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Yes, We Khan

Nationalism in Mongolia is in full bloom. But viral resistance seems to be growing — led by the heavy metal band 'The Hu'

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A river winds majestically through a mountain valley in the twilight. A rider carrying a battle standard made of black horse hair ascends a hill. He's followed by a group of menacing-looking motorcyclists. Dramatic music. This is the spectacular beginning of the Hollywood-style music video 'Wolf Totem' by the Mongolian heavy metal band The Hu. Since its release in November 2018, the video has been viewed more than 15 million times on YouTube. The band has also conquered the major streaming providers' charts in recent months.

The Hu's success abroad is based on the fascination exerted by the unusual combination of Western heavy metal music and traditional Mongolian instruments such as horsehead fiddle, Jew's harp and throat singing. At the same time, the videos present highly dramatic pictures of the Mongolian landscape that serve to perpetuate common clichés about nomadic life in the endless expanse of the Mongolian steppe.

But such a superficial view fails to do justice to the phenomenon that is The Hu. Their popularity in Mongolia also has to do with their song lyrics. Which are highly political. At first glance, they bristle with nationalism. The lyrics recall the greatness of Genghis Khan and make use of martial rhetoric. Hostile outsiders, who are not more narrowly specified, are threatened with annihilation in every single line.

Genghis Khan nationalism

This kind of nationalism, which harks back to the medieval Mongol empire, also characterises modern Mongolia. While reference to Mongolia's imperial history was banned for ideological reasons during the socialist era, it's now in full bloom following the successful democratic revolution of 1990. Genghis Khan, the founder of the

Mongol empire, which some 800 years ago reached as far as Europe, can be found everywhere today. A picture of him is emblazoned on the International Airport in the capital Ulaanbaatar, and his portrait is found in every government building. Genghis Khans adorn a wide range of products, from matchboxes to vodka bottles. Banks, insurance companies, hotels, shopping centres, universities and energy drinks trade under his name.

Nationalism as the glue that holds the society together is now also embedded in pop culture, as can be clearly seen in the growing hip hop scene.

This tendency to hark back to the distant past is surely no accident and says a lot about the state of modern Mongolia. Certainly, the fact that after 1990 a democratic political system developed in this sparsely populated, landlocked country between Russia and China, and that it has survived to this day in the face of all adversity, deserves credit. And its huge deposits of raw materials hold out the promise of growth and prosperity. However, the damage to agriculture caused by the hasty system change from a planned to a market economy has not yet been repaired. The gap between rich and poor is widening more and more. Poverty and unemployment remain high.

These problems are exacerbated by continuous urbanisation. For years, climate change in Mongolia has led to extremely dry summers followed by particularly harsh winters. Every year, thousands of nomadic livestock farmers lose their herds and thus their means of subsistence. In the absence of alternatives, they move to the capital Ulaanbaatar, where the infrastructure and labour market are already overstretched. The result is increasing hostility towards refugees from rural areas, and their exclusion and discrimination.

The Hu's political message

Free elections and peaceful changes of government have not yet succeeded in resolving these problems. On the contrary, the widespread corruption and oligarchisation of Mongolian politics have exacerbated the social and economic divisions. New governments promise much, deliver little, and perpetuate the same old nepotism. As a predictable consequence, the disenchantment with political parties and with politics more broadly among the general population is now at a worrying level. Although a broad majority is still committed to democracy, Mongolians do not expect their politicians and parties to change for the better. Political apathy is spreading, particularly among the relatively large

younger generation which grew up after the democratic revolution.

One of the last things this divided society has in common seems to be the worship of its forebears. Oligarchs to day labourers can agree on the fact that the Mongols, because of their superiority over other peoples, succeeded in establishing the largest land empire in world history. Politically, this is continually instrumentalised by those in power. They use overblown patriotism to distract attention from social and economic problems. It's no coincidence that the largest equestrian statue of Genghis Khan is in the possession of the incumbent President, or that no campaign speech passes without a reference to the good old times.

Nationalism as the glue that holds the society together is now also embedded in pop culture, as can be clearly seen in the growing hip hop scene. The Hu seem at first glance to be following this trend. But it's worth taking a second look. The band does not shy from tackling this controversial and difficult topic and shows how nationalism in modern Mongolia functions as a kind of opium for the people. That's what they might want to express at least when, in the song 'Yuve yuve yu', the following message is addressed to the political elites:

'You speak of the uniqueness of the Mongols, but you lie until your mouths dry up / What's going on? / The Mongolian people are born to live like nobles, yet they are unable to unite / What's going on? / Why can't you set our Mongolia back on its feet? / What's going on?'

The Hu question the nationalist consensus and thus open up the possibility of shifting the public gaze away from an idealised past and on to the present. Because social cohesion requires more than equestrian statues and heroic stories.

Or maybe it's all not so clear? In the wake of this article, we received an indication that, apparently, in the band's environment there's a motorcycle rocker club that uses symbols associated with National Socialism. We then followed up on this elsewhere.



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