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# Remembering Negdels: Nostalgia, Memory & Soviet-Era Herding Collectives

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Remembering Negdels: Nostalgia, Memory & Soviet-Era Herding Collectives

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### **Abstract**

During the socialist period Mongolia's nomadic herders were grouped into collective herding units called negdels. Today, over twenty years after Mongolia transitioned to democracy, herding has been privatized completely and negdels are a distant memory. This study explores the history of negdels by conducting twenty-five oral interviews with herders about their memories of collective herding. This study focuses on a soum in the Mongolian countryside, Bayandelger, while also incorporating interviews with people from Ulaanbaatar. Bayandelger is a unique location for this project because it was selected by the Soviets to receive assistance in an effort to make it a model of a successful negdel. The study's findings show that many of the participants, particularly those who were part of the Bayandelger negdel, remember the socialist time fondly and express significant nostalgia for their days in the negdel. Building on work about postsocialist nostalgia in other countries, broader conclusions can be drawn about the nostalgia expressed by participants in this study. Nostalgia is a remembrance of the past but it is also a reflection on the present, so interviewees' memories are examined as a commentary on their attitudes towards Mongolia's current economic and political situation.

**Key Words:** History, socialism, negdels, nostalgia

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## Key Terms

<b>Negdel</b>	Collective herding unit during the socialist period
<b>Aimag</b>	Largest administrative unit, similar to province
<b>Soum</b>	Administrative unit within aimags
<b>Bag</b>	Administrative unit within soums

## Introduction

Mongolia held its first democratic election on July 29, 1990 (Holley, 1990). Election day marked a major milestone in Mongolia's transition from socialist state to democracy, and other milestones were soon to follow. One of these was the dissolution of negdels, the collective herding system that served as the foundation of daily life for most Mongolians for over thirty years. Negdels were a signature part of socialist Mongolia, especially for nomadic herders. They owned all the livestock, set production quotas, and provided a support system and organization for the herders who looked after the animals. When negdels were dissolved, all livestock were privatized and distributed to herders. At last, they were free to make decisions independently of the negdels and manage their own herds. One might think this change was met with universal excitement, but that was not the case. The democratic transition was a messy and chaotic one, giving rise to a variety of problems. Democracy was heralded, but it was also met with skepticism.

Today, twenty-seven years after that first election, democracy in Mongolia is not quite so messy. But, as with every country, some issues persist. Mongolia's democracy stands in stark contrast to its days under a socialist government, and the performance of that democracy no doubt affects the way Mongolians look back on the twentieth century. As the socialist period fades deeper and deeper into history, perhaps the way it is remembered by the Mongolian people will begin to shift. Or perhaps it has shifted already.

This study was born out of a curiosity about how Mongolians remember the socialist period, twenty-seven years after the democratic transition. Is democracy universally praised? Is there nostalgia for the socialist period? This study will explore these questions by looking at negdels in particular, and how people who were once part of them remember negdels today. By interviewing Mongolians about their memories of the negdel period, this study aims to discover how much nostalgia they have for the negdel period and what broader conclusions can be drawn about that nostalgia or lack thereof.

Oral histories were chosen as the form of data collection for this study because they offer a chance to ask individual Mongolian citizens about their

memories in a personal and in-depth way. Oral history interviews allow for stories, family history, and anecdotes to emerge alongside opinions. One previous oral history project has been conducted in Mongolia: a project called ‘The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia’ that was launched in 2008 by Christopher Kaplonski. Over the course of several years, a team of interviewers carried out over six hundred interviews with subjects across Mongolia. Today, these interviews are available online. This project was a tremendous undertaking and has become a remarkable resource for those interested in Mongolia’s history. It is, however, a very general approach; the interview topics are wide-ranging.

This study, while not purely an oral history project, uses oral history methods to hone in on a more specific piece of Mongolia’s twentieth-century history: *negdels*. By building on the work of Kaplonski and his team, this study will be able to create a more in-depth picture of one part of life in socialist Mongolia and how that life is remembered today.

Memory and nostalgia are based in the past, but they are relevant in the present day as well. Nostalgia has significant political implications and can indicate a great deal about current public opinion and sentiment. By exploring memories of the *negdel* period and looking to see if there is nostalgia for *negdels* and the socialist time, this study also will delve into what the presence of nostalgia could mean for Mongolia today. This project, while based in history, has significant contemporary relevance.

Additionally, Mongolia’s rapid economic development in recent years has led to a changing economy, and larger private herds are increasingly stressing the country’s pastureland. These factors, combined with growing climate change and extreme weather, are threatening Mongolia’s traditional nomadic way of life. Because of this, it is more important than ever to preserve history and cultural heritage in Mongolia. This study also works towards that goal by interviewing older Mongolians about their memories of their country’s history.

## Theoretical Framework

Why memory? Why is the past, and the way humans recall it, a growing scholarly focus and cultural interest? Andreas Hyussen examines this very question in his article, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia.” Hyussen remarks on what he considers to be a global obsession with memory, and asks, “No doubt, the whole world is being musealized, and we all play our parts in it. Total recall seems to be the goal. Is this an archivist’s fantasy gone mad? Or is there perhaps something else at stake in this desire to pull all these various pasts into the present?” (Hyussen, 2000, 26). Boiled down, Hyussen is asking a question so simple it is easy to overlook altogether: why bother studying memory?

He is not alone in asking this question. Many of the participants interviewed for this study also asked the same question, suggesting perhaps it would be more informative to go to a library and read books and other sources instead of talking to them. They had only their thoughts, they explained, and could not possibly be considered experts with reliable knowledge to share.

The growing field of memory studies, however, suggests otherwise. In *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Astrid Erll writes, “Over the past two decades, the relationship between culture and memory has emerged in many parts of the world as a key issue of interdisciplinary research... bringing together the humanities, social studies and the natural sciences in a unique way,” (Erll, 2010, 1). This growing field, essentially created by Maurice Halbwach and his writings on *memoire collective* (Erll, 2010), engages with many different forms of memory and their political and cultural implications. Cultural memory research is inherently interdisciplinary, bridging and connecting ideas from across the academic spectrum.

In her introduction to *Cultural Memory Studies*, Erll writes of two categories of cultural memory: biological and collective. Biological memory “draws attention to the fact that no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts. From the people we live with and from the media we use, we acquire schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experiences... In short, we remember in socio-cultural

contexts,” (Erll, 2010, 5). The other level of memory focuses on the social and the medial, the way groups and institutions remember a shared past. These two forms of remembering, while distinct on paper, are harder to distinguish in practice. But Erll’s definitions still offer a helpful foundation for this study, which will attempt to focus more on individual memory. As Erll and Hyussen both indicate, memory studies is a sprawling field. To provide a context for this study’s analysis, it is helpful to consider a certain subcategory of memory studies: the scholarship addressing memory and nostalgia in post-Soviet states and communities.

One such work is Mitja Velikonja’s article titled “Lost in Translation: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-Soviet Countries.” In her article, Velikonja examines nostalgia for socialism in Eastern Europe in a variety of ways. She considers survey data and interviews as well as current media and pop culture trends. Velikonja defines nostalgia as “a complex, differentiated, changing, emotion-laden, personal or collective, (non) instrumentalized story that binarily laments and glorifies a romanticized lost time, people, objects, feelings, scents, events, spaces, relationships, values, political and other systems, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the inferior present,” (Velikonja, 2009, 538). She notes that nostalgia, though focused on the past, is also a reflection on the present and its shortcomings.

Velikonja acknowledges that many people view nostalgia for socialism as a fabrication created by politicians, entrepreneurs and the like to achieve their goals. She argues that this ‘industry of nostalgia’ does exist, but that nostalgia is not limited to just an artificial construction (Velikonja, 2009). Velikonja cites places, goods, images, events, art and culture as she makes her arguments. She includes data from public opinion research as well as her own interviews with people from various countries in Eastern Europe.

After considering all these data points and sources, Velikonja ultimately concludes that “all of this points to a core of nostalgia that consists of a positive memory of the past: people miss those times but do not want to return to them... They prefer the past and maybe even flirt with the idea of its return mostly because they are absolutely sure it cannot return,” (Velikonja, 2009, 546). This is why post-socialist nostalgia is so strong: people reminisce

over an era they know will never return. Velikonja again emphasizes that this is also an embedded criticism of the present.

She concludes, however, with a rather uplifting message: that nostalgia for socialism “does not relate exclusively and precisely to past times, regimes, values... but it embodies a utopian hope that there must be a society that is better than the current one,” (Velikonja, 2009, 548). Velikonja’s work on nostalgia concludes that nostalgia for the socialist past exists because people know they cannot return to that time, are dissatisfied with the present and hope for a better future.

Ayse Parla also tackles nostalgia in her article “Remembering Across the Border: Postsocialist Nostalgia Among Turkish Immigrants from Bulgaria.” Parla focuses on Turkish migrants from Bulgaria, especially women, who are now living in Turkey. She examines their apparent nostalgia for Bulgaria’s socialist period. Like Velikonja, Parla acknowledges that postcommunist nostalgia is often considered simplistic and misguided. She writes, “Former communist subjects who are nostalgic for full employment, access to education, and social security... are often considered to be hopelessly tainted with Marxist ideals to the point of not being able to discern where their true interest lies,” (Parla, 2009, 751). But Parla takes issue with this characterization of nostalgia.

In her own words, Parla interrogates the nostalgia of Turkish migrants for their life under the Bulgarian communist regime by offering a perspective that opposes the “hegemonic neoliberal discourse of capitalist triumphalism... through an analysis of nostalgia that neither takes fond reminiscences of communism at face value nor reduces them to discursive strategies deployed to ease the difficulties encountered in the present by merely retrojecting dignity onto the communist past,” (Parla, 2009, 751). She emphasizes the importance of neither idealizing nor dismissing nostalgia, but rather treating it carefully somewhere in between those two extremes. This careful consideration of nostalgia that recognizes its validity but also considers contextual factors is a respectful and thorough approach and serves as excellent context for this study.

Like Velikonja, Parla also recognizes that nostalgia is inevitably tangled with the present. She draws on other scholars who agree that nostalgia

is a 'presentist' act, serving the present as well as remembering what came before. Parla writes, "this presentist focus has historicized nostalgia and has thus paved the way for innovative analyses of nostalgia in postcommunist contexts as adaption strategies to cope with the difficulties wrought by the transition period," (Parla, 2009, 752). It is clear that when thinking about and analyzing memory and nostalgia, it is necessary to see nostalgia as more than just a reflection on the past. These reflections are influenced by current cultural, economic and political situations and must be critically evaluated accordingly.

Velikonja and Parla both write about the role that present day circumstances play in nostalgia. Haldis Haukanes and Susanna Trnka, in their article "Memory, Imagination and Belonging Across Generations: Perspectives from Postsocialist Europe and Beyond," agree with this but also add a new dimension: the future. In their own words, the authors examine "the interplays between understandings of pasts, presents and futures in postsocialist Europe, with the aim of showing how contemporary circumstances influence not only the dynamic interplay between what is remembered and what is forgotten, but also which visions of the future are allowed to blossom," (Haukanes and Trnka, 2013, 3). They believe that nostalgia, a way of recalling the past that is affected by the present, also plays a role in determining a country's future.

Haukanes and Trnka emphasize the political relevance and weight that nostalgia can carry. They write, "Collective nostalgia is often imbued with a political dimension; surpassing its conventional understanding as a 'longing for the past', the sentiment of nostalgia often couples affect with political critique, resulting in emotionally laden commentaries of pasts, presents and futures," (Haukanes and Trnka, 2013, 4). Thinking of nostalgia just as memory is a simplistic way of approach, they argue. In reality, what are perceived as wistful memories of a bygone era can have major political and cultural implications.

The authors quote Dominic Boyer, who argues in a similar fashion that nostalgia is essentially the 'politics of the future', and that "tropes that idealize the past make a claim upon the right of future self-determination," (Haukanes and Trnka, 2013, 4). They also give credit to Daphne Berdahl, who was

“among the first to suggest that nostalgia should be seen as a commentary on contemporary politics and market forces and as a form of resistance to Western hegemonies, rather than as a mournful longing for the past,” (Berdahl, 1997). Berdahl, Boyer, Haukanes and Trnka all agree that nostalgia has a powerful role to play in politics far beyond mere stories of the past. Thinking of nostalgia in these ways gives relevance to a study like this one, and shows the powerful role that memories can play.

In his “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” Alon Confino offers a more critical and equally valuable opinion. Confino sees the term memory as overused and the field of memory studies as predictable, sprawling and unfocused. He writes, “At the center of this essay is the problem of how the term ‘memory’ can be useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience,” (Confino, 1997, 1388). This article is essentially a critique of memory studies and cultural history, calling for more intense theoretical analysis.

Towards the end of his article, Confino offers two ways forward that he believes will improve the field of cultural history. He proposes “that the history of memory be more rigorous theoretically in articulating the relationship between the social, the political and the cultural and, at the same time, more anarchical and comprehensive in using the term memory as an explanatory device,” (Confino, 1997, 1402). As this study makes its own foray into the field of memory studies, Confino’s critiques are helpful to consider and incorporate.

Perhaps the part of Confino’s argument that is the most relevant to this study comes when he offers an example of why he is frustrated with the memory studies field. Confino warns against what he sees as an easy trap for cultural history work to fall into. He cautions, “There is too often a facile mode of doing cultural history, whereby one picks a historical event or a vehicle of memory, analyzes its representation or how people perceived it over time, and draws conclusions about ‘memory’ (or ‘collective memory’),” (Confino, 1997, 1402). This is an incredibly valuable perspective to have going into a study focusing on memory and nostalgia, and offers what Confino

sees as an important cautionary tale of a problematic mode of analysis that is all too easy to fall back on.

Hyussen and Erll provide a broad, foundational introduction to the sprawlingly interdisciplinary field of memory studies. Velikonja, working in postsocialist Eastern Europe, offers her own definition of nostalgia. She also argues that nostalgia is not a construction but rather must be taken seriously, as it also offers an embedded criticism of the present. Parla, working on Turkish migrants who experienced socialism in Bulgaria, agrees that nostalgia must be taken seriously but not completely at face value and also seconds Velikonja's conclusion that the present day must be considered as well. Haukanes and Trnka take that conclusion one step further, arguing that not only the present is tangled up in nostalgia but the future is as well. They also emphasize the political implications that nostalgia can have. Lastly, Confino provides an interesting critique of memory studies and suggests that more theoretical rigor and careful analysis is necessary.

None of these sources interrogate cultural memory or nostalgia in Mongolia specifically. Though there is a body of work on postsocialist Mongolia, it is less explicitly focused on nostalgia in the way that the above articles are. For this study, a framework more closely related in theory and less geographically related proved to be the most helpful foundation for analysis. That said, several of the articles discussed above do focus on other postsocialist states and people who lived through socialist periods in their own countries. It is true that each state's experience under Soviet influence is unique, and so is each state's approach to democracy and government in the postsocialist era.

But while they may not have shared the exact same experiences, the many people who lived under various socialist governments led lives that closely overlap or mirror each other in a variety of ways. So while Parla's work with Turkish migrants who lived under Bulgarian socialism and Velikonja's work with people from the former Yugoslavia do not translate precisely to the lived experiences of Mongolians in the socialist time, there are many parallels. These parallels mean that the articles above are highly relevant to this study and provide an important theoretical framework for the analysis to follow.

## Historical Framework

Mongolia first attempted to collectivize herding in 1930, with significant resistance and disastrous results. The number of livestock plummeted by nearly eight million in two years (Endicott, 2012). So in 1932, “collectivization was reversed and herds were repatriated under the ‘New Turn Policy’, allowing herd numbers to rebound... Mongolia’s so-called New Turn Policy was Stalin’s response to the catastrophic economic and social toll that the 1930-1932 Soviet-modeled attempt at collectivization had caused,” (Endicott, 2012, 68). To avert total economic collapse, Moscow temporarily relented. But this was not to last. Collectivization was revisited, with much more success, beginning in 1955. This time herders who did not voluntarily join were slapped with much higher quotas, often twice what herders already in the collective were expected to produce. This economic coercion worked like a charm, and by 1959 collectivization was pronounced a triumph (Endicott, 2012). These collectives were given a name: negdels.

Endicott explains how negdels fit into Soviet and socialist ideology, writing that “since Mongolia’s social strata did not lend themselves easily to the Marxist-Leninist conflict scenario of feudal exploiters versus the exploited... the herders were a substitute proletariat, since no urban working class existed in Mongolia in the 1920s and 1930s,” (Endicott, 2012, 71). In accordance with this ideology, animals were collectivized. Pastureland was not, but only because land had already been considered a communal resource for centuries.

Each soum became a negdel, and at the peak of collectivization Mongolia had over three hundred of them (Sneath, 1999). Each negdel was subdivided into brigades, and within the brigades families were assigned animals to look after. The negdel was “a comprehensive unit meeting every single aspect of the herding household’s social and economic needs. It offered free education, health care and pensions. It provided veterinary services, animal shelters, hay and transportation for people and equipment. It marketed all livestock products jointly, and supplied consumer goods in return,” (Bruun, 2013, 67). Negdels served as the foundation for and center of nearly all aspects of life.

## **Methodology**

### **Location**

This study took place in several locations in Tov aimag, Mongolia's central province. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Bayandelger, a soum several hours east of Ulaanbaatar. To add some contrast to the study, a smaller number of interviews were also conducted with individuals living in and just outside of Ulaanbaatar. A rural soum was selected as the primary location so it would be easy to access herders, who live in rural areas and who also made up the majority of negdel members.

In Bayandelger interviews took place with residents who lived in the soum center, residents who lived further away but had come to the soum center for various reasons, or residents located outside the soum center. In both Bayandelger and Ulaanbaatar, interviews happened in a variety of locations. These locations include participants' apartments, houses and gers as well as the homes of other residents. Additionally, several interviews were conducted in cars. The majority of interviews were conducted over a six-day period from May 8<sup>th</sup> through May 13<sup>th</sup>. In addition to this intense period of data collection, at least two weeks were devoted to researching relevant background information, watching films on the topic and creating a fine-tuned set of interview questions for interviews.

In terms of limitations, this study could have been furthered by finding participants in more locations to create a more varied understanding of the topic. Though sufficient location diversity was achieved by interviewing participants in both Bayandelger and Ulaanbaatar, this could have been expanded by traveling to other soums and talking to former negdel members there.

### **Participants**

Twenty-five participants were interviewed in total. Of these participants, nineteen are residents of Bayandelger soum and six live in the greater Ulaanbaatar area. Having most of the participants be from a rural area was a deliberate choice to ensure that a majority of the interviewees were herders. Additionally, older participants were chosen because they lived through more of the socialist period and have better memories of negdels.

All of the participants were over the age of forty, and most over fifty. Three participants were in their forties, ten in their fifties, seven in their sixties, four in their seventies and one participant was over eighty. At least ten interviewees are now retired. Fifteen participants were herders at one point in their career. The others have worked for the state in other capacities. These positions include but are not limited to jobs as teachers, drivers, tractor operators, veterinarians, accountants, cinema operators, post office workers and as entrepreneurs in private business. One interviewee had worked as a soum director, one as a brigade director, one as a bag director and one as the director of a negdel.

Selection of interviewees was not randomized. Participants were selected with the help of contacts in both Bayandelger and Ulaanbaatar and based on their availability at the time. Additionally, interviewees would recommend their friends and neighbors as potential participants. Family networks were also utilized at times as a way to find participants.

To protect their anonymity, participants are referred to by an assigned code. The first part of the code represents the location of the interview—‘B’ for Bayandelger or ‘UB’ for Ulaanbaatar—followed by a number corresponding to the order in which participants were interviewed. See Appendix 1 for a complete list of participant codes and more information about each interviewee. This study could have been expanded by interviewing more participants, however time and resources proved to limit the scope of the project.

## **Measures and Procedures**

Data was collected using interviews with each participant. Interviews were twenty minutes long at minimum, though some lasted for several hours. Each interview roughly followed the same list of questions, though additional questions arose throughout the course of each interview and therefore no two interviews are identical in terms of the questions that were asked. See Appendix 2 for a sample list of interview questions. Interviews were conducted with the help of a translator. The same translator was used for every interview to ensure consistency. With participants’ permission, interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. In addition to the recording, thorough

handwritten notes were taken during each interview. Anywhere from one to six interviews were conducted each day. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

### **Data Analysis**

After all interviews had been conducted, notes and recordings were synthesized into a single typed document. A spreadsheet was also created detailing the basic information for each participant such as their name, the date of their interview, the location, their age and occupation as well as several other categories. The document with complete data from all interviews was read repeatedly and exhaustively, and from that document a narrative began to emerge that ultimately formed the Results and Discussion sections of this study. The data gathered did not lend itself to any charts or graphs, so none were created and a more holistic approach was chosen instead.

### **Ethics**

Each participant was asked to read a consent form and, if they felt comfortable, sign and indicate their consent and willingness to participate in the project. They were informed about the nature of the project and what forms the product of the research would take. Interviewees were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time, that confidential information would be protected, and that their privacy would be safeguarded. They were also asked if it was okay to record the interview; every participant said yes. Consent forms were offered in both English and Mongolian, though as expected participants used the Mongolian version.

This project did not have any major ethical challenges; participants were simply asked to share whatever memories they felt comfortable relating to an interviewer. Though some memories could be personal and difficult to share, it was easy for interviewees to only talk about what felt comfortable to them and omit more sensitive information or avoid topics altogether. Additionally, the project was reviewed by a Local Review Board for potential concerns regarding human subject research before research even began. Through these varied measures, all potential ethical concerns were addressed.

## Results

Though it is not an oral history project in its purest form, this study draws on oral history as both an inspiration and a guide. Different elements of oral history methodology and practice are incorporated throughout the study. One of the most important elements is how the Results section is organized: by interviewee, not by themes. This decision was made to both reflect the oral history nature of the project and to respect the memories of the individuals who shared them: memories are deeply tied to the person from which they came and it seemed less fitting to separate the two and talk about themes instead of people.

### **Bayandelger**

One of the most important facts to come out of an interview was not about the negdel itself, but about a famous poet named Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj who was born in Bayandelger. Multiple participants mentioned Natsagdorj in their interviews, full of pride that a great Mongolian poet was born in their soum (B-14, B-19). He is remembered with a statue in front of the school in the small soum center. There is a statue of Natsagdorj in Ulaanbaatar as well, but the residents of Bayandelger claim him as their own. He is a central figure in Bayandelger's history, the negdel period included.

The story of the Bayandelger soum negdel essentially begins in 1906, with the birth of Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj. Raised by his father, Natsagdorj became an apprentice clerk at eleven and a secretary to the National Military Council at seventeen (Hangin, 1967). He studied in Germany and later in Russia. He died young, at thirty-one, but his work has lived on and today Natsagdorj is regarded as one of the founders of modern Mongolian literature. He was "a revolutionary, a patriot, a writer, a playwright and a poet," (Hangin, 1967). He is considered to be one of Mongolia's first socialist writers.

In his famous poem "My Native Land" Natsagdorj offers a vivid homage to his home. He writes, "Snow capped mountains gleam from afar; Clear blue skies over steppe, plain and field; Majestic glacial peaks are visible far off; Vast airy valleys which calm the mind of man. This is my native land,

Mongolia the beautiful!” (Hangin, 1976). It was verse like this that caught the attention of the Soviet leadership in Moscow.

After collectivization, in the 1960s, Soviet leadership in Moscow wanted to help Mongolians with the process of developing negdels. They wanted to create model negdels, shining examples of all that collectivization could accomplish. But which ones to choose? How to decide where to go? Someone involved with making that decision had read Natsagdorj’s work, and knew he was from a small soum in Tov aimag. Because Natsagdorj was such a well-known revolutionary, a writer who embodied the socialist ideas all Mongolians were expected to embrace, his birthplace was chosen as one of the negdels to receive Soviet support. It was because of Natsagdorj that the Soviets went to Bayandelger (B-14).

The story of Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj is central to this study because it is thanks to his work that the Soviets chose to help Bayandelger become a successful negdel. In turn, the Soviet presence in Bayandelger made it a much more successful negdel than most. This plays a major role in how the residents of Bayandelger remember the negdel period, especially in comparison to those from other negdels.

B-14 was the interviewee that first explained the connection between Natsagdorj, Bayandelger and Soviet assistance during the negdel period. He explained how the Soviets chose to help Bayandelger because it was the poet’s birthplace, how they hoped to make Bayandelger a model negdel. Because of their efforts Bayandelger was more developed than other negdels. Nomadic herders used cars to move instead of carts and horses. The Soviets arrived in 1966 and built “very nice fences” for animals, springs to water the livestock, winter shelters and areas for baby animals (B-14). Bayandelger focused on both herding and farming, which generated a lot of profit and helped make it a very successful negdel. He noted that while other soums may explain the negdel period in different ways, this negdel was very strong and developed so the memories are largely positive (B-14).

But the negdel didn’t just focus on agriculture and herding. B-14 described the ways in which the negdel took care of its citizens too. The negdel would retrieve children from remote herding families at the beginning of the academic year, bring them to the soum center for school, and help them

return home over school holidays. The negdel had special rooms with comfortable furniture for pregnant women, who could stay in these special quarters for the week before they gave birth. Once the babies were born, the negdel would assist these new mothers in returning to their homes in the countryside.

During the negdel period, B-14 worked as a driver for the state. For five years he served as the soum director's personal driver. He remembered the negdel period as a time when life was good, when people worked hard together. While he believed that democracy was good, he viewed the direct transition as a mistake and mentioned that a gradual transition would have been better. The ownership granted to citizens suddenly divided all property; essential resources like springs were suddenly owned by just one person who could do whatever he pleased with it. In this vein, some public buildings were neglected or ruined. He concluded that every period has its own advantages and disadvantages, but Bayandelger's negdel was far more successful than most. This, he explained, colored the way its residents remember the negdel period.

Many of the points made by B-14 were present in other interviews as well. Of the nineteen participants interviewed in Bayandelger, seventeen were involved with the negdel there in one way or another. The other two moved to the area after the democratic transition and belonged to negdels in other parts of Mongolia. The seventeen participants from the Bayandelger negdel were not all herders, but rather worked various jobs for the negdel or for the state. One such participant who worked for the state and served the people of the negdel is B-2, a retired teacher.

B-2 was born in 1947 and actually spent her childhood in Ulaanbaatar—her father was even president of the National University of Mongolia. But her father grew curious about herding lifestyles and what it was like to be part of a negdel, so in 1966 he moved the family to the countryside and became head of a negdel. She worked as a teacher during the negdel period, and retired after the democratic transition. B-2 won the Good Mother Medal for raising nine children with her husband. She joked that there are no pictures of her from the party celebrating her medal because she was too busy looking after all her children (B-2).

B-2 remembered the negdel period very fondly. She spoke of everyone working hard and being focused on their jobs of working for the negdel, remarking on how many nice memories she has from that time. The state organized everything, she said, and all people had to worry about was working. Though democracy was the right choice, there were mistakes. She explained that though every period has its advantages and disadvantages, during the negdels the motto was ‘one for all, all for one’ because working together was more powerful. Now, life depends only on the individual. She also lauded the Soviet people, saying that “The Soviet brothers helped us so much, I just have to mention that,” (B-2).

B-2’s husband, B-7, also participated in this study. B-7 was born in 1946 in Tov aimag, and started working for the state as a geography teacher in 1966 in Altanbileg, a different negdel in Tov aimag. In 1978, the negdel assigned him to Bayandelger and he served as its soum director until his retirement in 2006.

Like his wife, B-7 had nothing but fond memories of the negdel period. He explained that before collectivization, wealthy people controlled things. But then “simple Mongolian people” started talking about working together and becoming a union (B-7). The result was so good that it spread throughout the country, though rich people didn’t like the negdel because it meant they were not in control. But by 1959, “We declared the Mongolian union as winning,” (B-7).

During the negdel period, he said, everyone preferred to work together no matter what the task was: gathering hay, preparing cashmere, birthing animals. When people worked together, the result was more efficient and productive. People helped each other; tasks that were difficult for one family to accomplish were easy when everyone collaborated. The negdel paid for every kind of need, and all people following the director’s orders meant that there was no arguing about resources. B-7 also mentioned, as his wife did, the help that Bayandelger received from the Soviets. He said that in addition to Bayandelger the Soviets also assisted Zaamar, another soum in Tov aimag.

He supported democracy, saying that people “all over the world were supporting democracy,” (B-7). But he added that Mongolians were not ready for it psychologically and the transition occurred too early. Now that things

are private, he maintained that “everyone is selfish,” (B-7). He appreciated the privacy that came with democracy but qualified that by saying that while looking after one’s own animals is good it can be too many animals for people to handle on their own.

The main points brought up by B-2 and B-7, and earlier by B-14, are reflective of what many other Bayandelger interviewees had to say about the negdel period as well. B-3, a herder, echoed the same sentiments. She said that the negdel “brought the best things” (B-3), that it was organized and had good leadership. People listened to and supported one another, did their own jobs and looked after one kind of animal. Everyone had a plan, a quota to meet and their own salary. People didn’t have to worry. She said that life as a herder now was essentially the same, except people worked together during the negdel and herding is private now. When asked about the downside of being in a negdel she replied, “There were no hard parts. We worked together so there were no problems. Compared to now, it was easy,” (B-3).

B-3 did not have particularly good memories of the democratic transition, reflecting that while the negdel was very organized the transition to democracy was not. It was messy, she explained, and no one knew what to do. People became selfish and only lived and took care of themselves. After her husband died three years ago, she hired herders to help her with her animals. But she said it is difficult to find good herders that work hard. Even her grandchildren do not like coming to visit her; she said that younger people are lazier and just want easy jobs. In her opinion, they are not always up to the challenging work of herding and taking care of animals (B-3).

B-5 started working for the negdel as a post office assistant before advancing to post office director. He later became an accountant and also worked as a brigade director for the negdel. As brigade director, he worked with herders to increase the quality of livestock as well as the population. He became a herder after the democratic transition and is retired now. He describes the negdel period as “one of the nice moments of the Mongolian lifestyle,” (B-5). Everyone had a job and had to work, and “what people wanted in their minds and hearts was the same,” (B-5).

Democracy was not so bad in his opinion, but the way the negdel period ended suddenly was more problematic. Everyone was given ownership

of animals, but some people didn't know how to take care of the animals and so the livestock population decreased in both quality and quantity. Unemployment rose as well. But he doesn't regret democracy, explaining that every period has good and bad parts. Rather than complain, he wanted to "enjoy all periods in Mongolian history," (B-5). He did mention, however, that today Mongolians "know their rights very well but don't know their rules," (B-5).

B-12 and B-13 are a married couple, so their interviews took place jointly. They are herders, and have also worked in private business. They both focused on the Mongolian economy during the negdel period, and how it has deteriorated since then in many ways. They explained that during the negdel period there was no trash in Mongolia because all animal products were used. The Soviet brothers helped build factories that used every single part of an animal, skin and horn included. When democracy was instituted these factories were privatized and ultimately ruined or abandoned by their new owners. In their opinion it was a huge mistake to ruin these factories because now agricultural products are cheap and there are few factories in Mongolia to add value. Instead Mongolia sends raw products to China, where they are processed and sold back to Mongolia. The Mongolian economy is essentially owned by China, and the gap between wealthy and poor Mongolians is too big. Wealthy people keep their money in banks abroad instead of in Mongolia.

Herders are worried about this, and want to reuse discarded animal parts and create better products. But according to B-12 the state is not worried about this, and couldn't afford to rebuild factories even if they were concerned. It would be a valuable profit for Mongolia if the factories were rebuilt, but the government is focused exclusively on natural resources. B-13 denounced mining, saying that mining has made the Gobi Desert dangerous for animals and digging in the ground means less food for livestock. But they also acknowledged that each period has its advantages and disadvantages, and that this is not just a Mongolian problem. The whole world experiences changes from one period to another like this. It was always clear that Mongolia would move to democracy, they noted, but it happened too suddenly. At the end of the interview, they offered their hope that the future would be better for Mongolia.

B-18 experienced life in three negdels. She was born in Khovsgol aimag in 1965, moved in Khentii in 1972 at the negdel's command and then again to Bayandelger in 1988. She worked as a herder, looking after baby sheep and baby goats for the negdel. She explained that responsibilities were high during the negdel period but remembered those days fondly, saying that all aspects of life were neat and organized. Society was neat and people had good character. She lamented democracy's uncontrolled nature, saying, "people know their rights but don't know their rules," (B-18).

In her interview, B-18 specifically focused on the differences in child rearing between the socialist time and the present day. She thought the negdels were better because people were responsible when it came to raising children. She worried that "maybe people are understanding democracy wrong," (B-18). Now, while the development of democracy is very nice, people are losing important values like how to teach children. If a teacher is being strict then children and parents complain and the teacher gets in trouble, so teachers are too nice and not strict enough.

Education in Mongolia has followed other developed countries in a way that is not suitable for Mongolian children. Mongolia has its own methods, but these have been lost. Today, students are stronger than the teachers. In contrast, during the negdel period it didn't matter what kind of methods the teacher used. The results would still be children with good morals but now this is not the case. Because of the way children are raised today, B-18 was nostalgic for the negdel period.

B-19 also expressed significant nostalgia for his time in a negdel. He and his wife, both veterinarians, were assigned to Bayandelger after they finished school in 1980. As a veterinarian he got his salary from the state, not the negdel, but served the negdel members and took care of their animals. He lauded the negdel as neat, organized, responsible and reliable. Everyone had a job, salaries were enough and no one had to worry about their family. Even people who did not want to were forced to do work. When animals gave birth, people came together to help each other. He remembered the negdel as one big family (B-19).

After the transition to democracy, B-19's life changed in that he had ownership, privacy and profit. He was able to buy an animal hospital at

auction. But he said that because of democracy, Mongolia is divided between rich or average people and very poor people. At the end of the negdel period directors and coordinators shared animals equally with herders, but there were other possessions that they kept for themselves and did not share equally. These include houses, factories, fences, goods and tractors. This is how wealth originated for many people who are wealthy today. B-19 was frustrated with this dynamic, and nostalgic for the equality that was a hallmark of the negdel.

In addition to the interviews above, five other participants that were part of the Bayandelger negdel expressed nostalgia for that period. B-4, a herder and former soum director, remembered negdels as a time of people working together. All people were in a union, he explained, and this was better than working alone. Each person worked their own specific job and did not worry. No one was rich, and everyone was equal economically (B-4). B-6, also a herder, echoed these sentiments. She remembered negdels as a nice time and a good society when everything was plenty, when people were honest with good character and all had jobs. She declared, “everyone agrees that the negdel period was better than now,” (B-6).

Similarly, herder B-8 remembered the negdel as a “brilliant period,” (B-8). She emphasized that everything was ready, that if you were looking after animals you didn’t need to worry about other jobs like getting hay because other members of the negdel were responsible. After the negdel, she said, society was not good. People were shocked and frustrated at democracy (B-8). B-9, her relative, built on this sentiment. He added that people didn’t know what was happening or what democracy really was, and though people got ownership “something was broken down” (B-9). And B-15, a herder from Bayandelger, criticized democracy but declared there were “no disadvantages to the negdel period,” (B-15).

Two members of the Bayandelger negdel, B-10 and B-11, did not express the same wistfulness for the past as their fellow interviewees. B-10 was born in Bayandelger in 1959 and has lived his entire life there. During the negdel period he worked as a tractor driver for seventeen years, beginning in 1973. In 1995, he won the State Warrior Tractor Driver prize (B-10). Because every tractor driver had the same job, they all competed to see who could be the best. He referred to this as the “socialism race,” (B-10). The driver who

won the award would receive money and time off from work as part of the prize, making such prizes very valuable and coveted.

B-10 labeled the negdel period a “strict dictator period”. He explained that everything was planned, everyone worked for society and there was no privacy. Each family looked after one kind of animal, usually 700-800 of them. If you had 100 sheep and they all give birth, for example, you had to keep at least 85 of the babies alive or you would not receive your salary. The salary wasn’t very big either, just enough to meet basic needs. The advantage of the negdel, in his opinion, was the power of being united and having people work together. Each individual had their own strict job, but if a member of the negdel was sick others would band together and come help. In this way, even though life in the countryside could be difficult there was no need to worry about hard situations (B-10).

In 1993, the negdel period ended and the state granted herders ownership of animals. They gave the herders that had been negdel members animals first, and other state employees such as teachers and doctors got whatever was left. B-10 explained that everyone was happy with democracy because it meant they could go abroad, or even eat one of their animals if they desired. He thought that his life improved with democracy because he owned his own tractor, as opposed to the negdel period when the state owned it. Once he owned his own tractor, he could provide services for people privately. He has seven children, so another advantage of democracy is that his children can do what they want and have whatever career they choose.

After the negdels collapsed, B-10 found himself without a job. The negdel gave him animals but he ate them and was unsure what to do next. He mostly worked privately: renting stores, working for a wool and cashmere company, providing services with his tractor and other private businesses. More recently, he purchased some cows. Except for herders, everyone was left jobless in the early days of democracy. Despite these potential hardships, he emphasized that Mongolian people “have to follow whatever kind of society is in power at the moment,” (B-10).

B-10 was the first interviewee involved in the Bayandelger negdel who openly preferred democracy to negdels. Though he spoke fondly of negdels too, it was not with the same wistfulness that many other participants from the

Bayandelger negdel used. He was the first interviewee to state bluntly that his life had improved with democracy, and he did not seem particularly nostalgic for the socialist time.

B-11 moved to Bayandelger in 1978, when he was twenty and the state assigned him to the Bayandelger negdel. This was a frequent occurrence; the state would send someone who had just graduated to a negdel that needed a worker of that profession (B-11). In Bayandelger, he worked as a tractor driver. He noted that during the negdel period all people had “a purpose, a profit and a job,” (B-11). He had mixed feelings about the transition to democracy, saying that democracy was right but the state party made it wrong. He elaborated, explaining that “once we chose democracy, everyone could achieve success and improve their life, but the state party tried to make it equal which is not honest because it is supposed to be democracy,” (B-11).

His parents followed the state but he followed democracy, because democracy gives everyone the chance to be rich. The problem in his eyes, though, was that some people achieved success and others did not. He followed democracy but he could not reach success, and he thinks that is wrong. Today he serves as a bag director; he is the nearest person to the citizens and listens to their problems to help find solutions. But B-11 also spoke fondly of democracy, saying that everyone has the chance to increase their animals as much as they wanted. People can explore new things, buy cars from other countries, own businesses, and choose their own lifestyle. This gives Mongolia the “opportunity to develop,” (B-11). To him, democracy represents freedom. In his eyes democracy is better than the negdel period.

B-11 shared many of B-10’s sentiments about negdels. He did not have any complaints about negdels, but outwardly preferred democracy. B-10 and B-11 did not view the socialist time in the same rosy way that many other interviewees did. These were the only two participants from Bayandelger who expressed minimal nostalgia for the negdel period, and felt that life had improved for them in recent years.

The two herders who were interviewed in Bayandelger but moved there in the past twenty years, and therefore were not members of the soum’s negdel, were B-16 and B-17. They both expressed that they did not see much of a difference between democracy and being in a negdel. To them, life did

not change much. As B-17 put it, there was “no difference between herding in the negdel and herding my own,” (B-17). Both of these participants did describe the negdel as a nice period, a good time in Mongolian history. But they were not nearly as enthusiastic about it as many of the other Bayandelger interviewees.

### **Ulaanbaatar**

In addition to the nineteen participants interviewed in Bayandelger, six interviews were conducted in and around Ulaanbaatar. Of the six interviews, three participants expressed nostalgia for the negdel period. The other three either indicated a preference for democracy or did not express the same sense of wistfulness towards socialism.

UB-1, a herder originally from Tov aimag, remembered the negdels as a “nice moment,” (UB-1). He preferred the negdel period because everything was clear and ready, the salary was enough and all one had to do was focus on the specific job that had been assigned. In the negdel period there were almost no drunken men, and everyone had a job regardless of whether or not you had a degree. Now it is far more difficult for young people to find jobs, especially if they do not have a bachelor’s degree. He concluded that he does prefer the negdel period, and looked back on it wistfully.

UB-2, a herder until she retired and moved to the city in 2003, remembered the negdel period as strict and said that life did not particularly change with democracy though unemployment was higher. She did not seem especially nostalgic for the negdel period but in the end did say, “Maybe the negdel period was better. It was an honest period,” (UB-2).

UB-3 also expressed nostalgic memories of the negdel period. She is also a herder, and moved to Tov aimag from Zavkhan aimag in 1999. She called the negdel years “my parents’ period”, though she worked in the negdel for many years (UB-3). She described it as a planned economy period, and mentioned that there were no drunken men and no one had to worry about finding a job. She also concluded that “maybe the negdel is better,” though without the conviction that many of the Bayandelger interviewees expressed (UB-3).

UB-6 was almost completely neutral in her memories of the socialist period. At one point she asked, “What is the difference between negdel and democracy?” as if she genuinely did not know the answer (UB-6). She did say that the negdel was efficient and its workers were honest and hardworking. She worried that today salaries in Mongolia are not high enough, and educated people go abroad to make more money.

UB-4 and UB-5, however, expressed enthusiasm for democracy and did not seem particularly nostalgic towards the socialist period. UB-4 worked on a negdel farm in Arkhangai aimag and also had a job milking cows. She later worked as a herder in Tov aimag as well. She supported democracy and explained that her life changed after democracy because “everything became clear,” (UB-4). People could choose their own lifestyle and go abroad if they wanted to. She concluded that in her opinion, democracy is better than the negdel period.

UB-5, who worked as an accountant for 40 years, remembered negdels as a time when people had to work together and understand the power of unions. Everyone focused only on their job, and basic supplies such as flour and tea were made available to herders in return for their animal products. He called himself “the first member of democracy” and also said “I am a fan of democracy,” (UB-5). He explained that though democracy has not turned out quite the way he originally hoped it would, especially the very large income gap between rich and poor, he still believes in democracy.

## Discussion

In Parla's article, she discusses how it is important to carefully consider how one approaches the analysis of nostalgia. Parla offers two extremes to be wary of. She writes, "dismissing [nostalgia] as mere holdovers from the past deprives the speakers of any competence... also partakes in the logic of Cold War ideology that, a priori, assumes life under capitalism is better than life under communism," (Parla, 2009). She speaks of the danger of disregarding nostalgia entirely, but also of the potential to go too far in the other direction: "On the other hand, do scholars not run the risk of romanticizing the communist era if we take the expressions of a better past at face value? In doing so, would we not be paying insufficient heed to the 'politics of memory' with its selective practices of remembering and forgetting?" These two types of mistakes when it comes to analyzing nostalgia are important to think about when evaluating the results of this study.

Considering Parla's warnings of this sort it is important to first acknowledge that the participants' memories, while perhaps not factual or completely accurate and certainly not the same as reading a history book on the subject, are absolutely valid and relevant. Memories are an important part of historical discourse and should be treated as such, even though they do not carry the same academic accuracy as some other sources. That said, it is also important to keep in mind that memories are colored and changed over time, as the past grows distant and new experiences put old ones in a different light. The memories of the interviewees in this study cannot be taken completely at face value, but rather critically considered in a broader context.

Keeping this in mind while listening to interviews with participants, hearing about their memories and stories of the socialist period in Mongolia, several themes emerge. When talking about negdels, these themes include cooperation, lack of unemployment, organization, equality, stability and a strong sense of being part of a union. Participants talk about the negdel as being 'ready', with all aspects of life laid out and planned by the state. Of the seventeen participants who worked for the negdel in Bayandelger, fifteen of them expressed nostalgia for the socialist time. Each participant emphasized different parts of negdel life, but many of them came to similar conclusions in the end.

For B-14 it was the way that the negdel took care of its citizens, with extra services like special care for heavily pregnant women and rural school children. B-2, B-7 and B-3 all agreed that the negdel “brought the best things” like working together, mutual support and few worries (B-3). B-5 called the negdel “one of the nice moments of the Mongolian lifestyle,” (B-5). B-12 and B-13 both emphasized how there was no waste in the negdel period thanks to factories that used all parts of animals. B-18 noted how child rearing now is nothing like it used to be, expressing her preference for how children were brought up during the negdel period. B-19 praised the equality that the negdel brought to Mongolian society and the sense of unity it produced. When asked about the democratic transition, participants mentioned how suddenly socialism ended and that perhaps Mongolia was not ready for such a rapid transition to democracy.

As Fritz Stern writes in his article “Freedom and Its Discontents”, “Freedom also meant freedom to face an uncertain future, freedom to lose a job, to lose support nets, however inadequate they may have been,” (Stern, 1993, 109). Though he was writing about the fall of the Berlin Wall and a transitioning Germany, his words ring true here as well. Many of the participants in this study expressed a similar sentiment, extolling the virtues of the negdel and the structure it gave life while criticizing the chaos and uncertainty with which democracy arrived in Mongolia.

Only two of the interviewees from Bayandelger’s negdel did not seem to miss the socialist time and explicitly said that they preferred the democratic period. The two who moved to Bayandelger later on, and were part of negdels in other soums, were both fairly indifferent. Of the six interviewees from Ulaanbaatar, three expressed nostalgia for the negdel period and one expressed indifference. Two were openly much more supportive of the democratic period.

These results show that a significant trend of nostalgia for negdels exists among older generations of Mongolians. Twenty-five participants were interviewed in total, and eighteen of them remembered negdels very fondly. Three appeared indifferent, and only four seemed to heavily prefer democracy. This pattern of nostalgia is apparent in the quantity of participants who expressed it and also the language they used when describing their memories.

One participant used the phrase “all for one and one for all” to praise the negdel (B-2). They spoke of equality, reliability, a stable society. Interviewees recalled the good morals that seemed much more pervasive during that era, the lack of drunken people and also the lack of waste. There were achievement prizes, awards, incentives to perform well. Words like ‘union’ and ‘organized’ and phrases such as ‘everything was ready’ and ‘everyone had a job to do’ were used over and over again with remarkable consistency.

The results of this study and the interviews conducted for it also show an especially high concentration of nostalgia amongst former members of the negdel in Bayandelger soum. As explained by B-14, this is most likely because Bayandelger was chosen to become a model negdel thanks to Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj. The support, resources and infrastructure received from the Soviet brothers helped Bayandelger flourish. This success no doubt contributed to all the fond memories of the negdel period, and influenced how positively Bayandelger residents speak of the negdel today. Again and again, interviewees in Bayandelger mentioned the Soviets and how helpful they had been in so many ways: building fences, shelters, factories and other infrastructure. Though the number of interviews conducted in Ulaanbaatar was small, the participants there did not express the same enthusiasm for the negdel period with the same frequency that participants did in Bayandelger. This shows that the trend of nostalgia for negdels, while widespread, emerged especially in Bayandelger because of its history as a Soviet-assisted model negdel.

Why is this trend of nostalgia for the negdel time significant? Because as Velikonja, Parla, Haukanes and Trnka argue, nostalgia is more than just a longing for the past but also a reflection on the future. Nostalgia is a ‘presentist’ act, a way to cope with current dissatisfaction or hardship (Parla, 2009). Robbins and Olick explain presentism as a phenomenon that “documents the ways in which images of the past change over time... an inevitable consequence of the fact that we interpret the world—including the past—on the basis of our own experience and within cultural frameworks,” (Robbins and Olick, 1998, 128). As a person’s experiences grow and change over time, so does the way in which they recall their personal history. Current situations color and affect the way memories are recalled and shared.

This means that the participants in this study, in sharing their memories of life in a negdel, also offered insight into their attitudes towards Mongolia's political and economic situation today. The negdel period and the current democratic one are two very different systems; in some ways endorsement of one is an implied criticism of the other. Many interviewees shared numerous good memories of the negdel and talked about what a good period it was, how all people worked together as a union and nobody had any worries. Their nostalgia for the negdel period can be read as a disapproval of Mongolia's current political and social realities, as the country struggles economically and the income gap between rich and poor grows.

By emphasizing over and over again how people worked together for the negdels, participants suggest they are unhappy with the current lack of unity among Mongolians. By mentioning repeatedly how nice it was to not have to worry during the negdel period, because everyone had a job and a guaranteed salary, interviewees hint at feeling stressed and concerned about Mongolia's economic uncertainty. Of course it is impossible to know for sure what can and cannot be extrapolated by considering the oral interviews that make up this study. But social memory theory, and the articles considered above, create a framework for this type of analysis.

It is critical in this discussion to consider Confino's critique of social memory studies mentioned earlier in this study. Confino cautions against what he sees as a facile mode of doing history, where one analyzes how people perceived one historical event over time and then draws conclusions about memory (Confino, 1997). This study is certainly attempting to analyze how people perceived one historical event—negdels in Mongolia's socialist period—over time. But while it is attempting to draw conclusions and find broader significance in those memories, it is important to note that this study is in no way trying to make assumptions or declarations about memory as a whole. While memory is clearly a powerful tool for examining history, this one study of relatively small scope is not in a place to comment on the entity of memory itself and will make no attempt to do so.

Scholars in the field of memory studies talk and write often about the 'politics of memory'. This term is frequently used to label and discuss how groups and individuals manipulate collective memory to their own advantage,

how national identity is constructed or how history is passed on from one generation to the next. But in this context it takes on a different sort of meaning. The memories discussed in this study have political significance of their own. As participants mulled their history and shared memories, as they looked back fondly on the negdel period, Mongolia's current atmosphere was surely never far from their minds. The way they reconstructed their memories of the past to share with an outsider reflects directly on present-day circumstances and how they feel about their country's current progress. This is a different sort of memory politics, a potent mixture of presentism and reflection. These memories, especially the nostalgic ones of the interviewees from Bayandelger who remembered their negdel with exceptional fondness, carry both historical and political weight.

While discussing the significance of this study it is also important to note its limitations. Probably the biggest shortcoming is that all interviews were conducted through a translator. This has several implications: first, it means that there could be possible errors in the translations and notes recorded and used in this report. Second, it means that interviews were more stilted and with less natural flow than they would have been if conducted in only one language. It was more difficult to ask follow-up questions and probe the interviewee because the reaction time was much longer as each sentence had to be filtered both ways through the translator. This is especially a limitation for a project like this one, based as it is entirely on oral interviews.

Another major limitation is the sample size. If more participants had been interviewed the study would be much more comprehensive. In particular, this analysis would be enhanced by more interviews in Ulaanbaatar to compare and contrast more thoroughly with the interviews from Bayandelger. Other limitations include the short time frame in which the project took place. Though this study provides a credible picture of the way herders remember the negdel period, it would only be strengthened with more interviews from a larger pool of participants.

## Conclusion

The goal of this study, as stated in the introduction, was to interview older Mongolians about their memories of the negdel period as a way to examine nostalgia and its ramifications. Twenty-five interviews with Mongolians who lived through the negdel period generated memories, recollections and anecdotes about their experiences in a negdel. Many of these participants remembered negdels with great fondness and expressed significant nostalgia for the socialist period. Drawing on scholarship about nostalgia in other post-socialist countries, it becomes clear that this nostalgia has broader ramifications. Nostalgia is in many ways a presentist act, and reflects not only on the past but on the present as well. In this way, each memory is in a sense also a commentary on Mongolia's present situation. Nostalgia carries political weight and contemporary cultural relevance, and so do the memories of negdels that participants in this study shared.

Interviewees reminisced about the negdel's organization, structure and spirit of collaboration. They talked about how everyone had a job, no one needed to worry, and salaries were reliable. They remembered a messy and chaotic transition to democracy, a rapid shift to private ownership surrounded by confusion and uncertainty. A few talked more glowingly about democracy. Some commented how while the negdel period was very nice it was important to see each era's advantages and disadvantages and just embrace each period because truthfully they didn't really have a choice.

These largely nostalgic memories for Mongolia's negdel period show a wistfulness for the socialist era. This especially rang true for Bayandelger, a particularly successful negdel that was supported by the Soviets. This nostalgia can also be interpreted as a reflection of how participants see Mongolia today. In today's uncertain economic climate, amidst a decade of rapid and whiplash-inducing growth, it is important for Mongolia to take nostalgic sentiment into account. As Mongolia continues to grow and develop, its leaders must remember that nostalgia is valid, nuanced and incredibly powerful.

As far as recommendations for further research are concerned, it would be interesting to do a similar study with a much larger pool of interviewees. A

true oral history project, similar to Kaplonski's but focused on negdels, could build on this study and create a more in-depth look at negdels while also preserving a fascinating piece of Mongolia's history with traditional oral history methods. Such a project could even result in a physical or digital searchable database, a kind of archive, to make these memories of socialism accessible to anyone who is curious.

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### Appendix 1: Participant Information

<b>code</b>	<b>date</b>	<b>location</b>	<b>age</b>	<b>occupation</b>
B-1	5/8/17	Bayandelger	50s	herder
B-2	5/9/17	Bayandelger	70	retired teacher
B-3	5/9/17	Bayandelger	60	herder
B-4	5/9/17	Bayandelger	44	herder, former soum director
B-5	5/10/17	Bayandelger	63	retired post officer, accountant, brigade director
B-6	5/10/17	Bayandelger	56	herder
B-7	5/10/17	Bayandelger	71	retired teacher, negdel director
B-8	5/11/17	Bayandelger	85	retired herder
B-9	5/11/17	Bayandelger	40s	unemployed
B-10	5/11/17	Bayandelger	58	tractor driver
B-11	5/11/17	Bayandelger	59	former tractor driver, current bag director
B-12	5/11/17	Bayandelger	50s	herder
B-13	5/11/17	Bayandelger	50s	herder
B-14	5/12/17	Bayandelger	59	driver, entrepreneur
B-15	5/12/17	Bayandelger	60	herder
B-16	5/12/17	Bayandelger	59	retired herder
B-17	5/12/17	Bayandelger	44	herder
B-18	5/12/17	Bayandelger	52	herder
B-19	5/12/17	Bayandelger	63	veterinarian
UB-1	5/13/17	greater UB	65	herder
UB-2	5/13/17	greater UB	72	retired herder
UB-3	5/13/17	greater UB	69	herder
UB-4	5/13/17	greater UB	54	retired herder
UB-5	5/13/17	greater UB	66	retired accountant
UB-6	5/13/17	greater UB	76	retired cinema operator

## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

- What is your name? When and where were you born?
- What did your parents do for work?
- Were they in a negdel? What did they tell you about joining?
- What was school like for you as a child? What did you do after you finished school? Have you had jobs other than being a herder?
- When and how did you first hear about the collectivization movement?
- Did you join a negdel right away?
- How (if at all) did your life change when you joined a negdel?
- Did your negdel specialize in anything in particular?
- What was it like being part of a negdel? How did it affect your daily herding routine?
- How were serious decisions made in the negdel?
- What were the good and bad parts of being in a negdel? Do you have any fond (or not fond) memories in particular?
- Did you ever struggle to meet a production quota?
- What would happen if someone failed to meet a quota?
- How many animals of your own did you have, and how many state-owned animals? What kinds of animals?
- What are your memories of the democratic transition?
- How did your life and your herding practices change after the transition?
- How many animals did you have after privatization?
- Looking back now, how do your days in the negdel compare to herding on your own? Which do you like better? Why?
- As someone who is just learning about negdels, what do you think is important for me to know about them?