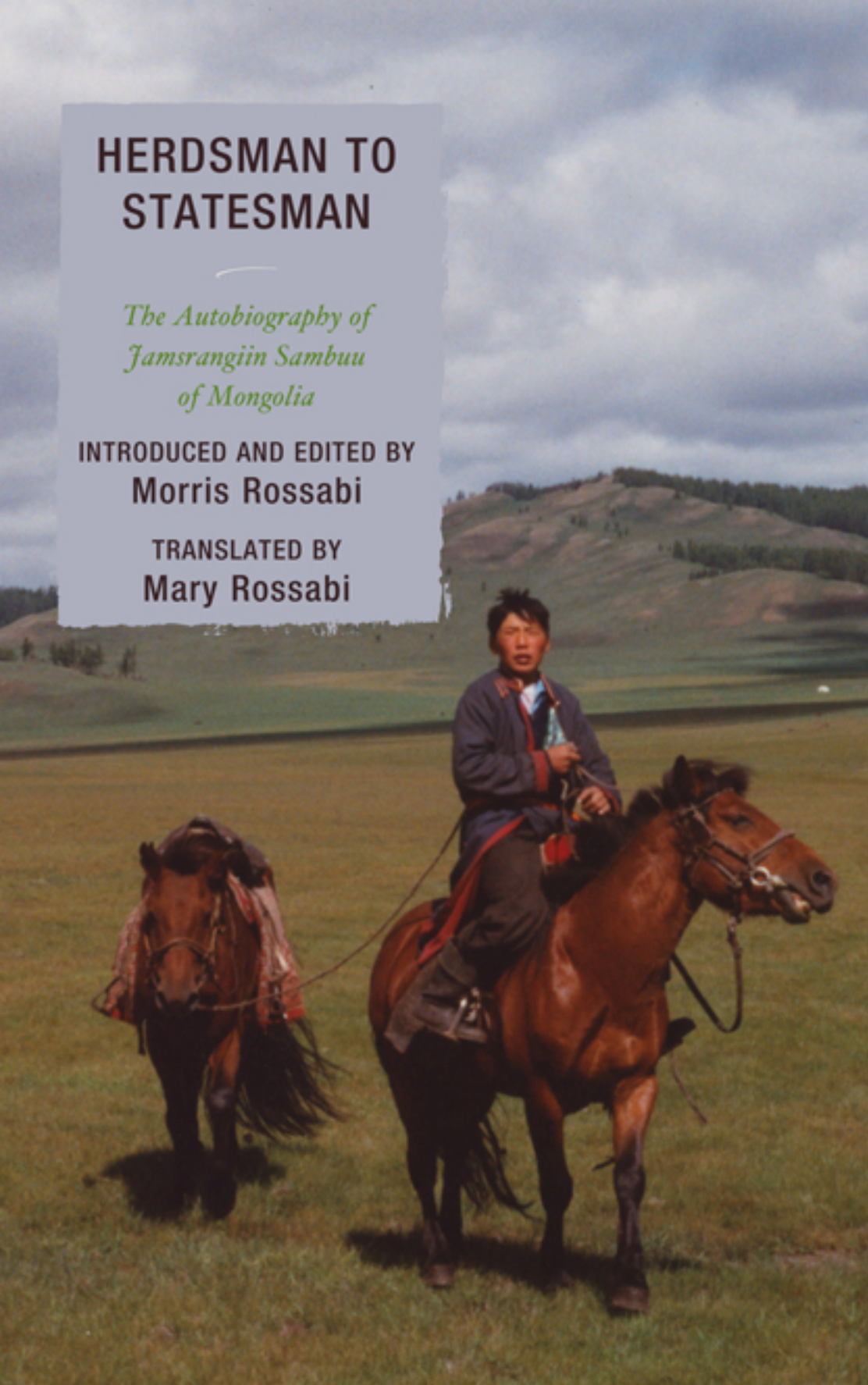


# HERDSMAN TO STATESMAN

*The Autobiography of  
Jamsrangiin Sambuu  
of Mongolia*

INTRODUCED AND EDITED BY  
**Morris Rossabi**

TRANSLATED BY  
**Mary Rossabi**



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## Prefatory Note

I have endeavored to stay as close as possible to the Mongolian text except when I felt some modifications of the original were necessary for English readers. Since many of Sambuu's sentences are extremely long, I have broken some of them up for greater clarity. On occasion, I was tempted to interpret what I thought the author was saying "between the lines." However, I resisted doing so and focused on the text itself.

Enkhjargal Batjargal, Bat-Erdene Baatar, and Tunga Ganbold have kindly gone over parts of the text, and their suggestions have been most helpful. Bolor Legjeem carefully reviewed the book when it was completed and clarified several passages. I thank them for their diligence and, as important, their friendship.

I am also grateful to Professor Veronika Veit, who sent me a copy of Sambuu's autobiography and urged me to translate it.

Mary Rossabi





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# Jamsrangiin Sambuu and His Autobiography: *Paths of Life*

*Morris Rossabi*

## INTRODUCTION

Jamsrangiin Sambuu's autobiography, *Paths of Life*, which has been translated in this volume, covers his life and career through the Korean War (1950–1953) but not his later involvement in the highest echelons of Mongolian government. His position as chair of the Presidium of the Mongolian Peoples' Republic (hereafter MPR), which he held from 1954 until his death in 1972, may have left him little time to pursue his writing.

Or perhaps, to offer another explanation, he did not wish to be entangled in the struggles concerning the Sino–Soviet dispute, the most contentious issue in the communist world at that time. Chinese and Russian divisions about ideology, territory, economic models, and relations with the West, especially the United States, had flared up no later than 1957 and had reverberations in Mongolia. As Sambuu began to write in the early 1960s, the Mongolian government had decided to ally itself with the Soviet Union instead of with China, with which it had had harmonious political and economic relations since 1950. In 1962, dissenters from this policy had been dismissed or exiled. The first part of Sambuu's autobiography was published in 1965 and the second part in 1970, a short time after this purge, and the future of Sino–Soviet–Mongolian relations remained unclear. Sambuu was a cautious man, perhaps the secret of his survival as a leading figure over a span of almost forty years. Why stake out a position when the future remained unclear? He writes less than a paragraph about the establishment of the People's Republic of China and Mongolian relations with the new communist state. Yet he lavishes praise on the Soviet Union from his earliest

encounters with Russians to his tenure as ambassador to the Soviet Union during World War II to the postwar assistance it provided to Mongolia.

Indeed, the autobiography's omission of his later years may not be a great loss. Sambuu's descriptions of his early life offer genuine and unaffected portraits of his joys and mostly his struggles under an oppressive system. His vignettes convey a sense of the hardships ordinary Mongolian herders faced in the early part of the twentieth century. His diction is straightforward and not riddled with slogans. He appears to be interested in describing the particular rather than fostering an ideological agenda. However, when he turns to communism and begins to climb the bureaucratic ladder in a communist Mongolia, his writing changes appreciably. It becomes formulaic, with stereotypical phrases (e.g., the Soviet Union as the "elder brother" and Mongolia as the "younger brother," "Left deviationism") dominating. He presents or follows the propaganda line enunciated by the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (hereafter MPRP), the dominant force in Mongolia from its founding in 1924 through Sambuu's death in 1972 and then on to 1990. To be sure, Sambuu offers intriguing details about the politics of the period from the 1920s through the early 1950s. Even his omissions and his rationalizations for the repeated shifts in his own political positions in order to avoid responsibility for policies condemned by the MPRP show much about his ability to survive under this system.

One other omission is also revealing. Although Sambuu writes about his mother and especially his father, he scarcely mentions his wife. He explains the two families' charming marital negotiations and their colorful marriage ceremonies but does not describe his wife's appearance, nor does he allude to her personality and her role in his life. His book does not cite her career. Was she literate? Did she work? Did she accompany him on all his travels? Similarly, he scarcely mentions his children. What were they like? Were they in the Soviet Union during his approximately nine-year tenure as ambassador? What kind of education did they receive? His family life, which would have offered greater insight about his personality, is simply unrecorded. Revelations of self were of secondary importance for him and for many Mongolians of his time.<sup>1</sup> Only because of interviews with his grandson did we learn much about Sambuu's wife.

It is difficult to conjure up the nineteenth-century world into which Sambuu was born and spent his early life. The territory in which he lived

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1. Owen Lattimore, "From Serf to Sage: The Life and Work of Jamsrangiin Sambuu," *Journal of the Anglo-Mongolian Society* 3, no. 1 (December 1976): 1-23, wrote a laudatory account of Sambuu's early life, without dealing with his career as an ambassador to the Soviet Union and North Korea and his service in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Lattimore winds up by writing that "what stands out in Sambuu's writing is the man's humanity" and "I hope that I have been able to preserve something of the echo of this great but also complex man" (22-23). Lattimore does not mention any negative features of Sambuu's rise to power.

was immense and scarcely populated. Living in the twenty-first century, globalized world where space is at a premium, the concept of the vast and relatively empty lands during Sambuu's childhood is almost unfathomable. The population amounted to about half a million people, most of whom lived in the countryside and were separated by considerable distances. Urga (earlier known as Ikh Khüree), the capital, consisted of about thirty thousand to forty thousand people, approximately one-half of whom were lamas and five thousand of whom were Chinese traders or artisans.<sup>2</sup> A few other towns, which were established for commercial, administrative, or religious purposes, had even smaller populations. Herders, including Sambuu's family, led a relatively isolated existence, camping with family and close friends and then moving with them in semiannual or sometimes quarterly peregrinations to fresh pastures and sources of water. This isolation magnified the significance of the postal relay system, which figures prominently in Sambuu's autobiography. Maintenance of postal relay stations was vital in facilitating transmission of official messages (and thus both government effectiveness and control), trade, and other kinds of relations and exchanges. Yet such maintenance imposed severe burdens on the poor, who served as *corvée* laborers or messengers or herders of the camels, horses, and other animals at the stations or provided the supplies required at these valuable halting places.<sup>3</sup>

### EARLY YEARS

In this isolated environment, Sambuu was born in 1895 in Büren *sum* of Töv *aimag* (or province) to a herding family. He implied in his autobiography that his family was poor, but his grandson S. Surenjav, whom Sambuu adopted as his son after the death of Sambuu's daughter, his only blood-related child, told us in a recent interview that his grandfather came from a midlevel or perhaps even fairly prosperous family background.<sup>4</sup> His father Lodon Jamsrang certainly taught him the techniques of herding, and Sambuu did not write about his own hunger or other serious deprivations.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Robert Doebler, "Cities, Population Redistribution, and Urbanization in Mongolia: 1918–1990," PhD diss., Indiana University 1994, 40–41.

3. As one specialist notes, "One of the most terrifying services was the duty of the commoners who were not personal serfs to serve at one of the postal relay stations; it could be a terrifying one since they had to move and live among strangers and serve travelling officials. The commoners provided their own livestock, manpower and property without any compensation, and officially supplied the feudal lords' communication services." See M. Sanjdorj, *Manchu Chinese Colonial Rule in Northern Mongolia*, trans. Urgunge Onon. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 2.

4. Interview with S. Surenjav, Ulaan Baatar, April 24, 2009.

5. Charles R. Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 181.

Yet he described poor families stealing from others in order to survive. He never had to stoop to such acts of betrayal.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, his autobiography portrayed a striving family seeking to ascend the ladder of success. Why else would his father at first have willingly acquiesced and permitted Sambuu to live with a *taij* (or nobleman) in order to learn to read and write? Literacy would not necessarily be so vital for a herder. Delivered by his father to the *taij*'s office, Sambuu anticipated instruction in the Mongolian script and language. Instead, the harsh and demanding *taij* compelled him to herd his animals and did not offer payment for his work. He also did not teach Sambuu to read. Betrayed by his overlord, Sambuu learned to read only through his own efforts and persistence and through the help of sympathetic clerks in the *taij*'s office.

Many of the early sections of Sambuu's book deal with the exploitation that characterized Mongolian society in the early twentieth century. Qing China, a dynasty ruled by Manchus, had gained control over Mongolia in 1691 and had used local princes and nobles and Buddhist lamas to maintain a harsh and oppressive system. Sambuu noted repeated floggings of underlings for the most minor of infractions. These beatings, which were administered by the *taij* or his guards or by Chinese and Manchu officials, took place in government offices and at postal relay stations. Some of the physical abuse Sambuu witnessed and then described reveal random cruelty, unrelated to any crime or offense, but they were designed to intimidate. For example, a sick Tangut man was simply allowed to die without efforts to treat his ailments, and a nobleman ordered an underling to toss him out with the garbage. He writes of these excesses, "Many people, exhausted and suffering, were treated like stray dogs and thrown away to die." Such harshness was used to instill fear and to persuade Mongolians to obey princes or nobles.

Ironically, Mongolia faced a shortage of labor, which should have translated into good treatment of laborers. Sambuu's narrative challenged that interpretation. The question that arises is how pervasive was this mistreatment and physical abuse. Sambuu implied that the physical abuse was normal, which was attested to by other sources.<sup>7</sup> In addition, he stated that the nobles, on occasion, deprived herders of their animals, forced the poor

6. J. Sambuu, *Am'drlyn Zammalaas [Paths of Life]* (Ulaan Baatar: State Publishing Group, 1965 and 1970), 31.

7. Joseph Fletcher wrote in John Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 10: Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 353, "There was little that ordinary Mongols could do to protect themselves against the growing exactions that banner princes, monasteries, and Han creditors imposed upon them. Those unable to meet the demands could take flight. . . . When banner authorities caught such fugitives, they meted out severe punishments. In one case, for example, sixty-nine defaulters were put in cangues and passed around the banner for two years from tent to tent. Since the cangues were too wide to fit through the tent doors, the prisoners had to spend their nights in the open, in the horrible winter cold."

to pay for their own gambling debts, placed their own sometimes incompetent or lazy sons in government posts, imposed arbitrary exactions or assignments on ordinary people, and left the poor with mere scraps of food and hardly any rice or flour.

In particular, Chinese merchants or officials whom Sambuu accused of abusing ordinary Mongolians or instigating floggings earned his hostility. On several occasions, he offered examples of the power of Chinese merchants who had a privileged position, partly because China controlled Mongolia. Much of their dominance was also due to their status as creditors. Many ordinary Mongolians (or *arad*) and nobles had become indebted to Chinese merchants who provided loans at prohibitively high rates of interest to herders to buy essential goods and to nobles to purchase luxury products. The merchants used their superior economic positions to secure leverage and to inflict punishments on debtors who were in arrears. Like many present-day Mongolians, Sambuu disliked what he perceived to be shrewd, avaricious, and exploitative Chinese merchants.

He exhibited similar scorn for Buddhist lamas. Portraying them as superstitious and ill educated, he accused them of exploiting and cheating gullible Mongolians. He disparaged their effectiveness in healing the ailing and was contemptuous of a lama's claim of having cured the young Sambuu himself after a virulent and long-lasting sickness. Sambuu had greater faith in herders' remedies such as the use of ice from snow, boiled water, and sugar to treat food poisoning or a mixture including rhubarb for foot infections. He was appalled at the Buddhists' expropriation of funds for the building of a huge statue of the Maitreya Buddha, especially considering the parlous conditions facing most Mongolian herdsman. His most damning indictment of the monks involved their behavior after his father's death in 1929. His father had instructed Sambuu to distribute his assets equally among educational institutions, medical organizations, and a Buddhist monastery. The local lamas asserted that his father's soul would remain in limbo and would not be reborn in a paradise unless the family gave them additional funds to pray for him. Such profiteering contributed to Sambuu's antipathy toward lamas, an attitude that persisted and helped him tolerate the later communist purge and execution of monks in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

However, his autobiography was not limited to bitter critiques of people and institutions. He also rhapsodized about the pastoral life and reveled in its purity and beauty despite its hardships. Recognizing that herding was demanding and required great knowledge, he lavished considerable praise

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8. For other views of Buddhism in Mongolia and its impact, see Larry Moses, *The Political Role of Mongol Buddhism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Uralic Altaic Series 133, 1977), 124–43. For the self-definitions of the Buddhist establishment, see Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 128–34 and 159–65.

on his father and others who had developed the skills required for successful management of animals. Even hazardous encounters with wolves or cold and snowy winters (known as *zuds*) failed to deter him from his desired association with the herding life. Naturally, he recognized the drudgery and difficult lifestyle and repeatedly sought leaves of absence from the office work assigned to him after he became literate in order to assist his aging herding parents. Yet his enthusiasm for this outdoor life was palpable. Later in life, he would compile an invaluable guide to herding that became the most important such book of instructions.

His love of family and of the herding life translated into acquiescence to traditional customs. For example, he abided by the system of arranged marriage. His father and another herder agreed to a match for him, which was cemented by Sambuu's family offering a male camel, a gelding horse, and several sheep as a bride price. Sambuu implied that his new in-laws were ordinary herders, but his grandson or adopted son informed us that his prospective father-in-law was a well-known lama.<sup>9</sup> Sambuu was twenty-three years old and his bride-to-be Nyamaa was sixteen years old when they were betrothed. Both followed the traditional marital ceremonies. Wearing a new *deel* (long robe) with a white crepe veil over her face, the bride paid respect to the Fire Deity, which she feared, and then outside her prospective father-in-law's *ger* (tent) offered incense and butter in front of a representation of the Buddha. She and Sambuu then prostrated themselves before the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> The next morning the old men and women assembled and gave the bride, who was still veiled, a saddle and a bridle trimmed in silver and a horse. She and Sambuu then rode off to the *ger* that their parents had constructed for them. A couple of women, abiding by traditional marital rituals, accompanied them and stayed with them for the first three days of their marriage.

By the time of his marriage, Sambuu had lived through turbulent times. The despised Qing dynasty had collapsed in 1911, offering Mongolians a superb opportunity to break away from China and to establish an independent state. A Russian official had described Mongolians' earlier dependence on China: "It was difficult at that time to find . . . a Mongol who was not in debt to a Chinese merchant or Chinese trading firm; just as seldom was a prince found who was not completely entangled in long-term obligations to the Chinese . . . the great majority of the herds of cattle, sheep and goats, the droves of horses and camels, did not constitute property of the Mongols; they had been transferred into the hands of the Chinese, and the Mongols only tended and watched them."<sup>11</sup> Numerous Chinese lived in Mongo-

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9. Interview with S. Surenjav, Ulaan Baatar, April 24, 2009.

10. Sechin Jagchid and Paul Hyer, *Mongolia's Culture and Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 81–95.

11. Robert Rupen, *Mongols of the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, 37, pt. 1, 1964), 59.

lia and had constructed many of the buildings (including monasteries) in the capital, provided invaluable goods and services, mined gold and coal, loaned money, and fashioned many of the household goods.<sup>12</sup> The Qing's downfall meant that Mongolia could take charge of its own affairs, and an Autonomous Government, under the leadership of the Bogdo Gegen (or Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu), or head of the Buddhists, was established. The failures of the Autonomous Government, which endured until 1919, are well known, and Sambuu, still young and lacking exposure to politics, had little new to add to the accepted view of these years.<sup>13</sup>

In retrospect, Sambuu emphasized the chaos of the Autonomous period, alluding to disunity among the Mongol secular leaders as well as the Buddhist hierarchy and to the intimidating, if not threatening, notes that Yuan Shikai, the president of the Chinese Republic, sent to the Bogdo Gegen. He did not mention the murder, by poisoning, of some of the most important Khans. Nor did he discuss tsarist Russia's reluctance to support Mongolian aspirations for independence. Russia had helped negotiate the Treaty of Kiakhtha of 1915, which laid down an ambiguous definition of Sino-Mongolian relations by proclaiming that Mongolia would be autonomous but under Chinese suzerainty. In theory, the Autonomous Government would take charge of domestic affairs, while China would be responsible for international relations. With his visceral dislike for the Chinese merchants and officials he met, Sambuu would surely have disapproved of this treaty, as well as one of the provisions extending the privilege of extraterritoriality to Chinese in Mongolia.<sup>14</sup> Bearing in mind his antipathy for lamas, he doubtless would have been critical of turning over secular authority to the Bogdo Gegen, who already presided over an institution that controlled one-fourth of the country's livestock and that consisted of about 91,000 lamas or about one-third to one-half of the male population.

His autobiography confirmed two features of the Autonomous period's almost decade-long existence. One was the desire of some Mongolian leaders to seek U.S. support in fending off Chinese and Japanese control. Nationalists who feared both Russia and China or those who later opposed the Soviet Union's involvement in the country believed that stronger ties with the United States would protect Mongolia. They were to be disappointed because the United States had other, more pressing concerns.<sup>15</sup> A second development Sambuu mentioned is the pan-Mongolian movement.

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12. Rupen, *Mongols of the Twentieth Century*, 87–88.

13. For additional details, see Thomas Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil? Chinese and Russian Policies in Outer Mongolia, 1911–1921* (Bloomington: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Indiana University, 1980).

14. Rupen, *Mongols of the Twentieth Century*, 61–71.

15. For one description of U.S. policy, see Alicia Campi, "The Political Relationship between the United States and Outer Mongolia, 1915–1927: The Kalgan Consular Records," PhD diss., Indiana University, 1988.



He appeared to have known about efforts to create a Greater Mongolia. However, internal strife among the Khalkha Mongolians in Mongolia and the Inner Mongolians, as well as tsarist Russia's opposition, doomed the prospects of a united Mongolian state. Barga, the Mongolian-inhabited region of Manchuria, also became embroiled in the controversies, further subverting the pan-Mongolian movement.<sup>16</sup> Sambuu omitted mention of Buryat Mongolians who would play an important role in Mongolia. He blamed the failures of the pan-Mongolian movement mostly on the ineffectiveness of the Autonomous Government.

### SAMBUU AS AN OFFICIAL

Sambuu himself assumed greater responsibilities and higher positions throughout the Autonomous period. His literacy and his mathematical abilities offered significant opportunities when such skills were in short supply and at a premium. Starting as a clerk at the *taij's* office, he moved to an accounting position in the government. When the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, with the assistance of troops from the Soviet Union, gained control of the country in 1921, he was recruited into the Ministry of Finance. He wrote a mercifully brief account of the chaos that enveloped Mongolia from 1917 to 1921. Recording the exploits of Chinese commander/warlords such as Xu Shuzeng, Japanese-supported leaders, and the Bogdo Gegen, he was, in particular, overjoyed at the defeat, capture, and execution of the brutal and autocratic Baron Ungern Sternberg, who briefly occupied and terrorized Urga in the spring of 1921.<sup>17</sup> He did not mention his own specific role in the socialist revolution, but he sufficiently impressed its leaders to earn an important post in the Ministry of Finance.

His description of the years prior to the attempted collectivization of 1928–1929 followed the official MPRP line. He condemned purged leaders for betraying the party and for their rightist views and appeared to sanction the executions of Premier Dogsomin Bodoos (1885–1922) and Minister of Finance Khorloo Danzan (1873–1924) as “nationalists” and “counterrevolutionaries.” In writing about the Great Khural (or Parliament) sessions of September 1925 and November 1927, he described rightists or counterrevolutionaries who had to be criticized and weeded out. One of their so-called crimes entailed attempts to create a rift be-

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16. See Lan Mei-hua, “The Mongolian Independence Movement of 1911: A Pan-Mongolian Endeavor,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 1996, and Udo Barkmann, *Geschichte der Mongolei* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1999), 101–61 for additional details about the pan-Mongolian movement and the Autonomous period during that time.

17. See the recent popular account of his career: *The Bloody White Baron* by James Palmer (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

tween the MPR, the new government as of 1924, and the Soviet Union. He did not entertain the idea that they might have been patriots fearful of Soviet domination. By this time, he addressed the Soviet Union as the "elder brother" and Mongolia as the "younger brother," a dictum that would shape his career. His ideological blinders prompted him to portray V. Lenin as a member of the proletariat when the Soviet leader actually derived from the professional and well-educated classes. In any event, he concluded that the younger brother profited so much from the relationship with the elder brother that he ought to be grateful and not challenge his benefactor. Neither did he openly criticize the institution of the Bogdo Gegen. When the Eighth Bogdo Gegen died in 1924, the MPRP ensured that no other reincarnation would be found. That same year, a constitution was promulgated that distinguished between the secular and the religious and curbed, if not totally vitiated, the Buddhist establishment's political authority. With his decidedly anticlerical views, Sambuu did not lament the erosion of Buddhist power.

Meanwhile, his career continued on an upward path. In June 1926, the Ministry of Finance promoted him to head accountant for state receipts and expenditures, a vital position in the new government. Aware of the regime's precarious finances, he sought policies that would lead to additional revenues. He advocated a tax increase on foreigners, specifically the Chinese, who, he believed, exploited Mongolia. In October 1928, the Seventh Khural agreed with him and expelled most of the Chinese in order to achieve independence from foreign capital and trade.<sup>18</sup>

However, the Seventh Khural's most significant decision was the development of radical policies. It sanctioned both imposition of higher taxes on and confiscation of the property and animals of the nobles, the lamas, and supposedly rich herders as well as greater economic planning and collectivization of the herds. However, because the Khural did not create clear distinctions between rich herders and "middle-class" herders, local officials, on occasion, expropriated the animals of relatively modest families, enraging much of the rural population.

This more radical policy imitated the Soviet Union's collectivization and destruction of the kulak class and the state takeover of private industry and trade. In May 1929, P. Genden (d. 1937), who later became prime minister, dispatched Sambuu to the modern province (*aimag*) of Arkhangai to implement this leftist policy and instructed him to confiscate property within twenty days. By 1930, he was on the Executive Committee of the Central and South Gobi *aimags*. Sambuu investigated the lords, lamas, and reputedly rich herders and, with great enthusiasm, confiscated their assets. He

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18. Irina Morozova, *Socialist Revolutions in Asia: The Social History of Mongolia in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2009), 70–76.

also met with ordinary herders to explain the transition to collectives, starting with the animals he had requisitioned from the nobles and lamas. He encountered considerable herder resistance. Many herdsmen could not understand the policy and opposed collectives and, at the same time, believed that the expropriation of the lamas', nobles', and supposedly rich herders' wealth upset the natural order to which they were accustomed. Adding to the confusion was the MPRP's egalitarianism, which entailed recruitment of poor and often illiterate herders into administrative positions for which they were unqualified.<sup>19</sup> In his autobiography, Sambuu criticized this policy as ineffective and counterproductive. As he often did, he also blamed lamas for spreading untrue rumors about the government's so-called nefarious objectives in initiating collectives.

The ensuing chaos led to a reversal of policy in 1932, a change that could have damaged Genden's and Sambuu's reputations. Instead, Genden suddenly became a staunch advocate of a New Turn, a rejection of the radical policy. Sambuu escaped demotion and punishment for his role in what came to be known as the Leftist Deviation of the 1928–1932 period. Leaders who had espoused the leftist views were dismissed from their positions or were purged or eventually, in some cases, executed. Yet Sambuu, as was characteristic of his entire career, was not criticized. He himself mounted a critical barrage against the Leftist Deviationists, whom he had earlier supported, for not educating the herders about collectives, for not studying local conditions before initiating these radical policies, and for misidentifying herders as rich and then punishing them.

How did Sambuu avoid blame for misguided policies and at the same time survive the purges that afflicted Mongolia from the late 1920s until the early 1950s? The answer remains elusive. Was he fortunate in having influential patrons? Was he a clever bureaucratic infighter? The evidence does not support such a view of his abilities. More likely, he had an ingratiating personality and was unpretentious, and wielders of power did not perceive of him as a threat. Throughout his career, he would willingly accept positions out of the limelight, ceding final authority to such leaders and heads of state and the MPRP as Kh. Choibalsan (1895–1952) and Yu. Tsendenbal (1916–1991), with both of whom he enjoyed cordial relations and whom he repeatedly praised. In his autobiography, he mentioned, but in a low-key manner, the various medals he received for his work. His encomiums to the Soviet Union and in particular Joseph Stalin for its assistance in fostering education, including the establishment of the first university in Mongolia in 1942, and modern medicine and in promoting herding and industry certainly helped protect him. His adopted son told us that he was an avid chess player and laconic, a trait and a skill indi-

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19. Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia*, 305.

cating cautiousness and an asset in surviving difficult times.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, serving as an ambassador for almost ten years, he was not in Mongolia during the height of the purges.

However tough and ruthless he might have been to reach the highest pinnacles of power, his actions revealed a generous spirit that earned him considerable respect. When his own blood daughter died in 1947, he and his wife adopted her orphaned twin grandchildren and reared them as their own children. This blood adoption paved the way for four other official adoptions and supervision of twenty-two other children, one of whom was from a younger sister's family, but the others were not directly related. These children eventually had careers as writers, politicians, attorneys, and journalists. One became the most important female writer in twentieth-century Mongolia, another was elected to the Khural, and still others became physicians. His grandson, an attorney, heads the Sambuu Foundation, which currently assists herders. When he and his family returned to Mongolia after his tours as an ambassador, they lived in the Ikh Tenger, a gated, protected, and relatively luxurious area about a twenty-minute drive from central Ulaan Baatar (or "Red Hero"), the designation for Urga since 1924. His growing family led a comfortable life in the Ikh Tenger until Sambuu's death in 1972. After a life of privation as a herdsman, then as a lowly government official and a more influential government minister, and finally as an ambassador in war-torn countries, he settled in his sixties to a more placid lifestyle.<sup>21</sup>

Before his admittance into the top ranks of the hierarchy, in the mid-1930s, he became minister of animal husbandry and crop farming. He was an inspired choice for the position, which was particularly important after the failure and abandonment of the collectivization movement. As a former herdsman with considerable experience in that demanding occupation, Sambuu could reassure the herders, who had, because of collectivization and the ensuing turbulence, lost confidence in the government. They had witnessed a sharp decline in the animal census from about 23 million to approximately 16 million or 17 million.<sup>22</sup> Sambuu set about assisting the herders and regaining their trust. In his autobiography, he repeatedly expressed gratitude to the Soviet Union for its help during his years as minister. To be sure, the Soviet Union offered graduate education for the

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20. In his autobiography, Jargalsaikhan, one of his underlings at the Mongolian embassy in the Soviet Union, also noted that Sambuu "was good at all sorts of games," including chess and volleyball, and loved to fish and to hunt for wolves. Jargalsaikhan found him to be "an extremely sincere head of the Party and State . . . not infected with corruption" and summarized by writing that Sambuu "was a simple, sober, lively, nice and humorous man with a strong intelligence," assets that served him well. See Mary Rossabi, trans., B. Jargalsaikhan, *Reminiscences of Many Years: Records of an Ambassador* (forthcoming).

21. Interview with S. Surenjav, Ulaan Baatar, April 24, 2009.

22. Rupen, *Mongols of the Twentieth Century*, 232. On page 233, Rupen noted "an offhand remark by Stalin that the MPR should support 200 million head (!) by 1951–1953."

veterinarians, whom the herders sorely needed. However, Sambuu's Ministry also assisted by constructing wells, transporting animals and animal products to market, supplying hay in winter, providing information, and other guides for the demanding tasks entailed in an environment of occasional frigid winters and drought-laden summers.

The culmination of Sambuu's efforts was publication of his guidebook *Malchidad Okh Zovlogoo* (Advice to Herders) in 1945. Before the communist revolution, monasteries and the local princely governments owned most of the animals and had experts who could offer advice to novice herders. After the revolution, herders were on their own, and quite a few lacked the experience, knowledge, and guidance to succeed in the pastoral life. In the mid-nineteenth century, To-wang, grandson of one of the four most important Khans, had written instructions for herders that emphasized "alternatives to herding." To-wang, who knew Manchu, Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian, made "agriculture . . . compulsory for many people . . . set up his own water mills . . . brought back skilled workmen to instruct his people . . . set up handicraft shops for producing textiles . . . mined gold, and had salt and soda gathered . . . [and] encouraged fishing and hunting."<sup>23</sup> However, by the 1930s, the book he had written was not readily available, nor was it up to date.

Recognizing the need for a new and more sophisticated work on herding, Sambuu, according to his grandson, gathered together experts and culled information and best practices from them. The resulting book was thus a compendium rather than merely his advice. Nonetheless, he produced the work, and it has been praised as "a wonderful book, written in the most difficult style of all, requiring a real master: the everyday language of the people, but used with literary distinction, at once firm and delicate."<sup>24</sup> It combined traditional lore with modern scientific methods and was reprinted in 1999 and 2000, a difficult time for many herders.

His tenure as minister coincided with a recovery in the herding economy. The number of animals increased from the paltry 16 million to 17 million in 1932 to 25 million in 1938.<sup>25</sup> Although Choibalsan, the principal leader, urged party officials to work toward a census of 50 million, a totally unrealistic figure that the pasturelands could not have sustained, the approximately 50 percent growth during Sambuu's years as minister was remarkable. His support for herders and their trust in him and the Ministry contributed to this sharp increase in production.

23. Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia*, 180.

24. Owen Lattimore, *Nomads and Commissars: Mongolia Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 45.

25. Rupen, *Mongols of the Twentieth Century*, 233.

## SAMBUU AS AN AMBASSADOR

In 1937, his success at the Ministry apparently led to his totally unexpected appointment as ambassador to the Soviet Union. He had never been outside the country, yet he now had Mongolia's most important diplomatic position. While it is true that few Mongolians had spent time abroad, still some in the elite had traveled to China, Germany, or Russia and could have served as ambassadors. This puzzling choice can be explained only as recognition of Sambuu's ability to get along with different types of people and his skill in not alienating or making enemies with influential leaders. He also was not identified with a specific program or policy that could be repudiated. Government leaders could rely on him to abide by their policies, and the supreme leader Choibalsan's instructions indicate that Sambuu was under some restraints. Choibalsan told the new ambassador that he needed to seek permission from the government even to meet with foreigners except for citizens from the Soviet Union and Tuva. He also ought to report any information that he could gather about the Japanese "imperialists" and their intentions. Finally, Choibalsan urged him to keep close tabs on the increasing number of Mongolian students in the Soviet Union.

On November 3, 1937, Sambuu departed from the only country he had ever lived in to undertake his new responsibilities in Moscow. He left Mongolia at the height of the major purges afflicting the communist era. The government killed or executed thousands of lamas, Buryat intellectuals, military men, members of the old aristocracy, prominent MPR officials, and ordinary individuals, portraying them as Japanese spies or counter-revolutionaries.<sup>26</sup> P. Genden and A. Amar (1886–1939?, 1941?), two former prime ministers, were executed in the Soviet Union. Soldiers and party activists confiscated Buddhist property and assets and destroyed or damaged monasteries and their artistic and literary treasures, a substantial loss to Mongolia's cultural history. In his autobiography, Sambuu hardly mentioned the disruptions and chaos of these terror-filled years, which engulfed some of his friends and associates, including his longtime patron and associate Genden. He omitted perhaps the most striking developments in Mongolia in the late 1930s. Reports about the violence must have reached him in Moscow, but he focused instead on his duties and ignored the disturbances in his homeland and in the Soviet Union. He had a fine pretext for doing so—his vital tasks in the Soviet Union.

Even before his arrival, a Soviet-Mongolian Agreement in 1929 and a Soviet Mongolian Protocol in 1936 had bound Mongolia closer to the Soviet

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26. B. Dashpurev and S. K. Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia, 1920–1990* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1992), and Shagdariin Sandag, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), offer useful if perhaps exaggerated and somewhat unreliable accounts of these purges. A careful and unbiased study is required.

Union. Genden opposed such a political alliance, a stance that may have contributed to his execution.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the most significant provisions of the protocol were that “the USSR was to render assistance in strengthening Mongolia’s military forces,” and “in case of necessity, the Mongolian government was to provide the USSR favorable conditions for moving Soviet Army troops through the territory of Mongolia.”<sup>28</sup> Both the Soviet Union and Mongolia feared Japanese incursions from Manchukuo into Mongolia, and it is no accident that Choibalsan instructed Sambuu to keep watch over Japan. Sambuu was gratified, in 1939, when Mongolian and Soviet troops defeated the Japanese in a battle at the Khalkh River (or Nomonhan to the Japanese) along the Mongolia–Manchukuo border. Japanese expansionism was halted, leading to a Soviet–Japanese Non-Aggression Pact in April of 1941 “when Tokyo agreed . . . to a Joint Declaration recognizing the territorial integrity and inviolability of the MPR, in exchange for Moscow’s recognition of Japan’s puppet state of Manchukuo.”<sup>29</sup> Sambuu expressed considerable relief at this resolution of the Japanese threat.

He remained as ambassador in the Soviet Union until 1946, a crucial era in the twentieth century. The staff he developed would include some of the most important diplomats in the postwar period. For example, his deputy B. Jargalsaikhan (1915–2006) would later assume the position of minister of foreign affairs and later still would become the first Mongolian ambassador to the United Nations. The entire staff needed to abide by the policy subsumed under the slogan of the Soviet Union as the elder brother and Mongolia as the younger brother, assuring the Soviet Union of an influential role in Mongolian domestic and foreign policies.

Nonetheless, Sambuu had his own agendas for his tenure as ambassador. One task was to facilitate the actual mechanics of Soviet–Mongolian commerce. The lack of infrastructure hampered the transport of Soviet products to Mongolia. Sambuu told Soviet officials that Mongolia required expertise to develop plans to improve roads and railroads to facilitate the flow of goods to his country. After World War II, such transport projects would be initiated. Sambuu cooperated with Anastas Mikoyan (1895–1978), the Soviet minister of trade, who emphasized the Soviet Union’s desire for Mongolian dairy and meat products. Mikoyan, a specialist on food supplies and the economy, made the practical suggestion to Sambuu to construct meat processing plants closer to the animals in the countryside rather than in Ulaan Baatar. It is difficult to tell whether Sambuu transmitted this advice to his superiors in Mongolia.

27. Elena Boikove, “Aspects of Soviet–Mongolia Relations,” in *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan*, ed. Stephen Kotkin and Bruce Elleman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 112–13.

28. Boikove, “Aspects of Soviet–Mongolia Relations,” 115.

29. Bruce Elleman, “The Final Consolidation of the USSR’s Sphere of Interest in Outer Mongolia” in Kotkin and Elleman, *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century*, 128.

Sambuu's consuming passion during the early years of his tenure as ambassador was the status and progress of the Mongolian university students in the Soviet Union. He repeatedly wrote that these students constituted Mongolia's future and was convinced that Mongolian schools needed to teach Russian in order to expand the pool of Mongolians eligible to study in the Soviet Union. An educated Mongolian populace was one of his most important objectives. He had striven so mightily to become literate that he was obviously delighted to learn that, with the assistance of the Soviet Union, the National University of Mongolia, the country's first university, had been founded in October 1942. Even during the dark days of World War II, he mentioned, with great pride, the establishment of the university in Mongolia. However, his main concern was with the students who faced food shortages and lived spartan lives in the Soviet Union. He and his wife set about inviting students to dinners. Bazaryn Shirendev (1912–2001), one of these students who eventually became rector of the National University of Mongolia (1946–1953), among other important positions, expressed his gratitude in his own autobiography, writing that "J. Sambuu, who was our ambassador, was very kind to us and sometimes used to invite us for meals."<sup>30</sup>

The onset of World War II compelled Sambuu to turn his attention to war efforts. Naturally, he agreed with the communist assessment that the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939 was a brilliant maneuver because it offered the Soviet Union time to prepare for a German invasion. Historians have disputed this assertion, claiming that the Soviet purges had devastated the Soviet army leadership and that Joseph Stalin did not make adequate preparations to counter the Nazi attack. Sambuu claimed to have been impressed with Stalin in their meetings together and often praised the Soviet leader. He wrote that Stalin spoke softly but was voluble and reputedly direct in his statements and opinions. In any event, Sambuu remained in Moscow throughout the war except for a brief period during which he and other ambassadors were evacuated when German armies approached Moscow.

Sambuu's war efforts were centered on providing supplies for the Soviet Union. He served as the official in charge of so-called gifts, which consisted of *deels*, boots, gloves, and jackets to Soviet soldiers and ordinary people.<sup>31</sup> The Soviets, via Anastas Mikoyan, craved meat and dairy products, which the Mongolians furnished. Sambuu proudly asserted that the Mongolians'

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30. Temujin Onon, trans., *Through the Ocean Waves: The Autobiography of Bazaryn Shirendev* (Bellingham: Center for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University, 1997), 103. On page 13, Shirendev wrote that he was born in 1912. Alan Sanders, *Historical Dictionary of Mongolia*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 298, wrote that he was born in 1911.

31. A delegation led by Choibalsan, the Mongolian leader, brought about 740 wagons of food and 300 kilograms of gold as gifts to the Soviet Union in late 1942. See Alicia Campi and R. Baasan, *The Impact of China and Russia on United States–Mongolian Political Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 275.



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