

A Personal Reflection of the Chinggis Khaan Ceremony

By Belig Borjigid

This year on November 4, 2017, we will mark the thirtieth annual Chinggis Khaan Memorial Ceremony in the United States. Over the past thirty years, the American version of the ceremony, which is an abbreviated version of the original ceremony held annually in the Ordos region of Southern (aka Inner) Mongolia since the time of Khublai Khaan, has drawn participants from all over the world, Mongols and non-Mongols alike. It's transformed from a small gathering of likeminded people in our modest-sized family room in Lawrenceville, New Jersey to a community-wide event with hundreds of spectators each year from all over the world. While the story of how the ceremony came to be in the United States is often repeated, the impact of the ceremony is untold. For me in particular, as a first generation Mongol-American born in the United States, the ceremony has had a particularly poignant influence throughout my life.

Although I have attended every ceremony since it began in the United States, I was only about three years old when it began and was therefore too young to remember much of the first few years. I do remember that I loved having all of our friends and family together once a year, and having the opportunity to wear my Mongol deel, eat Mongolian foods, watch Mongolian dances, and listen to Mongolian singers. I had few other such opportunities to be exposed to Mongolian culture on such a scale, and after each year, I would feel in awe of what I saw and wanted to learn everything and mimic everyone - the ceremonial roles, the dancers, the singers, and even the occasional contortionist. While my friends in school talked excitedly about their families' preparation for Thanksgiving and Christmas, I told my friends of my family's preparation for the Chinggis Khaan Ceremony - all of the guests we would have over, all of the things my father and his friends had built and gathered together for the altar, and all of the stories of my family history my father would tell my brother and me as we helped him fold paper copies of the early editions of the Mongol Tolbo and load the car the night before the ceremony.

As I grew older, I became more aware of the historical significance of the ceremony, especially when I occasionally struggled with issues of identity. My family originated in Southern Mongolia, but my grandparents escaped to Taiwan during the Communist Revolution. My parents were born there and eventually came to the United States where my brother and I were born. Three generations of my family have three different birthplaces, speak three different languages, and have three different nationalities, but when we are asked "who" we are, we all identify ourselves as Mongolian first. This is sometimes difficult for others who are not familiar with the effects of diasporas to understand, and I often encountered contentious people who would ask me questions like: "If you're Mongolian, how is it that you have never been to Mongolia?" "If you were born here, shouldn't you just say you're American?" "If Mongolia and the United States were at war, with whom would you side?" "If your parents were born in Taiwan, shouldn't you say you're Taiwanese?" "If your grandparents are Mongolian, why is their hometown in China?" I sometimes dreaded

fielding those types of questions for the fear of unwittingly entering into yet another debate of whether or not I identified myself "accurately".

Those feelings of uncertainty and frustration were often mollified when I attended the Chinggis Khaan Ceremony. At the ceremony, I was surrounded by other "unconventional" Mongols like me, the children of the children of diasporas. There were Kalmyks who came via Germany from Russia, Mongolians who came via India from Mongolia, and Mongols whose parents came from different regions and spoke different dialects from one another. We all had our unique traits, but we shared the same Mongol heritage. That knowledge and sense of camaraderie brought us together each year to remember the founder of the Mongol empire, Chinggis Khaan. Centuries ago, he united all of our tribes and with his aptitude for strategizing and statesmanship, left a legacy so storied that people all over the world know his name to this day, giving our people an everlasting source of pride. The annual ceremony in his memory fortified my understanding of what it meant to be a Mongol - an identity inclusive of all the people united under Chinggis Khaan, despite where they were located in the world - and gave me the conviction to face the inevitable questions people would have about my background.

Now as an adult, when I look back at all of the ceremonies, I feel truly appreciative of the vision that the founders of the Mongol American Cultural Association had and the dedication of the board members to ensure that this Mongol tradition would be continued in the United States throughout these years. Besides the formative impact the annual event had on my sense of identity as I grew up two generations removed from my family's homeland, it has also helped to promote our Mongol culture in the United States and encourage strong ties within our Mongol American community through our shared reverence of our ancestor and the nation that he built. As we prepare for this year's annual Chinggis Khaan Ceremony in the United States, I find myself thinking of the eye-opening number of people that have been involved over the years - the ritual participants, the speakers, the performers, and the attendees - and am in awe of all of the time and effort that was contributed to ensure the success of each year. May the next thirty years of the ceremony be just as impactful and meaningful as the previous thirty have been.