically significant geography begin to constitute children as persons, the development of the personality—that is of a source conscious of awareness, knowledge, reason and moral judgement—constitutes a self. Mauss (1985) was wrong to say that there is no idea of the self except in the West, and to see in China ‘an Orient that has never made the self into a sacred entity... a fundamental form of thought and action’ (quoted in Elvin 1985). In Mongolia, I suggest, it is as oneself that one searches for and chooses a teacher. It is common for people to look for many years until they find the one teacher they can truly admire.<sup>4</sup>

Finding exemplars is part of discovering and cultivating oneself. In Inner Mongolia (China) adolescents in particular choose wise sayings (*tsetsen üg*) that they particularly admire from the thousands available in the culture. They write these on pieces of paper which are kept in personal spaces (in one’s desk drawer, under the pillow, in an inner pocket). Sometimes the wise words are written on the back of photographs of film-stars—not that they are the sayings of these film-stars, but two kinds of ideal are combined in this way. Young people often exchange papers with wise words, as a way of indicating to one another what kind of person they truly are.

The relation of teacher (*bagshi*) and disciple (*shabi*) is a hierarchical one, in the sense that it is the teacher’s role to give advice and wise words, and the disciple’s to listen and learn.<sup>5</sup> The relation between teacher and disciple is, of course, one between socially defined persons, but it is also one between selves. This, I think, emerges from the nature of the discourse between teacher and disciple. To get at this we must think about what exactly it is that the moral subject strives after in putting him- or herself in the position of disciple. The chosen teacher simply is someone who has the qualities that one admires. However, what is important here is that it is not just the teacher as a social person that is the exemplar. In fact, more than the teacher, the exemplar is constituted by the ‘discourse’ of the teacher, which may be sayings or actions.

The word that the Mongols mostly use for exemplar is *üliger*, which at first might seem like a homonym, since it means what initially appear to be two quite different ideas. *Üliger* means example, model or precedent, e.g. when a mother says, ‘You should be an example (*üliger*) to your younger brother.’ But *üliger* also means an oral or written text of some kind, usually a story, and in different parts of Mongolia also an epic, or a riddle, precept or proverb. However, the exemplary words are not just something that has been said by the teacher. This is true even

though Mongols do regard anything said as having more consequence than we do. For example, they have a rather negative attitude to just chatting, and if you ask a Mongol about something they often will not reply directly but retort, ‘*Why* did you ask that?’ It is as though all sayings should have an intentional meaning, that is a meaning beyond their overt sense. So people may avoid dealing with the sense unless they can also see the intentional point, and this gives almost all talk a kind of weight, or directedness, which one might see as the grounds for a pervasiveness of morality in their culture. In any case, *üliger* stand out beyond such ordinary talk and sayings, that is, they are given prominence by the very fact that some person takes them in a special way (as an exemplar). Thus we find that there is a Mongol saying about *üliger*, which is itself an *üliger*.

If you follow sayings (*üg*) you [only] become clever  
 If you follow an exemplar (*üliger*) you become wise<sup>6</sup>  
*Üg dagaval uhaantai bolno*  
*Üliger dagaval tsetsen bolno*

(Erdene-Ochir 1991:47)

The *üliger* is thus the combination of the ideal represented by the teacher and his/her words or deeds, or more exactly those crystalline moments of the teacher’s actions that have been ‘listened to’ by the disciple and made to be exemplary in the context of some particular ethical decision. From the teacher’s point of view, these are his or her *surgaal*, the items of all his or her myriad sayings and doings that are the ones to be learnt. But although purposive teachings are not unknown in Mongolia, particularly in the context of Buddhist teacher-disciple relations,<sup>7</sup> very often the teacher does not know which really are his *surgaal*, as they appear almost as a by-product of his enlightened or spiritually gifted passage through life.<sup>8</sup> And so, although the *surgaal* or *üliger* appear from the teacher, it is the disciple, by actively paying attention, who provides the agency that transforms the words/act from merely having happened to something that is an exemplar.

Thus my Mongolian friend, the one who fell in love, stressed to me that Chingghis Khaan, taken as a historical personage, was not an exemplar to him. But in the circumstance of the difficult decision about his marriage, the particular principle of Chingghis’s strategic affinal alliances became exemplary to him, since this provided a way to envision his own best self if he took the decision to marry. It was not that he deluded himself that he was like the great Emperor, or that he

thought his marriage would actually make much difference in the tense ethnic situation in Inner Mongolia, but rather that acting according to this exemplar would make him a better, wiser human being, and would be a step to leading a more far-sighted life. This, I think, can only be understood as evidence for a sense of self as a fundamental form of thought and action.

2 Let me now move from the point that I have been making here, about the essential variability of exemplars and subjects, and the involvement of a sense of self, to a related issue. Among the things that distinguish a morality of exemplars from a morality that appears in a code is that there is no requirement that exemplars be consistent with one another or that they be coherent with regard to society in general. Because moral exemplars are unique to their subjects, they do not get tangled up in the characteristic arguments of European moral philosophy relating to consequentialism and moralities as total systems. Ever since Aristotle, many European philosophies, from those of the utilitarians to the social contract theorists, have proposed that there is an attainable ethics of harmony, whereby it would be possible for humans to resolve the contradictions between pure thought, practical wisdom and public life. However, other philosophers, with whom my argument would tend to agree, have argued that such a harmony, encompassing not only the different aspects of individual ethics but also the benign accommodation of individuals in society, is impossible. For example, Condorcet was opposed to public instruction in morality, giving children 'principles of conduct', because he did not agree with the idea that it was possible, or even desirable, for any public authority to sum up the happiness of individuals as the greatest utility of society (Rothschild 1994). Stuart Hampshire (1983) has argued, in a sustained attack on the Aristotelian position, that we need to recognize that human language and culture *reinforce* differences in behaviour, and furthermore that people do this in a self-conscious and willed way.

There is no set of natural dispositions which is by itself sufficient to form a normal and natural character and to which children could be introduced. They have to learn our ways, or to learn someone's foreign or archaic ways, our forms of deceit and normal living, our forms of justice and courage and friendship, or someone's alien forms.

(Hampshire 1983:149)

Not only is the reinforcement of differentiated moral ideals inevitable, but it involves a sacrifice of dispositions greatly admired elsewhere. People are aware of this as they grow up and embark on a way of life, and they know that every established way of life has its cost in the absence or repression of others. To give a simple example, by becoming a prudent and successful farmer one cannot have the qualities of split-second resolution of a fighter pilot, but this does not prevent one from knowing about them, or even admiring them. It is exactly this quality of moralities, that they sustain ‘ways of life’ —ways that are different from one another and may be in conflict with one another—that the ethics of exemplars embodies.

The Mongolians’ stories include a huge number of what we might call ‘negative exemplars’, that is *üliger*-by-mockery. These stories have a typical protagonist who takes a wrong step and turns everything upside down (Dorjlham 1991). In other words, he is a human who has not learnt ‘our way of life’ (*yos*). A typical example is the traveller who came and stayed and stayed, and thoughtlessly ate and drank until the household ran bare, and never gave anything to the hosts in return. It is interesting that these wrong actions are not really possible kinds of action in a Mongolian context, nor do they usually take the form of mockery of alien ways of life (the cheating foreign trader, etc.). Rather the typical protagonists are often called ‘mad ones’ (*soliot*), that is, human beings who are one of us, but who exist as it were in a natural state, without having developed the particular characteristics of mind and conscience cultivated in the Mongolian way of life. Thus the negative exemplar is not a story that simply says ‘You should not behave like this’, but rather it requires the listener actively to fill in mentally the social virtues that the mad one never acquired.

The relationship that I have described is between a thoughtful and ‘specialized’ subject and the exemplars chosen to develop and extend these very qualities. Its moral foundation is a sense of personal self-worth. However, it is the case that political leaders in Asia have used this very ethical formation to their own ends. But rather than develop those aspects that might lead to a ‘politics of difference’, they emphasized the hierarchical conforming aspect, to attempt to turn people to mass discipleship.<sup>9</sup> So in the Maoist period in China, and to a lesser extent in the Stalinist one in Mongolia, we can see the hijacking by the Party of the very structure I have described. Mao himself was not to be emulated, but he, as the great teacher, presented to the masses ‘from his own life’ many quasi-invented models of moral qualities.

A friend from Inner Mongolia remembered that when his school class went out to build roads in the early 1970s, they marched in step carrying a little white flag, on which were printed the words, 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng!' Lei Feng was one of Mao's favourite models. He was a poor soldier who devoted himself to the people far beyond the call of military duty. He helped old people free of charge, took patients to hospital, etc., and in the course of all this serving of the people he died. Recalling this, my friend also remembered the 'Two Little Sisters of the Mongolian Grassland'. This is a famous story of two little girls who, when their parents were away, had bravely gone out in a terrible winter snowstorm to save the commune's sheep. The exemplary model of the 'Two Little Sisters', printed in millions of illustrated booklets and even translated into English, incorporated the model of Lei Feng, because it was only 'having learned from Lei Feng' that the pair were inspired to do their selfless duty of saving the sheep. There were many other such models, like Jang Se De (the charcoal burner who died while trying to warm the leader with his fires), or Bai Tu An (a Canadian doctor who died of blood-poisoning while tending the wounded of the 8th Expeditionary Army), or Jau Yü Lu (assigned to govern a remote backward region, who devoted himself to raising its standard although he himself had an incurable disease). The important thing to note here is that there were many of these Maoist exemplars, and unlike the situation in more politically relaxed periods of Mongolian life, they were designed to blot out all previous models—that is, to take over the moral landscape.

In Inner Mongolia, despite all the thought reform of the Cultural Revolution, the Maoist attempt was not to be successful. Interestingly, it was not only the political pressure that people resented. They also came to turn against the endlessly repeated Maoist version of socialist morality, that is, exemplars representing personal sacrifice for the sake of society-wide advantage. The exemplars came to be used mainly to mock people: 'So you think you are a Lei Feng, eh?' Nor did the people chosen by the Party as living exemplars (hard-working farmers, etc.) take kindly to their elevation, since the intimidation and fear of the situation violated the essentially voluntative quality of the native model. A saying of those days was:

A human being is afraid of being famous  
A pig is afraid of being fat

Above all, everyone resented the brainless simplicity of these models. Now, although China is still ruled by a communist government, Mao's models have more or less zero currency. Nevertheless, the exemplary mode itself still seems to retain strong social currency in Inner Mongolia (this is not to exclude the possibility of the emergence of dissent, undercutting the role of the teacher, and the replacement of 'vertical' with 'horizontal' references for ideals, nor even, in the future, a swing to a more rule-based morality). However, as things are, the most bitter covert battles are now fought over historical and mythical figures who might serve as new and alternative exemplars to those of high socialist times. This is why the ideological battle of today is waged to a large extent in terms of obscure Mongolian bandits, Chinese princesses dredged up from the past, or the enigmatic sayings of early manuscripts.

3 I turn in the final part of this paper to the relation of the disciple to the content of the exemplar. The Maoist models, with their simple-minded messages, are uncharacteristic as far as Mongolia goes. The discourse of Mongolian exemplars tends to be highly wrought, focused and difficult to understand. Such exemplars require pondering by the disciple. In fact, they have no single meaning, but are given meaning in the context of the specific aspirations of the subject in his or her predicament. I am afraid that it is impossible to provide an adequate feel for this in a written paper (and this is where the ethnography of moralities in this case perhaps must fail) because the evanescent and notional character of the exemplar means that it is manifest only in the casting of one's actions in a *subjectively* new qualitative and intentional light.

However, to quarry a little at the edges of this, let me try to give an example. The thirteenth-century account of the life of Chingghis Khan, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, is a favourite source of exemplary incidents, but it is notoriously difficult even for Mongols to understand. Now the Mongolian scholar Jagchid, who fled the country at the time of the communist take-over and presently lives in Taiwan, and who has adopted something of a *bagshi* role in relation to the preserving of the traditions of his fellow Mongols, published an article (Jagchid 1988) in which he attempted to draw out the moral lessons of the *Secret History*. Among others he cited a saying that was used even in the *Secret History* itself as an exemplar: 'When a bird is chased by a sparrow-hawk and flies into the bush, the bush will save it' (*Secret History*. par. 85). In the *Secret History* the context was that the saying was used by some boys to persuade their father that, despite the danger to himself, he should save

Chingghis, who at that time was fleeing from his enemies, the Taichi'ud. Jagchid points out that the adage was used again, a century or so later, in the Chinese history of the Mongol Dynasty, the *Yüan Shih*, about Huo-tu [Khodu], a warrior who was at that point fleeing from Chingghis Khaan. Huo-tu, exhausted, arrived at the tent of one I-na-ssu. Chingghis sent an envoy to I-na-ssu with the message, 'Why do you hide a deer... stuck with my arrow?', and I-na-ssu replied, 'A bush can still help save the life of a bird that has escaped from the sparrow-hawk. Am I not better than leaves and wood?' and he gave protection to Huo-tu, upon which Chingghis immediately attacked him. Jagchid explains to his readers that what these incidents, with the same exemplary saying repeated over generations, reveal is an ethic of altruism not unknown to the nomadic peoples. We can note that it was Jagchid as *bagshi* who made this particular interpretation; in itself the saying is mysterious and metaphorical, and has a potential for being understood in some rather different ways. An Inner Mongolian colleague of mine, for whom this saying was important in the aftermath of Tienanmen, said, 'This means that if someone is helpless, you must help them.' However, another said, 'There are two birds, a weak one and a strong one; this saying is about establishing justice between them.' Finally, there was another interpretation: 'The important idea here is to do with the bush; we are humans and we must not be put to shame by nature.'

One can see that such an opaque exemplar could give rise not only to alternative readings but to successive understandings, as a person holding it dear turned it in the harsh light of the events of real life. I do not want to give too strong an impression of the extent to which exemplars inspire people to *take decisions* (I know few such cases explained to me in this way, and perhaps it is almost impossible from outside to weigh reasons for decisions which are entangled for people themselves). Certainly, personal exemplars cannot be seen as free-floating, beyond significant power relations, or unaffected by the systematic, non-contingent arena of production and reproductive social relations (cf. Smith 1994). However, what they seem to offer is not only alternative conceptions of how one ought to conduct oneself, but a discursive space for deliberation about ideals. This enables people to transform themselves and gradually to commit themselves to certain ethnic modes of being. Investigating exemplars also gives grounds to the people involved, and to us as anthropologists, for the questioning of the apparent givenness of social rules, and ideas like *habitus*.

To conclude: this paper has argued that the Mongolians' construction of morality places greater weight on the 'practices of the self' than on

the issues raised by following rules. One of the most fundamental ways of cultivating the self is through the discourse of exemplars. The qualities of the Mongolian exemplar that I have pointed to here make it different from the ‘cultural schemas’ proposed by anthropologists to explain the motivation of action. In one prominent tradition of cognitive anthropology, although the schemas themselves are culturally specific, the subject of such motivating schemas is assumed to be a universal person and self (Quinn 1992:194). This paper has suggested that certainly ‘the person’, and for all I know ‘the self’ too, must be understood as culturally formed in the context of ethics, even if we also recognize some strata of universality underlying the notion of human ideals. In their open-endedness, diversity and embeddedness in dyadic relationships the exemplars examined here also seem unlike the ‘cultural schemas’ of Sherry Ortner (1989), where the emphasis is on the structural and implicitly constraining nature of cultural models repeated in history. Finally, it is clear that the Mongolian recourse to exemplars should not be likened to the later European use of proverbs and maxims. During the nineteenth and particularly in the twentieth century the use of proverbs came to be despised as ‘sententious’, ‘commonplace’ and ‘hackneyed’, that is, as incompatible with the Romantic understanding of the self (Obelkevich 1987). The Mongolian morality of exemplars, to the contrary, is perhaps the location *par excellence* where individuality may be explored and the sense of the self’s moral being enhanced. As the example of the failed Maoist models showed, the exemplary relation is historically contingent, but in the end has been quite resistant to overt ideological pressures. Despite the emphasis that I have placed on specificity and historical contingency in this study, perhaps the best concluding remark is that of Rodney Needham (1985: xii), who boldly presents exemplars as ‘characteristic features of thought and imagination to which men of any period are inclined’. He wrote of them (Needham 1985:2) that they present us with ‘the imaginative provocation offered by a poetic interpretation’.

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## NOTES

- 1 By 'forms of subjectivation' Foucault refers to the way in which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct, i.e. 'the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object' (Foucault 1987:29).
- 2 Hence Taylor puts to one side Wittgenstein's more challenging and enigmatic additional remark, 'When I obey a rule, I do not choose, I obey the rule *blindly*' (Wittgenstein 1973:219) and he emphasizes Wittgenstein's general insistence that following rules is a *social* practice.
- 3 However, since the chosen models are often exemplars of different moral qualities, they do not necessarily form an encompassing sequence, from the general to the particular, such as that described by Roy D'Andrade for cultural schemas to guide action (D'Andrade 1992:30).
- 4 In a monastery young lamas are allocated teachers when they arrive. But they do not have to stay with these teachers and are free to choose the monk to whom they will devote themselves. The result is that many senior lamas have no disciples at all, while others who are more revered may have hundreds (Arjiya Khutagt, Kumbum Monastery, personal communication to U.E.Bulag).
- 5 A detailed ethnographic example of similar dyadic relations among Jains in India was beautifully described by Carrithers (1992).
- 6 *Uhaan* (clever) refers to intelligence and reasoning, while *tsetsen* (wise) refers to a quality of sageness or prudence.
- 7 A sacred text or exhortation that the teacher has authorized for use by a disciple is known formally by the Tibetan term *lung*. The Kanjurwa Khutukhtu has written interestingly (Hyer and Jagchid 1983:9) that the *lung* gives the disciple(s) a special mandate to fulfill the exhortation (read the prayer, perform the ritual), but that among lay persons this term came to be used for a telling off or scolding, or alternatively as a dry, indoctrinating and boring lecture. This suggests that a one-sided teacher-to-disciple formalization of the exemplar is inimical to its continued viability, and that the initiative of the disciple is essential.
- 8 The Diluv Hutagt (Lattimore and Isono 1982:142–143) explained movingly that a previous incarnation of the Narvanchin Hutagt was possibly superior to his present incarnation, even though he was a drinker and a profligate. The earlier incarnation, for all his worldly life, had a miraculous healing touch and worked wonders, 'so we are made aware that here are mysterious things'.
- 9 The phrase 'politics of difference' here refers more specifically to Charles Taylor's argument in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Taylor 1992a) and *Multiculturalism and 'The*

*Politics of Recognition*' (Taylor 1992b). Taylor is concerned here with ideals and the practices that are meant to conform to them, and he argues against various sceptical positions suggesting that ideals cannot be subject to reason. 'Authenticity', being true to one's own individual identity in one's own unique way, has validity as an ideal. Taylor argues beyond the liberal view that the character of the just state can be seen in its impartiality to these different conceptions of what constitutes the most worthwhile, fully human life. He suggests that a new 'politics of difference' is required on the grounds that, as it is the demands of politically marginalized groups, rather than individuals, that are at issue now, the individualist construction of liberal political theory is inappropriate. Furthermore, the liberal model belongs to a philosophical tradition which is blind to ineliminable culturally embodied differences. Taylor suggests that this can be remedied by a politics of 'equal recognition', i.e. positive recognition of what makes people different, rather than what makes them the same. See Nick Smith (1994) for a perceptive critique of this position. The Mongolian use of exemplars is somewhat different from the recent Western 'culture of authenticity', since it is not a question of *new* modes of self-fulfilment but of 'self-cultivation' in the direction of historically held virtues. The importance of the teacher, who is normally of a previous generation, pulls the ideals in a retrospective direction, although we cannot exclude that even archaic exemplars, such as those taken from the thirteenthcentury *Secret History of the Mongols*, might not come to be signs for a new consciousness; nor can we conclude that Mongolian exemplars will not inspire groups as well as individuals.

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