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# LOCAL VARIETIES OF OLYMPIC WRESTLING - MONGOLIA

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## ABSTRACT

As a category, wrestling refers an eclectic mix of physical activities featuring a wide range of rules, aims, and histories. This broad, sprawling category is generally accepted and supported; Olympic wrestling's international governing body (UWW) states its first goal as: "to encourage the development of all Wrestling styles and to promote the Sport in all countries of the world" (UWW website). Approaching wrestling in this way makes it highly inclusive by extending its base to regions where the Olympic styles are far less common. Furthermore, this outreach supports the narrative that 'wrestling is everywhere,' which is powerful, because it not only spans across geography and culture, but also history. However, despite the relevance and weight of this narrative, not enough attention has been given to examining points of interaction and overlap between the Olympic styles and the so-called traditional styles. Based on qualitative data collected in Mongolia, the present article argues that significant, tangible linkages exist between *bukh* (Mongolia's national wrestling) and the Olympic styles, which contribute to shaping how these distinct styles are experienced by athletes and coaches. Specifically, it investigates how concepts rooted in *bukh* are hailed in the Olympic styles and in this process these concepts are subsequently extended to accommodate new spheres of wrestling experience.

Key Words: traditional sport, Mongolian wrestling, Olympic wrestling

## DISCLAIMER

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In a recent special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Bromber et al. (2014) put together a number of excellent case studies that reframe how so-called 'traditional' wrestling styles are set in relation to the sportification process, but also processes of modernity. They argue (Krist, 2014 in particular and in relation to *bukh*) that the contemporary version of these traditional or modified sports are often the product of sometimes careful and sometimes overt (re)traditionalization. Furthermore, they feature many of the same characteristics attributed to 'modern' sports, like marketization and branding, and performances are often closely tied to political ideational agendas. With these contributions in mind, an important avenue that has not yet been investigated is how the Olympic styles are themselves often woven into local contexts and straddle the tensions and linkages between 'modern' and 'traditional' sports. This is not to suggest a (re)traditionalization of Olympic wrestling, but rather to recognize that it too is experienced and engaged at both local and transnational levels, each with its own set of norms and practices.

This approach runs against the grain of what one observes at Olympic wrestling competitions, which, like other Olympic sports, are highly standardized and regulated. From the competition format, to the uniforms (at most international competitions athletes' names and countries are written using the Latin alphabet as opposed to Chinese or Arabic script, for example), to the pre- and post-match practices (referee-inspection and hand-shaking) this field of play is relatively closed off from external, and especially local references. However, competitions only comprise a portion of athletes' experience with the sport. A much larger portion is spent off the mat, where wrestling's social, cultural, and economic significance is handled. It is these 'off-mat' variables that can, upon examination, elucidate examples of local embeddedness in what is otherwise treated as an international sport.

Research for this project was conducted over three weeks in Mongolia in 2019. The majority of interviews were held in the capital, Ulaanbaatar (UB), but also in Erdenet and Zuunmod. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six individuals, including athletes, coaches, scholars, ministry officials, and school directors. Save for a handful who spoke sufficient English, the majority of interviews were conducted through a translator. Participants were contacted through two different avenues. The first, which accounts for the majority

of interviewees, is the Mongolian Wrestling Federation. The federation facilitated direct contact with national team coaches, national team athletes, retired coaches and athletes, and sports schools in Erdenet and Zuunmod. Another, smaller group of contacts were accessed through an informal international wrestling network, which in this case mostly involved Mongolian athletes who have gone through the US collegiate wrestling system.

One obvious shortcoming with regard to the data sample is an emphasis on urban sites. The division between urban and rural is particularly stark in Mongolia and this distinction likely influences how wrestling is experienced and organized in the hinterland as compared to the capital. Approximately half of Mongolia's population is concentrated in Ulaanbaatar, which is the political, commercial, and industrial center. On the other hand, to some degree the study's urban focus is justified given that the national wrestling federation is based in Ulaanbaatar and practically all elite athletes relocate to the capital at one point or another. Migration to the capital is common across society, and has increased over the last several decades due to a number of factors including climate change, limited social services in the country, unsustainable pastoral practices, and land reforms (Mayer, 2016; Barcus, 2018). For athletes, relocating to the capital is relevant for training purposes, as well as for education and pursuing a career.

### **Freestyle wrestling in Mongolia**

Since its introduction in Mongolia in the 1950s, Freestyle wrestling has been closely connected to Mongolia's national wrestling (referred to hereafter as *bukh*), which was and continues to be Mongolia's most popular sport. *Bukh* competitions have an open weight-class, are held either outdoors on grass or in a carpeted arena, and Bouts are decided when one wrestler is thrown to the ground or touches it with one of his knees or elbows, or his torso. Athletes wear boots, briefs, and jackets tied at the front with a string that can be gripped by the opposing wrestler. In general, only males compete in *bukh*. Zeveg Duvchin, a now retired national team coach who wrestled in the 1970s and whose brother won an Olympic silver medal, suggests that Olympic sports like wrestling and judo were promoted by the then socialist government as modern extensions of *bukh* and in the context of the Cold War, athletic success on the international stage symbolized national strength (*interview, UB, 16.10.2019*). However, these 'modern' sports never replaced *bukh* and even lightweights who are highly disadvantaged by the open-weight class continued to compete in both styles.

Mongolia's 'golden era' of Olympic wrestling began with Jigjidiin Mönkhbat's silver medal in Mexico City in 1968 and closed with Davaajav and Uyuunbold's silver and bronze, respectively, in Moscow in 1980. Among the eight medalists in this period, Jigjidiin Mönkhbat and Khorloogiin Bayanmönkh both went on to win the *Naadam* festival (the largest *bukh* competition) several times, each. The *Naadam* is a massive annual event, which features Mongolia's three 'manly games'. The *bukh* portion of the competition can have 512 to 1024 athletes, depending on the year. Since each match is decided by a single take-down, champions must give a near perfect performance through eight or nine rounds of competition. Mongolia's early success at the Olympics was no doubt driven by an existing pool of experienced *bukh* wrestlers, but in turn, the success that Olympic wrestlers and judo athletes had at *Naadam* also encouraged a multidisciplinary approach to *bukh*.

Although *bukh* is a strictly male event at *Naadam*, children often grow up wrestling one another, regardless of gender, especially in the countryside. The introduction of Olympic wrestling and judo therefore presented an opportunity for women to continue to wrestle in a formal and competitive environment. It should also be noted that in general, Mongolian society is highly supportive of its female wrestlers and their success is perceived as rooted in Mongolia's wrestling tradition. An example of this, though correlational, is that the most popular boys name is Bat-Erdene, after Badmaanyambuugiin Bat-Erdene, the eleven-time *Naadam* champion, the most popular girls name, especially in the countryside is Battsetseg, after Battsetseg Soronzobold who won a bronze medal in wrestling at the London Olympics.

At present, *bukh* has significantly more public interest, resources, and offers greater financial incentives for athletes than Olympic wrestling. In addition to prize money and club salaries, *bukh* sponsorships can be lucrative for the top athletes. Other 'under-the-table' opportunities also play a role, like accepting bribes to throw a match deep in the *Naadam* tournament which can earn one a new car or a cash equivalent. Among Olympic wrestling athletes, the top competitors benefit from several funding schemes, such as national team salaries, club salaries, as well as generous state bursaries and salaries for Olympic and world medals. Additionally, they may also receive gifts and sponsorships from companies, yet these often depend, at least in part, on personal connections. However, some athletes feel funding for their sport is lacking, especially in comparison to *bukh*. Even world medalists personally expressed frustration that Olympic wrestling, especially women's wrestling, is overlooked by private sponsors in favor of *bukh*. A recent government program offers a lifetime salary for world and Olympic medalists, plus one-off bursaries that are shared between the athlete and the coach. These certainly provide a greater degree of financial security for Mongolia's top athletes, however only a few receive them.

One athlete who competed at the world championships a few years ago and at the time of the interview was training both freestyle and *bukh* put it simply, “*bukh* is where the money is... It is professionalized and politicized” (*Interview*, UB, 04.10.2019). In a later conversation he also elaborated on how *bukh*’s politicization plays out in practice:

Coaches, who are normally the owners of clubs, go to politicians and companies, or they come to the coaches, and get or give money for the athletes. Athletes might also get individual sponsorships...they are also expected in some cases to go to rural areas and promote certain politicians [...] People who live in the countryside might not know anyone who is a world champion freestyle wrestler, but they will know mid-level national wrestlers [...] Every time a wrestler goes to compete the announcer calls his name, his region, his club, and his sponsors. So, there is a lot of name recognition. There are also four tournaments a month, and lots all over Mongolia (*interview*, UB, 10.10.2019).

Regarding the role of politics in sport, the connection between sport and the concept of the nation-state has been well borne out in the literature (Houlinhan, 1997; Bairner, 2015; Lu & Hong, 2013). In the case of national wrestling styles around the world, the symbolism is perhaps even more compelling than in other events, as wrestlers both figuratively and literally embody strength and tradition (Alter, 1993; Krist, 2014). This image of ‘wrestler as the nation’ is especially relevant in Mongolia, where many wrestlers move into politics following their athletic career. On this topic, a *bukh* scholar at the Avarga University in Ulaanbaatar suggested that the connection between politics and wrestling in Mongolia is historical and cultural. This link traces back to Chinggis Khan and the khans that followed, who would appoint wrestlers to high political and military positions (*Interview*, UB, 16.10.2019). He clarified that (*bukh*) wrestlers are, and have always been highly respected by Mongolians and believed to have strong character in addition to strong bodies. He also mentioned a custom that when a boy is born, people will always wish that it becomes a wrestler. This moral ascription echoes findings by Krist (2014) and Mikkola (2019) that wrestlers, or more specifically, wrestling success, has spiritual and ethical dimensions.

The Olympic styles benefit from their connection to *bukh* and are certainly included in a broader notion of Mongolia’s wrestling culture. Focusing on a few of the practical boundaries and exchanges between the two styles is important, but it fails to capture the nuances and tensions relating to how the Olympic styles relate to *bukh* from a cultural perspective. In order to begin to approach this issue, the ways in which individuals frame their experiences must also be taken into account.

### **Recognizing local linkages**

That Olympic wrestling and *bukh* training often takes place under the same roof and among the same people is significant in itself. Influences from one style to the other are inevitable in this situation and athletes, both male and female, attest to the existence of a ‘Mongolian style’ of Olympic style wrestling that has its roots in *bukh*. A female national team athlete described her own wrestling as characteristic of Mongolian style, which is “the art of upper body wrestling” as it emphasizes upper body throws and attacks (*interview*, UB, 11.10.2019). Conversely, a heavyweight U23 World bronze medalist, noted how Olympic wrestling has improved his *bukh* by developing his speed and positional awareness and that participating in international competitions provides an important mental edge and ‘feel’ that he can bring to *bukh* tournaments (*interview*, UB, 14.10.2019). Occasionally coaches will combine the two styles in training by mixing the uniforms and rules. In this case, this mixed training is truly an example of hybrid wrestling, as athletes are likely experienced in both styles.

While these trans-discipline dynamics are interesting, what is more relevant to the notion of localized variations of wrestling, is the way in which concepts which are deeply rooted in the *bukh* tradition are also applied to frame how male and female athletes perceive their own involvement in Olympic wrestling. Though a number of concepts and motifs are worthy of further investigation, this study will focus mainly on the notion of bloodlines or hereditary success (*bökhiin udam*). In addition to widespread use and recognition among both *bukh* and Olympic style athletes, Adiyahuu, the afore-mentioned scholar from Avarga, stated that it was one of the principle variables he looks for when selecting athletes. Therefore, not only is this concept used by athletes to frame their participation in the sport, but it is also a variable that can influence an athlete’s career trajectory. Of course, usage and application vary among individuals, yet, it is significant that it is nonetheless mutually recognized and understood by members of the wrestling community in Mongolia. Moreover, by referencing locally embedded concepts, as well as applying them in practice, Olympic wrestling athletes and coaches hail a cultural legacy that is firmly set in the Mongolian context, and to some degree integrate Olympic wrestling, namely their involvement in it, into this local context. Certainly, this notion of bloodlines is not unique to Mongolia; it also resonates with other groups and in different activities across the world, such as sumo in Japan and horse racing globally. Therefore, before addressing these concepts in relation to Olympic wrestling in Mongolia, they need to first be unpacked in their own social and historical setting.

The idea of bloodlines in relation to sport has to do with physical characteristics, and perhaps cognitive characteristics too, being passed down from generation to generation (Mikkola, 2019). However, to understand this in the Mongolian context, we should look to the broader frame of kinship and its role in Mongolian society. Jagchid (2019) suggests that as far back as the 12th century, the kinship unit, *obogh*, was the basic social unit in society. The significance of kinship groups is highlighted in *The Secret History of the Mongols* (the earliest piece of Mongolian literature written approximately twenty-five years after Chinggis Khan's death in 1227; see de Rachewiltz, 2004 for the translation), which records various kin-group alliances and struggles for power. Scholars generally agree that before Mongolia was united by anything resembling the concept of a nation, it was characterized by tribal groups which were largely based on clan lineages who did not necessarily see themselves as comprising a cohesive Mongolian group (Kaplonski, 1998; Jagchid, 2019).

Following the formation of the Mongol Empire by Chinggis Khan, the concept of lineage was reframed according to the new political situation. In both a literal and symbolic sense, lineage was highly relevant for the ruling group, the *taiji*, who were Chinggis' relatives and descendants. This group owed its position and the legitimacy that underpinned this position to blood ties with the Khan of Khans. However, according to Atwood (2012), for commoners who were subject to the *taiji*, the principle variable organizing this level of society and defining identity was access to shared resources rather than hereditary ties. This distinction is blurred largely due to the extent to which territorial and social administrative units were modelled as kinship units, of sorts, in which the relationship between *taiji* and commoners was framed as a patrimonial hierarchy, "partly as a parent to children and partly as a master to slaves" (Atwood, 2012, p.3). Jagchid (2019), too, notes that 'pre-nation' Mongolia also featured larger groups that included several kinship groups and were based around shared lifestyles and livelihoods, and one must therefore also include shared resources.

Much more recently, lineage has also been used to foster group membership at the national level. Throughout the 20th century, the notion of Pan-mongolism, which expressed ideas like Mongolian purity and Mongolian blood, found some traction in response to surging nationalism around the globe (Bulag, 1998). This idea was, like the earlier system Atwood describes, based on the symbolic status of a "paramount leader who established the largest land empire the world had ever seen" (Bulag, 1998, p.136). Although pan-Mongolian sentiments or aspirations were, and continue to be checked by its neighbours (China and Russia), Chinggis Khan and the notion of a Mongolian lineage continues to be a powerful political motif.

Admittedly, the formulation, application, and significance of hereditary success in Mongolia's history and political culture can only be addressed superficially here. Yet what these very brief examples show is that it is indeed firmly set in an ideational framework which is rooted in Mongolia's history and society. Moreover, regardless of whether hereditary success or lineage is used by individuals in an overtly genetic sense or leans towards more of a social, cultural, or political reading, it is nonetheless a potent and broad concept that straddles each of these categories. In this way, it evokes a meaning that is specifically tied to the Mongolian's sense of themselves and their history. Of course, at the individual level and in the context of wrestling it is not necessarily the case that people are intentionally referencing these historical events and structures. However, this history certainly underpins this concept's contemporary relevance and impact, whether in wrestling or in politics.

### **Engaging locality in Olympic wrestling**

Given *bukh*'s close connection to Mongolian history and culture, as well as its status as one of the country's three national sports (in addition to horse racing and archery) it is understandable that concepts like bloodlines play a role in influencing how wrestlers frame their involvement in the sport. Though perhaps not surprising considering Olympic wrestling's intimate relationship with *bukh*, it is still significant that these specific concepts and terms are also highly relevant to how Olympic style athletes and coaches frame their perception of the sport and their experiences. Moreover, it is not only that these concepts familiar in the Olympic context, they are advocated, legitimized, and woven into personal biographies in relation to Olympic wrestling styles. This process is similar to what Appadurai (1996) describes in his work on *locality* reproduction, in which intercontextual interactions produce new contexts which carry forward concepts and structures relevant to the social unit in question, but in a way that bears the influence of external processes and forces. It should be mentioned that this process of reproduction and transformation need not entail conflict or contradiction.

When asked how wrestlers and athletes understood bloodlines, athletes at every age group immediately referenced a family member that had earned a title at a district, regional, or national *bukh* tournament. Those without a *bukh* bloodline also admitted that they were the first of their family to participate and they did so boldly, as if charting new territory. In the case of the former, bloodlines were often presented as grounds for their involvement in wrestling (regardless of whether it was *bukh* or Olympic style, or male or female). For the latter, the lack of a bloodline lent weight to their agency; to *their* decision to take-up this sport. Most also explained that rather than being imbued with their ancestors' strength, bloodlines meant having a family member who wrestled, yet also that social dynamics must play a role. In fact, this concept was almost exclusively explained

in terms of the influence and support from family members who generate shared interest and ingrain cultural norms.

What was also evident is that among Olympic wrestling athletes, the concept of bloodlines was translated or applied unproblematically to Olympic wrestling. For example, although women do not compete in *bukh*, female athletes claimed these concepts in their biography. In this sense, not only do Olympic wrestling athletes use *bukh* concepts to frame their engagement with the sport, which also references their own cultural system, in doing so they are carrying these concepts into new spheres of activity and therefore extend in real experiences the concepts usage and meaning. Olympic wrestling is indeed an international sport, however, we would do well to further examine its local expressions which tie it to wrestling's global relevance and diversity.

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