BURRYING, SUBMERGING, FORGETTING
Inventing and Subverting the Memory of the Dead in Mongolia
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On July 28, 1955 the government of the Mongolian People’s Republic undertook to reform the country’s funerary rituals. The primary aim of the reform was to rid the country of the practice of laying the body of the deceased to rest above ground, naked but for a simple shroud. The purpose of this practice was for the remains to disappear as quickly as possible, devoured by animals or exposed to the elements. This custom, according to the reform’s authors, was totally unacceptable; it had no place within the modern, urbanized society that Mongolia was to become after its commitment in 1924 to “non-capitalist development,” under the guidance of the USSR. Several laws were adopted mandating that the entire population bury the deceased in tombs—a more “suitable” resting place—thus creating a “dignified” memorial. It seemed that these laws were successful, as cemeteries began to appear on the outskirts of the new urban areas.

The funerary reform that took place in Mongolia was not an isolated example in the communist world. In Vietnam,¹ and in

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regions of the USSR such as Kyrgyzstan,² the traditional customs were criticized for being excessively lavish—to the point of driving the common people to ruin. It was also considered a means for affirming feudal hierarchies, or for harboring superstitious beliefs about the fate of the soul in the afterlife. As in the European part of the USSR,³ the governments’ reforms of funerary rituals had an educational purpose. The intelligentsia created new rituals to replace the old with the purpose of encouraging tendencies in the population that were conducive to founding a new society. The success of these reforms was often mitigated, either because the population carried out the new rituals without ascribing to the ideology underlying them,⁴ or because the population simply did not wish to abandon certain rituals.⁵

In Mongolia as well, the success of funerary reform was not as complete as one might be led to believe by the general adoption of the practice of burying the dead. In particular, cemeteries did not take on the appearance desired by the reformers; they never became the tidy memorial gardens, cloistered and landscaped, that the government had hoped for. To this day, these cemeteries are more like immense wastelands. Without any discernible order, tombs cover large expanses that flank the mountainsides surrounding cities and towns. In Ulaanbaatar, the country’s capital, three of the five cemeteries founded on the outskirts of the city in the 1950s have since become integrated into the city proper. Their appearance and rapid growth have sparked numerous debates since the start of the 21st century,⁶ with an apparently growing portion of the population in favor of cremation.⁷

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6. See, for example, *Ulaanbaatar Times*: “The Silent City [i.e., the cemetery] Shall Become a Garden” (October 7, 2010), or “The Maan’t Cemetery Will Be Enclosed” (October 18 2010), on www.sonin.mn (consulted November 3, 2010).
I will focus here on the issue of the appearance of these cemeteries, and show that it is at the heart of the problems posed by the sudden, authoritarian imposition of the practice of burying the dead, as occurred in the mid-1950s. Based on an investigation carried out in Ulaanbaatar, I will show that the layout of Mongolian cemeteries stems from a certain conception of what a final resting place should be, and of what this place should do for the remains of the deceased. Two contradictory “funerary ideologies” are at play here. In the one expressed in the laws, the burial site is a monument—a central place, if not the only place, for celebrating the memory of the deceased. In the other, which corresponds to the above-ground burial, the final resting place is not a locus for the memory of the deceased; rather, this memory is celebrated only in the survivors’ home, via funerary portraits created just after death.

It is worth noting that the ban on laying the dead above ground, and the imposition of burial as the only acceptable practice, were not adopted in the rest of the country with as much success as they were in the cities. While the city-dwellers consented almost immediately to the new treatment of corpses, the nomadic herdsmen, most notably in the remote northwestern region of the country, posed greater problems. The Dörvöd Mongolians of the Harhiraa region, for example, chose to maintain their practices in spite of government measures. To this day, they continue to lay their dead above ground, naked but for a shroud.

By comparing these rural grave sites with the cemeteries in the country’s capital, I will show that tombs are sites of an astonishing subversion of the ideology at the heart of Mongolian funerary reform. Established as the locus of commemoration of the deceased, these tombs have been transformed into a sort of memory repository, where the personal attributes of the deceased are concentrated, so that they may be more quickly forgotten. Today, though it may give many city-dwellers cause to complain, the appearance of Mongolian cemeteries is the result of a gradual, silent, “tactical”

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8. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *L’individu, la mort, l’amour. Soi-même et l’autre en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 104. I am referring here to a notion of funerary ideology that is slightly different from that of the author, by considering what the form given to a burial says about the burial’s place in an approach to commemorating the dead, which is made up of memory and forgetting.

process, resulting in tombs serving the same purpose as leaving the deceased above ground. Whether the bones are dispersed by birds, wind, wolves, or dogs; whether the resting place is submerged in an undifferentiated multitude of identical graves, the result is the same. In time, no one recalls the exact spot where the body was laid. Before we discuss what these cemeteries have effectively become, we will examine laws adopted between 1955 and 1972, in order to clarify the spirit of the reform and the ideology that motivated the creation of cemeteries in Mongolia.

Reforming Funerary Rites: Commemoration of the Deceased

In Mongolia, the 1950s was a decade of industrialization and urbanization, which saw the development of cities, towns, and collective farms across the country. After the revolution of 1921 in which Mongolia proclaimed its independence from China, after the ratification in 1924 of the constitution establishing the country as a People’s Republic and first satellite of the USSR, and, above all, after the years of “destruction of the old order,” which saw the eradication of the Mongolian nobility and Buddhist clergy, the country experienced a period of major construction. This period did not, however, mark the beginning of urbanization in Mongolia. Cities were already present at the beginning of the 20th century — most notably Urga, the country’s religious and commercial center, which would be renamed Ulaanbaatar after the revolution. In this period, Urga’s development was already drawing remarks from foreign observers about the maladaptive practice of leaving the body of the deceased above ground, where the corpses were easily found by local dogs. Frans August Larson, who lived in the city at the turn of the century, describes the situation in his journal:

This is a gruesome practice which made horrible the territory just outside the city of Urga. Urga is the only place in Mongolia where a multitude of Mongols live close together. But no encampment is safe from the possibility that one of the family dogs may come in dragging

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a human leg or arm. Thirty-five years in Mongolia has not inured me to this. I shudder with horror every time it happens.12

Though it seems that the majority of the population of Ulaanbaatar was not very alarmed by this situation,13 the government made a decision to address it by reforming the way the dead were treated. Between 1955 and 1972, the Council of Ministers of the Mongolian People’s Republic adopted four laws intended to compel the entire population to bury their dead, and to lay the groundwork for a centralized administration of funerary practices.14

The first law, signed in 1955 by both the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and by the First Deputy Prime Minister, contains a long preamble in which the authors lay out the reasons why the reform of funerary practices is necessary.

Laying the deceased to rest above ground is described as a “filthy” custom (mash muuhai), an unacceptable “residue” (üldegdel) of the past, which no longer has a place “in our current stage of development.” One might expect that the practice was termed “filthy” out of concern for maintaining sanitary conditions in the city, but in fact, only towards the end of the text is there mention of the idea that leaving corpses in the open air might cause epidemics. Rather, the characterization is rooted in the idea that the practice is unjust, and does not allow for a dignified commemoration of the deceased. The authors emphasized that before the revolution, only the “common people” were subjected to such practices, while the nobles and religious dignitaries “laid their own family members to rest in tombs, incinerating or embalming them, marking the tombs with headstones, or erecting stupas [Tibetan-style funerary monuments];

13. As evidenced by certain travelers’ writings, (Roland Strasser, *The Mongolian Horde*, trans. R. T. G. [London: Cape & Smith, 1930], 272-275), as well as the inclination in the 1955 law to attempt to raise awareness of this issue – proof that this was not initially considered a problem.
14. Law passed by the Mongolian People’s Republic Council of Ministers and by the Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolution Party, number 339/199, Ulaanbaatar, July 28, 1955; Law passed by the Mongolian People’s Republic Council of Ministers, number 9, Ulaanbaatar, January 20, 1956; number 570, Ulaanbaatar, December 25, 1964; number 359, Ulaanbaatar, September 8, 1972. Nearly all of these measures were to be repealed between 1986 and 1992, during the “restructuring” initiated in Mongolia in conjunction with the Russian perestroika.
they had common people care for these sites, and demanded that these sites be venerated.” In other words, the practice of laying the deceased to rest above ground was, according to the authors, a way for the nobles and religious dignitaries to “oppress and pauperize the people,” by reserving dignified memorials only for the deceased of their own class. The central point of this preamble, and the focus of the authors’ rhetorical efforts, is the inherently abominable quality of a practice that brings physical harm to the remains of the deceased, and that does not allow for the construction of any permanent funerary monument over the remains.

The custom of abandoning the dead in the open air brings about measures that are necessarily reactionary. Generally speaking, any ritual that amounts to abandoning the dead in the open air, to be eaten by dogs and birds, is an insult to the dignity of the person. Disposing of a corpse this way does not encourage respect for others, but rather engenders a disdainful attitude.

In contrast to the Soviet governments of the western USSR, and to the Vietnamese intelligentsia,\textsuperscript{15} it is worth noting that the Mongolian reformers were not concerned with the presence of clergy at funerals, nor with the superstitious ideas about the afterlife supposedly perpetuated by old rituals. This is surprising, given the overwhelming influence that Buddhism had on funerary practices since the country’s mass conversion to the Gelugpa (or Yellow Hat) sect, which began in the late 16th century.\textsuperscript{16} Since the early 1990s, Buddhist clergy has regained its wide influence within the population by overseeing funerary rituals. Nevertheless, after the great purges of the 1930s, which saw the destruction of hundreds of monasteries and the disappearance of thousands of monks, Buddhist clergy no longer seemed a threat in the eyes of the communist government of the 1950s. Moreover, the reformers seemed unable to imagine that the act of laying the dead directly on the ground could correspond to any particular doctrine, nor to any idea, however superstitious, about the fate of the soul after death. For these reformers, the act of leaving the deceased above ground, thus abandoning them “in the open air,” evinced an absence of ritual

\textsuperscript{15} Lane, \textit{Rites of Rulers}, 82-83; Malarney, “State Functionalism,” 541.

and a neglect for the commemoration of the dead, which had been strategically imposed by feudal lords in order to perpetuate their domination.

Consequently, this first law focused on enforcing a uniform style of burial among the entire population, to create a dignified locus of commemoration for the deceased. The first clause imposed the practice of burying the dead, starting on September 1st throughout the country. Cemeteries, particularly in Ulaanbaatar, were expected to have an “appropriate appearance” and be properly maintained. They were to be landscaped and enclosed by a fence or hedge. A few months later, on January 20, 1956, a second law was signed, extending the first and providing administrative means for applying the reform. In particular, “Offices of Mortuary Services” would be established throughout the country, to control the proper burial of remains, manage their placement in cemeteries, and supervise the production, in specialized facilities, of caskets, headstones, monuments, and other items needed for installing tombs.

These laws did not stop at simply replacing a “filthy” custom with the widespread practice of burying the remains of the deceased. The “Offices of Mortuary Services” were a means for laying the groundwork of a centralized administration of funerary practices, responsible for monitoring, organizing, and even producing a memory of the dead. The aim of funerary reform was nothing less than a civilizing project meant to endow the Mongolian people with the right to respect their dead, by making dignified burial methods available to them. From this standpoint, Mongolian funerary reform was focused to a surprising degree on interment. No mention was made in these texts of the rituals that were supposed to accompany the burial of the deceased, or of the ceremonies that would celebrate the memory of the dead. The reformers proceeded as if the grave, once its use was successfully implemented by the entire population and properly placed in the new cemeteries, would in itself be sufficient to inspire the respectful behavior desired—as though the act of commemorating the dead would naturally flow from the invention of a physical locus for their commemoration.
Cemeteries in Ulaanbaatar: Memorial Gardens, or Land of Oblivion?

Ulaanbaatar has five major cemeteries. Dalan Davhar and Bayan Hoshuu in the Northwest, and Altan Ölgii in the Northeast have all been enveloped by the expanding city, and are now surrounded by housing. Naran and Tsagaan Davaa lie further to the east and west of the city, respectively. The cemeteries of Ulaanbaatar never became the enclosed and ornamented spaces that the reformers once envisaged. It is quite possible that the capital’s “Office of Mortuary Services” never achieved, or never attempted, to establish cemeteries that were enclosed spaces, where the buried remains would be laid out in an orderly fashion, as the law prescribed. When I visited this bureau in the late 1990s, it was indeed issuing “interment authorizations”; assigning each of the deceased to a cemetery. These authorizations did not, however, indicate a specific plot or burial site; at most, they indicated the section of the cemetery in which the grave should be placed. In Ulaanbaatar, as in the rest of the country, Mongolian cemeteries are constantly expanding. Each tomb is placed at the edges of the preceding graves, and positioned in whichever way the constraints of that particular area allow. The digging of the grave occurs the day before the burial, and is carried out either by the cemetery caretaker, or, occasionally, by the family itself. No master plan guides the growth of these cemeteries. As a result, their borders creep outward, progressively covering all the available hillsides with a patchwork of graves.

Mongolian cemeteries are an impressive sight: one after another, countless graves spread out toward the horizon without any discernible order. There are no pathways to permit easy circulation among the graves. As they are never maintained by the families, the graves are quite often dilapidated, if not in ruins—exposing their contents to the outside world. The cemeteries are also used as dumping grounds: brimming garbage bags, metal scraps, leftover food from local restaurants, and even junked cars all wind up there. In the summertime, adding to this uninviting appearance is a smell of decomposition that can be simply repulsive. The cemeteries are inhabited by crows, stray dogs, and sometimes foxes, who take advantage of the garbage and the occasional windfall of a freshly opened tomb. Drunks go there to drink, and the caretakers of the...
cemeteries, discreet guardians of these shady territories, have questionable reputations, to say the least.\textsuperscript{17}

It seems that Mongolian people never really developed the habit of going to cemeteries and visiting their relatives’ graves. While it is not unheard of to speak of occasions when it might be possible, or even vaguely desirable, to visit a relative’s grave, opinions vary on exactly what day is appropriate—first or third anniversary of the death, lunar new year (\textit{Tsagaan Sar}), or perhaps even the national holiday in honor of the dead. In practice, visits to the cemetery are extremely rare. Most families do not bother at all. Though the grave was imposed as the only possible resting site for the deceased, intended to serve as a locus of commemoration, its use was not enough to ensure the development of commemorative practices, contrary to reformers’ expectations. Cemeteries remain, above all, places to avoid. In addition to their unwelcoming appearance, the presence of seedy characters, and the accompanying stench, they are said to be haunted by the souls of those buried there. A visit to the cemetery is therefore considered a dangerous act, an occasion for unpleasant encounters of both human and supernatural varieties, which most people would prefer avoid.

If a trip to the cemetery is inevitable, for example on the day of the funeral, precautions are taken to limit or counteract the “pollution” (\textit{buzar}) that necessarily results. Upon returning from the cemetery, members of a funeral procession carefully “purify” (\textit{ariutgah}) themselves by walking between two fires and washing their hands and face with spring water (\textit{arshaan}) that has been blessed by a religious specialist. My frequent, cavalier visits to cemeteries inspired incomprehension and disgust among my Mongolian friends. The pollution that I accumulated over the course of these visits was a ready explanation for any illness or misfortune that might befall me thereafter.

Mongolian cemeteries are thus categorically marginal places, mostly defined in negative terms: they are places outside of the city where one does not go. Moreover, even if someone wished to visit a relative’s grave, it would not be possible. The graves, placed side by side, leave no passageways for accessing older graves, which become engulfed in an undifferentiated expanse of nearly identical

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headstones. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to locate a specific grave, even just a few years after the funeral. The result of this was manifest in my interviews with many locals concerning the whereabouts of their relatives’ burial places: no one recalls the exact location of their family members’ graves. Far from being the memorial grounds envisaged by reformers, these cemeteries have turned into “non-places.”

It is neither possible nor desirable for the people to maintain any sort of connection to these places.

While it may be clear that Ulaanbaatar’s cemeteries deviate significantly from the reformer’s plans, it is more challenging to imagine what sort of funerary ideology could justify the present layout of cemeteries in the capital. What conception of burial and remembering the dead could correspond to the layout of Mongolian cemeteries? To answer this question, we must take a detour into northwestern Mongolia, where the practice of laying the dead to rest above ground continues to this day.

Forgetting the Grave: Deterritorializing the Dead

In contrast to the conclusions drawn by the reformers in the law written in 1955, the above-ground laying to rest does not simply amount to disdainful “abandon.” Rather, the practice is surrounded by precise rituals, the purpose of which is to help ensure the rebirth of the deceased’s soul in the body of a descendant—the most desirable outcome in the afterlife. The resting site, for either a man or a woman, is chosen by the family in collaboration with one or more religious specialists. The first ritual, called “opening the golden vessel” (*altan saw neeh*), is carried out by an astrologist just after death, in order to determine the proper conditions and sequence of events for the funeral. Through esoteric means known only to himself, the astrologist calculates what route the funeral procession must take, who should bear the body to the resting site, which prayers the

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18. Marc Augé, *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 100: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”

family should have read, and what objects they must dispose of to prevent the soul of the deceased from lingering.

The day before the funeral, a small group of male relatives—generally the sons, brothers, and husband of the deceased—sets out with a ritual specialist in the direction indicated by the astrologer to determine the exact spot where the body will be placed. While selecting the resting site, the specialist performs a ritual to “take the place” (gazar avah). Having obtained permission from the spirits who are the “land masters,” he uses a pointed object—often an antelope horn—to delineate the spot, and leaves it covered by a piece of cloth or felt until the next day. Offerings of incense, libations of milk and liquor, and a ceremonial scarf made of blue silk (badag) are presented to the land masters. Finally, a few centimeters from the delineated area, the specialist places a large, flat stone called the “sign stone” (temdeg chuluu). This serves to mark the funerary significance of the place, and to serve as a platform for the offerings that will be made to the deceased the next day.

During the funeral, more offerings, similar to those made the previous day, are made to the land masters, in addition to offerings left by the family for the deceased. Once the body has been placed on the ground, with the head resting on a tea brick “pillow” (der), the funeral procession should leave the site without looking back, via a different path than the one that led there, to prevent the soul of the deceased from following them home. The body is then supposed to disappear quickly, thanks to the combined effect of animals and the elements. If this does not happen, it is considered a bad omen for the future rebirth of the deceased. The body is left above ground so that, in time, nothing remains at the resting site except for the “sign stone,” which will not be removed.

Following the laying to rest, it is forbidden to visit a man’s grave site for one year. For reasons that remain unclear, the ban is three years long for a woman’s resting site. After this time, if they wish, the family may visit on the death anniversary, or for the lunar new year (Tsagaan Sar), and leave offerings of milk, liquor, and

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21. These “land masters” (gazryn ezed) are invisible entities thought to reside in the mountains, or certain parts of the countryside. They are held responsible for the weather, as well as the success of daily activities, in particular, herding and hunting.
incense. Nonetheless, it is rare to visit a relative’s resting place after the first year following the death. It is often the case that, only a few years after the funeral, no one recalls the exact location of the resting place—except for those who laid the body to rest. The “sign stone,” if it stands out enough to remind the area’s inhabitants of the spot’s funerary purpose, still does not bear any information concerning the identity of the person who was placed there. When several sign stones are present in a small area, as they are in the collective resting sites (salantai gazar) that exist in the Northwest, it is nearly impossible, even for those who participated in the funeral, to recall with certainty which spot served as a resting site for their relatives.

As in other societies—for example, the Achuars of Ecuador, who permit the casket to vanish into the lush vegetation of the Amazonian forest—the nomadic herdsmen of northwestern Mongolia do not intend for their resting site to guarantee commemoration of the dead, but rather to enable forgetting. This does not mean that the dead are totally forgotten once their bodies have been devoured or scattered, but that the resting place is not intended to become a monument. In Mongolia, the home is the place for the commemoration of the dead—and the means for this commemoration is the photograph.

In both urban and rural areas, it is the custom, at the moment of a person’s death, to create a funerary portrait by enlarging and colorizing an identity photo. This portrait is used at certain key moments during the funeral rituals: it is carried by a young child at the opening of the funeral procession, then receives offerings of incense, tea, and food during funeral meals, and again at the celebration marking the official end of the mourning period, 49 days later. After this point, the portrait usually remains in the household of the next of kin who was responsible for the organization of the funeral. This household regularly makes offerings to the deceased, on holidays, certain days of the lunar calendar, and on the occasion of successful hunting trips or slaughter of livestock. In the most scrupulous households, an offering is made each time tea is prepared. On these occasions, the offering is no longer destined solely for the person represented in the portrait, but is made, by extension, to all of the household’s deceased relatives. In other words, after

the 49-day period of funerary rituals, the representative value of the portrait changes, to include a relatively undifferentiated assembly of ancestors.

The funerary practices surrounding the rural, above-ground resting site indicate a particular approach to commemorating the dead. In this approach, the resting site remains obscure, while the home serves as the primary, if not only, place where a family group establishes a connection with the dead. In producing a grave whose purpose is to allow the body to disappear, the funerary practices of these northwestern herdsmen thus radically delocalize the memory of the dead, to then re-localize it in the home. If Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are correct in saying that the nomad is “the Deterioralized par excellence,” then it is possible that the act of leaving the body above ground, and the radical “reterritorialization” of the memory of the dead that is thereby permitted, are the epitome of a “deterioralized” relation to the land that characterizes the authors’ notion of the “smooth space” of nomadism.24 This deter-territorialization of the dead goes hand in hand with their deindividuation, as the personal portrait used to maintain a connection to the deceased ends up designating a whole group of deceased ancestors who remain mostly undifferentiated.

This same conception of the grave could explain the form taken by the cemeteries in the capital since their inception in the 1950s. Each new tomb in turn becomes lost in the multitude, and it becomes apparent that these cemeteries are part of a system of forgetting, which deteriorializes the memory of the dead by submerging it in an expanse of nearly identical graves.

The Means of Demonumentalization:
The Tomb as a Memory Repository

And yet, at first sight, it seems that these graves actually bear signs and symbols that have significance for the individual who is buried there. In addition to the name of the deceased, the headstone or slab is often engraved with an epitaph, emblems derived from the Mongolian national symbol (the Soyombo), or other symbols

representing the occupation of the deceased. Also present since the 1990s are various elements meant to guarantee the soul’s comfort at the site of the grave, or its safe passage to the afterlife: often, a miniature yurt in polished steel is set into the cement slab, said to serve as a shelter for the soul, which will remain near the grave site.²⁵

The casket, decorated in the official mourning colors of red and black, also serves as a receptacle for a variety of objects that were personally relevant to the deceased. A man’s hat and belt might be placed in his casket, and a woman might be buried with a thimble, thread, and needle—signs that the deceased lived a good life and fulfilled appropriate gender roles. The casket might also contain symbols of a particular profession, such as a small model truck for a truck driver, or a saddle blanket for a herdsman. In general, all of the precious items that belonged to the deceased, or those that he particularly treasured, will accompany him into the grave.

The evolution of the appearance of the graves also seems to demonstrate the significance they bear in the minds of the residents of Ulaanbaatar. First modeled in the 1950s on Russian-style tombs, composed of a slab and pillar in reinforced cement, and surrounded by a wrought-iron enclosure, Mongolian graves design has gradually shed most of these elements. By the beginning of the 21st century, graves had become simply a mound of earth paired with a natural-looking stone that serves as a grave marker. This type of burial, which cannot but evoke the rural resting site with its “sign stone,” has been deemed the closest to “Mongolian tradition,” as it allows for a “respectful” relationship to the environment by limiting the permanent marks left behind.

How do we explain, then, the general disregard for the grave once it has been erected? Inversely, why take such pains to invest the grave with all sorts of symbols if it is never meant to be visited, much less maintained? The first potential explanation has to do with the need to take care of the soul of the deceased. The aim of the funerary rituals executed in the home and at the grave site is to permit the soul of the deceased to be reborn as quickly as possible in the body of one of the direct descendants. Failing this, the soul will linger to haunt the living, disrupting the family’s livelihood, causing illness or even another death. The offerings made at the gravesite, just like

the personal objects buried with the deceased, are intended to ensure favorable conditions for continuing the cycle of rebirths.

A second explanation may be added to this, however, offering an understanding of the system of cemeteries and grave as a remarkable memory trap. Like the labyrinths described by Alfred Gell\(^26\) as mind traps that capture the attention of a viewer who then becomes lost in contemplation of an object, the grave acts as a sort of vacuum that draws in the memory of the deceased, which then sinks into oblivion with the grave as it becomes submerged in the undifferentiated multitude. The family proceeds as though the grave were providing a focal point for the memory of the deceased, depositing personal attributes—the body, most importantly, but also the symbols described above; this focal point is meant to dissolve once it becomes subsumed into the expanse of uniform graves. In this light, the cemetery becomes a means of demonumentalizing the tomb, counteracting and erasing its singularity in the proliferation of comparable singularities. The graves, all different in the same way, are unable to differentiate themselves once they are placed one after another, ad infinitum.

In other words, what the above-ground laying to rest achieves by dispersing the body, the cemetery achieves by submerging the grave. In both cases, the result is the same: the grave is lost in the undifferentiated multitude. The memory of the dead is then “reterritorialized” in the home, which is, in Ulaanbaatar as in the Northwest, the primary place, if not the only place, where this memory is celebrated.

Conclusion

The current shape of the cemetery demonstrates an ingenious reversal. The requirement to bury the dead is subverted in support of a funerary ideology that is radically different from what was imagined by the Mongolian Communist government when it created the law on burial. As Mongolian cemeteries grow into imposing “non-places” on the city outskirts, tombs become key elements in the system of forgetting that allows the grave to disappear and

“deterritorialize” the memory of the dead, even though the reformers intended for these graves to be monuments to that memory. The funerary practices centered on the cemetery are currently changing: the recent success of cremation set the stage for a new type of burial based explicitly on the funerary monuments for religious dignitaries that were abolished in the law of 1955. Near the two crematoria a few kilometers from the capital, large stupas, or Tibetan-style funerary monuments, contain the cremated remains of the deceased. The brilliant white facade of each monument displays a simple list of names with the dates of birth and death. Once it is filled, the monument is sealed and none of its contents is revealed, other than some 300 names listed one after another on a plaque. In an accumulation that cannot help but recall the placement of graves in a cemetery, each name is added to the list in chronological order—unique, but perfectly standardized for font and character size. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish the constitutive elements of the whole.

The plasticity of Mongolian funerary rituals is astonishing. Over the course of the 20th century, the Mongolian people have adopted some radically different ways of handling corpses, all with disconcerting ease. Nevertheless, the subversion of the obligation to bury the dead, and the method of collective burial of cremated remains practiced today, both show that, ultimately, the type of burial adopted in no way determines the people’s relationship to burial practice, nor to the “funerary ideology” that underlies it. The Mongolian people are remarkable for the pragmatic way in which they have been able to adapt a single conception of the grave to several completely different methods of handling the corpse. Via new rituals that were either imposed upon them, or that they acquired for themselves, they have preserved a singular approach to commemoration, and a singular place for the dead in the society of the living.