POSITION PIECES

Making ‘Setgel’s Creature’ Mindful
Conceptual Change in Contemporary Mongolia

Elizabeth Turk

Received: 15 October 2022; Accepted: 14 October 2023; Published: 29 April 2024

Abstract

As globally circulating understandings of mental health and mindfulness practices gain popularity in Mongolia, they articulate with setgel, a localised concept that has been shaped by a constellation of historical forces. Loosely translated as 'mind' in English, setgel has remained central to Mongolian notions of personhood, health, and civic duty, even as the meanings associated with those ideas have changed. As progressivist forces, Tibetan Buddhism and the dominant Soviet political culture of much of the 20th century have held and shaped values in public life. This Position Piece explores the role of power relations and political economy in changing associations of setgel through the example of a recent state-sponsored, Buddhist-inflected mindfulness promotional event for Mongolian influencers. It asks broader questions about how anthropologists as generators of 'cultural' knowledge attend to expectations from institutional hosts in the field while also maintaining fidelity to historical change in our work.

Keywords

Concepts, Political economy, Mindfulness, Influencers, Social media.
Influencing influencers at the Mind Reflection Forum

In February 2022, Narovanchen gegeenten,¹ a Mongolian Buddhist reincarnate lama and high-profile figure in Mongolian public culture, invited me to present my research at the first Mind Reflection Forum, hosted by the national government at its palatial estate set in the alpine foothills of Ulaanbaatar. Jointly hosted by Narovanchen’s own Naroba Institute, the Forum’s aim was thoroughly ethical and campaign-driven: one hundred social media influencers—from professional judo athletes to actors to NGO founders—would attend, learn about mindfulness and the importance of compassion (ninjin setgel²) in cultivating ‘good’ social relations, and go on to promote the idea that it is ‘our duty’ to incorporate compassion ‘into every sector of society’ through their social networks, as the Forum’s Facebook page announced (Mind Reflection Forum 2022). A perceived national moral crisis among young people, exacerbated by wider trolling trends on social media platforms, has coincided with the ‘revival’ of Mongolian-Tibetan Buddhism in recent years, after the country was officially aligned with atheistic ideals for most of the 20th century.

As plans for the event progressed, it became increasingly clear that the Forum organisers wanted me to present as an anthropologist of Mongolian culture, and specifically on the concept of setgel. However, the word ‘mind’ in the event’s title (which was promoted in English) referred to setgel, and the two were used interchangeably. This was somewhat puzzling to me. When I first started to learn the Mongolian language thirteen years ago, I was struck by how frequently the term is used, referring to either mental or emotional activity, and occasionally both. Sometimes setgel indicates an intellectual state, as in setgel khoyordokh, ‘to be undecided’. At other times, it refers to affective or emotional states, as in setgeltei bolokh, ‘to fall in love’. More nuanced still is the usage of setgel to express emotional proximity to something or someone: setgeld dotno, also oirkhon, ‘to feel close’; and conversely a sense of distance: setgeld khüiten, ‘cold-hearted’. Translating setgel into English therefore proves challenging, as neither ‘mind’ nor ‘heart’ capture the term’s richness and nuance.

Having worked with healers, Buddhist lamas, medical doctors and lay people to understand the interrelation of human health and natural environment, I certainly had a lot of material upon which to draw in planning my presentation. This is because setgel is often referenced in discussing health and wellbeing, with healers identifying it as central to illness manifestation, and targeted to improve health. For

---

¹ Saint Narovanchen (sometimes written Naro Banchen) Danzanlkhündev was identified by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama as the 16th incarnation of Naro Banchen (Duchin Naroba), one of the 84 ‘ancient’ Indian sages. Gegeenten is an honorific indicating that he is a saint.

² All italicised terms are in Khalkh Mongolian, unless otherwise stated. All translations to English are the author’s own.
instance, an astrologist participating in my research based at the central Gandantegchinlen Monastery in Ulaanbaatar detailed a mechanism for illness manifestation, with setgel at the centre: ‘a person thinks greedy thoughts, his energy becomes weak, this passes to his setgel and he falls ill’. This conception of setgel in relation to weak bodily energy and ill health is not confined to Buddhist discourse, but is part of Mongolian public thought more generally. The Kazakh fortuneteller (üzmerchi) Mongolkhaan (Fig. 1) explained to me how disagreeable states such as anger, greed and laziness cause the setgel to become weak, and that through gossip, jealousy and dishonesty a person ‘becomes his own enemy’. The body in turn becomes feeble, and illness easily enters.

Figure 1: Mongolkhaan divines by ‘pulling’ (tatakh) 41 stones. Photo by the author.

While research participants identified setgel as central to human health, it is also more than this. Setgel is fundamental to perceptions of personhood. It ‘carries a person’ as his or her main support (gol tulguur), in the words of one interlocutor. I heard time and again that a person is ‘setgel’s creature’ (setgeliin amitan).

As opposed to being atomising, setgel was described as connected to a person’s societal environment (niigem orchin), itself characterised by many as ‘disorganised’ (zambaraagüi) today. My interlocutors said that people become like the turbulent times in which they live, and that greed stoked by living during the ‘age of the market’ causes people to care less about one another and less about
the natural environment. Conversely, what we as humans think and feel influences our surroundings. ‘Because setgel is unstable so are our surroundings’, as a Buddhist lama in a small northern town explained to me. He meant this in both an environmental and societal sense.

This interconnectedness of setgel with one’s natural and social environments resonates with recent trends in the social sciences towards a post-humanist view, and away from considering humans as isolated from our surroundings. My conversations with Mongolians of varying demographics and life experiences converged on a few central points: while a principal aspect of the human (mind- )bodily experience, setgel is also a relational concept that indicates ethical obligations to surrounding human and more-than-human worlds. As a concept, setgel sheds light on public values at a given point in time. And as those values change, they in turn influence the associations and definitions the concept retains.

My position as one of four headlining presenters at the Mind Reflection Forum was unusual in at least two ways. First, the Forum aimed to reframe and mobilise my social anthropology research as part of a state-sponsored project to remoralise social media-using Mongolians, using teachings often (however loosely) associated with Buddhism. Second, in my role as researcher the Forum positioned me as a ‘cultural knowledge’ expert. This was troubling because I was expected to present on setgel as mediated through the English notion of ‘mind’— a move that obscures, impoverishes and dehistoricises the concept, as my research shows. I also wanted to avoid upsetting my hosts. This was not, or at least not only, an issue of translation. The problem was also not one of equivocation, in which difference extends beyond the conceptual and into the realm of the ontologically mutually other (Viveiros de Castro 2004; de la Cadena 2019). As experiential and historical entities, concepts transform, while also carrying with them a constellation of associations as they travel to new contexts (Wittgenstein 1953; Brandel and Motta 2021). How do anthropologists account for historical change in the concepts that we—together with our research participants—use, while also dealing with instances in which they are mobilised in the field for political purposes?

**Setgel as concept and changing public values over the 20th and 21st centuries**

From at least the 13th century we know that setgel was a concept in active circulation, and historical sources reveal that setgel (or setkil) was at times used

---

3 Alongside post-humanist work, scholarship on ‘ecologies of mind’ is particularly relevant too, which posits that mind is not limited to individualised human bodies but instead diffusely distributed in organised pattern. As such, mind is a reflection of the multifaceted natural world outside of the thinker that connects all living beings (Bateson [1972] 2000, 1979). Scholars have understood mind as both embodied and embedded in environment in terms of affective ecologies (Weik von Mossnar 2017), the eco-centric self (Kirmayer et al. 2009) and brain-body-environment feedback loops (Kirmayer 2015).
nearly interchangeably with ‘heart’ (*jiruke, zürkh*).\(^4\) By the late 16th and 17th centuries, Buddhist religious influences were heavily shaping understandings of *setgel*. The conceptual weight of ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ in Tibetan (*sem*) influences the connotations given to *setgel*, as seen in the term ‘bodhicitta’ (Mongolian: *bodi setgel*; Tibetan: རོ་གཞུང་མཆོག་བཤད་ or *chang choop sempa*), referring to a person’s mind awakened with compassion and wisdom.

*Setgel* and related concepts underwent important changes during Mongolia’s state socialist period (1921–1990); firstly, a rupture with Buddhist tradition in public life. This period is characterised by the loss of knowledge and material culture, especially marked by the ‘time of repression’ (*khelmegdüüleltiin üyed*) of the late 1930s, a kind of ‘auto-destruction’ that ‘annihilate[d] all that was best and most sophisticated about native Mongolian culture, philosophy and art’ (Humphrey 1992, 375). Developing the mind in particular ways took on secular and civic importance through the mid- to late 20th century, in line with Soviet-era values that would usher in a ‘new’ Mongolian man and woman. The value in public life of the average person being educated, knowledgeable and worldly eventually coalesced into formalised ‘cultural campaigns’ (*soyoliin dovtolgoon*) by the 1950s directed not only at hygiene, the elimination of general diseases and maintenance of public order, but also the improvement en masse of literacy and education.

---

\(^4\) Referenced here is *The Secret History of the Mongols* (author unknown), written after Chingis (or Genghis) Khan’s death in the thirteenth century and an important literary work and historical source on the Mongols. In verse 125, Chingis Khan praises the steadfast loyalty of his friends Bo’orchu and Jelme, saying, ‘When, apart from my shadow, I had no friends you were my shadows. You eased my mind [*setkil*], so in my mind you shall stay’. He also said: ‘When, apart from my tail, I had no fat, You were my tail. You eased my heart [*jiuke*], so in my breast you shall stay’ (De Rachewiltz 2004).
Figure 2: ‘Learn, Learn and Learn’, by Tserendorjiin Jamsran, 1960s, Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery. The text at the bottom right reads, ‘Whomever values the direction of learning will determine the direction of their own existence.’ Photo and translation by the author.
During this time, concepts already in circulation took on new meaning. For instance, the term ‘enlightenment’ (*gegeereel*) came to be associated with being well-educated in a secular sense (Sneath 2009, 76; see also Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019, 5). It still retains this areligious meaning today. A sense of civic duty gained value too, and the importance of ‘being cultured’ in public thought went hand in hand with spending time in nature (*baigal*) as a particularly wholesome activity and appropriate use of leisure time. Children were encouraged to attend summer camps in nature, learning the skills necessary to become moral and productive members of Mongolian-Soviet society. The ‘cultured’ family was imagined in close proximity to the natural environment, enjoying the outdoor alpine setting, as depicted in Fig. 3. During the state socialist period, being the ‘right’ kind of person vis-à-vis fellow country-women and -men, motherland, natural environment, and wider socialist ecumene involved developing the mind and body in particular ways.

*Figure 3: ‘The educated/cultured [bolovson] family is the creator and spring well of our life’s happiness!’*, poster entitled ‘Happy and Healthy family’, anonymous, early 1950s (Rossabi 2017, 136). Image courtesy of Yuki Konagaya.
The legacy of state socialist-era messaging about the kind of consciousness a person should have persists today. The governor’s office of Ulaanbaatar, for instance, began its five-year ‘A Cultured City is Lovely’ (Khot Soyoltoi bol Goy) campaign in 2019, which makes appeals to the ‘citizen’s consciousness’ to create ‘a healthy, trash-free environment’.

Figure 4: A billboard in central Ulaanbaatar reading, ‘Citizen’s consciousness, Healthy trash-free environment’, part of the ‘A Cultured City is Lovely’ campaign, Office of the Governor. Photo by the author.

Today, the concept of setgel continues to be influenced by values widely held in public culture, for example, in mental health-related discourses. As this topic has grown in recognition on a transnational scale, it has increasingly become a point of interest in Mongolia too, especially amongst international development organisations and foreign-trained medical doctors. With rates of alcohol use disorder having increased fortyfold in the past thirty years, and anxiety tenfold over the same period, Mongolians today are experiencing what a principal clinical and research psychiatrist at the National Centre for Mental Health described in our 2015 interview as a ‘crisis of psychology’ (setgel züin khyamral). As unsuccessful global health interventions are typically considered to have failed because of
Making ‘Setgel’s Creature’ Mindful

structural or technical shortcomings,\(^5\) a few basic questions are easily overlooked: with respect to mental ill health (setgetsiin ovchin), on whose terms are concepts like ‘mind’ understood? Whose models of mental health should be implemented in treatment?\(^6\) Importing a Western-derived concept, together with a standardised and context-independent model of medical treatment, is considered a serious error by several practitioners of traditional medicine (ulamjalt anagakh ukhaan) with whom I met. According to them, biomedical sciences do not have the opportunity to heal many mental ill health conditions because they lack a sophisticated understanding of the causal factors or underlying reasons (undesnii shaltgaan). One nationally renowned practitioner of traditional medicine explained to me that the increase in mental ill health in Mongolia in part stems from stress and fatigue resulting from the use of technology-based entertainment like Facebook, video games, online films and chat platforms, naturalised as features of a ‘modern’, socially progressive society.

A second place where the concept of setgel has been influenced by circulating values in wider public life is the increasing global interest in mindfulness and meditation. Based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama and transformed into a globally reproducible course by S. N. Goenka in 1970s India, Vipassana meditation courses in many countries fill their several hundred-seat capacities within minutes of opening their online registrations. In Mongolia, Vipassana meditation training began in 1997, with approximately one thousand Mongolians attending courses each year, as the teacher and director of Dhamma Mahaana Vipassana Meditation Centre told me in 2016. And while a person of any (non-)religious or cultural background can practice Vipassana, described instead as ‘a science of the mind’, structurally integral to the course is a particular ethical stance associated with Buddhist philosophy called sila, or virtuous living. As well as no killing and no lying, sila means that meditation participants adhere to a vegetarian diet and are forbidden to speak to each other for the duration of the course. Here a particular disciplining of the mind and related concepts are translated directly from the Pali liturgical language, injecting new connotations of setgel in Mongolia mediated through South Asian Buddhist theory and practice.

\(^5\) Unsuccessful initiatives typically blame underfunding, lack of basic supplies and failure to build sustainable infrastructures for managing health problems (Packard 2016). Critics also point to the unintended consequences of policy-making that exacerbate health inequalities (Castro and Singer 2004), and centrally-generated, vertical programming that fails to adapt to localised settings (Whiteford and Manderson 2000), often excluding mental ill health (Read et al. 2009).

\(^6\) Recent anthropological scholarship on global mental health calls for critical reflection on differences in psychiatric disorders and to historicise treatment in varying societies (see Raikhel and Bemme 2016). It also questions the extent to which tacit models based on biomedical pathogenesis obscure cultural dimensions of mental illness (Kleinman 1987; Deane 2019; Kohrt and Mendenhall 2015; Kohrt and Hruschka 2010).
In these two examples of how the concept of setgel continues to be influenced by values widely held in public culture—international mental health discourses and meditation-based practices—the broader forces behind how concepts change become visible. On the one hand, setgel emerges through global trends derived from South Asian or ‘Western’ understandings of the mind and mind-focused practices and mental health. On the other hand, there is an important legacy of setgel specific to the Mongolian regional context that doesn’t quite fit definitions and interpretations from either the Global North or conventional Buddhist scripture. As such, setgel illustrates particularly well the ways in which concepts are not static, and how they are shaped by power relations and political economy.

The Mind Reflection Forum was one such instance in which setgel was actively being reformulated in real time, by close association between the current Mongolian government and the country’s Buddhist institutions, and through the now globally popular practice of mindfulness. As presenter-framed-as-cultural expert, I was recruited into a political project to make Mongolian young people more ethically minded. I was expected to do this by depicting setgel as both...
nationalist and thoroughly Buddhist, a politically motivated dehistoricisation of the concept.

Figure 6: Mind Reflection Forum promotional material, circulated on social media.

Figure 7: Narovanchen gegeenten presenting at the Forum. The text reads, 'every person wishes to be happy'. Photograph by the author.
On the morning of 19 February 2022, Forum invitation holders arrived at the Great Heaven's Gateway/Pledge (Ikh Tengeriin Am) government palace and, upon admission, were instructed to enter a small building inside the gate to take a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test. While waiting for the results of my test, I was struck by the chic and glamorous outfits of the country’s top influencers. The dress code was either ‘black tie’ or ‘traditional dress’, as in a deel, or calf-length tunic; both options were adorned mesmerisingly, from pearl-studded hair clips to crystal-emblazoned, floor-length sable fur jackets. A few at a time, we were shuttled by black SUV through a winding mountain pass of Bogd Khaan mountain to a stately building. Inside, guests checked their coats and were offered light refreshments until the Forum began.

Buddhist reincarnate lama and Forum organiser Narovanchen gegeenten opened the event with a discussion of the benefits, both personally and societally, of cultivating compassion. Narovanchen delivered his talk on a raised platform via headset microphone, whilst on the floor-to-ceiling screen behind him appeared succinct key messages such as ‘Every person wishes to be happy’ (Fig. 7). Halfway through his opening speech, he guided a short mindfulness exercise for the audience. While I presented on the ethics of being ‘setgel’s creature’, Lkhagvademchig Jadamb, a social anthropologist from the National University of Mongolia, presented on the relationship between Buddhism, political institutions, and Mongolian culture. Business mogul and mining company owner Mönkhasan Narmandakh spoke about how mindfulness techniques helped her through a recent difficult period of verbal harassment and defamation that had been highly visible on social media. From start to finish, Forum attendees were treated as VIP guests, served an elaborate four course lunch and entertained by performances from the country’s most famous musicians. Two gift bags—one from the national government and one from the Naroba Institute—were presented to each guest.

As Narovanchen closed the day’s events with a guided heart meditation, and the country’s top social media influencers repeated, in unison and line-by-line, his prayer for peace and love for all sentient beings, a glimpse into the normative ethical expectations held in public culture—and the mechanisms by which they were imagined to transform—became visible. On stage, Narovanchen’s public relations specialist offered the parting invitation to share the event widely on soshial (social media). ‘If you liked the Forum, please tell your friends!’

A boisterous cheer resounded in response.
Authorship statement

This article is authored by Elizabeth Turk based on research conducted by her.

Acknowledgements

Research included in this publication has been supported over the years by: Cambridge Overseas Trust and University of Cambridge Student Registry; the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded ‘Mongolian Cosmopolitical Heritage’ project (AHS006869/1); and the EU Erasmus+ ‘Mongolian Mental Health Nurse Training (MoMeNT)’ project. I would like to thank research participants and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. I am grateful to the Cosmopolitical Heritage project’s Principal Investigator (PI) David Sneath, MoMeNT project’s PI Fiona Nolan for their guidance, as well as Tsermaa Tömürbaatar for her support in the field. I would also like to thank the editorial team of *Medicine Anthropology Theory* for their finalising edits.

About the author

Elizabeth Turk is a Research Associate and Affiliated Lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK. She earned her PhD from the same department in 2018. Her research explores health-based strategies in Mongolia, traditional and alternative medicine, nature-based therapy, and religious rituals, as they have and continue to relate to political economy. She is currently working on an AHRC-funded project that comparatively explores the politics of linking health and cultural heritage across the Mongolian-Chinese border.

References


Making ‘Setgel’s Creature’ Mindful


