

## Mongolia's Golden Ages: A Brisk Gallop through Changing Representations

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### Summary

“Golden Age” is a trope commonly applied to periods of outstanding prosperity. Concerning Mongolia, it is likely to conjure up images of Genghis Khan<sup>1</sup>, the Mongol Empire, and the Pax Mongolica. Surprisingly, though, there exists (at least so far) no globally recognized Mongolian equivalent to such widely established concepts as the Danish, the Polish, the British, or the Dutch Golden Age. At the same time, however, it has recently become popular for political observers and journalists alike to predict the coming of a Golden Age, since Mongolia's economy, due to its abundance of natural resources, currently features one of the highest growth rates in the world. The motif “Golden Age” had found its way into Mongolia as early as in the 15th–16th century through eschatological literary texts of Chinese and Indo-Tibetan origin. Their partly apocalyptic images, and the inherent ideas of unceasing decline that accompany them, would in the 20th century largely vanish under socialist rule. Yet, even then evoking a Golden Age proved to be convenient for legitimizing political authority. In postsocialist Mongolia today, the designation “Golden Age” (*altan üye*) is explicitly applied to an epoch that from a typical “Westerner's” perspective would hardly qualify for the awarding of such a grandiose label. This essay offers a brisk gallop through changing representations of the trope “Golden Age” in different Mongolia-related contexts. By experimentally identifying narratives and language-games against the backdrop of shifting perspectives in historical and prophetic thinking, I intend to explore what possible kinds of motivation keep inspiring its use.

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### Grand narratives and language-games

The trope “Golden Age” has had a colorful history of usage in different parts of the world, and its meaning is just as pluricentric. Irrespective of the cyclical or linear nature of underlying time concepts, Golden Ages typically bear mythical dimensions. Four brief examples might serve as illustrations: In ancient Hindu philosophy, the historical process is imagined as a cycle of reoccurring ages (Sanskrit: *yuga*) commonly depicted as the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages, which oscillate

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1 The spelling of Mongolian words follows the established convention widely accepted in the English-language literature; names and terms in quotations and references remain in their original form. Classical Mongolian is represented according to the internationally used Petersburg transliteration; for reasons of simplification, this is done without diacritics.