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## **A Historical Analysis of the Genre in Mongolian Cinematic Art**

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### **Abstract**

Mongolian national cinema was formally established in 1936, and by 1990, a total of 164 feature films and over 400 documentary films had been produced. This study classifies Mongolian cinema into two primary periods based on the distinct developmental stages of the industry: 1936-1990, during the socialist era, and post-1990, during the transition to a market economy. The socialist period (1936-1990) was marked by state-controlled production and ideological influence, with all films financed by the government and disseminated within a limited scope. This era also saw the systematic training of film professionals, substantial state investments in the film industry, and the foundational development of Mongolian cinema. The transition period from 1990 onwards, coinciding with the shift from a centrally planned socialist economy to a market-driven system, brought significant changes to the structure and production practices of Mongolian film. This study employs scientific, synthetic, and empirical research methods to analyze the evolution of Mongolian cinema across these two critical periods.

**Keywords:** Genre; historical periodization; Mongolian feature film.

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## **1. Introduction**

The term "genre" in Mongolian cinema is derived directly from the Russian language, which in turn borrowed it from the French word *genre*. As defined by Ümit SARI [8], a "genre" refers to a group of entities sharing common and similar characteristics. In the context of film, genre can be understood as a category that groups films based on shared elements, such as narrative structure, character development, visual style, formal characteristics, and the overall tone that resonates with audiences. For the sake of clarity and consistency in this research, we will continue to use the term "genre" to refer to these categories.

From the very inception of cinema, the recognition and categorization of film genres have been essential for filmmakers, marketers, and distributors. Cinema, in many respects, operates as a commercial enterprise, and understanding genre helps define audience expectations. Furthermore, for scholars, critics, and artists, knowledge of film genres is crucial for analyzing and understanding the historical development and social implications of cinema.

Film genres, as conceptualized within literary theory, are often delineated by their setting, imagery, narrative structures, and character archetypes [4]. However, additional categorizations may encompass tone, thematic content, psychological framing, format, target demographic, and production budget [5]. The study of film genres represents a critical lens for examining the traditions, cultural heritage, societal conditions, and core values of a nation, as well as tracing the evolution of cinematic production systems [6].

Furthermore, defining genres provides a framework for clustering narratives, characters, visual motifs, and themes, enabling comparative analysis of their historical development [7]. Scholarly interest in the theoretical and systematic study of film genres gained prominence during the 1950s [3]. Bondebjerg proposed a triadic framework for analyzing film genres, encompassing formal elements, social psychological impact, and thematic content [1].

Traditional classifications of film genres include westerns, comedies, musicals, war films, thrillers, crime dramas (detective), film noir, horror, and science fiction [2]. Additionally, the stylistic and technical approaches employed in filmmaking significantly influence genre distinctions. Williams suggested that a foundational understanding of genres begins with the three primary categories: narrative film, avant-garde or experimental film, and documentary film [10]. This theoretical perspective underscores the multidimensional and dynamic nature of genre studies in cinematic discourse.

Several studies have examined the temporal development of cinema in Mongolia, but genre-based classifications remain relatively rare. Researcher Ch.Dashdondog provided one of the early frameworks, categorizing Mongolian films into four broad types: documentary, artistic, simplified scientific, and cartoon/puppet films. He further subdivided artistic films into narrative, tragic, comedy, satire, adventure, fairy tale, historical revolutionary, historical biographical, lyrical, and simplified scientific genres [12].

Expanding on this, film director, art historian, and scholar G.Jigjidsuren classified films produced between 2000 and 2015 into ten main categories in his *Encyclopedia of Mongolian Cinema II*. Building on these foundational

works, the present study focuses on identifying and classifying the genres of films produced in Mongolia from 1936 to 1990. This classification employs both the "empirical" and "a priori" methods commonly used in the United States and Western Europe for genre analysis, including genres such as Action, Adventure, Animated, Comedy, Drama, Fantasy, Historical, Horror, Musical, Noir, Science Fiction, Thriller, and Western.

The "empirical method" involves categorizing films based on predefined standards and comparing them with established genre conventions. In contrast, the "a priori method" relies on predetermined common elements of film genres. Additionally, the "social convention method" defines genres based on cultural consensus and societal acceptance [4]. By combining these approaches, this study aims to provide a systematic and culturally informed analysis of Mongolian film genres during the specified period. Film genres are often classified into simple, broad categories that can evolve through historical processes and develop subgenres. For instance, films made in specific styles such as noir, animation, and musical drama; films targeting specific demographics, such as children or women; and those appealing to emotional resonance, like comedy, horror, and melodrama, reflect diverse audience interests. Additionally, genres emphasizing action and character development, including war, police, and historical films, demonstrate a broader range of storytelling [1].

Rarely is a film confined to a single genre, owing to the multifaceted nature of filmmaking [5]. Film genres are dynamic, continually reshaped by societal changes and shifting audience interests [8]. Hollywood films, for example, rarely adhere to a single-genre framework. Martin Loop has noted their tendency to blend romance with other genres, while Jim Collins observed a "hybridization" of genres beginning in the 1980s. "Back to the Future Part III" exemplifies this trend by merging western and science fiction elements.

In the context of Asian cinema, filmmaking and production can be divided into two regions. The primary region includes countries with significant global influence in the film industry, such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Meanwhile, the secondary region comprises countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, which possess distinct but smaller-scale film industries, contributing unique narratives to the broader cinematic landscape [9]. This regional distinction highlights the diversity and complexity within Asian cinema and its evolving role on the global stage.

This research presents an observational study on the genres of films produced in 1990, situated within the historical context of the formation and development of Mongolian cinema

## **2. Origin and Development of Mongolian Cinematic Art**

The origin and development of Mongolian cinema have been the subject of significant scholarly inquiry. Researchers such as Dr. D.Tsolmon, G.Rinchensambuu, Ch.Dashdondog, Ts.Baigalmaa, B.Tsogtbayar, film director and writer Ts.Zandraa, as well as P.Davaasambuu, D.Myagmarsuren, G.Dolgor, S. Batchuluun, J.Solongo, and Ch.Navaan, have extensively explored the historical trajectory of Mongolian cinema during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. However, the detailed analysis of film genres remains a relatively underexplored area within this body of research.

In this study, we aim to fill this gap by examining the genres of films produced in 1990, a pivotal year that reflects the culmination of the historical development of Mongolian cinema. Our analysis situates these films within their broader historical and cultural context, offering insights into their thematic diversity and genre classification during a transformative period in Mongolian filmmaking.

The advent of cinema in Mongolia is believed to have occurred during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Prior to the People's Revolution, the first short silent films were shown in 1912 at various venues, including the Uyghur Palace of Sain Noyon Khan, the Bogd Palace of the Great Palace, and the courtyards of Jantsan Bey and Nanzad Zaisan in Naimaa (present-day Amgalanbaatar). Other locations included open-air stages in Chinatown's northern Shi-yanz and Urd Shi-yanz on the avenue, as well as the Russian "Birja" hotel and the "Krym Restaurant." During this era, cinema was referred to as 'Suuder Shi' and the films presented were largely silent performances capturing segments of real-life events [12].

The People's Revolution of 1921 marked a turning point in the development of Mongolian cinema. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress in July 1923, it was declared that cinema, or the "Electric Shadow Festival," should serve as an educational tool to analyze and understand the economic and social conditions of foreign countries. The Party emphasized that cinema held noble potential for enlightenment and education. Consequently, the Central Committee, with assistance from the Youth Central Committee, was tasked with organizing and promoting cinema as part of Mongolia's cultural development [15].

Significant progress was made in the 1920s and 1930s to institutionalize cinema in Mongolia. In 1929, equipment was imported from the USSR, and 45 individuals were trained as film mechanics over seven months under the guidance of P.Badamaa, a technically skilled expert of the time [12]. By 1935, a resolution by the Council of Ministers laid the foundation for establishing a national film factory, supported by Soviet technicians.

During this period, the majority of the Mongolian population was illiterate, making visual and performing arts, such as cinema and drama, the primary mediums for public education. Recognizing the transformative power of cinema, the Party and government prioritized its development by increasing the number of cinema halls, extending cinema access to rural areas, providing Mongolian translations and commentary for foreign films, and producing national films. These initiatives created the necessary conditions for the growth of Mongolian cinema.

In 1936, Mongolia released its first feature film, "Mongol Khuu"/A Mongolian, directed by Ilya Trauber, with the support of Russian experts [17]. This milestone marked the official establishment of Mongolian cinema as an art form and cultural institution. French researcher and historian George Sadoul documented the story of Mongolia's initial encounter with cinema in his "History of World Cinema", situating the beginnings of Mongolian cinema within the global cinematic narrative.

While Western societies primarily regarded cinema as a commercial enterprise, socialist nations, including Mongolia, viewed it as a vital ideological tool. This divergence underscores the unique trajectory of Mongolian cinema, shaped by its socialist context and the broader goals of education and cultural enlightenment.



**Figure 1:** Photographic introduction to the film “Mongol Khuu” /Mongolian Archives General Office



**Figure 2:** New York Times newspaper page /Mongolian Archives General Office

The first independent films produced by the “Mongol Kino” factory marked a significant milestone in the development of Mongolian cinema. In 1938, “Norjmaagiin Zam/Norjmaa’s Path” (Tragic Drama), directed by T.Natsagdorj and L.Scheffer, was released, followed by “Sureg Chono/Wolves” (Adventure) in 1939, directed by T.Natsagdorj. Other notable films from this era include “Ankhdugaar Khicheel/First Lesson” (1940, Adventure) by T.Natsagdorj, “Amidralliin Zam/The Path of Life” (1941, Adventure) by M.Luvsanjamts, and “Morin Tsereg Tankist/Cavalry Tanker” (1942, Combat) by M.Luvsanjav and M.Bold. Further significant releases included “The Road to the End” (1942, Adventure/Historical) by A.G.Zarkhi and I.E.Heifitz, “Sukhbaatar” (1942, Adventure/Historical) by M.Luvsanjamts, “Aymshiggui Eth Oronch/A Brave Patriot” (1943, Combat) by M. Bold and M.Luvsanjamts, “Khil Deer Bolson Khereg/The Case at the Border” (1943, Adventure) by Y.Tarich and M.Luvsanjamts, and “Tsogt Taij/Prince Tsogt” (1943, Historical) by Y.Tarich and M.Luvsanjamts. Between 1936 and 1945, ten films were produced, with a breakdown of 57% classified as adventure films, 33% as action films, and 10% as tragic dramas. Regarding thematic content, 89% of these films focused on military and homeland-related narratives, while 10% addressed the spread of modern hospitals and cultural advancements. This period coincided with a tense international environment and rapid national development. Despite the nascent stage of the Mongolian film industry, the films produced during this time were imbued with significant ideological and patriotic themes. Feature films and documentaries emphasized patriotism and encouraged diligence and loyalty among the populace, reflecting the sociopolitical priorities of

the era [11]. These productions not only served as cultural artifacts but also as tools for national solidarity and education during a transformative period in Mongolian history.

### 3. Genre Study of Mongolian Cinemas

In the first decade following the establishment of “Mongol Kino” (1946–1954), the studio primarily focused on producing film reports and documentaries that captured events from across Mongolia. Notable examples include “Manai Orond/In Our Country”, “Orkhonii Khoni/Orkhon Sheep”, “Uriлга and Shine Useg/Call and New Letters”, and “Khavriin Tarialan/Spring Crops”. These documentaries served as records of the national achievements and as tools for disseminating information about the country’s progress to its citizens. After World War II, “Mongol Kino” expanded its scope to include significant documentaries intended to promote Mongolia on the global stage. Films such as “Tusgaar Togtnol/Independence” and “Bugd Nairamdakh Mongol Ard Uls/Mongolian People’s Republic” played a key role in solidifying international recognition of Mongolia’s independence, particularly during a critical period of negotiations with China. By 1954, feature film production resumed, resulting in the creation of 340 feature films across 42 titles by 1971. The 1960s marked a turning point in the intensity of Mongolian film production, with 5–8 films being released annually. Films such as “Khurgen Khuu/Son-in-Law” (Family) and “Tungalag Tamir/Tamir, the River” (Historical) exemplify the dominant themes of this era. These films celebrated the construction of socialism, championed the working class, and highlighted the collectivization movement, aligning with the ideological and propagandistic goals of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party. The research relies on film documents sourced from the Mongolian Audiovisual Archive, which offer critical insights into the thematic and stylistic evolution of Mongolian cinema over the decades. The following section presents a detailed analysis of feature film genres by decade, providing an overview of their thematic focus and production trends.

**Table 1: Mongolian Film Genres by Decades**

| Genre           | 1936<br>1945 | -<br>1946<br>1955 | -<br>1956<br>1965 | -<br>1966<br>1975 | -<br>1976<br>1985 | -<br>1986<br>1990 | Total | Percentage |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------|------------|
| Action          | 2            |                   | 3                 | 2                 | 4                 |                   | 11    | 6%         |
| Adventure       | 8            |                   | 7                 | 6                 | 10                | 4                 | 35    | 21%        |
| Kids (for)      |              |                   | 3                 | 3                 | 3                 | 2                 | 11    | 7%         |
| Comedy          |              |                   | 4                 |                   | 1                 | 2                 | 7     | 4%         |
| Drama           | 2            | 2                 | 9                 | 19                | 27                | 20                | 79    | 47%        |
| Fantasy         |              |                   | 1                 | 1                 | 1                 | 2                 | 5     | 3%         |
| Historical      | 1            |                   |                   | 6                 | 3                 | 2                 | 12    | 7%         |
| Horror          |              |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |       | 0%         |
| Musical         |              |                   | 1                 |                   |                   |                   | 1     | 1%         |
| Science fiction |              |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |       | 0%         |
| Thriller        |              |                   | 1                 | 2                 | 3                 | 1                 | 7     | 4%         |
| Western         |              |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |       | 0%         |
| TOTAL           | 10           | 2                 | 29                | 39                | 52                | 32                | 164   | 100%       |

Between 1936 and 1990, a total of 164 films were produced in Mongolia, reflecting a diverse range of genres. Among these, 7% were adventure films, 47% were drama films, 7% were action films, 3% were fantasy films or fairy tales, 7% were historical films, 4% were children's films, 1% were musical films, and 4% were crime or police films. This distribution highlights the prominence of drama as the dominant genre during this period.

The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) played a pivotal role in the development of cinema, viewing it as a powerful ideological tool to propagate its policies and values [11]. Films during this time often emphasized themes of patriotism, calling on soldiers to defend their homeland and supporting the broader goal of socialist construction. However, a significant number of films also celebrated the lives, struggles, love, and humanity of ordinary citizens - herders, workers, peasants, and students - who contributed to society with their knowledge, skills, and labor. This thematic diversity can be attributed to several factors: the stable social and political conditions of the time, the government's active promotion of socialism, and the systematic training of professional personnel in the film industry. The establishment of a skilled workforce allowed the film industry to produce works that not only promoted state policies but also resonated with the everyday lives and aspirations of the Mongolian people.

The combination of ideological narratives and human-centered storytelling reflects the dual purpose of Mongolian cinema during this era: as both a medium for political propaganda and a reflection of the social and cultural fabric of the nation. This period stands as a testament to the role of cinema in shaping and reinforcing national identity while addressing the evolving needs and aspirations of society.

Since the 1950s, Mongolian cinema began actively participating in international film festivals, primarily those organized within socialist countries. These engagements not only showcased Mongolian films but also facilitated exchanges with filmmakers from other socialist nations, allowing Mongolian filmmakers to familiarize themselves with global cinematic achievements. Notably, at the First Conference of Filmmakers of Socialist Countries held in Prague in 1957, S.Genden's "Serelt/Awakening" (Adventure) and R.Dorjpalam's "Bidend Yu Saad Bolj Baina Ve?/What Bothers Us" (Drama) received critical acclaim and were honored at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

The international distribution of Mongolian films also gained momentum during this period. Films were translated into Russian, English, and Chinese, and distributed to countries such as the USSR, Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This widespread dissemination served as a significant cultural advertisement, enhancing Mongolia's visibility on the global stage. Starting in 1959, Mongolian cinema achieved further success with notable works by prominent directors. Director D.Jigjid produced films such as "Ardiin Elch/People's Messenger" (Adventure), "Uer/Flood" (Adventure), "Ugluu/Morning" (Historical), "Khurgen Khuu/Son-in-Law" (Drama), and "Ulaanbaatar baigaa Minii Aavd/To My Father in Ulaanbaatar" (Drama). Similarly, R.Dorjpalam's contributions included "Icheend ni/In Dens" (Historical Adventure) and "Motoriin Duu/Sound of Engine" (Drama). Other significant works include H. Damdin's "Ulaan Dartsag/Red Flag" (Adventure), D.Khishigt's "Tus Bish Us/Help which is not Help" (Adventure), and J.Buntar's "Nar Khirtsen Jil/The Year of the Solar Eclipse" (Drama). These films not only reinforced the narrative and ideological goals of Mongolian cinema but

also highlighted the technical and artistic capabilities of Mongolian filmmakers during this era [12].

Through participation in international festivals and the production of acclaimed films, Mongolian cinema steadily solidified its reputation within the socialist bloc and contributed to the broader cultural dialogue of the time.

Research indicates that the period from 1966 to 1990 marked the pinnacle of Mongolian cinema development. During this time, 39 films were produced between 1966 and 1975, 52 films between 1976 and 1985, and 32 films between 1986 and 1990. This sustained growth was largely attributed to government initiatives aimed at strengthening socialist realism in filmmaking and systematically training professional artists [12]. Classical film artists, many of whom were trained under the old system of film art, created some of their most celebrated works during this era despite challenging social and ideological constraints. These works reflected the artists' talent, knowledge, and creativity, striving to enlighten audiences and contribute to national identity [13]. Prominent examples from this golden age of Mongolian cinema include:

- "Tungalag Tamir/Tamir the River" (1970–1973, Drama), directed by R.Dorjpalam, regarded as the best Mongolian film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- "Mandkhai Tsetsen Khatan/Mandkhai, The Wise Queen" (1988, Historical), directed by B.Baljinnyam, hailed as the best Mongolian historical film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- "Uer/Flood" (1966, Drama), directed by D.Jigjid.
- "Ulaan Dartsag/Red Flag" (1971, Children's/Adventure), directed by H.Damdin.
- "Hunii Ami/Life of a Person" (1976, Crime), directed by G.Jigjidsuren.
- "Ergej Bodokh Bodol/A Memory" (1980, Drama), directed by H.Damdin.
- "Gobiin Zergelee/Gobi's Mirage" (1980, Lyrical Drama), directed by R.Dorjpalam.

The remarkable output during this period was also significantly influenced by the influx of professionally trained filmmakers. Many of these professionals graduated from esteemed institutions such as the Russian State Institute of Cinematography and the Kiev Institute of Theater Arts, bringing advanced technical and artistic expertise to Mongolian cinema.

This period not only demonstrated the flourishing of Mongolian cinema but also underscored the importance of education, state support, and ideological alignment in the creation of films that resonated deeply with both domestic and international audiences.

Since the 1980s, Mongolian cinema experienced a profound transformation, introducing a new artistic atmosphere. Most researchers identify the period from the mid-1980s (1986) to the early 1990s (1992), often referred to as the "Permanence" period, as a revolutionary phase in the relationship between artists, audiences, and cinematic art. This period marked significant shifts in aesthetic concepts, reflecting the broader political and social changes occurring in Mongolia. Despite its brevity, this era is considered pivotal in the history of Mongolian cinema, as it gave rise to groundbreaking works and introduced influential filmmakers whose contributions remain indispensable.



The "Permanence" period saw the emergence of films enriched with innovative imagery and content, showcasing the free thinking and creative expression of artists. Key works from this era include:

- "Garyn Tavan Khuruu/Five Fingers" (Drama), directed by B.Baljinnyam.
- "Tan Ruu Nuuj Yavna/Moving in to You" (Drama), directed by B.Baljinnyam.
- "Khun Chuluunii Nulims/Tears of Stone Men Monument" (Tragic Drama), directed by G.Jigjidsuren.
- "Bi Chamd Khairtai/I Love You" (Drama), directed by B.Baljinnyam.
- "Amidraliin Nakhia/A New Chapter in Life" (Tragic Drama), directed by H.Damdin.
- "Iluu Sartai Zun/An Indian Summer" (Drama), directed by J.Selengesuren.
- "Khunii Khun/A Stranger" (Drama), directed by Ch.Jumdaan.
- "Seruun Duganii Mokhol/Ruining the Seruun Monaster" (Drama), directed by B.Damchaa.

These films not only expanded the artistic boundaries of Mongolian cinema but also addressed complex themes and explored new narrative forms. They embodied the evolving aesthetic and ideological paradigms of the time, reflecting the dynamic interplay between Mongolia's sociopolitical environment and its artistic expression [14].

The "Permanence" period stands as a critical chapter in the history of Mongolian cinema, illustrating how art can adapt to and mirror times of significant cultural and political transformation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Up until 1990, under Mongolia's socialist centrally planned economy, all films were state-financed, with their genres and content heavily influenced by party ideology. During this period, the government implemented specific policies to promote the development of cinema, which included the training of professional personnel in Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) and the cultivation of national artists. State support also facilitated the establishment of cinemas across the country, ensuring that cinema became an accessible cultural medium and laying the foundation for the growth of Mongolian cinema.

Using the genre classification system commonly applied in the United States and Western Europe, this study analyzed Mongolian feature films produced between 1936 and 1990. Employing the "empirical" and "a priori" methods, we classified a total of 164 films into the following genres:

- Drama: 79 films
- Adventure: 35 films
- Action: 11 films
- Historical: 12 films
- Children's: 11 films
- Comedy: 7 films
- Fantasy/Mythology: 5 films
- Crime/Police: 5 films
- Musical: 1 film
- Science Fiction: 1 film

The predominance of drama films during this era reflects the overarching themes of humanistic ideals, socialist social construction, and the prosperity of human life. This trend can be attributed to the restricted creative freedom of filmmakers under a one-party system, where a government organization, the "Committee," controlled film content, often banning or re-editing productions. This control aimed to promote social stability and align public consciousness with shared social norms, values, and interests. Family and romantic dramas were particularly encouraged for their positive impact on social psychology and their broad appeal to audiences.

As Ümit Sari notes, audiences are drawn to genres that are easy to understand and provide enjoyable experiences. Filmmakers, in turn, tend to cater to these preferences, creating a feedback loop where certain genres dominate regardless of the prevailing social or political system [8].

In the current state of global cinema, the convergence of art and commercial cinema has resulted in a symbiotic relationship where both influence each other profoundly. Even after 130 years, cinema continues to function as both a major commercial market and one of the most influential art forms. This duality remains evident in the Mongolian film industry, highlighting the relevance of studying film genres. Understanding genres is not only vital for researchers but also crucial for film producers and industry professionals aiming to balance artistic expression with audience demand in a rapidly evolving global market.

As a pioneering investigation into the genre of Mongolian films, this study provides a foundation for future research and can serve as a reference for subsequent academic inquiries in the field.

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