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# Nature and Nomads: Service Approach to Mongolia Tours

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Nature and Nomads: Service Approach to Mongolia Tours

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**Abstract:** Tourism has potential to diversify Mongolia's geopolitically challenged economy. Tourism development and promotion has increased since 1990, and there is reason to expect continued sector growth. Cultural tourism has potential to commodify or degrade cultural resources (Gilbert, 2006, Pigliasco, 2010, Soma & Suhkee, 2014) and alter the physical landscape and identity of local people (Chang & Yeoh, 1999, Seng, 2005, Phua & Berkowitz, 2014). As tourism in Mongolia increases, its effects on cultural resources should be understood. This study of Mongolian tourism interviews fifteen tour company employees to understand how Mongolian culture is perceived and used from a business perspective. What attractions do companies visit and why? How is the government involved? What does this imply for tourism stakeholders? Data shows that Mongolia tour companies lacks standard protocol, making individual companies responsible for tourist activity and resource management. When a limited number of resources are used in different ways, fragmentation may undermine collective interests like cultural preservation. There also appears to be multiple and even contradictory perspectives on cultural authenticity, which complicates the role of nomadic people. Issues of seasonal contracting and exclusive growth are also discussed. The research fills some gaps in Mongolian tourism literature and provides a base for further research.

## Introduction

### *1.1 Tourism in Mongolian*

Mongolia's economy has struggled since the 1990 transition to free market. The Soviet Union controlled trade from 1924 to 1990, preventing Mongolia from experiencing international trade and free industrialization (Bilskie & Arnold, 2002). Geopolitics challenge growth, as Mongolia's nearest ports lie in Russia and China. Around 80% of Mongolia exports go to China, and Russia is the main supplier of Mongolian oil, which raises concerns about Mongolia's ability find economic freedom from its superpower neighbors (Byambakhand, 2018). Mineral extraction has contributed largely to GDP and attracted foreign investment in the previous 28 years, but Mongolia's mining industry is associated with environmental damages (Batbold, 2018), and over-development of one industry might diminish other sectors and create dependence on few resources (see Ragnar, 2009).

International tourism can provide economic diversity needed to reduce dependence on mining and dilute the power of Mongolia's neighbors. The Government of Mongolia (GOM) has sought to increase tourism since the revolution. The National Tourism Board was created in 1995 to advertise Mongolia as a global destination. Mongolia created two tourism development plans in 1999: a "Master Plan for Tourism Development" designed by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to design policy and national tourism development plans, and a "Strategic Tourism Development Plan for Mongolia" provided by the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States to develop tourism between 2000–2005 (Yu & Goulden, 2006). The GOM also advertised "The Visit Mongolia Year" in 2003, and "Discover Mongolia"

in 2004, but these campaigns were somewhat unsuccessful due to coincidental outbreaks of SARS (World Tourists Discover, 2009).

The GOM created legislation to manage the growing tourist sector. The “Law on Tourism” was established in 2000 to provide legal definitions for tour operations and the right to government inspections/regulations of tour company behavior. This document has been amended 23 times between 2000 and 2015 (Law of Mongolia, 2015). The ministry has since passed further laws on tourist development as well as laws on the use, definition and protection of cultural heritage (Laws Relating to Tourism, 2015). In 2014, GOM responsibilities shifted when the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism was split into three joint ministries, including the newly created Ministry of Environment and Tourism (“New Minister Appointed” 2014). The current ministry redesigned the tourism motto and logo: “Nomadic by Nature,” which it seeks to advertise in international conferences and expositions (Personal Interview with MAP). The efforts indicate public sector attempts to increase tourist traffic.

There have been changes in the private sector as well. During the communist/socialist era, the state-owned Juulchin company held a monopoly on tourism, but 14 years after the free market opened, over 210 private tourism companies operated in Mongolia. More than 90% of those companies were created after 1990 (Dolgorsüren et al. 2004:27). Tourism was also limited to citizens of the USSR and communist-bloc nations during the socialist era, and in 1989, of 236,540 international visitors coming to Mongolia, 95% were from the Soviet Union and other eastern European countries (Kokubo & Haraguchi, 1991, quoted in Yu and Goulden 2006). While Mongolia saw the same number of international visitors arrive in 2004, Russia no longer dominated and visitors arrived from America, Europe, Japan, Korea, and China (MMRTT 2005,

quoted in Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2007). More recent statistics see over 400,000 visitors in 2016, but this number was not specific to nationality (World Bank 2016). Today companies may seek assistance through non-governmental organizations led by members of the tourist industry, such as the Mongolian Tourism Association (MAP) or the Mongolian Tour Guide Association (MTGA). The MAP, for example, was created in 1992 to develop tourism while protecting interests of the Mongolian tourism sector, and it is the largest professional body assisting tourist companies through tour guide trainings, and news. While the MAP is defined as non-governmental, it was designated by the GOM as the only organization allowed to offer official tour company certifications since 2011 (Personal Interview with MAP).

## *1.2 Culture and Tourism*

The literature on culture and tourism is extensive—mainly identifying the connection between heritage identity and the pressure attracting tourists (see work by Lacy & Douglass, 2002, Lui, Chi, & Lui, 2015, Phua, Berkowitz, & Gagermeier 2012, Zeng, Go, & Vries, 2012). When using cultural identity as a resource for attracting visitors, the incentive to perform economically may override the desire to preserve genuine heritage. Still, perceived authenticity is a factor that increases tourists' satisfaction of a destination (Lu, Chi, & Liu, 2015, Truong, Huong, Lenglet, & Mothe, 2017). In some cases, aspects of cultural tradition may be supported, such as the representation of historic arts and folk concerts (Ayden & Alvarez, 2016, Lacy & Douglass, 2002). Heritage preservation is supported by tourism in several parts of the world: residential surveys found cultural tourism to preserve historical culture and identity in Hispanic American communities (Besculides, Lee, & McCormick, 2002). The Indonesian government preserves the material tradition of rural communities with public law, such as the absence of electricity or

window in homes (Cole, 2007). The designation of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO facilitates culturally and historically accurate tourism at over 1,000 sites world-wide (UNESCO World Heritage, 2018).

On the other hand, tourism can lead to misrepresentations and cultural commercialization. Since tour operations depend on patronage, they compete with one another to attract tourists, nations, firms, or individuals are pressured to represent their culture in a competitive way. Not all aspects of cultural are equally accepted; in ancient Chinese towns, historical practices like prostitution, opium use, and traditional hygiene are considered negative by tourists and bring pressure for change (Zhou, Zhang, Zhang, & Xiang 2018). Traditions which may be considered more culturally or historically relevant can produce fewer tourists. Several studies find that the socio-economic benefits of tourism can lead to cultural commodification and degrade historic culture (Gilbert, 2006, McIntosh & Prentice, 1999, Pigliasco, 2010). Tourism not only (re)values elements of culture, but it may change culture and lifestyle altogether.

Government-driven tourism in Singapore has both preserved and altered the lifestyles and cultures of local people. It has been argued that incoming tourists, who outnumber locals two-to-one, have been absorbed into Singapore's daily life and hold a constituent presence in government decision making (Seng, 2005). The government-backed Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has redesigned ethnic districts and physical landscapes to project certain heritage narratives and its latest brand image. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) (re)packages cultural landscapes by superimposing distinct themes that allow tourists to interpret and experience local cultures, such as the 'creation' of a historic Chinese diaspora district marketed as 'Little China' (Chang & Yeoh, 1999). To some locals, the imposed architectural 'authenticity' of Singapore's tourism strategy

was seen to privilege a *vision* of Chinese culture rather than the lived experience local diaspora culture (Chang & Yeoh, 1999). Residential testimonies find that tourism efforts are becoming internalized by residents, suggesting that the STB transformed both the physical landscape and a cognitive element of human activities (Seng, 2005). The most successful tourist attractions in Singapore are also not necessarily the most relevant to cultural heritage, as found by Phua and Berkowitz (2014). Sites losing support by new waves of tourists are in danger of fading away and losing federal interest, such as the diminishing Chinese heritage-themed park, Haw Pa Villa (Phua & Miller, 2014). Singapore thus represents heavy-handed shaping of the nation's identity to benefit a tourist economy. While the densely populated, cosmopolitan city-island of Singapore is hardly a proxy for Mongolia (landlocked and the second least-densely populated country in the world), the two nations play a similar game.

The extent that tourist affects Mongolian culture is largely unknown. Studies suggest that the Kazakh eagle hunting festivals have been “de-contextualized” falconry into a symbolic demonstration for tourists, which undermines the conservation of tradition (Soma & Suhkee, 2014), but general cultural representation in everyday tour activity is less understood. A survey of 2,000 international tourists found that among travel objectives, “beautiful” and “unspoiled” nature was number one, while seeing and understanding Mongolia's history, culture, and nomadic life came in second (Dolgorsüren et al., 2004). Yu and Goulden (2006) found that international summer tourists are most satisfied activities to be nomadic visits. Other found studies dated to Dolgorsüren et al (2004) and Yu and Golden (2006), who cover satisfaction of tourists, and Buckley Ollenburg, and Zhong (2007), who describe the construction of a cultural landscape in tourism products. These studies indicate that cultural changes may occur among nomads, but there

is little knowledge about how nomadic people are used and represented. Without understanding cultural tourism in Mongolia, the integrity of this cultural heritage is at stake.

### *1.3 Constructing the Mongolian Experience*

Destination image and distinction are important factors behind travel. An empirical study in Vietnam found that distinctiveness is formed through social communications linked to concepts like destination image and uniqueness (Truong, Lenglet, & Mothe, 2017). Motivations to visit destination attractions are informed by promotions and the destination image, or the most essential elements that represent a destination (Kotler & Gerner, 2004). Tourists visit Transylvania to find the fictional Count Dracula show that destination images can be social constructed through advertisements and representations in mass media (Banyai, 2009). A broad anthropology study determined that Mongolia's nomadic people and pristine landscape are joined under a single *cultural landscape* present in the advertising, expectations, and tourist consumption of tours and advertisement (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2007). That destination image will be accessed through products that that provide a perceivably 'Mongolian experience.'

Tours are the hallmark of contemporary Mongolian tourist agencies, advertised in nearly every guest house in UB and tour agency. About 64% of visitors took packaged tours to Mongolia (Yu and Golden 2006). Since countryside infrastructure is somewhat non-existent, many travelers book packages through tourist companies to experience Mongolia's emblematic culture and nature. These trips are consider the way to 'get' a true, Mongolian experience:

The archetypal authentic product in Mongolia is a tour offered by a US-based specialist operator, Boojum Expeditions (2006)... a 19-day, 150 km horseback journey through the steppes of the Khovsgol area, staying in gers amidst the nomadic herds, eating local food

and interacting with local nomad families, and taking part in the annual festival of sports and horses, the Naadam (Buckley, Ollenburg, and Zhong 2007, 53-54).

Such cultural exchange with genuine ‘local’ people with region-specific activities and festivals contain nearly all the components of authenticity known to satisfy cultural tourists (Truong, Lenglet, & Mothe, 2017). A number of other companies offer tours to the Gobi, horse riding to in Terelj or Khustai Nuruu National park, group trips to the Chinggis Khaan statue outside the capital city, and tours to cultural moments in Ulaanbaatar. There may be an endless combination of individually tailored tours, which can be designed by the client in respect to their interests (City Tours and Excursions 2017, Courageous Rider LLC 2018, Bolod Tours 2018, Tours Expeditions Fun 2018).

#### *1.4 Role of Mongolian Business*

The effects of the ‘Mongolia experience’ may be shaped by the decisions and capabilities of individual tour companies. The GOM represents the country on a global scale through its campaigning and the “Nomadic by Nature” slogan, but it is possible there is weak connection between private firms and government. The GOM has recently shuffled the ministries related to tourism, and there is reportedly widespread corruption and unclear government behavior in office (Investment Climate Statement, 2015). Where government interaction between private enterprises is weak, cultural tourism relies on the methods and capabilities of local service providers, which must negotiate their own products (McCamley & Gilmore, 2017). Without strong government influence, the in-country operator responds in respect to the demand of travelers, structuring employment patterns, supply chains, and tourism impacts based on an individual basis.

To date, research has not examined how Mongolian tour operators respond to the demands of the tourism sector. This gap is worth filling for several reasons: without information regarding employment practices, there is no guarantee of inclusive growth. Second, given the sensitivity of cultural resources, there should be an understanding of how Mongolian tourism uses its most widely advertised and appreciated resources: nature and nomads. This research responds with a qualitative exploration, asking: how do Mongolia tour companies perceive destination attractions and how are these elements accessed? How is Mongolia presented to travelers? What does this mean for sector employees? How is the GOM or other institutions involved in Mongolian tourism?

## **Methods**

### *2.1 Setting*

The study took place in Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar, as the majority of Mongolia's tour agencies and guest houses are based here. One interview occurred through skype, as the participant was abroad during the interview period.

### *2.2 Participants*

A purposive sample sought to interview a diverse group of companies. Companies operated between 64 years and 2 years, ranging between 40 and 7,500 tourists annually. Both guesthouse and tour providers were included in the sample as both provide tour services and accommodations to travelers. The profiles of company size, employment, and can be viewed in Table 1. Study participants consisted of owners, managers, and salespersons of Mongolian tour companies. All participants oversaw tourist services and understood the needs and expectations of foreign tourists.

Tourism experience ranged from 10 months to over 20 years. Simple demographics for participants, as well as position and average experience are featured in Table 2.

**Table 1:** Company Profiles. All reported numbers are estimates. (FT= Fulltime, TG= Tour Guide, D = Driver). Inbound tours are for international arrivals, outbound tours are for domestic travelers leaving Mongolia.

Company Number	Company Type	Company Age	Fulltime Employees	Contracted Employees	Inbound Tourists (annual)
Company 1	Inbound Tour Agency	2015	7 FT	30 Contract	30
Company 2	Inbound Tour Agency and Guesthouse	1999	6 FT	20 TG, 40 DR	2000
Company 3	Inbound Tour Agency and Guesthouse	2005	4- 5 FT	70 Contract	2300
Company 4	In-bound Tour Agency	2013	4-5	Guides infrequent and seasonal	30-50
Company 5	In/outbound Tour Agency	1954	36 FT	100 TG; 100 D	5000
Company 6	Inbound tour agency; niche: challenge tourism	2004	4 FT	+50 TG & D	500
Company 7	Inbound Tour Agency and Guesthouse	2014	4	10-15 TG, 10 D	250-300
Company 8	Inbound Tour Agency; niche: film/photography	2002	7 FT, 2 FT TG	100+ TG & D	500
Company 9	Inbound Tour Agency	1998	7 FT	20-25 TG; 20-25 D	750
Company 10	Inbound Tour Agency	1998	9 FT	TG & D rented by tour	350

Company 11	Inbound Tour agency, guesthouses, ger camps, and restaurants	2000	11 FT, 5 FT G, 3 FT D	11 TG, 20 D	550
Company 12	Inbound Tour Agency and Guesthouse	2016	5 FT	TG infrequent, hired if needed	230
Company 13	In/out bound Tour Agency and Guesthouse	1993	15 FT	20-22 TG	70
Company 14	In/Out Bound Tour Agency, ger camps, and restaurants	2003	35 FT, 5-6 FT TG, 30 FT D	200 TG; 100 D	7500
Company 15	Tour Agency; French Market Niche	2006	2-3	25 TG, 20 D, and 15 Nomadic families	250

**Table 2:** Participant Profiles.

Average Age	~29 years
Sex	8 Female, 7 Male
Positions	Mangers (7)
	Sales managers (4)
	Tour Mangers (3)
Average Experience at Position (years)	4.5 years
Average Total Experience in Tourism	10 years

### 2.3 Measures & Procedures

Data consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews with managers and employees of Mongolian tour agencies. Interview were conducted in English. The interview technique has been

used by several researchers attempting to understand tourism business (Hampton, Jjeyacheya & Long, 2018, Fei, Li, Wei, & Luo, 2015, Truong, Lenglet & Mothe, 2017). The interview period took place over 9 days, and interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Participants were asked about typical business operations and interactions with clients. Other questions investigated the use and responsibilities of contracted workers, the inclusion of nomads in tourist products, and their perceptions of company capabilities and challenges. Wrap-up questions addressed government involvement and perceived impacts of tourism on Mongolia. Questions were pulled from a guided list, which was continuously revised during the collection process. The final interview format is attached in the appendix (Figure 1).

Data were analyzed via content analysis. Ten interviews were transcribed by audio recording; other data were recorded during the interview. Responses were categorized first by question/answer response, then into broad categories, and finally into core themes that all broader categories relate.

#### *2.4 Ethics + Consent*

Consent was obtained in-person and online for participants who were not physically present. Participants were given the option to decline audio records or use of quotations. Consent forms were provided in English and Mongolian; translations were done by a professional and native Mongolian speaker. The English consent form is featured in the Appendix (Figure 2).

## Results

### *3.1 Business Profiles*

Companies varied in size and age. The oldest company began in 1954. Four companies began between 1993 and 1999. Six companies started between 2000 and 2006, and the final four companies began between 2013 and 2016. The age of these companies did not correspond to their number of employees or tourists, as some older companies were smaller than new ones, and vice versa. Seven of the participating businesses were tour agencies, five were guest houses, and three may be considered conglomerates, as they owned and operated restaurants, ger camps, guest houses, and shops, which had separate offices and staff. All companies kept headquarters and offices in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city and supplied services in the form of tours. Typical cliental came from Europe (France, Germany, and Italy), America, and South East Asian countries, like Japan, China, and Korea. Client age was between 35 and 50, but some companies reported between 50 and 75. Client demographics were not described by all companies because the question was added most interviews were complete.

Participants saw tourism creating economic, environmental, and cultural benefits. All fifteen respondents commended tourism for economic growth. It was most frequently explained that tourism contributes to multiple sectors, spreading wealth and creating jobs. Seven companies suggested that tourism benefits the environment because it was superior to mining and did not extract natural resources:

**C6:** It's a very good sector because you don't need to dig, you don't need to drain natural resources, you don't need to.. its inexhaustible, if its managed well, its inexhaustible.

It was suggested that by shifting Mongolia mindset away from mining, environmental resources might be better managed.

Six participants thought tourism brought positive culture dynamics to Mongolia. Almost all companies believed tourism could advertise Mongolia to the world and make people more knowledgeable about Mongolian issues. Tourism was also considered a major incentive of foreign language learning:

**C12:** If not many tourists came, then nobody learns English or foreign language. For example, before the 1990s, almost no tourists. Its very rare. So at the time, the main foreign language is Russian. So after we changed to democracy, its more international. We have a choice to choose foreign language. It was Russian or English, but after we have more ability to learn.

Tourism was described to develop technical skills and professionalism. Others saw the inclusion of foreign cultures to open the minds of new generations.

### *3.1.2 Advertising*

Companies advertised differently. The larger companies tended towards international expositions and partners abroad:

**Company 14 [7500 tourists/year]:** We have some existing partners but we usually attend the tourism expos, like WTM in London, ITB in Berlin, IT Hong Kong and ITF in Taiwan, so this is the main marketing tool for the company.

Participants indicated that expositions were expensive, costing up to 10,000 euros due to renting space, purchasing flights, and accommodations. Four of the largest companies, as well as one luxury operator reported having high google rankings. These companies suggested that it was important to be a “first-pager.” Medium-sized companies (800-500 tourists/year) thought their

websites were important, and they could improve their advertising by attending these international expos. Smaller companies tended towards blogs, social media, and etc.

**Company 1 [30-40 tourists annually]:** I mostly use online media, like Facebook, Reddit as well, blogging forums help a lot. I use word-to-word, if you refer people give them discount prices and they can link me as well.

Word of mouth was important for companies of all sizes. The most common quality described to set companies apart was teamwork:

**Company 5 [1964, 5000 tourists]:** What makes us different is that we have a huge team... Everyone is working on one tour, and there will be no mistakes on one tour.

Qualities reminiscent of teamwork were mentioned by six other companies, such as the ability for good communication, to effectively coordinate long tours, and simply sheer size. Niche markets like activity, photography, and luxury tours were mentioned.

### *3.1.3 Contracted Employees*

All fifteen companies contracted seasonal workers. A small number of fulltime, office employees organize logistics and correspond to clients and contractors. Outside the office, the majority of drivers and guides were hired as contract workers during the summer months. An estimated 220 employees were described as fulltime, with approximately 950 people employed seasonally. Such employment patterns are justified by the Mongolia's seasonal tourism:

**C7:** Tourism is only seasonal and the other 9 months are dead, and the winter is longer than summer. So people cannot be employed full year.

There was a necessity for contracted guides and drivers. Mongolia is a vast landscape, and as many participants described, it lacks the infrastructure of other tourists destinations:

**C5:** Its very convenient to backpack in SE Asian. There's transportation everywhere, you can walk around an navigate easily, but in the countryside of Mongolia it is impossible. You always need someone with you. You always need a guide or transport, otherwise there is no daily transportation. There is no infrastructure for tourists to travel on their own.

When the tourists arrives in Mongolia, they are greeted by the tour guide and driver, with whom they spend the majority of the trip. Drivers are needed to commute clients to and from destinations, while the tour guide requires some broader culture and language skills.

Nomadic families were incorporated by seasonal contracts or random encounters. All operators had criteria for appropriate visits, which were used to justify different company-to-nomad relationships. Seven respondents reported true seasonal contracts with nomadic families. Contracts could prepare nomads for tourists by conjuring room for accommodations, guiding hygiene, and facilitating interactions between nomads and visitors, which affects tourists' satisfaction. One company used a system of herder competition to create better service:

**C5:** We think it's good to have different options in one area, so everywhere it's not good to depend on one family. And so the families have to compete with each other, right, to provide the good services... sometimes they don't give the good, proper service. Just to make them more competitive and to make them work well with the travelers, it's important to have different families.

Eight companies justified random encounters by seeking a sense of authenticity in families that were not "too touristic." Traditional nomadic hospitality provided them food, drink, and access to nomadic activity. The desire to find "authentic nomads" is discussed further in section 3.3.

Financial rewards were not covered by all participants, but it was learned that nomads were paid monthly, seasonally, or at the end of visits. Overnight visits ranged between 5,000 – 20,000 Mongolian tugriks. Lunch visits tended to provide only gifts.

#### *3.1.4 Tour Guides*

Tour guides were necessary for Mongolian tourism. The tour guide would accompany tour groups, and they were responsible for immediate needs and services, including safety, field logistics, museum presentations, interpretation/translations, and responding to client needs and concerns. Eleven companies mentioned that tour guides facilitate interactions between the client and nomadic families, who (most likely) do not speak the clients language.

**C15:** [The tour guide] must enable tourist to experience the nomadic culture... We want to show the tourists what it is like to be in the countryside as a nomad... the interpreter is there to help and answer questions. The role of the guide is to help the families explain themselves.

For this reason, language skills are necessary are tour guides are expected to speak the target language, such as English, French, or Mandarin. A need for historical and cultural knowledge was mentioned by ten companies for providing a quality experience:

**C5:** The tour guide must know everything—like the sights, scenery, history, tradition, and the politics, or anything. The tour guide must be very educated about the country, and should be able to answer everything as possible with facts and reasons.

Such knowledge was not necessarily expected because it was featured in tour guide training. Tour guides were trained by twelve of fifteen companies on practical skills and cultural information. Seven of fifteen companies held in-house training, while four outsourced training to non-governmental associations, such as Mongolian Tourism Association (MAP) or the Mongolian Tour Guide Association (MTGA).

### *3.2 Company Products*

All fifteen respondents said tailor-made tours were possible, meaning that clients can arrange a list of attractions and companies provide the itinerary. Sometimes this meant making suggestions or curbing client interests towards more realistic schedules. When probed for common

tours, all participants arranged tour products to nomadic people. Duration varied from multiple overnight stays to three to four hour lunch visits and random drop-in. During these stays, tourists could participate in everyday nomadic life by herding animals, milking cows, cooking traditional food, and staying in a ger. Such nomadic visits were appreciated by clients of every company and represent a quality all participants claimed to be distinctly Mongolian.

Nine of fifteen operators mentioned tours to the Gobi, where clients visit attractions like the Flaming cliffs, Yoll valley, the monastery and energy center, and the Khongor sand dunes. Other destination-based tours went to the West to the Kazak Eagle hunters, North to Lake Hovsgol and the reindeer people, and to Central Mongolia and Kharkhurem, which were mentioned seven times. Some concluded that well-promoted sites, such as the Gobi, the Western mountains, and nomadic people were visited because this is what clients knew before arrival.

Three companies described themselves as luxury. Luxury operators take similar itineraries, but they include high-end facilities such as toilets with running water, hot showers, and high quality restaurants. These are more commonly taken by older clients.

Less frequent were tours to the east, in/around the city, and during the winter. Tours to Eastern Mongolia were uncommon, despite being the birthplace of Chinggis Khaan. Some operators felt the East was underpromoted:

**C5:** Two years ago, we started promoting an eastern product, a tour to the east, and we've had one tour to the east. I provide the option and they always pick for the Gobi... To promote it, only one tour agency cannot do it. It should be the work of the ministry of tourism, one tour operator cannot do it anything.

Ulaanbaatar was not a bulk product for any company. Tourists frequently complained about the traffic, picket-pockets, and pollution present in cities. The majority of tour operators saw the city as indistinct:

**C14:** It's just like a big city. After every trip we do, we make a tour evaluation and that's the main complaint we see from the client... The image of Mongolia is more about the nature and the Gobi. That is why they choose trips to the Gobi and out of the city.

Three said the city is not special or a unique to Mongolia. Even less common were the Mongolian ger districts. All companies mentioned that winter tours were uncommon or nonexistent.

### *3.3 Perceptions of Authenticity*

The reported "authentic Mongolian experience" included trips outside of the city, visits to Mongolia's unique ethnic groups, and stays with nomadic people. Thirteen of fifteen respondents mentioned the authentic Mongolian experience is amongst the nomadic people:

**C12:** What is real Mongolian experience? I can say this is the Mongolian nomadic life. It was explained in these responses that Mongolian nature might be seen by spending time and doing activities that nomadic people do.

Travels outside the city included visits to remote areas of the Mongolian steppe. Such a tour included nature and ethnic people. The following response is characterizes most descriptions of an "authentic" Mongolian tour.

**C7:** Perfect 4x4 car, with friendly, reliable driver... Guide is good, personality is good, good knowledge. Hiking in the Altai mountains, staying the Kazak eagle people, eagle hunting in the morning with them. Western.. Go and visit Khovsgol lake, go and stay in the Taiga area, where you can stay in a teepee and herd reindeers, ride a reindeer with the reindeer people. In the evening, see a shaman ceremony, ask you future, milk the reindeer... it's gonna be fun (sic). Ride the horses through the taiga to get to the taiga herding community because you can't drive, [it's] at least 30 km horse riding...

This respondent's description was common to others, and featured many key Mongolian attractions like Khovsgol lake and the Altai mountains, which were reported as common tours earlier on.

### *3.3.1 Authentic Nomads*

All companies could define authentic and unauthentic nomads. Thirteen respondents remarked it was traditional hospitality that marked authentic nomadic people. The unauthentic nomad was one who strayed from generosity to business:

**C11:** Some areas for example, they have an understanding that tourists have wealthy people, they have a lot of cash to throw. In this case, they are wanting to sell everything, even a cup of tea. But according to our culture it is the tradition to offer a cup of tea to our guests without anything.

Tourists supposedly noticed which families are authentic and appreciate them over others, so it was explained that tour companies sought those real nomadic people. Monetary rewards nomads had to be offered within limits or in traditional manners, else they “spoil” the nomad. Participants also thought that nomads had to be pastoralists. For this reason, nomads could only participate as an partner to tourism, rather than taking their own professional role.

**C15:** It's bad for us [when nomads become professionals]. The point of this company is to promote the nomad lifestyle... If the tourism we bring is breaking this dynamic it would not be a success. The goal is some kind of balance, to bring additional income, and not much more.

Those families/groups who had strayed from animal husbandry were not authentic and not attractive to tourists or tour companies.

Such concerns were the justification for different styles of agency-to-nomad relationships. Some companies considered fresh nomadic people to be most authentic because their traditions had not been affected by tourists.

**C6:** The most authentic experience is going to the countryside, the grassland, and going to a family who has never seen a foreigner.

These companies believed preemptive methods from the company or prior visits disrupted the behavior of nomadic people. Four companies said trainings help nomads understand the meaning of tourism and ensure that they hold onto their true lifestyle. The least common method was the competition system used to incentivize better nomad services, as described in section 3.1.3. Several tour companies acknowledged a ‘paradox’ between desiring pristine nomads and sending tourists with the potential to spoil them. In such cases, their precautions were done to avoid turning families “too touristy.”

### *3.3.2 The Less Authentic City*

The city was not mentioned frequently during descriptions of ‘authentic’ Mongolia. Only two companies indicated that the cities were important to see, so visitors could witness modern attractions like night clubs and big buildings. On the other hand, many considered Ulaanbaatar to possess a culture of its own that was unrepresentative of Mongolia’s true nature:

**C2:** This city, Ulaanbaatar, I would not call it Mongolia. It’s so much more modern, its modern people. Look. They are not wearing the deel, they are not riding the horse. It’s pretty much urban stuff. If you go outside the city, you get the meaning of Mongolia.

**C12:** In the capital city, you cannot show the real Mongolian experience... They living in city, they like to follow the European people, they don’t wear the traditional Mongolian dress. But in the countryside, we wear traditional Mongolian dress. In the city most of people like to follow the foreigners, they like to visit, study, and go to work foreign countries. So I’m not sure there is really Mongolia experience in the city.

Only three respondents considered the ger districts to represent ‘true Mongolia.’ One mentioned that traveler’s should experience all things, not only the good ones, to know what the country is like:

**C1:** You should see both good and bad parts of the city ... see and accept it because some are very critical. I see a lot of newspapers, of US and on the internet, where they see Ulaanbaatar city, and they just use the ger districts. It’s kind of shitty, how about I show bad parts of Chicago as the only place in the US? ... Bad is not exclusive to certain countries or certain cultures... just accept it.

### *3.4 Government*

Government influence was reportedly weak. Twelve respondents reported “not much,” “not a lot,” or “not at all” when asked how GOM influences their business. More negative responses were reported than positive ones. It was a failure of government policy to create real impacts on the industry as well as distraction by mining that made tourism a less desirable industry for government interaction. Government affected smallest businesses the most negatively with paperwork and certifications costing time and effort.

When positive and negative influences were probed, nine responses said government participation in international exhibitions or the GOM’s decisions to participate as a 2015 ITB host country had increased tourism. Still, several companies considered low government funding for international expositions to damage Mongolia’s advertising. Other responses said that the number of tourists had increased when new airlines were introduced or when VISA free travel was granted to specific countries. Three companies providing less than 250 tourists a year did not report any positive government interactions.

Thirteen companies reported the negative government behavior as unfair or failing to protect tour company interests. One small (~40 tourists/year) and one larger (~2000 tourists/year)

company suggested the department of tourism listened to only wealthy companies. Larger companies suggested the GOM distribute unfair numbers of Naadam tickets:

**C14:** Last year they distributed the same number of tickets to each operator. So for example, we have 800 clients for the opening ceremony, but a small company with two staffs has 100-200 [clients]. This is unfair.

Different-sized respondents spoke of small, seasonal companies that provide poor tourist services and cause copyright issues, which they think the GOM ought to prevent:

**C7:** The new tour companies tend to steal peoples photos a lot, professional photos. My text can be on their website a lot... The travel itinerary, the wordings, that I've spend so many hours, so many weeks, even years to make. You can just lose that.

The same companies explained that new and inexperienced companies provide unprofessional services and damage Mongolia's reputation as a destination. Only companies providing less than 250 tourists a year did not report any negative government interactions.

### **Discussion**

Data show that private tour companies are responsible for tourist services. Since Mongolia is vast and lacks public transport or frequent accommodation outside the city, travel companies provide logistic services through tours. Individual business decisions create some standard practices, such as seasonal contracts, tailored tours, and a tendency to visit well-promoted attractions such as nomadic homestays, the Gobi Desert, Khovsgol lake, the Altai mountains, the reindeer people, and the Kazak eagle hunters. These answers also overlapped with what operators consider uniquely Mongolian, supporting that the epitome of Mongolian products is a sprawling cross-country tour interweaving nomads and natural panoramas (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2007). At the same time, since there was little evidence of industry standards for company procedures. Businesses had different advertising tactics, niche roles, perspectives on government

involvement, and strategies for nomadic involvement. Different methods of hiring (or not hiring) nomads were justified according to different and sometimes unreconcilable notions of authenticity.

Government influence was allegedly weak for all participants, and totally absent for small companies. This was despite a GOM appointed Ministry of Tourism and the Environment and laws related to tourism development. As McCamley and Gilmore (2017) suggest, weak relationships between government and private companies fragment responsibility among private enterprise, who behavior according to individual desires and capabilities. Standards were reportedly absent for environmental and cultural sustainability, which could have negative effects on industry sustainability. For example, only upon self-initiative did companies begin using environmentally friendly practices, like reusable water bottles and bio-degradable materials. Not all companies took such measures. While organizations like MAP and MTGA provide services like news and trainings not covered by the government, members reported this activity was infrequent and included a minority of companies. Certifications were provided by MAP (as commission by the GOM), but small businesses sprout during the summer, provide tours, and disappear in September without official regulation. Without an agreed-upon standard, such segmented behavior may undermine individual and collective goals.

Regarding sector growth for example, GOM participated in international conferences but provided limited-to-no support for individual participation. International conferences and international partners were limited to only well-established companies, which typically drew the most tourists. Conferences were not reported (and assumingly unnoticed) by new or small companies, so there may be limited private companies advertising Mongolian tourism, also suggested by McCamley and Gilmore (2017).

Another issue is incorporation of nomadic culture. Again, a segmented sector led to different and even contradictory methods of nomad management. Seven companies took time to prepare nomads by encouraging openness/extroversion and good service. They reduced aspects of nomadic culture undesirable to tourists, like a lack of modern hygiene, heavy or bland food, and uncomfortable beds. These changes relate to what Zhou et. al (2018) coined as ‘negative’ authenticity: true practices at a cultural attraction not considered worth preserving. Such behavioral incentives can lead to “emergent authenticity” (first discussed by Cohen 1988, cited by Zhou et. al, 2018), where changes are internalized as the new normal and change cultural activity. There were six companies specifically opposed preemptive measures because they believed it made nomads less genuine. These companies preferred random visits and sought fresh nomads that had not been affected by tourists, supporting the belief that tourism is changing nomadic people.

The authenticity problem complicated the standard for nomadic employment. Employment varied between seasonal/monthly contracts and random encounters. There were significant differences between large, conglomerate corporations able to contract nomads at will, and small, family-operated businesses giving return contracts to family in the countryside. All companies thought nomads could become too touristy, which created an apparent paradox for tour companies. To stop tourists from changing nomads, companies used random stays or incorporated strategies into their contracting. A handful of companies explained the meaning of tourism and encouraged contracted families to stay genuine in spite of tourist visits. There was an apparent cultural incentive to limit the amount of money nomads receive (for both random and contracted visits). If nomads were given too much money, too often, they might abandon their traditional habits and become entrepreneurs themselves, which is not what clients wanted.

The data noted both potential and limits to inclusive sourcing of local goods and employment. All companies reported local sources for horse and camels ‘rentals’ (for riding). Tours for one or two weeks or longer are likely to require resupplies, given space and practical limitations. About half of participants reported purchasing food and beverages in the countryside from province (aimag) and county (soum) centers, as well as using ger camps which purchased food locally. On the other hand, some tours paid-in-full in Ulaanbaatar purchase supplies inside the city that is shipped to the destination, especially tours headed towards remote locations. These tours limit countryside expenditure and favor urban growth. Considering nomads, typical Mongolian tours cost more than 1,000 USD and go above 3,000 USD. Participants reported nomad payments between ₮5,000–20,000 (Mongolian tugrik) per night, or between two to eight USD (based on May, 2018 conversion). It is likely that random nomads see far less income than contracted families due to less traffic. This raises questions about the value chain regarding nomadic families and rural communities. The pattern favors urban centers not serving as the local attraction and creates exclusive benefits (Hampton, Lenglet, & Mothe, 2018, Fan, Wei, Loi & Luo 2015).

Participating companies used temporary contracts with potentially exclusive requirements. Companies in this study reported around 210 fulltime and 950 seasonal employees, due to the “dead” winter months. There is a pattern of repeat contracting, since tour companies provide training and standards to their and a number of respondents had worked first worked as contractually. However, most respondents said tour guides typically leave after four or five years, and “no one can be a tour guide forever.” Given that companies had roughly three times as many contract workers than fulltime employees, contracted employees are likely to stay freelance or move to different work. It is not likely that Mongolian tourism provides strong internal labor

markets with intra-company protections and benefits or access to upward movement from long-term commitment to a single firm (Kamiat, 1996). This could be go against the interests of employees, who seek financial/career stability, and employers, who wish to retain trained employees over time.

Tourism employment also may be limited to young or well-educated Mongolians, especially relating to tour guides. The most common skill required for all positions (except drivers) was language proficiency (both Mongolian and the client's language are required, which is commonly English, Chinese, French, or German). This may pose difficulties to older Mongolians, since English as second-language policies were created after 1990 revolution (Cohen, 2014). This is supported by the fact that no participant was older than 40 years, and the majority under 30. Even today, some areas lack effective education policies, such as small soums, the countryside, and the ger districts where education access is unavailable (Batdorj, 2018). Also noted by Cohen (2014), Mongolia's second language policies include only Russian or English in secondary school. Other languages may arise from private schools or universities, which are not equally accessible.

A board-member of the Mongolian Tour Guide Association (MTGA) remarked that an agreement between teachers and tour companies could solve the issue of high-turnover guides. The school year and the tourist season occur at different times, so he believed Mongolia should deliberately seek second-language teachers to work as tour guides. The industry could receive reliable employees, and teachers could supplement their income and travel with foreigners to improve their language skills. Such a plan could not be successful without widespread cooperation between companies and schools, which he thought could be the responsibility of the government.

Finally, while participants considered tourism as way to learn about Mongolian culture, there was a narrow perspective presented. The majority of participants did not include the cities or

ger districts in their tours or in their versions of an authentic Mongolia. The concept of authenticity is elusive at best, as multiple measures exist (Meng & Choi, 2016, Zatori, Smith, & Puzcko, 2018, Zeng, Go, & Vries 2012), but it is clear that participants subscribe to a traditional/historical vision of Mongolian attached to the nomadic roots. Travelers may leave with the impression that Mongolia is nothing more than a nomadic grassland, rather than a modernizing country with a declining nomadic lifestyle (Fernández-Giménez et. al 2017, Marin 2010; Mayer 2014) and problems related to rapid-urbanization (Batdorj, 2018). The disconnect between rural and urban seems problematic. The study suggests that urban centers (participants' inauthentic) may benefit from tourism the most, while the countryside and the nomadic people receive less and function as the resource for tourism-driven growth.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

The strength of this study was its novelty and breadth. The sample included businesses varying in age, size, and activity, and the participant sample was experienced and familiar with tourism. This study provided a fresh perspective on behaviors and perspectives not covered by previous research (Buckley, Ollenberg, & Zhong, 2007, Yu & Goulden 2006). Other information included the perceptions of authenticity beyond the studies (Soma & Sukhee, 2014).

The sample may have been limited for two reasons. however. Only one non-Mongolia business was interviewed, and it is significant that the only foreign-born participant provide unique responses to several questions. Differences in Mongolian/non-Mongolian opinion might have been confirmed with more foreign participants. Secondly, managers and founders were the target participant but not always available. The study had a near equal number of tour managers (four) and sales managers (three) to managers/directors (eight). It is not say that these individuals do not

provide valuable information, but questions about government involvement and contracting were unknown to specialized employees who suggested managers might have known.

An overall weakness was the brevity of each topic. Contracting and labor markets, cultural representation, and inclusive growth deserve studies of their own. Too much information was left out of this study regarding these topics, which could be followed in future work.

### *Future Research*

For long-term use of environmental and cultural resources, Mongolian tourism should seek industry standards, and with the current structure it is likely to come bottom-up. To guide such standards, the impact on nomadic culture should be understood. They will likely to remain a center of attraction, and it is in the interest of the tourism sector preserve that resource. The expectations of certain companies could create a type of emergent practice and new ‘tradition’ among nomadic people. The degree to which practices recommended by tour agencies are internalized and followed outside the tourist season should be researched to understand tourism’s effects on nomadic culture.

Value splitting raises questions as well: is the value chain appropriate and fair? Are there limits to what a nomad can earn before they abandon their traditional lifestyle? How much do urban-businesses benefit the countryside they visits? Where is there potential to improve?

The proposal to employ teachers as tour guides ought to be followed up as well. Seasonal hiring cause issues because Mongolian tour companies must replace/relocate workers each season and employees cannot rely on tourism for steady work. It is unlikely that winter attractions, like the camel and ice festivals or Tsagaan Sar, can change employment patterns, given their short time span and the fact that summertime provides easiest access to Mongolia’s most appreciated and well-known attractions: nature and nomads.

## Appendix

### *Demographics:*

Age \_\_\_\_ Sex Identity \_\_\_\_ Nation of Origin \_\_\_\_  
if foreign born – VISA worker?

### *Business:*

What is your job?

Responsibilities?

Can you describe the business you work at?

Probe: # of employees? # of tourists?

How many years have you worked in tourism?

At this company?

How do you attract tourists?

What sets your business apart?

What do clients want from your company?

Probe: most common 'tour' / logistics of such?

Least common 'purchase' / why uncommon?

How are Driver, guides, horses, food, items, sourced?

What are your contractors responsible for

Drivers

Guides?

Nomads?

### *Culture:*

Why is Mongolia different from other destinations?

What do YOU consider an authentic Mongolian experience? Or What is the your company's best tour?

What do travelers like most about Mongolia?

What do travelers like the least?

### *Wrap-up:*

#### *Government/Institutions:*

How is the government involved in your business?

Probe: do they impact you positively

Negatively?

How would you improve your business?

How is tourism positive for Mongolia?

How is tourism negative for Mongolia?

Is there anything else you'd like to mention or want me to wrap up?

Is there anything else you'd like to mention or want me to wrap up?

### **Figure 1:** Interview Protocol

**PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT**

My name is Jesse Shircliff, and I am a sociology student researching tourism in Mongolia. I am conducting research through SIT Mongolia (Students for International Training), a program by World Learning. This interview helps me understand how your business operates and why.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to understand how Mongolian tour companies meet the expectations of visitors and provide valuable experiences through products, such as tours.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study and no penalties exist if you choose not to participate. Participation is therefore voluntary. You have the right not to answer any questions or discontinue participation at any time.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

The study may benefit you. Tourism in Mongolia is lacking, despite having one of the world's most unique cultures and landscapes. By investigating the collective struggles and interests of tourist companies, this research may provide a comprehensive advice institutions that make decisions around tourism. Reports will be provided electronically to participants upon request.

**ANONIMITY**

Your responses are anonymous. Demographic questions and specifics about your business are used only to describe the characteristics of my respondents and their businesses. I will refer to you and your business not by name but using a unique numeric code, such as 'Respondent A' or 'Business 2.'

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

"I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older."

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent to Quote from Interview**

I may wish to quote from the interview either in the presentations or articles resulting from this work.

Pseudonyms or code-identifiers will always be used instead of true names.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to allow quotes from this interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to allow quotes from this interview.

Consent to Audio-Record Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to audio-recording.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to audio-recording.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by an SIT Study Abroad Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact me or my SIT program. My personal email is shirje01@gettysburg.edu. If you do not have access to the internet, you may contact the SIT-Mongolia office, who will deliver your concerns to me. My academic director at SIT-Mongolia can be reached by phone (976)9911-2978 and by letter at the address:

World Learning/SIT Mongolia  
P.O. Box 1178  
Ulaanbaatar 15160  
Mongolia

**Figure 2:** Consent Form (English Version Only)

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