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Tea Practices in Mongolia

A Field of Female Power and Gendered Meanings

This article provides a description and analysis of tea practices in Mongolia that disclose features of female power and gendered meanings relevant in social and cultural processes. I suggest that women's gendered experiences generate a differentiated power that they engage in social actions. Moreover, in tea practices women invoke meanings that are also differentiated by their gendered experience and the powerful position of meaning construction. Female power, female identity, and gendered meanings are distinctive in the complex whole of cultural and social processes in Mongolia. This article contributes to the understudied field of tea practices in a country that does not grow tea, yet whose inhabitants have turned this commodity into an icon of social and cultural processes in everyday life.

KEYWORDS: female power—gendered meanings—tea practices—Mongolia—female identity

Asian Ethnology Volume 74, Number 1 • 2015, 193–214

At the time this research was conducted, salty milk tea (*süütei tsai*; *сүүмэй цай*) consumption was part of everyday life in Mongolia.[1] Tea was an ordinary beverage whose most popular cultural relevance appeared to be the expression of hospitality to guests and visitors. In this article, I endeavor to go beyond this commonplace knowledge and offer a careful observation and analysis of social practices—that I identify as tea practices—which use tea as a dominant symbol.

In tea practices, people (women in most cases) construct and/or reappropriate the meaning of their gendered identity in social networks of power. Women display aspects of female power and construct gendered meanings in a society that is predominantly patriarchal. It is my task here to provide an analysis of some of the meanings women construct in everyday life tea practices. My suggestion is that tea practices are a field of female power and gendered meanings relevant in the processes of sociality in Mongolia. Furthermore, I argue that tea practices are symbolic actions whose meanings are about identities in social relations. Moreover, beyond disclosing female power and identity, tea practices include processes of meaning transmission that contribute to gender regeneration.

To construct an analysis of tea practices, I have relied heavily on my observations of tea practices during extensive field research in Mongolia undertaken between 2006 and 2010. I discuss my own field research using a practice approach (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 2006) and gender theories (Moore 1988; 1994; Ortner 1996) as a "tool kit" to understand how a commodity of foreign origin and from a secondary economic activity (agriculture) became significant in the social processes of pastoralist herders.

The following analysis comprises a brief discussion of the history of "the conquest" of Mongol social practices by tea leaves packed into rectangular bricks and imported mainly from China. I then provide a description of tea practices before discussing the meanings people invoke in everyday tea practices. Understandably, this discussion does not represent any particular person's tea practices. On the contrary, I endeavor to present tea practice stories as well as I can recall observing them, as I construct a narrative of the stories whose meanings and interpretation concern identities in social and cultural processes. In the conclusion, I clarify my suggestion that tea practices in Mongolia are a field of female power and gendered meanings by highlighting a few of the processes I observed.

The tale of a plant leaf that took over social practices in Mongolia

Mongolia is not a tea-producing country and Mongolians are rarely mentioned among renowned world tea consumers. However, people in Mongolia consider themselves to be tea consumers (*tsaisag*; *цайсаг*). They also consider tea to be the finest and the most symbolic source of all foodstuffs (*ideenii deej, ideenii ekh*; *идээний дээж*, *идээний эх*) (Gaadamba and Tserensodnom 1989, 23).[2] Many informants across the country argue that tea has always been the staple drink in Mongolia, and Mongolian tea practices part of a tradition (*ulamjilal*) passed on from their ancestors.

Although these assumptions imply that tea practices were part of the legacy of the legendary Mongol empire, a careful reading of *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Damdinsüren, ed., 1957; SHM hereafter), the thirteenth-century epic chronicle of the social and political history of the early days of the Mongol empire, shows no mention of any instances of tea consumption. The word "tea" (*tsai*; *цай*) is not part of the chronicle's vocabulary, and tea certainly was not a prominent beverage as it is never mentioned as part of the imperial social life compared to mare's milk and alcohol.[3] Mongolian historiography has generally avoided the topic of tea consumption, and authors such as Mair and Hoh (2009, 126) and Legrand (2011, 192) suggest that tea consumption is absent from the early historical records of the Mongols.

In his report to the French king, the Franciscan friar Guillaume de Rubrouck, a meticulous observer and emissary to the Mongol empire between 1253 and 1255, mentioned that the Mongol people he met during his visit did not consume any water (Rubrouck 1997, 85). On the contrary, they drank fermented mare's milk (*airag*; *айраг*) during the hot summer days and boiled milky water (*khyaram*; *хярам*) during the winter. He does not mention tea at anytime. During my fieldwork, these dietary practices were still largely prevalent, yet tea had since become the staple drink.

I am in agreement with these authors yet, in line with the popular claim of the authority of the ancestors that sustains everyday tea practices, and in spite of the absence of the word "tea" in the SHM, it is also important to examine the history of tea consumption from the perspective of social practices. In this regard, a Mongol researcher, Bürentögs (1991, 94), suggests that Mongol emperors consumed a tea infusion and army soldiers were often punished by death for stealing tea beverages.

To reconcile these conflicting accounts, I understand that the people of Mongolia have always consumed a tea infusion from the wild plants that grew (and still grow) in their vegetation (*tisane*). Not only are these plants medicinal (for example, they are used to replenish energy), they also add flavor to water, providing a hot beverage in the harsh cold weather that can prevent waterborne diseases. I found that in the Mongolian countryside, people did not drink plain water unless it was boiled first. People in South Asia make similar choices to avoid waterborne diseases and to replenish their energy in a highly demanding environment—they drink a tea infusion and also chew tea leaves (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004, 31–39).

However, *Camellia Sinensis*, the type of tea leaves from which tea is widely prepared and that has been consumed in Mongolia since the sixteenth century, does not grow in Mongolia due to the climate. These leaves are imported, mainly from China and Georgia, and they have largely substituted the local tea plants because of their particular economic value in the trade between Mongolia and China. It is this Chinese tea that is largely used in tea practices in contemporary Mongolia that is discussed in this article.

Nevertheless, the Mongols were not altogether strangers to Chinese tea before the sixteenth century. Indeed, the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty in China (1271–1368) organized the tea trade to provide income for the empire (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004, 49; Mair and Hoh 2009, 129). However, tea was not traded in the Mongol territories. The tea trade existed in Tibet and along the Silk Road. After the collapse of the Yuan dynasty (1368) and a period of disintegration of the Mongol political organization, the succeeding Ming dynasty (1368–1644) restricted circulation between the Chinese-Mongol border to avoid raids and war from the Mongols.

However, the Ming leaders' foreign policy to isolate the Mongol territories was not sustainable in the long run. The Mongol population in the northern steppes beyond the great walls needed to trade silk, grain, metals, and so on. Likewise, China badly needed horses to equip its cavalry and counter nomadic attacks from the north (Mair and Hoh 2009, 72). To supply their needs and answer the pressing demands from the Mongol territories, Ming leaders opened a horse market at Khaalgan (1571), where every fourth day, the Mongols could trade horses for Chinese goods (Sanjdorj 1963, 15; Mair and Hoh 2009, 71–85). However, there were restrictions at this market due to the Ming leaders' security concerns. Tea was not traded at this time as the government, which controlled tea trading, did not authorize it at the market (Gongor 1970, 279; Yoshida 2004, 87–90; Mair and Hoh 2009, 126–27).

Meanwhile, Altan Khan, a Tümen-Mongol leader who claimed to be a descendant of Chinggis Khan and wanted to reestablish the Mongol empire, converted to Buddhism and established solid relations with Buddhist Tibet, whose religion provided him with a basis for legitimacy over the Mongol population. In other words, "political patronage was exchanged with religious prestige" (Mair and Hoh 2009, 126), and this made Altan Khan a prominent leader.

The relation with Tibet and the conversion of the Mongol populace to Buddhism obliged the Mongol believers, similar to the Tibetans, to continually offer tea bricks (*manz*, tea offered to monks and monasteries) to monks as part of their religious practices and obligations. The Mongol population also deperately needed to trade with China for food supplies, including tea, after they endured a number of natural disasters in 1531, 1542, 1551, and 1579 during the reign of Altan Khan (1507–1582) (Jamsran ed. 2004, 92).

Altan Khan made several demands to the Ming emperor to open direct trade relations with the Mongols but to no avail. Consequently, Khan regularly raided and looted Chinese territories, not to conquer or occupy the areas, but to force the Ming emperor to open up trade relations with the Mongols. Finally, in 1577,

the Ming emperor agreed to Khan's pressing demands through the good offices of the Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama. Thereafter, among the commodities traded at Khaalgan, tea was traded for the first time to the Mongols (Gongor 1970, 279; Yoshida 2004, 87–90; Mair and Hoh 2009, 126–27).

Other markets opened up progressively, and the Mongol population would trade tea at different points in time, but always under the careful supervision of the government. The Ming leaders strictly controlled trade to avoid any Mongol raids that may have been camouflaged as trade expeditions. At the same time, they promoted trade because they believed it sustained peace between the countries. Indeed, through trade, the Mongols could get the consumer goods they needed and therefore not resort to raiding Chinese territories.

The proximity between the Mongolian, Chinese, and Tibetan (mostly Buddhist) leadership explains the mutual influence in lifestyles. The *Altan Tobchi* (Luvsandanzan 1990, 173), a chronicle of the Mongol empire originally written in the seventeenth century, mentions tea consumption among the Mongol leadership. Jagchid and Hyer write that "the first mention of tea in a Mongol record is in the *Altan Tobchi*: in the fifteenth century, the *khatun* or empress, Sain Mandukhai (1449–1510), in anger, poured tea on a minister who made a proposal with which she did not agree" (Jagchid and Hyer 1979, 44).

Since the first formal tea trade between Ming-led China and Tümen ethnic Mongol, the Mongols traded tea with China, following shifting geopolitical contexts until the establishment of the Tea Road with the signature of the Nerchinsk trade and peace treaty between China and Russia in 1689 (Mair and Hoh 2009, 139–40). To guarantee trade safety through Mongol territories that were highly unstable after the collapse of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty, Russia and China agreed, among other things, to place Mongolia under Chinese supervision, thus politically connecting Russia to China (Michel 1992, 941–57).

The Nerchinsk treaty allowed trade caravans to travel from China to Russia through Mongol territories. Accordingly, in

> [T]he eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands of camels, ox-carts, and sleighs laden with tea trudged their way from China across the undulating Mongolian steppe, through the snowstorms of southern Siberia, over the Ural Mountains, and to their final destination—the bustling fair of Nizhny Novgorod, Imperial Russia's greatest emporium, situated on the bank of the Volga river 250 miles east of Moscow. (Mair and Hoh 2009, 137)

Russia and China expanded their relations further and established a main trade market following the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727. The Kyakhta trade market extended through two posts, with a Russian market located south of Lake Baikal on the border with the Manchu-controlled Mongolia, and a Chinese market called Maimaicheng located on the other side of the Russian market, yet separated only by a wooden fence (Mair and Hoh 2009, 140). Tea caravans would travel from the starting market at Khaalgan in China through the Mongol territories to the trade market in Kyakhta.

As the caravans crossed Mongolia, tea became a valuable commodity in the steppes, especially after the complete occupation of Mongolia by Manchu-led China (1696) and the privatization of trade, which was a government monopoly (Mair and Hoh 2009, 71–78). Chinese private companies saw in Mongolia an immense business opportunity as they opened direct trade with the Mongol herders. Following the tea trade tradition along the Silk Road and Central Asia, tea became legal tender in Mongolia (Maiskii 2001, 206; Atwood 2002, 2: 1062; Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004, 49; Gongor 2006, 86–87) and had indispensable economic value for the aristocracy until around 1925.

Since tea bricks were a form of legal tender in the Mongol territories, Chinese merchants estimated loans and interest in tea bricks, and Mongol aristocrats and monastery leaders, as well as ordinary herders to a certain degree, ended up being heavily indebted (Maiskii 2001, 223–26). The Mongol borrowers could repay their loans and interest mostly using livestock. A tea brick was financially equivalent to a sheep. A tea brick unit was divided into halves or *tal tsai* (*мал цай*), quarters or *dörvön khuruu* (*дөрвөн хуруу*), and eighths or *shoo* (*шоо*) (Gongor 2006, 30–32).[4]

Since then, tea leaves packed into bricks have largely taken over from local tea plants because of their better quality and economic value. During the Second World War, Mongolia experienced a shortage in tea imported from China because of political circumstances, and the Soviet occupants of Mongolia (1924–1990) imported tea from Georgia to make up for the shortage. Tea bricks imported from Georgia bore the communist emblem of a sickle and hammer. After the normalization of diplomatic relations between China, Russia, and Mongolia, the tea trade resumed, and Mongolia could buy tea from China. Both Chinese and Georgian tea were available on the market at the time of this research.

Since 1990, Mongolian tea plants have largely reemerged on the market. Mongolian scholar Rinchen (1979, 122–24) lists about ten herbal tea plants (*tisanes*) that grow in the Mongolian territories. People suggested to me that local tea plants were of better quality than foreign tea leaves because they grow in the local soil that nourishes life in Mongolia. Nevertheless, in the Mongol markets, Chinese tea leaves were largely available.

Female power in tea practices

In rural Mongolia, it is common to observe the following scenario: in most households, the woman gets up early, before anyone else, to prepare tea for breakfast. Therefore, Mongol folk knowledge describes a housewife as a person who gets up early, prepares tea for the household, and performs subsequent tea practices (for example, tea libation, tea services). Consequently, people usually say that tea is the face of a woman, as one judges a housewife by the quality of her tea and tea services.

As the morning tea preparation continues, most household residents and guests are still not up. In the *ger* (*гэр*; yurt), tea preparation breaks the silence of the

night, and the function of the morning tea rituals is to mark the starting point of the day. This orchestrates the rest of the day's activities.

Preparation of the most popular tea recipe (*süütei tsai*; *сүүтэй цай*) takes about fifteen minutes. It consists of boiling water in a large pot to which tea leaves are added. After the tea has boiled, the woman adds fresh milk, lifting the ladle out of the mixture several times to mix the tea and milk. The more she ladles, the better the beverage gets. After ladling, she adds salt and then butter. It is the aroma of the tea that tells the woman when it is ready.

Once the tea is ready and while still on the fire, she collects a sample that is considered to be the first and best part of the tea. It is sprinkled in a libation to nature and earth (*khangai delkhii*; *хангай дэлхий*), poured in an offering to deities (*burkhan*; *бурхан*), the spirits (*ongod, lus savdag*; *онгод*, *лус савдаг*), and the spirits of the deceased family members whose portraits and representations are kept on the family shrine. In other regions of Mongolia (for example, western Mongolia), part of this first sample of tea is also offered to the fire by pouring drops on the four corners of the stove.

According to my female informants, tea offerings to deities and spirits are meant to guarantee lasting health and wealth through the success of everyday work (*ajlyn bütemj*; *ажлын бүтэмж*). The ritual is particularly intended for the well-being of children (*ür khüükhdiin tölöö*; *үр хүүхдийн төлөө*). In the uncertain conditions of the Mongolian pastoral economy, women negotiate with the spirits and deities to guarantee conditions for success that lay beyond human control. It is only after the morning tea offering rituals that other activities of the day can begin.

From inside the *ger*, it is particularly recommended that one drinks the woman's tea before commencing any activities (for example, a journey) outside the *ger*. In drinking tea, one drinks the wishes (of good luck) she has for her household that morning. Her wishes, prayers, and good intentions are imbued in the tea she prepares in the silence of the morning; they are offered in tea rituals and extended to those who drink the tea. It is thus important that people start any activities of the day after drinking tea to guarantee success.

Moreover, tea offerings made to nature and the earth, to fire, deities, and the spirits, depict a woman in a ritual leadership position in a society where ritual power is predominantly patriarchal. In tea offerings, women negotiate their household well-being with nature and the earth, as well as with the spirits. This practice suggests a different and yet complementary domestic leadership from a female position of power. As Ortner (1996, 140–43) suggests, women effectively control some spheres of responsibility that contribute to their sole gain of power and privilege.

It is only after the woman has performed tea libation outside the *ger* and served tea to deities and spirits on the family shrine that she serves household residents, following a hierarchical order starting with her husband. The husband receives part of the tea first because he is head of the household (*geriin ezen*; *гэрийн эзэн*). Even when he is absent or away for a short time, tea is served in his special bowl and set aside before service continues. This first bowl of tea to the husband marks respect

(*nökhör khündlekh*; *нөхөр хүндлэх*) for his hierarchical position in the household, and sets the pattern of hierarchical domestic relations.

The woman serves residents according to a hierarchy of age, gender, and social status, with guests (strangers) being served ahead of residents (intimates). During the tea service, she enacts a social hierarchy and reconstructs the hierarchy of people connected to her household network. People become offended if they do not feel respected during tea service, and she has the privilege of playing down a person's social status. However, it is generally the man, her husband, who represents the household, and he uses this network of solidarity as a channel of services and an exchange of goods.

The construction of social networks through serving tea implies that the power of men is constructed through women's practices, to paraphrase the title of Hamayon's (1979) article. In the case of a bowl of tea offered to express hospitality, a woman partially negotiates the process by which a stranger is converted into a member of her social network. In the exceptional case a guest is not offered a bowl of tea, or is served in a way that expresses a low quality relationship, she discloses her power in the (re)construction of social networks of power.

It is only after the consumption of breakfast tea that other daily activities can commence. The woman and her morning tea practices set up order, as residents wake up and have breakfast, and the daily work schedule is casually discussed at this occasion. The woman embodies order as she organizes the onset of the day, and thus it is correct to suggest, along with Humphrey (2012), that women maintain the idea of domestic order and the home in Mongolia. As tea is kept in the home all day long for residents, and also for extending hospitality to guests, the home becomes a place where there is always tea (and also a fire) to drink.

I found that tea practices are generally female activities and men are excluded from this as a matter of principle. The practices are primarily concerned with domestic processes of family replication (such as marriage and bride tea rituals—practices through which the family as an institution regenerates itself) and the socialization of members. Therefore, the ideas that exclude men from tea practices are femaleness and motherhood. Young women may perform tea practices either as a pedagogical activity that introduces them to their gendered education, or on behalf of their absent mothers. Only a housewife holds the position of performing tea practices, and these practices enhance motherhood as a central feature of female identity in Mongolia.

In tea practices, the woman, as the matron, negotiates with nature and the spirits about the well-being of her household, where children take a central role. It is her responsibility as a wife and mother to nurture the family and this implies resorting to ritual practices. Single women and childless women express awkwardness about offering a tea libation everyday as they do not represent a household with children. Newlywed women offer a daily libation because of its potential efficacy and because they are expected to bear children.

Finally, although morning tea preparation and service portray the women as the central figures of order and domestic power, they also set an asymmetrical pattern in domestic power relations (for example, giving priority to the husband). This

does not necessarily imply subordination as women use their position to resist and engage in a variety of domestic life processes, making decisions in matters regarding the home and leadership in domestic activities. Nonetheless, in tea practices, women construct a different power, not necessarily in opposition to male power, but a power that is anchored in female identity and gendered experience that they apply in social relations to influence others.

Gendered meanings in tea practices

With a few exceptions, tea practices are ascribed to women according to the gendered labor division. Women have the experience and knowledge that relate to particular social and cultural processes. The meanings women invoke in tea practices are communicable, relational, and inclusive, although gendered. I shall consider a few of these processes in general terms.

Classification and Social Hierarchy in Tea Practices

People classify the types of teas served according to their regional distribution or symbolic significance. For regional distribution, the types of teas served are either salty milk tea (*davstai tsai*; *давстай цай*), drunk by people in western Mongolia, or non-salty milk tea (*davsgüi tsai*; *давсгүй цай*), drunk by those in eastern Mongolia.

Regional classification follows the level of sodium in water sources around Mongolia. In western Mongolia, water sources contain a higher level of sodium (*khujirtai us*; *хужиртай ус*), which explains the large number of salt lakes in the region. In eastern Mongolia, there is less salt in the water, and so the milk tea is usually not salty. Although particular households have different cooking practices, the level of salt in the tea is one way people classify the inhabitants of Mongolia into these two principal groups. Western Mongolians consider their eastern compatriots' tea to be tasteless or simply water-like tea.

Classification is not limited to salt and regions; people also classify tea according to categories of symbolic significance. These are black tea (*khar tsai*; *хар цай* or *бор цай*), milk tea (*süütei tsai*; *сүүтэй цай*), and "supplemented tea" (*khiitstei tsai*; *хийцтэй цай*). In the latter, tea is supplemented with rice, dumplings, and grains in a semi-food form and this is consumed in place of meals.[5] Tea without milk, generally known as "black tea" because of the color of the liquid rather than that of the tea leaves, is an exception in Mongolian tea consumption practices. Mongolian black tea should not be confused with tea that is widely consumed in Western countries, which is commonly called *baikhuu tsai* (*байхуу цай*) in Mongolian and is not discussed here.

Herders consume black tea when they do not have milk, which is common in the spring when households run out of milk and the livestock are not lactating. When people talk about tea, they generally mean salty milk tea, and folk knowledge suggests that salty milk tea is composed of the finest five food ingredients (*tavan tansag idee*; *таван тансаг идээ*). These are tea leaves, water, milk, salt, and butter. Of these five items, milk bestows tea its color (white) and subsequent symbolic

meaning. Five elements confer the meaning of the source (*ekh*; *эх*) of all foodstuffs to tea according to the symbolic meaning of the number five as a foundational unit for different universals: for example, five basic colors (white, black, red, yellow, blue), five basic directions (north, south, east, west, and center), and so on (Dulam 2007, 1: 93).

To account for the symbolic classifications and to obtain a high quality beverage for consumption, women in the western provinces of Mongolia prepare tea in a way that displays the mixing of the five finest ingredients. This preparation is known as *tsai tavlakh* (*цай тавлах*), which literally means "to fit the head to tea," and involves a woman pouring water in her cooking pot and adding tea leaves. When the mix has boiled for about five minutes, she transfers the mix into a container. I call this liquid a "water-tea mix." Thereafter, she thoroughly wipes the pot so that there are no drops of the "water-tea mix" left in the pot. She then puts the pot back on the fire and pours in milk to boil, adding very few tea leaves. I call this other liquid "milk-tea mix." While the "milk-tea mix" is boiling, she pours the abovementioned "water-tea mix" into the boiling "milk-tea mix." This mix is now milk tea that is ladled up and down several times. The woman then adds salt and eventually butter to obtain a high quality beverage.

Folk knowledge has it that one should never pour milk on top of water, so the "milk-tea mix" cannot be poured onto the "water-tea mix." Milk is white and goes first into the pot. A woman respects this hierarchy of color, which implies that she would not pour water in the pot first and then pour milk into it. Milk, similar to the head that is the first among the human body, imparts meaning onto the whole. Although people in Central Mongolia (*khalkh*; *халх*) simply pour milk into the boiling "water-tea mix" (*tsai chanakh, tsai butsalgakh*; *цай чанах, цай буцалгах*), in their discourse, they respect the hierarchical meaning of colors according to which white remains the first of all colors.

Even when women make a tea infusion, as in eastern Mongolia (especially in the Khentii province region), they respect the symbolic classification of color and meaning. Following this process of tea preparation (*tsai khandlakh*; *цай хандлах*), a woman boils water and adds tea leaves. When the mix is ready, she transfers it into a small container (*guts*; *гуц*). This tea infusion is known in the region as "tea juice" (*tsainy khand*; *цайныханд*) and it is kept in the home for regular use. Anytime there is a need to prepare tea (for example, for hospitality), the woman simply boils milk and adds a few tea leaves before directly serving the guest, who is also presented with the tea infusion container to add the infusion to the boiled milk according to preferred tea strength.

When people are obliged by circumstance to drink black tea, they avoid using the qualifier "black" to indicate tea without milk. Instead, they refer to this beverage as brown tea (*bor tsai*; *бор цай*), "bare" tea (*shaldan tsai*; *шалдан цай*), or red tea (*ulaan tsai*; *улаан цай*). It is taboo to invoke the color black on such a valuable beverage as tea (*khar öngö tseerlekh*; *хар өнгийг цээрлэх*), and so black tea is in a sense "hidden" so that people do not worry about failing to respect the taboos related to the color black. The color black, Dulam (2007, 2: 7) writes, is a symbol

of what is bad and negative. The color white is the symbol of what is good, positive, and of what lies ahead. One must not offer black tea to guests or sprinkle it in a libation.

Tea Consumption

Tea is mostly consumed as the staple drink, a medicinal potion, or as a food supplement. The practical choice of tea is understandable and not unique to Mongolia. For Mongolian herders, even milk is not their staple drink due to its potential to breed bacteria. Therefore, tea is usually kept at home for regular consumption throughout the day.

Mongolian herders believe that drinking tea is instrumental in improving health and well-being. It balances a diet high in fat, and many people suggested to me that tea absorbs poisons (*khor*; *хор*) from the body, and this is why people oppose tea to anything that compromises health (for example, the water in a particular location). In the same vein, women apply tea leaves (*tsainy shaar*; *цайны шаар*) on swollen body parts to absorb toxins and alleviate pain. Some women insert a tea leaf vein in their earlobe piercing to prevent infection. Moreover, in order to prevent infection, gain strength, and improve overall well-being (*tenkhee oruulakh*; *тэнхээ оруулах*), people give black tea (often referred to by a different name, such as brown tea) baths to babies and elderly people.

In connection with the energy-giving properties of tea, herders mix tea leaf residues to livestock feed to help them gain strength in the winter and spring. The connection between tea consumption and an improvement in health is well established, and the list of ailments that tea consumption may relieve is rather impressive (Amarjargal 2004, 62–63).

Since the democratization of Mongolia in 1990, there has been a steady increase in the consumption of local tea plant infusions. People believe that Mongolian tea plants have better therapeutic effects because they absorb natural nutrients that are suitable for sustaining life in the Mongolian environment. The assumption is that local tea plants mediate health better than imported tea leaves. In the context of the post-socialist transition of Mongolia, maybe national identity and pride play their part in considering Mongolian tea as better than imported Chinese tea, which is generally considered to be inferior.

The therapeutic qualities of tea are not limited to replenishing energy, and people take these qualities to a symbolic level. Tea is used in a potion for symbolic healing intended to alleviate extreme fatigue: the seven-dumpling-tea recipe (*doloon banshtai tsai*; *долоон банштай цай*). To prepare such a potion, women add seven meat dumplings to the regular salty milk tea recipe, and the patient drinks the potion once a day for thirteen consecutive days. On the first day, the patient drinks the potion with one dumpling in it, with the number of dumplings gradually increasing until the seventh day. From the seventh day, the dumpling intake gradually decreases till the thirteenth day. The seven-dumpling-tea recipe is effective because people believe in the principle of the healing power of the ritual symbols (see, for example, Douglas 1970; Moerman 1979; Dow 1986).

According to some women, drinking tea every morning brings luck and success in daily work (*ajlyn bütemj*; *ажлын бүтэмж*). These are the wishes that the women, by serving tea, express. Tea mediates an exchange of wishes, and this is why whenever a guest enters a household while tea is being prepared, it is considered a sign of good luck for the guest. Consequently, a guest is not allowed to leave a house without drinking tea because the success of one's endeavors for the day depend on the blessings conveyed through tea consumption.

Tea as a Symbol of Hospitality

Hospitality may be one of the most prominent and obvious meanings of tea practices in Mongolia and is a celebrated Mongol tradition of the steppe culture (for example, see Sampildendev 2006). Upon entering a home, a guest is offered a bowl of tea which, together with the greetings, is part of the hospitality protocol. The gendered repartition in this protocol is that it is the man as the household master who performs the greetings, and the woman, as the household matron, who offers the hospitality tea. The gendered meaning of tea is already set at this point.

In most Mongolian homes where I have been a guest, I have never been served tea by the household master unless his wife was away and there were no girls to perform this duty normally ascribed to females. When hospitality protocol involved alcohol and a meal of mutton, it was usually the male household master who performed the service. The tea offered to the guest has to be milky and hot. One should not offer black tea and/or cold tea as this may undermine the symbolic meaning of hospitality. When a guest comes from far away, the matron may prepare tea for hospitality, thus adding another quality to the hospitality tea: milky, hot, and new.

When presented with the tea, the host expects the guest to drink or at least to sip some of it. I was initially told that as a guest one should never turn down the offer of the hospitality bowl of tea. My informants insisted that this should never happen; turning down the bowl of tea would imply not accepting the hospitality protocol which defines the relationship between the residents and the guests (Humphrey 2012).

Transmission of Meanings and Gender Regeneration

Tea practice meanings are transmitted from one generation of women to the next through everyday routines and are an ensemble of experiences collected under the concept of "tea tradition." Tradition implies the transmission of experience and meanings, and women progressively introduce their young adult daughters into these meanings through handling tea. Some boys are also introduced to tea practices, yet there is a difference between a daughter's initiation and a son's initiation into practices that are generally classified as female. The gender ideology connected to the practice is not useful to a young boy because it is not valid in the social frame that sustains his gender identity.[6]

Tea practices are part of a mother-daughter relationship. Not only are tea practices passed from mothers to daughters, but also attitudes, social behavior, and the

gendered division of labor are introduced together with tea practices. Gender ideology is introduced not as a principle of life, but rather as a principle of practices that have implications in everyday life. This latter aspect is absent in the case of a boy's initiation into tea practices. Initiation into tea practices is necessary for daughters to master both the practice and the attitude of the practitioner.

As young daughters acquire a mastery of tea practices, the meaning of the practices they learn contributes to the definition of their gender identification, which offers a position from which they engage in social relations; mastery of practices connect younger members to a larger complex of meaning and experience; and the daughters' learning and subsequent knowledge connect them to tradition.

Tea Practices in Social Processes

People organize tea gatherings (*tsaillaga*; *цайллага*) to celebrate different occasions in the family life cycle. Such occasions include (although are not limited to) the cutting of a child's hair for the first time (*daakhi ürgeekh*; *даахь үргээх*), a name-giving ritual, and a child's birthday. During tea gatherings, other foodstuffs are served, yet tea is often prioritized to welcome guests and respect the hierarchy in food service. Tea gatherings are small-sized receptions among kin and close friends.

Tea gatherings are not only for celebrations. Women gather to drink tea and exchange information, and eventually exercise a certain level of social control over each other. Tea gathering practices bind people together and bring back memories. During my research in Central province, an elderly woman regularly invited her now-independent children for tea drinking during weekends and holidays. The woman reminisced about when her children were young and enjoyed her daily tea services at breakfast. For this woman, a conversation about tea provided an opportunity to discuss her relations with her children and to her own mother. For some people, the best memory they have of their mothers is of being at home and drinking tea "prepared and served by one's mother" (*eejiin chanasan tsai*; *ээжийн чанасан цай*).

For both men and women, the memories of drinking tea primarily involve their mothers. Missing one's mother (and her care) is associated with missing the tea that she prepared (*eejiin chanasan tsai*; *ээжийн чанасан цай*). Even though few men evoke memories of their wives, the centrality of motherhood in relation to tea practices emphasizes tea as a metaphor for women and whose symbolic meaning defines female identity.

Tea as a symbol of women goes as far as people mocking a man who cannot find a female companion by calling him a "tea companion" (*tsainy khani*; *цайны хань*). On the contrary, the same expression is used as a metaphor for a woman who is required to prepare tea every day and complete tea services. People associate tea and women to the point that one represents the other. Men not only endorse this association, but some also insist that the measure of a good husband is his wife's character, and the measure of a good wife is the quality of the tea she prepares. Accordingly, the ideal male lover sings for his beloved using metaphors such as "would you be willing to be the person to prepare my tea?" (*tsai chanaj ögökh khün maani bolooch*; *цай чанаж өгөх хүн маань болооч*).

Tea and Exchange

Although tea is mostly bought from local markets, there are other ways of acquiring it. When a woman buys a supply of tea for her household, she usually buys the most popular tea on the market at the time—tea leaves pressed into a rectangular brick (*dugui bulantai tsai*; *дугуй булантӑй цай*). Women usually buy one tea brick at a time and supply a new one only after the previous is totally consumed, or almost consumed. Further, it is taboo to loan tea to each other even if one runs out of stock.

Nevertheless, people borrow tea from each other. They break the taboo because of the practicality of everyday life—there is ususally a ritual to make up for a broken taboo. Married children borrow tea from their parents (for example, a daughter from her mother). As a newly-married couple settling beside the in-laws, the daughter or daughter-in-law are often allowed to borrow tea leaves from the in-law's stock because they do not yet have their own stock, and also because they are considered to be an extension of the in-law's household. Also, if one runs out of tea and absolutely needs to borrow tea from the neighbors, this is considered as incurring a debt to be paid off later. In order not to incur any debt, the lender gives a different food item next to the tea leaves, to cover the tea.

In addition, a tea brick is exchanged when a man requests a bride's hand. Among the many gifts that the groom's family presents to the bride's family is a tea brick for the bride's mother. This tea brick is wrapped in a blue fabric (*khadag*; *хадаг*) and placed on the bride's family's domestic shrine. The significance of this tea brick exchange is the recruitment of a new family member. Parallel to this, occasionally people exchange a tea brick to acquire a puppy because herders consider a dog to be a member of the extended family.[7]

People also exchange tea as a gift, a gift that is generally intended for females—in some cases, people insist that only children should give a gift of tea to their mothers. The "gender of the gift" of tea—to borrow a phrase from Strathern (1981)—is female, as opposed to alcohol, which is a male-gendered gift. Children give tea to their mothers for major celebrations such as the Mongolian New Year, or simply after a prolonged absence.

Nevertheless, the gift of tea is never free, and there is always an exchange gift (*khariu beleg*; *харцуу бэлэг*). The exchange gift, different in nature and at different times of giving (Bourdieu 1977, 5), is the parents' joy of receiving from their children and an affirmation of the filial bond. It is important for children to make their parents (their mother in this case) happy by offering presents (*eejiigee bayarluulakh*; *ээжийгээ баярлуулах*), and a gift of tea is an excellent choice. People also place a tea brick on a cairn (*ovoo*; *овоо*) as an offering to nature; tea represents other food, and by placing a tea brick on the cairn, people wish to share (*khuvaaj idekh*; *хуваажидэх*) with nature and earth the best part of their food.

In a libation, tea is also exchanged with nature and earth and with the spirits of the land and water. Every morning, most women in both rural and urban Mongolia offer a tea libation. In the Khangai region of Mongolia (for example, Arkhangai

province, Övörkhangai province, and Zavkhan province), women say they offer tea libation to *Khangai delkhii* (*Хангай дэлхий*) or to *Bayan khangai* (*Баян хангай*); women from the Gobi region talk about an offer to *Altan delkhii* (*Алтан дэлхий*); whereas those from the Altai Mountain region talk about *Altai khangai* (*Алтай хангай*). All these linguistic expressions refer to an inclusive concept of nature and earth in its different regional representations.

Stories about the exchange of tea with nature and earth also come up through the evocation of taboos regarding turning the ground. As a matter of principle, it is taboo for human beings to "turn up the ground" (*gazar ergüülekh*; *газар эргүүлэх*).[8] However, when people are obliged by circumstance to dig the ground (for example, digging a grave or the foundations for a house), they needed to ask permission for the piece of land they are going to use (*gazar guikh*; *газар гүйх*). This permission is obtained, among other ways, through placing a tea brick on the ground to be dug. Therefore, a tea brick is placed in the foundations prior to the erection of a building, as well as being placed in a grave.[9]

Other forms of tea exchange between human beings and nature can be found in the offering of tea bricks at female shrines such as at the "Mother Rock shrine" in Central province, as well as at the "Mother Tree shrine" in Selenge province. At these particular shrines, there is an impressive amount of tea brick offerings. The gift and the shrines are of the same gender (female) although tea is offered by both men and women to request fertility (for women) and good health and success (for all).

Tea offerings by men in a religious context are also popular at the Mongolian New Year as they suggest replication of the clan line (Humphrey and Onon 1996, 151–52). Indeed, at the first sunrise of the first day of the New Year, the household master goes up to the local cairn with all the male children and unmarried female children. The man makes a tea offering to the cairn to guarantee success for his household during the upcoming year.

Tea leaf bricks may have lost their economic value as they have become a cheap commodity on the local market. Nevertheless, I still observed one use of tea in the economic process: the exchange of tea for labor in rural Mongolia. After herders have received help with important domestic work (for example, assembling a *ger*, moving abode, and so on), they often offer a bowl of salty milk tea to the individuals who help with the work. Tea is exchanged for labor, and this has given rise to a linguistic expression, "to put tea in someone's hand" (*gar tsailgakh*). The linguistic expression *gar tsailgakh* (*гар цайлгах*) has come to mean offering a gift, and in an urban setting it may imply offering a wage, especially when people involved do not want to speak openly about money. This expression has also come to mean—mainly in Ulaanbaatar—to offer a bribe in order to get a job done.

Tea Pollution Taboos

Apart from mastering tea recipes, daughters also learn what one should or should not do with tea. Tea taboos introduce daughters to the particular meaning of tea practices. Daughters gradually gain knowledge of, among other things, the proper

way to dispose of tea leaf residues. After tea preparation, it is necessary to dispose of tea leaf residues correctly so that these residues do not become polluted.

Some women bury tea leaf residues in the ground outside the *ger* and away from the dust disposal pile that is usually placed outside to the left (east) of the *ger*. Other women bury them at the front and very close to the *ger*. There are also instances when tea leaf residues are buried at the back, a distance away from the *ger*; and they are also piled up in a cairn shape on an elevated place away from residential camps. In all cases, tea leaf residues are to be absorbed in the ground, and people insist that this is the same as entrusting them to nature.

As an alternative, women toss tea leaf residues into a fire immediately after tea preparation. They do the same with the tea leaf powder that remains in the tea pouches after the brick is used. Burning tea leaf powder is related to offering tea to the fire deity, similar to what women in western Mongolia do when offering tea libations to the fire by pouring drops of tea on the stove. For these people, fire is sacred (*gal burkhan*; *гал бурхан*), which is an old religious concept of the Mongol religious experience (Damdinsüren 2000, 2: 248–66).

Related to the therapeutic quality of tea, some people gather a substantial amount of tea leaf residue to stuff pillows. These pillows are believed to balance blood pressure and relieve headaches. In all cases, the tea leaf residue is to be protected from any human feet stamping on it and from being mixed with dirt—in other words, to be protected from pollution.

The treatment of tea leaf residue concerns the boundaries between purity and pollution that deal with social relations (Douglas 1966, 141–72). Pollution (*buzar*; *бузар*) is considered a source of misfortune. Tea taboos imply a morality whereby something that is pure, such as tea, must take precedence over other things. Tea leaves and their residue are not to be associated with anything that represents dirt (for example, feet or ashes). In everyday life, people know too well that one never mixes what is pure with what is polluted because it endangers life. Embedded within this practice are moral principles that discriminate what is good from what is evil in everyday life.

Tea's Symbolic Actions

Most of my conversations about tea's symbolic actions evoked the baby cleansing ritual that takes place four to seven days after childbirth and during the name-giving rite when "black" (but here called "brown," "red," or "bare" due to taboos) tea is used to cleanse babies (*khüükhdiin ugaalga*; *хүүхдийн угаалга*; Sampildendev et al. 2006, 109–15; Gantogtokh 2007, 23). The cleansing is performed either by the baby's grandmother (on either descent line) or by the midwife. The baby is taken to the honorific place inside the *ger* where the woman, with a mouthful of "black" tea to regulate the tea to body temperature, pours the liquid onto the baby's body for a quick wash.

During fieldwork in 2009, in Ulaanbaatar's Bayanzürkh district maternity hospital, nurses cleansed newborn babies with "black" tea for both hygienic and ritual

purposes. This ritual was about strengthening the baby's body, while also cleansing the baby from the blood pollution that covered its body at birth.

When the ritual is held at home, the midwife receives all honors as she sits at the most honorific place in the *ger* where a table with ritual mutton is set up. The midwife has the privilege of "reaching" the ritual mutton (*shüüs khöndökh*; *шүүс хөндөх*), that is, the most important person makes the first cut, not as an "honorary male" (for example, HASTRUP 1987, 95–98) but as an honor to her position of power and her ritual leadership.

Tea cleansing is also done during funerary rituals. Corpses are specially prepared before the burial, including, among other things, the washing of the corpse (*yas barikh*; *яс барих*). People who wash the corpse, those who touch it, and those who drive the coffin to the grave receive, among other things (for example, matches), a pressed tea brick (or any different tea brand). Anyone who touches the corpse is considered polluted, and the gift of tea implies cleansing. On these occasions, the tea is presented to men, not as a gift, but rather as a cleanser.

I observed symbolic actions involving tea that included the symbolic marriage of a woman with a tea jug during fieldwork in Erdenbüren county, Khovd province, August 2008, and in Mörön city, Khövsgöl province, 2009. Western Mongolians, famous for being culturally conservative, symbolically married some of their single women who reached forty-nine years of age to a tea jug. This ritual is an alternative form of a wedding rite, yet since there was no groom, a (male) tea jug was used to symbolize the groom. This ritual is known as *dombotoi suulgakh* (*домботой суулгах*) or *dombo tevrüülekh* (*домбо тэврүүлэх*), literally meaning "(for the woman) to marry a tea jug" or "(for the woman) to embrace a tea jug."

A tea jug is the faithful companion of a woman who prepares tea everyday and pours it in a tea jug. A (male) tea jug shares the external symbol of masculinity—that is, a belt. A tea jug is thus used as a symbolic man. This symbolic marriage allows an adult single woman both sexual and economic independence.

CONCLUSION

The above description has presented some tea practices and their meanings and has also provided features of female identity and power. In tea practices, women invoke a range of meanings that are relevant in a variety of social processes. Furthermore, women engage in social relations from this particular position. The meanings of the social and cultural processes women negotiate in tea practices are part of a larger web of significance in life. Both men and women relate to these meanings in their everyday lives and in their construction of identities and social networks.

Tea practices provide women with a position of social action. Although asymmetry is a prominent feature of these relations, these positions are not necessarily those of subordination because they provide women with a position of resistance. I consider female power to be women's experiences of impacting social actions from a female position. Gendered meanings are those that women invoke in everyday

practices from a female position of power. Women construct meanings of a specific world wherein the experience of their personal (female) identity is central and influential. The female world of meanings orients social actions—including male actions—because of the symbolic dimension of practices.

Female power in this discussion is not a tenure over specific domains of social life; rather, it is a quality that only women exercise in their relation to other members of society, including spiritual entities. This quality creates specific meanings of social processes or gendered meanings.

As I have suggested, the meanings women invoke in tea practices are gendered because of the differentiated position of power from which they are constructed. Nevertheless, these meanings are no less part of an open and complex set of meanings relevant in social processes—they are different and complementary. As Moore (1994, 1) suggests, the difference is about forming and maintaining group boundaries. Meanings in tea practices enforce gender differentiation and replication.

Finally, it is imperative to mention that tea practices in Mongolia have been a marginalized field of research, probably because of the gendered and elitist biases in social discourse. Unlike China and Japan, where tea practices are associated with institutions of power (Anderson 1987), tea practices in Mongolia are marginalized from the mainstream cultural discourse because of their association with women and the domestic domain. Further, in the fast-growing urban and capitalist economy of Mongolia, many features of tea practices have been altered, although some urban women reappropriate and construct new meanings of their identity in their lives using their memories of the old meanings.

Notes

1. Transliteration of Mongolian-language terms follows colloquial language pronunciation in the Republic of Mongolia.

2. With regard to Mongol publications, publishing during the socialist era (1924 to 1992) was a state-controlled business and publication companies did not exist. As such, Mongol books published during that period have no publisher name listed. Even today there are very few publishing companies because the private sector has been slow to catch up with the political changes.

3. Alcohol consumption was part of the social fabric of the Mongol empire, as attested by the conversation Emperor Chinggis Khan has with his children and heirs to the empire (Luvsandanzan 1990, 120), as well as the report of the meeting his best nine generals had with an orphan boy about alcohol consumption (Damdinsüren 2000, 92–100).

4. Bawden also mentions *khunz tsai*, which means a "basket of tea" (1997, 470).

5. Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2004, 43) describe the "semi-food" tea in South Asia as a "mushy tea soup." It is this very similar mushy tea soup that I call "supplemented tea" to literally translate the Mongolian term *khiitstei tsai*.

6. I share Humphrey and Onon's (1996, 142) suggestion that rituals—and practices—are not inherently ideological. Agents bestow ideological meaning onto practices. Young men performing tea practices do not always have an idea of the ideological meaning of these practices. On the contrary, young women performing tea practices are very much aware of the connection of these practices to their female identity.

7. Dogs are considered to be extended family members in Mongolia. People believe that at death a dog could reincarnate into a human being because of its natural affiliation with human beings (*neg töröl)*. A dog has a relationship of mythical kinship to humans.

8. In Mongolia, a largely non-agrarian society, there is less work done on the land. I observed during my fieldwork in Myangat county, Khovd province, August 2007, that the taboo about not turning the ground also concerns the protection of pasturelands. Turning the ground is considered to be a negative activity (*nügel*). When herders set up a new tent and they need to turn the ground to place the *ger* platform, some use a pig tusk (*gakhain soyo*). To the spirits of the land, it is the pig and not the human that turns the ground. The same process is mentioned by Otgonbaatar (2009, 46–80), although in this case before turning the ground.

9. Otgonbaatar (2009, 46–80) describes funerary rituals in Mongolia in detail and mentions the process of placing a tea brick on the ground to request the piece of land from nature for the burial.

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