

Alcohol and the Mongols: Myth and Reality

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I. INTRODUCTION

Western accounts of the use of alcohol by the Mongol conquerors, especially the later rulers of the thirteenth and fourteenth century rulers, abound. The Franciscan John of Plano Carpini offered the most graphic and perhaps most quoted description when he wrote:

Drunkenness is considered an honorable thing by them and when anyone drinks too much, he is sick there and then, nor does this prevent him from drinking again.¹

William of Rubruck, the second great Franciscan traveler to the Mongol domains, added that during feasts they sang and played the “guitar,” and

they all drink round in turn, men and women alike, and at times compete with one another in quaffing in a thoroughly distasteful and greedy fashion.”²

A recent article has argued that the Mongols’ seemingly voracious appetite for liquor contributed to their decline and fall.³ This essay suggests that alcoholism has been overstated as a link to the Mongol Empire’s decline. Moreover, the current high rate of alcohol consumption in Mongolia reflects but is not a cause of serious social dislocations.

Twentieth-century reports appear, at first glance to attest to the veracity of the Western accounts of the thirteenth century. A large number mention rampant drinking in both rural and urban areas. An anthropologist describing his experiences in the countryside writes that “country people rarely take no for an answer when it comes to drinking,” and that:

¹ Christopher Dawson, ed. *Mission to Asia* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p. 16.

² Peter Jackson, ed., *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1990), p. 77.

³ John Masson Smith, “Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire,” *Journal of Asian History* 34:1 (2001), pp. 35–52.

Some men are intoxicated regularly, or in fact the better part of the milking season. Drinking *arkhi* [i. e. Mongol vodka] is considered manly and is a subject of much joking among the men: anyone who cannot drink is considered a wimp.⁴

He observes, in a classic understatement, that the most successful herders abstained from liquor. A Western journalist who spent four months mostly in Ulaan Baatar in 2004 writes that:

Drunkenness in Mongolia was not confined to street corners and gutters. It was also a feature of many households.⁵

My own visits to Mongolia since 1977 confirm some of these observations. There were drunks on the streets, but the people I dealt with in a variety of occupations or statuses were never inebriated. Judging from other accounts or explanations, however, the casual observer might assume that most Mongol men, as well as some women, drank immoderately and that alcohol was a pervasive feature of Mongol life.

Numerous explanations have been offered for the reputedly high level of alcohol consumption among the Mongols. The explanations for the alcoholic indulgences during the Mongol Empire differ from those of alcoholism in contemporary times. Increased drinking in the Empire stage allegedly reflected the successful conquests and the attendant greater accessibility of liquor. In Mongolia, liquor, in the form of fermented mare's milk, was available only in late summer and early autumn, but in the newly subjugated lands, alcohol was found year round. The higher rate of alcoholism in present-day Mongolia tallies with the chaotic circumstances and the economic, political, and social failures of the post-1990 period, with its greater levels of unemployment, poverty, abandonment of children, and domestic abuse.

To be sure, the foreign observations during the Mongol Empire and in the post-1990 era refer to copious consumption of liquor, to the point of severe ailments or extreme fuzzy-headedness. Yet a cursory examination of nineteenth and early twentieth-century reports by foreign travelers reveals few such descriptions. Swedes, Russians, and Englishmen complain about filth, insects and rodents, and other unsanitary conditions, but they fail to mention alcoholic binges.⁶ Although several write briefly about feasts and banquets,

⁴ Ole Bruun, *Precious Steppe* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), pp. 36, 59, and 159–160.

⁵ Paul Bacon, *Escaping the Ice-Prison* (Ulaan Baatar, 2005), p. 28.

⁶ These works include A. M. Pozdneyev, *Mongolia and the Mongols* (trans. by John Roger Shaw and Dale Plank; Bloomington: Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series 61,

they scarcely allude to heavy drinking. Even the notorious Roy Chapman Andrews, who frequently used what modern observers would describe as racist and sexist terms, does not mention riotous drinking even at the feast he attended after a special day of wrestling and camel and horse races.⁷ The Swedish traveler Henning Haslund cites singing and dancing festivals, especially in monasteries but does not allude to any drinking whatsoever in the religious institutions. He refers to consumption of *airagh*, the fermented mare's milk, during the five days of celebration of *Tsagaan Sar*, the New Year. Yet his description pales in comparison to those in John of Plano Carpini's and William of Rubruck's accounts of revolting behavior induced by heavy imbibing. He depicts Torghuud Mongolians drinking liquor, but, unlike the foreign travelers' reports of the Mongol Empire era, he does not portray the Mongols as obstreperous, violent, or disgusting in the ways they quaffed the liquor or in their behavior during the feasts.⁸ The lack of extensive descriptions of alcoholic excesses challenges the conventional wisdom about the Mongols' addiction and may require re-evaluation concerning the extent of alcoholic binges during the Mongol Empire.

1971); Henning Haslund, *In Secret Mongolia* (trans. by Elizabeth Sprigge and Claude Napier; London: Kegan Paul, 1934); Aleksei M. Pozdneyev, *Religion and Ritual in Society: Lamaist Buddhism in Late 19-th Century Mongolia* (trans. by Alo Raun and Linda Raun; Bloomington: The Mongolia Society, 1978); and James Gilmour, *Among the Mongols* (New York: American Tract Society, 1888).

⁷ Roy Chapman Andrews, *On the Trail of Ancient Man* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), pp. 155. Typical of his stereotypical view is the following: "The Mongols are immoral rather than immoral. They are children of nature, with the animal instinct unchecked." (p. 94). He is extraordinarily condescending and dismissive of women. See pp. 18–19, for example, on his unpleasant remarks about a woman who wished to join one of his expeditions.

⁸ Henning Haslund, *Men and Gods in Mongolia* (trans. by Elizabeth Sprigge and Claude Napier; London: Kegan Paul, 1935), pp. 301. Henning writes that "Despite the lively mood, which towards the end grew quite uproarious, respect and veneration for the Regent and the other exalted personages were still observed, and I witnessed nothing which even a sober man could not excuse. And to me, the stranger, of another race and creed, they displayed always the greatest cordiality."

II. CHINGGIS AND ÖGÖDEI AND ALCOHOL

There is little evidence of alcoholic excesses in the early years of the Mongol Empire. The *Secret History of the Mongols* portrays Chinggis Khan as ascetic, and one way he elicited loyalty was by allegedly sharing the spoils of conflict with his men and refraining from demanding a disproportionate amount. He provided substantial rewards for his most steadfast commanders.⁹ As for himself, he “frowned upon luxury.” A Chinese source quotes him as saying,

I am from the barbaric North [...] I wear the same clothing and eat the same food as the cowherds and horse-herders. We make the same sacrifices and we share our riches.¹⁰

It may be that this perception is part of the hagiography that led to the deification of Chinggis. Nonetheless, even according to Rashīd al-Dīn, Chinggis was not averse to imbibing liquor, but he inveighed against excessive drinking, noting that

it was all right to drink a little wine, but that it was unwise to drink a large quantity because a person would lose control of himself.¹¹

Ögödei, Chinggis Khan’s son and designated successor, certainly did not take his father as his model. He was not at all ascetic and lived lavishly in the new capital city of Khara Khorum. Persian and Chinese sources concur that he was “extremely fond of wine, and [he] drank continuously and to excess.”¹²

He was so often inebriated that Yelu Chucai, one of the most influential advisers to the Mongol Court, attempted to frighten him into abandoning liquor.¹³ Removing the metal top of a wine container, Yelu showed the Great Khan the corrosion induced by the wine. He explained that if liquor could

⁹ Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Times* (trans. by Thomas Nivison Haining; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 90.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ratchnevsky, *Genghis*, p. 149.

¹¹ Sechin Jagchid and Paul Hyer, *Mongolia’s Culture and Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), pp. 42–43; Song Lian, et al., *Yuanshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju ed. 1976), 118, p. 2924.

¹² John Andrew Boyle, trans. *The Successors of Genghis Khan Translated from the Persian of Rashīd al-Dīn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 65.

¹³ On Yelu, see Igor de Rachewiltz, “Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai (1189–1243): Buddhist Idealist and Confucian Statesman” in Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 189–216.

inflict such damage to metal, then one could only imagine the harm it could cause in the human body.¹⁴ This demonstration did not make a strong impression on Ögödei. None of his retainers could prevent from truly excessive drinking. While drinking, he reportedly gave lavish presents to a variety of petitioners who came to Court. When his retinue sought to persuade him not to fritter away such vast sums, he responded, either when he was inebriated or when he was sober, that he wanted his commands obeyed. According to Rashīd al-Dīn, he died one evening after an especially devastating binge.¹⁵

How plausible is all of this? The sources are unanimous in portraying Ögödei as a serious drinker.¹⁶ After the conquest of North China, he reputedly spent a month in celebrating the campaign.¹⁷ His nephew Möngke offered a veiled¹⁸ critique, saying:

All of us brothers and sons stand awaiting thy ever-fulfilled command so that we may give our lives in whatever manner he may suggest whilst Qa'an busies himself with spectacles and pleasure and amusement and does not endure the toils and hardships of travel. Otherwise of what use are kinsmen and emirs and a countless army?

Unlike his father, Ögödei did not lead the forces in the attack against the Jin dynasty in China or the various kingdoms and city-states in Russia and Eastern Europe, unusual for Great Khans who were expected to demonstrate their military leadership. His failure to participate in these campaigns lends credence to reports about his alcoholic stupor. His drunkenness and his attendant health problems probably precluded physical activity and the hardships of campaigning in distant lands. Instead he chose some of the most capable Mongol warriors, including his brothers and nephews, to organize and command the expeditions. He stayed in the Mongol homeland and simply waited for reports from far-flung locations. Moreover, he appears not to have played a substantial role in developing strategy. He convened a *khuriltai* (or assemblage of the Mongolian nobility) to initiate the expeditions and performed the proper rituals for such a great enterprise. Yet he had no significant role in these spectacularly successful campaigns.

¹⁴ *Yuanshi* 146, p. 3463.

¹⁵ Boyle, *Successors*, pp. 65–66.

¹⁶ See Thomas Allsen, “Ögedei and Alcohol,” *Mongolian Studies* 29 (2007), pp. 4–7 for more sources on his consumption of alcohol.

¹⁷ Boyle, *Successors*, p. 54 writes that “For one continuous month [...] he joined the morning [draught] to the evening draught in feasting [...]”

¹⁸ Boyle, *Successors*, pp. 54–55.

The commanders who led the expeditions and increased the territories under Mongol control were the decision makers, none of whom the sources depicted as alcoholics. Chinggis' grandson Batu and the brilliant military leader Sübötei, who commanded the Western campaigns, had to remain sober for the remarkable feats they would accomplish. The stereotype of alcoholic excesses among active commanders does not jibe with reality. Expedition leaders, their underlings, and ordinary soldiers could not have been inebriated during such demanding campaigns. One false move could be disastrous. Injury or even death could result with a moment's inattention. The campaign's rapidity and difficulties required alertness. Elaborate alcoholic binges under these circumstances would be unlikely, and indeed the sources omit mention of feasts or banquets, despite the availability of wines and hard liquor in China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. It strains credulity to argue that rampant alcoholism afflicted the troops. The leadership had to remain sharp to maintain the pace. Ögödei was perhaps unique in his time in his almost constant consumption of liquor. Military commanders had to be involved in daily decisions and could not be distracted, and ordinary soldiers literally could not afford vast sums for liquor. Ögödei appears to have been an alcoholic, but the major military leaders could hardly have joined him in the continuous binges of which he is accused.

Ögödei's son and successor Güyüg imitated his father. On his return to Mongolia after campaigning in the West and assuming the position of Khaghan, he was engaged "from dawn to dusk with the quaffing of cups of wine and the contemplation of peri-faced, sweet-limbed maidens."¹⁹

This report complements John of Plano Carpini's observation that at the celebration of Güyüg's ascendance to the throne, he and his supporters "drank without stopping until the evening."²⁰ The Franciscan envoy had also referred to Güyüg as "very intelligent and extremely shrewd,"²¹ but, like many in the Great Khan's retinue, was dismayed by Güyüg's lifestyle. Despite repeated admonitions from his Ministers to refrain from such abuse of his body, Güyüg refused to abandon his hedonism, became increasingly ill, and died within two years of ascending to the throne. Once again, the sources concur that the Khaghan himself was the principal alcoholic and that his retainers repeatedly tried to dissuade him from imbibing vast quantities

¹⁹ Boyle, *Successors*, p. 188.

²⁰ Dawson, *Mission*, p. 63.

²¹ Dawson, *Mission*, p. 68

of wine. His inebriation may, in fact, explain the lack of new initiatives or new campaigns. He was simply too out of touch to focus on State affairs, but his own Ministers and ordinary troops cannot be painted with the same brush.

III LATER KHAGHANS AND ALCOHOL

His eventual successor Möngke differed. The new Khaghan, who ruled from 1251 to 1259, undertook numerous projects and initiated several military campaigns. He began to establish a centralized government, conducted censuses, and started to standardize the tax system, create a new currency, and develop a means of recruiting soldiers and laborers. He not only limited the power of Imperial princes who had received lands from the Court but even admonished his younger brother Khubilai concerning policies in North China.²² In addition, he initiated two military campaigns—one against the Abbasid Caliphate led by his brother Hülegü and the other, in which he participated, against Southern Song China. In fact, he commanded the troops which went from North China to Southwest China, and in 1258–1259 was poised to attack Southern Song from the west. He and his forces faced the most daunting terrain and environment of any of the armies dispatched against the Song. Such involvement in numerous State projects would make it unlikely that Möngke would have been as besotted as Ögödei.

Rashīd al-Dīn and William of Rubruck attest to Möngke's general sobriety on significant occasions. The Persian historian wrote that Möngke's accession to the throne inaugurated a week of celebration and revelry, including feasts and considerable consumption of liquor.²³ He also cited two annual festivals congruent with nomadic migrations during which the Khaghan and his men drank enormous quantities. However, these were Rashīd's only mentions of alcohol in relation to Möngke, a striking contrast to the repeated references to Ögödei's addiction to liquor. In an audience with the Khaghan, Rubruck speculated that "Mangu Khan struck me as tipsy."²⁴

²² See Thomas Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Politics of the Grand Khan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). On Möngke's confrontation with Khubilai, see Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 33–36.

²³ Boyle, *Successors*, pp. 206–207.

²⁴ Jackson, *William of Rubruck*, p. 180.

However, he generally portrayed Möngke as alert and inquisitive, seeking information about the Bible from the Nestorians at his Court and quizzing Rubruck himself about his religious beliefs. Rubruck was much more critical of the Nestorians' alcoholic binges.²⁵ Tasting *airagh*, the drink with the least alcoholic content, he found it palatable. Möngke also offered him wine, rice wine, and honey mead, but he either did not taste them or did not think it merited attention. Rubruck further justified the use of alcohol, noting that it was a Mongol tradition and a way of breaking the ice with foreigners. Finally, to inject some speculation, could the Mongol Khaghans have been using their so-called inebriated state as a ruse? After all, they were adept at employing such tricks. The feigned retreat and psychological terror of a massacre in and destruction of one location prompting others to submit voluntarily were standard Mongol tactics. Could the Khaghans have pretended to be drunk during interviews and negotiations as a ploy to give them an advantage or to engender the misleading appearance that foreigners could capitalize and extract concessions? Alcohol or the lack of it may have been a tactic. At least, such a possible ruse should be considered.

Rubruck's description of Guillaume Boucher's fountain complicates and may lead to misleading conclusions. Boucher, a French captive of the Mongols, fashioned a variety of objects for his patron Möngke, including a silver crucifix with an image of Christ, an object which surely antagonized the Nestorians at Court.²⁶ He also produced an iron to make wafers, which further alienated the Nestorians who employed leavened bread in their rituals. Boucher created these works to reflect his own Catholic beliefs. Even in the renowned silver fountain which he and his craftsmen built, he included Christian images. At the top of the fountain, he placed an angel with a trumpet. Other motifs on the fountain were snakes, a tree, and lions, and there was a strong ritual element to it. Placed right across from Möngke's audience hall, it was meant to impress both Mongols and foreigners. To be sure, four pipes dispensed different alcoholic beverages, but the blaring of the trumpet, which announced the opening of the pipes, was rarely heard. The fountain was activated only for feasts and for foreign visitors. Its construction scarcely confirmed the serious alcoholism of Möngke or his commanders and troops.

²⁵ Jackson, *William of Rubruck*, pp. 190, 196, 209–210.

²⁶ Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher: A French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), p. 33.

The fountain brings to mind the ritual significance of alcohol for the Mongols. *Airagh* was a vital part of ceremonial functions. The Khaghan scattered mare's milk at the beginning of meetings of the *khuriltai* and at the outset of military campaigns. For example, as Möngke set forth for a meticulously planned invasion of the Southern Song dynasty, "he made the proper offerings to Heaven, scattering the milk from his own special herd of mares on the sacred ground around his palace."²⁷ *Airagh* was also employed on special occasions. On August 28th of each year, before leaving his summer palace at Shangdu to spend the fall and winter in Daidu (or modern Beijing), Khubilai Khan "conducted the ritual of the scattering of mare's milk. This ceremony, in which four shamans also participated, reputedly ensured a year of good luck. It consisted of the sacrifice of a horse and a few sheep, bowing toward Heaven, calling out Chinggis Khan's name, and the scattering of mare's milk from specially bred horses."²⁸ Actually, the horse allegedly sacrificed to the deities was simply set free. Marco Polo witnessed this ceremony and wrote that

the astrologer and the idolaters have told the great Kaan that he must sprinkle some of this milk of these white mares through the air and on the land [...] so that all the spirits which go by the air and by land may have some of it to drink [and thus] they may save him all his things & that all his things may prosper [...]²⁹

Khubilai performed similar rituals at the beginning of the New Year. At these occasions, Imperial clan members were the only ones granted permission to drink the *airagh*, which derived from mares in special pasturages. The Emperor himself and perhaps members of his household drank so-called black *airagh* at these festivals because it was clear and tastier than the white *airagh*.³⁰ Horse races were often held at these celebrations, presaging the contemporary Naadam festivals, which take place in July. When the Mongols converted to Buddhism, the festivals included ritual elements from that religion.

²⁷ Rossabi, *Khubilai*, p. 44.

²⁸ Rossabi, *Khubilai*, p. 173. Different travelers give different dates for these ceremonies. It appears that two ceremonies were held – one in Spring and one in Autumn.

²⁹ A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (George Routledge & Sons, Ltd. 1938), pp. 187–188.

³⁰ For additional information, see Henry Serruys, *Kumiss Ceremonies and Horse Races: Three Mongolian Texts* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), pp. 1–18.

Khubilai, the second most prominent figure in Mongol history, followed along the path charted by his older brother Möngke. He attempted to rule the vast domains he had inherited as well as the territories he had subjugated. By 1280, he governed all of China and demanded tribute and other services from the Jurchens in Manchuria, Korea, and Tibet. In seeking to govern China, he maintained a balance between accommodation to Chinese institutions and values and affirmation of Mongol practices and beliefs. Such far-reaching efforts and reforms required an alert ruler, and there is no evidence that he was bibulous during the first and most important decades of his reign. To be sure, he performed the standard rituals associated with *airagh*. The Chinese and Korean sources fail to question his sobriety until his last years. In the 1280s, he suffered, in quick order, the deaths of his favorite wife and his son and chosen successor, and his military expeditions to Japan, Annam, and Java were disastrous. His successes in Burma and Cambodia and his suppression of insurrection in Manchuria hardly compensated for the substantial expenditures required in vanquishing these regions. His drinking coincided with these abject failures, especially in old age. Afflicted with gout and other ailments, he began to consume vast quantities of liquor and food. In his earlier and more successful career, the Chinese sources portray him as quite sober.³¹

The distinguished scholar John Masson Smith focuses on the post-Khubilai rulers to support his views about dietary decadence and the decline of the Mongol empire. He argues that alcoholism and overindulgence in food resulted in the early deaths of the later Khans in China and Iran. I will not deal with Il-Khans in Iran and will concentrate on the Yuan Emperors in China. Smith notices that of the Yuan Emperors who succumbed to natural causes, “Timur died at age 42, Qaishan at 31, Ayurbarwada Buyantu at 35, Yesün Timur at 35, Tugh Timur at 28, Irinjibal Qutuqtu at 7, and Toghon Timur at about 50.”³² Irinjibal Khutugtu can certainly be eliminated from this list. The Chinese histories confirm that Temür was indeed an alcoholic but seem to absolve the others of addiction to liquor.

Toghon Temür, the last Emperor of the Yuan dynasty, was distracted by the sexual exercises of Tibetan Buddhism, but the Chinese sources depict

³¹ For an evaluation of his career, see Rossabi, *Khubilai*. The Preface to the second edition (2009) offers some revisions to the first edition.

³² John Masson Smith, “Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire,” *Journal of Asian History* 34:1 (2000), p. 50.

him as sober. Several of the other Emperors were dedicated decision makers and supporters of Chinese civilization. One restored the civil service examinations, another founded the Academy of the Pavilion of the Star of Literature (*kuizhangge xueshi yuan*)³³ to ingratiate himself to the Chinese, and still another promulgated a new law code. The especially sophisticated Emperor Ayurbarwada Buyantu (r. 1311–1320) was an ardent patron of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), the greatest Yuan painter and calligrapher, and of his wife Guan Daosheng (1262–1319).³⁴ In fact, the decline and collapse of the Yuan had scant relation to alcoholic excesses and overindulgence in rich food. It had more to do with strife within the Mongol royal families, conflicts between the Mongol rulers and the Chinese native inhabitants, and a disastrous inflation, among other economic problems. The Emperors' early deaths appear to be coincidences. The Chinese sources fail to describe any extraordinary alcoholic binges, so liquor does not appear to be the cause of their demise. In any event, the later Yuan rulers underwent remarkable stress, including challenges to their legitimacy, the opposition of Chinese officials, and turbulence in many regions. Such pressures may have been a factor in their early deaths. Another possibility is murders through poisoning or other means. The Chinese sources provide tantalizing hints about such murders, but there is no definitive evidence.

In the authoritative *Cambridge History of China*, the Chinese historian John Dardess does not blame the Mongols for the fall of the Yuan. He suggests that “the fourteenth century was calamitous everywhere [...] China was spared none of [these disasters]. No fewer than thirty-six years in the fourteenth century had exceptionally severe winters, more than in any other century on record. In the greater Yellow River region, major floods and droughts seem to have occurred with unprecedented frequency in the fourteenth century [...] These natural disasters created huge numbers of uprooted and impoverished people [...] The various Yüan regimes all tried seriously to alleviate these disasters [...] [but] the history of Toghön Temür's reign

³³ Marsha Weidner, “Painting and Patronage at the Mongol Court of China, 1260–1368,” University of California at Berkeley Ph.D. diss., 1982, p. 57. For more on this Emperor's literary and cultural interests, see Kanda Kiichirō, “Gendai no Bunshū no fūryū ni tsuite” in *Haneda hakushi shōju kinen tōyōshi ronsō* (Kyoto, 1950), pp. 477–488.

³⁴ On Guan Daosheng, see Morris Rossabi, “Kuan Tao-sheng: Woman Artist in Yuan China” in *Bulletin of Sung Yuan Studies* 21 (1989), pp. 67–84.

raises the question whether any regime could have coped with these repeated large-scale disasters any better than the Yüan did.”³⁵

IV. MONGOL ALCOHOLISM IN MODERN TIMES

To jump the six centuries from the Yuan collapse to the present day is to discover a more serious social problem. The post-1990 neo-liberal policy of shock therapy, with an agenda of minimalist government, elimination of subsidies for food, energy, and housing, privatization of industry and the herds, unrestricted free trade without any protection for native infant industries—in other words, dependence on a pure market approach has resulted in the closing down of factories, large-scale unemployment, increases in poverty, rapidly accelerating income disparities between the nouveaux riche and the rest of the population, depredations in the environment, urban squalor, declines in education and health, and reductions in support for the arts, including the ballet, cinema, the circus, music, theater, and the opera.³⁶

Male and, to a limited extent, female responses to these parlous conditions have been a turn toward alcohol. Vodka, with its higher alcoholic content than *airagh*, is more and more the drink of choice, certainly in the urban areas or towns, which now constitute approximately seventy-five percent of the population. Production has increased dramatically. From a total of 3,583 thousand liters in 1996, alcohol consumption grew to 9,116 liters in 2004 and then to 12,591 liters in 2007. Imports of liquor have followed the same trajectory. In 1996, imports consisted of 3.1 million liters, but by 2007 the amount had increased to 19.9 million liters.³⁷ Population growth did not spurt at the same six-fold increase in eleven years as liquor. The numbers of bars and liquor outlets have had a similar exponential increase. As of 2004,

³⁵ John Dardess, “Shun-ti and the End of Yüan Rule in China” in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 585–586.

³⁶ On these developments, see Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: from Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and the same author’s updates in “Mongolia: Transmogrification of a Communist Party,” *Pacific Affairs* 82:2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 231–250 and “Ballet in Mongolia,” *Ballet Review* (Spring, 2010)

³⁷ State Statistical Office of Mongolia, *Mongolian Economy and Society in 1996* (Ulaanbaatar, 1997), p. 91; National Statistical Office of Mongolia, *Mongolian Statistical Yearbook* (Ulaanbaatar, 2008), pp. 243, 270; National Statistical Office of Mongolia, *Mongolian Statistical Yearbook, 1998* (Ulaanbaatar, 1998), p. 146.

Mongolia also had 184 vodka factories serving a population of less than three million, and unofficial observations and statistics indicate a further growth.³⁸ These numbers reflect social dislocation, including unemployment, poverty, and attendant domestic abuse, not any genetic proclivity toward alcohol. Foreigners have, on occasion, attributed the high rate of alcoholism to the cold weather and to a general Mongol tendency toward liquor consumption. If so, why the relatively low rate before the economic and social crises of the post-socialist era?

The government has been ineffective in curbing alcoholism, perhaps because liquor generates substantial tax revenues. It has hardly initiated campaigns against excessive consumption, and inexpensive vodka is readily available in Ulaan Baatar. The government's principal response has been to order the police to pick up inebriated individuals and to transport them to sobering or drying-up stations. In one year, the police allegedly dealt with 100,000 such cases.³⁹

In sum, a high rate of alcoholism often bespeaks social dislocations. The thesis that so-called dietary decadence, including consumption of inordinate amounts of liquor, led to the decline of the Mongol Empire needs serious re-evaluation. Political and economic problems caused the Empire's collapse, and it is unclear whether Mongol rule in China was beset by alcoholic excesses. The Mongol Emperors of the Yuan dynasty died young, but proof of liquor as a cause of their demise is lacking. Similarly, the high rate of Mongol alcoholism since 1990, which can be documented, reflects an astonishing array of social problems.

³⁸ *UBPost*, May 6, 2004.

³⁹ *Montsame Mongolian News Agency*, April 9, 1999; *UBPost*, December 6, 1997.

