

# Mongolian Circus Industry in the Post-transitional Economy

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## ABSTRACT

Circus has its long-standing history in Mongolian entertainment industry. It had a rapid growth and became a prominent cultural identity during the socialist period. However, the social and economy transition in the 1990s has put a halt on all industry sectors, including the circus. The challenge of market economy and privatization has left most of the circus talents perplexed. They lost their stable income and amenities which were the granted luxuries during the socialist regimes. This article illustrates the historical development of Mongolian circus, identifies its challenges and opportunities in a post-transitional economy, and proposes consolidation of strategies as a way to push the Mongolian circus industry to the next level.

**Keywords:** Circus industry, Cultural and creative industries development, Developmental strategies, Mongolia, Post-transitional economy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Circus holds a special place in Mongolian entertainment industry. It was once the main form of mass entertainment in the socialist era. Its legacy continues despite the difficulties during the transitional period in the 1990s and circus retains its position as the nation's cultural pride. Mongolian circus is famous for its arts of contortion—the arts of physical display that involves dramatic bending and flexing of the body (Figure 1). Contortion is a nationally respected art form which bears the cultural importance of Mongolia. This artistic form holds the cultural identity of the nation and is considered as a form of intangible cultural heritage of Mongolia, passed from generations to generations. Circus industry has the prospect to emerge as a potential sector of cultural and creative industries (CCI) in Mongolia. Mongolia is the source of unique culture and good-quality circus talents. Mongolian circus performers' skills are acknowledged internationally and they are contracted to perform in prominent shows such as Broadway, Las Vegas, and Cirque du Soleil. Moreover, the supporting resources to develop circus industry in Mongolia are present. There is abundant pool of skillful talents and a strong cultural identity as valuable inputs to support the

industry, not to mention the existing circus cluster and training schools, leaving a big question mark on the stagnation of the circus industry.

This article presents the historical development of Mongolian circus, its hurdle through the transitional economy, and its current conditions in the post-transition period. This study identified the opportunities and challenges in Mongolian circus industry and proposed strategies to further develop the circus industry as a potential CCI sector in Mongolia.

## 2. THE SOCIALIST ERA: THE GOLDEN AGE OF MONGOLIAN CIRCUS

Circus as a form of performing arts has a long history of entertaining the mass since the days of the ancient Rome. The arts of circus have been continuously developing from the entertainment of the privileged to the acts that can be enjoyed by popular mass nowadays. The former Soviet Union set a turning-point in circus development with the renaissance movement in 1919, setting a standard of circus acts based on the techniques of ballet and gymnastics.

Soon after the Soviet government established the world's first State College of Circus and Variety

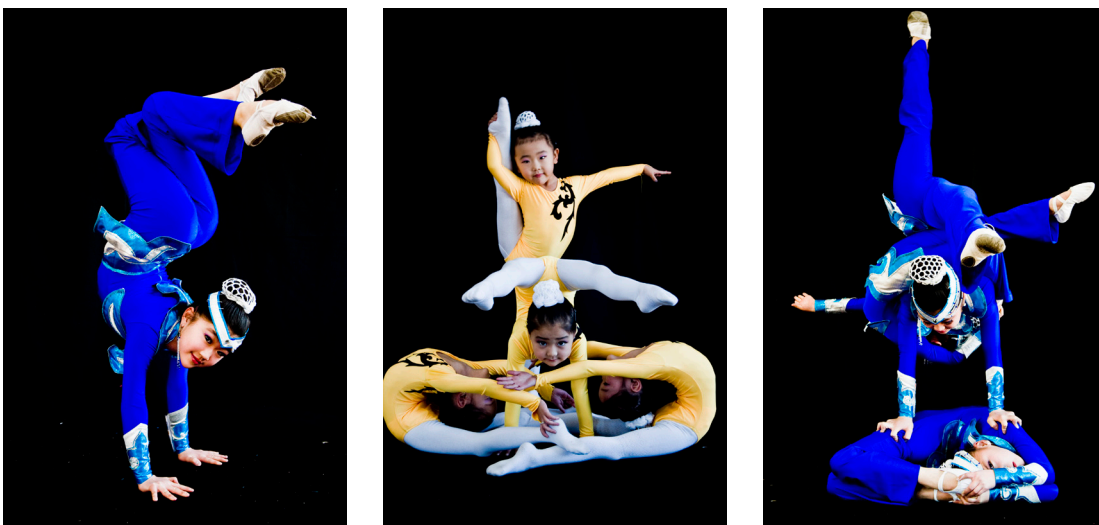


Figure 1. Contortion, a unique art that defines the identity of Mongolian circus

Arts in 1927 (the school was also known as the Moscow Circus School), the Russian circus emerged as the benchmark of circuses worldwide (“Chronology of Circus,” 2008), resulting in the supremacy of Russian circus in the world’s stage. Circus became an even more prominent piece of culture and a point of pride; it played an important role in the development of cultural policy in the Soviet Union.

Not long after Russian circus rose to the world’s acclaim, the spillover effect was strongly felt by Mongolia—the neighboring socialist country—leading to the birth of Mongolian circus. Mongolia was a satellite state that was closely aligned with the Soviet Union since 1921 (Rossabi, 2005). Mongolia was soon introduced to circus in the 1930s. The principal of the Moscow Circus School, Aleksander Voloshin, made multiple visits from 1931 to 1939 to scout Mongolian young talents to be trained in Moscow. In the first batch, 50 talents were selected to receive one-year circus training in 1940. These pioneers returned to Mongolia and established a circus group under the name of Mongolian Circus, with its opening performance in July 9, 1941. Following the inaugural show, a circus training center was founded the next year. Using the apprenticeship system, the senior performers scouted and trained young talents to provide the human resource for the Mongolian circus industry.

The entertainment acts was formally institutionalized in early 1970s, with the opening of the Mongolian New Circus (MNC), a state-owned circus company in 1971. Mongolia started to train circus performers domestically with the establishment of Mongolian Circus School in 1972, and at the same time the government sent a few top-notch talents to train in Russia. The country constantly produced circus talents to supply its industry. There were in total 44 graduates of Moscow Circus School (1936-1987) and more than 200 graduates from Mongolian Circus

School (1940-2008). Apart from those officially trained in circus schools, there were hundreds of talents being trained through apprenticeship with experienced circus performers outside the schools. All circus performers worked for and listed under the flag of MNC. During the socialist period, circus held an important position as a form of entertainment for the public and large portion of budget from the Ministry of Culture was devoted to support circus arts and entertainment. Similar to the Soviet Union, circus was utilized as a powerful propaganda tool to promote Mongolian cultural and creative endeavors and was projected as the icon of the nation’s pride. MNC was the center of circus activities and emerged as a small scale geographically concentrated area for circus performing arts. Retrospectively, the socialist period was the golden years of Mongolian circus development in which Mongolia produced many world-class circus artists who performed in the Soviet Union bloc and other socialist counterparts. All circus performers, supporting and related personnel were employees of the state-owned MNC and they received financial support and amenities from the state. The development of circus in Mongolia is presented in Figure 2.

### **3. ECONOMIC TRANSITION: THE CRITICAL TURNING POINT OF MONGOLIAN CIRCUS**

The fall of socialist regime in 1990 was a critical turning point in Mongolian circus development. The transition from planned economy to market economy required structural reforms that eliminated the state subsidies and minimized the government involvement in the economy. These changes led to market liberalization and mass privatization of all state-owned assets. New foreign policies were made to open the market to the capitalist world under the assumption that market economy will bring wider opportunities and promising economic growth, while the planned economy was perceived as inefficient,

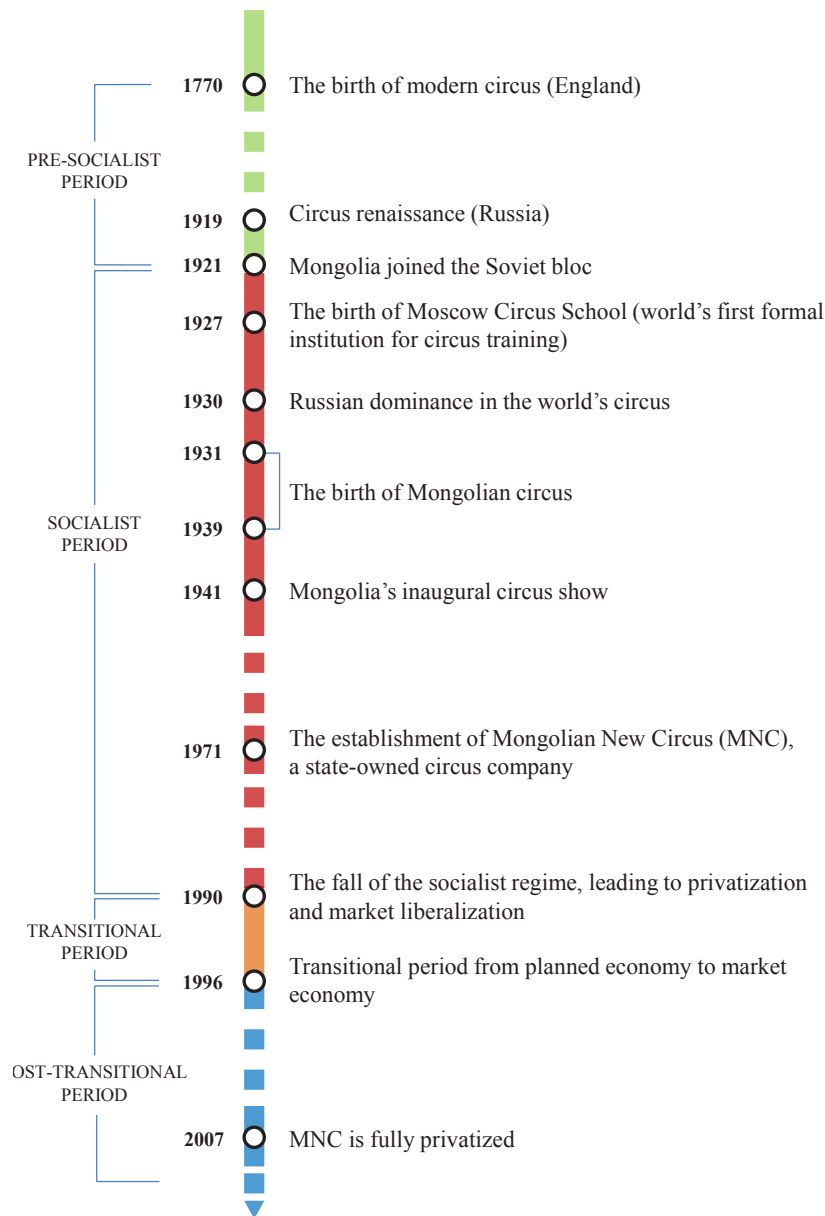


Figure 2. The development of Mongolian circus industry

unproductive, and authoritarian (Anderson, Korsun, & Murrell, 1999). After the Privatization Law was enacted in May 1991, state-owned public assets were gradually privatized, from large enterprises, small enterprises, to collective and state farms (Korsun & Murrell, 1995). However, the transition came with its price. Breaking free from the Soviet influence equaled to a loss of patronage as the Soviet Union had been the

constant supplier of financial aid to Mongolia since 1921. Moreover, Mongolia lost 90% of its trade and investment from the Soviet Bloc nations (Ginsburg, 1995). The picture of the transitional time was not pretty where economic policy took precedence over social concern, relying purely on market forces to lead to a strong economy that will solve the social welfare problem (Anderson et al., 1999). The political and economic

reform was soon followed by the deprivation of people's welfare caused by high rate of inflation, unemployment, and poverty. It was a major setback compared to the communist-era advances in health, education, and social welfare. Although the standard of living was low during the socialist regime, only few Mongolians abject poverty as rent, utilities, food, and other consumer needs were provided by the state and subsidized by the Soviet Union trading bloc (Rossabi, 2005).

As for the role of circus in the new regime, the new government no longer needed circus as a propaganda tool as much as in the olden days, causing the local demand for circus to plummet. In addition to that, the transition to the market economy has opened the Mongolian market to foreign products, bringing in more competitors in the entertainment industry. Following the free market dynamic, local circus talents inclined to work as independent artists who freely choose where they work and whom they work with. During the economic reform in 1990-1996, Mongolian market was opened to join the global market, allowing foreign circus companies to recruit Mongolian talents to join their shows. For example, the Canadian-based Cirque du Soleil started to approach Mongolian performers in 1992, not long after the transition began.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many independent artists, small-scale groups, and trainers emerged as the key players of Mongolian circus industry. At the same time, the state subsidy to support MNC's operation and employees was continuously reduced and the funding was completely stopped in 2007, turning the MNC management into a fully private-owned company. The privatization was the turning point of MNC, from a state-owned institute of entertainment to a fully commercialized circus cluster. The outpouring facilities for performers and supporting staff—once public goods provided by the government—were stopped. Circus

performers have the choice to join the cluster or work independently outside the cluster. Since circus artists no longer receive fixed salary from the government, they are required to organize their performances independently and their incomes are based on the revenue received from their performances. With the higher pay for contracts with international circus companies, many talents choose to pursue their circus career outside the country, causing a wave of “talent drain” in Mongolian circus industry.

#### **4. CIRCUS AS A POTENTIAL CCI: THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

There is no doubt that the Mongolian circus industry has been facing major challenges due to the social and economic transition. The diminishing demand in the local market, the participation of local talents in the free market, and the dramatic changes in the entertainment industry are posing as double-edged swords with threats on one end and opportunities on the other end. However, the Mongolian circus industry has potentialities that cannot be neglected.

Circus is one of the well-established performing arts in Mongolia with a long history dated back in the early 1930s. Circus is the national pride and it represents the country's cultural and creative endeavors. The facilitating cluster and the dynamic network of circus artists have been formed through the development of the industry; these are invaluable assets that when properly utilized can escalate the Mongolian circus development to the next level.

Mongolia has a big pool of talents in circus industry. Among the total population of 2.7 million, there were 800 artists who are officially affiliated to MNC during the period of 1941-2011, five independent circus groups, one travelling circus, one equestrian circus, more than 10

independent training centers, and one circus association that interact closely with MNC as a cluster. Outside the MNC cluster, there were several independent circus artists who perform in local touristic and celebratory activities.

The limited size of the local market, the non-conducive environment to grow (low pay, fierce competition, and less appreciation of talents), and the open market have pushed the best talents to find opportunities to perform abroad, causing the “talent drain” in Mongolian circus industry. Once settled, some will stay to become a trainer or open a training center abroad. There are approximately 300 artists who work as performers and trainers in over 40 countries. Their skills and contributions are well-recognized, indicated by the significant positions that they hold in the world circus arena.

The disbandment of MNC as the state-owned primary institutions that unite the circus performers caused the circus talents to walk their separate paths in their unavailing attempts to succeed in both local and international market. Despite the fact that circus talents think that a shared vision, complementary roles, interactions, and a space for creativity are important for the circus talents in individual, business, and industry levels (Chuluunbaatar, Ottavia, Luh, & Kung, 2014), they tend to disintegrate themselves, forming small closed alliances that are hostile, if not, apprehensive of one another. Because of the fierce competition in a relatively limited market, new techniques or creative approaches are generally best kept within one’s closed group, discouraging information sharing and collaborations with other groups.

## **5. CONSOLIDATION OF STRATEGIES: THE WAY FORWARD**

With all these potentials and challenges, the policy-makers are facing the crossroad when creating policies and strategies for Mongolian

circus development, whether to retain the centralized system in the entertainment industry or to decentralize and support the dynamic collaborations among independent artists.

A talent-oriented approach should be taken to develop the industry instead of industry-oriented approach. By developing talents, it will produce the human resources needed to support the industry development. Stemming from the Mongolian cognitive creation and unique cultural identity, the talent development should focus on creating performances which highlight Mongolian characteristics. Moreover, the talent development should also focus on diversification of skills. These two foci will provide Mongolian talents with competitive advantages to compete in the world market. The government should also create policies to regulate circus training centers and standardize training for circus performers. By doing so, it will increase the overall quality of skills and techniques. Certification system should be applied for both trainers and performers, making sure that only qualified talents are allowed to perform, hence maintaining the quality and reputation of Mongolian performers in the international market.

To retain its talents, proper rewards and awards should be given to circus performers who possess high-quality skills or develop innovative techniques and those who contribute to the development of circus in Mongolia. Rewards can be given in forms of financial supports and scholarships to further improve the circus skills. Opportunities to train with reputable international circus schools or to have internship with international circus companies will also be useful to expand the local performers’ horizon.

Mongolian communal culture should be integrated in strategies to develop the industry. There is the need to consolidate strategies to push the development of Mongolian circus and its

talents to compete in the world market. The policy makers should focus on facilitating collaboration to pool complementary roles, build trust, and create shared vision among Mongolian circus talents, forming a strong alliance among the local circus talents. This strategy will effectively boost the development of individual talents and business. Instead of investing the energy on competing, Mongolian circus talents should have shared vision and collective strategies to compete in the foreign market, solving the problem caused by the limited market size within Mongolia. The combination of a better management and visionary strategies will recreate Mongolia as a potential supplier of the world circus talents.

The function of MNC, as a circus cluster with its supporting suppliers and training center, should be resumed and maximized for the sake of talent training and career development. MNC can be transformed into a talent hub where local talents and international talents meet, train, and collaborate. The government should collaborate with the private sector to encourage more activities and symposiums to bring together local and international circus talents. An international activity such as “World Circus in Mongolia” in 2013 (News.mn, 2013) serves as a good example. The event was organized by the National Circus of Mongolia, the “Development Center of the Mongol Circus” NGO, and the Mongolian Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The organizers invited 60 circus performers from 14 countries to collaborate in a show in Ulaanbaatar. It was the biggest international circus event since International Circus show as part of the “Friendship of Brotherhood Socialist Countries” program in the socialist era 30 years ago. This kind of event will facilitate creative collaboration and exchanges, expand the talents’ international network, and promote Mongolian circus.

Mongolian long lasting history, cultural identity, and pool of talents are the key resources to support

the development of the circus industry. However, if there is no strategic plans and room for collaborative works, it will be difficult to develop the existing potentialities and turn circus into a productive industry. As the Mongolian proverb says, “the friendship of two is stronger than stone walls”, integrated efforts should be taken to unify the circus talents and further develop their qualities to compete in the international market.

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