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Cluster Session 1

Buryatia: Bridging Siberia, Russia, and Eurasia

Introduction from the Editor

Tatiana Linkhoeva

This special cluster originates in the second Buryat studies workshop, held at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University, on October 7–8, 2024. This follows the first Buryat Studies workshop at NYU's Jordan Center for Advanced Study of Russia, which resulted in a special cluster published in *The Russian Review* in July 2025.

Interest in Buryat studies is growing, forming a critical mass of scholars engaged in the emerging field globally. Buryat history is also attracting attention for the comparative insights for understanding other non-Russian ethnic peripheries of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as Mongol groups beyond present-day borders. For the Hokkaido workshop, we brought together Buryat scholars from Ulan-Ude (Russia), alongside scholars from the Republic of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (PRC), Kazakhstan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. In many ways, the workshop became a microcosm of the Mongol world, united by a shared effort to reconstruct Buryat history from a Buryat perspective. Our goal was to shed light on previously unknown, ignored, or obscured connections, ruptures, and interrupted futures. All four authors in this cluster are of Mongolian heritage, from Ulan Ude, Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia.

The three selected papers demonstrate how, across the three centuries covered in this cluster, individuals and communities in Buryatia actively worked through the collapse and reorganization of multiple empires and states, and revolutions to recover meaning and manage ruptures. They further reveal how the intellectual, cultural, religious, and intimate lives of Buryat-Mongol peoples have been continually reconstituted through contingent practices, negotiations, and competitions.

Battsengel Natsagdorj examines marital relations between Buryats (Russian imperial subjects) and Mongols (Qing imperial subjects) from the 1727 Treaty of Kyakhta through the late eighteenth century. Drawing, for the first time, on a substantial body of archival materials from both Russian and Mongolian archives, B. Natsagdorj argues that despite strict prohibitions and severe punishments, intermarriage persisted. Marriage customs involving bride-price were similar on both sides of the border, and these ties were mutually beneficial: Qing Mongols gained economically, as Buryats typically paid a

higher bride-price than Qing law stipulated. For Buryats, the ties maintained important connections to maternal kin across the border. B. Natsagdorj also shows that the Russian state was far more concerned with suppressing these marriages than the Qing authorities. As Russian power solidified in Transbaikalia, cross-border marriages sharply declined.

Zumber Orluud investigates the crucial period following Mongolia's 1911 Declaration of Independence from Qing China. As Mongolian nobles worked to build a new nation-state and enter the international system, they confronted the challenge of translating European political concepts like "sovereignty," "nationhood," and "territoriality." Rather than treating these as entirely new, Orluud, working with extensive archival materials, focuses on the complex translation process itself—the various options considered and the meanings embedded within each choice—which proved integral to creating a new political structure. He demonstrates how these political neologisms were ultimately rooted in, and drew upon, established Mongolian political concepts, highlighting the key role of the Buryat intellectual Tsyben Zhamtsarano in their formulation.

Galina Dondukova and Bato Dondukov analyze the contemporary circulation of the epic hero Geser in post-Soviet Buryat public and religious discourse. They outline the distinctive features of the Buryat Geser epic compared to its Tibetan origins, noting Geser's contested identity—as literary hero, shamanic figure, and Buddhist deity. Dondukova and Dondukov focus on recent debates surrounding a proposal to establish a "Day of Geser" in Buryatia, revealing clashes between shamanic and Buddhist groups. As new Tibetan Buddhist schools entered Buryatia in the 1990s, competing with established local Buddhist institutions, Geser became a focal point of contestation. The authors show how one Tibetan school's elevation of Geser to the status of protector deity, and specifically as a protector of the military, resonates strongly in the current moment of uncertainty amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, boosting both Geser's popularity and the school's own standing.

Taken together, the contributions reveal several powerful and interconnected themes central to contemporary Buryat studies. First, the agency of Buryat individuals and communities—whether in choosing partners, translating Western political concepts, or selecting heroes to worship (thereby instilling them with political meaning)—is evident in how they have navigated and shaped their place within and beyond imperial and national frameworks. Second, the articles demonstrate how Buryats engaged in crucial processes of cultural translation, adaptation, and negotiation, which were further conditioned by the fact that Buryats inhabited the borderland area. These strategies were important to sustaining their communities and forging a distinct cultural and political identity amid shifting imperial and national pressures. Third, the articles underscore Buddhism's enduring significance as a unifying force, a site of contestation, and a bridge to wider Asian networks.

Buddhist leaders and practitioners leveraged these networks to articulate alternative political visions and to elevate their standing by invoking broader Buddhist traditions or responding to current political and religious needs.

Our aim is to advance the study of Buryatia within its interconnected contexts: examining horizontal and comparative relations with other Siberian regions; vertical and uneven interactions with the Russian and Soviet state; and transnational histories across Eurasia. This multi-scalar approach feels increasingly urgent. As nationalist tendencies harden borders across Eurasia and exclusionary ethnonationalism grows within Russia, the task at hand is to de-naturalize those borders, both external and internal, and to recover the fragmented histories they have obscured. The cluster also problematizes how these border-making historical ruptures conditioned the subsequent uneven formation of national subjects. The cluster thus demonstrates the importance of transcending modern political borders to understand Buryat and Mongol histories and to recast both Russia's history and broader history of Inner Asia.