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FROM *GERIIN BUUZ* TO FINE DINING

The Changes in Mongolian Food Culture from the 1990s to the Present

Abstract

Mongolian food culture has changed radically in the last thirty years. During this period, Mongolia experienced significant cultural and social changes and the era of political opening up and economic changes also took place, in parallel with the worldwide process of globalisation. Explosive urbanisation undoubtedly left its mark on the everyday life of the Mongols, including their eating habits. The changes in food culture clearly shows how Mongolians integrate into the globalised cultural environment, and, at the same time, an opposite process can be observed – one which emphasises certain elements of traditional culture and makes them symbols of national self-representation.

Introduction

The Inner Asian nomads were never characterised by a high gastronomic culture.[1] The nomadic lifestyle does not allow for a varied diet, as the available raw materials are limited. Animal foods – meat and dairy products – are essential dietary elements, while only a few grain products and vegetables are available seasonally. Spices, with the exception of salt, were almost completely absent. They use only rudimentary kitchen utensils and the cooking technology is limited to the basic levels of boiling, steaming, and, less often, frying. In traditional nomadic circumstances, the aspects of practicality, efficiency, and easy and quick preparation were of primary importance

1 Reference to this study: Zsolt Szilágyi: From *Geriin Buuz* to Fine Dining. The Changes in Mongolian Food Culture from the 1990s to the Present. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 399–413.
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in the food-making process. This article aims to present examples of changes in Mongolian food culture, and the process by which certain Mongolian 'national' dishes have become important elements of a Mongolian memory policy consciously constructed in recent years.

The experiences presented in this paper come from different parts of Mongolia, such as the Gobi Desert, Eastern (Khentii and Dornod aimags) and Western (Bulgan, Arkhangai, Övörkhangai, Uvs, Khovd aimags, etc.) parts of Mongolia, as well as Khövsgöl County in the north, and places ranging from the capital city Ulaanbaatar, to small towns in the countryside. The examples in this article are drawn from my experiences in Mongolia during annual field-research visits since 1992, during which I lived with different nomadic families, participated as an honorary guest in a child's haircutting celebration,[2] and celebrated the Lunar New Year *(Tsagaan Sar)*.

On these research fieldwork visits conducted over more than thirty years, I could observe the changes occurring in the eating habits and the taste perceptions of the Mongolian people and also how city and country life diverged in this regard. I noted how traditional nomadic foods became mass-produced products, and again how they created craft products of a guaranteed high quality. I could also discern how the Mongolians adapted to international cuisine with Korean, Japanese, Chinese or European foods becoming an integral part of everyday life, and how some nomadic dishes became symbols of traditional Mongolian culture in a world made uniform by globalisation. Or, how they became fine dining brands conjuring up 'national' symbols.[3]

2 The hair-cutting ceremony is one of the most important family celebration, usually taking place when the child is 3–5 years old, and this is when they receive their name. Batsaikhan, J. – Lkhagvadorj, Ts.-E. and WuDong QiMuGe (Odonchimeg): 'Keeping the Hair-cutting Ceremony in the Context of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia', *Nomadic Studies 31. Nomads, Ethnics and Intercultural Dialogue.* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372946254_Keeping_the_Child_Hair_Cutting_Ceremony_in_the_Context_of_Mongolia_and_Inner_Mongolia> accessed 19 February 2025.

3 <https://www.naadam.com.au/post/the-great-influence-of-mongolian-cuisine-how-dumplings-spread-across-eurasiaintroduction> accessed 13 November 2024.

Social and economic context

Since 1990, Mongolia has undergone economic, cultural and social change at an unprecedented pace.[4] This was also the era of political opening up, and economic changes took place in parallel with the worldwide process of globalisation.[5]

While the structures of a traditional nomadic lifestyle are apparently disintegrating under the effects of the new political and economic environment, two distinct social groups have gradually emerged in Mongolian society in this context. In Mongolian cities – and primarily in the capital – one group is living an entirely settled lifestyle adapted to urban economic circumstances, and this includes those who increasingly see living abroad (not necessarily in an 'urban' setting) as a means of achieving their existential goals. Their aim is to settle and work in Asian countries – mainly South Korea and Japan – with better economic conditions. China is a less attractive destination, partly due to prejudices – observable mostly in Chinese cities – arising from misinterpreted national consciousness, historical tradition and nationalism, despite the fact that a significant Mongolian minority can already be found living in the Chinese territories bordering on Mongolia. I will return to this special issue later in this article.[6]

A very large number of young people living in Mongolian cities are following a new trajectory which diverges completely from the traditional Mongolian model. For them, the fashion, music and lifestyle dictated by the global culture of the United States or by major economic centres in Asia, are the examples of choice to be followed. These young people are gradually losing their connection with Mongolian traditions, by rejecting the way of life that their parents and grandparents followed.[7] They are primarily reacting to the cultural effects of globalisation, but it cannot be stated that the changes resulting from this phenomenon are characteristic only of

4 Boldbaatar, J. – Sanjdorj, M. and Shirendeb, B. eds.: *Mongol Ulsiin Tüükh V. bot'* ('History of Mongolia, V') (Ulaanbaatar: Mongol Ulsiin Shinjlekh Ukhaanii Akademi, 2004), 401–442.

5 Rossabi, Morris: *Modern Mongolia from Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 1–29.

6 <https://www.iom.int/countries/mongolia> accessed 13 November 2024; 'Internal Migration in Mongolia. Situation Analysis Report'. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/Internal-Migration-Situation-in-Mongolia.pdf> accessed 12 December 2024.

7 Janzen, Joerg and Bat-Ochir, E.: 'Rural-Urban Migration of Pastoral Nomads in Mongolia: Causes, Course and Consequences for the Country's Development', in Enkhtuvshin, E. ed.: *Nomadic Civilizations in Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (Ulaanbaatar: International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations, 2011), 309–313.

them. In terms of our topic, this is indicated, by, for example, the appearance of *kimchi* in the diet of a rural shepherd family.

The depopulation of rural areas and the disappearance of a traditional lifestyle can be largely attributed to this globalisation trend. Half of Mongolian society now lives in cities, resulting in the population of the capital city Ulaanbaatar drastically increasing over the last decade. During the 1990s, residents of the Mongolian capital numbered around 700,000 persons. By 2010, the registered population had increased to over one million people,[8] and it has continued to steadily grow since then, reaching, nowadays, nearly 1.5 million residents.[9]

This phenomenon of urban population growth has been clearly visible from year to year in the expansion of *ger* (yurt) districts built by settlers on the hillsides surrounding the capital city, which are now extending to the far side of the hills in the area to the north of the capital.[10] Over the past few decades, it has become a common habit among local urban dwellers to maintain smaller rural homes near the city, usually in the form of yurts, where they live from spring to autumn, only returning to their city residences during the extremely cold winter months. This acquisition of space has been simplified by zoning laws which stipulate that all Mongolian citizens have the right to fence off a specified area of land outside of the city for their own use – which has led to the development of a special system of 'summer homes' *(zuslan)* or yurts in the outlying areas beyond the residential districts surrounding Ulaanbaatar.[11]

In the years following the political transition, especially during the last decade and a half, the number of new settlers in the capital city has increased far more rapidly than the number of newly-constructed flats – which those moving in from rural areas were often unable to afford.[12]

8 Szilágyi, Zsolt: 'Városlakó nomádok. A politikai változás és a globalizáció hatásai a Mongol társadalomban' ('City-dwelling nomads. The effects of political change and globalisation on Mongolian society'), in Berta, Péter ed.: *Ethno-lore XXVII.* (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 2010), 325–337.

9 According to the latest data from the Ulaanbaatar Bureau of Statistics, the registered population of the capital in 2011 was 1,206,000 persons. <http://www.ubstat.mn/> accessed 13 November 2024.

10 Data from 2013 indicates that the population in the capital had reached 1,226,991 persons. <http://www.infomongolia.com/ct/ci/208/137/Ulaanbaatar%20General%20Information> accessed 13 November 2024.

11 In addition to establishing temporary homes and 'summer residences', many have also used this opportunity to build storage facilities and wholesale warehouses connected to their businesses.

12 Estimates by the Asian Development Bank suggest that the annual number of new arrivals to Ulaanbaatar is up to 40,000 persons. ‹http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/dafcddc6-9bfc-11e4-a6b6-00144feabdc0.html› accessed 12 December 2024.

The explosive urbanisation phenomenon undoubtedly left its mark on the everyday life of the Mongols, including their eating habits. The changes in their food culture clearly show how Mongolians integrate into the globalised cultural environment, and, at the same time, how an opposite process can be observed – one which emphasises certain elements of traditional culture and which makes them into symbols of national self-representation. This phenomenon can also be observed in connection with some traditional Mongolian dishes.[13]

The role of food heritage in Mongolian culture

Food heritage plays an important role in self-identification and in the creation of group cohesion. Food culture is significant for defining identity and togetherness, both at a community and at a personal level, while the underlying social and economic processes also make themselves felt at the same time. Thus, certain dishes with the traditions connected to them serve as mediators, as a means of communication and as a channel, contributing to the legitimacy of a situation or of a person within the community.

A good example of the latter is presented by the picture of Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (Fig. 1). In the second half of the 17th century, when the second wave of Buddhism was spreading in Mongolia, he was the first Mongolian Buddhist Head Lama. In the picture he is shown cutting a cooked sheep's tail (***uuts*** in Mongolian) into pieces. This food item is an indispensable element of Mongolian festive meals – the cutting of it into pieces and the dividing of it among those present at a festive meal is the task of the head of the family. Therefore, in this picture, the new Mongolian Head Lama is represented as 'the head of the family' for all Mongolians.

The traditions of food and drink production and consumption of any nation are closely connected to that country's natural and climatic conditions, and to the lifestyle and religion of its people. Mongolian nomads live among extreme natural environments, and their food is based on animal husbandry and on products of animal origin. However, it would be wrong to state that they are just simple 'meat eaters'. Firstly, because in certain periods of the past centuries agricultural production was performed in areas where nomadism was practised.

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13 'Zöv khollolvol Mongolchudd urt nasalna' ('Mongols will live longer if they eat properly'). <https://oditan.mn/posts/7039> accessed 13 November 2024.

14 See: Szilágyi, Zsolt: *A mongol főlámák rövid története* ('A Brief History of Mongolian Head Lamas') (Budapest: Magyar Vallástudományi Társaság, 2010), 34.

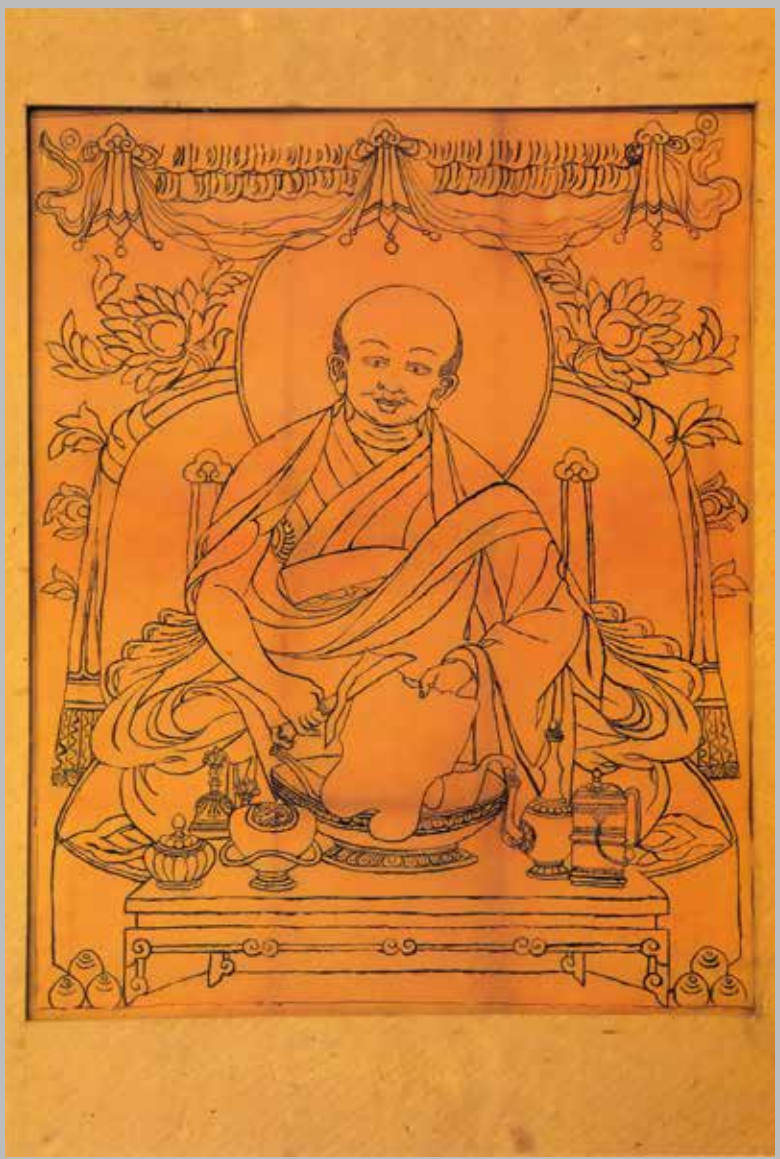

Fig. 1. Öndör Gegeen with uuts[14]

This is clearly shown by the landscape-archaeological analysis of a settlement dated to between the 10th and 12th centuries – the time of the Kitan Empire – which has centuries-old signs of land cultivation. Around the excavated town settlement, furrows can be seen which were the result of tilling. On the other hand, the nomads could obtain grain through their trade contacts, and their diet was completed with plants from their environment.[15]

As the nomads have lived closer to nature than the peoples of settled nations, they have made and consumed many different types of food and drink produced from plants, and the cyclic changes of the seasons have had a greater effect on their diet than that of settled communities. Despite this, Mongolian gastronomy is not as rich as that of settled nations, as it strives for simplicity in terms of its technology and use of tools, hardly using spices; but it adapts better than the settled population to the natural resources available locally.[16]

Traditional nomadic dishes in Mongolia

In the traditional Mongolian diet, changes following the cycle of the seasons can be observed. In winter, the people eat meat (*khar* or *ulaan idee*), and fatty dishes *(shar idee)*, completed with dairy products *(tsagaan idee)*. In spring and summer, they eat goat *(yamaa)* more often, because they regard the goat as being a 'cold nosed' animal whose meat can only be consumed in hot weather. But in summer, they usually avoid eating meat, preferring to consume dairy products, sometimes supplemented with grains.

Summer is the time when fermented milk *(airag)* is consumed. It is part of the general diet with an undisputed alcohol content. In the autumn, more vegetables and fruit are included in the diet, preparing the body for the winter, which is a time poor in vitamins. The dishes particular to the Mongolian traditional diet are systematised as depicted in the following examples.

15 Szilágyi, Zsolt and Erdenebold, Lkh: 'A Khi-Land tájrégészeti projekt', in Khishigbadam, G. and Enkhbaatar, M. eds.: *A Magyar- és a Mongol Tudományos Akadémia Együttműködései* ('The Khi-Land Landscape Archaeological Project') (Ulanbator: Ungariin Elchiin Saidii yaam 2022), 44–56; Harmath, Andras et al.: *Under the Eternal Blue Sky. Landscape Archaeology in Mongolia* (Budapest: Institute of Ethnology, 2019).

16 Chuluunjav, D.: 'Khollokh soyol, kholloh zan üiliin zokhikh' ('Food culture and eating habits') *Sonin.mn*, 22 October 2024. <https://sonin.mn/newsDetail/6096> accessed 12 December 2024.

The dishes are indicated by colours (*khar idee* – meat), (*tsagaan idee* – dairy products), and the various types of animal meat used – derived from 'cold-nosed' animals *(khüiten khushuutai mal, хүйтэн хушуут мал),* and 'warm-nosed' animals *(khaluun khushuutai mal, халуун хушуут мал),* are classified according their effect on the body, which also affects the period when they are consumed. In summer, goat is eaten, in winter sheep, and horse-meat is preferred. The most important aspect is that the nomads try to use the ingredients available to them in the most varied manner possible.

It is a characteristic feature of nomadic cuisine that it uses the simplest technologies that are fast and effective in food preparation. Although the basic ingredients (dried meat, dried cheese, and cottage cheese) are preserved, the nomadic way of life does not allow for the preservation of food for a long period of time, so almost everything is consumed fresh. Among their dishes, those that can be highlighted from our point of view, and which are not only part of their everyday diet but can also be connected to festivities, are as follows. At the *Tsagaan Sar* (the Lunar New Year), and at other festivals, such as *naadam*s (family celebrations), a cooked half of a lamb *(uuts)* is placed in the middle of the table, and the *buuz* (a type of Mongolian steamed dumpling filled with meat), and the *khorkhog* (a special Mongolian BBQ) are also indispensable dishes for family occasions. It cannot be categorically stated that all of these are exclusively nomadic dishes as the Chinese *jiaozi, baozi* is very similar to the *buuz* in terms of its technology. The significance of the Mongolian meals listed here lies in their cultural role.

Due to the political and economic transformation that has been going on since the 1990s and the urbanisation boom as a consequence of it, Mongolian society has been divided into two parts. These days, hardly a quarter of the population leads a nomadic life – a kind of life which has certainly changed substantially from what it was like thirty or one hundred years ago. Today, the vast majority of the population of Mongolia live in cities. Thanks to the introduction of a market economy, product shortage, which characterised the decades of consolidated socialism (approx. 1950–1990), has been eliminated. Ulaanbaatar and the bigger cities can compete with any other big cities of the world in this respect.

Urbanisation, and the change in lifestyle that it brought about, has had a profound effect on the diet of Mongolians. After the product shortage caused by the initial economic hardships, people in the cities could gradually gain access to various basic ingredients. Since the seasonal 'dependence' on such ingredients was over, they

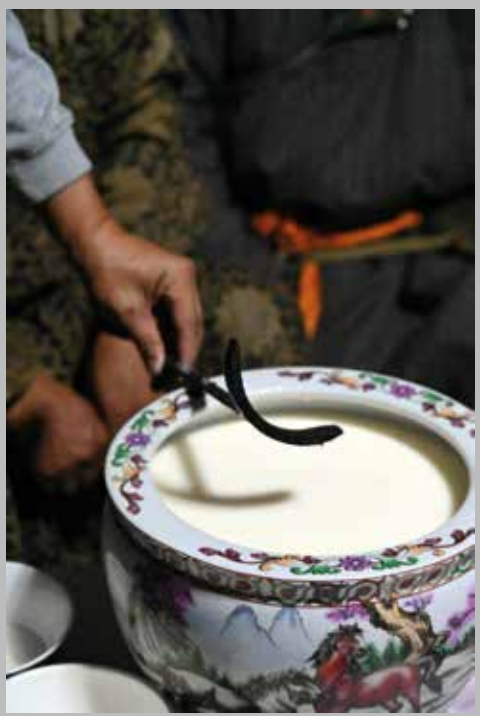

Fig. 2. Airag*, Tsagaandelger* sum*, Mongolia, 2024. (Photo by Zsolt Szilágyi)*

Fig. 3. Khorkhog *with* kimchi*, Tsagaandelger* sum*, Mongolia, 2024. (Photo by Zsolt Szilágyi)*

became acquainted with the cuisine of other nations, and they began to use components – like fish, vegetables, and spices – which are not elements of traditional nomadic culture. Strangely enough, though, the change in their taste was slower than the expansion of the ingredients available. Soon, in the cities, small restaurants appeared for those eating out, but these offered only traditional nomadic dishes in their menus, the taste of which did not always seem tasty to non-Mongolians. The extension of restaurant services was a slow process, but the adoption of technologies and spices used in the cuisines of other nations, the provision of a wider range of meals, and change in Mongolian taste, was an even slower process. In spite of this, city people in Mongolia today can be considered to be 'omnivorous', and they eat spicy foods that are a far cry from traditional Mongolian taste. The Korean, Japanese, Chinese and European restaurants, and so-called 'traditional' Mongolian restaurants, are always full of guests. The everyday eating habits of Mongolians have also undergone changes, as meals consumed during the day – lunch and dinner – are also often eaten out of home.

In consequence of these changes, products of animal origin, which were exclusively made for private consumption – like yoghurt *(tarag),* dried cottage cheese, cheese *(aarts, aaruul, byaslag)*, and traditional dishes such as the *buuz*, became mass-produced products, which often involved a decline in their quality. However, phenomena that had been less conspicuous in the nomadic environment, such as a vegetarian diet, also appeared. This development also influenced the language, as the term *'tsagaan idee'* ('white meals containing milk'), and the expression, *'tsagaan khool'*– which means meatless, vegetarian (and not dairy) food – appeared.[17]

The role of Mongolian dishes in Cultural Heritage nowadays

During the past decade, the need to emphasise national culture has also become stronger in Mongolia. This is partly as a consequence of the fact that in 2005 Mongolia joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and it is also in accordance with the cultural heritage policy of Mongolian governments after 2010.[18] On the other hand, it can also be considered

17 'Tsagaan khool gej yuu ve?' ('What the "white dish" is?'. <https://www.emonos.mn/blog/51> accessed 12 November 2024.

18 'Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage'. <https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/mng/law-on-the-protection-of-cultural-heritage_html/Cultural_Heritage_Law_eng.pdf> accessed 13 December 2024.

to be a cultural response to globalisation as has happened in other parts of the world. During the past decade, national cultural features, as constituent elements of identity, have been emphasised more frequently in public speech. Besides the nomadic lifestyle and cultural traditions, these cultural features include the early nomadic empires, the history of the Great Mongolian Empire, Mongolian sacred traditions, Mongolian clothing and motifs, as well as traditional Mongolian dishes, which have also become elements emphasising cultural independence, an anti-globalisation counter-culture, and national traditions.

Recent attempts at (re)constructing Mongolian national identity can be considered to have been successful. It is of special importance today for the Mongols living in an urbanised environment to feel that they can experience their nomadic identity by consuming traditional food. It is no wonder, then, that there is an increased prospect of traditional Mongolian gastronomy being designated as cultural heritage. It makes itself felt in various ways. The traditional nomadic lifestyle or/and the Mongolian lifestyle and culture – these two words are often interchangeable in the contexts of cultural heritage and memory policy – have become well-defined means of cultural identity. Traditional Mongolian cuisine and dishes have become important elements in the heritage-creating processes that are in progress in Mongolia today.

Due to some governmental and cultural political attempts, certain parts of traditional Mongolian gastronomy became official elements of the cultural heritage policy of the country. Thus, in 2015, Mongolia nominated *Traditional Technique of Making Airag in Khokhuur* for the UNESCO Representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[19]

Food heritage has appeared as an important element of local tourism. As a part of this endeavour, programmes and contents connected to traditional Mongolian cuisine have been produced in social media, and also in other media where they promote hospitality and tourism businesses, and expand their knowledge of culinary techniques.

Khövsgöl County declared 2023 'the year of visiting Khövsgöl',[20] thereby aiming ait increasing internal tourism. As a means by which to do this, traditional dishes and

19 'Traditional technique of making *airag* in Khokhuur and its associated customs'. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-technique-of-making-airag-in-khokhuur-and-its-associated-customs-01172> accessed 13 December 2024.

20 Gantuyaa, B., 'Khövsgöl Zochlokh jil', *Montsame*. 3 October 2022. <https://www.montsame.mn/mn/read/305094> accessed 13 December 2024.

drinks characteristic of the region were popularised, and its history and culture were presented in cooperation with the Association of Mongolian Gastronomy and Tourism – an organisation which intends to popularise Mongolian eating and drinking culture.

Companies also launch their own brands, basing their products on traditional Mongolian gastronomy. The franchise restaurant chain called *Modern Nomads* is such an enterprise.[21] Micro-communities organised around the topic of traditional Mongolian gastronomy, appeared in housing estates – making *buuz* together before the Lunar New Year, for example – or in the social media, especially on Facebook. Competitions are organised in connection with traditional foods.

In catering, 'handcrafted' and 'traditional' products have become synonymous with high quality meals. Thus, *buuz* and *geriin buuz* ('traditional *buuz*'), for example, has retained its place in spite of the challenges posed by the change of lifestyle dictated by urbanisation, and it has remained an indispensable element of the most important Mongolian family occasions – such as at the celebration of the Lunar New Year *(Tsagaan sar)*, and at weddings *(Khurim, Khurimlakh yos)* – where it appears on the festive table together with cooked lamb.

Conclusion

Mongolian nomadic dishes, as unique national cultural features, have found their way into high gastronomy, where they serve to symbolise the unique characteristics of traditional Mongolian culture in the space of globalised culture.

The examples mentioned here are less well known internationally since probably fewer people know about *tsuivan* (noodle with vegetables and beef) than they do about *ramen*, and the Mongols have no such international food-brand as the fermented and preserved cabbage, which is the basis of the Korean *kimchi diplomacy*, and neither is *buzz* unique, as the method of its making in Mongolia, is similar to that used for the Chinese stewed dumplings called *jiaozi, baozi*.

Nonetheless, the Mongolian dishes listed here constitute an integral part of present-day Mongolian cultural tradition, and while their consumption provides culinary enjoyment, it also gives us an insight into nomadic culture. In the ongoing Mongolian

21 <https://www.modernnomads.mn/> accessed 13 November 2024.

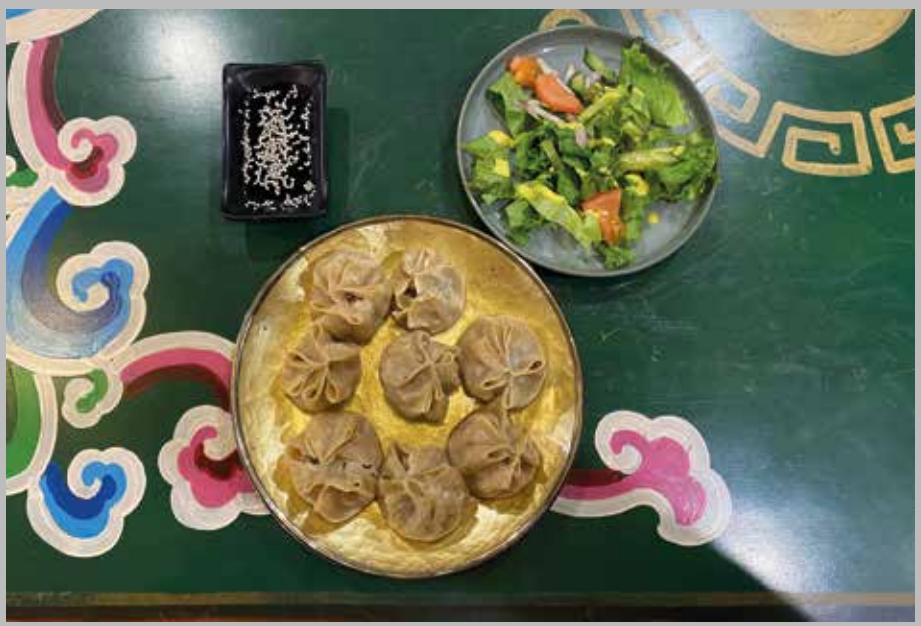

Fig. 4. Buuz, *Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2024. (Photo by Zsolt Szilágyi)*

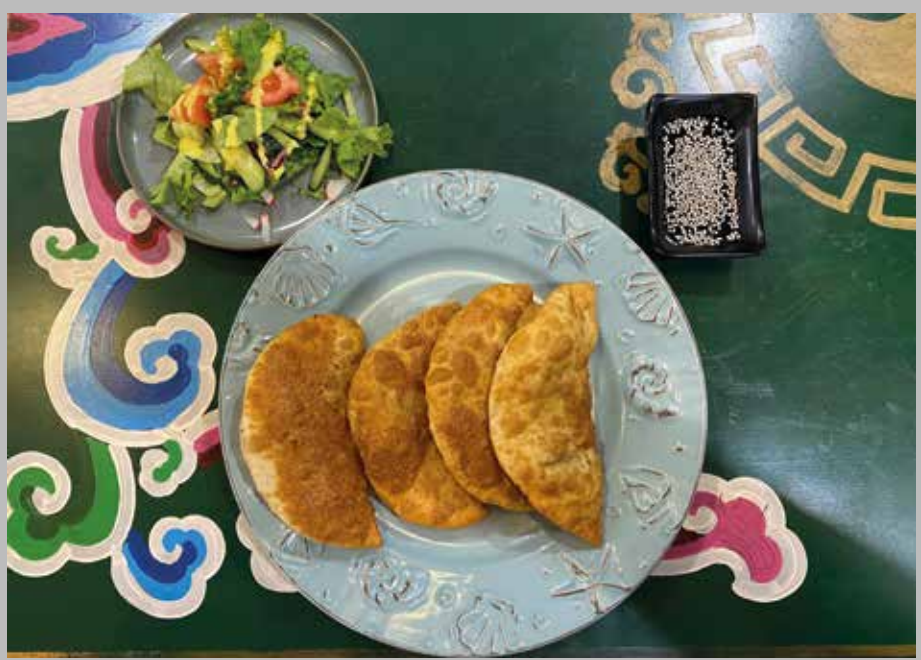

Fig. 5. Khuushuur, *Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2024. (Photo by Zsolt Szilágyi)*

heritage-creating process, it is as important as Mongolian dance, the Mongolian long song, and the other parts of Mongolian nomadic tradition.

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