

“Being Cultured”, Changing Culture

Public Health Messaging in COVID-Era Ulaanbaatar

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Abstract As poetic and political, images mobilized by public health campaigns are often dense with meaning and associations, even as they make certain assumptions about the good, virtuous, natural, and right. This article explores the assumptions about “being cultured” that underlie the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign and related public health messaging in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia’s capital city. In the image-slogan complexes mobilized by such campaigns, “being cultured” (*soyoltoi*), healthy (*erüül*), and clean (*tsever*) is linked to curbing specific behaviors such as urinating and spitting in public, which took on new urgency in health-related discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a concept that retains the legacy of meanings and associations in connection with state socialist era values, “being cultured” has been used in different yet connected ways across the 20th and 21st centuries to disseminate hegemonic messages. Drawing on the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and related ideological public health campaigns, this article explores discursive efforts to generate a subject of the state that espouses bourgeois values.

Keywords political economy – ideological state apparatus – exemplars – postsocialism – propaganda

Introduction

Having returned to Ulaanbaatar in November 2021 after a protracted, pandemic-related absence, I first noticed visible features of the city that had changed: ostentatious displays of wealth exemplified in expensive sedans and SUVs, new luxury grocery stores and shopping malls, specifically crafted outdoor spaces in which to spend time with friends and family, as well as public signage designed to inspire ‘selfie’ moments. The presence of health-related messaging was ubiquitous, both in public spaces and privately-owned establishments, such as “wear a mask!,” “keep your distance,” and “stay home,” intended to prevent spread of COVID-19 infection, and much like signage in the UK where I had come from. Walking past the former Trade and Development Bank headquarters, where Little Ring Road meets Tourist Street, I noticed the once-stately bank had disappeared and now a large paneled fence surrounding the area, as the prime real estate was undergoing conversion likely to become a mall or high-rise apartments, similar to the Max Towers just behind it. On one of the fence panels I noticed

a three-part image display of a red circle-backslash symbol (typical of ‘forbidden’ signage) with the silhouette of person urinating, spitting, and littering inside each (see Figs. 1 & 2). Below the images was written: “Let’s create a trash-free, clean and civilized environment.” These images belonged to the “Let’s Make the City Cultured”



Fig. 1 Adjacent sign on a construction panel in central Ulaanbaatar. Photographs by author.



Fig. Adjacent sign on a construction panel in central Ulaanbaatar. Photographs by author.

(*Khot Soyoltoi Bolgoy*) campaign, sponsored by the Governor¹ of Ulaanbaatar City (Ulaanbaatar Khotiin Zakhiragch) beginning in 2019. The green and red lettering of the campaign's title and the ambiguous placement of words is a play on language, and so the slogan also reads "A Cultured City is Lovely" (*Soyoltoi Khot bol Goy*). In the image-slogan complexes presented by the "Let's Make the City Cultured" and other related campaigns that visibly populated public and private Ulaanbaatar spaces in 2021, "being cultured" (*soyoltoi*), healthy (*erüül*), and clean (*tsever*) were linked to curbing specific behaviors such as urinating, defecating, and spitting in public, which has taken on new urgency in health-related discourses during the COVID-19 era. In public culture, Ulaanbaatar – Mongolia's capital city and home to over half of the country's population – is often considered dirty, polluted, and congested in juxtaposition to the clean, healthful, wide-open spaces of the countryside. In contrast to the 'traditional' ways of countryside living, Ulaanbaatar is considered the modern nucleus of the country in vernacular thought, and associated with being cosmopolitan, forward-looking and trendy, being educated and receiving an education, the digital and technological, and so on. At the same time, important demographic shifts have taken place over the past few decades, with migration into Ulaanbaatar from the countryside and migration out of Mongolia from Ulaanbaatar, salient trends. The population of the city has nearly doubled since 1990, during which time the coun-

try moved from state socialist government and a centralized economy to multiparty parliamentary system and marketized economy. While important differences exist between countryside and urban economic activities and rhythms of daily and seasonal life, access to information, national and international news, and connection to others via internet and 4G is not one of them. Apart from the obvious geographical point, in many ways countryside and city people resist mapping onto two distinctive "communities" (and less appropriate still discrete classes or "ethnic" groups), as families are often split between rural and urban dwellings and a steady flow of goods, people, and cash takes place in between. The differences between the countryside and city people in public thought is largely attributed to divergent lifestyles associated with occupational realities, with portions of the population in both groups controlling and regulating the means of production.

This article explores how the "Let's Make the City Cultured" campaign and related public health messaging rely on normative ideas about what it means to 'be cultured' even as they seek to reform public culture. As the notion of "being civilized" or "cultured" (*soyoltoi*) retains bourgeoisie connotations in Mongolia, standing for cultivated taste and embracing the sophisticated, educated and "the arts," the normative assumptions about "cultured" behavior reveal underlying classist values that resonate more generally with the influence that celebrities, athletes, influencers on social media, and other publicly visible figures are considered to have in contemporary public life. However, the value of "being cultured" is far from new, instead having been shaped and circulated in connection with ideas about education, public order, and health and hygiene from the mid-20th century.

As a concept that retains the legacy of former meanings and associations, but also migrates, appropriating new associations,² 'being cultured' has been mobilized in different yet connected ways across the 20th and 21st centuries in Mongolia to disseminate hegemonic messages. Such dominant, "top-down" messaging disseminated in the "Let's Make the City Cultured" campaign brings to mind French Marxist structuralist LOUIS ALTHUSSER's scholarship in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (1971), as one of many possible

forms that an ideological state apparatus (ISA) can take, the transmission and dissemination of which reinforce the control of the dominant class. Generally considered to further ideas about Gramscian hegemony and Marxist ideology,³ one key point of ALTHUSSER’s model is to illuminate the ways in which ISAs reproduce the relations of production which, in the capitalist mode of production, are exploitative (ibid. 146). He comes to this conclusion by expanding upon the Marxist concept of the state apparatus; as opposed to political revolutions that affect the possession of state power, state apparatuses can survive without being affected or modified, ALTHUSSER (ibid. 134) tells us. He distinguishes between two kinds of state apparatuses: repressive, constituting the government, administration, army, police, courts, and prison, which function primarily by violence; and ideological, such as churches, political parties, trade unions, families, schools, the media, and so on, which function primarily by ideology (ibid. 138). Discussed in the following section, for ALTHUSSER, human beings become subjected to ideology and emerge as particular kinds of subjects through a structural and totalizing process called interpellation. He is largely preoccupied with schools as the dominant form of ideological state apparatus in a mature capitalist social formation, as it reproduces relations of production by inculcating, *en masse*, the ideology of the ruling class, replacing the church as the previously-dominant ISA in global north contexts.

Although ALTHUSSER’s writings has been variably received and critiqued over the years, especially for the absence of individual agency proposed therein,⁴ I am interested in reading “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and related public health messaging in COVID-era Ulaanbaatar alongside his notion of ISAs for two reasons, both relating to the analytic purchase the latter lends the former. First, I am interested in what ‘being cultured’ as social value mobilized by these campaigns tells us about how social change is imagined to take place, by those with the means, power and authority to circulate such messages. Because ideological state apparatuses can, in some ways, endure political revolutions, they tell us something about the legacy or endurance of social values across disparate political regimes. Read in this light, and with respect to normative ideas about citizen’s du-

ties, health, and being educated, “post-socialism” might remain useful, even if the analytic purchase is localized to specific social phenomena and intended to highlight the endurances (instead of ruptures) across state socialist to ex-socialist transitions. This is then in constructive dialogue with claims that post-socialism is a ‘vanishing object’ (BOYER & YURCHAK 2008: 9; MÜLLER 2019) that would likely disappear with time (HUMPHREY 2001: 13). My aim is then not to examine the extent to which “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and related ideological campaigns were actually successful in changing thought or behavior or, in Althusserian terms, the extent to which Mongolians were interpellated. I am more interested in how ideological subjectification is imagined to take place, by those who control such messaging (even if not stated or understood exactly as such by the institutions in power).

Second, I am interested in exploring Mongolian public health messaging alongside ALTHUSSER’s scholarship for the insight such enquiry provides by way of class-making as discursive process. Though he does not directly speak at length about class relations in his chapter on ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ (1971: 121-173), ALTHUSSER mentions that ‘the Ideological State Apparatus may be not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle’ (italics in original) (ibid. 140). In a footnote, he qualifies that MARX distinguishes between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production and transformation in terms of ideological forms (e.g. legal, political, philosophic, and so on) in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. ALTHUSSER reads MARX as saying that class struggle is thus expressed and exercised in ideological forms, inclusive of ISAs. But class struggle also extends far beyond such ideological forms (rooted, as it is, in relations of production), and for that reason “the struggle of the exploited classes may also be exercised in the forms of the ISAs, and thus turn the weapon of ideology against the classes in power.” ISAs then reveal something about class relations, even as class has been shown in recent updates to Marxist theory not to be a static structural category ‘out there’, but rather in co-constitutive relationship with social and cultural processes and projects of self-making (e.g. YANAGISAKO

2002: 70-109). I am interested then in the kinds of discursive class-making assertions “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and related public health messages render possible, however fleetingly, partial, and incomplete, and however variously received by different publics, whether disputed, rejected, or allowed to exist in qualified ways.

COVID-era public health messaging in Ulaanbaatar linking “cultured” behavior to public safety and citizen’s duty retains some of the meanings and associations established during the state socialist period, while taking on contemporary values in Mongolia’s “age of the market” (*zakh zeeliin üyed*) or “business age” (*biznisiin üyed*), as the current times are commonly referred, marked by salient social media presence and trend for campaigns aimed at changing individual behavior to be hosted on social media platforms, and disseminated with the help of influencers. As discussed more below, the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign and associated public health messaging links “cultured” behavior with the refined, well-educated, considerate, social norm- and law-abiding conduct of the city, with derogatory classist connotations for non-city dwellers, be they intended or unintended. However, distinctions between “cultured” and “uncultured” behavior resist mapping onto countryside and urban dwellers as two distinctive classes, even as the social effects of urbanization and migration from countryside to city has been well documented (BRUUN & NARANGO 2006; CHARLIER 2020).

As I will argue, the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign mobilizes its central concept by discursively naturalizing ‘being cultured’ as a universal value to all Mongolians, but to which city dwellers have better access, while also trying to shape “the city” as field. Here I draw on BOURDIEU’s (2013[1977]) notion of field, as a kind of social space amongst many in which interactions take place. As part of a series of concepts integral to BOURDIEU’s theory of social class and its reproduction which also includes habitus and capital, fields can be social realms such as politics or education, professional spheres such as medicine, or specific institutions such as a university. A set of tacit rules govern interactions within a particular field, and the better one has or develops a “feel for the game,” as BOURDIEU puts it, the more capital

(cultural, social, economic, symbolic) one is able to attain. For the purposes of city (*khot*) as field, it is the unwritten set of rules that the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign sets out to describe (and in so doing, prescribe) that interests me. Crucially, the field of “the city” extends into online spaces like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, the unique affordances of which amplify the reach of campaign messaging and provide digital spaces for ‘grassroots’ exemplar-ship to spread.

“Improving the introduction of the city’s Culture”: The prescription of rural-urban divisions

Whether traveling by bus, car, or on foot, public health messaging was nearly ubiquitous in COVID-era Ulaanbaatar. Depicted in various locations around the city but concentrated in the centre, highly digitalized, futuristic sets of large paneled images from this campaign line construction walls, behind which renovations or new builds take place. Such images depict clean-lined skyscrapers reaching into a clear, light blue sky; other panels feature a typical “green” urban space: wind turbines, trees and suburban-like homes dot the background, while shapes of faceless people enjoy the outdoors in the foreground: a woman pushing a stroller, a child riding their scooter. Short, punchy phrases are written across each, such as: “a clean city from us” and “trash-free environment – healthy life.” Details hinting at what a “cultured city” might entail are especially visible in certain forms of the signage; lettering includes two, Facebook-like “thumbs up” that form the diaeresis above the “e” of *roë*, which in turn doubles as the adjective “lovely” and also as the ending of the verb *bolokh* “to become, to make” rendering it first person plural imperative – *болгоё* – meaning “let’s make” (see Fig 3). A broken up, straight line resembles dotted central road lines on the “t” of “city,” connoting following driving laws, while the bowtie forming the diaeresis of *coël* (meaning culture) illustrates the perceived social value of being refined and fashionably well-presented in public life. A number of hashtags in Mongolian language not only remind that the campaign has a vibrant social media presence online, but also further elucidate the Governor of Ulaanbaatar’s message: #PublicSpace, #ServiceSpace, #Traffic,

#PublicTransport and #OnlineEnvironment. Next to #TogetherLet’sChange is the *garuda*, a Buddhist mythical bird and symbol of Ulaanbaatar city, signifying the Governor’s official endorsement.

The Governor’s office is joined by several other organizations in such messaging, including some transnational organizations such as World Vision,



Fig. 3 “Let’s Make the City Cultured” sign near Monnis Tower, central Ulaanbaatar. Photograph by author.

the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and USAID. These signs tend to link behavior such as spitting in public to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and infectious diseases more generally. The WHO has published signage incorporating spitting into health-related behavior to be avoided along with “close contact [with others] when you are experiencing cough and fever.” Sponsored by the Ministry of Health, the National Centre for Public Health, and the Asian Development Bank, a poster displayed inside a central indoor market called *Bömbögör* appeals to potential spitters by encouraging them to consider how their behavior might contribute to the spread of illnesses like COVID-19 (see Fig. 4). It also illustrates where such illicit behavior is considered to take place (e.g. the bus stop) and perpetrated by whom: e.g. a middle-aged man, appearing more disheveled than the similarly-aged man and woman standing behind him. The title reads, “Do not openly ‘throw’ (*khayakh*) your snot or phlegm” and in smaller text below: “Attention: do not put yourself or others at risk by spitting on the street, as this poses a risk of spreading infectious diseases.” Other signs appear more handcrafted. This one, displayed in Fig. 5, is written on a sheet of A4 paper, protected by a



Fig 4 COVID-era public health poster, sponsored by the Asian Development Bank, the National Centre for Public Health, and the Ministry of Health. Photography by author.

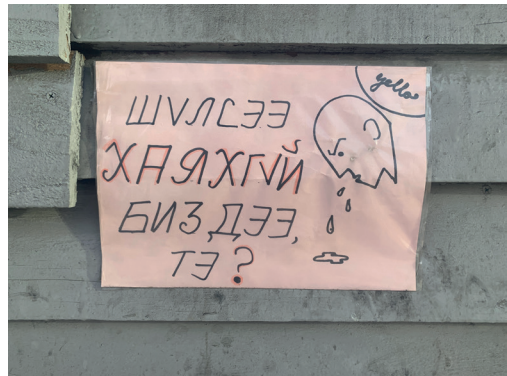


Fig. 5 Hand-made sign posted near Natsagdorj Library, Seoul Street. Photography by author.

clear plastic sleeve and taped to a building along the city’s central Seoul Street. It reads: “You won’t ‘throw’ your saliva, right?”

Collectively, visual public health messaging belonging to the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and related campaigns aims to change public health-related behavior, relying on a few different strategies. Along with propagandistic appeals to join the “culturedness” of the city, the Ulaanbaatar city’s Governor’s office fines for spitting and smoking in non-designated areas. One sign, posted between a school and bus stop near the Music and Dance College, says: “Area around the school. Smoking, snorting, spitting and littering are pro-



Fig. 6 Signage outside of a grade school near the bus station colloquially associated with the music and dance College. Photograph by author.

hibited in public places,” with a 50,000 MNT fine for smoking and a 10,000 MNT fine for spitting⁵ (Fig. 6). Fines are in relation to breaking Mongolian law, their official verbiage reproduced in both Mongolian and English language on a sign located behind City Tower. This sign not only reminds that “CCTV is working” but also includes a phone number one can call to file a complaint (Fig. 7).

On a characteristic sunny, cool spring morning in March 2022, a friend and I met with a high-ranking official from the Ulaanbaatar City managerial institution overseeing the planning and implementation of the “Let’s Make the City Lovely” campaign. We waited in the corridor of the two-story government building in Sansar district for an internal meeting to finish, and were then invited in. We sat at one end of a long, shiny conference table, with Ganbold, a middle-aged man dressed



Fig. 7 Signage detailing Mongolian law forbidding spitting, urinating, defecating, and littering in public. Photograph by author.

in suit and tie, seated at his desk at the other end. After a polite welcome and being offered tea and coffee, Ganbold asked why I had contacted him. I explained that I had noticed the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign signs around the city, and wanted to know more about them. What was the rationale behind the campaign’s inception?

“Recently young people, especially of Ulaanbaatar, have been improving their behavior in society and improving the introduction (*nevriiulekh*) of the city’s culture every day. But, of course, there are also some inappropriate actions due to the large number of people living in the city” over half of the country’s population, Ganbold mentioned. “It’s been about two and half to three years since the appeal to make [the city] beautiful/comfortable (*tokhijuulakh*) began. We said, ‘let’s fight littering side by side and educate’ (*gegeeruulie*) our citizens to live together in a safe environment for the good of our city.” The campaign aims to create “the healthiest and safest environment possible by adopting the right standards,” and that this is related to Article 16 of Mongolian Constitution,

which guarantees every person the right to live in a healthy and safe environment, Ganbold explained.

How do these health and safety standards connect to the idea of “being cultured”? I asked.

“The city’s culture is that, when a person leaves their home in the morning, they enter social life (*niigmiin amidral*). Even from the moment they cross the road, or drive their car, they enter public relations (*niitiin khariltsaa*). Even from [the moment] they leave their home, to take out the trash, to throw it in the street or in the sorted garbage bins, they will be greeted by the city’s culture.”

While Ganbold described the city’s culture as external to the individual, each person also actively shapes the city’s culture. Each person is responsible for “being cultured” which, according to Ganbold, means no littering, no spitting in public, and following traffic rules.

Here Ganbold describes the need to develop a healthy and safe urban environment, imagined to be achieved through adopting the “right” municipal standards and educating citizens about those standards. As something that belongs to the city, yet each person contributes to, the “city’s culture” relates to both public relations and social life. By adopting certain behaviors – and refraining from others – citizens can contribute in a positive way to the “city’s culture.” The stress Ganbold places on educating citizens, and being educated as a citizen, is a strand that runs throughout campaign signage, sometimes expressed as the need to “self-actualize” or “become conscious” (*ukhamsarlakh*) or simply being courteous to others. At other times, this is expressed as having the right

kind of consciousness (Fig. 8). For the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign, the key is to have a “citizen’s consciousness.”

One gets a sense of the kind of culture the city claims to embody in a 28-minute video posted on the campaign’s “Let’s be Cultured” Facebook page, the opening scenes of which depict young adult artists, musicians, and dancers performing in different public spaces around Ulaanbaatar city. Except for a ballet dancer, wearing a characteristic white tulle skirt and leotard, the artists and musicians each wear clothing that code as traditional national dress, such as a *deel* (tunic) and hat.⁷

A series of posts on the campaign’s Facebook page mostly dating from 2019 depicts by photograph (e.g. stills from CCTV camera footage) ‘real-life’ instances of people not behaving in a ‘cultured’ way. One image depicts an SUV parked in a river, the water of which about a half a meter deep, with a man and woman cleaning the rear bumper and floor mats with river water. The caption says, “We believe that #Ulaanbaatar city car owners will not wash their cars in the river.” A second Facebook post depicts the backs of three men while urinating on the wall of an outdoor sports stadium. The caption says, “When will #Ulaanbaatar city youth become conscious (*ukhamsarlakh*) as 21st century citizens of the city?” As referenced here with urban youth, “uncultured” behavior such as urinating in public is not explicitly associated with people from the countryside. This point was reiterated in discussion with a friend: “City people (*khotiin hüümüüs*) or countryside people (*khödöönii hüümüüs*) – it doesn’t matter. Anyone can act in an uncultured manner.”

However, Ganbold mentioned that not everyone is equally to blame for breaking the city’s aspirational cultural code. He detailed rising tensions in recent years between longer term residence of Ulaanbaatar and newcomers from the countryside:

“There is a tendency for native (*unagan*) citizens of the city to complain that the orcs (*orkuud*) of the countryside are coming and littering trash, scouring (*davkhikh*) the city, and violating traffic rules, such as exiting from a ‘no-exit’ location. But if you consider it, for a while now, the exchange of online information by Facebook is good in all rural areas, so even though they are our countryside people, our city is one big family (*ail*). The dif-



Fig. 8 Campaign sign at a construction site behind the Flower Centre. Translation: ‘Citizen’s consciousness, healthy trash-free environment’. Photograph by author.

ference [between countryside and city culture] is narrowed if you understand that ‘it’s lovely to be cultured’. Of course, during the time when online information/media was bad [i.e. impoverished], people that came from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar were shocked, they hadn’t seen any of this. Now that everything is open, people themselves want to be lovely, and dress themselves in clean clothing.”

Here Ganbold details the assumption held by the Governor’s office of Ulaanbaatar about the supposedly universally held value among countryside people in appearing and behaving more like city dwellers, and that the spreading of this value has been greatly aided by 4G networks extending social media platforms to rural places (see also Munkherdene, forthcoming). As a kind of nucleus of the nation’s culture, Ulaanbaatar and its governing body owe it to their countryside-dwelling kin to extend the kind of modernity that has been developing there outwards, made much easier than before by social media, internet, and 4G coverage available in increasingly more rural places.

While the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign doesn’t explicitly target countryside people, it does send clear messages implying a “cultural” divide, as exemplified in a sign displayed on the front door of Terelj Hotel, a high end, resort-like hotel, spa and restaurant. While still within the city limits, Terelj Hotel is nestled within the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, some 40 km from central Ulaanbaatar. The least expensive double room in off peak season costs 650,000 MNT, approximately half of the average monthly salary which, in 2022 was 1,330,400 MNT, or 465 USD. As a reminder for countryside people that this establishment is frequented by affluent urbanites especially on the weekends, two signs are posted at the hotel’s entrance, asking patrons to wear a mask and refrain from spitting. Both co-sponsored by Ulaanbaatar City and World Vision, the lower sign reads “LET’S GET USED TO THE BIG CITY’S CULTURE!” (Fig. 9). The sun-bleached sticker depicts a red circle-backslash symbol inside which the shadow outline of a person spitting, and reads, “Don’t snot/spit.”

Given that the sign is posted in a prominent and highly visible location on its property, here it seems that Terelj Hotel – with the help of signage

from the Governor’s Office of Ulaanbaatar and World Vision – wants to remind clientele and staff that, while located in a rural setting, Terelj Hotel is an establishment in which the ‘cultural norms’ of the city apply.



Fig. 9 Appeals to ‘get used to the big city’s culture’ at the entrance of a high-end hotel. Photograph by author.

Here the classist connotations of the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign, whether intended or not, are noticeably apparent. Considering ‘the city’ (as delineated by the Governor of Ulaanbaatar’s office) as Bourdieusian field is helpful, as the analytic brings with it tacit rules that govern interactions within, about which the ruling class (within a given field) has a better “feel for the game.” As indicated by the Terelj Hotel sign, the city as field is not limited to urban areas, further illustrating the aspirational scope of the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign.

The set of tacit rules that govern interactions within the city as field is clearly spelled out by the Governor of Ulaanbaatar City’s office and, as such, normatively prescribed. “Being cultured” is the principle social value of this field, and also ex-

pressed as universal value to all Mongolians, but to which city dwellers have better access. Even as countryside and urban dwellers resist class-based distinctions, such state-circulated public health messaging discursively seeks to produce a particular kind of bourgeois subject.

One can catch a glimpse of the push back against such narratives circulated by the Governor of Ulaanbaatar City’s office, due to the comment-able feature inherent to social media platforms where dissenting opinions can be expressed. Two posts on the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign’s Facebook page include photos of cars parked on the sidewalk. In each post, a commenter challenges the claim that this is straightforwardly behavior to be condemned. A commentator in the post of Fig. 10 explains that, “There are two sides to the story. If land planning was done correctly from the beginning, there wouldn’t be a problem for anyone.”

As a revise-able field, “the city” includes dissenting and critical voices, troubling the notion that campaign designers and disseminators unproblematically designate “cultured” behavior in a top-down model. Due to the affordances of social media platforms like Facebook, multiple actors revise the narrative, in this case, holding the Governor of Ulaanbaatar City’s office accountable. This space for resistance against potentially clas-

sist ideological messaging is in line with ALTHUSSER’s notion that ideological state apparatuses are sites of class struggle:

“The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs as easily as it can in the (repressive) State apparatus [...] because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle” ALTHUSSER 1971: 140).

As illustrated in the comment drawing attention to poorly executed city planning, there is room for resistance within the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” ideological campaign, by publics targeted or exploited by such messaging.

A citizen’s duty to be cultured: State socialist health propaganda

As seen above, central to the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign and related public health messaging is the linking of public order, health, safety with “self-actualized,” considerate, and “cultured” behavior, which is understood to be achieved through adopting particular standards and educating citizens of those standards. The appeal to citizen’s consciousness of the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign – and focus on

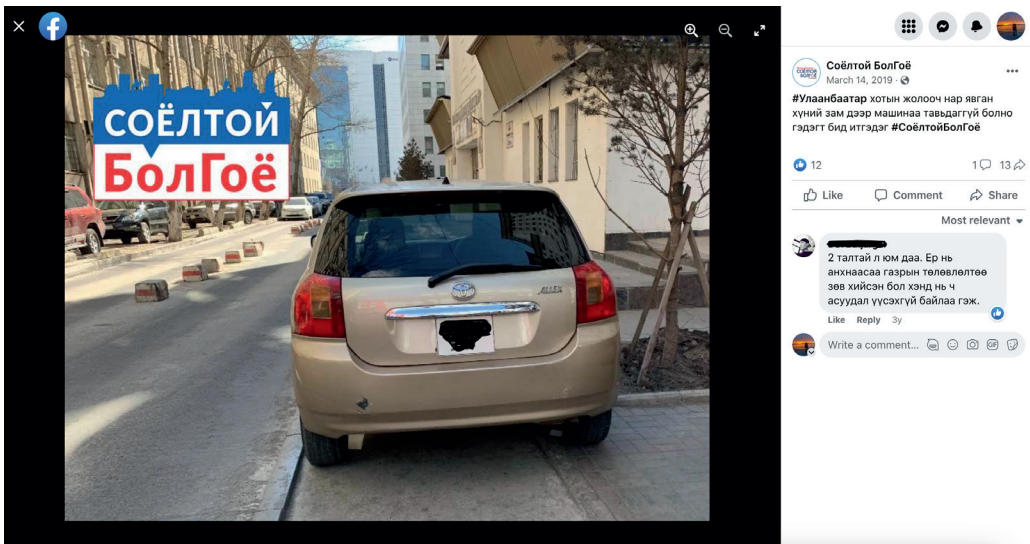


Fig. 10 ‘We believe that #Ulaanbaatar city drivers will not park on the sidewalks. #It’sLovelytoBeCultured’.

raising awareness through educative campaigns in COVID-era Mongolia more generally – bears particular resemblance to the ways in which society under state socialist regimes was expected to transform. If, for MARX, societal change was to begin with the base (the means of production and relations of production) to then change the superstructure (i.e. politico-legal institutions and ideology), actually existing socialist regimes inverted that model; as GLAESER reminds,

“In spite of frequent invocation of Marx in socialist rhetoric, then, socialist practice was in an important sense very un-Marxian. It inverted the Marxian ‘inversion of Hegel’ once more in developing what was, in effect, a consciousness-driven model of social transformation.” (GLAESER 2011: 67)

Much of the current public messaging around “being cultured” and either promoting or denouncing certain behaviors or habits is reminiscent of state socialist period propaganda (*urialga loozon*) from the mid-20th century. This trend is consistent with the ways in which state-led propaganda sought to influence health-related public behavior in multiple state socialist or late-socialist contexts, including China (LYNTERIS 2013), Cuba (BROTHERTON 2012: 56–83), Vietnam (LE & BLOCK 2023) and Tanzania (LAL 2010: 7). While the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) was not formally part of the USSR, it was a satellite state; the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) of the early 1920s was Soviet-backed and followed policy disseminated from the Soviet Union. During the state socialist era, the dominant Soviet political culture gained particular value in public life. While elite Party members at times disagreed on the level of Soviet involvement in Mongolian affairs, especially economic, the local variant of Marxist-Leninism heavily promoted Mongolia as part of the same socialist ecumene.

One of the MPRP’s central goals after consolidating power in the 1920s was to create a “new culture” that would be “national in form, socialist in content, and international in characteristics.” While cultural transformations of the early MPR (1921–1940) focused on eliminating the dominance of religious ideology – primarily targeting the Tibetan Buddhist establishment, but also including shamans – by the late 1950s and early 60s more relaxed communist ideological pressures⁸ meant

that cultural aspects of prerevolutionary culture previously denigrated as “feudalist” only a few decades prior were reimaged and valorized as the “cultural heritage” of celebrated national intellectuals. Across the arts – music, literature, fine arts, and so on – primitive “bad” culture was parceled from “good” folk culture belonging to the proletariat – sometimes the subject of heated debates. “Good” folk culture that could be praised as an aspect of “socialist national identity” was elevated, re-imagined and re-made through nationalist and secular discursive lenses, sometimes including wider European lenses.

Given the early MPRP’s aim to annihilate religious ideology, teachings, and material culture,⁹ it is somewhat ironic that the Mongolian *soyol* was selected as translation of the Soviet *kul’tura* concept, for the proximity to religion the former entailed; in prerevolutionary society, *soyol* was associated with teaching, doctrine/religion, ethics and nurturing (TSETSENTSOLMON 2015: 427), and closely related to the Buddhist monastic establishment. This can be seen during the decade-long Bogd Khaanate divine monarchy (1911–1921), from which phrases like “to obey the culture of the Bogd” (*Bodgiin soyold dagah*) were used, retaining not only religious but also political and administrative connotations that trace from the Qing dynasty and usages of the Manchu word *wen* (culture) that meant decree or legislation (ALTANZAYA 2007).

Soyol was recruited into the revolutionary project to transform society, into one that was modern, educated, and urban. It was also mobilized to reflect the new secular educational values of the socialist state. To “have culture” or “be cultured” meant to be well-educated, and the terms “educated” (*bolovsroltoi*) and “cultured” (*soyotoi*) became nearly synonymous. Mass literacy campaigns linked education (*bolovsrol*) and enlightenment (*gegeerel*) to form terms such as *soyol bolovsrol* or *soyol gegereel* (see also SNEATH 2009: 76).

Alongside the introduction of Soviet medicine from the earliest days of the MPR, the state targeted hygiene, health, and cleanliness (*ariun tsever*) in an effort to transform daily routines, habits, and ways of thinking. Such messaging eventually coalesced into cultural campaigns (*soyoliin dovtolgoon*) by the 1950s directed at hygiene and elimination of general diseases, the improvement literacy

and education, protection of children, and maintenance of public order; cultural campaigns were expected to usher in “a cultured mode of living” (*ahuin soyol*) (see also SHAGDAR: forthcoming). The state introduced European habits of personal grooming, such as daily washing of hands and face, and brushing of teeth, and regular cleaning of one’s body, hair and clothing; and using regularly cleaned bed linens. An “hygiene corner” became a staple in every *ger* (yurt), located upon entering to the left and consisted of a washstand and bowl.

“These habits were compulsory at the schools that had been established around the country, and in rural districts people were instructed that they should have washbins, soap and clean bed linens available for inspection at all times. Local cadres would tour encampments checking that households complied with these standards, and failure was punished, in some cases by public humiliation – such as having to display a large board painted to look like a pig outside one’s home.” (TSETSENTSOLMON 2015: 427)

Soviet hygiene campaigns, largely speaking, were cast as educative, intended to uproot bad habits and immoral actions that lead to unproductivity and disease as “hygiene became part of an all-encompassing ideology of enlightened Soviet behaviour” (STARKS 2008: 7). This can be seen in the push to educate Mongolians in terms every person was thought to understand: widely-distributed posters with short descriptions accompanied by an easy-to-follow set of images. State socialist propaganda (*urialga*; also *ukhuulga*, *surtag*) linking “being cultured” to practices that promote hygiene, cleanliness and safety conferred a sense of personal responsibility for one’s own actions, which would not only keep oneself healthy, but those around them. This sense of responsibility scaled up to the nation-state; the title of the poster in Fig. 11 (likely from the 1950s or 60s) reads, “Destroy the lice that cause typhoid fever. This will benefit yourself and your country!” and depicts in the central large panel a smiling youth demonstrating the “joy and happiness” (*bayar*, *jargal*) of bathing.

One technique to deliver health and hygiene “promotional materials” as they were sometimes called was to focus messaging on cause and effect; often the result of what was written in text was il-

lustrated through image, showing either a bright scene with people smiling (as in the above poster encouraging lice destruction), or the opposite: a dark and bleak scenario one should avoid. A formula for such messaging could be read as: “if you do what x [text] instructs, your life will look like y [image].” An example of illustrating positive and negative scenarios can be found in a poster from 1945 (Fig. 12) in which the three images mirror scenarios, on the left coded as “bad” and on the right, “good.” Through juxtaposition of positive and negative examples, the poster instructs how to “disinfect the interior of the home,” the importance of food safety, and protecting the water one drinks from polluting elements that might be present in the topsoil, such as those deriving from livestock carcasses and feces, as well as human activity, such as washing clothing.



Fig. 11 Lice and Typhoid Fever poster. Artist and year unknown (ROSSABI 2017: 135). Image courtesy of YUKI KONAGAYA.

The introductory text at the top reads “People! Remember that you can create a clean, healthy, and comfortable environment by working hard and diligently. The more you work to purify your home, the more you can be clean and become a role model to others.” Showing, or setting, an example (*ülger duurai(al)/jishee üzüülekh, ülger tursh-laga bolokh*) for others – whether striving to set a good example, or avoiding setting a bad one – is a consistent trend for such public health messaging. Through sets of instructive text and image, the title of the poster featured in Fig. 13 reads, “Set an example for children of how to keep themselves clean.” The image depicts an adult man smiling, standing in a modern, Western-style bathroom demonstrating to a boy (presumably his son) how to keep clean. The caption below the image reads, “Teach children how to fulfill the requirements of practicing personal hygiene.” The four-part panel at the bottom depicts a woman wearing an apron showing by example a girl (presumably her daughter) how to brush her teeth. The text below the set of images reads, “Setting a good example



Fig. 13 Propaganda poster illustrating the importance of setting a good example for children. Artist and year unknown. (ROSSABI 2017: 134). Image courtesy of YUKI KONAGAYA.

and demonstration helps the child master the skill quickly.

In some cases, the educational messaging of such posters involves making the viewer aware of the agent causing the illness by making it visible. By enlarging the microscopically small virus, bacteria, parasite, and so forth, the artist can then portray how the bacteria or virus is transmitted. In the “good example and bad example” poster shown in Fig. 12, in the left column are three magnified images of the illness-causing culprit, reminiscent of the circular field as viewed through a microscope. The viewer sees a person bedridden from tuberculosis, intestinal tapeworms brought into the home by a dog, and intestinal typhoid and dysentery hidden in food and drinking water.

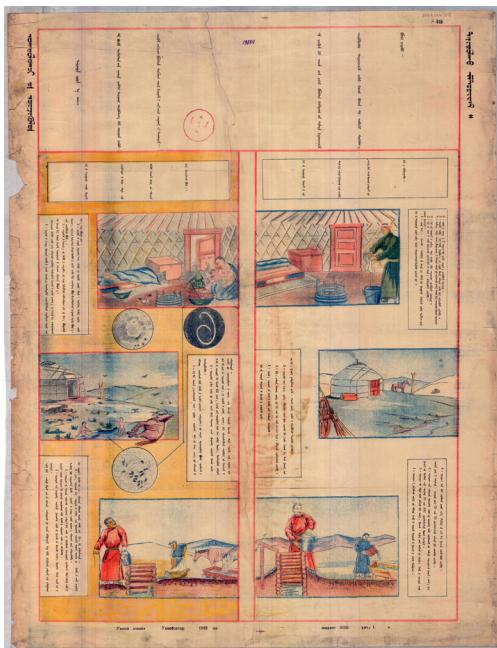


Fig. 12 Creating a clean, healthy, and comfortable environment, illustrated through positive and negative examples. Artist unknown. Image courtesy of YUKI KONAGAYA.

Interlinking values in public life across political regime changes

Upon closer inspection, many of the above-mentioned common themes of health and hygiene related state socialist-era posters – illustrating good and bad behaviors through cause and effect, keeping oneself healthy as one’s duty as citizen, setting a good example for others, and making the illness-causing agent visible as illustration to educate about transmission – appear in COVID-era public health messaging. The “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign’s Facebook page includes posts that take up the importance of parents not setting bad examples (*buruu ülger durailal üzүүлөkhгүй*) for their children. One post depicts a photograph (likely from CCTV footage) of a man stepping over a fence-like, waist-high road divider in central Ulaanbaatar with a young child in tow. The commentary states, “We believe that #Ulaanbaatar city parents are able to show their children a good example of how to cross at crosswalks. #It’sLovelytoBeCultured (#Soyoltoibolgoi).” A second post shows a photograph taken of two children with their heads and upper torsos out of the sunroof of an SUV cruising through central Ulaanbaatar. The caption states, “We want to keep #Ulaanbaatar city parental drivers from setting wrong examples for their children. #It’sLovelytoBeCultured.”

COVID-related health messaging also features a microscopically small virus made visible by the naked eye through illustration, similar to the “good example, bad example” poster depicted in Figure 11. In a one-minute animated educational video entitled “Let’s [All] be Cultured” (*Soyoltoi Baitsgaay*), sponsored by World Vision and circulated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a man at a bus stop spits on the ground near a child. The camera zooms in on the spit to show red, menacing-looking bubbles meant to represent infectious diseases like COVID-19 that hide inside saliva (Fig. 14). The bus arrives, and the following scene depicts the boy on the bus, already infected. The red virus bubbles linger around his face as he stands next a seated, elderly woman. He coughs, and the red virus blobs travel away from him in all directions, some of which towards the elderly woman. Here we also see illustration of wrong behavior through cause and effect.

Reading such similarities in health-related messaging from state socialist and pandemic era Mongolia alongside ALTHUSSER’s scholarship on ideological state apparatuses reveals a few things. Even as the disseminators of COVID-era public health messaging include the state but also extends to trans-national organizations like World Vision, the World Health Organization, and Asian Development Bank, as well as owners of private establishments such as shops and hotels, there is consistency in messaging from before and after

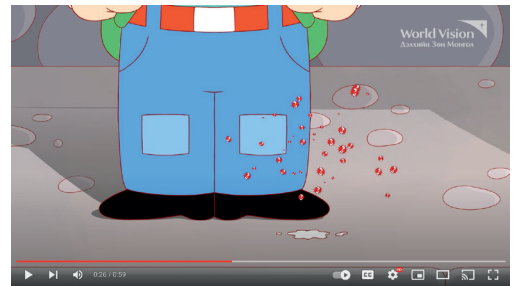


Fig. 14 A still shot from the “Let’s [All] be Cultured” video, sponsored by World Vision and publicized on Youtube (World Vision 2020).

the socio-economic and political rupture of the 1990s. This helps us say something about ideology with respect to ISAs. In the case of the examples offered here, institutional powers beyond the state circulate ideological messaging about “cultured” behavior that aligns with state interests in producing bourgeois subjects. That the majority of these trans-national health, financial and/or development organizations are based in the global north (and some of the signage in English language) holds particular weight, both in terms of messaging in public culture about the importance of Mongolia’s “Third Neighbors” (i.e. geopolitical powers beyond Russia and China) and mobility trends to Global North countries, especially for higher education (LOO 2017).

The naturalized social value of ‘being cultured’ – entailing associations of being educated, “self-actualized,” having “citizen’s consciousness,” upholding one’s civic duty, and engaging in safe and healthy daily habits – is not the only idea to have endured across the socio-economic and political changes of the 1990s. There are res-

onances between the two periods with respect to how social change is imagined to take place, by institutions with the means, power and authority to circulate such messages: first, in the assumption that people follow “cause and effect” public health messages about how their behavior will affect their own health and that of others in a straight-forward and predictable way. This supposition hinges on the idea that humans are fundamentally rational, consistent, and autonomous choice-makers who, once properly educated, will continue to make the “right” decision. We know social behavior to be much more complex, and mediated by entanglements of social relation, such that a parceling out of social rules or “norms” from individual choices made by an atomized subject is overly reductive and prescriptive in most cases (ENGLUND 2012).

Second, considering health-related propaganda from the mid-20th century and COVID-era with respect to ideological state apparatuses, reveals how, in both instances, messaging entails the assumption that social change takes place by exemplars adopting the “correct” behavior that others will want to emulate.¹⁰ “Setting a good example” or avoiding setting a negative one, with regards to health and safety measures carries powerful weight today, not only as it is mobilized as a strategy by the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign. Commenters, presumably unaffiliated with the Governor of Ulaanbaatar’s office (yet also a self-selected group, interested enough to “follow” the campaign on Facebook), urge parents to set good examples for their children. Here ordinary citizens are involved in the process of interpellation, fruitfully complicating ALTHUSSER’s top-down model.¹¹

Given the moral importance of exemplars during the state socialist period, as illustrated in the posters above, one might be invited to read HUMPHREY’s (1997) seminal work on the topic with a different inflection. In “Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse of Moralities in Mongolia,” HUMPHREY (1997: 25) argues that ethics and morality for Mongols coalesce more around the relationship between individuals and exemplars than around rules or customs. Perhaps it is less about the Communist government “hijacking” pre-existing Indigenous discourses

(*ibid.*), which has been interpreted by some scholars using a culturalist lens, and more about values circulating in wider Soviet political economy, and the powerful ability and long lasting effects of the authors of such messaging to link ideas about citizenship, health, and education together with a normative sense of social progress, in ways that ultimately promote state interests.

Concluding thoughts and the enduring relevance of a postsocialist analytic

In this article, I have suggested that BOURDIEU’s notion of fields is helpful in understanding COVID-era public health messaging from the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” and allied campaigns, for the tacit rules or social norms the analytic brings with it. Social media platforms amplify the reach of the Governor of Ulaanbaatar’s office and other institutions like World Vision to change those tacit rules, by normalizing them as features of a national “culture” that everyone should want to be a part of.

I have also suggested that reading such campaigns alongside ALTHUSSER’s work on ideological state apparatuses reveals a few things. First, it helps to focus on class as an aspect of social relations that is co-constitutive with socio-historical processes and shaped by power relations. Even as countryside and urban dwellers resist class-based demographic or sociological distinctions, by delineating the “city’s culture” and associating it with bourgeois values, the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign participates in discursive class-making, however partial and incomplete, and however variously received by different publics. The campaign subtly and by implication makes claims about something that could be called “countryside culture” without explicitly having to do so, as the countryside (*khödöö*) already holds the position of the city’s antipode in public thought.

Second, reading COVID-era public health messaging alongside ALTHUSSER’s work on ideological state apparatuses highlights instances in which social values, their “packaging” and modes of dissemination endure across political regime changes. Much scholarship in ex- or post-socialist scholarship tends to privilege a central rupture (MÜLLER 2019) – the collapse of state social-

ism – but there is, of course, the other side of the “rupture” coin to consider. While sometimes described as continuities, considering the duress of historical endurances better captures the ways in which, as opposed to inert relics of the past, histories are uneven and contingent, folding back on themselves “and in that refolding, reveal new surfaces and planes” (STOLER 2016: 26).

Alongside enduring social values of “being cultured,” well-educated, fulfilling duties as citizen, presenting oneself as clean, and so on, in the “Let’s Make the City Cultured” campaign we can see the enduring effects of socialist ideas about the role of the state (DUNN & VERDERY 2015) by those in charge of making, promoting, and disseminating public health and safety messages. We also see endurance in assumptions about how social change is imagined to take place: that human beings, as rational, consistent, and autonomous, once taught about how behavior influences one’s own health and that of others, will predictably make the “right” choices. Oversimplification of human behavior can be claimed too for ALTHUSSER’s model of interpellation, in its dogmatic assumption about the all-encompassing power of ideologies, and the lack of accounting for individual human agency.

In this case study, postsocialism can be helpfully utilized not as universalizing descriptor of societies, nor as a singular discursive lens that can be evenly applied across the former state-socialist world (PLATT 2009: 9–10). Instead, I think that postsocialism as analytic can be harnessed to do specified work, used in certain contextualized instances. With respect to interlinking values in public life associated with health, exemplarship and citizenship as explored here, a postsocialist analytic brings to light similarities across disparate political regimes, particularly the salience of social progressivism, naturalized value in being a subject of the state, and importance placed on modern science. Perhaps postsocialism’s days are over as an “-ism,” and instead more helpfully mobilized to qualify particular social forms.

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Notes

- 1 Also translated into English as ‘Mayor’.
- 2 BRANDEL & MOTTA (2021) tell us that is a feature of concepts more generally, as lived-in and experiential aspects of our lives.
- 3 An important break from Gramscian theory is found in how social transformation would take place; whilst GRAMSCI (1971) promoted the idea that intellectuals would organically arise to creatively devise ways to actualise communism, ideology for ALTHUSSER is considerably more structural and deeply embedded in capitalist social relations. Entire systemic collapse is needed for individuals to be able to think outside of ideological forces.
- 4 Such critiques also suggest that ALTHUSSER’s rendering of ideology ignores successful instances of political or work-based collective activism, even during a time marked by increased precarious labour conditions worldwide (see LAZAR & SANCHEZ 2019).
- 5 Approximately 15 USD and 3 USD, respectively, during the time of fieldwork.
- 6 A literal translation of *gegeerüülekh* would be ‘to make enlightened’, but in this context I’ve chosen to translate it as ‘to educate’, other translations of which found in *bolovsrol olgokh* and also *surgakh*.
- 7 Interestingly, according to the campaign, ‘being cultured’ doesn’t always map onto practices considered cultural in the sense of being ‘traditional’, such as offering the top of tea or milk, typically in the early morning (*deej örgök*), as criticized on their Facebook account.
- 8 These were felt both within Mongolia’s borders and were part of a larger trend across the sphere of Soviet political influence. This ‘Post-Stalin Thaw’ period saw increased freedom of information in the arts, media and culture and witnessed a more relaxed approach to forms of entertainment existent in public culture. TSETSEN-SOLMON (2015: 428-9) notes that Mongolian intellectuals such as BYAMBYN RINCHEN (1905-1977) and TSEDIIN DAMDINSÜREN (1908-1986) (although they disagreed on a number of issues) promoted the importance, variety, and unique characteristics of Mongolian forms of art and literature, arguing that they be reclaimed as valuable aspects of pre-Revolutionary heritage. This formed part of a movement of ‘a more self-confident and cosmopolitan national elite who were aware of the national culture of other socialist elites, particularly Russia’.
- 9 This aim, both in theory and practice, was neither inevitable nor a singular event, but rather a complex process of dealing with the ‘lama question’ in an effort for the socialist government to be seen as legitimate by the population (KAPLONSKI 2014), which had been ruled by Buddhist feudal theocracy in the decade leading up to

the Revolution. It took nearly a decade and a half for the decision to be made; beginning in 1937 and for a period of eighteen months, at least 22,000 people of a population of 750,000 were killed, half of them Buddhist lamas (KAPLONSKI 1999: 97) and many of them educated and political elites deemed enemies of the state. The Soviet-Mongolian government ordered the destruction of 700 Buddhist monasteries, their printed materials and iconography. While some Buddhist lamas continued practicing 'in secret', the extent of lost religious knowledge was severe, as these purges 'annihilate[ed] all that was best and most sophisticated about native Mongolian culture, philosophy and art' (HUMPHREY 1992: 375).

10 This is distinct from, but certainly compatible in many ways with, the moral authority of the past in Mongolia, as HUMPHREY (1992) details.

11 I am thankful to my reviewer for mention that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, ordinary citizens were discussing the need to revive the state-socialist era 'cultural campaigns'.

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