

THE ORAL HISTORY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY MONGOLIA



Sugir

Basic information

Interviewee ID: 990046
Name: Sugir
Parent's name: Hühhendüü
Ovog: Ih Ölziit
Sex: m
Year of Birth: 1963
Ethnicity: Halh

Additional Information

Education: higher
Notes on education:
Work: sumyn zasag darga
Belief: Buddhist
Born in: Manlai sum, Ömnögovü aimag
Lives in: Manlai sum (or part of UB), Ömnögovü aimag
Mother's profession: herder
Father's profession: herder

Themes for this interview are:

(Please click on a theme to see more interviews on that topic)

authority; politics / politicians; work; belief; NGOs;

Alternative keywords suggested by readers for this interview are: (Please click on a keyword to see more interviews, if any, on that topic)

climate change; nationalism; mining; Manlai sum; democracy; darga; press; Ulaanbaatar; trust; religion;

Click here to submit your own keywords for this interview

Please click to **read an English summary** of this interview

Please click to **read the Mongolian transcription** of this interview

Translation:

Oyuntungalag -

Mr. Sugir, this time let's talk about those who held power during the socialist period. What were the differences and the relations between those who had power and those who didn't, between the commanders and the soldiers? How did power-holders differ from other people? Did they, for example, differ in the things they owned or the cars they drove? Or were their relationships or their behaviors different?

Sugir -

Well, socialist leadership was completely different from leadership today. During the socialist period, the leaders, especially those at the level of the national government and that of the local administration, I would say they weren't greedy. Maybe they really weren't greedy, or maybe it was the society that was able to make people commit to their work. The leaders, the soldiers and the common people, they all lived for the sake of their work, for the sake of the development of their country. I don't think that Tsendbal guai and Batmönh guai, those high representatives of the state and the Party, had more privileges and more money than other people, that they were living in luxury. Just like the herders and the common people, the worked tirelessly all day long for the independence and the development of our country, and for people's health and education, that's how I understand it. And now, especially at the level of our parliament, people get power and then they use it to take bribes, to enhance their living standard, to send their children to study here or abroad, to send their relatives abroad or around the country. It is clear to everybody that this is the direction into which they are going. And you can see how they fight and compete with each other in order to get power and for what reason. In today's society, those who hold power live well, they have more money than other people, they can help their relatives and friends much better, that's what we see today. In the socialist society, one had to start from the lowest level in order to get promoted. One would get promoted if one worked well. And because this system has been eliminated, today new graduates become directly department heads in the ministries. So today people who graduated from school and worked their whole lives for the sake of the state and society, who have accumulated a lot of experience and are more than 50 years old, they are supervised by people who just got their diplomas from some private school. It's just like Dashdondog guai said: 'Is this the time when the crooked lead the straight and the fool shouts at the wise?'. Today this time has come, you know. When everything goes according to the rules things are good. If a minister or a sum leader or a provincial governor has been promoted to that position after having worked at the lower levels, they know the lives of the common people, the good and the bad aspects of his own work, and the characteristics of the territory. If you take people from right behind the desk, instead, who don't know anything except for a few theories, then there are lots of mistakes and deviations. So I don't agree at all with those who say today that the leaders of the socialist period were all dictators. Those people worked and struggled, at every level, for the sake of the people. Of course their salaries were a bit higher than that of common people. And because their salary was higher and rather adequate, they worked without ever thinking about any kind of bribery. Today, instead, their salaries are not sufficient, so they are just not in the position to work for the sake of the people. Actually, society pushes today's leaders to take bribes, that's how I see it.

Oyuntungalag -

Did the attitude of the common people and those in lower positions toward the power-holders change?

Sugir -

In the socialist period, you see, people accepted their leaders. Generally, if a leader said that something was good people would listen. A sum leader might have been good or bad, but when the provincial governor came he would be more respected than the sum leader and so on with all levels. And people recognized the Chairman of the Council of Ministers as the most intellectual, the most intelligent person and the greatest leader of Mongolia. There was no need to get recognition by telling everybody that he is the greatest. He was respected because he had started from below, because he knew Mongolian people's life and was an intelligent person. But today people don't trust their elected leaders. And on the other hand, the mass media represent whoever is in a leading position, whether they have been elected or not, as an enemy of the people, as indecent animals, who eat, drink, and abuse their power, trying to make the Mongolian people have not even one leader. Who will benefit from the absence of leadership? In my opinion, it's the foreign powers, who constantly think about destroying Mongolia's independence. I suppose such powers operate inside and outside of the country. And even within Mongolia there might be mixed-blooded people who don't want Mongolia to stay independent. I guess it benefits them.

Oyuntungalag -

So have there been similar changes in the religious and monastic establishment?

Sugir -

Well, you see, in the socialist period monasteries and temples were forbidden. Since lamas could not marry and start families, people thought on the one hand that they harmed the growth of a pure-blooded Mongolian population. And on the other, there was the idea that those lamas, who were just sitting there reading their books, did not make any



[Mongolian version](#)

[Back home](#)

[Website Tips](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Gallery](#)

[Mongolia](#)

[Project](#)

[Project Team](#)

[Oral History Resources](#)

[Links](#)

[Terms and Conditions](#)

[Contact](#)

contribution to the development of Mongolia, that Mongolia did not need people who just sit there. But worship and faith weren't eliminated completely. There was the so-called Gandan, and if the socialist society or the Mongolian Revolutionary Party had wanted to eliminate Buddhism completely they could have done it. The Gandan monastery is still there in Mongolia. Harhorin, they could have just razed it to the ground. It was probably because they thought that it was necessary to keep some part of Mongolia's history and that people's beliefs and worshipping had to develop step by step. Otherwise, like today, with the freedom of religion not only Buddhism, but also all sorts of foreign religions are coming in. There might be good things about it as well as bad things, but I think that especially the Christian church contributes a lot to making people lose their moral qualities. You see, in this vast and uninhabited country, there are many cases of people dying from hunger or thirst, or because they fall from their mount or because their vehicle breaks down. So if a good person saves someone who is injured, hungry or thirsty, and gives him to drink, instead of saying 'This man called Dorj gave me water' they say 'God sent me this person'. It's not that this person helped me, but that God helped me, but who knows whether that is true or not. The right thing to do is to love and respect for your whole life the person who saved you and brought you water. So today if a good-hearted businessman gives flour for a month to a poor person, Christians would forget about him, instead of telling everybody that this businessman called Dorj gave him this because he means well, that he really is a good-hearted man, thereby encouraging him and many others to strongly love other people and life. If you just say that Christ has sent him and that everyone is just His servant, then you really dilute the humanistic thought. That's why I criticize it.

Oyuntungalag -

Do you believe in any religion?

Sugir -

I'm not so much of a believer, but Buddhism is necessary from several perspectives. I would never condemn anybody for any religious beliefs. Rather, I condemn people who don't have any religion. In fact, is there any big difference between a beast and a person without any beliefs? I think that a person who has a belief, something that tells him what one should and shouldn't do, has a more compassionate, a more caring heart. Well, there are a lot of things in Buddhism that are a hindrance to people's daily lives and work, but there are also a lot of necessary things. And from the scientific point of view, Buddhism is considered to be more scientific than other religions. I think that might be true. However, if it was possible, the religion needs to be reformed a bit, but the religious leaders don't deem that necessary, you see. Especially when they say that you shouldn't head into that direction or that on that day you shouldn't set up a ger or shear wool, well, who knows if it's true or not. And why can't they transcribe their scriptures into Cyrillic? As if it was useful only if they mumble something nobody understands. As for Christianity, the good aspect is that they wrote everything in Cyrillic. While they have written everything in Cyrillic and try to reach out to the people, the Buddhist church just sleeps. And they sleep as if this is how it should be, as if they were following some template. I wonder whether maybe they can't adapt to today's people's traditions and the intellectual development of our society. Who knows? Well, there are things to be critical about and others that are acceptable. But well...

Oyuntungalag -

Do you have monasteries?

Sugir -

Well, as I understand it this thing called religion is one of the human necessities, you know. When someone dies, one wonders why and how, it's almost a tradition, you see. Once there is no monk, no lama, who has finished school and knows the scriptures well, there is an old saying: 'In the land of the blind the one-eyed is king', so when there are no lamas and no monasteries, a little abnormal cross-eyed people appear from everywhere and act as if they were lamas. And they milk money from the people, so religion is a necessity. Because it's necessary, especially during the Tsagaan Sar people travel 160km to the Ölgii Monastery or as far as Ulaanbaatar to do corrective ceremonies within the 15th day of the new year and they incur a lot of expenses. In 2001, we collected about one million Tögrög from people's donations and our own contributions to build a temple and get some lamas in this sum, so that they could perform the ceremonies here. We thought that if we had a lamasery we could gradually train people and get our own lamas, but we failed. So we brought three people to the city to get them trained in the monastery for 45 days. But none of them became a lama, they all went to school and disappeared. So we appealed to the Gandan Monastery, even in written form. But first there is no lama who would come from the city to work in the countryside, and secondly in the Gandan Monastery there is no such thought like religion is necessary for people, let's bring it closer to them. So something has been built thanks to people's donations, why do they say they can't send not even one lama to live here for a year and a few months? Or they say that we need to train somebody from here, but there is nobody to be trained, and what do you think is the reason? It's because they don't have an example that young people would follow proudly, that shows what nice social relations a lama has and what a well-educated person he is. That's why when talking about becoming a lama they say 'Oh no, stay away from that, lamas can't take wives!' So nobody is interested. So we built this, thinking about religion as a necessity, and we think a lot about getting a lama, but it somehow doesn't happen even though it would help a great deal to alleviate the poverty of the people in Manlai Sum. If we had a lama, he would talk nicely to people, lamas have a very nice attitude, they are very modest when they greet people, so it would contribute a little bit also to the education of our children and young people. And those who visit the place, maybe not all, but at least 10, 20%, will have faith and I think that this useless fighting, beating each other up, using knives and competing would decrease. So we built it thinking that it would be necessary from an educational perspective.

Oyuntungalag -

There's no single lama now, right?

Sugir -

No, not one. There was a very old one, but he just died.

Oyuntungalag -

Oh, he died?

Sugir -

Luvсандөвдөв гуай was his name, his funeral is going to be tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. And then, well, there's Badamdorj гуай, an old man in the countryside. He comes here sometimes. Well, we sent a request to the Gandan Monastery, but they never considered the matter. They could tell one of the lamas there 'Ok, you go and work in the countryside'. That's what they do with the doctors, once they graduate to school they are sent to work in a sum or an aimag center for one or two years. And after that they are given a job as doctors. Why not do the same with the lamas from the Gandan Monastery? Why don't they say 'Ok, you go to work in a sum in the countryside for a year and in an aimag center for a year, and after that you can stay in the Gandan'?

Oyuntungalag -

So how did people find work in the socialist period? What was their attitude to work in general? How did it change? How was the process of getting employed?

Sugir -

Well, during the socialist period, you see, the leaders of the cooperative or the sum used to assign people to jobs. However, the preparatory course in trade was taught at an independent school. The directors of certain organizations would also issue instructions to hire people on their own, but usually it was the sum leader or the leader of the cooperative who had the authority. In general, during the socialist period after you graduated you would immediately start to work with a salary of 700 Tögrög. There was no question that those with a higher education would get a job. And it required a lot of organization. Mongolia had only a small number of good state universities, the Mongolian State University and the Teacher's College and they would admit only as many students as were needed each year. And that's how graduates immediately got a job. During the socialist period, those who didn't work would be held accountable, there was that kind of dictatorial system. Well, everything has two sides. The predominant attitude to work was one of great responsibility. The incentives to work well were very good, if you did a job successfully you would get an award, a higher salary and you could travel. So people would strive for that. But those who did their work badly and irresponsibly, got a lower salary and their standard of living was a little low. During the socialist period, the sum had an old people's home, and there were five, six, ten elderly people living there. They had bad careless relatives or nobody looking after them, so they were brought to the old people's home and the cooperative would cover all the expenses including those for food and clothing, and in addition they would also get their own pension. In such a way they were cared for and could pass away like that. They didn't work themselves, so there would be a worker at the old people's home who cooked and kindled the fire. But then the cooperatives were abolished as a bad thing that exploited people's labor. But actually it is good to work in cooperatives, it is an excellent method that has given a great impetus to the social development of the world. Otherwise if you live somewhere in a valley, there is no way there can be development. There was a cooperative before, but then it was dismantled and the media always talk bad about it and people don't trust each other anymore. Today they have no trust at all. For example, the director of some organization, no matter how well he works, people say that he is responsible for the budget and he certainly takes some money for himself. Or parents send their own child to sell let's say five kilos of cashmere and they say 'We heard that at the border the price for cashmere is 30.000 per kilo, so why did you bring back only 29.000? Did you take those 1000 for yourself or what?' This is the kind of society we have today. People don't trust each other, everybody only thinks about themselves, this kind of thing is spreading more and more. A little bit of trust and love for each other, a little cooperation, this is how things should develop. But they don't do that. Rather what

is gaining ground is disunity and selfishness.

Oyuntungalag -

How do people find employment today?

Sugir -

Well, state employees are of course selected. The selection is conducted in the aimag center of Ömnögov' Province. So if, for example, in Manlai Sum we have a vacancy for a teacher or for a civil servant in the public administration or for an accountant, we inform the province. The province carries out a competitive exam for those specialized in accountancy and if let's say ten or twenty people pass it, they are assigned to different places. So people who are not necessarily from Manlai Sum but could be from anywhere. And people's preference will be considered. Right now, in this period, it is very difficult to employ someone from far away. Those who are not appreciated in their own territory, those who don't work well, who drink and so on, they usually move around in their own territory. Those who are really intelligent and can do any kind of work, instead, they are not interested in leaving their home in order to work in some faraway sum. That's why we try to appoint our own personnel here locally. I don't approve of this law according to which all state employees have to go through a competitive examination at the provincial level. We want to employ only local people. Last year, for example, we really lacked teachers, so a Mongolian language teacher came and two years ago a few teachers, a chemistry teacher, a history teacher, and one for foreign languages came here to work. Those three teachers who came two years ago, they were all people who go from place to place, wherever there was a shortage of qualified personnel, making up things in order to seize the opportunity. Especially that teacher for Mongolian language. That teacher worked here for two years and concluded a big contract with the director of the school. It was agreed that the teacher would work for two years, get one camel-load of food every year as well as firewood and coal, well, the money for firewood and coal, even though the teachers lived in a heated building, thus getting much more than the other teachers. And this year that teacher was transferred to a different place and caused great damage to the people. S/he (gender not clear) borrowed 2- 300.000 Tögrög from some shops and money from the parents of some of the students, saying 'I have some debts and I can't pay them back. Please take out a loan of 400.000 Tögrög from the bank on your own name, I will pay the money back as soon as possible'. However, s/he took the loan, went to the city and disappeared, you know. Once in the city, s/he changed the phonenumber and address and vanished. Therefore, you see, it is becoming very difficult to hire people who come from a larger settlement in search of work. There are people who move from sum to sum cheating people everywhere. So if we don't train our local personnel as much as possible, it is very complicated to find good people who come from a center to work in such a faraway place with such an underdeveloped infrastructure.

Oyuntungalag -

So, you worked at the brigade, right? After your military service, right? So during the socialist period, have you always been assigned to jobs?

Sugir -

Yes, I have.

Oyuntungalag -

So, they would just appoint you, whether you liked it or not?

Sugir -

Well, they considered your opinion, you know. When I had just come back from the military, they told me to herd horses, but I never did. The cooperative leader would scold me, but I would say 'No, I can't do it' and go away. They didn't punish me for that. Later they told me to do bookkeeping and that I did. I was assigned to that job.

Oyuntungalag -

What kind of work did you do in the democratic period? When democracy came, after the democratic period had come, you changed your job, right?

Sugir -

Yes, I did. When the democracy came, I was working as brigade leader. With the democratic system came a reform in the laws on land and the brigade was turned into a bag. So from 1990 to 2000, in those ten years I worked as bag leader.

Oyuntungalag -

Did you like your work? Was there anything you detested? Was there anything that you were proud of? What was difficult and what was easy? And what about today?

Sugir -

No matter what work I did, I always tried to do it the best I could. I never told anyone that a job was a burden to me. Until today I have never thought about quitting a job, of how to get away from it. But, well, my children want to live in the city, and since I am not alone I have wondered whether it is necessary to continue doing this job for a long time. I thought about quitting my job as sum leader this year after the elections, but there is a lot of work that has to be done in this sum, so I submitted a list of these tasks to the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party to be included in their programme for the elections in 2008. I made the parliamentary candidates promise that they would do it. Like building a paved road from Oyu Tolgoi to Dundgov' through Manlai Sum, building a high voltage transmission line from Tavan Tolgoi to Manlai Sum, and linking all government and residential buildings in Manlai Sum to water and sewer lines. All these points were included in the programme of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party and the parliamentary candidates promised to do them. The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party has won the elections and formed the government. So it seems necessary to stay in this job for another year or two in order to create the conditions for these works to be carried out. And moreover, there are currently no skilled personnel that would be accepted by the people in the sum. Really, there is nobody. If you ask why, I would say that that for the time being there is nobody who works sincerely for the sake of the people, who would strive for eliminating poverty, for constructing buildings for public use, or for making the mineral exploration companies do something useful for the people. Maybe there is some private person, who wants to work for the people, who would want to assist and cooperate with them, but perhaps people don't like them. For the time being there is nobody who believes in dedicating his whole mind and body to such work, alone or together with his family. That's why we need to search and understand who among the government officials is most active and enterprising. The most important question is whether or not somebody takes initiative. But because it does not find recognition, people refuse showing extra initiative. That's why I think to continue working for another two, three years after the local elections. There is no alternative. The children can study there, but let me first complete the few big projects that I proposed. The construction of a paved road from Oyu Tolgoi to Dundgov' is a very difficult task, you see. We still don't have a road from Ulaanbaatar to Dundgov' and from Dundgov' to Ömnögov', so building a road connecting two sums is difficult. There is no doubt that within the next four years a road will be built between Ömnögov' and Ulaanbaatar. And if we don't fight for how this road is built between Oyu Tolgoi and Ulaanbaatar, who can? Our way of doing this is to conclude a contract with the government of Oyu Tolgoi, in which we agree on building a road from Oyu Tolgoi to Dundgov'. In order to get this into a contract, we first have to exert some pressure on two members of parliament, and at the next stage we will have to fight from the environmental side. We started that fight one, two years ago, when Oyu Tolgoi had not yet been opened and the road through Manlai Sum was not larger than two meters, just two meters. So we started to fight for a widening of the road from two to twenty meters. If our lawsuit is not successful, we will go up to the government. And if they don't fix our road will block all those many vehicles coming from Oyu Tolgoi and not allow them to pass through our territory. I think it is necessary to get this into the contract and to fight for it in various ways. This wind turbine has stopped working, you see, and it is clear that it is a hopeless case. We understood that fixing it won't change anything, so we want a high voltage transmission line to be built here, and I think that if we push more we could manage to get it done within two years. Then there is the problem of the water and sewer lines. Every sum office digs a toilet right next to it, there are toilets all around, and some families don't have space anymore to dig theirs. If instead we could be linked to water and sewer lines, it would mean a great improvement from the hygienic and cultural perspective. The same with hot water.

Oyuntungalag -

So what kind of people are in your team? With whom do you work together?

Sugir -

I work with the directors of the governmental budget units, with the staff of the governor's office and the bag leaders. The latter generally know their work well, they are surrounded by the people, and they are usually sincerely concerned. As for the directors of institutions, such as the hospital or the kindergarten, they are independent. So there is no big need for the governor's office to push them to do something, their work has become really well organized. As for the cultural center, new staff has been appointed just now, a person with work experience, who is more enterprising than other people, we'll see how that goes. The schools, they have real shortcomings. There really is a lack of initiative. The physical education teachers are somehow very slow, maybe they have a slow mind, who knows. The teachers, the directors, never set any high requirements concerning the curriculum or the improvement of the children's environment, there is no collective effort. It's enough if there is one person who never requires anything for all others to close their eyes and think that it is enough to get a full salary. This mindset has become predominant, and in a such a place it is difficult for work to proceed. At the governor's office, there are a lot of young people, really many, and their superiors should set stricter requirements for them, they should require them to consider social issues and working conditions, to follow principles and demand a lot from themselves. As I understand it, these requirements are not sufficient. The head of an organization or a sum should

not have any moral shortcomings. But if they drink and behave indecently in public, how can they require anything from other people? Someone who is after money, food and drink, someone who has become the object of gossip, how can such a person be surrounded by many people, right? If someone does not come to work on time and does not show any effort, how can such a person guide others? So in the governor's office there are a lot of shortcomings with regards to organization, public appeal, leadership and being a positive example. I think that all of these shortcomings should absolutely be fixed within the next four years.

Oyuntungalag -

How did you personally manage your work and your life?

Sugir -

Ah, well, when you do government work the support of the family is essential. When you work without having anything to worry about at home, it's an indicator that you are successful. It is of great support. As for me, my wife owns a shop and by running a business she is of great support to my work, because our financial resources are never enough. This year, for example, I have spent about 2 million Tögrög from my own pockets that should have been covered by the budget. Our revenue will increase a bit if we allow hunting, the money generated from hunting will come in at the end of December. So from the beginning of the year I used my private money when it was necessary and by the end of the year I will have spent around two, three million Tögrög, but the conditions are there for me to get it back. The Mongolian Youth League and the Provincial Youth League, for example, gave ten facilities for children's games to Manlai Sum, that is a basketball court, a volleyball court and fitness equipment that is usually in the courtyards of apartment blocks. They said that we should pick it up and bear the transportation costs ourselves. But the governor's office had no money, so I paid 400.000 Tögrög myself for a driver to bring the load. If we had sent a truck from here, we would have spent 600.000. So we saved money by having someone come from the aimag center to bring a freight of almost five tons. And I took those 400.000 Tögrög from the shop. But I will get them back at the end of the year. And then there are spare parts of vehicles. I bought them for 600.000 Tögrög. The governor's office wouldn't give money, because if they did they wouldn't be able to pay the salaries anymore. That's why we do things that way, that's why the greatest support comes from the family. Because my wife understands and supports our work, I don't have to worry about family matters and work day and night. Without the family's support it's difficult to dedicate one's whole heart to work, because there are great many things to do at home like taking the children from the kindergarten, making them do their homework, preparing food and so on. Therefore the greatest support to my work comes from my wife.

Oyuntungalag -

How many children do you have?

Sugir -

Five.

Oyuntungalag -

And your children are studying?

Sugir -

Well, the eldest is going to become a student this year, and the youngest one is still very small.

Oyuntungalag -

All of them went to school in Manlai?

Sugir -

Well, when they went to secondary school I brought them to the city, you know. Secondary school here is really nothing, you know. There is no trained or experienced teacher for any subject, and that's why, considering the children's future, last year I sent the children to the city. And this year there was no alternative to living in the city. Elementary school is slightly better, but since the school management doesn't set any serious requirements, it can't possibly be very good.

Oyuntungalag -

There are some NGOs here, right? What do you think is their significance? How are they useful to Mongolian society? What NGOs do you have here and what is their role?

Sugir -

Well, the Trade Union can't work here anymore, there is nothing here for them to do. The Council of the Women's Federation wasn't functioning very well, so last year they reorganized it. Since they don't have their own budget, they can't do anything at all. Now, well, during the socialist period, non-governmental organizations worked a lot in various forms. They were given a certain financial support, but nowadays they don't, so if they want to do something they ask people for donations, but people don't donate. Especially in the non-governmental organizations the idea of working for society without being paid has become very rare. The question is always whether you give money or not, and if not it is difficult to find somebody who is interested in working. If you are not a state employee and you don't have a salary and you ask somebody working for a government organization for something, they will say 'Who are you? Why are you that greedy?'. Today's society tells you that if you don't have money you don't move, and people humiliate each other. There are many reasons why there are less and less people working for governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the activities of many NGOs have thus stopped. We have the Women's Council here in our sum and because the director is very active once in a while she organizes some things and gatherings like for the Women's Day. But since everything is based on money, if you don't have any you don't get anything done. An NGO should conduct various trainings and campaigns, but without money they don't, and since they don't have a budget their work has stopped everywhere. If NGOs work well and people are active, the decisions that result are actually very useful. Since it would be decisions made by the people, they would be very close to real life and they would be helpful to those who have the authority to make decisions.

Oyuntungalag -

You've talked a lot about democracy in your previous interview, right? You talked a lot about its positive and negative effects. What did you expect from it for your life? And did democracy have the same impact on women and men or not?

Sugir -

Well, what I think is that democracy gave all people, women and men, the same freedom. The idea that women should be the same as men, at home or in the state bureaucracy, has become predominant. Especially at the family level, I don't think that it is good if women fight for having the same rights as the household head. I think that if power is distributed among many people, be it in the family or in the sum or in an office, if many people strive for power, things fall apart and hinder development and progress. The most distinguished and intellectual people should work for the state. Instead, today they say 'Both of us should equally look after the children. You have to wash the children's diapers and cook, too.' But I think it's not right for a woman to do that if she doesn't have her own income. Actually a man shouldn't marry before he is able to maintain a family. Otherwise, if he can't do it it's useless to marry. It doesn't promote development. Some men have very little education, their understanding is very limited, and because of that there are many single women who lead their households. There are these cases where women don't have another choice but to adapt. And when you look at it from another perspective, it is better if the household head is a woman rather than a drunkard, and there are many cases in which such women lead a better life. And when families sink into poverty, it's usually because of careless people, because of careless men. And democracy, well what is democracy actually? Sometimes people say that when Elbegdorj, Enbold and Gundalai don't work for the government and are not members of parliament anymore, democracy will end. But democracy shouldn't be owned by somebody. Democracy is when you respect and listen to a minority, and when the decisions are made by the majority and everybody follows those decisions, when in a contest the winner recognizes the defeated, and the defeated recognizes the winner. The people have the right to vote once every four years and the elected have to acknowledge that right. It's not that every word and every act of the people who went on hunger strike in 1990 was democratic, and that everything else is what you call communist or not communist. It's a sign that democracy is going the wrong way. It's those people who want to change democracy into anarchy that ruin the reputation of democracy. Except for them, there is no political force that rejects democracy today. There is almost no Mongolian who would want to go back to the socialist, the communist society. That's because the two big neighbouring countries have taken the path of democracy. So even if one calls himself a communist, everything develops according to the market economy. That's why there is no return from democracy, but what is democracy actually? I think that we have to make people understand that one's freedom is limited by the freedom of others and that if somebody tries to possess it it's a sign that democracy has been corrupted.

Oyuntungalag -

Well, how did you first go to the city and what impression did it make on you? And later when you visited again, how had it changed? What do you think is the significance of the city in nomadic life?

Sugir -

So, I visited Ulaanbaatar after I was discharged from the military in 1984, yes, after I was discharged. I had a general idea from what I had seen on TV, I knew that it was a big place, that one couldn't see its boundaries and that it had a lot of people. There were good things, and you could see bad things on the outskirts. As I understand it, the development of any

nation always starts from the city, in recent times a lot of beautiful and colorful buildings have been built in Ulaanbaatar. But what is a real pity is that Mongolia has done away with all its factories. He was elected, too, our 'Ajnai' Bat-Erdene, he privatized Mongolia's wonderful leather factory and today some Chinese have rented the space. And there is no information about that factory. It is a real pity that property has become owned and destroyed by such people. As for the nomadic civilization and the city, well, as I understand it the city is absolutely necessary. But Mongolia shouldn't get rid of its nomadic pastoralism either. It would be appropriate to develop cooperatives and associations, you know. Well, my personal opinion is that the human species originated from Mongolia. That's what I believe even though I haven't studied the theoretical side of it. There are no rivers flowing into Mongolia, but all rivers flow out of the Mongolian territory. From this I understand that Mongolia is the most prominent point. If you ask me why I think that it is true that humanity originated from Mongolia, well, Mongolians and maybe all human beings in the world, when they are young they don't think much of their home country, their parents and their relatives. They go away, they study and work and they settle down. And just before they pass away, they dream of their relatives, they miss their home country and they think 'Why not visit the place where I was born, why not linger in it for a while? There still should be an elder brother whom I haven't seen for thirty, forty years. I wonder where he is and where his grandchildren are, whether they are studying'. So when approaching death people think about the land where they were born and grew up. I suppose that's not only a Mongolian characteristic. Nagarjuna or Nostradamus said that men became the size of an ell and horses the size of a rabbit and that the world is about to end. So maybe what the elders say is true, that in the past people were very tall with large backs and that horses were huge. I think that it is true that human bones are becoming smaller, and people say that Mongolia and the world will end in 2000 years. So since the human species first appeared more than two million years have passed, and maybe one million years ago humans shrank to the size of an ell of the humans that existed before, who knows. If only two thousand years are left and Mongolia is the only place in the world that still has wild nature and untouched resources, if all those foreigners rush here to see Mongolia and its nomadic civilization, who knows whether its not because they want to see their place of origin before the end of the world? Therefore, it is not right that our forefathers complain about and curse that Mongolia hasn't been developed. Every thing has its time and once the time has passed people today can't make history right, you know. What we are talking about today, only the two of us know. If somebody, who stands there and doesn't hear anything, said 'Those two said this and that', he would just be lying. The same thing happens when history is denied too much, it is a real pity, you know. In this sense, maybe Mongolia's nomadic culture won't disappear not even if we tried to destroy it. Maybe we can use the nomadic civilization, maybe we can show all of it on the internet. Mongolia has never used its natural resources and some of our people call that underdevelopment. Foreigners come to see that Mongolian underdevelopment, but even if it is underdeveloped, maybe for them it is really interesting and unusual to eat genuine, healthy food, to sleep outside in the wide steppes and the fresh air and to watch the sky and the stars. And who knows, maybe Mongolia will develop thanks to the money of the tourists who come to see her. That's why this nomadic civilization will probably continue to exist. It can't be eradicated by force, but in the future maybe we can just show it, like it started to be done in Japan, you know, where people stay with a family for a month or two and study their lives, give the family a thousand dollars and leave. It might be very useful to develop something of such a form in Mongolia.

Oyuntungalag -

I have a question linked to the technological development, and that is what kinds of new techniques and technologies were introduced during the socialist period? What do you think was the most amazing technology? Planes, cars, computers, agricultural and livestock breeding equipment, radios, television, which was the most amazing for you?

Sugir -

You mean during the socialist period?

Oyuntungalag -

Generally, in your opinion.

Sugir -

Well, actually, these electronic devices, these computers are really amazing. Then the telephone and planes. In the socialist period, we really thought that it was a great intellectual achievement to make metal fly. And today this electronic development is fantastic. But it's a pity that we don't know how to properly use these things that have been given to us. But I think Mongolians should never think that Mongolia is not developed and that America is so nicely developed, and that they shouldn't have been born in Mongolia but rather in America. I will never think like that. Generally speaking about development, when we look at plants they flourish and then they dry again. They dry very quickly but it takes them a long time to flourish, it is a long way to get there. They blossom and become the most beautiful and then in a very short time they disappear. I think the developed countries are similar, and generally it is about technological development, everything is done thanks to the power of electronics and we develop those things. Whenever less things are being done manually we call it development. But the climate is changing a lot. What if all of a sudden there was no electricity anymore in the world? What if it disappears for some reason? Then the developed countries will become nothing, but Mongolia will live without relying on electricity. Maybe in the city it will be difficult, but in the countryside people will live and not lack anything. They will eat their meat, ride their horses and camels, they will find their su'hir to eat it, and will find salt here and there, dig and eat it. Therefore, the only nation that can live without industrial products, without any industry, without any technology, is ours, our herders, a country based on pastoralism. If such a time comes, Mongolia will be the most developed, the greatest nation, you know. And those nations that are full of industrial products, that depend on industry, they might perish, who knows. I think it is better to think in this way, then you can be content with being born in Mongolia, you can accept it.

Oyuntungalag -

As a leader of this sum who has done this work for many years, would you briefly introduce your sum? In which part of Mongolia is it situated, how far is it from the capital, what is its internal structure? What is its population?

Sugir -

Well, within Ömnögov' Province our sum is the fifth largest in terms of territory, population and livestock, but it is one of the more distant ones from the province center. It is almost 230km from the province center, and the desert provinces are very far from Ulaanbaatar. But compared to distant provinces like Uvs or Bayan-Ölgii, I think it isn't that remote.

Oyuntungalag -

How many kilometers is it to Ulaanbaatar?

Sugir -

Almost 480-500, it's almost 500 when you travel around Dornogov'. Well, if you ask what the advantages are compared to other sums, especially those in the Hangai, it's that it has always been a little far from the forest, a little bare and cold, and hence people are quite industrious. People who are used to having everything available right next to them, they have that kind of mindset, they expect things to be there. Maybe that's why they are less thrifty, industrious and creative. I think that people who have always lived in a peripheral, bare and cold place, I think they are superior because they have learned how to do something out of anything, they improve things and are industrious. As for the nature and the climate, there is no natural wealth, but I think there is a possibility to develop tourism over time. Especially from the point of view of the nomadic civilization and a vanished nature, there are petrified trees and dinosaur bones and footprints of dinosaurs. 80 million years ago, this place was at the bottom of the ocean, so there are fish skeletons and shells. So as I understand it, here there is a possibility to develop tourism around this vanished nature and the nomadic civilization. And in our province there are also quite a number of leaders, there is for example a 'Hero of Labor' who comes from Ömnögov' Province. There are five or six who didn't get the title, and we have three or four of them. As for the people who contributed greatly to the Mongolian revolution and independence, Manlai Sum is the first in Ömnögov' Province. During the collective period, we had 13 State Champion Herders and the award was given according to very strict standards and only after many years of and continuous work and achievements. The award was given to only ten people a year, I think. And Manlai Sum has given birth to thirteen State Champion Herders during the socialist period, such a sum is rare not only in Ömnögov' but in the whole country. In Ömnögov' there is no other sum like it. From this you can see people's diligence. As for wrestlers, Ömnögov' has a State Lion and a State Elephant, and they are both from Manlai. So Manlai is the leading sum also in terms of wrestling. Our children and young people are also very successful in track and field athletics at the provincial as well as at the national level. People have such a genetic heritage, they are light, energetic and sinewy.

Oyuntungalag -

How many people are there in your sum? And how many heads of livestock?

Sugir -

We have a population of 2500 people. Right now we have 95.000 heads of livestock, but we expect the number to reach 150.000 by the end of the year.

Oyuntungalag -

Which animal makes up the majority of livestock?

Sugir -

Goats. We have over 50.000 goats. As for camels, our sum is the one with the third largest number in the province and

the fifth largest nationwide. Our sum has the largest number of horses in the province, the second largest number of cows, the third largest number of sheep, and I think the ninth largest number of goats. And goats make up the majority of our animals.

Oyuntungalag -

How many bags do you have?

Sugir -

Four.

Oyuntungalag -

How many years is the secondary school here?

Sugir -

Nine years, we give a general secondary education.

Oyuntungalag -

You have one school and one hospital?

Sugir -

We have one hospital, one kindergarten, a post office and the cultural center. There are about ten enterprises, most of which are retailers. There is almost no industry, except for the Batsaiz company that produces felt.

Oyuntungalag -

When was Manlai Sum founded?

Sugir -

In 1924. We celebrated our 80th anniversary in 2004. Next year is the 85th anniversary. Well, I guess I don't have anything else to talk about, unless you have further questions.

Oyuntungalag -

Well, do you wish to add anything?

Sugir -

Well, there is nothing special to say.

Oyuntungalag -

Well, thank you so much for taking your time for this interview even though you are so busy. It was a very interesting story. I wish you success for your work.

Sugir -

Thank you.

Back to top

Interviews, transcriptions and translations provided by *The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia*, University of Cambridge. Please acknowledge the source of materials in any publications or presentations that use them.



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

MONGOLIA AND INNER ASIA STUDIES UNIT

DIVISION OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

THE MOND BUILDING, FREE SCHOOL LANE

CAMBRIDGE CB2 3RF