Book abstract

**The Buryat-Mongolian transnational community:**

**between accommodation, resistance, and transcendence**

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The Buryat-Mongols are considered the Mongolian people based on racial, linguistic and cultural grounds. The Russian colonization of their land in the 17th century led to dramatic changes for the native population who became inscribed in the hierarchical structure of the colonial state and subjected to its Eurocentric policies. The Soviet regime fueled the erosion of Buryat-Mongolian identity, including through the elimination of the traditional Mongolian writing system, interferences in the local economy and social structure, and Buddhist learning and religious practices. Buryat-Mongolia was perceived by the Soviet state to pose special problems as it was not only home to the most populous native community in Siberia with a strongly developed national consciousness, but also a frontier region linked ethnically with Mongolia and culturally, via Buddhism, with other countries in East Asia. Despite national borders, the flow of ideas, relations and practices had nonetheless continued, giving rise to the Buryat-Mongolian transnational community that has been rooted in the shared ethno-cultural code. Yet, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a new era for the Buryat-Mongols that opened opportunities to revive its ethnocultural tradition, while also bringing new challenges posed by globalizing Western modernity that has penetrated the post-Soviet space both in physical and digital realms.

Against this backdrop, I argue that the Buryat-Mongols have faced a double level of hegemony: the continuing Russian colonial legacy spanning across tsarist and Soviet epochs and the emergence of globalizing Western modernity since the turn of the 21st century. This dual hegemony has exacerbated the unequal distribution of power, roles and resources within and across borders, while prompting the Buryat-Mongols to exercise their agency to sustain their ethnonational identity amid Eurocentric hegemony. In this process they have leveraged power structures, transnational networks, community-based practices, and gender strategies to accommodate, resist and transcend the status quo of unequal power relations. The scope of their agency, however, has been conditioned by geopolitical events and socio-economic forces, including the paternalistic order, authoritarian regime, neoliberal policies, and more recently the Russo-Ukrainian War that disproportionately affected the Buryat-Mongols.

In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there have been increased calls to decolonize Russia, reassess Eurocentric narratives, and engage with perspectives of the colonized whose identities were altered by state policies. Eurocentric approaches have long dominated epistemology characterized by a highly hierarchical view of cultures, with a perceived superiority of European civilization. In the existing scholarship, the narratives of the Buryat-Mongols have been largely relegated to the margins of imperialist hegemonic discourse with little consideration of their agency. Such situation can be interpreted as a symptom of the intersecting matrix of colonial power, paternalistic system, and neoliberal ideology within the global project of Western modernity. The proposed book addresses the need to decolonize knowledge and decenter conventional Eurocentric approaches and practices by examining the reconstruction of Buryat-Mongolian identity amid geopolitical and socio-economic transformations. In doing so, it moves beyond the victimization of the colonized towards recognizing their agency, power and resilience in navigating the hegemonic rule by embracing ethnonational sensibilities. The research for the book conducted since 2017 is based on archival records, over 300 interviews, and fieldwork in Buryatia (Russia), Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (China), and India.