

**‘Living from Loan to Loan’: Tracing Networks of
Gifts, Debt and Trade in the Mongolian
Borderlands**

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

of

University College London

Department of Anthropology

University College London

'I, Hedwig Amelia Waters, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

Abstract:

This thesis explores the reliance on diverse economic networks in the margins of the neoliberal Mongolian state. Despite wanting to be included in contemporary economic and political narratives, residents of the border town of Magtaal feel largely neglected by the contemporary state and its political representatives. The remoteness of Magtaal, the recent Mongolian economic crisis and the inflation of cash money have submerged the township into a 'regime of debt' (Sneath 2012) manifested in what locals call 'living from loan to loan'—subsisting off temporally-spaced cash influxes from bank loans and other sources. Yet, residents have appropriated these local economic, political and legal ambiguities through the creation of debt-motivated and/or resource extractive networks that engender monetary returns for the township.

Through experience living and traveling with cross-border natural resource bulkers, local moneylenders and debt-based trade participants, this thesis explores debt-motivated economic networks that function to mobilize and distribute diverse sources of value. The power of these lies in their ability to bridge the multiple disjunctures between the bank-based formal system and the temporalities and values of the local social world. For one, these networks are driven by bank-based debt, yet enabled by social-based, 'gift-like' (Pedersen 2016) debt. Additionally, these chains can 'translate' (Tsing 2015) across moral worlds through the inclusion of local registers of patronage, care, assistance and prestige into economic calculi. As a result, these networks are increasingly utilized and morally sanctioned for their provisioning and distribution functions in lieu of the state. But in doing so, cosmoeconomic narratives are reconceptualized to sanction the increasing monetization, financialization and resource extraction in the Mongolian economic landscape.

Impact statement:

The two main topics of this thesis—the proliferation of financial debt and the illegalized extraction of natural resources—are unique in their contextualization in Mongolia, yet instructive for global trends. First, the thematic of debt has recently enjoyed a renaissance within academic literature, because financial debts have increasingly become a central, universal phenomenon interrelated with the spread of global finance and market-based economic policy. Additionally, this academic scrutiny has partly been inspired by the recent 2008 economic crisis, which revealed that the breadth of debt-based mechanisms, usages and sociocultural effects were poorly understood. In accordance with this increased academic interest, I attended a workshop, *Payback: coordinating solutions to the debt crisis*, in June 2018 at the Institute for Global Prosperity at University College London, which gathered experts on debt from diverse fields as economics, finance, activism, development policy, governance etc. to investigate novel approaches to the globally-burgeoning debt crisis. Within the context of this workshop, the Mongolian case presented in this thesis was considered unique, because Mongolian informants frequently engage with finance debts and loans in a non-individualistic, non-private-property-based manner. Indeed, as discussed in another June 2018 workshop, *Rethinking Usufruct in the Global Economy*, held at the Department of Anthropology at University College London, temporary forms of possession within diverse families, groups and networks are becoming increasingly common as access to savings and economic resources decrease. In other words, the more finance debt increases as a reflection of the lack of monetary access among e.g. poor communities, the more residents must resort to new forms of sharing and temporary access to navigate shrinking capital access. In short, this research is highly topical in the contemporary moment. It discusses, for one, how local individuals implement finance debt in a manner highly contradictory to finance models. In doing so, this research discusses how Mongolians perceive a continuum of diverse forms of debt. Consequently, this research can be instructive for diverse economic, finance and anthropological pursuits, because it discusses multiple apprehensions and usages of debt and also how the accrual of finance debts are impacting individuals in a manner contradictory to finance visions. In this vein, I wrote a blog post on the *Emerging Subjects Team's* project blog, which enjoyed high response and traction because of the didactic novelty and relevance of this case study for not only Mongolian studies, but diverse considerations of debt in multiple fields.

Secondly, the motivation for the illegalized extraction of natural resources is poorly understood within policy debates in Mongolia and is often presented as a purely legal

issue (i.e. that laws need to be amended and upheld) (Scharf et al. 2010). In this case study, I discuss how illegalized resource extraction is largely a result of the aforementioned ongoing debt crisis, which is exacerbated by neoliberal governance policies. Providing more jobs and welfare options to local residents, as opposed to new debt and/or banking packages, would substantially relieve local dependence on natural resources and ongoing illegalized extraction. This insight has implications not only for Mongolia, but for developing contexts the world over where lack of economic opportunities combined with burgeoning finance debt motivates individuals to undermine environmental restrictions.

Sources:

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Acknowledgements:

I had the extraordinary good fortune of being chosen to be the PhD student on the team project *Emerging Subjects of the New Economy* in the Department of Anthropology at University College London. For one, I was surrounded daily and treated as an equal as a budding PhD candidate by bright minds more experienced and knowledgeable in the fields of economic anthropology and Mongolian studies than mine. In this vein, I am deeply thankful to the project's principal investigator, my research advisor and mentor, Professor Rebecca Empson, who offered me the opportunity to open my mind to new intellectual vistas. Through her suggestions, advice and hours of detailed feedback on the multiple, evolving drafts of my work, I have learned more and travelled further geographically, academically and intellectually than I thought I would at the beginning of this experience. It has truly been a journey that I owe to her encouragement of my curiosity.

By extension, working in a team has been a fantastic opportunity—and quite rare for a Mongologist—and has shown me the breadth of knowledge we can glean about the human condition when several minds work together. I am consequently incredibly grateful for the countless educational and life-affirming hours (and cups of coffee and bowls of soup) spent in discussion with Dr Lauren Bonilla, Dr Rebekah Plueckhahn, Dr Bumochir Dulam and, briefly, Dr Baasanjav Terbish. Unbeknownst to them, their multiple insights, advice and support greatly strengthened my confidence in my academic abilities in my impressionable first year of this PhD.

I am thankful to Dr Allen Abramson for lending me a kind ear and for his incredibly invaluable non-Mongolist appraisal of and advice on my academic work.

I am deeply grateful to my parents who, despite their nerves, allow me to traipse around the world in pursuit of my various dreams.

Thank you to Dr Uranchimeg Ujeed, who sat with me for hours in the library pouring over classic Mongolian scripts I only roughly understand. Her insight has been a great help in framing the historical background of this thesis.

Of course, this research was only possible because of the various efforts on the part of many individuals in and outside of Mongolia. I wish to say 'thank you' to the town of 'Magtaal', which provided the site for my fieldwork, and, in particular, the family of 'Baatar' and 'Tsend', who allowed me, a stranger, into their home repeatedly for months on end. I truly experienced an adventure in Magtaal and know that this work,

which I am proud of, was only possible because many individuals chose to trust me, a stranger, with their deepest thoughts. I hope I have done justice to their stories.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Doljinsuren Batdelger, who was my research companion for three months between 2016 and 2017. Not only is she an incredibly sweet and open-minded individual, but she is a great anthropologist! We were the perfect intellectual team and I truly believe that this PhD would have been very different had she not been there with me.

Penultimately, thank you to Aeron O'Connor, Liz Fox, Pauline Destree, Rosalie Allain, Joseph Bristley, Tess Altman and all the other members of our wonderful PhD cohort for countless hours of emotional support over coffee breaks, lunchtime walks and 5 p.m. drinks. I'm grateful we all lived this experience together.

Thanks to my parents for planting the seed of intellectual curiosity in me.

Finally, thanks to Carl who is simply fantastic.

Note on transliteration:

The transliteration of words from the Mongolian Cyrillic form of the Halh (Khalkh) Mongol dialect appears in italics throughout the thesis. The transliteration scheme used here follows Empson's (Empson 2011) modifications to Lessing et al. (1960). These modifications are adumbrated below. In the case of the terms *soum*, *khot ail* and *khan*, however, I have left them in the text in this form, because they are well-known in the ethnographic literature as such. Otherwise, all terms are transliterated according to the following:

О as O

Ө as Ö

У as U

Ү as Ü

Ё as Yo

Э as E

Е as Ye

Ы as Y

Я as Ya

Х as H

И and Ы as i

Ь as '

Ю as Yu/Yü

Note on anonymity:

The location of this fieldwork has been anonymized for the protection of the informants' identities. This fieldwork was carried out on the Mongolian/Chinese border in the eastern state province, *aimag*, of Dornod, Mongolia. In Mongolia, an *aimag* is divided into smaller provinces known as *soum*, which are further divided into *bag* administrative districts under the *soum* government. The *soum* province this fieldwork was carried out in has been anonymized as 'Magtaal'. Magtaal *soum* has three *bag* and its capital, i.e. *soum* centre, officially holds the same name as the *soum*. Unofficially, however, the *soum* residents colloquially call the *soum* centre by a different name as to not confuse it generally with the *soum*. Consequently, in this thesis, the Magtaal *soum* centre is colloquially known as 'Bayant'. To the west of Bayant is a second *bag* that figures prominently in this thesis as the location of a Chinese oil company and a lake. This second western *bag* is anonymized as 'Tsogt' *bag*. The lake in Tsogt *bag* has also been anonymized as 'Dalai Lake'. Finally, Magtaal shares a border with China. The Chinese town on the other side of the border, which has Mongolian origins, is anonymized as 'Tümenjargal'. All informant names in the thesis have been changed.

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Figure 1: A sign forewarns 'Attention, Border Zone'

Introduction: The emergence of economic network capitalism in the Mongolian borderlands

'Like wolves in the rain'

Chains of headlights advanced like lanterns in the dawn. On October 24th, 2015, hundreds of residents of a remote Mongolian township on the eastern Chinese border roused early, pooled into cars or trudged up the hill at the entrance of their township—up a mound known as the 'nose at the threshold'. On this morning, the residents of this otherwise-sleepy township of Magtaal—the eastern-most Mongolian *soum* province of 3018 constituents,¹ known colloquially as the 'eastern front'—felt motivated to action by recent news. A major politician of the ruling government was traversing the roughly 900 kilometres between the seat of administrative power, Ulaanbaatar, and Magtaal, and was slated to arrive on this day. But, in contrast to the usual fanfare of flowers and carefully-curated schoolchildren, the concerned citizens of Magtaal were mobilizing for protest. After constructing a blockade of cars across the town's entrance, the constituents stood from 10 am until dusk, chanting, holding signs and eagerly awaiting any stirrings of approach on the horizon. In hindsight, township informants remember the impromptu ambiance of solidarity, comradery and motivation—we built a little town on that hill, one lady nostalgically narrated; not a drop of alcohol was drunk on that day, another proudly recounted.

At dusk, the politician—the agricultural minister of the ruling party—arrived to a line of angry faces holding banners. Some signs referenced the minister like 'Resign, minister, resign!', 'You are not wanted here!' and 'Go back!' Some pointed to the direct political source of the anger—'Rescind the 75th resolution!'; 'The people [*ard tümen*] do not want your plan!'; 'This is land grabbing [*gazar bulalt!*!'; 'We are not giving up our homeland!' Referencing Magtaal's history as a major WWII battle location, other posters made increasingly poetic pleas—'we bled for this land, now what are you [politicians] doing with it??', 'Leave the land for our next generations [*hoich üyedee üldeeye!*]' and 'Keep our land blue, clear and clean'. As informants later recounted to me, the minister's entourage and

¹ As per the 2015 figures sourced from the *aimag* Statistics Office (*Statistikiin Heltes*) in Choibalsan, Dornod province.

the line of irate protestors composed two camps yelling at each other from across a divide. My plan is good for you, the minister attempted to argue, but the local residents would not have it. Their blockade symbolically represented their refusal to receive the minister, her plan or the ruling party. True to their resolve, the television headlines the next day read ‘Minister forced back from Magtaal’.

As insinuated, the instigator for this day of action was the so-called 75th resolution—a legally-adopted plan to transform 500,000 hectares of Magtaal’s land territory (an area roughly five times the size of Hong-Kong) into an agricultural free trade zone (FTZ). The culprit, however, was not just the what, but the how. Over three months prior, on July 9th, the resolution was passed in a largely-empty government hall on the day before the beginning of Naadam, Mongolia’s largest national holiday. I was told that this action was like ‘wolves striking in the rain’ (*chono борооноор*)—with the entire country looking another way, a highly-unpopular resolution was passed without deliberation or debate. I was told after the legal adoption of the resolution that residents saw it on the news, but believed the plan was too fanciful to be true. No one had informed them of any such plan—a free trade zone that would have wrapped completely around their township centre and fundamentally changed the structure of their livelihoods. It was only when an upstart, Ulaanbaatar-based political party took up the cause that the township became educated over and the nation became aware of this monumental newly-passed governmental resolution. This feeling of powerlessness and of not being heard nor recognized by the political apparatus shrouded local residents’ experience with the resolution process. In turn, the slighted township rejected a politician they felt had excluded them first.

The decision of Magtaal residents to protest a free trade zone that would hypothetically bring jobs and development to an economically beleaguered area has been described to me by outsiders, Ulaanbaatar-based Mongolians and foreign nationals as nonsensical. Therefore, when I caught wind of the events in Magtaal surrounding the FTZ, my curiosity was piqued—why would residents in a small countryside town resist economic change proposed by the state?

To understand the motive behind their protest, we must locate the local political and economic assemblage that has arisen in Magtaal in the post-socialist, market democratic, neoliberal historical moment. The longer I stayed in Magtaal, the more I realized that local livelihoods depended on a vast network of gifts, debt and trade that revolved around the availability of natural resources from the surrounding commons. By 'networks' I do not only mean the interrelations of kin and affinity among pastoralists that have historically ensured mutual subsistence through the creation of animal wealth. Rather, I denote entrepreneurial, business-inclined networks that siphon and distribute value materialized as monetary wealth. Seen from the viewpoint of local residents, the post-1990 market democratic era has been defined by a reoccurring experience of political neglect, lack of recognition and economic disenfranchisement vis-à-vis the contemporary economic-cum-governance system. The far-removed Ulaanbaatar-based government, represented by politicians, is seen to place great rhetorical emphasis on the appraisals and indexes of 'the economy', yet show little interest in the local ability of citizens to make daily subsistence ends meet. In this lacuna of economic direction and provisioning, residents of Magtaal have constructed livelihood systems, whereby goods and monies are temporally-possessed, shared and dispersed by moving them in chain-link fashion along actors of affinity. Scaled up to the township level, these overlapping branches form a circuit of trade that is debt-motivated and creates monetary value from the commodification of locally available resources (e.g. fish, medicinal roots, hay, wild animals, etc.). By becoming linked in to these capillary networks, residents participate in systems of accumulation and distribution that allow them to construct economically dignified lives in the margins of state power.

Returning to my initial inquiry, residents mobilized to defend the way of life they had forged out of a perceived situation of economic abandonment in the post-socialist 'age of the market' (Sneath 2002, 2012). In contrast to the larger governance assemblage that has recurrently neglected, ignored and debarred them, these chain-link networks allow for the reformulation of local archetypes of governance, engendering feelings of hierarchical recognition and political inclusion. Materially, these economic networks provide for citizens where the

state does not. And spiritually, these networks allow for methods of redistribution that resonate with wider aesthetics of community growth,² reproduction and Buddhist merit-making. Therefore, these networks comprise a ‘form of living’ (Millar 2018) or ‘way of life’ (Humphrey 2004) that residents perceive as more in tune with their ideals of governance, economic provisioning and social care, than the contemporary Mongolian state and formal economic system. Considering that these networks derive (partial) value from natural resources, the implementation of the FTZ proposal would have constituted a fatal incision into the commons that all local residents have benefited from to feed their families.³ Consequently, this thesis is about the emergence and local reliance on ‘economic networks’ (*suljee*) in the borderlands of Mongolia and why these networks might rival the symbolic power and garner more trust among the populace than the contemporary state. Importantly, they are not simple throwbacks to pastoral cosmo-economic organizational ideals, but powerfully flexible mechanisms that derive value from playing with the ‘gray space’ of state limits and laws (Reeves 2013); funnelling local value (resources, human capital, etc.) into economic, calculative form; and forging linkages between the rhythms of the local social world and the regimentations of finance.

² This thesis has often used the term ‘community’ as a shorthand for the residents of the locality of either Bayant and/or Dalai Lake (chapter 2). In using this term, I am referencing the sense of interconnection between occupants based on the similarity of residence. In a remote location like Bayant, the shared experience of detachment from the state’s administrative and infrastructural grid has not only engendered a reoccurring sentiment of social abandonment but an increased material interdependence. However, I acknowledge that the post-socialist Mongolian political narratives have often sought to construct ‘imagined communities’ based on shared locality and/or kin origins (in combination with the more common construction of nationalism) oft associated with the Mongolian term for ‘homeland’—*nutag*. As discussed by Sneath, *nutag*-ism—i.e. a discourse of commonality based on region/locality—is often politically deployed in Ulaanbaatar by politicians (to appeal to constituents) and residents (to formulate privileged networks of material transfer) (2010). In line with this insight, this thesis focuses on the gestalt of network to emphasize how processes of interconnection and mutuality in Magtaal are more accurately depicted as interregional networks than as blocks of ‘community’. Nevertheless, the sense of ‘community’ that residents describe is born of a shared experience of infrastructural, social and political isolation that requires a certain level of local mutual action to circumscribe; and/or predisposes residents to privilege interdependence on other local residents over self-perceived ‘outsiders’ (as is the case with Mandaa working together with village fishermen in chapter 2). In short, the author is aware of the debates around the term ‘community’ and means to emphasize the shared experience of abandonment and required material interrelation rather than a romanticized village united in solidarity. Even within Magtaal, different interregional (and international) networks emerge that privilege certain actors above others (Ichinkhorloo & Yeh 2016; Murphy 2015).

³ Essentially representing, in Marxist terms, a process of enclosure, whereby a landed populace is dispossessed and turned into a labour class for, in this case, Chinese businessmen.

Consequently, I argue in this thesis that capitalism in Magtaal has taken the gestalt of the economic network.

.....

This thesis introduction will present the general background themes that are relevant for understanding the political and economic dramas currently at play in Magtaal. I have split this introduction into three sections for clarity. The first section is focused on my ethnographic journey to Magtaal with emphasis on two controversies that happened during my fieldwork—my own experience of being accused of spying; and the ongoing political dramas surrounding the FTZ. Inspired by these confrontations, I devise a tentative theory of three economic moral modes that create platforms for moral contestation—hierarchy, relations of mutuality and exchange—that reoccur throughout the thesis. Part 2 discusses the larger theoretical trajectories and literature background that contextualize contemporary changes in Magtaal within the anthropological canon. In this section, I discuss theories of states, neoliberalism and network/chain theories to investigate the hypothesis that a) politics of neoliberalism have resulted in b) changing state spatializations, ontologies and modalities of governance; which c) create space for alternative organizational structures like networks. Part 3 utilizes the indigenous phrase ‘living from loan to loan’ as self-description for how Magtaal residents experience their subject positionality within larger distribution chains of social and economic value. I describe how economic networks have historical precedents in the Mongolian context and why individuals have become reliant on them in the contemporary, neoliberal economic moment.

Part 1: Ethnographic journey

Magtaal—An out-of-the-way place

I first became aware of Magtaal as the broadcast of the residents’ protests swept the national news circuit. At the time, I was living in Ulaanbaatar and had arrived two months prior to start fieldwork on the topic of arbitrage-based, entrepreneurial female traders (known as *naimaachid*), who would nominally travel to China to government-created free trade zones, buy in bulk, come back

to Mongolia, and sell piecemeal at higher rates. In combination with this endeavour, I had been interviewing traders at Narantuul Market (known colloquially as the ‘black market’ in English due to its formerly informal nature)—the largest outdoor market in the country (Pedersen 2002). In order to place this fieldwork possibility within larger geographic circuits, I decided to take a trip on the train down to Inner Mongolia, China, in mid-October, 2015, around the time of the Magtaal residents’ burgeoning protests. I was disappointed by the trip, as I had discovered that the ‘free trade zones’ writ large on Mongolian governmental websites were materially non-existent. Hiring a Mongolian driver to take me across the border from the Mongolian town of Zamiin-Üüd to the Inner Mongolian market town of Ereen (ch: Erlian), my driver points out the window to a solitary building in the distance—‘That’s the free trade zone!’ he exclaimed. Disappointedly returning home to Ulaanbaatar, colleagues informed me of the action that was underway in Magtaal against another purported free trade zone plan. Excited by new prospects to study topics of globalization, trade and networks from a different angle, I hired a research assistance and travelled to Magtaal for a preliminary research excursion.

Magtaal is not a straightforward province to get to; it is an ‘out-of-the-way place’ (Tsing 1993, 1994). Magtaal *soum* is geographically exceptional in many ways—it is the *soum* district province with the largest hectare land area in the country, counting at 2,809,000 hectares; it is the furthest eastern Mongolian province; it boasts two border crossings with China (the most for any *soum*);⁴ and it is the most remote *soum* district centre in comparison to its province capital, because it is located 360 kilometres over unpaved road from the Dornod *aimag* province capital of Choibalsan. As mentioned, I first travelled there together with a research assistant, Doljko, an anthropology student from the Mongolian National University, who assisted me several times in the years after. Because Magtaal *soum* centre was located over 1000 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar, we first had to take a 12-hour bus journey from Ulaanbaatar’s eastern bus station to Choibalsan, the capital of the *aimag* province. Then the following day, we went to a little market where we had been told local Magtaal

⁴ There is also a further border crossing to the north near the *aimag* centre. In total, Magtaal residents have three border crossings that they regularly use/access.

residents wait for prospective passengers. Here we found a Soviet bus (*porgon*) with a sign for 'Bayant' in the window. As we then found out, the land area of contemporary Magtaal *soum* had previously been split into two different *soum*—Magtaal *soum* to the west and Bayant *soum* to the east. In 1994, the two *soum* were merged into one, but residents still colloquially call Magtaal township centre by its original name of Bayant. After traveling in this bus for over eight hours over bumpy, unpaved road, past Chinese oil drills, border checkpoints and a large lake, we arrived in the early morning and were deposited in front of an old spaceship-formed museum that was accentuated at night by a single string of bright green neon lights. It was only after this trip that we both learned that I had technically required an official border permit from Mongolia's Border Protection Agency to enter the town, which was within 30 kilometres of the Chinese border—a requirement we had unintentionally circumvented by traveling with local residents instead of hiring a car.



Figure 2: Oil drills line the horizon of Magtaal

My move towards Magtaal was gradual. By February of the 2016, I had moved from Ulaanbaatar to the *aimag* province capital, Choibalsan, in order to learn more about the area. I spent the month hanging out with a local wine and flower dealer, who travelled once a month over the Chinese border into the Chinese free trade zone of Manzhouli (mg: Manjuur). Magtaal had been the location of a major WWII battle between the joint Soviet/Mongolian army and Japanese-led Manchurian forces, which had prevented the Japanese from advancing into the eastern Soviet Union. The previously mentioned museum documented this event and most foreign visitors to Magtaal went to either research or commemorate the victory. As such, the flower trader's uncle had spent time accompanying foreign tourists to the area and knew a local Magtaal resident through the expeditions. This local resident was Baatar—a 36-year-old former tourist guide, computer teacher and (at the time) bee keeper. The uncle put me in touch with Baatar and by March I had moved to Magtaal (with proper border permit in hand!) to live with Baatar, his wife Tsend (35) and their two school-age children. After this move, I ended up living with this family of four from March until mid-November of 2016 in their three-room flat in Magtaal; and then again for two months between July and September of 2017 after they had moved into Baatar's mother's extended compound (*hashaa*). Baatar worked as a bee keeper and (alternatingly) in the school, and Tsend worked in the museum and they provided me with honest and direct insight into the economic difficulties of local citizens.

Research trajectory and methods

My goal when I set out to Mongolia on research was to complete a research project that analysed the current rise of cross-border and cross-national entrepreneurial subjectivities. For starters, I was part of a European Research Council-funded team called 'Emerging Subjects of the New Economy', which focused on how Mongolian citizens were navigating the recent economic vagaries through the forging of new identities and discourses. Additionally, this research intention was informed by the awareness, elucidated by Marcus, that late-20th-century theoreticians across disciplines had been documenting a growing global sense of 'dissolution and fragmentation' of wonted world system paradigms, represented in the emergence of discourses surrounding post-

Fordism, flexible specialization, globalization, transnationalism, neoliberalism, etc. (Marcus 1995: 98). In this vein, I believed that research with cross-border trading women would be promising, because their positionality played with the cusp and margins of gendered, national and economic narratives—e.g. they were often female breadwinners, who put themselves in vulnerable positions to trade with social others like Chinese men. Following Marcus' appeal, I endeavoured to carry out 'multi-sited research', because doing so '...arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production' (1995: 97). By traveling with women as they moved, I imagined I was 'following the thread of cultural process itself' (97) and therefore seeing how new identities were being forged and shifted as they moved over space and time. Nevertheless, as often happens for nascent anthropologists, the field and its exigencies often choose the ultimate field of study for you. In contrast to other disciplines, anthropology students must be open to the circumstances that emerge in situ, in order to allow unique ethnographic insight to organically materialize from the specific moment. This was my case: Although I knew that I had a general interest in cross-border trade and global/local economic frictions, I was not as set on the thematic manifestation I should study. Ultimately, by pursuing the dramas and events that took place in Mongolia at the time, I allowed the field site to show me which emerging subjectivities and narratives were historically novel and most relevant.

When I first arrived in Magtaal, I decided, out of habit and interest, to continue the general research trajectory I had begun at Narantuul. I started to shadow the local female shop owners and cross-border traders (*naimaachid*). My first few months were thus spent mostly in Degee's bakery shop, where I noticed the intricacies of both trade and debt networks that she utilized to move her product of cakes and bread. In fact, the more I asked, the more I realized that not only traders were engaged in these daily elaborate calculations of debt and return, but the entire community. By late summer 2016, however, the fieldwork unpredictably revealed another trade-related phenomenon. At this time, the countryside around Magtaal started to become dotted by rounds and rounds of hay bundles that I was told was being gathered for export to China. Everywhere

in town were rumours of Chinese labourers ravaging the countryside around Magtaal for hay and profit. Because most of these workers were said to not be local residents, I decided to hire a driver and travel around the area with Doljko for a month to find the locations where labours were gathering. In the course of these excursions, we also started to encounter Magtaal citizens who were sweeping the countryside for Chinese medicinal roots. I thus became aware of the breadth of unspoken resource extraction that was happening around Magtaal *soum* centre. Fascinated, Doljko and I decided to follow the resource chains that we had discovered, which took us across the border into China several times. Quite unexpectedly, I had found my research topic—economic chains that combined relations of debt within the local community with the economic proceeds from cross-border resource-dependent commodity chains. Without directing the process, I had once again looped around to a multi-sited ethnographic study on cross-border trade and economic frictions born from the confrontation of local lifeworlds and global economic exigencies.

The breadth of my multi-sited movement was limited, however, because I only moved in the circuits and networks available to my research informants and myself as a foreigner. In the vein of participant observation, I decided to stay in Magtaal and live in Baatar and Tsend's household for 10 months. In doing so, I noticed that multiple local 'resources'—incl. money, goods, information and people—flowed and moved along capillary networks with diverging trajectories and boundaries. For one, as a foreigner, I was able to move into Magtaal via networks from Choibalsan and eventually move back out again. Baatar and Tsend, in contrast, do not have this choice; they do not have the funds or social connections to leave Magtaal at whim. On the flipside, they are privy to local forms of knowledge—rumours and anecdotes about community happenings, sentiments and actions—only accessible when one is considered integrated into the local social fabric. I thus decided to do my fieldwork and multi-sited ethnography within the chains available to Baatar and Tsend, in order to experience their own scope of manoeuvrability. Using my family's connections, I began to trace the chains of money, resources and knowledge that local residents have access to—I first followed money circuits, which introduced me to moneylenders, which led me to natural resources, which introduced me to

resource bulkers (called changers), who introduced me to cross-border contacts in China. As a result, I ‘followed the thread of cultural process itself’ (Marcus 1995)—as opposed to ‘follow[ing] the thing’ (Appadurai 1986a; Cook 2004; Marcus 1995) or mapping an entire commodity chain (Dolan 2007; Dolan & Humphrey 2000; West 2012)—to let the edges of my multi-sited field organically reveal itself through the local disjointed trajectories of people, goods, monies and knowledge. By focusing on the legs of chains accessible to Magtaal citizens, I wish to draw attention to the contradictory and convoluted flow of local resources—goods and monies, for example, move more freely than people—and also on how global economic exigencies do and do not impact the liveworlds of local residents. Chains are fascinating organizational structures, because they not only adapt to and transcend fractured and decentralized space, place and political/economic systems, but they link Magtaal citizens into global processes whilst, simultaneously, holding them apart. As a result of my restricted mobility to Mongolian contacts, however, I, like my research informants, are not completely aware of what happens with the resources and monies when they are completely subsumed into the Chinese-directed legs of the chains.

[Spy accusations—contesting my allegiance](#)

I was the first post-socialist non-Chinese foreign national to live in Magtaal *soum* centre for an extended period of time. Magtaal is remote, it had a recent history of anti-government protest, had a distant history of war (the war museum has a wall dedicated to espionage), and the surrounding countryside is awash in questionably legal trade and extraction. Not surprisingly, residents were generally distrustful towards all manner of outsiders.⁵ I admit that my own intercultural background did not do me any favours in this regard—I am an American national of extensive German cultural background and upbringing, employed in a European-Union-funded research project based in the United Kingdom. In order to gain approval to live in Magtaal, I had had to undergo a background check by the Mongolian Intelligence Agency, which granted me

⁵ There was a Chinese beekeeper employed by the UN to work for three months during the summer months in Magtaal. He was accosted a few times in Magtaal and barely left his flat. Occasionally, foreign-born agricultural workers have come to Magtaal for a planting season, but are often very isolated from the residents.

approval under my American passport, but I spent many evenings talking outside on the phone to my mother in German. When I arrived in Magtaal, I was already quite conversant in Mongolian⁶—an ability that often drew more criticism than praise, as individuals questioned why on earth I, a foreigner, had chosen to learn Mongolian. Residents had previously only been accustomed to the presence of non-Chinese foreign nationals within the scope of the museum—occasionally, international war historians would arrive in Magtaal to engage in short-term, controlled studies under the constant accompaniment of a driver, translator and museum guide. My behavioural presence in Magtaal—a lone, 30-year-old, unmarried woman, living in a local, semi-poor family, fluent in Mongolian with questionable origins and doing undefined, general research about ‘the economy’⁷—contradicted most local understandings of the appropriate roles and abilities of foreigners. Historical serendipity was also not on my side—the late June 2016 Brexit referendum results stirred even more confusion among local Magtaal power players regarding my national research allegiances.⁸ Standing outside the cultural centre one evening on the phone in June 2016, I suddenly became aware that curious local officials were eagerly listening to my German conversation. The next time I entered the war museum, a friendly tour guide pointedly made me aware of a large picture on the wall in the exhibition hall—a portrait of Richard Sorge, the Soviet-German spy who had infiltrated the Nazis to inform the Soviets regarding Japanese war plans.⁹ I eerily felt like I was the unsuspecting heir of a historical legacy.

⁶ Due to previous research stints in Mongolia

⁷ I did not know myself at the beginning – I tried to combat this by putting posters up in the central square

⁸ Accusation of spying happened amongst Mongolians within Magtaal as well: At the end of June 2016, Magtaal was awash in political propaganda as multiple parties were vying to win the 2016 general parliamentary elections. Stumbling into one party location in the interest of hearing their platform, the local party head turned to me and asked, ‘So, are you leaving us now? Your country is out of the EU’. Confused to have found out about Brexit this way, I left the party office after this man proceeded to be very rude towards me. Calling me privately on my phone a few hours later, he beckoned me back to his office to apologize. ‘I believe there are spies in my ranks’, he told me, ‘I was using you to see if information was fed back to the other party about the incident’.

⁹ <http://www.historynet.com/the-spy-who-saved-the-soviets.htm>

Figure 3: The picture of Richard Sorge in the war museum in Bayant

The whispered moniker of spy haunted me during my months of fieldwork in Magtaal. At first, I was told that the rumour was an innocent joke and not to worry—like when two old men sitting on a stoop saw me and teased, ‘oh there goes our local spy!’ Nevertheless, the snowball kept rolling. By June 2016, I had been accused of being a spy by a government official. By July 2016, I had been pulled into the military compound, asked to show my research notes and semi-interrogated by the locally-stationed agent. He let me go. Yet, in September 2016, a cadre of high-level officials drove to Magtaal before the local parliament election, in order to sway local votes in the interest of their party. The ruling Prime Minister was amongst them. As I entered the cultural centre for the *soum*-wide meeting, which I was legally allowed to attend, I felt my arm being twisted. The local police chief had shoved me into a wall and then tried again to yank me out of the eyesight of the incoming political retinue. Asking beseechingly ‘why can’t I be here?’ he answered cryptically, ‘they don’t like it’. I never really found out who ‘they’ were, but it was clear that my activities in the local area had contradicted the role expected of me.

I am far from the first anthropologist to have been accused of being a spy. As described by Borneman and Masco, 'There are many parallels between anthropological fieldwork and espionage. Both involve looking, listening, eavesdropping, taking notes, recording conversations, snapping photos, and establishing trusted confidants. We call it participant-observation; they call it spying' (Borneman & Masco 2015: 781). The main difference between these two occupations, in my opinion, is the ascription of interest—an anthropologist claims a humanistic ideal, a search for truth or the ethnographic method as the motivation for their actions, whereas a spy's objective is more concrete in the form of a national agenda. When, in 2006, Verdery (2014) was able to access the secret police file kept on her by the former Romanian communist government, she also became aware of contrasting interpretations applied to her various actions. While doing her dissertation fieldwork in 1973, the former secret service had partitioned and filed her activities under various code names (like 'Folclorista' in description of her activities as transcriber of folklore). Experiencing herself partitioned into explanatory categories provoked schizophrenic feelings of doubt over her previous understandings of her experiences and sense of self in the field. In this vein, Borneman and Masco note that ethnographic moments of misrecognition—where one becomes aware of interpretive frameworks ascribed to oneself that contradict one's own self-perception—can lead to revelatory ethnographic insights when theorized as reflection on cultural differences (2015: 782). In my case, Baatar first made me aware of how my earnest insistence that my research was purely motivated by a search for knowledge was perceived as somewhat absurd to local residents—'You mean you came all this way, left your family, friends, gave up all luxuries, stopped seeing your romantic partner, to be amongst strangers and eat food you don't like for over a year just to learn something you might not use?'

To wit, the feelings of confusion and misrecognition that the spy accusations unleashed in me ultimately became theoretically productive, because they made me hyper-cognizant of the interpretive frameworks at residents' disposal to make sense of their social universe. For starters, the subjectivity of anthropological researcher implies a perception of an individualistic being, who has limited qualms leaving home (or doesn't feel like they have one), friends

and family in the pursuit of a nondescript ideology with speculative return—a subject motivation I had a difficult time conveying to individuals, like Baatar, who interpreted all actions and knowledge as embedded within and motivated by the social universe (family, friends, homeland, community mutuality, etc.). Additionally, to be a ‘scientist’ implies a belief in an objective truth; an idea that contrasts local understandings of knowledge derived from social experience and conveyed through networks.¹⁰ In combination with this fundamental difference in subjectivity—between the individualistically-driven anthropologist, motivated to find (subjective) ‘truth’ in society; and the partible subjectivity of a Mongolian herder, motivated to construct and further familial relations—my actions did not neatly fit local interpretive frameworks readily available for foreign nationals of European descent. Like Verdery’s code names, my actions did not fit the categories of ‘English teacher’, ‘NGO worker’, ‘tourist’, ‘mining boss’ or ‘missionary’ that are often implemented as motivational clarifiers for foreign nationals in Mongolia. Similarly, Bulag—as a Cambridge-educated, Inner-Mongolian Chinese citizen researching in Outer Mongolia—also encountered accusations of spying, because his subject position and national allegiance/motivation was difficult to categorize (1998). If one presupposes, like Magtaal residents often did, that all subjects are constructed through and motivated by mutually-entangled networks in a social universe, then the concept of an objectively-motivated, non-socially-orientated subject is difficult, if not bizarre, to conceive. I realized with time that the indictment of ‘spy’ was a moniker implemented when the networks—the social embeddedness, construction and familial allegiance—of a subject were unclear, provoking moral confusion over a failed positioning in the social universe.

Anti-state narratives—contesting national allegiance

Another ongoing controversy in Magtaal—the rise of anti-state narratives—can be similarly described as a contestation over interpretive frameworks. Whereas in my case, with the spy moniker, I have been compared (and found wanting) to an idealized expectation of my behaviour, a similar mental exercise is

¹⁰ Dumont reaches a similar conclusion that the contemporary tenets of the scientific method presuppose a distinction between social value (concepts of the good) and objective reality: ‘...we moderns separate science, aesthetics, and morals. And the nature of our science is such that its existence by itself explains or rather implies the separation between the truth on the one hand [and] the beautiful and the good on the other...’ (Dumont 1986: 236).

undertaken vis-à-vis the contemporary state. For example, I chose the opening vignette, because the mobilization of local citizens against their government seemingly contradicts the well-documented pervasiveness of Mongolian nationalism and patriotism (Billé 2013, 2015; Bulag 1998; Kaplonski 1998; Lhamsuren 2006) amongst residents and towards the state. At the same time, anthropologists have documented the prevalence of suspicion and enmity experienced as ‘generalised witchcraft’ (Højer 2018; Pedersen 2011; Swancutt 2012) within countryside Mongolian relations. In Magtaal, I find that these trajectories combine and suspicions, accusations and enmity rise—aka curses fly as either a moral corrective or admonition—when subjects or entities are perceived as not meeting their idealized moral behavioural attribution. In my case, I did not fulfil my attribution and was morally condemned as ‘spy’. From a slightly different angle, the opening vignette presented a clash between an Ulaanbaatar-based politician and the local township members. In my reading of this encounter, part of the ire amongst local residents was that protestors had an expected vision of a politician’s role—as authority working in the common Mongolian social and economic interest—that is not being met by the politician’s behaviour. As a result of this perceived failure on the part of the politician, moral condemnation and accusation abounded. I thus wish to draw attention to this common ethnographic occurrence in Magtaal—to the comparison of an actor’s behaviour to an idealized expectation, which results in moral condemnation (as corrective) when found lacking. This moral opprobrium is a powerful behaviour corrective in Mongolia.

In the case of politicians and the state, Magtaal citizens often accuse the state of having become too ‘foreign’ as a moral condemnation. This point has been similarly made by Billé in his discussion of anti-Chinese hate speech in Mongolia. According to Billé, moral opprobrium and accusations of being ‘bad subjects’ are hurled at Mongolians whose personal and intimate aspirations are not perceived as dovetailing with ‘the good of the nation’ (Billé 2013). Likewise, Magtaal subjects often pose the question ‘Who is the real (*jinhene*) Mongolian?’ when morally evaluating not only their own behaviour, but the political trajectory of the state. In Magtaal, anger towards the state has been bolstered by the ongoing presence of a Chinese oil company. In 2005, a major Chinese-

government-owned oil company purchased an oil field in the *soum* to the west of Magtaal. Although the company wasn't formally in Magtaal at the time, the company started sending lorries of oil across Magtaal to its northern border crossing, creating massive plumes of dust. In 2011, various Magtaal citizens staged a failed protest at the border crossing to demand an adequate road. This action went largely unheeded and, by 2014, the company moved to Magtaal to set up a second oil field. Magtaal residents thus have simmering resentments towards the company, which is perceived as a foreign entity that carries out actions without consideration of the local community. In discussion of economic fears over the same company's worker composition, Pedersen and Bunkenborg quote a countryside resident who asks, 'Thousands of Chinese workers and hundreds of people from Ulaanbaatar are working at the...oil field. But only few people from this district have been able to find work there, some of whom were subsequently fired, and this despite the fact that we are desperate to find jobs here! How can this be fair?' (Pedersen & Bunkenborg 2012: 563). Similarly, the oil field in Magtaal grows daily, but only a handful of Magtaal natives are employed at the oil field (which employs over 4,000 individuals)¹¹ and all as either cooks, cleaners or entry level drill operators.¹² Residents have protested several time and made several complaints to their politicians regarding the company to little avail. Consequently, the ongoing tensions between the local residents and the oil field not only stir up resentment vis-à-vis the foreign company, but, moreover, bitter anger vis-à-vis the state, which is perceived as neither resolute nor authoritative enough to act to the benefit of its citizens over foreign economic interests.¹³ In continuation of Billé's description of hate speech towards 'bad subjects', hate speech, in a sense, is also on the rise

¹¹ According to official statistics I received from the Mongolian government office at the oil company in October 2016, there were 262 formal Mongolian employees and 94 formal Chinese employees. Discussions with long-time employees revealed, however, that the company contracts multiple Chinese firms for short-term repairs and services—i.e. oil transport, nature rehabilitation, drilling companies, drill repair and cartography. These supporting companies thereby comprise an additional 3,000 to 4,000 (mostly Chinese) individuals. This situation explains the difference in perception between local Mongolian individuals—who perceive the oil company camp to be occupied by mostly Chinese citizens—and the official numbers, which present the oil company's camp as having a Mongolian majority.

¹² <http://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/12257>

¹³ The word commonly implemented to describe the widespread sentiment of disappointment vis-à-vis the state is 'hashrah', which means being exhausted, burned or fed up by i.e. previously having high hopes for something that has been bitterly disappointed.

towards the 'bad state' and 'bad politicians'. The allegiance of politicians and the state is seen as increasingly orientated towards foreign capital and foreign interests and not towards the good of everyday residents of Magtaal. As a result, the censorious question 'Who is the *real* Mongolian?' is extended to 'Who is the *real* Mongolian politician?' and 'Is this a *real* Mongolian state?'

The skirmish over the FTZ must thus be understood against this historical backdrop. In line with the trajectory of these sentiments, residents increasingly feel and rhetorically express a growing cultural chasm between themselves and Ulaanbaatar-based politicians. To return to the denouement of the free trade zone plan, the 75th resolution was eventually declared illegal and was rescinded at the end of 2016. This victory was short-lived, however, because the next ruling party into office reconceptualized the plan and changed it from a free trade zone into an 'agricultural industrial zone'. After the passing of this second zone, which was to be located on the same land area in Magtaal, this second party, too, was ousted from office. As of 2018, the industrial zone resolution still stands, but its political future remains unclear and residents live in limbo. These experiences of political frustration have engendered an increasingly 'detectable system-awareness in the everyday consciousness and actions of subjects' lives' (Marcus 1995: 111)—an imagined visualization of the larger political governance system and their constructed positionality as countryside, marginalized 'other' within it (Tsing 1994). To illustrate the waxing social, cultural and political chasm between Magtaal lifeworlds and the actions of Ulaanbaatar-based political representatives, local residents often use hierarchically spatialized, class and wealth-based terminology. Ulaanbaatar politicians are depicted as 'elites' (*elit*), 'the government people' (*uls törchid*) 'the big bosses' (*tom tom darga nar*), the lords (*ezenten*),¹⁴ the high rankers (*deedchүүл*), the rich (*bayachuud*), 'from above' (*deereesee*), the people that came from over there/from the city (*tendees, hotoos*), the billionaires (*terbumtan*). In contrast, I have often heard residents refer to themselves as 'the people' (*ard түмен*), 'the poor' (*yaduuchuud*) and as '*har borchuud*'—a term that literally translates to 'black and brown people' but figuratively means the

¹⁴ Although, interestingly, used less often for politicians, and more often for bosses in patron/client relations.

‘working class’, ‘the proletariat’ or ‘the dispossessed’.¹⁵ These terms will crop up repeatedly in quotes across the thesis as self-designations from Magtaal citizens vis-à-vis Ulaanbaatar elites. Thus, although adulation of the state and nation as concept has been widely documented in Mongolian ethnography, my research evinces that contemporary changes within the state are sparking a reformulation of the state’s hierarchical positioning (opening up space for other hierarchical actors). In Magtaal, an ethos of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’ has emerged, which proudly situates local residents in opposition to their state politicians, framing them as morally superior to corrupted (‘not real’) Mongolian politicians.

[A theory of Mongolian moral sentiments](#)

I hope to have described how local moral aspersions often reveal a moral debate over an interpretative social framework. By extension, throughout the writing of this thesis, I recognized similar moral correctives for economic behaviour. For example, in the aforementioned, the state is maligned as not performing in the interest of local individuals and residents, which is materialized through the state’s economic behaviour—i.e. is wealth being distributed to local residents or being created for foreign residents? Moral concerns over the correct usage of economic wealth have become contested terrain in contemporary Magtaal. I first became aware of these economic moral evaluations, because the structure of my research funding often made me cogitate on the local role and interpretation of exchange-based transactions. My research was funded, but in order to receive money back, I had to have local residents fill out receipts to hand into the funding body. This resulted in many hilarious situations, but also made me uncomfortable, because it often framed my presence in Magtaal as an exchange relationship. For example, I lived with Baatar and family for a long time and, considering our differences in wealth, wanted to economically contribute. In order to be reimbursed, however, I had to sit down with Baatar and quantify, on paper, our relationship to one another. I realized that in a social universe where many people do not know each other extendedly over time, exchange-based transactions (i.e. eye for an eye, equivalence, tit-for-tat, reciprocal exchange) allow people to define their

¹⁵ See chapter 1 for detailed definition

relations to one another.¹⁶ Yet, in settings like Magtaal—where people are reciprocally embroiled on deeper, existential levels (i.e. a mother/child relation or best friends) in ongoing chains of mutual aid and effort—qualifying and quantifying seems deeply antisocial, because ‘paying off’ (being square or even with someone) would hypothetically end the relationship and the economic social tie. Returning to the aforementioned spy deliberations, the roles ascribed to foreigners—a subject positioning that is by definition not entangled in local social networks—suddenly made more sense. ‘NGO worker’, ‘missionary’, ‘English teacher’, etc., are often transactive social roles; they often offer the local Mongolian community a service or benefit—be it, infrastructure, knowledge, money and/or language skill—in return for local toleration and integration. Although I did teach some English, I was initially predominantly a social other who did not have a clearly defined transactional role—once again, provoking moral confusion about my positionality. The longer I stayed in Magtaal, however, and the longer my relations with local individuals built up over time and intertwined, the more I felt the social perception around me shift. Later in my fieldwork, I was often asked if I wanted to go into business with local residents to become a ‘changer’—a middlemen boss in economic commodity chains and a subject position often reserved for local residents with high reputation, social capital and foreign contacts (to expedite the economic business chains). In this way, I had made the fraught leap from foreign, transactive ‘other’ to local, hierarchical boss subject category. I wore the abrasion scars from repeatedly bumping up against local interpretative social frames, but this process taught me to become aware of the larger economic classificatory moral system at work.

Indeed, economic anthropologists have long been aware of multiple, overlapping economic moral narratives and categories simultaneously at play in any one society. In *The Gift*, Mauss argues that the popular Western conceptualization of economics as a moral world based on concepts of material

¹⁶ As alluded, this transaction-based relationship was morally acceptable when I first arrived in Magtaal and maintained a defined status as social outsider, but became increasingly uncomfortable the longer I stayed in Magtaal. By the end, both Baatar and I barely looked at the receipts, in attempts to reduce the social inappropriateness of quantifying our relationship to one another.

maximization, rationality and advantage misrecognizes and elides the pervasiveness of social dealings, conviviality and collective furtherance (commonly manifested in the form of 'gifts') as a motivation for economic exchange (1993 [1925]). Although he opines that 'our Western societies' are the ones who 'quite recently turned man into an economic [read: material maximization-orientated] animal' (1993: 76), having a profound impact on how we perceive human subjectivity in society, he also emphasizes that multiple forms of moral economic transactions occur 'everywhere' in every society simultaneously (79). This recognition has incited diverse economic anthropologists, like Polanyi (2001 [1944]), Wallerstein (1986) and Sahlins (1974), to posit multiple overlapping moral sentiments in attempts to construct holistic societal explanatory frameworks on human economic interaction. Seminally, Sahlins, inspired by Polanyi, delineates a spectrum of schemes of reciprocity reoccurring within societies where the social relation exerts governance over the flow of goods (1974: 191–6). Although, as discussed by Sneath (2006), the term 'reciprocity' is misleading, this spectrum is crucial in depicting how the proximity of affinity between two parties is instrumental in framing the moral (concretized as material) transfer involved between the parties. In *Debt*, Graeber (2011, 2014a) continues this trajectory by advancing three fundamental modes of economic organization—1) reciprocal exchange, 2) communism and 3) hierarchy—that reoccur throughout human societies and '...each carr[y] within it its own form of morality, its own way of thinking and arguing about the rights and wrongs of any given situation...' (2011: 94). Although these categories should be understood as frameworks, and not deterministic typecasts, they are helpful in describing contemporary moral contestations in reference to economic behaviour.

To Graeber, there are three economic moral modes reoccurring in any society (and any institution) that are associated, based on the cultural mooring, with specific social characteristics between the actors involved (2011, 2014a). The first mode, reciprocal exchange, is the most recognisable to Western observers, because it lies at the root of the principle of commercial exchange central to Western economic understandings. Importantly, he emphasizes that transactional exchange is based on a concept of equivalence (i.e. eye for an

eye, tit for tat) that allows actors in the exchange to walk away from one another once the deal has been completed (2011: 104), because the actors are now considered even. Therefore, 'exchange' can best operate uncomplicatedly in social situations where the actors are socially distant and unlikely to encounter one another again. But exchange does not work well in situations where actors are socially close (i.e. best friends) or socially-intertwined (like neighbours in Magtaal), where a focus on equivalence might be perceived as a social affront. Consequently, he calls the economic moral mode based on close social proximity a form of 'communism'—i.e. the principle that various economic actors offer and take what they can, according to their own abilities. Interestingly, Graeber argues that 'communism', and not reciprocity, is the foundation for all human sociality (96), because it can be seen everywhere in the myriad of ways that people work together (from small forms of help like bumming cigarettes and trading weather news to inter-familial sharing, inter-collegial work, team projects, etc.). This economic mode of sharing is based on the understanding (whether cognizant or not) of subjecthood as mutually intertwined and interdependent (i.e. family or society) with others. Rhetorically, it is described, based on context, through actions of 'solidarity', 'mutual aid', 'conviviality', or even, 'help' (2014a: 67). These descriptors of sharing and aid, however, are not used in situations where individuals occupy drastically different social positions to one another. Such forms of economic interrelation are neither based on reciprocity, nor sharing, but on 'hierarchy'. For example, economic transfers between a prince and commoners is often not induced based on goodwill, but on precedent i.e. upholding the expected traditions and customs of giving and taking.

My intuition is that Mongolian moral evaluations of economic modes also reveal a classificatory system similar in nature, but different in local idiomatic expression, to Graeber's concepts. For starters, two different Mongolian terms used as a synonym for 'economy' contain clues as to the moral relations embedded in indigenous economic models—specifically, 'ediin zasag' as idealized hierarchical model; and '*zah zee*' as idealized behavioural spectrum stretching from communitarian to exchange-based relations. The first is the word 'ediin zasag', which is translated by Sneath as the 'governance of

property' (Sneath 2002: 201), and encompasses ideals of hierarchical relations in economics (201-3). According to Sneath, *ed* can be diversely translated as 'possessions', 'property', 'thing', 'article' or 'item', but has positive and negative moral valences based on how the *ed* is distributed (201). Consequently, *ed* needs good governance to distribute itself in a morally proper manner. Therefore, *zasag*, the first part of the term, refers to government, but, historically, to the lord of a patrimonial fiefdom. Combined, *ediin zasag* is often associated with hierarchical holistic systems of wealth distribution—i.e. when all property and land in a fiefdom nominally belonged to the hierarchical sovereign, who would then apportion the land access and proceeds to subjects (203). According to the understandings of governance embedded within this term (Plueckhahn & Bumochir 2018), the authoritative superior in the hierarchical relation should take control to effectuate the best possible, multi-level economic organization, in order to safeguard the material prosperity of all. Consequently, *ediin zasag* implies both that 'the economic' is a holistic process of interrelation between multiple actors in hierarchical tiers, but also that its distribution and governance has moral implications.

The second semantic compound I wish to highlight is the contemporarily-popular term of '*zah zeel*'—a linkage that Wheeler translates in meaning to 'the market' and is often used in the post-1990 byword 'the age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*) (Sneath 2002, 2012; Wheeler 2004). Furthermore, *zah zeel* is a linkage of two terms that both have multiple meanings associated with different types of markets (Wheeler 2004: 225). For one, *zah* is a word that translates as 'border', 'margin' or 'frontier', but is also separately used to indicate 'open air market'. Not surprisingly, these two things often coincided historically—markets were often specifically constructed at the borders between Mongolian and Chinese ethnic groups to regulate the trade between these cultural communities.¹⁷ *Zeel*, in contrast, pertains historically to shopping thoroughfares

¹⁷ Wheeler discusses how the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) carried out trade with Mongolians at either court or regulated border markets (2004: 226). Following Jagchid and Hyer, he argues that border markets were a reoccurring phenomenon as the site of legitimate exchange between diverse Mongolian and Chinese polities (Jagchid & Hyer 1979: 306–7; Wheeler 2004). In Magtaal's general vicinity, from the late 18th-century to the early 20th-century, a yearly border market had emerged between the end of August and beginning of September around the Barga monastery of 'Ganjuur'. This market was located on the border between the Barga and Outer Mongolian territories (on contemporary Magtaal *soum*'s border). It operated annually for nearly

within cities (so, 'market streets'), which often contained shops that offered the other form of *zeel*—a loan.¹⁸ Wheeler (2004) consequently argues, based on the merging of the multiple market symbolism embedded in these two terms, that this indigenous economic idiom offers a construct that morally approves both ideals of collective control (*zah*) and individualism (*zeel*). Based on my understanding of *zeel*, however, I offer a slightly alternative reading. To me, *zah* embodies socially-condoned reciprocal transactions performed with social others—e.g. Chinese dynasties, foreign emissaries or Silk Road caravans.¹⁹ In contrast, *zeel* refers to socially-sanctioned extended relations of loaning, sharing, borrowing and distribution amongst individuals jointly-embroiled in networks of economic mutuality over time. Such an approach to the *zah zeel* compound echoes with Sahlin's continuum of schemes of reciprocity based on social distance between the actors; the more relations move from social affinity to social distance, Sahlin's argues, the more forms of 'reciprocity' move from open sharing, to direct exchange, to unsociable appropriation (Sahlins 1974: 191–6). Whereas some aspects of Sahlin's model do not apply,²⁰ I do view *zah zeel* as a compound that combines Sahlins' and Graeber's economic moral frameworks. *Zah zeel* encompasses an idealized moral framework that stretches from relations of communitarianism to exchange that are morally approved based on whether the actors involved are social allies or social strangers, respectively. Conceived together, these two economic idioms encompass emic directives for hierarchy, (out-group) exchange and (in-group) sharing.

Evaluations of contemporary economic behaviours to idealized moral renditions occur and will be deliberated on throughout this thesis. As evinced through the ethnographic contestations over my positionality and the politician's allegiance,

150 years and became formalized between governments—tax proceeds from stands were split 60/40 for the Chinese and Mongolian governments, respectively (Kormazov 1928: 95).

¹⁸ As will be discussed extensively with chapter 4, '*zeel*' refers to multiple forms of loaning (including sharing and borrowing), but has been particularly co-opted by the post-1990 finance system to indicate all manner of exchange-based bank loans.

¹⁹ Therefore, equivalence-based transactions are not bad, they just must be done with certain recipients

²⁰ In particular the emphasis on reciprocity—between notably close relations, the word *zeel* is often no longer used and is replaced by the term 'help', which is often non-reciprocal and approaches a 'free gift' (Laidlaw 2000). The usage of the word 'help' overlaps with Graeber's description of communitarian relations.

these moral modes are not prescriptive, but descriptive evaluative frameworks. For example, when I first arrived in Magtaal, the central economic organizing principle I was evaluated on (and often failed) was an exchange-orientated discourse based on my social status as foreigner. As I became increasingly integrated into the community, I was progressively morally evaluated as a social compatriot, pushing me, in Graeber's terms, from an 'exchange' to a more 'communistic' moral evaluation.²¹ Thus, my intention in describing these categories is to describe tendencies for how moral controversy, and claims for moral legitimacy, is often formed—by comparing lived behaviour to idealized exemplars. I noticed throughout my fieldwork that diverse forms of gifts, debts and trade in Magtaal were often found to be moral or immoral based on the economic action's convincing assimilation into available moral categories for proper hierarchical, communitarian or exchange-motivated behaviours. As the economy changes, actors continue to make moral claims based on these wonted categories.

Part 2: Literature background

The contemporary state and its breakdown

The aforementioned moral crisis towards the state has partly arisen in Magtaal due to widespread post-industrial, post-socialist sentiment that the contemporary state is failing in comparison to its socialist predecessor. Because Magtaal soum centre was founded during the socialist era as a collective state farm, contemporary local apprehensions of the state are steeped in comparative nostalgias, longings for the past and tensions over contemporary insufficiency. Popular, legal and theoretical conceptualizations of states during much of the 20th century were influenced by the Westphalian model of state territorial sovereignty and Weberian concepts of rational-legal state authority—in short, the apprehension of the state as a governance entity that had sole and pervasive legal and authoritative jurisdiction over its territory. Although diverging structures of statehood existed prior to the socialist era (Sneath 2007), the Mongolian People's Republic (1924-1990) actively strived to construct a centrally-governed, all-encompassing nation-state system (Bulag 1998). By

²¹ Albeit a hierarchical one, since changers are also considered hierarchical local actors, like petty bosses.

extension, contemporary Magtaal township was founded in 1972 as the site of an extensive agricultural state farm (*sangiin aj ahui*). Between 1972 and the late 80s, hundreds of families were resettled in the township in order to build up and maintain the Magtaal agricultural cooperative and its facilities—which gradually expanded into a school, a library, cultural centre, a dairy, fruit farm, mechanic garage, hospital, research centre, military compound and multiple two-story flat blocks replete with electricity, heating and water filtration systems. By 1989, the booming cooperative boasted a population of 4,308²² and had won the award of most productive farm in both 1984 and 1989 (Ts. Davaajargal et al. 2006). Similar to Gupta and Ferguson’s description of contemporary imagined state spatializations as an entity that guards from above (‘verticality’) and is all-inclusive (‘encompassment’) (2002), Magtaal residents fondly recall how their membership in the state farm made them feel recognized, included and protected by a paternal, total organizational and provisioning system.

In whimsical recollection, former workers recall that the Magtaal state farm cultivated a sense of being in the technological, cultural and historical vanguard. A respected local historian and former leader of the state farm’s youth brigade recounted that the founders of the state farm had intended for it to become the centre of a new Dornod state (*muj*). Magtaal’s surrounding land was widely considered to be some of the most fecund arable land in Mongolia²³ and, in consequence, the state farm was allocated an unusual amount of infrastructure and attention. At the time of its founding, for example, it consisted of 30,000 hectares of arable land, which increased to 40,000 in 1986. In contrast, the next largest state farm in the aimag, Herlen, boasted 10,000 hectares. In order to accommodate these large numbers and ambitious goals, the city planners set themselves the task of building a new city in a fairly uninhabited steppe. A book released in 2012 in memory of the state farm’s magnitude recalls: ‘By July 1976, the state farm was able to build the following with the help of Soviet technology:...[they received] eighteen two-story buildings housing 288 families

²² According to the Dornod Government’s Statistics Office, the population of Magtaal’s state farm peaked in 1989, its final year, at 4,308 individuals.

²³ Magtaal was considered warmer than other agricultural regions in Mongolia, notably Selenge aimag. As a result, its average agricultural season was over 30 days longer with more precipitation and thus more fecund (Komarov & Ganchimeg 2012: 6).

outfitted with steam heating and water filtration systems; a primary school with 10 school years with an occupancy of 560 children; a boarding house for 160 school children; a hospital with 50 beds; a social club with an occupancy of 200; a kindergarten with 100 cribs; a canteen and store; a service centre; an steam heating power plant; an electricity plant; a telephone connection centre; paved roads; and a many thousand planted trees...' (Komarov & Ganchimeg 2012: 7–9). Residents also recall that there were 360 cars working on the fields moving harvest; Magtaal had a Soviet consulate that oversaw the local placement of Soviet agricultural experts; and an air field with flight accessibility. The result of this usual infrastructure provisioning was inimitable productivity. The aforementioned historical recounts how Magtaal's agricultural yield was 22/23 centner of wheat per hectare in 1989,²⁴ which broke Mongolia's state record (2012: 8). As a result, Magtaal provided 82 percent of the wheat needed by Choibalsan's central flour factory to provision the eastern regions of Mongolia (Suhbaatar, Choibalsan and Hentii aimags) with flour. Former participants of the state farm retell that they were highly motivated and felt as in the grips of a historical, upward transformation. Indeed, Magtaal's state farms was unusual in the its speed of growth, infrastructure complexity and location; the founders veritably built a city in the Mongolian frontier.

²⁴ In contrast to 15-17 centner at other state farms. A 'centner' was a metric unit equal to 100 kilograms and was used in the Soviet Union.



*Figure 4: The remains of the socialist state farm's agricultural refinery as it looked in 2017.
Photo taken by Doljinsuren.*

However, the progression of historical and technological advancement suddenly careened to a stop. One year after the local state farm received an accolade, the socialist system collapsed. Immediately, in the post-socialist moment, the former workers attempted to carry on planting 38,000 hectares of the arable fields. But by 1996, due to funding and distance issues,²⁵ only 2,000 hectares were still being utilized. As a result, by the time of my fieldwork in 2015, the population of the township had dropped in half to roughly 1,700 individuals. As recounted in other post-socialist Mongolian ethnographic contexts (Buyandelger

²⁵ Residents recounted that, once the socialist system collapsed, the aforementioned flour factory required less wheat and thus preferred to purchase off of local fields. Because Magtaal's fields were far away and thus more expensive to transport, the local farmers couldn't stay competitive.

2013; Pedersen 2011), the breakdown of the system engendered 'a pervasive sense of post-socialist chaos, crisis, and loss...containing the forces of disintegration [and] felt to have released unknown and invisible agents of post-socialist transition, from alcoholism and violence to soul loss' (Pedersen 2011: 30). The marked shrinking of the town, infrastructural decline and withdrawal of state provisioning engendered an affective 'dreamscape' (Muehlebach & Shoshan 2012) of whimsical regret, nostalgia and longing for a bygone era similar to post-Fordist (Muehlebach 2012; Thorleifsson 2016), post-industrial (Bear 2015) and post-Soviet (Kalb 2009; Reeves 2014a) contexts the world over. Now, when one walks into the township, old decrepit signs call attention to the booming, total organizational state system that once existed here—a rusty state farm billboard outside the government building still reads 'the state is the master of the person, the person is the jewel of the state' (*hümüünd tör erhem törd hümüün erdene*). The veneer of rust and chipped paint on this sign mirror contemporary citizens' feelings toward their state—underneath the façade, they still profess hope for an overarching state system that has, nevertheless, been eroded and corrupted by years of weathering and disregard. In short, the exuberance of affect and possibility experienced in Magtaal prior to socialist collapse makes all the more stark the feelings of neglect and abandonment in the contemporary moment.

Consequently, in order to better understand the contemporary manoeuvrability (and vulnerabilities) of Magtaal citizens, the state should be conceptualized not as a solid, territorially all-encompassing entity, but as a 'chessboard' (Reeves 2014a) of gaps and disputed spaces. As evinced by this story of protest, the government and state is not so much absent in this border region, but contested. Similarly, increased scholarly attention on the phenomenon of 'neoliberalism' (discussed below)—an ideology that purports to separate governmental interference from market economic functioning—has inspired anthropologists to 'reformulate the spatial and scalar assumptions of governmentality' (Gupta & Ferguson 2002: 996). In contrast to a traditional Westphalian apprehension of the state (as solid territory with borders as lines) and Weberian concept of a legal apparatus with the legitimate usage of force, the contemporary ideological privileging of 'the economy' (Appel 2017; Callon

1998; Polanyi 2001 [1944]) has been said to affect the protean form of the state in multiple ways—either as undergoing a ‘retreat’ or ‘rolling back’ through the displacement of traditional welfare responsibilities onto extra-state actors (Barry et al. 2005); as striated by zones of ‘graduated sovereignty’ (Ong 2000); as experiencing not a breakdown, but an ‘unbundling of sovereignty’ through dispersion of responsibilities (Ruggie 1993); and as a ‘decentering’ or ‘denationalizing’ of states to focus on monetary mobility (Sassen 2015), including increased securitization and control of trade flows (Chalfin 2010; Galemba 2018). Additionally, the irregularity of flows across the border lends itself to a perception of borders, not as solid lines, but as punctuated by holes like a piece of Swiss cheese—not only are borders the ‘political membranes through which peoples, goods, wealth and information must pass in order to be deemed acceptable or unacceptable by the state’ (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 9), but they represent a ‘zone of possibility’ (Reeves 2014a: 165) that contributes to various backdoor flows. The state that Magtaal citizens currently encounter is thus not a solid unit, but a contested, variegated authority.

Neoliberalism

Reconceptualizations of state spatializations have been particularly encouraged by increased attention on neoliberalism as an ideology that encourages international monetary flows at the expense of state sovereignty (Gupta & Ferguson 2002; Sassen 2015). Neoliberalism, in its most basic rendition, refers to a political ideology that privileges the autonomy of the economy. The role of this state, in this conceptualization, is as guarantor of (but not as participant in) an economic structure, within which individual actors and entities can economically engage freely with one another. This concept was initially enthusiastically received and applied to a whole manner of contemporary global changes—from the rise of occult economies and speculative capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000); to the intensification of individual and entrepreneurial subjectivities (Englund 2006); a hegemonic system of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2005); the shifting of class alliances (Graeber 2014b); and the rise of ‘shareholder value’ and intensified financialization (Ho 2009). Because this term has been variously (and at time, liberally) applied to contemporary changes, it has also been criticized as an

'overarching trope' (Kipnis 2007) that glosses over and lumps various tendencies together instead of 'exactly [showing] which policies, or traditions of thoughts, or discursive actions that author is defining as neoliberal' (Reeves 2014b, quoting Marr). Although I agree that 'neoliberalism' as concept cannot be implemented as a blanket descriptor for post-1990 market, governance and subjectivity changes, its specific ideological character did influence the creation of the contemporary market democratic system in Mongolia and thus has credence for our analysis.

The concept of neoliberalism appertains to Magtaal, because this ideology directly influenced the construction of the post-1990 Mongolian market democratic system. The larger economic philosophy behind neoliberalism is defined by Harvey as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey 2005: 2).

Accepting this definition, neoliberalism's most pervasive and impactful expression has been through the widespread implementation of 'structural adjustment' programmes and reforms. 'Structural adjustment' refers to a series of loans distributed (often in the latter half of the 20th century) by the IMF and World Bank to developing countries, which stipulated the removal of government regulation and fiscal control as a condition of their dispersal. These loans often comprised mechanisms of regulatory disciplining, because these funding bodies often oversaw and advised politicians to construct developing economies in line with their models—often in return for additional future loans. Years later, the increased economic inequalities that structural adjustment programmes have incited are ethnographically well documented (see i.e. Englund 2006 for Malawi; Ferguson 2006 for Zambia; Han 2012 for Chile; Li 2015 for Indonesia; Roitman 2005 for Cameroon) . In Mongolia's case, the government has received IMF loans with structural adjustment conditions in

1993, 1996, 1997 and 1999, which resulted in ‘the privatisation of public assets, price liberalisation, cutting state subsidies and expenditure, currency convertibility and the rapid introduction of markets’ (Sneath 2012: 464).

Because of its opaque nature, my usage of the term ‘neoliberalism’ is restricted to descriptions of the contemporary state-directed economic and political philosophy. This includes post-1990 governmental efforts to construct (Callon 1998) and privilege ‘the economy’ (Appel 2017; Polanyi 2001 [1944]) as an autonomous sphere. To be sure, many post-1990 political, economic and cultural changes in Magtaal fall under the general rubric of ‘neoliberalism’—the post-1990 moment saw the rise of economic inequalities, entrepreneurial activities, debt-based financing, effects of precariousness, emphasis on private property, financialization, and more. But, to quote Reeves, ‘many of the people we work with are preoccupied less with distancing themselves from neoliberalism than with making this particular constellation of economic and shifts (however we label them) work for them’ (Reeves 2014b: 142). Indeed, residents in Magtaal do not describe the contemporary changes as ‘neoliberal’²⁶ and thus I refrain from labelling the diverse strategies and contemporary engagements of local residents as such. Additionally, this thesis draws frequent comparisons between contemporary economic changes and the 19th-century Qing Dynastic era, because of many uncanny similarities between economic phenomena in regards to debt, trade, moneylending and resource extraction between the two eras. This is not meant to be historically deterministic, but rather to tease out what is and what is not different about contemporary economic behaviour with reference to trading patterns of the past. For example, debt financing, in response to a lack of wealth, happened both during the Qing and currently and is thus difficult to describe as a mark of ‘neoliberalism’. What is new, in contrast, is the perceived removal of state-allocated provisioning and economic authority in combination with the monetization and financialization of

²⁶ Rather, as indicated by the protest vignette, residents most often brush up against this ideology in moments of confrontation with Ulaanbaatar-based state actors. As elucidated by an incident in chapter 4, non-local politicians and state actors will often quote and reproduce these narratives towards local residents. There is thus no term for ‘neoliberalism’ among local residents; these narratives, however, do induce feelings of being misunderstood and not heard among the local populace.

the economy—leading to the rise of entrepreneurial economic networks to meet subsistence needs. This is, however, a locally-inflected constellation that is indeed intertwined with the policies of neoliberalism, but not solely a product of it.

Chains and networks

Increasing scholarly and popular awareness of the fracturing and inapplicability of holistic models (to contemporary states among other phenomena) has engendered a cross-disciplinary interest in a multiplicity of lines, chains and networks. Related to the aforementioned discussions of ‘chessboard’ (Reeves 2014a: 3) states and neoliberalism, the eruption of anxieties over globalization—as a phenomenon that challenges conventional understandings of global power spatialization—has led to novel approaches to apprehending the interrelation between the global and local—i.e. global ‘scapes’ instead of nation-states (Appadurai 1990); ‘glocalization’ (Bauman 2013); ‘territory, authority, rights assemblages’ (Sassen 2015); and ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005). Similar thought trajectories have inspired post-structuralist theorists to disregard holist frames altogether—Latour, for example, famously attacks Durkheimian tendencies in social theory to unearth overarching discourses like ‘society’ instead of tracing specific associations between heterogeneous elements that create states of affairs (Latour 2008: 5). The resulting school of thought, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), conceptualizes the social and natural world as comprised of networks of human and non-human actors in ongoing dialectical relationship (also conceptualized as ‘meshworks’)(Ingold 2017; Latour 1993, 2008). Within economics and sociology, the theme of lines, nodes and networks has achieved different manifestations in discussions of digitization and information technology—e.g. ‘network society’ (Castells 2000); or ‘blockchain’ technologies—and in increased attention on globally-extended economic commodity/value chains (Gereffi 1994; Hopkins & Wallerstein 1986) and finance chains (Sokol 2017). This attention on lines and networks as tools to circumnavigate the fractured narratives of modernity resonates with the Magtaal context, where economic circulation networks, in their various manifestations, are being harnessed to navigate the vagaries and exigencies of the current Mongolian economic/political system.

Actor/network

Actor-Network theory is useful for conceptualizing dynamics in Magtaal for its narrowing of theoretical scope down to specific collective assemblages that make situations possible. Latour argues that social theorists and scientists frequently presume larger frameworks (like national, culture, society, gender) in their analysis of the social/natural world (Latour 2008). To avoid bias, Latour draws attention to describing specific confluences of actors in networks and argues that non-human influences, like computers, the natural world or materials (like wood), are critical actors in the influencing of events. Somewhat polemically, Latour asserts that ANT should be ‘flat’—that human actors are not privileged as actants in this narrative, but that all (also non-human) actors should be equally considered. As a result, Latour also explicates that ANT is not a theory of social relations of human actors—‘it does not wish to add social networks to social theory but to rebuild social theory out of networks’ (Latour 1996: 2). Ingold (Ingold 2017) expounds upon ANT by apprehending the social/natural world as ‘meshworks’—a plethora of line segments that meet at nodes envisioned as knots. Because connections between entities co-respond, he theorizes, meshworks are founded on and continually creates relations of heterogeneity. Of course, in contrast to Latour, the networks I discuss in this work are predominantly human-enabled and forged in relation to human actors’ envisioning and experiencing of the world.

Commodity chains research

In contrast to the philosophical musings of ANT, commodity and value chain research draws attention to the recent exponential proliferation of chains as a capitalist mode of organization. The term ‘commodity chain’ was first coined by Wallerstein and Hopkins to describe the dominant form of global economic inclusion in the mercantilist ‘long 16th century’—it is ‘a network of labor and production processes whose end results is a finished commodity’ (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1986: 159). According to their World Systems Theory, commodity chains ‘structure and reproduce a stratified and hierarchical world-system’ (156) that is divided between dominant countries (often where the chain ends) and peripheral countries (often where the chain begins). Because World Systems Theory is largely theoretical, macro and descriptive, it has inspired further

economic re-conceptualizations that focus on understanding chains in the hopes of creating prescriptive country and sector-based analysis. Global Commodity Chain (GCC) and Global Value Chain (GVC) research has emerged from this line of thinking to focus on the specific constellations of chains and how actors and countries can reposition themselves to capture more value (Bair 2005). Although the plethora of research that has resulted from this trajectory does discuss the flexible usage and implementation of chains by various actors, they are 'less effective in capturing how social relations are forged and negotiated in the face of exchange relations' across space and place (West 2005: 242).

Due to the stipulations of multi-sited ethnography, anthropological studies on commodity chains have been less forthcoming. Although ethnographers have often focused on consumption (Miller 2012); the creation of commodities (Gregory 2015; Strathern 1988); and the 'social life of things' from gift to commodity and back again (Appadurai 1986b); commodity chain research often requires the anthropologist to leave their habitual 'single-site location' and 'follow the thing' (Cook 2004; Marcus 1995). This call was brilliantly taken up by geographer Ian Cook, who traces the movement of Jamaican papayas from their industrial origins through the reoccurring process of 'unravelling and becoming more entangled' in images and values as they move to the British consumer's table (2004). Diverse ethnographers like Mintz (arguably the first anthropological commodity chain researcher) (1985), West (West 2012) and Dolan (2007) discusses how sugar, coffee and fairtrade flowers, respectively, change drastically in meaning and motivation as they move from one leg in the chain to another. Exemplarily, Anna Tsing has combined ANT network approaches and Marxist notions of primitive accumulation to discuss how mushroom commodity chains subsist off of value absorption from the social and natural landscape to make economic returns for further investment into more capital returns (2013, 2017).

As evinced, the visual of chains and networks as patterns of organization and interrelation have become commonplace in an era defined by the breakdown of holistic narratives. The capitalist emphasis on the free movement of money unencumbered by authoritative mechanisms has engendered vertical cross

sections of flow across geopolitical space. Flexible and context-dependent, these streams striate generalizing narratives of territory, legalities, states, cultures and scale and resist models that aim to typecast them. In this vein, the geographer Sokol has argued that the literature on financialization, the growing power of finance over societies and economies, has so far ignored its inherent spatial element as networks of value that link diverse scales from national economic space, to firm/corporation, to household/individual level. He calls for a new research agenda on 'financial chains' to elucidate the ways in which the diverse actors of the economy are interconnected to produce new spaces of financial exploitation (683). Indeed, this thesis corroborates Sokol's directive by discussing how the mechanisms of finance (interest, collateral, debt/credit) have merged through the schematic of chains and networks with local narratives and registers of value to create, distribute and absorb monetary profit across scales and geopolitical space.

Part 3: Living from loan to loan

Historical Mongolian networks

Although the form of economic chains that I discuss in Magtaal are products of their contemporary period, the metaphor and modality of chain-like networks has many historical precedents and ethnographic manifestations within Mongolia. For one, Empson describes how within historical conceptualizations of kinship and personhood among Buryat communities, a person consists of the coming together of 'bone' from the father and 'blood' from the mother (Empson 2011). As a result, a person has two distinct avenues of relatedness and connection they can call upon in their interaction with others—agnatic 'bone' descent relationships, but also, mobile 'blood' relations. As a result, diverse relations can be forged through networks of intra-kin rebirths, blood relations based on movement, birthplace and age sets (115). Pedersen combines Empson's characterization of relatedness with ANT to characterize Tsaatang reindeer herders' embeddedness in place as a network (2003). Pedersen argues that Tsaatang herders do not envision the land in terms of boundaries but as configurations of relations with both human and nonhuman actors in the surrounding landscape—as they move, he argues, they do not perceive of themselves as being in a fundamentally different space, but that merely their place, their positionality, in the meshwork of local relations shifts in degree

(2003: 248). From another angle, Humphrey and Sneath emphasize the historical importance of institutional and locale relationships networks over time in Mongolia, thereby critiquing anthropological models of 'segmentary kinship' as a model for social organization. Importantly, Humphrey and Sneath discuss how the historically reoccurring base form of organization in Mongolian society is not principally based on kin (although important), nor class, nor ethnicity, but on the small herding group (*ail*) in its changing combinations embodied as networks across distance (Humphrey & Sneath 1999: 15). Consequently, networks as a conceptual model of relatedness have had many expressions in Mongolian ethnographic depictions—whether as interactions between human and nonhuman, kin-related and/or locality-linked grids of connection. In contemporary praxis, these relations of affinity form webs across space and distance that serve as mechanisms for the distribution of resources and forms of care.²⁷

As an instantiation of networks, commodity chains, importantly, also have a long history in Magtaal. As underscored by World Systems theorists, commodity chains were common during the mercantilist age and, as discussed by Mintz, initially served to funnel consumables and commodities to the elite of Western countries (1985). This historical channelling of resources from subjugated areas to urban elites was not limited to the European colonial context, however. In *A World Trimmed with Fur*, Schlesinger talks extensively about the various commodity chains—he discusses pearls from Manchuria, mushrooms from Mongolia and furs from southern Siberia—that funnelled luxurious resources back to the Qing capital's aristocratic court (Schlesinger 2017). Similar, the 1890's Russian traveller Pozdneev noted how networks of debt and resources were already intertwined in 19th-century Uliastai (now part of contemporary Ulaanbaatar) (1971). He noted how Chinese merchants would sell products through local inns (*tien*), who would in turn extend these goods on credit to local peddlers. These peddlers would pay back in Mongolian products—hides, skins, tails, wool, mushrooms, etc.—establishing a debt/resource chain. In 1877, he wrote, mushroom and salt chains to Hohhot and Peking were big business. Of

²⁷ Often kin or affinity relations between urban and rural areas are expressed through the distribution of meat or dairy products from rural to urban; and/or the sending of e.g. children to spend different seasons in either rural or urban areas.

major historical importance for this thesis are the commodity chains mentioned by Schlesinger, since the mushroom trade he describes historically took place in what is current-day Magtaal *soum*. Consequently, there is a multi-century historical precedent of using diverse forms of economic chains and networks in Magtaal that—not coincidentally—used debt/credit as a motivating force to move resources. Importantly, I wish to emphasize that commodity chains, as they are often found in Mongolia, are not pure economic models, but often overlap with networks of kinship and locality—i.e. relatives in different cities form a commodity chain—combining Mongolian network formation with financial imperatives.

Contemporary economic networks

The fall of the socialist system and the loss of ensured forms of economic livelihood in the post-1990 moment in Magtaal resulted in the re-emergence of commodity chains as an entrepreneurial occupational avenue. In her descriptions of post-socialist economic upheaval in the Buryat Ashinga district, for example, Empson discusses how the dissolution of the local socialist cooperative forced residents to resort to household subsistence economies for their livelihoods. During the Mongolian socialist era, periodic official shortages of goods had engendered the practice of utilizing local networks and circles of kin and affinity to access coveted goods and services (Humphrey 2012, 2017; a Ledeneva 1998; Sneath 2012). These habits likely carried over into the immediate post-socialist period, where sharing produce and distributing goods among physically-separated households became common, as relations were manifested through the sending of consumables between kin (flour and sugar; dairy and meat from urban or rural settings, respectively) (Empson 2011). In Magtaal, the dissolution of the cooperative similarly engendered networks of economic sharing, distribution and resource gathering (of i.e. berries, wheat and wild animals) to navigate the economic collapse. As economic difficulties continued, however, these relational distribution networks took on new significance as ‘potentially crucial links for one’s survival’ (60). When, in 1994, the border to China opened, these networks expanded from familial distribution to profit-oriented subsistence chains. At this time, local residents began stripping the metal piping, heating and water infrastructure from the now-defunct

state farm buildings for the Chinese market. This engendered the formation of root-like chain infrastructures, where a resource is moved by one person for one leg and then handed on to the next 'link' in the chain for a price. Specifically, local residents started collecting metal and hides; would sell them to local middlemen, known as 'changers' (*chyenj* from the English word '(ex)change') (High 2017; Lacaze 2010, 2012; Pedersen 2002); who would in turn bulk them in urban centres and sell on to Chinese middlemen. As evinced by Ichinkhorloo and Yeh's spatial analysis of countryside relations, these chain networks span across rural/urban and herder/non-herder divides and are linked together by various 'key brokers' (e.g. like 'changers') (2016: 1019). These networks now fuse kin relations with economic needs, engendering Murphy to argue that 'patron-based groups, made up of kin and clients, have emerged as fundamental architecture in the administration and governance of land, livestock and labor' (Murphy 2015: 419–420) in the Mongolia countryside. This is how contemporary economic networks differ from historical commodity chains—monetary value, symbolized as cash, has become the predominant signifier of value in the contemporary era and thus all other relations of society and culture increasingly revolve and build up (as networks) around its reproduction.

Importantly, and in contrast to other studies in Mongolia, animal livestock has not emerged in post-socialist Magtaal as a viable occupational path for most residents. There are many reasons why animal products are not emphasized in Magtaal. For one, due to the unusual infrastructural provisioning of the socialist era, Magtaal's residents have historically focused on and were trained in agriculture. In combination with this fact, the only large-scale outfits that have moved to Magtaal in the post-socialist moment have been agricultural companies (and the Chinese oil company). These companies, in combination with yearly small-scale hay building entrepreneurialism, have monopolized local arable land for agriculture, thereby displacing herders. Additionally, the local herder families I worked with reported that most families lost between one and two thirds of their animals in a particularly harsh winter (*zud*) between 2012 and 2013. As a result, in 2015, Magtaal *soum*'s government reported 48,203 heads of livestock in the *soum*. But finally, a major experiential reason for the lack of

animal production is the soum's geographical distance from population centres, which highly reduces competition in animal product prices.

For example, Bayar, my driver and also a herder, recounts the difficulties that herder families like his experience in trying to sell livestock meat. Similar to the post-socialist hurdles to selling local wheat, the geographic distance between Magtaal's *soum* centre and Choibalsan reduce the competitiveness of Magtaal's meat and encourage high prices. In Magtaal, most residents have their own small herds, but those that don't often desire to purchase small quantities of meat at a time. However, in order to supply an order, a herder needs to kill an entire animal. Consequently, Bayar and other herders have often had the experience of killing an animal for a singular order and having difficulty selling the rest of the animal before it decays. The solution to this issue of increments would be either to be near an urban centre (where meat sells quickly) or to sell entire animals to large industry. But the large industry locally (the agricultural and Chinese oil companies) have meat requirements that are too large for singular families to supply. Consequently, in this space, three meat changers have emerged in the soum who monopolize the industry and dictate its prices. These changers negotiate the complexity of perishable portions by purchasing from many herders simultaneously and delivering large orders to the companies. But the issue of distance works in their favour; these three changers fix the prices amongst themselves (to decrease competition), which individual herders have to follow because of their distance from a market.²⁸ Frustrated by this situation, Bayar once tried to sell a cow for 6,000 MNT per kilo, 2,000 below the changers, and received an angry phone call that he was devaluing the animal price in the *soum*. During my fieldwork, I heard similar stories (of angry phone calls and local pressure) from small shop owners who tried to raise the price of bread, leading to the conclusion that Magtaal's distance allows small groups of traders to monopolize certain food stuffs. The resource chains discussed here, in contrast, are subject to competition from

²⁸ Additionally, the high price means that often small families need to take out loans to purchase meat. They can also receive a 'meat loan' from a changer; they can pay back the changer through other means or when monies come in at a later date. Small individual herder families, themselves dependent on loans, often do not have the ability to loan meat to families. 'The loan ability is what distinguishes changers from average herders', opines one herder resident of Magtaal.

both Choibalsan and China, possibly engendering a general sense of fairness in price that is missing from herder industry in the *soum*.

Consequently, this thesis focuses on contemporary ‘economic networks’ as structures of social organization that fuse historical precedents of kinship formation and registers of value with economic imperatives for the creation of monetary profit—exemplified in the Mongolian term *suljee*. In describing the post-1990 increased reliance on kin for economic survival, Sneath invaluable notes that Sahlins’ continuum of economic morality should be differentiated in Mongolia, not by proximity vis-a-vis kinship/residential groupings, but by diverse forms of relations within networks—nodal linkages between various actors, whereby the form of social relation dictates the expectation of obligation and, by extension, the form of material transference. Indeed, Mongolians in the post-1990 moment have increasingly subsisted by fusing the moral spectrums embedded in tentacle-like kin relations with the universal need for monetary wealth. Accordingly, the word most often used by Magtaal residents to describe the increased utilization of kinship and friendship networks to economic survive and thrive is ‘*suljee*’. This term generally means ‘multiple interweaved connections’ and can be conceptually succinctly translated as ‘web’, ‘chain’ or ‘network’. Importantly, although multiple forms of interrelation have existed historically in Mongolia, the *suljee* as descriptor is most often implemented in situations that are (in some capacity) economically calculative—i.e. to describe the diverse transfers of money between kin and friends performed to navigate bank indebtedness (an *öriin suljee*, or ‘web of debt’); the intertwined social relations utilized to illegally transport goods across the border; the sourcing of monies from urban centres for distribution amongst local residents; the building of commodity chains amongst interrelated actors to engender economic returns, etc. In this vein, *suljee*, as economic network, is not only a commodity chain—conceptualized as one-directional stacking of economic value to create a commodity—but predominantly emphasizes the variegated and flexible implementation and fusing of diverse social relations of obligation to engender an economic advantage.

Illegality or debt

As elucidated in the thesis, the lack of new economic opportunities and employment in the *soum* have engendered a widespread scarcity of cash money in a historical moment that simultaneously elevates cash money to the ultimate signifier of wealth. As a result, residents have become inextricably indebted vis-à-vis the bank, the ultimate arbitrator of cash money in the post-1990 moment. Similarly, studies of financial debt have recently exponentially increased in combination with the emergence of neoliberalism as a concept (Han 2012; Ho 2009), which encourages diverse populations to accrue debt to navigate ‘...the mercurial edge between global flows and parochial closures’ (Chu 2010: 4). For example, studies on neoliberally-influenced societal economic changes have repeatedly documented how the removal of forms of state welfare is increasingly being replaced or supplemented through rising dependence on financial debt (Bear 2015; Han 2012; James 2015)—often, ‘debt-fare’ has replaced ‘wel-fare’ (Soederberg 2014). Recent ethnography on financial debt in Mongolia bolsters this general sentiment—financial debt is increasingly being used by capital poor communities like herders (Marin 2008; Sneath 2012) and *ger* district residents (Pedersen 2017) to fund everyday consumption. This economic modality that has emerged in Mongolia post-1990 has been characterized by Sneath as a ‘regime of debt’ (Sneath 2012)—increasingly all economic endeavours, whether at state-level, business-level or individual/familial-level, are effectuated through debt financing. The circulation of wealth in Magtaal fits this general trend—the curtailing of state subsidies, lack of formal jobs and increased reliance on bank loans means that the majority of wealth in Magtaal is bank-loaned money. As a result, a pool of loaned money is being swished back and forth amongst networks in Magtaal, paying individual loan interest payments as it moves.²⁹ The emic idiomatic phrase of ‘living from loan to loan’ (*zeelees zeeliin hoorond*)³⁰ refers to this experience of siphoning money off of these larger distributions of wealth manifested as loans, using this money to cover consumption needs for an

²⁹ Additionally, often the purpose of the bank loan is not necessarily to pay it off, only to open and keep open a line of credit. This financing technique—of taking out loans and only paying interest and not the principle—has a historical precedent in 19th-century loaning behaviour vis-à-vis Chinese traders (Sanjdorj 1980).

³⁰ The phrase became so commonplace a Financial Times article used it to describe Mongolia’s debt circumstance: <https://www.ft.com/content/4055d944-78cd-11e6-a0c6-39e2633162d5>

increment of time, and then passing on money to the next individual in a chain of cash sharing.

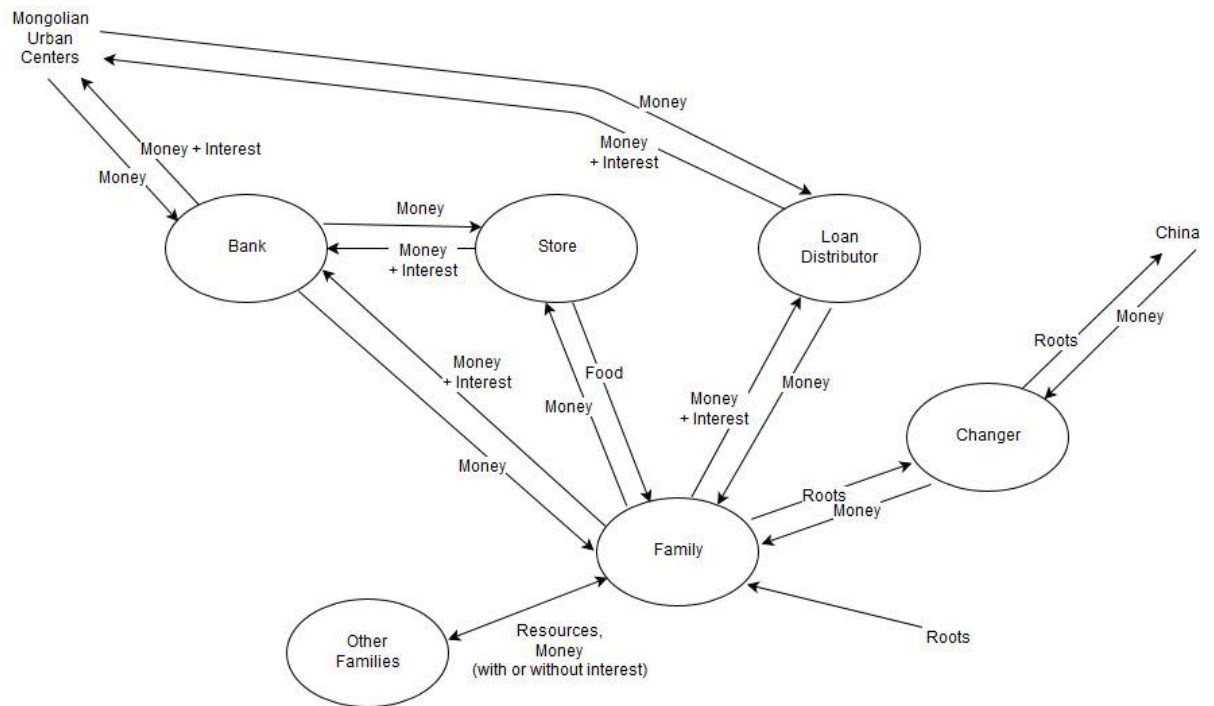


Figure 5: Magtaal's 'web of debt' (öriin suljee)—the diverse movements of resources and monies within the township to navigate mounting debt burdens

This situation of the rotation of bank debt would hypothetically be untenable over a period of time (because bank interest accrues), if not for the cash influx of non-interest-accruing money through resource-based commodity chains. The above is a chart of the economic flows of value in Magtaal engaged in by residents to trade up and gain further access to cash money. Two predominant avenues to cash emerge from this graph—first, money with interest conditions from banks and/or loan distributors/lenders that flows from Mongolian urban centres; and, secondly, money from non-interest-laden, yet illegalized resource-based commodity chains that flows from China. Despite its (often) formal illegality, commodity chains with funds from over the Chinese border are the only source of local cash that is both a) sufficient and growing and b) doesn't have interest stipulations. Therefore, loosely put, residents who need cash money predominantly have the option of either a) the further accrual of debt or b) illegalized trade. In praxis, the general circulation of economic value in the township happens as follows—residents will take out a loan from the bank; they

will pay off the interest payments for that loan through either a loan from a friend or from a loan lender; in the interim, they can borrow consumption items for their subsistence from the local stores; ultimately, when commodity chain season starts, individuals use the proceeds to pay off their diverse inter-familial, store and loan lender loans. Generally, finance bank loans are temporarily held in abeyance through localized forms of loaning to be ultimately paid off through monetary flows from China in return for illegalized resource extraction. This thesis consequently shows that the more interest payments and formal bank restrictions create pressure on the community, the more local natural resources are illegally funnelled into Chinese-exported commodity chains to pay off this accruing bank debt.

The thesis structure

In summary, this thesis focuses on how and why economic networks have become the predominant form of social organization in the post-1990 Magtaal 'age of the market'.

Chapter 1 discusses the contemporary revitalization of the historical legacy of a local 19th-century prince—Togtohtör (known otherwise as To Van). To Van's memory is currently being elevated as a historical exemplar that represents the local idealization of hierarchical economic and political governance. Through this comparison, residents justify their contemporary reliance on local networks vis-à-vis the state's perceived failure to hierarchical and properly govern.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the illegalized flows of money into the *soum*. Chapter 2 expands upon the previous chapter to discuss how economic networks revolve around narratives of communitarian 'help' in light of the perceived vacuum of hierarchical sentiments of 'care'. Ethnographically, this chapter discusses commodity chains that export fish into China to discuss how economic chains navigate the grey zones between legalities and border to create economic proceeds.

Chapter 3 focuses on local Fang Feng commodity chains—a Chinese medicinal root—which comprise the most pervasive resource extraction network in post-socialist Magtaal. This chapter discusses how economic chains, despite their overt profit motive, recreate local models of hierarchical care (in the form of

patron/client relations) and communitarian help (in the form of pastoral-esque picking groups) in their economic pursuits. Consequently, networks can recreate hierarchical ideals in lieu of a perceived vacuum of hierarchical state guidance. Consequently, local moral worlds are shifting to accommodate this change.

Chapters 4 and 5 move to the thematic of debt. In chapter 4, I compare contemporary debt/loan behaviour to the 19th-century precedent to investigate what is and isn't different in the contemporary era. I argue that multiple types of debt are being subsumed into one word for loans—*zee!*. Consequently, social forms of loans and debts—i.e. communitarian relations—are being mobilized to navigate accruing forms of bank debts and loans—i.e. exchange relations.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with an investigation of 'loan lenders' or *soum*-based moneylenders. I argue that loan lenders are a form of 'translation occupation'—their activities allow residents to bridge the gap between local lifeworlds and the regimentations of the bank by linking social and financial registers of value. The insights of the previous chapter is expanded upon to show how loan lenders collateralize social registers of value to effectuate economic returns. In doing so, however, they enable local registers to increasingly becoming financialized. Exchange relations are thus capitalizing on local relations of communitarian help.

In all, the more bank interest and debts accrue, the more local resources (of fish and roots) and social registers (of help and mutual aid) are extracted, collateralized, reformulated, mobilized and translated into economic returns to pay off financial debt.

I hope I have now illustrated why local residents protested so vehemently against a free trade zone plan. The entire network system I have begun to describe revolves around the prevalence of and access to naturally-grown resources. A free trade zone encloses the land, turning countryside residents from countryside dwellers to countryside, landless labourers. As labourers, residents would become dependent on a formal, governance system they don't trust. Economic networks have emerged to provide subsistence in the state's wake. In many ways, the land secures these chains and grants them moral,

ethical and economic nourishment. Thus, residents mobilized to protect the land, their usage of it and the access of future generations. They see this as their birth right. In this way, economic networks have become locally incorporated into the moral/social universe and sustain local communities. Yet, with time and the dwindling of roots, nature is the loser in this modern cosmic economic drama.

Chapter 1: Prince Togtohtör as governance exemplar—anti-state politics and the failed politicians of the present

Dust hangs in the air in the bowl of the mountain. It is August 2017 and Doljko and I, together with around 300 other Mongolian participants, have arrived at the base of Tsagaan Uul—the White Mountain located roughly 100 kilometres southwest of Bayant and 30 kilometres from the Chinese border. Despite the mountain’s remote, uninhabited location, cars from as far as Choibalsan and Ulaanbaatar approach and their car headlamps seamlessly fuse into the parade of approaching cars—a swarm of fireflies in the dark. We are all supplicants in a cairn ritual to the mountain—a ‘tihilga’³¹ from the Mongolian verb ‘tahir’ meaning to deify, worship or revere, which happens triennially at this ritual site, but coincides this year with a week of festivities in Magtaal’s *soum* centre, Bayant. As opposed to previous years, which saw smaller gatherings, this year hopefuls from as far as Choibalsan (over 360 kilometres) and Ulaanbaatar (over 1000 kilometres) arrive to pay their respects to the mountain and its namesake—prince Togtoktör, or simply, To Van (‘Van’ being his princely title). In the mid-19th-century, To Van had singled out this mountain as his chosen ritual site, solidifying the mountain’s extended name as ‘Vangiin Tsagaan Uul’, or ‘The Van’s White Mountain’, in Mongolian history. After joining the procession of participants and parking at the base of the mountain, we set up camp for the night. At 4 am, before dawn, the members of our party stand up, put on their finest coats (*deel*) and approach the mountain to make their offerings of rice and milk tea to the spirits of the land—the *gazariin ezed* (land masters) that live in the *uul us* (land and water) of the local *nutag* (homeland).

The ritual is partitioned by gender—the male participants begin the ascent to the *ovoo*, or stone cairn, at the peak of the mountain, whereas the women stay and venerate at the female *ovoo* at the base. Collecting our offerings of rice and fried pastries (*boortsog*), Doljko and I hastily move to the start of the mountain incline to the procession of women. *Ovoos* are stone cairns, commonly placed

³¹ The word ‘tihilga’ is associated most directly with offerings or sacrifice; the word ‘dallaga’, which generally means ritual to beckon fortune, can also be used in this context (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018; Humphrey 1995: 147).

at the peaks of mountains and other revered natural formations that honour the spiritual masters and inhabitants of the land (Bawden 1958; Chabros 1992; Empson 2011; High 2017; Humphrey 1995; Humphrey & Sneath 1999; Pedersen 2003, 2006, 2011; Sneath 2007). At both this site and the male cairn above on the mountain peak, appellants humbly approach with offerings of various grains, milk products and vodka, circumambulating the stone piles three times, while dousing the stones in libations. Afterwards, the group of women retreat to the camp, where we set up a line of blankets parallel to the shadow of the mountain. Here the women—clutching colour-coordinated Buddhist prayer beads and *hadag* silk scarves—interchangeably kneel, prostrate on the ground or ladle offerings of milk tea into the sky. I ask one elderly woman who recognizes me why she has chosen to participate today. She answers: ‘I am worshipping (*tahih*) the mountain and water (*uul us*). This tradition has been passed down to us from the deep past (*ertnees*) and so the mountain and water provide for all (*daatgah*, literally ‘to insure’) regardless of what we need in life. We are calming (*argadsan*) the waters and the homeland (*nutag usaa*) and worshipping them to ask for work, children and for no drought’. The theme of cycles figures prominently—just as the *ovoo* emerges through reprises of stones crescendo-ing in a point at the top, aspirants move in circular motions around the stones in repetition of their predecessors and in precedent to their ancestors in a succession of years and generations.

Ovoo ceremonies are the ritualized manifestation of a Buddhist-influenced, ranked worldview, which locates humankind in eternal hierarchical interrelation with both human and nonhuman masters. This ritual depicted here is striking for this insight, because it simultaneously honours both a spiritual master—the otherworldly inhabitant of the White Mountain—but also the memory of a historical mortal role model—prince To Van. Consequently, this chapter begins by examining the *ovoo* ceremony and the historical writings of prince To Van to argue that they both reproduce a specific idealized vision of society—as governed through a hierarchical, yet complementary alliance between the citizenry, human masters (sovereigns) and spiritual masters at the pinnacle. I suggest that To Van’s memory is currently undergoing a revitalization as a background *exemplar*—a moral archetype (Humphrey 1997)—because the

actions of current politicians are seen to not live up to the aforementioned ideal. The second section therefore discusses the rise of contemporary anger towards the state, as exhibited through the free trade zone (FTZ) protests in the introduction, as a result of local political and economic disenfranchisement. In contrast to other discussions of ‘populism’, the Magtaal citizenry chiefly blames the unsatisfactory state of affairs on their politicians and their inability to live up to standards of (in-group and/or national) sovereignty. These larger trends are significant for our understanding of economic networks, because they often arise in reaction or as a replacement for the perceived economic governance void left by the state. Additionally, as will be discussed between this and the next chapter, *ovoo* ceremonies take on added significance, because residents appeal to the moral superiority of spiritual masters (over mortal masters) to grant their (nature-dependent) networks moral legitimacy when acting against and thwarting the contemporary state.

Hierarchy as chiefly ideal in *ovoo* ritual

Ovoos are the physical manifestation of a Buddhist-inspired, animist ontology that recognizes impressive natural formations as the seats of powerful, wily spirits known as land masters. As reflected in the introductory quote, local supplicants often believe that the steppe landscape is not inanimate, but occupied by great powers, spirits who ‘own’ particular locations in the land—the ‘masters of the land’ (*gazariin ezed*) or, most commonly in Magtaal, ‘mountain and water’ (*uul us*) spirits. These anthropomorphized spirit entities are perceived as in possession of great majesty (*sur*) or effectiveness/ability (*chadal*) (Humphrey 1995: 136), which makes them powerful but wily and unpredictable. In order to tame their energy (*argadah*), ritualized actions (like *tahilga*) are performed regularly (commonly once every summer) at various impressive natural formations in reverence to their respective land deity. Furthermore, each spirit is unique to its location, formation and homeland, is seen as having its own personality and does not necessarily bestow its power freely. As a result, individuals speak of opening up relations, coaxing and cajoling the spirits to grant them benevolence and general good fortune³²—

³² Supplicants open up relations through the process of offerings, which resembles a sequence of gifts—participants e.g. kill a sacrificial animal, offer its life to the spirit, who in turns imbues its meat with spiritual benevolence, which the participants eat to absorb this power (Empson 2011).

manifested in diverse forms of prosperity like e.g. favourable weather, familial protection from illness, strong herds, many grandchildren, etc. On the reverse, when the natural world becomes chaotic or tragedy strikes, local residents will often implicate unbalanced relations with a land master and seek redress through the performance of additional ritual. In this way, I attended several ceremonies during my fieldwork that were directly or indirectly induced through a misfortune—once when local residents drowned in the local lake and twice in reaction to an ongoing drought.³³ As a result, annual (or, in this case, triannual) ceremonies are important local temporal markers that uphold ongoing relations with the masters perceived as responsible for the continued prosperity of a region.

By extension, the *ovoo* ritual, as an exercise defined by vertical movements, symbolically reflects a political vision of a hierarchical social universe. As the *ovoo* ritual emerged in Mongolia in the 16th and 17th centuries,³⁴ it was often moulded to meet the demands of local nobility and uphold the dominant political environment of the time—i.e. fiefdoms ruled by aristocratic patrilineal classes that divided society into commoner and aristocratic classes. As a result, *ovoo* rituals often became sites that were associated with and actualized chiefly, hierarchical forms of power.³⁵ Making the argument that landscape topographies and social

³³ Because relations with the capricious masters can be precarious and must be carefully maintained, the interaction of local individuals with their natural environment is ideally regulated through upholding certain injunctions on actions known to provoke land masters. In this way, actions that could disturb the land or interfere in the reproduction of nature were traditionally prohibited.

³⁴ Although *ovoo* ceremonies are often associated with Lamaism in contemporary Mongolia, their animist inflections belie their mixed ancestry. As Buddhism entered Mongolia in the 16th and 17th centuries, the local nobility demanded that the religious ceremonies of the new religion incorporate old animist characteristics. For example, the first texts to mention the *ovoo* ritual in detail are the writings of the Third Mergen Gegeen (1717-66), whose elucidation of the *ovoo* ritual served as a formalisation of the ritual and the ongoing association of *ovoo* ceremony with Lamaism (Atwood 2004; Bawden 1958; Humphrey 1995). Reading through the Gegeen's texts, Bawden asserts: '...the collected works of [the] Mergen Diyanci Lama...show how Lamaism was, at the time concerned, systematically engaged in satisfying the demand put forward by the Mongol nobility for prayers in the tradition of the old animistic religious ideas, by the creation of prayers which took over the popular pantheon into the lamaist pantheon, and popular religious characteristics into lamaist ritual' (Bawden 1968: 24).

³⁵ As argued by Humphrey, *ovoo* ceremonies commonly became stages for local chiefs, lords and patrilineal families to show off their power and virility—as reflected through 'the three manly games' (*eriin gурvan naadam*) of wrestling, horseback riding and archery commonly on display during these festivities. Additionally, by hosting *ovoo* ceremonies, patrilineal families could elevate their spiritual claims to power by literally and figuratively monopolizing access to the spiritual master. Lastly, the chiefly lineage in control of the *ovoo* ceremony controlled the terms of participation by segmenting participants (based on class, gender or foreigner status), according to their societal

power ontologies can dialectically affect one another, Humphrey reasons that steppe topography mirrors a social worldview focusing on chiefs and inheritance (a vertical perspective), whereas the variegated forest landscape reflects the acephalous worldview of personal relations common to shamans (a horizontal perspective) (Humphrey 1995; Pedersen 2006). The *ovoo* ceremony, as a ritual performed on high peaks in steppe landscape (flatness punctuated by height), reflects appeals to power above, or 'higher' than oneself in a hierarchy, as ritual participants literally and figuratively reach upwards to appeal for grace. Additionally, the actions of climbing and circulating—to return with each passing year, to climb the mountain, to circumvent the mountain, and then to revolve around the *ovoo* itself, as one asks for grace and adds one's contribution to the pile—ontologically evokes feelings of immutable cyclicity. She beautifully illustrates this sentiment through the metaphor of a spiral of smoke (or a pile of stones stretching to a pinnacle)—the individual particles of the smoke might change but the form and its eternity remains over time and generations.

My intention with this discussion of the cairn form was to discuss the verticality of the cairn ritual as a symbolic manifestation of an idealized hierarchical worldview. The idealized power relation encompassed in the physical *ovoo* form is of invariant, cyclical, hierarchical complementarity of commoners unified under a mortal sovereign (as prince or aristocratic lineage) over lifetimes; who are, in turn, united as a unit in obeisance to otherworldly spirit masters. This duality of hierarchy is reproduced through the double meaning of the word *ezen* for 'lord'; supplicants in *ovoo* ceremonies often talk of appealing to the local *ezen*, or land master, but the term can also be used for human sovereigns as mortal masters (Humphrey 1995: 145; Sneath 2007). Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that this historical ideal of hierarchical mortal-cum-spiritual governance is perceived as not being upheld and, as a result, supplicants are reconceptualizing the focus of the *ovoo* ritual. Indeed, different forms of political organization have existed in Mongolia throughout time, which have varied with

vision. During 'the age of the noble patronage of Buddhism', Sneath notes, '...ritual sites were to be divided in the same way as political subjects, between royal, noble, and commoner' (Sneath 2007: 195).

the needs and circumstances of history.³⁶ In the case of Magtaal, centralized political organization has been historically emphasized, as evinced in the pervasiveness of Buddhist *ovoo* rituals and the relative local paucity of shamanist worship.³⁷ Yet, at this historical moment, the power base of chiefly, mortal masters is being questioned. In the following, I discuss how To Van is considered an exemplar of the hierarchical governance as symbolically mirrored in the *ovoo* form.

Historical understanding of hierarchical obligation between prince and peoples

As noted, the August 2017 cairn celebration at the White Mountain was performed in combination with a larger multi-day festival dedicated to the memory of To Van. The 18th-century prince Togtoktör, or simply To Van, was the 6th generation in a line of nobles in *Tsetsen Khan Aimag* during the Mongolian Manchu period (1691-1912) (Namjim 2004: 221–2).³⁸ In 1822, To Van inherited the title of Van from his deceased father and became the regent of *Ilden Vangiin* banner province (*hoshuu*),³⁹ the location of contemporary Magtaal. In commemoration of 220 years from his birth in 1797, the *soum* leaders in contemporary Magtaal organized a nine-day celebration (from the 11th to the 20th of August 2017), which included the kick-off event at the White Mountain, a similar Buddhist ceremony at *Ikh Burkhan* (a Buddha statue built

³⁶ For example, Humphrey argues that Mongolian ontologies often evince two ‘ways of being in the landscape’ (1995: 135)—a chiefly/Buddhist worldview associated with steppe plains; and a shamanist worldview of forest landscapes—that have varied in appeal and influence throughout history (Humphrey 1995; Pedersen 2006). These two forms have dialectically interacted through history—‘Chiefs in the process of military expansion repressed shamans in an attempt to obliterate alternative kinds of agency. On the other hand, when native political organization came under threat and was generally seen as weak and unsuccessful, the people might turn their allegiance to shamans’ (Humphrey 1995: 138).

³⁷ Which differs starkly from other *soum* in Dornod that have a plethora of shamanist activity (Swancutt 2012)

³⁸ During the Manchu period, contemporary Outer Mongolia was a protectorate under the suzerainty of the Beijing-based Qing Empire. Although formally independent, (Halh/Outer) Mongolia was split into four provinces that were overseen by Qing-chosen imperial residents (*amban*) (Bawden 1968). These *amban*, located at the capital of Khüree, further allocated governance duties to Manchu-chosen Mongolian aristocratic lineages located in the various provinces. In this way, the four provinces (*aimag*) were further divided into smaller banners (*hoshuu*) that were under the control of Mongolian aristocratic lords who had inherited their title (like To Van).

³⁹ The *hoshuu* or banner was the *soum*-sized administrative unit during the Manchu, often ruled by a hereditary lord or run by a Buddhist monastery and operated as a small political economy (Sneath 2007: 17).

by To Van),⁴⁰ theatre performances, wrestling, singing, horse racing and a three-day academic conference. Although the government was unable to provide funding for the event (due to austerity), locals gathered and donated personal funds to make the programming possible—reflecting local respect towards the figure of To Van, his legacy and perceived continued relevance. The words ‘220 To Van’ were embossed in big letters on the mountainside overlooking Bayant and the entire *soum* become enraptured in the multi-day event. Thus, although the opening ritual at the White Mountain was nominally performed in appeasement of the local mountain spirit, supplicants were quick to emphasize that this spirit had been handpicked as significant by To Van himself. In line with this implication, the descendants of To Van had been invited to the festival and, similar to Humphrey’s description of social ranking, were separately regaled in a luxurious yurt and entertained as honoured participants throughout the ceremony (see also Pedersen 2006). Therefore, the White Mountain rite encompassed a dual symbolism as an appeal to two kinds of ‘masters’ (*ezed*)—to the spiritual masters of the mountain, but also to the ongoing legacy of To Van as exemplary mortal authority. This section analyses the multifaceted figure of To Van—the stories and legends shrouding his activities; the meanings and imagery of his own writings; and the historical contestations around his actions—to investigate his contemporary pull and popularity.

To Van as moral exemplar

As indicated through the contemporary adulation at the *ovoo* ceremony, To Van is often locally elevated by Magtaal residents as the standard for correct authoritative governance. In discussing historical forms of Mongolian morality,⁴¹ Humphrey draws attention to the penchant for using historical exemplars—idealized narrative figures in folktales or stories who are perceived as having perfected themselves in relation to some moral principle—as a realm for moral improvement (Humphrey 1997). Humphrey notes that that the translation of ‘morality’ in Mongolian—*yos surtahuun*, which in combination means ‘the commonly accepted rules of order, reason and custom...that have been

⁴⁰ See Haining for the history of Ikh Burkhan (1992).

⁴¹ Defined as ‘the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities’ (Humphrey 1997: 25).

[passed down and] taught' (1997: 25)—contains the imperative for individuals to self-improve and focus on personal ethics vis-à-vis the recognition of correct order in the social universe around them. By extension, Mongolian actors often seek to morally improve themselves by drawing upon stories of an exemplary figure—as a precedent or model in epics, riddles, precepts or proverbs—as a frame of reference. Similarly, while walking around the *ovoo* ceremony, Doljko and I decided to ask the participants (who were always either local Magtaal residents or the descendants of local residents) what they knew about To Van. The responses almost always came in the form of a proverb or folktale (*domog*):

According to local lore, during To Van's reign (1822-1868) a Manchu prince came to To Van and claimed the White Mountain as his own. In reaction, To Van struck up a deal—'I desire a piece of the mountain that is the size of a large cowhide. Anything more than that, you can have'. Thinking To Van to be foolish, the Manchu prince agreed. To Van then went and had his servants take a large cowhide, soak it until pliable and cut it into a very fine, long cord. Two days later, To Van had the cord wrapped around the base of the mountain. Not only did the cord exceed the base circumference, but there was extra leftover. Seeing this, To Van revealed that years ago gold had been buried in the mountain. The extra cord space meant that someone had already stolen part of the gold from the mountain, which had become thinner. To Van then accused the prince of theft. Caught off guard and scared of being exposed, the Manchu prince fled.

The second story frequently retold at the *ovoo* celebration, was how one local lake—the Sangiin Dalai Lake⁴²—became a salt-producing, saline lake. According to local residents, To Van was born close to the lake and thus was keenly aware of its alkaline properties. He struck up a trade with a Manchu banner (*hoshuu*) to exchange 1000 carts of salt for 1000 two-year-old cows (*beruu*), but set a strict delivery date. But when the salt carts did not arrive on time, To Van proclaimed that his banner did not need salt anymore, and told the caravan to return. When the traders proclaimed that they would rather dump the

⁴² Not to be confused with the Dalai Lake described in chapter 2

salt then lug it back, To Van brought them to the lake. From then on, according to local lore, the Sangiin Dalai Lake has produced its own salt.

Combined, residents emphasized, these stories evince a few traits that To Van embodied to perfection. In both, To Van outwitted a Manchu prince, depicted as an exemplifier of the sneakiness, unreliability and greed of the Chinese. To Van, in contrast, is clever—he used his superior knowledge and ingenuity to finagle both situations to the advantage of his local *hoshuu*. He is nationally loyal—he didn't play to the favour of foreign (Chinese) aristocracy, but acted in the perceived interest of his local Mongolian banner (*hoshuu*). And he is economically astute—narrators often concluded by emphasizing that the Sangiin Dalai Lake still produces salt over 200 years later. Not only did the Soviets recognize To Van's legacy by placing a salt factory at Sangiin Dalai Lake, I was told, but the lake's production continues to provide for the subsistence of local herders. In short, To Van is frequently contemporarily elevated as a political exemplar—he is intelligent, he is loyal to his populace and he is economically astute. The fruits of his labour are still evident in the landscape, only bolstering the sentiment that To Van's choices were in line with moral, social and cosmological correctness.

To Van's economic vision

An integral component of To Van's exemplar status is the enduring admiration of his economic perspicacity. Amongst contemporary scholars, To Van is most renowned as an economic visionary—he carried out a series of avant-garde political and economic reforms in his banner and, notably, is credited with writing the first economics text in Mongolian (Bawden 1968; Namjim 2004; Natsagdorj 1968; Natsagdorj & Nasanbadjir 1966). The Mongolist and historian Bawden called To Van '...a rare bird amongst his fellows' (Bawden 1968: 179) because he ran his territory '...as an integrated and diversified economic and cultural unit' (180) through the implementation of projects unusual among his contemporaries—including agriculture (despite being contrary to Manchu policy at the time), small-industry (like craftsman schools, handicraft shops and water mills) and even forms of mining. Despite his foresight, however, To Van's banner was hit by a series of droughts in the early 1850s that left it impoverished. In the interest of economically revitalizing his banner, To Van

subsequently wrote his ground-breaking economics text—the *Hevei Vangiin Aj Töröhiig Zaasan Sargaal* or *Treatise on Livelihoods from the Hevei Van* (1853). At the time, animal herd size was considered the ultimate standard of generalized wealth and prosperity, whose value literally grew in line with the cyclical nature of birth and rebirth. Consequently, To Van’s *Treatise* contain a series of moral, ethical, cultural and practical instructions that directly or indirectly focus on the long-term growth and maintenance of animal herd populations (Bawden 1968: 239). Importantly, however, To Van’s understanding of ‘economics’ was not purely materially conceptualized, but was framed within a larger cosmos of ‘correct’ political, economic, social and cultural behaviour through time. If an individual acted in line with their class and carried out their duties (*üüreg*, also ‘obligation’) faithfully, he opined, they would be graced with prosperity in its various manifestations.

The Treatise

Of central importance to To Van’s writings is the metaphorical comparison he makes between the social world and the cosmological realm. He begins the *Treatise* with the following assessment:⁴³ ‘there are two forms of human honour: to respect the laws of this world through working diligently for hearth and home; and to remember the afterlife through respecting the Buddha’s religion by reading holy (*buyan*) scriptures’.⁴⁴ Within this statement, To Van draws a variety of bridges between the spiritual and social realm—for starters, he says that a proper societal member⁴⁵ must strive for both spiritual and social correctness, but, secondly, he implements the cosmoeconomic concept of *buyan* as instruction on how to obtain this dual salvation. By ‘cosmoeconomic’, I mean that the term is rooted in a larger worldview that frames economics and

⁴³ The complete *Treatise* can be found transliterated into the modern Mongolian Cyrillic script at: http://tovan.pms.mn/index.php?module=menu&cmd=content&menu_id=13&id=23

⁴⁴ ‘*Hünii erhemleh yum n’*. *Ene yertöntsöd yos jurmyg хүндэтгэн аж зуухуиг хичээх, етсес хоityг санай бурхан шажныг ерhemлэн buyan номыг үйлдэх еhe hoyor болой*’.

⁴⁵ It is, of course, in hindsight unclear what To Van meant by ‘the laws of this [material] world’. Although, at the time and pre-Durkheim, the concept of ‘society’ did not exist, I am using the term society to express the sentiment, in our own terms, of the laws of proper behaviour in the profane, material world. Of course, the politically-constructed concept of ‘society’ (and its concomitant ‘nationalism’) did not exist at the time in the manner we conceive it.

social/spiritual well-being as intertwined with one another.⁴⁶⁴⁷ *Buyan*, which can be translated as ‘virtue’ or ‘merit’, is a predominantly Buddhist concept associated with good karma that can be accumulated through good deeds carried out by the actor (Empson 2011). Within the Treatise, *buyan* is often linked to the sister term *hishig*. According to Empson, ‘*hishig*’ is an indigenous Mongolian term that is recognized as ‘a life-force or animating essence’ that spirits can bestow on favoured individuals, which can be ‘gathered, harnessed or beckoned’ through everyday practices and correct behaviour (70). ‘*Hishig*’ has also been described as an ‘animating life-force’ or ‘gift from above’ (Chabros 1992) and is materially associated with life-furthering cyclical growth—for example, *hishig* is manifest when animal herds grow, children are born and nature flourishes. The combined pair, *buyan hishig*, augments the meaning of *hishig* and frames To Van’s statement within a larger cosmological cyclicity (73). The implication by using this term throughout the text is that if the reader follows To Van’s instructions on how to act ‘correctly’ vis-à-vis the social universe, then one will create *buyan*, or Buddhist merit, for oneself. In doing so, one automatically elevates one’s ‘fortune’ (*hishig*), which has both material (i.e. more animals and children) and spiritual reverberations.

Furthermore, the social universe that To Van depicts is hierarchically constructed. As mentioned, *buyan hishig* is often materially associated with herd size and growth. In one of his lessons, To Van tries to admonish against the wasteful sale of animals, which he says will lower one’s fortune:

⁴⁶ In contrast, contemporary Western societies tend to frame economics as a separated scientific field. As a historical comparison, Mauss demonstrates with his concept of *total prestations* that the social world of various historical societies did not draw distinctions between different domains (Dumont 1986; Mauss 1993 [1925]). Economics, social and spiritual reverberations were intertwined and the actions of individuals were seen as having cumulative effects. From a Christian standpoint, this historical trajectory is likely embodied in the term ‘value’, which itself has a social and an economic meaning. According to Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic*, for example, Calvinist teachings offered economic pursuits as an avenue to spiritual salvation (Weber 2016 [1905]).

⁴⁷ The term ‘cosmoeconomics’ is also utilised by da Col to describe a worldview where the energies and flows between human and nonhuman actors have material effects for economic processes (2012). In his Tibetan case study, economic changes are conceptualized and experienced as alterations in the flows of cosmological fortune and vitality. Consequently, the term ‘cosmoeconomics’ has validity for this Mongolian case study, where economic actions are often posited as interrelated with Buddhist fortune and ritual practice.

*‘Because during difficult times⁴⁸ people do not have a lot of fortune [buyan], it is difficult to accrue wealth on one’s own. But if you pay your taxes well to the lord khan [ezen khan], then you will get rich through his fortune [buyanaar]. There are no cases of people adhering and paying duties [alba] with the true/faithful mentality [unen sanaagaar] and then becoming impoverished [hoosorson]...In this way, the old saying goes “people who pay tax are sponsored by heaven[tenger], people who produce fortune [buyan] will be saved by Buddha”’.*⁴⁹

During To Van’s time, the local citizenry paid their taxes to the Manchu overlords in animals, which was, at the time, the standard of wealth. Consequently, the above statement can be materially interpreted as concern over the populace’s ability to pay their taxes. Nevertheless, in framing this unease in terms of spirituality, To Van interrelates the spiritual universe and the state. With this statement, To Van not only draws a set of parallel, vertical trajectories between 1) vassals and their state (*ezen*), but 2) mortals and their spiritual overlords (spirits or Buddha); but he claims that ultimate material and spiritual salvation can be guaranteed by further investing one’s accrued ‘fortune’ (i.e. animals) into one’s relationship with one’s respective lords. Thus, the pursuit of fortune opens up a neverending cycle of reciprocal relations between vassals and lords—right behaviour invites material and spiritual fortune, which can be invested into taxes or service (as Buddhist merit), which then invites future returns from the lords (i.e. material or spiritual provisioning or gifts), which continues to be invested into taxes and service (merit), which invites more returns in the form of i.e. spiritual rebirth as a materially wealthy person. Through To Van’s usage of the concept of ‘fortune’—an amalgamation of both material and spiritual benevolence—he does not distinguish between earthly and otherworldly, but describes humans, mortal nobles and spiritual lords as locked together in the eternal cyclical dance of *samsara*.

In the mortal world, To Van opined that Buddhist merit could be engendered by maintaining economic aestheticism in line with the expectations of one’s social

⁴⁸ ‘Difficult times’ is a translation of ‘*tsöviin tsag*’, which can refer to either the Buddhist end times or simply a difficult phase like a drought.

⁴⁹ ‘*Alba ögsön хүнийг тэнгэрт тэтгэдэг buyan үйлдсэн хүнийг бурхан авардаг гэж хүчин үг бий үү*’.

station. To Van's documented vision was of a social universe in spiritual harmony when segmented into ranked, yet complementary classes—specifically, commoner and aristocratic classes—that performed their respective duties under the banner of a mortal sovereign. His *Treatise* consequently contains separate moral injunctions and different lifestyle instructions for both classes, which he presented as dually vital to the overall functioning of society. To Van emphasizes that commoner herders cannot take their station for granted, but must work assiduously to rise early, go to sleep late and avoid idleness.⁵⁰ He offers e.g. pragmatic directions on herding behaviour, seasonal variation and clothing preferences to help them effectuate this end. The wealthy, on the other hand, may not become greedy by endeavouring to sell their animals for coinage or to loan it as interest. Money does not naturally grow the way animals do, he argues.⁵¹ Therefore, selling animals for coinage represents a cosmic affront—'Because not just the lamb, but also the skin is worth more than the interest money, you lose the future potential of that large amount of money. The guardian spirits of the nation (*töriin tenger*) won't like it and various evil omens will result'. In both cases, To Van admonishes against excess that can incise the cycle of *buyan hishig* (thereby beckoning spiritual calamity)—amongst commoners, idleness can lead to stagnation, the overconsumption of resources and debt, whereas the wealthy can become greedy and potentially suffer through engaging in risky behaviour. For To Van, a subject's (whether of the commoner or aristocratic classes) ultimate duty is thus the correct performance of one's social role (as expressed through moderate, non-excessive behaviour), which allows the maintenance of individual and collective herds, thereby upholding the material stability of the community.

⁵⁰ In some ways, To Van's instructions are reminiscent of Weber's description of the Protestant ethic. According to Weber, capitalism, as ideology focused on bringing and reinvesting material returns, found its ideological origins in the Calvinist idea that spiritual salvation could be obtained by, not focusing on material reward, but by dutiful adherence to one's 'calling' concretized in the form of labour and hard work (2016 [1905]). To Van similarly strives, in his cosmological construction, to mitigate impulses of excess and profligacy among the various classes by framing asceticism as path to salvation. As will be discussed, this possibly had material motivations for To Van.

⁵¹ In this vein, To Van's statements mirror injunctions against the breeding of money discussed in chapter 5. Additionally, see Appendix D for a discussion on how To Van frames monetary wealth as inimical to social reproductive wealth materialized in animals.

Although an idealized representation, To Van's documented vision for societal prosperity frames various actors as separately-conceived, yet complementary parts united in a holistic hierarchical cosmoeconomic unit. As a comparative, Dumont's various writings have often focused on the subject of hierarchy, not as power enforcement introducing a chain of command (Dumont 1966: 19), but as a holistic societal construct that posits the universe as a series of domains inclusively incorporated into the pursuit of a higher value—i.e. that specific society's relative vision of 'the Good'. In order to elucidate how the tenor of classes in Dumont's hierarchy differ from power hierarchy, he often uses the metaphor of the right and left hands in relation to the body: 'Right and left, having a different relation to the body (a right relation and a left relation, so to speak) are different in themselves...Being different parts of a whole, right and left differ in value as well as in nature, for the relation between part and whole is hierarchical, and a different relation means here a different place in the hierarchy. Thus the hands and their tasks or functions are at one and the same time different and ranked' (Dumont 1986: 248). Through this example, Dumont attempts to demonstrate the logics of ranking, reversal and segmentation intrinsic to his inclusive vision of hierarchy: 1) the right and left are seen as different in value and ranked, because the right is often perceived as superior; 2) nevertheless, the concept of reversal implies that each hand might be perceived as superior within its own domain (i.e. eating food or throwing a ball); and yet 3) these two hands are segmented into clearly delineated categories with inherent otherness. Returning to To Van, the *Treatise* can be interpreted as constructing a similar holistic hierarchy of being in the Mongolian social universe. For starters, the human world is segmented by To Van into two ranked classes with specific, yet harmonious domains—both aristocracy and commoners must work in tandem to create prosperity rendered as animal wealth. They are ranked, they are segmented and they evince reversal of domains. In addition, the mutual strivings of banner vassals can be reinvested into cosmoeconomic prosperity—To Van's ideology of 'the Good', in this case, *buyan hishig*, is propagated through this hierarchical whole. Zoomed out, To Van's *Treatise* formulate a tripartite hierarchical holistic vision of separate, yet harmonious social roles between human vassal, human masters (i.e. the state) and the cosmologically masters above.

To Van the Difficult

Despite his own ideological proclamations, however, historical records evince that To Van himself likely did not always embody the apotheosis of the dutiful patriarch. As discussed, To Van envisioned a societal hierarchy where (human and spiritual) lords and moral vassals were mutually-intertwined in a ranked cycle of prosperity—this progression is maintained if all actors dutifully fulfil and uphold the obligations of their social class. In this formulation, he claims that the state and its lords (like himself), sufficiently strengthened by the effort of its people, will protect and care for their vassals in times of spiritual and natural calamity. Otherwise conceived, mortal lords (the prince; state) and the commoner classes must uphold their social duties to facilitate the holistic system, which includes the obligation to help one another in times of need to guarantee rebalance. In contrast to his idealized rendition of the mortal lord as benefactor, however, the figure of To Van had a reputation during his lifetime of being unaccommodating. In fact, To Van had acquired the nickname of ‘hetsüü To Van’ or, translated, ‘To Van the Difficult’ amongst his contemporaries (Bawden 1968; Namjim 2004; Natsagdorj 1968; Natsagdorj & Nasanbadjir 1966). He likely developed this reputation among his populace because he himself did not always follow his maxims on the virtue of frugality. The Soviet-era scholar Natsagdorj thus expresses misgivings over To Van’s underlying motivations behind the instructions in the *Treatise*: his writings ‘...did not in the least spring from his consideration of the welfare of the people, but are to be explained as being aimed at reducing the people’s consumption as far as possible and increasing his own exploitation of them’ (Bawden 1968: 182; Natsagdorj 1968). As a Manchu-approved prince, To Van was legally entitled to tax his populace of animals for various needs, including the payment of tribute to the Manchu overlords. Consequently, in praxis, To Van often utilized several loopholes and unclear legal rulings to tax his populace at irregular intervals, under multiple justifications and even to tax his own lower princes (which was debarred under Manchu legislation) (Namjim 2004: 24–5). As a result, as I delineate in Appendix A, To Van’s vassal revolted against him in 1839 in attempts to rectify a perceived imbalance in (both economic and obligative) duties between prince and peoples.

Thus, negotiations over separate, yet vital, social roles, duties, obligations and their reciprocal nature within a mortal-cum-spiritual hierarchic whole pervade To Van's writings and the spirit of his time. Although the Manchu administration ultimately ruled in To Van's favour when his vassals protested against him (condemning the protest leaders to die in chains or in exile), similar sentiments over the lopsided nature of taxation sparked continued movements and lawsuits throughout the Mongolian *aimags* (Bawden 1968 on Ayushi; Dear 2014 on Prince Otai; Natsagdorj 1963 on Dugartsembel; Ochir et al. 2003: 252). Both To Van's *Treatise* and the grievance petition against him (see Appendix A) emphasize concepts of moderate and correct implementation of societal roles, as well as reciprocal, hierarchical obligations between commoners and their mortal lords. In fact, To Van continued to navigate these sentiments even after the demonstration in his banner and during the publication of the *Treatise*. For example, during the multi-year drought that hit To Van's principality in the 1850s, To Van and his princes took out loans from moneylenders to buy animals to distribute among the impoverished populace. Unable to stem the hardships befalling his banner, To Van wrote to the administration in a plea for help—he couldn't find the money to feed his people anymore and entreated them for tax leniency (Natsagdorj 1968: 36–41). These endeavours evince that To Van did strive in times of spiritual-cum-natural calamity to bolster and support his followers. One could argue that To Van's motivation in doing so is purely material—after all, a struggling populace can only poorly be taxed, affecting To Van's own coffers. Nevertheless, although the rendition of harmoniously ranked and segmented hierarchy elucidated in the *Treatise* is somewhat romanticized, both the protest actions of the populace (in calling for moderation and rebalance) and To Van's attempts to help his economically-struggling populace (in distributing goods and food among the people) reflect a dually-held conceptualization of an intertwined, reciprocally-obligated relationship understanding between commoners and their mortal lords.

Echoes of history

220 years later, the current-day iteration of To Van's banner has once again been gripped by the throes of political dissent. As detailed in the thesis introduction, Magtaal's residents recently banded together to block an incoming

politician from entering their *soum*. This event was perceived as a political protest against Ulaanbaatar-based politicians' machinations to turn the *soum* into an agricultural free trade zone (FTZ). Consequently, in this section, I discuss the feelings of neglect vis-a-vis political representatives that have induced popular anger towards the state—a symptom of a phenomenon labelled in various contexts as 'populism'. I argue that local popular sentiments are similar to other ethnographic contexts in the feelings of political and economic dispossession. However, local sentiments differ from other contexts labelled 'populist' through the normative expectation of nationalism and the trajectory of blame. I argue that Magtaal residents compare the behaviour of local politicians to historical standards—like To Van's hierarchical governance ideal—and thus chiefly blame politicians—who they perceive as now corrupt and selfish—for the contemporary status quo. Within this context, To Van is elevated as a 'genuine politician for the people' as a strong, protectionist leader who properly economically provides for his populace and upholds the moral tenets. Returning to the site of the *ovoo* ceremony, residents express sentiments that the natural universe is out-of-balance (on account of economic greed) and that they participate to uphold, honour and remember the obligation relation between nature and its supplicants.

[A growing consciousness of economic and political disenfranchisement](#)

Over a year after the FTZ protests, I found myself in Kazi's kitchen, asking her why she had decided to protest the proposed zone and the minister's presence a year earlier. While her multiple grandchildren swirled and played around her, Kazi, a 57-year-old born-and-raised native, explained that she usually worked as a cook for hire for Ulaanbaatar-based agricultural companies and initiatives when they seasonally worked in the area. On the day of the FTZ protest, she decided to implement her cooking skills to nourish the many slogan-holders and chanters that participated. When I asked her why she thought the protest was worthwhile, I felt a swelling of perceived injustice flow out of her:

'These companies [that come here] are generally foreign companies with foreign investment. I don't know how they come and occupy our land [ezleed] and carry out their activities. Only the government's big big bosses [tom tom darga nar] know, how they finagle it and what they invest, public information

over these things is bad, we don't know anything...like they say that we are supposed to all be able to access land, but when we say 'give it', there is none. But if we say 'yes there is', then they show us land covered in mud, and pot-holed and unusable...but if a foreign company comes, then suddenly they get the most beautiful land!...People like us, we are just the 'black and brown people' [har borchuud, figuratively means 'working class'], and people like us don't have many acquaintances [taniil] in government, they don't provide jobs to people like us'

Within this retelling, Kazi depicts three subject groups—1) local poor residents, 2) the government's 'big bosses' as politicians and 3) (foreign) companies. First, Kazi frames local residents as a mass of poor people, as the 'black and brown' working class (discussed below). In opposition, the companies, as economic actors, and the politicians, as political actors, are in cahoots with one another with a similar agenda. Ideally, all citizens should have equal access to resources under the law, but in actuality, it is felt, the amalgamated political-cum-economic class can carry out its economic programme without much political interference. To substantiate this claim, Kazi discusses the double-standards between local requests for land (which is guaranteed as a right of citizenship under the law) and the actual favouritism that is experienced. Earlier in the conversation, she also emphasizes the lack of public information that politicians gave local residents regarding the FTZ plan (prior to its governmental passing). Combined, Kazi's point is that local residents are politically not treated equally (to other citizens) and are being overridden/ignored in the elite's quest for economic riches and opportunity.

Importantly, within Kazi's statements, she describes local residents as a united front of 'black and brown people'. In the above, she frames the 'black and brown' people as local residents, or people 'like us', who do not have access to jobs, are treated unfairly and do not have the necessary connections (*taniil*) in government to be able to better their situation. In fact, I inquired further, 'Who exactly are 'the black and brown people'?' and Kazi answered, 'We are. My [Magtaal] people—impoverished, normal people just scraping by [*amia teeh*] through working and living'. They are the individuals who do 'black and brown work' (*har bor ajiil*)—the miserly, hard, grunt work, undesired by other classes,

which leaves one's skin brown through exertion under the blazing sun. Interestingly, the colour references in the term have historical precedents in both the pre-socialist, Manchu and the socialist eras. According to the Mongolian Academy of History, 'borchuul', as the singular to 'borchuud', was a Manchu-era term used to distinguish a member of one of the lowest class denominations in 18th and 19th-century Mongolian feudal society—city vagrants who had been dispossessed or moved from the land.⁵² According to Bawden's Mongolian-English Dictionary, first published in the mid-1970s, 'borchuud' had historically been a term for the secular inhabitants of towns in Manchu times (Bawden 2015).⁵³ During Mongolian socialism, the term expanded to become a placeholder for the concept of 'the proletariat' (Dulam, personal comm.). Black, in contrast, was used for centuries to elucidate a distinction between the noble, aristocratic classes, who were referred to as 'white-boned', and the commoner underclasses, designated as 'black-boned' (Sneath 2007). In the immediate pre-socialist period, in addition, 'black' (*har*) was used to differentiate secular commoners from the 'yellow' (*shar*) members of the Buddhist monastic establishment (51). Framed in history, the contemporary amalgamation of 'black and brown people' tells a story about how local residents are rhetorically reproducing historical precedents of class segmentation between upper and lower class peoples. Only, within contemporary society, the upper class has moved to the city and refashioned themselves as 'politicians'.

Consequently, a rhetorical polarity is fomenting itself in Magtaal that frames local residents as positioned on the losing end of contemporary political and economic dramas. During my time in Magtaal, certain political topics—like the FTZ; political offshore account scandals; government debt vis-à-vis international banks; the Chinese-organized hay trade; the local Chinese oil company; international mining conglomerates, etc.—would often spark a particular speech vocabulary among local residents that signified them as disenfranchised. What united these diverse topics was the sentiment that an economic injustice had

⁵² <http://jwf.mn/%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D2%AF%D0%B5%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD-%D1%82%D2%AF%D2%AF%D1%85/>

⁵³ When Bawden describes the 18th-century phenomenon of 'a class of vagrants who could no longer support themselves in their banner territories [who then] migrated to the growing towns...[and] formed a rudimentary proletariat, working for wages wherever they could scrape a living' (1968: 93), he is most likely discussing *borchuud*.

been perpetrated that should have been, at least in theory, preventable through proper political governance. When discussing the aforementioned topics, residents often spatially presented themselves on the lower end of a power hierarchy and geographically removed from locations of power—i.e. in discussing the lack of information over the FTZ promulgation, Kazi mentions decrees coming ‘from over there’, ‘from the city’ and/or ‘from above’ (*deereesee*). By extension, the economic and political elite are depicted as sitting above—they are ‘the elite’ (*elit*), ‘the upper people’ (*deedchүүл*), ‘the big bosses’ (*tom darga nar*). Rhetorically, they are pitted against local residents as the united ‘our people’ (*manaihan*) or ‘people like us’ (*man’ metiin*), ‘the people’ (*ard tümen*)⁵⁴ and ‘the black and brown people’ (*har borchuud*). Finally, these various terms are often used interchangeably with wealth rankings—the ‘big bosses’ are frequently labelled ‘the rich’ (*bayachuud*) or ‘the millionaires’ (*terbümten*) in contrast to the local ‘poor’ (*yaduu хүмүүс*). In sum, a particular speech rhetoric of political-cum-economic disenfranchisement has emerged in Magtaal in situations where residents feel that they (as members of the Mongolian national polity) are being economically marginalized through the political inactions and corruption of politicians.

Magtaal populism

In many ways, growing awareness and discussion of economic inequalities manifested as class-based polarization resembles burgeoning global narratives labelled as ‘populism’. Internationally, the election of Trump and the unanticipated British ‘Brexit’ decision have made global actors more aware of the term ‘populism’—often associated with widespread right-wing, authoritarian and nationalist movements as reaction to neoliberalist-driven inequality, economic and political dispossession (Gusterson 2017). Nevertheless, this term is, as described by Comaroff, a ‘shifter’—it often only expresses opposition to what is defined and is more about marking difference than denoting content (Comaroff 2011: 100). As a marker of disapproval, populism is based on context and must be defined. Considering the aforementioned rhetorical divide, I define populism in the Magtaal context as a political movement motivated by a self-

⁵⁴ The combined term ‘ard tümen’ was a socialist neologism to describe ‘myriad commoners’ (Sneath 2011: 51). Previously, *ard* had referred to banner serfs, but a new socialist term was needed to unite previously disparate classes—e.g. urban labourers and rural herders.

perception of belonging to an economically-marginalized and disenfranchised underclass that exists as a result of local political neglect vis-à-vis the economic and political interests of foreign actors. Defined in this way, both the protest actions of the 19th-century Daivan *soum* residents and contemporary anti-FTZ movements can be interpreted as broadly populist. Nevertheless, a key difference exists between them. In contrast to pre-socialist group distinctions that emphasized political affiliation,⁵⁵ the burgeoning socialist state sought to refashion the Mongolian ethnic narrative into a national political community with shared kin origins (Sneath 2011: 50-1). Consequently, the contemporary political consciousness I have described overlaps with ‘national populist’ movements in global contexts that emphasize national belonging as a benchmark for political and economic inclusion (Gusterson 2017; Kalb 2009; Muehlebach & Shoshan 2012; Thorleifsson 2016). Nevertheless, these sentiments have local inflection by focusing on the failure of national politicians to live up to historical standards.

Failed politicians

Magtaal residents assume that national, in-group loyalty should be a given for their political representatives. To provide a comparison, Kalb discusses how in Western contexts the rise of national populism is often encountered with shock and horror, because its exclusionary rhetoric contradicts many citizen’s self-perception as an open, inclusive liberal democracy with citizens of equal standing. Because this rhetoric is considered antithetical to the tenets of democratic, nation-state-based, 20th-century modernist liberalism, the larger populace often mystifies ‘...the sources of nationalism in the West by shifting them onto actors deemed ultimately external to the core of the West itself, that is, migrants and the fringe of the extreme Right’ (2009: 209). The internal logic of Magtaal-based national populism differs substantially from the aforementioned, because of the base assumption of in-group and/or nationalist allegiance. For one, the historical Manchu era hierarchical narratives I described are inherently an in-group/out-group logic—individuals that live in an

⁵⁵ As discussed by Sneath, in the pre-socialist period, individuals known as ‘Mongolian’ rarely identified with one another based on the perception of shared characteristics or kinship, i.e. a *volk* concept. Rather, the term ‘Mongol’ referred to the shared experience of existing under the domination of the aristocratic lineage associated with the designation ‘Mongol’ (2007, 2011).

area, are united by a sovereign and participate in ceremonies are enclosed in the in-group. By extension, socialist era narratives, which strived to create a consciousness of national class in Mongolia, expanded ideals of governance and consequently, the in-group, onto the entire nation. Nevertheless, this is still inclusionary/exclusionary—only ‘true’ (*jinhene*) Mongolians are of the in-group.⁵⁶ Consequently, I argue that in contrast to Kalb’s Polish context, Mongolians are not incensed by the rise of nationalist emphasis, per se.

Rather, political nationalism is a base assumption in Mongolia and political debates often revolve around dissenting opinions of genuine nationalism.⁵⁷ In the European context Kalb describes, society poses the question: Why is there nationalism? In the Magtaal context, however, society poses the question: Why isn’t there nationalism? Assuming nationalism to be a given, Magtaal residents struggle to answer why their Mongolian political representatives, who should in their eyes be nationalistic, are perceived as not acting so. National populism can thus be interpreted as a political narrative that aims to incite political representatives to act in the economic-cum-political interests of the in-group national body, however defined. Indeed, Kalb similarly argues that contemporary national populism in Poland is ‘...the rejection of liberal elites and ideologies that fail to use the resources of the democratic national state to harness global process to local needs and desires, that celebrate an elite cosmopolitanism, or that use state power and cosmopolitan ideologies for outright local dispossession’ (2009: 209). Consequently, the condemnation of elite politicians, who fail to act in the national interests of ‘the people’ are common to these contexts. Nevertheless, Kalb asserts that variances in contemporary forms of politicized national populism ‘...have broadly similar social roots and comparable constituencies and are occasioned by related processes of neoliberal globalization and class restructuring, whereas their actual event-based dynamics, of course derive from differently ordered and

⁵⁶ ‘True’ (*jinhene*) Mongolians were often conceived as the Halh majority—see Bulag for an excellent description of the making of the Halh-based national majority in the socialist era (1998)

⁵⁷ Rather, in my experiences talking to urban residents regarding the FTZ protests, they most often complain that countryside individuals are working against the national interest. In other words, urban and rural residents often accuse one another of not being nationalist enough. Therefore, nationalist as a concept is not the culprit, but various segments of society have different conceptualisations of ideal nationalism.

sequentialized political fields and get their symbolism from profoundly different national histories, memories, and amnesias' (2009: 209). In Magtaal, residents search for the source of failed nationalism, which they locate in the corrupted moral character of their politicians through the allure of foreign monies.

The corrupting power of foreign capital

As a result, although foreign elements (in particularly monies) are indirectly blamed for contemporary disenfranchisement, the onus is most directly placed on Mongolian politicians' greed and inability to live up to sovereign duties. It is true that sinophobia has a long history in Mongolia and that local characterizations of Chinese citizens frame them as economic avaricious (Billé 2015). Additionally, the debates surrounding the local activities of a large Chinese-owned oil company (discussed in introduction) largely conform to these historical stereotypes. This company's reputation is locally mired by constant corruption rumours⁵⁸ and the widespread knowledge that the company, on account of its singular contract with the central government, pays all of its taxes to the *aimag* and Ulaanbaatar. Nevertheless, this isn't framed as only the company's fault—residents are keenly aware the brokers in this process, their Mongolian political representatives, have allowed this situation to arise. Unable to explain this seemingly-irrational circumstance—that politicians do not help implement legitimate local needs vis-à-vis foreign companies—residents suspect that politicians are being bribed to look the other way. The FTZ situation—as a political plan implemented without consideration of local needs—further triggered this pent-up negativity. In coining the term 'competition states', Friedman argues that contemporary states will lose their popular legitimacy if they continue to 'compete for mobile capital by offering their populations and territories up as readily exploitable factors for global capital' (Kalb 2009: 207). Indeed, Kazi went to the protest gripping a sign that stated 'My Magtaal is not the Government's Payment' (*Manai [Magtaal] Töriin Tölöös Bish*), because she believed that the land was being sold off by politicians to foreign investors in exchange for national debt.⁵⁹ She further explained, 'People

⁵⁸ During my fieldwork, an official who worked in the oil company as a governmental overseer was embroiled in a scandal over locally offering jobs in the oil company in exchange for votes.

⁵⁹ Magtaal residents were aware of protests in neighbouring countries like Kazakhstan where individuals had started protesting over the prospect of China grabbing land in order to pay back

generally protested because we have a magnificently beautiful homeland and so we protested to let it be. You can't just seize (*bulaah*) people's livelihoods away...If that [Agricultural] Minister really wants some five hundred thousand acres [note: the size of the proposed FTZ] then it's just selling our local...land away...then everything from the Menen Steppe over towards us will just be sold away'. Consequently, Kazi reasoned that Mongolian politicians (in this case, the minister) were positioning to sell off local land—and by extension, local livelihoods—to make revenue for their state and personal debts. Direct experiences of political frustration and neglect thus inform local residents increasing suspicion and lack of trust in politicians (who are seen as morally-debased).

debts. Local residents were scared that this was happening in Magtaal. See <https://uk.reuters.com/article/kazakhstan-china-protest/kazakh-opposition-calls-for-halt-to-china-expansion-idUKLDE74R02M20110528>



Figure 6: Early fall 2016, after the FTZ resolution had been rescinded, mysterious, numbered signs began popping up at night across the land area of Magtaal that declared their location as designated sites for the 'State's Agricultural Zone'. It was never revealed how or who put these signs up. They thus incited a flurry of rumour and suspicion in the township that the slighted Agricultural Minister had been trying to implement her FTZ plan illegally; further revealing the depth of local mistrust vis-à-vis politicians.

To Van—a politician for the people

Three days after the *ovoo tahilga* at the White Mountain, a festival of wrestling, archery and horseracing was held in Magtaal *soum* in To Van's honour. The celebration began with a scene from To Van's age—a herder dressed in gold, crowned with a tasselled, domed hat, rode in on a noble steed. Behind him, a retinue of retainers—first, two men on fine horses, followed by a showing of military might, nobles in elegant clothing, and lastly, the largest contingent of all, the commoners. The actors, local residents dressed like serfs, carried buckets

and bowed low as they followed and ladled milk into the air in honour of their prince. The retinue then ceased marching, when a list of the many accomplishments of To Van echoed over the loudspeaker—telling of his economic prowess, of his *Treatise*, of his construction of the Buddha at Ikh Burkhan, of his creation of the Sangiin Dalai and his tricking of the Manchu prince who coveted Tsagaan Uul. The dramatic rendition concluded with the commoners bowing low on the ground in obeisance and in awe in front of the historical figure of To Van. The crowd got on their feet and cheered in encouragement and unison.



Figure 7: 'To Van' on his noble steed

Considering the contemporary disenchantment and disappointment with their political leaders, contemporary Magtaal idealization of the historical figure of To Van can be understood in a new light. A few days after the ceremony, I asked

one of the actors, Tseren, why she had bowed down as a serf in front of To Van in the dramatization. She answered, 'I am a school teacher and the school is named after To Van, so I thought I should teach the kids lessons from his *Treatise*'. She 'appreciates' (*üneleh*) him, she said, because he created the *Ikh Burkhant*, wrote the *Treatise* from his own lived experience, and gave his vassals useful ideas to follow. Out of respect for his legacy and his intellectual power that carried on for 200 years, she said, she participated. But then I asked her if she knew why his contemporaries had labelled him 'difficult' and she answered:

'Difficult means smart [hetsüü bol uhaantai]. He had economic smarts and life smarts and he used them to think about his banner and try and raise it up. He did a lot for this area. He was cunning and clever and liked to trick people. He couldn't be tricked by others' words. For example, he made the Sangiin Dalai Lake by taking salt from China. So, he's smart, so it's labelled 'harsh' [shirüün]. He worked hard and was quarrelsome and could use words to get what he wanted. This is what 'difficult' means'.

I later asked if Tseren knew about the protests against To Van that had happened during his regency, and she said she did not. But regardless, she reiterated, To Van was 'difficult' (*hetsüü*) because he was hard to beat, which was admirable because he implemented these skills out of love for his people (*ard tümendee elegtei*). From our historical vantage point, it is impossible to know exactly what motivated To Van's various reforms and activities.

Considering his own economic indebtedness, profit-oriented activities and merciless treatment of the protestors in his *soum*, To Van was likely more complex than his depiction within the contemporary Magtaal imagination. Nonetheless, his current popularity (as evinced through the collection of donations from residents for the event to proceed) says more about contemporary society than about To Van's era. Contemporary residents desire a strong, tough, nationalistic hero, a political patriarch like To Van.

To Van's contemporary revitalization can thus be partially attributed to his elevation to a political exemplar vis-à-vis the perceived failings of contemporary

politicians. After mentioning the staying power of his intellectual prowess, Tseren continued with further laudations of To Van:

'If there was someone like To Van now, then they would be a "genuine politician for the people". If there were more people like To Van, then our country would be better. Maybe we wouldn't be in debt. I don't think our modern government is good for people [eeltei gej boddoggüi]. Our current politicians just think of themselves; there are no bosses that think of the people.⁶⁰ Maybe there are one or two, but it's so rare. Politicians just enrich themselves and have money and offshore accounts and their own companies...When they want to get elected, they talk about caring for the people. When they talk, they talk like To Van, but when they act, they do the exact opposite. On the surface, they speak like they will work for the people, but beyond, they just enrich themselves. They are liars'.⁶¹

To Tseren, To Van was a 'genuine politician for the people' (*jinhene ard tümenii uls törch baina*) because he fulfilled his sovereign obligations and duties towards his citizenry in representing their (economic and political) interests. According to Tseren, the contemporary government and its representatives have the responsibility to work for the people, to provide for them and to care for them. If we consider historical concepts of obligation relations (as exemplified in the *Treatise*), prince and peoples each have their operative place and should jointly provide and care for one another. Working together, the whole survives. In consequence, To Van's local adulation comes at this historical moment, because of the widespread sentiment that current politicians are not fulfilling his standard of sovereign duties. As Tseren mentions, they talk like To Van, but they don't walk the walk. As a result, the most common criticism towards contemporary politicians that I heard during my time in Magtaal was that they have become selfish or, literally, they only 'think of themselves' (*öördsdiigöö boddog*). They focus on their own companies, act in their own interest and hide money in their own offshore accounts. Returning to the aforementioned discussion of the normative expectation of nationalism, the denunciation of

⁶⁰ 'Töriin alba avsan хүмүүс чин' өөрdsdiigöö boddog bolohoos ard түменii boddog darga baihgüi.

⁶¹ 'Yarihdaa bol yag Tovan shig yaridag hiihdee yag esregeer n' hijjchih bairaa yum. Öngö n' deeree bolohoor hudlaa'.

'selfish' implies that politicians should be acting in the greater national interest, and out of 'affinity for their people' (*ard tümendee elegtei*), but are choosing to individualistically and immorally line their pockets instead.

'Real' politicians

Because residents are comparing the contemporary landscape to an endeavoured ideal, they frequently discuss contemporary political issues in terms of being real and genuine (*jinhene*) or not. Indeed, in the aforementioned, Tseren labels To Van as 'real' in contrast to contemporary politicians who are 'liars' and/or 'fake' (which is the same word in Mongolian, *hudalch*). This adjective of 'genuine' or 'true' (*jinhene*) is often used in populist discourses to investigate whether the behaviour of an individual, politician or government is diverging from the proper fulfilment of their role within a nationalist-inclusive hierarchical governance ideal.⁶² For example, Billé mentions how the majority Halh Mongols, as the ethnic group who most conform to the national ideal, relies on a discourse of being the 'genuine Mongols' (*jinhene*) (Billé 2013: 10; Bulag 1998). Within the 2017 presidential election season, the winning candidate—much like Trump's calumnies regarding Obama's heritage—tried to sow doubt over his opponents 'true' genetic Mongolian-ness.⁶³ According to the proverbs that local residents retell about To Van, he is a politician who harnesses his intelligence and economic foresight to the long-term benefit of his followers. Although these retellings elide certain aspects of To Van's lived historical actions, the specific communal formulation of these proverbs is understandable when seen within the larger historical epoch of the '*zah zeeliin üye*'—the age of the market. Economic survival and prosperity, delineated in material terms, has become crucially important to the contemporary historical moment—a field that To Van, compared to almost every other Mongolian historical exemplar, excelled in. In describing diverse forms of power in the Shishged Depression, Pedersen discusses how 'businessmen' have emerged as a power category in the post-1990 economic and social field, whose power

⁶² From a different angle, Darhad in the Shishged Depression will debate if post-1990 shamans are 'real' (*jinhene*) or fake (*huda*), representing a similar moral trajectory of living up to an exemplar shaman (Pedersen 2011).

⁶³ This isn't historically unique – Bulag discusses how discourses of being of mixed heritage (*erliiz*) has often been used to discredit politicians' loyalty to Mongolia (1998).

rest on their qualities of being intelligent (*uhaantai*) and ‘good with numbers’ (*too sain medne*) (2006: 91). Not only is ‘uhaantai’ the most common accolade associated with To Van, but he combines this economic perspicacity with authority, effectiveness and power—qualities seen as lacking amongst contemporary politicians. Denunciations of contemporary politicians as selfish, greedy and inauthentic are thus comparatives to an idealized image of a selfless politician who acts in the economic-cum-political interest of their native peoples. Against a backdrop of economic and political neglect, To Van’s unique historical example of economic cunning in the interest of elevating the national Mongolian polity is a character amalgamation that affectively resonates with politically disenchanted populations and constructs his memory into the ideal of a ‘true’ Mongolian politician amongst contemporary fakes.

Seeking balance

Revisiting the cairn ceremony at To Van’s designated White Mountain, supplicants often remarked that they were motivated to join the ceremony because of a perceived imbalance in relations between humans and the natural world. For example, after Doljko and I had participated in the morning *ovoo* ceremony, we returned to the camp to watch the start of the various competitions of wrestling and horseback riding on display. While awaiting the start of one wrestling round, I plopped myself down in the heat under an umbrella, next to an eye-glass-wearing inspector for the local branch of the national park service. I asked him why he had decided to participate in this cairn ritual. ‘Nature is out of balance (*baigaliin tentsvert baidal aldagdaj baina*)’, he said, ‘we need to remember how to regrow and reproduce it’. Another woman I met pointed out the dust plumes in the air created by the movement of so many cars—‘In the past these rituals were frequented with horses [so this dust did not happen]; it is one thing to say you love nature, but another to show it (*baidal gej setgel n’ bairaa ch ilerhiilegdeh n’ arai öör baina aa*)’. She blamed this situation on poor government and organization. A third lady mentioned how individuals are increasingly using (*ashiglah*, also ‘exploiting’) the world—‘we have come to entreat nature for more fortune (*buyan hishigee*), but we need to use it appropriately (*zohistoi baih*). Right now, nature is imbalanced (*aldagdaj baina*

aa)'.⁶⁴ Similar to the lessons in To Van's *Treatise*, these actors envision a world where nature (land masters), human masters and everyday citizens act in harmony with one another in order to continue the cycle of prosperity depicted as the cosmo-economic value of *buyan hishig*. Their assertions that the world, however, is not in balance points to a belief that something is amiss in this hierarchical cyclicity.

To Van is consequently idealized in contemporary Magtaal, because he presented constructive economic instructions for how to maintain an economically-viable society in line with social, cosmological and moral precepts. Returning to the current-day bespectacled nature inspector under the umbrella in the heat of the *ovoo tahilga*, he elaborated further on the idea of nature currently being 'out-of-balance':

Why are we doing the celebration? So that nature doesn't lose its ecological balance. We are here to show our children how to love nature and we are asking [the nature spirits] for rain and to not become ill. To Van knew how to maintain this [balance]—he taught us about how to raise our animals and said, for example, don't sell or eat the female sheep. If you want to eat animals, don't eat the healthy/young ones [cor], eat the worst. Balance how many resources you use and use it correctly. This means growing, reproducing, only using for daily consumption, re-growing...only eat old antelope so they can reproduce again. Only use old trees, only hunt male deer. Our Mongolian people are now getting an ego [bi gesen handlaga setgeltei bolson] and forgetting our historical traditions. So, nature is imbalanced.

To him, To Van's *Treatise* taught a sense of balanced, managed human behaviour that had the larger purpose of maintaining the continuity of society and nature. Accordingly, the *Treatise* promoted a vision of sustainable pastoral livelihoods that allowed their long-term, yet measured and balanced, prosperity through embracing, promoting and harmonizing with the cyclical growth of

⁶⁴ 'Aldagdaj baina aa' literally means a piece or part is missing or has been taken away, i.e. that a holistic element is incomplete. This confirms with a vision of nature and society as a whole/holistic sphere with parts that people have claim to. See chapter 3 for a discussion of parts of nature to whole.

nature—e.g. only eat or hunt male, old animals, to promote female fecundity and birth of new animals. This inspector thus believes that the imbalance in nature is linked to a breakdown of the ethical self. If one adhered to traditions (and thus the lessons of To Van), one would maintain an ethics of moderate, measured, sustainable, non-ego-focused growth and behaviour in line with larger expectations of social place. This rhetoric of reasonableness in economic behaviour—growth in moderation within reasonable, sustainable, socially-considered bounds that allows social continuity—was a reoccurring ethical dilemma in Magtaal during my fieldwork. Consequently, even though To Van himself did not always follow his own guidelines, the popularity of his image endures because he constructed an all-inclusive, practical system for economic prosperity that takes on new historical significance at a historical moment when the underclass is being economically neglected and marginalized. He is an exemplar for a working economic system that is moral.

Indeed, these statements point to a growing feeling that the balance of interactions between humans, in their various rankings, and the natural world are changing. According to Humphrey, pastoral herders, whose livelihoods have historically been directly interrelated with natural circumstances, historically viewed the natural world as an ‘...all-encompassing system which ideally remains in balance, a state of normality, regulated by *tenger* (the sky, Heaven). [Because a]ctions or events in one part of the system affect the other parts...[m]ost of the rules concerning human treatment of things in nature are designed to preserve the normal, balanced, state of affairs...’ (Humphrey et al. 1993: 51, emphasis in original). Since human beings are part of this system, they can take from nature, like animals who eat grass, as long as it is not harmful to the system and necessary for existence (ergo the cycle of life). But also, at the same time, they must strive to preserve the balance in nature. Traditionally, for example, humans were meant to uphold certain injunctions on actions known to disturb the land and interfere in the reproduction of nature—i.e. moving stones, scuffing the ground, burying things without ritual, breaking branches, putting chemicals in water, etc. (Humphrey 1995: 141). I suggest that these correct forms of relation and balanced treatment of nature are ideally conceived as guarded, regulated and governed by mortal and spiritual masters

to effectuate the well-being of the whole. In contemporary society, in contrast to this vision of hierarchical multi-tiered balance, residents feel that the central mediator in this hierarchical governance ideal, human sovereigns, have failed. As a result, as will be elucidated in the next chapters, residents are increasingly reliant on nature and are constructing nature-dependent economic chains to replace the void left by politicians. Nevertheless, this is multiply morally fraught—for one, residents are defying injunctions and regularly digging into the ground; and it is no longer clear how much natural extraction is ‘balanced’ and ‘necessary for existence’ or not. In consequence, the nature inspector opines that nature is ‘out-of-balance’ and individuals have received an ‘ego’ (i.e. are materially selfish) in acknowledgement that nature is being overly consumed to engender money and feed a populace that can no longer rely on the governance of its political sovereigns.

Chapter 2: Fish-extractive, cross-border economic networks—carving dignified life across zones of political, economic and legal abandonment

I first met Zurhee when our rusty-yet-steady Soviet bus (*porgon*) pulled up next to the shiny, black Range Rover parked in front of his house on a warm evening in July 2016. Blinded by the disparity of wealth between the Range Rover and the compound, Bayar (my driver) and I sat for a second deliberating if we should go in as to not disturb an important meeting. As if on cue in response to our mental musings, however, the occupants of the Range Rover stepped out of the corrugated-metal-roofed house. Bayar and I immediately recognized the guest of honour: Baterdene, the Mongolian government representative stationed at the local Chinese oil company, who was making the local rounds in preparation for a bid for province-level elections within the next days. After Baterdene's Range Rover drove off scattering dust into the lake-framed sunset, we yelled to ask for permission to enter the compound. Zurhee's fence-lined plot consisted of a hodgepodge assortment of cages and compound sections reflecting his many talents as a renaissance provider. He exited the house wearing large black wellies from a recent fishing expedition and beckoned us inside for food. 'So,' he eyed me intently over the rim of the sheep's head, 'you're not politicians, so are you here to buy fish?'

Zurhee's home of Dalai Village at Dalai Lake is a fishing settlement located in Magtaal *soum* roughly 65 kilometres northwest of Bayant. This village of a few dozen households (we counted 28 houses) historically emerged in tandem with the fish trade at Dalai Lake. Born in 1964, Zurhee's family had moved to the north-eastern lake edge to work for the fish factory established there in 1954.⁶⁵ But in 1990, the fish factory collapsed due to privatization. After 1990, he was employed at the lake for a privately-owned, Chinese-partnered fish company that also collapsed. At this point, Zurhee was approaching 40 and felt too old and untrained to start a new trade. So, while his six children moved to the city, turning to urban futures, Zurhee stayed behind in the village of his youth. As a

⁶⁵ The village grew to 60-70 families around it.

result, the contemporary village at Dalai lingers as a hamlet of overwhelmingly elderly residents and pre-school-age children. Because no new large-scale fishing enterprise has ventured to Dalai in the last 17 years, Zurhee explains, Dalai residents only sporadically have legal allowance to fish. With restricted recourse to fishing, he provides for his family through a plethora of small-scale, informal resource activities.

I subsequently marvel that Zurhee must be very hard-working with his many subsistence activities. 'It is because there is no other work', he says, 'sometimes we get permission [from the government] to fish, so we fish. But often we don't have permission, so there are no other forms of work. So I plant vegetables outside of my home. I plant and eat potatoes for my own food, And I pick [and sell] roots, you know... but I'm not hardworking, it's just that if I don't [work], who is going to look out [harj] for me? If we ask the government for help, we just go into debt'. Zurhee is referring to the permit-system, which requires fishermen and women to purchase fishing licenses (thereby possibly indebting them). I mention that he could ask Baterdene for help with this intractable work situation. Psssh, he wrinkled his nose. 'Politicians like him are all the same, they say many niceties right before the election [like now]. If I were a politician [*darga*], I would also say pretty things. I would say, I'm going to allow you to fish all the time. But while I'm telling you [that I will help you] to fish, I'm actually not doing anything'. He concludes, 'I don't care about this election...I want to support someone who is good and looks out for their country's people [*ulsuudaa harj bairaa*]'.

To him, such a government representative currently does not exist. Zurhee, like the chapter 1 participants in local cairn rituals, is disenchanted and expresses resignation with the contemporary state system and its representatives. In chapter 1, I elucidated the teachings and legacy of To Van to discuss a historical Mongolian governance ideal of a hierarchical, total encompassment system revolving around the value of *buyan hishig*—Buddhist merit and fortune, or, more generally, cosmoeconomic fecundity.⁶⁶ By

⁶⁶ Importantly, this historical ideal of 'nested hierarchy' (Dumont 1966) contrasts sharply with Scott's depiction of frontier peoples as desirous of living outside the confines of the state; local residents often express longings not for political exclusion and autonomy, but to be wholeheartedly encompassed in the workings of a total cosmoeconomic service and provisioning system (Scott 2009).

extension, I discuss how national populist sentiments are currently on the rise on account of contemporary politicians' inability to live up to historical ideals of sovereign action. By this, I am not claiming that the historical ideal remains statically unchanged from the Manchu period; both patron/client ideals and network formations have carried over and adapted throughout the Manchu, socialist and post-socialist periods. Zurhee's aspersions towards Baterdene continue this comparative trajectory of ideal versus lived, but extend the metaphor beyond individual politicians to the disadvantaged positionality of local residents in the larger governance system. By using the word 'harah'—a verb that means 'to see' but also figuratively translates as 'to recognize' or 'to care for'—Zurhee expresses feelings of abandonment, neglect, lack of recognition, safety and provisioning by the state vis-à-vis local contemporary citizens. He portrays the state as having a responsibility and role of care that it is not currently fulfilling. Consequently, Zurhee opines, the current lack of state care induces him to resort to small-scale entrepreneurialism—to 'look out' (*harj*) for himself—in an attempt to fill this care and provisioning void.

As a result, this chapter is about how economic networks are endeavouring to replace the vacuum in governance left by the state. Using the example of fish networks, I discuss how residents perceive the state as having deserted them and thus, in turn, decide to forsake the state's laws in the interest of carving out economically dignified livelihoods. In order to frame this shift, I discuss two affective registers of economic morality that reoccurred during my fieldwork and throughout this thesis. First, as discussed, Magtaal residents rhetorically describe their idealized positionality in the hierarchical master/custodian relationship with the state by evoking a value nexus of care (*harah*, or literally, 'being seen') versus neglect (*toohgüi*, or literally, 'disinterest').⁶⁷ In praxis, the formal economic system has relegated Magtaal residents to an 'economy of abandonment' (Povinelli 2011) that is physically untenable. Consequently, residents engage in a plethora of economic activities that exist in an ambiguous space between life and law (Reeves 2013, 2014a). Because this is necessary for economic survival, a narrative of breaking the law (*hulgaigaar*) that is

⁶⁷ Though not always—like in the aforementioned quote, Zurhee mentions that he can't ask the state for help

increasingly framed as moral in light of state neglect. At this point, I discuss the second affective register—a value nexus of help and assistance (*tus, tuslamj*) versus hurt (*hohirooh*, literally ‘to cause to suffer’). Because residents share the experience of being marginalized, they are forming economic networks that create monetary wealth (through navigating the lines between borders). These networks allow residents to economically survive in an economy of abandonment and thus are governed by a rhetoric of ‘help’. This fusion of rhetoric of social favours with monetary access is common to the Magtaal context and reoccurs henceforth throughout the thesis. Finally, in the next chapter, I discuss how residents’ widespread dependence on resource-extractive economic networks is resulting in the shift of moral narratives to justify their wide-scale resource extraction.

Dalai on the margins

Dalai is both literally and figuratively on the margins of the Mongolian state and thereby occupies a transgressive political position that harbours potentiality to question wonted narratives. Broadly conceived, the multifarious symbolic image of margins and borders has multiple forms of credence for the Dalai region. For starters, the widely pervasive Weberian conceptualization of states as territorially-encompassing administrative units punctuated by borders symbolically places the geographic position of Dalai on the administrative and political margins of the Mongolian state. As discussed in the intro, local inhabitants recognize this administrative positioning through self-descriptors as residents of a remote and isolated frontier (*alslagdmal gazar*) that comprises the ‘eastern front’ (*zūün hyazgaar*) to China. Secondly, Dalai’s geographic remoteness and proximity to the border means that the residents of Dalai are frequently in contact with perceived social ‘others’—Chinese citizens. These various refractions of political, legal, social and economic margins create a ‘contradictory zone of culture and power’ (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 26) recognized by other scholars of border (Reeves 2014a; Roitman 2004, 2005) and/or state marginalized (Millar 2018; Povinelli 2011) settings. As a result, Dalai residents are adept at the ‘art of neighbouring’—a subject position of neither total social sameness, nor otherness with various populations—which encourages novel forms of relational interaction (Saxer & Zhang 2017).

Geographic margins

The geographic and spatial awareness of Magtaal residents, in general, but Dalai residents in particular, is highly defined by relative spatial distance from the centre of Mongolian state power (over 1000 kilometres) in contrast to the proximity of the Chinese border (less than 30 kilometres).⁶⁸ As of 2015, Magtaal *soum* has a population of 3018 and is split into three tiny administrative districts known as bags. The majority of my fieldwork took place in ‘Bayant’ i.e. Bayant bag,⁶⁹ which is the capital centre of the *soum* and has a population of roughly 1,700 individuals. Zurhee and the informants in this chapter, in contrast, live in Tsogt bag, which is 60 kilometres to the northwest of Bayant and has a population of roughly 800 individuals.⁷⁰ The administrative centre of Tsogt *bag*, founded in the 1960s,⁷¹ consists of a few hundred families, a few stores, a schoolhouse, a gas station and sporadic electricity. In contrast to Bayant, it does not have a bank, hospital nor government building. Importantly, Tsogt *bag* centre is approximately 7 kilometres from a border crossing (*boomt*) into Tümenjargal, China, which is the most frequented border point for all Magtaal residents. As a result, Tsogt is constantly filled with traffic to and from China—sometimes in the form of Mongolian residents heading to Tümenjargal for various technological needs, food or health care, but frequently as Chinese oil lorries traveling between the Chinese oil company’s fields in Tsogt *bag* and their refinery.⁷² Importantly, Tsogt *bag* is also the home of many local ecological marvels—the Menen Steppe, large plains known for its swarms of antelope, and Dalai Nuur (*nuur* meaning ‘lake’), a large, oyster-shaped freshwater lake. As a

⁶⁸ These relative feelings of isolation and remoteness are also underscored by the fact that Magtaal *soum* centre, known colloquially as Bayant, has one of the largest geographic distances in Mongolia between *soum* and *aimag* centres—Bayant is located over 360 kilometres over unpaved road from the *aimag* province centre of Choibalsan.

⁶⁹ Confusingly, the contemporary *soum* centre, which was my main location of residence, is officially called ‘Magtaal’ after the same-named larger *soum* of Magtaal *soum*. Unofficially, however, the location is colloquially known as ‘Bayant’, due to the merging of Bayant and Magtaal *soums* into Magtaal *soum* in 1994. With the merging, the original Magtaal *soum* became Tsogt *bag*, whereas the original Bayant *soum* became Bayant *bag* (and the *soum* centre). Contemporarily, residents refer to the new Magtaal *soum* centre as ‘Bayant’ and to the old Magtaal *soum* centre as ‘Tsogt’.

⁷⁰ The third *bag* is the southern *bag*, which consists of mostly a few dozen herder families.

⁷¹ It was founded in the 1960s as the location of an agricultural research centre tasked with discerning the quality of the local land—the initiative that eventually led to the founding of Bayant as an agricultural state farm in 1972.

⁷² These oil lorries frequently form long queues of multiple lorries at the border point, see picture.

result, Tsogt *bag*'s population actually congregates in two locations (not including the company's oil field)—first the *bag* centre of a few hundred people already mentioned and another smaller village (*tosgon*) on the lake. This latter settlement is Zurhee's home hamlet of Dalai Village and is sufficiently removed (around 20 kilometres) from Tsogt *bag* centre to be perceived by Magtaal residents as a separate location.



Figure 8: 18+ oil lorries lined up at the border crossing in Tsogt bag on their way to the oil refinery in China (taken in August 2017)

Social margins

Importantly, Dalai Lake, the source of Dalai Village's prosperity, is currently split by the Mongolian/Chinese border line—the north-western edge and 10 percent of the lake's surface lies in China, whilst the majority of the lake is located in Tsogt *bag*. In 1732-4, the Qing authorities resettled members of the Barga minority (Mongols with a Buriat dialect) to the Hulun Buur valley—an area so named because of the presence of multiple lakes further to the north (Ochir et al. 2003: 325). With their move, the newly arrived Barga and the inhabitant Halh

groups were kept separate and split⁷³ according to the flow of the Halh River, which flows into Dalai Lake on its north-eastern edge⁷⁴ (Ochir et al. 2003: 326). Consequently, Dalai Lake itself was divided between the two groups—the north-western edge of the lake (west of the Halh river entrance) became Barga and the rest remained in Halh territory in *Ilden Vangiin* banner, To Van's ancestral banner. In fact, when To Van's ancestors founded the banner, one of the banner units lived and moved around the Hulun Buur region. As a result, when the division between the Barga and Halh was decided, one *Ilden Vangiin soum* unit continued their tradition of nomadizing on the northern edge of the lake near the Orshuun River (in newly-proclaimed Barga territory). This incident, in addition to Barga claims on the Huld Mountain (which became the White Mountain in the *ovoo* ritual in chapter 1) on the southern edge of the *Ilden Vangiin* banner's territory, led to frequent Qing litigations between the Barga banner (specifically, the *Barga Shuluun Tsagaan* and *Shuluun Höh* banners) and the *Ilden Vangiin* banner (Ochir et al. 2003: 326).⁷⁵ Due to these varying border contestations between the Barga and Halh, the border was moved in 1822, 1845, 1848 and 1857 and border litigations continued unabated into the 20th century (Ochir et al. 2003: 328). These ongoing disputes thus reflect the effort and 'border work' that was required to maintain clear divisions between groups united by territory, language and lifestyles. As a result, Bulag argues that the 'imperial legacy' of the Qing was multiple Mongol peoples with a clear consciousness of their united identity as Mongolian, who were nevertheless 'deeply divided institutionally' (2014: 42). In fact, the historical Qing-defined demarcations endured and the initial decision—land east and west of the river is Barga and Halh, respectively (Ochir et al. 2003: 326)—still lingers (and fixed in the 1960s), as the contemporary border between Inner Mongolia (China) and Magtaal (Mongolia) is defined in large part by the flow of the Halh River.

⁷³ According to Bulag, the Manchu Qing had 'a strong sense of border, using it as a political technique to manage the disparate populations with the empire' (2014: 39) in order to 'prevent the Mongols from realigning with each other and challenging the Qing' (41).

⁷⁴ While the Orshuun River runs out of Dalai Lake to the north into Hulun Lake.

⁷⁵ For example, the lake was even involved in To Van's economic reforms—when he wanted to block off the Sharaljin River (the part of the Halh River which doesn't flow into Dalai Lake but directly into the Orshuun River) to increase the number of fish in the lake, the Barga protested due to the impact on their water supply (Ochir et al. 2003: 328).

The historical identities of the Inner Mongolian (Chinese) and Mongolian occupants on both sides of the lake have thus developed in dialectical, contradictive relational ‘friction’ (Billé 2017; Tsing 2005) with one another. As an irony of circumstance, the populations of lake dwellers remotely gaze at one another from across a formal and social distance, remotely fantasizing about each other’s activities, whilst their lives are directly intertwined at the most fundamental of levels—through the fish they eat. As early as 1913, Russian entrepreneurs received a 5-10 year contract to carry out a fishing business on the lake (Ochir et al. 2003: 90). In 1954, the aforementioned Soviet fish factory was established on the north-eastern side of the lake, close to where the village now stands. In 1970, the factory became a department (*tsyeh*) of the newly-established meat processing plant (*mah kombinat*) in Choibalsan.⁷⁶ However, like the sister state farm in Bayant, the fish unit collapsed in the privatization phase in 1990 and its assets were distributed among the former workers in the form of red and blue vouchers (*tasalbar*) (Empson 2011; Pedersen 2011). As will be discussed later, Magtaal residents frequently narrate that a common feature of this economically-beleaguered, post-factory period was attempts by residents on both sides of the lake to steal resources from one another—whereas Outer Mongolians stole horses from China, the Inner Mongolians stole lake fish from the Mongolian side. In the early 90s, residents narrate, a Mongolian businessman arrived from Ulaanbaatar who offered to buy the vouchers to privately invest them into a fishing company. For a decade, then, many of the former factory workers remained and worked for this company, which exported fish to China and brought Chinese workers to the Mongolian lakeside. However, residents retell, the company lost revenue through a drop in the Chinese fish price, paid back loans in Dalai fish and subsequently went bankrupt. Since then, no large-scale business has operated on the Mongolian lakeside, whereas the Chinese 10 percent of the surface has been partitioned off through nets owned by various fish-farming companies.⁷⁷ Sans regular, formal business infrastructure on the Mongolian side, the remaining residents have carved out subsistence niches from small-scale fishing and economic

⁷⁶ <http://www.choibalsan.mn/index.php?newsid=9198>

⁷⁷ Although I wasn’t allowed to see it; foreigners cannot get that close to the Chinese border without a state-mandated permit.

networks, which continue to rely on Chinese markets. Thus, dwellers have entrepreneurially reinvented the historical local tendency of existing in intimate collaboration, yet simultaneous antagonism with residents on the other side of the lake.

Importantly, as a border population, Dalai residents have forged localized identities that scale in seemingly incompatible ways. In the *Art of Neighbouring*, Zhang and Saxer have discussed how being located on borders often requires a specific relational form that can balance a constant subterranean tension of anxiety and doubt with, contractively, friendly gestures and vows of trust born from a need to co-exist (2017: 16). Indeed, Dalai residents have become adept at this ‘art of neighbouring’ by associating and disassociating themselves with various populations based on relational needs. For example, although strong nationalist sentiment is widely documented in Mongolian ethnographies (Billé 2015; Bulag 1998), the feelings of economic disenfranchisement addressed in the following paragraphs mean that Dalai residents also increasingly feel like the ‘neighbours’ of their own state’s urban or politically-established populations. Because local residents, like Zurhee, perceive of themselves as ‘marginal’—largely removed from the infrastructural, political and economic formal structures of the state—they increasingly most readily identify with the lake (as a spiritual and geographical phenomenon). Consequently, local residents of Dalai Village will refer to themselves, a village without a formal administrative name, in the self-referential—either as ‘our village people’ (*manai ene tosgony хүмүүс*) or, most prevalently, as ‘the Dalai [Lake] people’ (*[Dalai]han*). Importantly, the self-referential as ‘lake people’, as will be discussed later, does not *necessarily* exclude lake residents on the other side of the lake who are Chinese state citizens. Particularly in matters of economic need, residents on both sides of the lake become friends and allies. Viewing the subjectivities of local populations as marked by ‘neighbouring’ helps us understand how localized identities can shift in seemingly inconsistent ways between i.e. decrying the local activities of the Chinese state and its citizens, whilst working together and becoming friends with them; condemning the activities of Mongolian state politicians, whilst ethnically identifying with them; and romanticizing the ideal of a strong state, whilst practically breaking state laws.

Care versus neglect

Walking into Zurhee's compound for the first time on the heels of Baterdene created a serendipitous opportunity to discuss the interrelation of governmental politics with local subsistence activities. This first venture into Zurhee's compound was one of my initial sojourns from Bayant over to Dalai and I wasn't as versed at that time in common local habits. Sitting down at his kitchen table, as mentioned above, he looked at me and asked if I wanted to buy fish. I was perplexed. I already knew at that point in the summer of 2016 that fishing was out of season and environmental permits were hard to come by. Nevertheless, the more time I spent at Dalai over the coming months, including living with a local family for a few weeks in 2017, the more I realized and saw that fishing was de facto always in season. In fact, Zurhee was, from the beginning, rather open with the circumstance that his small-scale resource entrepreneurialism depended on the availability of Dalai fish and Fang Feng roots—two resources that are both often illegalized and highly subject to environmental legal restrictions:

'Yes, I pick roots, you know, but there was no [government] root permission this year...but no matter, if I hear that someone is coming to get the root this year, I go straight out and go pick roots and give it to them. But it's also hard if the purchaser doesn't have permission [from the government either]. Like now, when this happens we are just always have to do it all 'illegally' [hulgaigaar, literally, 'through or by theft']...[We know that] it is wrong to catch the fish in the reproduction season, but we still do it...[so] we are forgetting our morals in order to live our lives. We do it to eat and drink and consume. Not to get rich'.

Although within this conversation Zurhee does not blame the government directly for his actions, he nevertheless portrays his circumstances and choices as axiomatic within a framework of restricted mobility, barriers and neglect created by the government. In the same conversation, as quoted in the intro to this chapter, he makes the statement 'I'm not hardworking [for engaging in all of these resource activities], it's just that if I don't [work], who is going to look out (*harj*) for me?' Tuya, a local town dweller, is more forthcoming than Zurhee in

her attribution of blame for the uncomfortable position of shirking the law to catch fish:

'We get no help nor benefits from the government [töröös harj bairaa yum baihgüi]. [Dalai] is so far from everything and there are no government workers. So, we are just living lives and providing for ourselves [eriin saindaa am'draj baina]'.

Consequently, this section is about local Dalai town dwellers' relationship to, evaluation and subsequent negotiation of their government, its economic policies and legal restrictions. In both Tuya's ascription and Zurhee's description, they rhetorically implement the verb 'harah'—to see, recognize and care for—to define their conceptions for what the state should be doing towards them, the citizens. As evinced, the common consensus in Dalai is that the state is not fulfilling its duties towards them and thus is described as 'not caring' or as politicians being 'disinterested' (*toohgüi*) towards local needs, desires and economic hardships. Understanding local perceptions of the failure of proper state action and political behaviour is crucial for elucidating why residents feel increasingly motivated and justified in their continued reliance on formally-illegalized resource-based entrepreneurialism.

The disappointment of idealized hierarchical economic moralities

To Van's vision of a tripartite nested hierarchy of multiple complementary social components also encompasses role partitioning to ensure prosperous economic functioning. In fact, one of the most common contemporary words for economy, *ediin zasag* (another being *zah zeel*), encompasses the historical ideal of a hierarchical, multi-tiered economic system. In their illuminative introduction to a special issue on the contemporary Mongolian economy, Plueckhahn and Bumochir elaborate how the Mongolian compound term for economy, *ediin zasag*, combines *ed*, the Mongolian term for 'thing', 'property', 'possession', and 'wealth', with the word *zasag*, or 'governance', 'rule' and 'authority' (Plueckhahn & Bumochir 2018). As a idiomatic illustration of the interrelation of the meaning of 'governance' or *zasah* in this compound term, Plueckhahn and Bumochir quote the aphorism 'first govern yourself, then govern your home and then govern the state' (*biye zasaad geree zas geree zasaad töröö zas*). The implication in this idiom is that the governance relation (between governed and

governing) should be repeated in multiple social scalabilities—at the individual, familial and larger state/political levels. Combining this understanding of ‘governance’ with economy (as it is found in *ediin zasag*) means that the governing, regulatory body (in this case, the state) is also expected to penetrate and regulate the economy at these multiple register scales. Because, within indigenous conceptualizations, objects are imbued with aspects of their owner (Empson 2011; Højer 2012), the transfer or movement of property (*ed*) needs to be carefully governed and apportioned with a social and moral order to protect all involved (Sneath 2002: 202–3). Translated literally by Sneath as the ‘governance of property’ (2002: 201), this indigenous compound understanding of ‘economy’ implies a realm of consumption objects highly intertwined with expectations of multiple levels of governance by the political, state authority.⁷⁸ Within this indigenous conceptualization, the overarching authority should be economically omnipresent at all levels to ensure the best economic functioning and provisioning for all participant members.

Framed against historical idealizations, contemporary Dalai residents often feel that the current Mongolian state iteration is neglectful in its hierarchical duties by failing to properly govern and provide at all levels of society. As astutely noted by Sneath, this aforementioned historical ideal—of a sovereign power that provides hierarchically, authoritatively and definitively for its people—was also reoccurrent throughout the Mongolian socialist period (2002: 200–1). Because of similarities between ‘feudal’ and collective notions of property, he notes, the shift between the Manchu and socialist eras might have been less radical than the market economic transition. Similarly, during the socialist era, the social, political and economic lives of citizens at Dalai Lake like Zurhee were completely regulated and structured by the fish factory and its authority.

⁷⁸ A manifestation of this ideal of hierarchical economic-cum-political governance is the pre-socialist custom of rotating access to land known as ‘custodial ownership’ or ownership by ‘temporary possession’. Empson argues that a prominent historical pastoral model of land ownership was based on ideas of ‘usufructury access’—that multiple herders could access and temporarily utilize the land and its fruits, as long as the base land was not damaged (Empson 2018b; Sneath 2007). This model, for example, existed within To Van’s banner, where multiple herders would rotate access to land that was not, however, considered their exclusive property—rather, it was the prerogative of the higher authority, either To Van, the Manchu administration, or cosmologically, the spiritual master, to govern the land and administer access. In short, the administrative head governed the *ed*, i.e. land, so that everyone could have access, thereby upholding the economic viability of the entire banner.

Consequently, the contemporary longing for hierarchical inclusion does represent a romanticization of the ‘deep past’ (Humphrey 1992), but political sentiments that have continued and adapted with the political eras. A few decades and a system change later, Zurhee laments that he currently does not trust current leaders, because they don’t show recognition nor care through active governance. ‘I want to support someone who is good and looks out for their country’s people [*ulsuudaa harj bairaa*],’ he says, in contrast to contemporary politicians who ‘say many niceties’, but actually don’t change anything. Coincidentally, when I follow up by asking what a ‘good’ (*sain*) politician entails, he quotes back an explanation that is remarkably similar to Plueckhahn and Bumochir’s aphoristic quotation: ‘What should [good politicians] do first? They should govern (*zasah*) their self (literally, body). Then they should govern (*zasah*) their home (*ger*) and make it nice (*goyo bolgon*). After they do that, they should enter into the national government (*uls tör*)’. In combination, Zurhee is arguing that local residents are not being ‘seen’ (*harah*) by a government apparatus that is supposed to ensure the public good through governing (*zasah*) at every aspect of society. As a result, he questions the morality and the authoritative legitimacy of the state and its politicians. When I ask, for example, if he thinks the government’s permit system (discussed below) is effective, he responds ‘It’s not really accurate to say that this system fits our lives. If it is true that the number of fish are decreasing, then [the government] should really just stop [all the fishing]. Or they should just completely let us fish. There are two options [*Hoyor zam I baina*].’⁷⁹ In essence, Zurhee believes the government is too inconclusive in its authoritative decision-making. Consequently, the contemporary perceived inability of the neoliberal Mongolian government to regulate its politicians, govern effectively at all levels and create

⁷⁹ By ‘two avenues’, Zurhee indicates that the government should either let them fish completely, or not let them fish completely (with enforcement). He continues by emphasizing that if they weren’t allowed to fish, local residents would find a way to make ends meet: ‘I mean what are we supposed to do with this current system? If the resource is really depleting, then they should just totally stop the fishing... There are other ways to live than just from fishing... I mean, for example, there are people that live in Choibalsan and they don’t fish, but they still can live. Just like [they do], we are thinking of how to live! (*Bid tegeheer bas am’drahyg I bodno doo*)’. Zurhee is generally exasperated by a system in authoritative limbo that purports to disallow fishing yet contains a plethora of loopholes that tolerate illegalized activities.

constructive, conclusive decisions often engenders a crisis in authoritative confidence in the contemporary state.

Formal economies of abandonment

When Zurhee previously asserted that residents cannot ask the state, nor politicians, for economic help because ‘we would just go into debt’, he is referring to the functioning of the post-1990 governmentally-allocated resource permit system.⁸⁰ After the collapse of large-scale industry at Dalai in 1990, the residents that remained, like Zurhee, became self-reliant, freelance resource entrepreneurs within the new formal system who could either a) purchase a permit from the government to entrepreneurially access natural resources or b) be hired as freelance procurers for a larger, permit-wielding company. The legal framework for these occupational avenues was constructed through the 1995-implemented, 2000-amended Mongolian *Law on Hunting* (LOH, see Appendix B). According to this law, all wildlife is the property of the state, but the raw materials of animals can be accessed, utilized and ‘shall belong to the hunter or trapper’ if the animal is hunted with a government-purchased license (Scharf et al. 2010: 28). The 2000 *Law on Fauna* (LOF, see Appendix C) continued this political trajectory with specifications for fishing—it stipulated that the various species of fish in Dalai Lake would have legislated fishing periods, but generally could not be removed between the 15th of May and the 1st of June during the fish breeding season. According to this formal legislative structure, fisherman at Dalai who desire to fish for ‘household needs’ can do so by paying fees and receiving a permit from the *soum* governor (Article 10 of LOH in Appendix B). Any industrial hunting entity, however, must a) receive approval from the regional *soum*-level representative council; b) hire professional hunters; and c) have a plan for reproduction of the wildlife (Article 9 in Appendix B). From the formal perspective, the fishing activities of entrepreneurial fisherman at Dalai is subject to a) economic restraints through the purchasing of permits and b) seasonal restraints as per environmental regulations. Nevertheless, as

⁸⁰ In the following section, I discuss the post-1990 formal legal structure for resource-based entrepreneurialism—a legal structure that emerged during the IMF-loan period that frames resource-based economic entrepreneurialism between individual citizens and the government as a consumer relationship. Accordingly, citizens become ‘economic entities’ (LOH, see Appendix B) and the government is envisioned solely as arbitrator of economic relationships largely administered by private citizens and extra-state economic entities.

discussed shortly, this legal framework often proves inscrutable (for example, if they are fishing to produce profit to e.g. send children to school, is it household needs or industrial fishing?) and insurmountable for a handful of autarchic fisherman sans schooling, funds and legal advice access.

Not only sheer volume of monetary wealth,⁸¹ but a general lack of recognized resources (broadly defined) comprises a local access barrier to formal avenues of economic advancement. The term ‘formal economy’ discussed here was coined (somewhat inadvertently) by Hart in 1971 to discuss aspects of the economy governed and administered by the state bureaucratic and legal system (Hart 2012). As discussed by Hart, Guyer and Roitman, concepts of the ‘formal economy’ are often associated with a ‘regularity of...order, a predictable rhythm and sense of control’ (Hart 2012) reified through the ‘appearance of paper’—like state-recognized contracts, permits, identity cards and established scales (e.g. exchange rates)—that fixes economic relations and expectations between participant entities (Guyer 2004: 156; Hart 2012; Roitman 2005). Consequently, many Dalai residents feel that the documents and papers themselves—like the permits associated with the *Law on Hunting*—comprise access barriers to more lucrative forms of resource entrepreneurialism. For example, Batbayar, the local Dalai electrician, lives a few metres from Zurhee’s compound and runs a resident grocery store with his wife. Batbayar, who grew up in Dalai Village, graduated in Bulgaria in 1989⁸² with a major in artificial fish reproduction i.e. fish farming. He returned to Dalai Village with the intention of being able to implement his learned skills, but laments that the opportunity never arose after the collapse of the factory on the Mongolian side. I asked him why he doesn’t try to set up a company with other locals to export the fish—‘our fishermen are experts (*mergejilten*), but [Dalai residents] can’t get permission as a formal company. Other companies come [from Ulaanbaatar] that don’t have expertise, but they use their networks to get the credentials. Some companies use the documents of dead people [who were trained in fishing during the

⁸¹ Zurhee, for example, feels that it is neigh impossible for himself to access permits on his own because he lacks adequate funds to construct a business—‘from our perspective, we don’t have access to the permits. Even if we could get them from the government, I wouldn’t be able to collect enough root [or fish to make it profitable]. To do that I need a lot of money.’

⁸² The *tsyeh* apparently would send fish to Bulgaria and had a local partnership there.

Soviet era] to show that they are ‘experts’. When the person was alive, they got a signature and then they continue using the documents after the person has died. So the company has the documents to pay tax to the government [to get the fishing permit]’. Batbayar’s wife agrees with his sentiments that the requirements of formal documentation hinder the formal acceptance of their fishing activities—‘When [the local Chinese oil company] sends representatives over to buy fish from us, they ask for documents on how clean the fish are, etc. We don’t have any formal letters or documents, we just fish the fish’. Yet, formalization is not new to the Magtaal context—papers, documents and bureaucracy were certainly present during the socialist era. Rather, as evinced, Batbayar does not only suffer from a cash dearth (to purchase permits), but he also lacks in social access (‘networks’) due to his countryside upbringing and in cultural capital⁸³ to effectively navigate a system through e.g. semi-forged permits. Consequently, the residents of Dalai are compositely affected by social, geographic and economic marginalization, which coalesces into inaccessibility to formal documentation (to, in turn, economically advance).

These compounded practical hindrances to economic advancement mean that Dalai residents’ only formal and legally-recognized avenue for (resource-based) employment is as seasonal, freelance fishermen (*ulirlyn ajilchin*) for permit-carrying commercial fishing companies from Ulaanbaatar. Over the last 15 years, as residents recount, various Ulaanbaatar-based companies have purchased permits from the Ulaanbaatar city government and arrived in winter in Dalai Village to hire local fisherman for a period of two months. Before the Chinese New Year, which happens each year between the 21st of January and the 20th of February, the cost of fish skyrockets on the other side of the border in China.⁸⁴ Because the Chinese side of the lake is largely occupied by fish-farming, the Mongolian Dalai fish, seen as organic and naturally-grown, are particularly commercially desirable. According to a Magtaal *soum* government representative, companies that wish to take advantage of this short-term price

⁸³ Although Batbayar does have official educational accreditation as an ‘expert’ (*mergejilten*) in fishing, setting up a company to get a short-term resource permit (*tusray zövshööröl*) requires you to ‘go to many government departments and meet lots of people’.

⁸⁴ Particularly in Tümenjargal (roughly 25 kilometres from the Dalai Village) and the southern Hulun Buir province, the aforementioned Barga covet Dalai fish for their New Year’s tables.

spike first turn to the Ministry of Nature in Ulaanbaatar and apply for permission to a) commercially fish in Dalai Lake from the 1st of November until the end of the year (December 31st); and b) to export this fish product to China between the end of December and the Chinese New Year. After they apply for this permit, the Ministry of Nature orders the local *soum* government to ascertain how many tons of fish are available in the lake and then, utilizing this number, issues permits with fishing tonnage quotas to safeguard the reproduction of the lake's resource. Receiving approval through joint efforts from the Ulaanbaatar-based Ministry of Nature and the Bayant-based *soum* government, these companies then move to Dalai Village for the span of 2-3 months in order to effect their commercial fishing activities. However, the last time fishing approval was extended for an Ulaanbaatar-based company was in the fall of 2015 for the 2015/6 New Year's season; no officially-sanctioned fishing happened at Dalai in the winters of 2016 and 2017.⁸⁵

Being hired as a freelance fisher places various limitations on Dalai fishermen's profitability. Zurhee, for example, spoke at length about his experience working as a freelance fisherman for two months in November and December 2015. According to residents' recollection, between three to five different individuals and companies were actively working and recruiting in Dalai Village at any point during the 2015 winter season. After being approached by a company at the beginning of November, Zurhee signed a contract to be a fish supplier paid at the company-fixed rate of 5,000 MNT for one kilo of fish.⁸⁶ However, this still leaves the problem unsolved that Dalai fishermen do not have official permission, in form of a governmental license or permit, to fish. In order to solve this legal riddle, Ulaanbaatar-based companies have devised a system where they can extend their own government-granted fishing license to their freelance procurers for a fee. Fishermen, who sign company contracts, can (as the fishermen call it) 'borrow' (*zeeleh*) a permit from the company. In this way, Zurhee signed a contract with a company in 2015 that the first 30 kilo of Asian

⁸⁵ A Magtaal *soum* government representative relayed that the system of formalisation on the Chinese side of the border has become stricter—permits weren't extended in 2016 and 17 because it would have become more costly and complicated to export fish.

⁸⁶ During my fieldwork in 2016, 1 USD was worth around 2,200 MNT and 6 CNY. Consequently, 5,000 MNT is a little more than 2 USD. I will use MNT throughout the thesis. Source: www.xe.com

carp (Ru: *сазан*; Mo: *buluu tsagaan*) that he caught would go directly to the company as payment for a resource permit that allowed him to fish for the duration of the company's presence at Dalai (the months of November to December). Only after the initial 30 kilos was paid off, did Zurhee get paid 5,000 MNT per kilo. Additionally, all the fish the fishermen source under the company-procured permit is legally and contractually-obligated to be sold only to that permit-extending company. In short, the only official, formal and legally-sanctioned avenue for resource-based entrepreneurialism that is practically accessible to Dalai fishermen is in the context of freelance fishing procurers for an urban company that a) fixes the fish price (to a low price, as discussed later), b) only temporarily employs the labour of seasoned fishermen and c) contractually-obligates them to their company.

Considering their restricted options within the legislated system, residents of Dalai commonly feel economically abandoned by the state's formal economic paradigm. In describing her fieldwork amongst indigenous Australians, Povinelli coins the term 'economies of abandonment' to describe late-liberal governance assemblages that, first, reduce human value to economic calculations and then, secondly, ostracize populations who are unable to economically compete (2011). Accordingly, populations that are structurally relegated to these zones of economic abandonment do not thrive, but can only endure in poverty and economic marginalization. In such structural formulations, the state no longer kills disadvantaged, unwanted populations, '[i]nstead it directs life, letting those who wish to swim against the tide to do so until they cross a line or exhaust themselves' (2011: 118). Povinelli's viewpoint has credence for Mongolia's current economic political governance assemblage, which de facto limits the upward mobility of certain (often, countryside or yurt district) populations within its formal system, thereby practically debarring them and maintaining them in their (economic-cum-political) marginalization. First, in both Batbayar's account of documentation difficulties and Zurhee's experience of freelance fishing, the formal resource-based entrepreneurial system—not necessarily in its idealized rendition on paper, but in its real, lived, experienced manifestation—encompasses multiple forms of marginalization (social, cultural, geographic, economic) that make the overall system impractical for Dalai residents.

Additionally, in her descriptions of state-constructed economic abandonment, Povinelli notes how populations, subsisting off of limited economic resources, learn to persevere and endure in the face of prevailing material obstacles. Using the metaphor of a man trying to maintain a struggling business with a failing truck, parts of the vehicle fall off over time, to be quickly reattached with limited resources, but the individual and vehicle putter on until they no longer can. Similarly, Zurhee, who catches roughly 1 ton (1000 kilos) of fish a winter, would have made over 4 million MNT (1000 kilo – 30 kilo for permit = 970 x 5,000 per kilo = 4,850,000 MNT) in winter of 2015 from selling fish. While this amount is a good income for a few months of work, it is not enough to substantially maintain a large family over a 12-month period, especially not if they wish to attend better schools or improve their livelihoods. Consequently, Zurhee's family economically endures in a space of limited resources, on the brink of economically dignified livelihoods, one emergency or failed improvement attempt away from economic catastrophe. Seen within the context of the larger formal resource entrepreneurial system, Zurhee's assertions that his townsfolk are abandoned, unseen and disregarded by the state becomes increasingly understandable—they are cognizant of a double standard that professes upward economic mobility for all within the governmental framework, which, however, practically limits their mobility and relegates them to endure in economically marginal positions.

Thwarting the laws of a life-stifling government

Because they perceive the lived application of the formal, legislative economic system to be impractical, untenable and ideologically problematic, residents often feel inspired to creatively negotiate the legal/formal system. For starters, because freelance occupational fishing is only marginally profitable, Dalai fishermen often use the legal smokescreen of the company permit to engage in other unregulated economic activity. For example, catching wind of a business opportunity, informal changers (*chyenj* from the English word '(ex)change') also glided into Dalai in the winters of 2014 and 2015 on the coattails of formal company-led activity. Changers are middlemen brokers in business settings that buy either goods or money at a low (often wholesale) price and then resell it at

a higher (e.g. retail) price (High 2017; Lacaze 2010, 2012; Pedersen 2002).⁸⁷ Because changers, in contrast to companies, often do not have legal permission, they need to attract suppliers, in this case, fishermen, in other ways. As informal middlemen, who do not apply for governmental permission and thus do not pay tax, they often offer a higher price for the fish bounty. In this way, in the winter of 2015, Zurhee had two running business deals—he fished 30 tons of carp for the company permit and the rights to fish during the season, and, utilizing said permit, interchangeably sold any fish he procured to the company (at 5,000 a kilo) but also to a changer (at 6,000 a kilo). This breaking of formal contract allowed him to make more profit than he would have otherwise, which, somewhat counterintuitively, sustains his ability to participate in the system overall. This example thus confirms Roitman’s assertion that the in/formal dyad is a ‘false dichotomy’—the formal system, in this case, is tacitly dependent on the informal income of its workers (1990). But beyond in/formality, this case study at Dalai depicts how the line between il/legality increasingly blurs, as concepts of legality become questioned in the name of survival and dignified life.

After 2015, no formal companies applied for the permit for Dalai, causing local fishermen to drastically question and reconceptualize their relationship to legal state authority. In the introductory ethnography to this section, I quote Zurhee as saying: ‘But it’s also hard if the purchaser [i.e. changer] doesn’t have permission [from the government either]. Like now, when this happens we just always have to do it all illegally [*hulgaigaar*]...[We know that] it is wrong...but we still do it...to eat and drink [and] not to get rich’. True to this statement, the government did not extend either fish or root permits during my fieldwork, but this did not hinder the resource extraction activities. Rather, I often heard the term *hulgaigaar*—which figuratively means ‘illegally’ but literally means ‘through or by way of theft’—as well as, less commonly, *nuutsaar*—literally and

⁸⁷ According to the online Mongolian Linguistic Encyclopedia (*Mongol Helnii Ih Tailbar Tol*) made available by the Mongolian government, the term ‘chyenj’ has two main usages—first, inter or extra-bank currency exchange, incl. individuals who buy currency at low rates and sell high. Secondly, individuals who buy at wholesale price and then sell at retail price for more money, thereby earning profit off the price differential.
https://mongoltoli.mn/search.php?opt=1&ug_id=127422&word=ченж

figuratively, ‘secretively’⁸⁸—to describe the political shroud surrounding residents’ resource-dependent economic activities. The noun at the root of this prepositional phrase, *hulgai*, means ‘theft’, which incited me to ask questions regarding who residents felt they are hypothetically ‘stealing’ from. Although the answer I received in turn was overwhelmingly ‘the government’, the ‘government nature protectors’ or ‘the *soum* governor’, I was also made aware that the term refers less to the act of stealing—i.e. taking something you shouldn’t—but more the act of transgression—i.e. of thwarting a tenet that has been specifically elucidated by an authority.⁸⁹ Interestingly, *hulgai* or *hulgaichid* (‘thieves’) is a term also commonly used in local populist rhetoric to describe excessive draining of resources by politicians from government coffers. Consequently, one could argue, residents feel that politicians are excessively siphoning wealth for their personal needs, and, feeling the system to be undermined, siphon for their own personal needs in response.

Either way, the usage of the term *hulgaigaar*, as also evinced by Zurhee’s resignations (‘we know it is wrong’),⁹⁰ points to local acknowledgements that state governance models no longer necessarily coincide with local perceptions of moral correctness. Given that Dalai fishermen increasingly feel that politicians are duplicitous, selfish and steal (*hulgai*) and that the current government actively creates policies that marginalize and disadvantage them, it is no surprise that residents like Zurhee feel increasingly suspicious of government elections and distrustful of government rules. Their faith in the sacredness of government has been shaken. Consequently, this case differs from High’s description of Mongolian artisanal gold miners’ fears of spiritual

⁸⁸ These two terms are used interchangeably. However, I have been told that *hulgai* refers directly to breaking mortal laws, whereas *nuutsaar* (‘secretively’) can refer to the need to not let the general social (and spiritual) realm aware of one’s transgression. I suggest, considering the widespread infraction of historical injunctions towards resource extraction (as discussed in chapter 3) that *nuutsaar* has affective overlaps with the perceived need to hide (i.e. keep secret) one’s resource activities from spiritual masters.

⁸⁹ The term *hulgaigaar* can be used to describe an action against any authority—i.e. when a father tells a child not to use their computer and they do it anyway. That is also a *hulgaigaar* action (Dulam, person comm.)

⁹⁰ Zurhee’s resignation conforms to the nature protector’s lament at the ovoo ceremony in chapter 1. The nature protector complains that residents are becoming greedy and selfish by taking too much from nature and ‘forgetting their traditions’. Zurhee, in contrast, directly says ‘we know it is wrong; we are losing our traditions’. He acknowledges being a culprit in the process the nature protector maligns.

reproach and otherworldly calamity for their gold mining activities. Magtaal citizens (mostly)⁹¹ don't feel that their transgressions are directed at a spiritual entity, but rather the morally-undermined, contemporary political-cum-economic formal governance system. Residents like Zurhee often use a moralistic argument of economic disenfranchisement ('we know it is wrong, but we do it to feed our families') to withdraw moral and spiritual authority from the state and reconfigure it to local livelihoods. For example, Sukh, another fisherman, opines:

*'Hulgaigaar and nuutsaar mean the same thing. It means you fish without being seen [by] the patrolling nature protectors...We are 'taking' [or defying, hulgai] from the government [bid töröös hulgai hij bairaa yum daa]. Everyone wants money so we are collecting roots, because we don't have jobs...is it morally ok? Yes it is, it is just called "stealing" [hulgai] because there is a government fine and bureaucrats who control for it. But our lives weren't working [in the formal system] so life demands [we do something].'*⁹²

Although Zurhee and Sukh might differ slightly in their ultimate moral judgement surrounding their activities, both men acknowledge that their activities are a necessity in order to live non-suffering lives—i.e. 'life demands it'. They thus implement a moral argument of economic marginalization and disenfranchisement to justify their continued (illegalized) extraction. In short, their consensus is, 'We don't have jobs, so we have to avoid the government in order to live'. This is not predominantly a spiritual argument (although it is an existential one); rather, residents are directing their transgressions at a state authority that they feel is undermining their ability to flourish.

Zurhee and Sukh's moral deliberations thus revolve around this question if the contemporary state system and its laws can ensure a 'good life' for them. In her discussions of 'economies of abandonment', Povinelli reconceptualizes Agamben's distinction between the sovereign-deigned dignified versus 'bare

⁹¹ Comments on the world being 'out-of-balance' as discussed in chapter 1, however, evince that this topic is morally debated amongst local residents. Increasingly, residents feel more comfortable extracting resources and even spiritually justify its morality (chapter 3), but for others this is still questionable and morally fraught.

⁹² 'Am'dral bolohgüi baina am'dral shaardaj baina'

life' by noting that 'economies of abandonment' reduce said populations to endure in the realm of economic bare life—i.e. economically reduced to biological survival without dignity.⁹³ Increasingly, locally, the sentiment prevails that adhering to the formal economic-cum-political system as it stands would relegate local livelihoods to 'bare life' equivalents (Agamben 1998). First, both Zurhee and Sukh question the moral and social legitimacy of an authoritative state structure that cannot (or does not) fairly economically distribute to all members of society. Statements such as 'we get no care from the government' and 'we have to [engage in resource extraction], because we have no jobs' indicate the prevailing feelings of having been reduced to economically and humanly untenable positions. Secondly, the moral legitimacy of the dominant state model is further undermined when contrasted with the local usage of the revenue from resource chains. Specifically, Zurhee assuages his regret and resignation with the assertion 'we are doing to this live, not to get rich' and Sukh's declaration 'our lives demand it'. I have heard a plethora of life-orientated rhetoric in defence of local illegal resource extraction.⁹⁴ In combination, residents indirectly claim that the forms of accumulation and distribution within local illegalized resource chains are humanly, locally and morally preferable vis-à-vis an ineffectual government system that reduces them to live 'bare lives' of endurance in 'economies of abandonment'.

Figuratively, residents live in a space of ambiguity between life and law. In discussing the predicament of Krygyz migrant workers in Moscow, Reeves similarly elucidates how the contemporary Russian mode of governance relegates migrants to live in a 'gray space'—a space of relations marked by increasing uncertainty over knowing where the line between 'legal' and 'illegal' actually lies (2013: 511). In the Russian context, she argues, a particular constellation of legal and economic regulations—specifically, laws that allow the

⁹³ This would be the end result, but she is quick to note that 'economies of abandonment' are not Agamben-esque camps—they are late liberalist creations of distributed power marked by a 'texture of enervation and endurance' (2011: 133). She perceives Agamben's 'bare life' to be too decisive and structuralist; contemporary power is variegated and maintains simultaneous potentiality for destruction and creation.

⁹⁴ A common phrase was that resources allowed residents to 'supply life' or 'supply livelihoods'—'*am'dralaa zalguulah*' or '*am'jirgaagaa zalguulah*'. Also, 'we do it for life' (*am'dralyn tuld*). Or, as Zurhee says above, 'we are thinking about life' (*am'drahyg l bodno*) or 'life demands [it]' (*am'dral shaardaj baina*).

free movement of migrant workers whilst rendering legal residence increasingly difficult⁹⁵—and, additionally, the privatization of legal legibility—e.g. that border guards and local policemen are grossly underpaid—has engendered an industry that offers migrants the ‘service’ of legal legibility—making them legally passable—in the form of paperwork, housing, etc. In Magtaal, the permit system creates a similar ‘gray space’—with both fish and (in particular) roots, it is often unclear if permits will be extended and for what period; the permit system encourages entrepreneurialism, whilst making it de facto untenable; ‘illegal’ income bolsters ‘legal’ business; and border guards and police, responsible for controlling, are frequently underpaid and thus fish/pick themselves for extra income on their days off. What is technically legal or illegal increasingly becomes unimportant in the face of needing to live. As we will see, the pressure of inscrutable and ambiguous laws gradually affects the shape of local social favours, help and care. Increasingly, it is seen as a moral act to either help someone break the law (ergo restriction to economic advancement) and/or provide (illegalized) access to income in a space of economic abandonment.

Help versus hurt

Mandaa, like Zurhee, grew up in Dalai Village and has spent his life involved in the ins and outs of the fish trade. And similarly, when the governmental permits stopped arriving after the winter of 2015, Mandaa chose to ignore the permit system and continue fishing. Only, Mandaa had been preparing to take his fishing a step further. Having spent his life a few kilometres from the Chinese border, Mandaa was keenly aware that the fish price for Asian carp—a species plentiful in Dalai Lake—was often double, triple, sometimes manifold more expensive on the Chinese side of the lake than on the Mongolian side. In fact, because Asian carp is subject to environmental fishing restrictions on both the Mongolian and Chinese sides of the borders, the price of a kilo of fish skyrockets during the state-mandated breeding protection period of 15th of May to 1st of June. In Dalai Village, during this period, one kilo of carp costs between 7,000 and 10,000 MNT, whereas on the Chinese side it pinnacles between 60 and 74,000 MNT (160-200 CNY)—a price gap of around 50,000 MNT. Feeling

⁹⁵ Importantly, she notes that this is the result of a contradiction in governance agendas—i.e. the need for migrants to build booming housing, whilst presenting the image of cracking down on migration.

frustrated at his limited employment opportunities at Dalai, Mandaa looked around and became very aware that many Tsogt friends, families and neighbours were becoming adept at stashing Fang Feng roots in hidden car compartments and building materials for border-crossing attempts. Only Mandaa didn't have roots, he had fish. Desiring money to feed his growing family, Mandaa decided to try his luck at crossing the border with fish hidden in secret compartments to take advantage of the price differential.

The first time he tried, he recounts, he was completely naïve. He hid a few kilos of carp, on ice, in his car and drove across the Tsogt crossing to the inner Mongolian town of Tümenjargal. An acquaintance had told him about a local Mongolian-focused hotel that was known to be 'reliable' (*naidvartaï*) and Mandaa headed there. He stashed his fish under the bed, he recounts, and went out with other Mongolians for a drink to find a buyer. When he came back, they were gone. Stolen. But, he was undeterred and tried again. 'At first, I just sold my fish to anyone who wanted them,' he recounts, 'I just kept talking to Inner Mongolians. Sometimes I sold them high, sometimes low. After a while, I gained a lot of experience and learned who the best buyer was'. In the process, Mandaa met Tamir, an Inner Mongolian man with a lot of friends and relatives in the fish trade. Tamir desired to get involved in the hay-making business on the Mongolian border in the upcoming year, and Mandaa needed a Chinese-speaking companion to sell the fish. Thus, a partnership was forged—Mandaa would help Tamir with Mongolian permits and legal regulations, whereas Tamir would help Mandaa find suitable clients and fish buyers. Through repeated trial and error, dozens of trips to Tümenjargal, hundreds of drinks with potential buyers and a bit of serendipitous luck, Mandaa had forged a cross-border economic network to sell his Dalai fish.

Because the winter fish season had been previously mostly dominated and price-controlled by Ulaanbaatar-based companies, Mandaa and his wife, Tuya, decided to focus on exporting during the spring season. In early 2015, Tamir found an Inner Mongolian restaurant owner in Tümenjargal, who was willing to buy fish from the Mongolian side, because the fish would likely be higher quality (than Chinese fish-farmed fish) and cheaper. Consequently, in the spring of 2015, Mandaa and Tuya started taking turns fishing and driving back and forth

between Dalai and Tümenjargal every few days, fish hidden in secret compartments within the car. Two years later, the entire village has caught on: 'during last [2017] spring, roughly ten cars from Dalai were going back and forth from the border. Anyone with a car was going', Tuya recounts. The border guards, unable to understand why so many local residents were crossing the border every day, started getting curious: 'In the spring, the Chinese border workers started asking me why Tümenjargal was full of Mongolian fish. But they didn't find anything [in our cars]...And the Mongolian guards started asking why I keep going alone to China and coming back with nothing. So, I just started coming up with reasons: at first, I had to go to the doctor, then the doctor's check-up, then my kids needed clothing, then I had to go to the dentist, and then I needed a traditional Chinese massage'.⁹⁶ In this way, Mandaa and Tuya have spent the last few spring seasons illegally exporting fish by taking advantage of lax border enforcement, their knowledge of local customs and regulations, extended friendship and business ties, seasonal timing and price differences.

⁹⁶ Although she emphasized that it wasn't 'just business' at the beginning; the first few times she went, she would take friends with her to Tümenjargal and party for days. That got boring after a while, she said.



Figure 9: Selling Dalai fish in Tümenjargal

In spring of 2016, however, Mandaa and Tuya decided to expand their business—they became changers. Because the fish need to be fresh when they arrive in Tümenjargal, Mandaa and Tuya had been previously divvying up their time between alternatively fishing and driving and/or driving during the day and fishing under the cover of night. Eventually, they realized that they were spending a lot of time on fishing that could have been better put to use in the process of export and negotiation. So, Mandaa decided to become a middleman changer himself. He started going around to all the fishing houses in the village—since they all grew up together and knew one another—and offered to buy fish off of the other villagers at the going Dalai Lake rate. Once he had gathered a few kilos, he packed them into the car and crossed the border. In this way, Mandaa and Tuya were able to start crossing the border each day—maximizing the two week environmental restriction period—because they no longer needed to spend mornings or days catching fish. Once they crossed, they would bring the fish to Tamir’s house or to Tamir’s friend’s restaurant. And everyone would benefit, they emphasize. Because they buy the fish at the Dalai

Lake rate, local residents are able to make a substantial return during a price spike when they would otherwise have no market outlet. And on the other side of the border, they would sell their highly-delectable, rare (organic, as opposed to fish-farmed) fish at the going bulk rate. Because of the market differences between the borders, Mandaa, Tuya and Tamir would still make a substantial income off of the sale of fish in spring, all the while unloading the fish at fair prices and employing residents in Dalai Village (and in Tümenjargal) who would otherwise have no income.

Thus, although these border-crossing commodity networks and chains might be formally illegalized, they are socially accepted by the local Dalai community. Returning to the procedures of the formally-sanctioned, Ulaanbaatar-based, permit-wielding companies, the businesses who visited Dalai in the winter months of 2014 and 2015 were able to jointly depress the fish price and pay fishermen less than the going rate. Fishermen had no recourse. But, in Mandaa's scheme, the fishermen are no longer just anonymous employees, but his family, friends and neighbours. In contrast to companies who set prices to maximize profit, Mandaa and Tuya purchase fish from local residents for a 'fair price' (*bolomjiiin üne*, literally 'possible price')—a price that allows residents to continue dignified lives and sustain their families and community.⁹⁷ As a result, Mandaa and Tuya do not view their activities to be exclusively economically-motivated. Using a rhetoric that reoccurs through my fieldwork to discuss moments of perceived social, long term, communal and mutually-motivated monetary distribution, Tuya claims that the networks they are building comprise a form of community 'help' (*tus*) and 'assistance' (*tuslamj*). As opposed to the formal, profit-motivated system that engenders feelings of local social asphyxiation in an economy of abandonment, Mandaa and Tuya's activities breathe life into the village through cash flow and employment. Although a differing context, Muehlebach argues that the affective breakdown of the social contract within Western European welfare states has resulted in the rise of calls for inter-communal relational labour and a devolution of state functions onto local areas (Muehlebach 2012). Similarly, the affective loss of the hierarchical care relationship with the state has engendered novel localized relations

⁹⁷ Chapter 3 will discuss this ethical price at length

(manifested as economic networks) within Magtaal, in order to satisfy the economic care role that the state no longer provides. Because the state's neglect is reified in lack of and blocked access to economic wealth, local care also, in turn, take monetary form. In this section, I talk about how residents are constructing economic networks around a rhetoric of economic actions of 'help'—preserving local livelihoods—versus economic actions that 'hurt'—suffocating local livelihoods—in reaction to their shifting relations with the state.

Marginal gains

The economic networks that Mandaa and neighbours construct are economically profitable because they flexibly navigate the spaces of ambiguity in price, regulation and boundaries between and amongst the border zones. In general, as mentioned above, border zones often throw wanted state projections into relief, because the populations of border areas frequently contradict state narratives through geographic and social distance. Reeves, in her ethnographic study of the Fergana Valley, notes that border zones and state delimitations often shed light on how states are not a priori entities, but must be 'made' through various processes of contestation, formalization and disciplining. By extension, she argues, border lines are often not impenetrable, but constructed by a 'productive configuration of gaps and limits' (Reeves 2014a: 149) that can lead to unique opportunities for adjacent, discerning residents. Roitman, although not discussing border lines per se, also argues through fieldwork in the Chad basin that border margins are productive because they reveal reconstitutions of state power. In order to describe changes in contemporary state constructs, Roitman draws a distinction between 'state power'—the capillary effects and forms of power that constitute the field of 'the state' (also 'state effect')—and 'regulatory authority'—the enforcement of state legislation (Roitman 2004, 2005). In doing so, she critiques common assumptions that contemporary states are evincing 'retreats' or withdrawals of state power, by showing that border regions are, more specifically, marked by contestations over regulatory authority that remain within state power narratives (Reeves 2014a; Roitman 2004).⁹⁸ Both of these ethnographies, therefore,

⁹⁸ In her case, contestations in border regions lead to 'conflict[s] over regulatory authority [that lead to] its dispersion through knots of power relations tied through cords of unregulated

speak to the productive, generative gaps between conceptions of how the state *should* be (state power projection) and the reality of how the state *is* experienced (i.e. its enforcement through regulatory authority). Combining these various ethnographies, the border line itself reveals the productivity of these regulatory gaps—it is envisioned as an idealized, impenetrable border, but its actual regulatory failings (i.e. porosity) allow for the creation of new productive remainders, opportunities and lifeworlds (Humphrey 2004; Povinelli 2011; Reeves 2014a; Roitman 2004, 2005). This is relevant for Dalai, because the reification of state power(s) in border lines artificially maintains the illusion of formal separation of markets, maintaining diverging fish prices on each side of the border. In reality, though, the border is easily traversable, allowing local residents, with luck, knowledge and skill, to engage in both markets. Thus, Dalai fishermen earn their keep through employing multiple gaps between state power and regulatory enforcement—the gap between Mongolian law and enforcement in Mongolia, the gaps within and between the actual border lines, and the gap in law and enforcement in China.

Although located within a few dozen kilometres from one another, the fish prices for Dalai fish between Dalai Village, Mongolia, and Tümenjargal, China, remain divergent throughout the year by means of the formal separation of markets. As previously mentioned, Tümenjargal is highly populated by the Inner-Mongolian Barga minority that has been historically active on the northern Chinese side of the lake. In contrast to Mongolians who, I am told, predominantly eat fish as a luxury resource (partially explaining the activity of companies at Dalai Village during the Mongolian mining boom), Barga Inner-Mongolians include fish as a year-round staple to their diet.⁹⁹ There are three main types of fish that Dalai residents catch that is popular for sale in China—Asian carp (Ru: *сазан*; Mo: *buluu tsagaan*), catfish (Ru: *coom*) and common carp (Ru: *крас*; Mo: *algana*).¹⁰⁰ As previously mentioned, Asian carp is the most popular and fish price is commonly calculated in terms of a kilo of Asian carp. On both the Mongolian

economic activity that span national borders' (Roitman 2004: 191). Much like economic networks.

⁹⁹ This is a common local stereotype that 'Chinese' (broadly defined) smell of fish.

¹⁰⁰ Residents most often use the Russian terms for the various fish, reflecting the Soviet impact on the development of the local fish industry.

and Chinese sides of the border, Asian carp reproduces in spring and its procurement is legally restricted during this period. As a result, the fish price fluctuates wildly based on seasonal, reproductive and cultural cycles. According to fishermen and fish procurers on both sides of the border (see table), the kilo fish price in Tümenjargal starts at 50 CNY and skyrockets to 100 and 200 CNY right before the Lunar New Year. It drops for a period, but once the reproduction cycle starts, the price spikes again to 160-200 CNY, because it is formally illegal to fish (and they are harder to catch). In the summer, the reproduction ban is lifted at the beginning of June, and all individuals are free to go fishing (with permits). Moreover, fish must be eaten quickly during this period, because it does not store well in the heat. As a result, the price plummets to 8-10 CNY. In fall, the price steadily rises as the chill sets in, reaching the start-of-winter price of 50 CNY. This economic cycle mirrors the Dalai Village price—in winter, the price is often controlled (by companies) at 5,000, but is informally 6,000 (if there are changers); in spring, during the reproduction cycle, the price goes up to 7,000 to 10,000; in summer, it plummets to 2,500; and in fall, it steadily goes up to reach 5,000 again. Generally, the carp price in Tümenjargal is much higher than the Dalai Village price because of the large fish demand from the Barga minority, which is officially met by fish farming on the Chinese side of Dalai. Unofficially, though, Dalai fishermen do participate in the Chinese market, but their fish supplying has not affected the price—likely because their activities are a) temporary and informal, but also because b) their fish is seen as highly prized and rare on the Chinese side because it is ‘organic’ and not fish-farmed. Therefore, the presence of the border actually carves out a specialty ‘organic’ niche for Dalai fishermen—due to legal separation, Chinese fishermen and buyers are not able to fish the organic fish themselves;¹⁰¹ they must rely on Mongolian fishermen and changers to supply this market (that officially does not exist). The artificial separation of markets through borders—which keeps humans and demands at bay, whilst secretly allowing the movement of goods—creates and maintains a price differential that Mongolian fishermen are exploiting.

¹⁰¹ Also residents complain to authorities if they see Chinese fishermen and/or tourists fishing on the Mongolian side. Residents do not complain nor inform authorities regarding each others’ activities, but are liable to do so regarding Chinese citizens.

As evinced, the gaps within state power, borders and margins are not the same for all actors and objects, but create irregular pathways that economic chains can duly navigate. In describing this process, I find Guyer's description of historical trading customs in the Congo River trading system to be particularly illustrative. Based on early 20th century resources, Guyer discusses how a variety of trading ethnic groups each had their own formal economic registers, currencies and specialized goods and therefore had to exchange with a variety of different neighbouring communities to gather the goods and currencies they needed (2004). Often, what resulted were trading pathways, as opposed to direct exchanges, like a chain of trading groups—where, for example, one group would trade with neighbour A to get a certain currency (say, brass rods) to trade with neighbour B for a specialized good (say, horses), which could be traded with neighbour C (for guns), etc. In chapter three and four, I discuss at length the processes of conversion and translation between groups that created economic value through the matching of disjunctive systems of currencies and values. For now, I wish to focus on the idea of 'thresholds' as 'junctures in transactional pathways' (Guyer 2004: 30) or barriers to the flow of trade that can be overcome through appropriate situational matching—in Guyer's case, the 'thresholds' are the obtaining of the correct currency or good to engage in another chain of trade. In the case of Dalai Village and the fish trade, economic chains comprise transactional pathways that are directed based on overcoming various regulatory (state-created) and sociocultural barriers. Tamir explains how the fish commodity chains are constructed through multiple chain-links that overcome varying thresholds, allowing the effective functioning of the larger system:

'It's like a network [suljee]¹⁰²...The first person [in this case, fishermen] can't sell fish directly to the consumers, because s/he doesn't know who they are. You need to go through changers to expedite the process. If you aren't bolstered by changers then the chain doesn't survive. You just wouldn't know the right people.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Here, he goes on to talk about how money is accumulated in the process. This will be discussed further in chapter 3.

¹⁰³ 'Chyenjeer damjihgüi bol diilehgüi. Tanihgüi'.

For example, this person (1) knows this person (2). And 2 knows 3, who can buy the fish from him/her. And 3 knows how to sell to customers. If people don't know you [especially if it's illegal] then they won't buy fish from you. Or if they don't know you and trust you, they will only buy it for super cheap. So, you have to go through changers [to give validity and bolster the price] and your product will then reach the customers'.¹⁰⁴

Fish-based economic networks thus overcome a plethora of thresholds—either regulatory, formal and/or sociocultural—to expedite the delivery of the final product in Tümenjargal. For example, the fishermen at Dalai Village have access to the Mongolian side of the lake, which is not full of fishing companies (therefore, not farmed), have the expertise to fish and/or the knowledge of how to avoid controls. They, however, do not know Chinese, cannot cross the border and do not know how to negotiate or find Chinese customers. So they employ residential changers like Mandaa, who has a car, contacts, reputation,¹⁰⁵ knowledge about how to evade border regulations, and importantly (as opposed to Chinese buyers), a Mongolian passport that allows him to go back and forth across the Tümenjargal border crossing. Mandaa also does not know Chinese and cannot find customers. So, he partners with Tamir who can speak Chinese, find adequate customers, but would not be able, in turn, to work together with the Mongolian fishermen at Dalai. As Tamir emphasizes, knowledge of how to circumvent thresholds at each step—be them formal, legal or sociocultural—are particular important for illegalized networks where everyone is slightly suspicious.

Therefore, as a modernized version of Guyer's transactional trading pathways, economic networks are adept at overcoming regulatory barriers (like the formal separation of markets) and sociocultural thresholds (like language differences) to carve one-directional transactional niches within the specific surrounding circumstances. In describing the Congo River trading system, Guyer uses the term 'marginal gains' to discuss how margins—in this case, the gaps between

¹⁰⁴ *'Tanil bish bol hün chinii zagasyg avahgüi. Hün tanihgüi bol chinii zagasyg hamag hyamd üneer avna. Chyenjiingaar damjsaar baigaad etsesiin hereglegchid hürne'.*

¹⁰⁵ Reputation among the local community is also very important—that you are somewhere who knows local residents well, supports them and engenders feelings of trust and respect. See chapter 3 on Fang Feng root changers and reputation.

inter-group understandings of form, currency and value—can be negotiated through situation matching to make ‘gains’—i.e. open up further transactional pathways to earn currencies or commodities (2004). In the Dalai case, the ‘margins’ are not only the sociocultural differences and understandings between Tümenjargal Barga and Dalai Mongolian populations, but the variety of regulatory, formal and legal boundaries separating markets and trade. Importantly, these chains do not generate profit in a realm beyond state regulation, but because of state regulation—they make money through the process of circumnavigating a legal threshold. If the environmental prohibition (on both sides of the border) and the hypothetically-impermeable border did not exist, then the fish price would not remain so high. Here too, do Reeves’ and Roitman’s discussions of economically productive gaps between state power and regulatory legal presence find credence. Like the cooked Dalai fish that lands on the plate of Tamir’s friend’s restaurant, Dalai fish, once in economic circulation in China, is no longer traceable. Because both Chinese and Mongolian fishermen have access to Dalai, which side of the lake it was angled from is hard to verify. As their activities indicate, the gap between the idealization of state omnipresence and the reality of experienced regulatory flexibility allows this produced separation to be traversed for profit. Their fish is only illegal at the moment it is crossing the (first Mongolian, then Chinese) border, but once subsumed into Chinese markets, is once again a legally-tradeable consumption item. In this situation, ‘marginal gains’ becomes a triple entendre—economic networks circumnavigate the infrastructural legal border as state margins (Reeves 2014a), the marginal gaps of ambiguity between state power and regulation (Roitman 2004, 2005) and the sociocultural margins between groups in economic exchanges (Guyer 2004) to produce economic profit for all participants.

[Cosmoeconomic help](#)

On one of my trips over to Tümenjargal, I found myself joining Mandaa, Tuya and Tamir for a cairn (*ovoo*) ceremony at Bogd Mountain in the New Barga banners in Inner Mongolia, China. Less than a month after the comparable ceremony at the *Vangiin Tsagaan Uul* (White Mountain), thousands of Barga flocked to the annual sacred site, parking their cars on separate sides of the

mountain in symbolic representation of the many directions they had come from. Located roughly 60 kilometres northwest of the Chinese edge of Dalai Lake, Mandaa felt (although not Barga) that he should attend the ceremony, which honoured the spirits of the same land that took care of his birthplace at Dalai Lake. Mandaa and Tuya attended many owoo celebrations in the summer of 2017 dedicated to the lake, which they revered as the life spring of their subsistence, including an annual smaller Dalai villager ceremony (at an owoo on the northern tip of the lake), the annual Barga Bogd Mountain ceremony and the triennial *Vangiin Tsagaan Uul* cairn celebration (from Chapter 1). Later, I asked Tuya why she attended all the various cairn worship ceremonies (*tahilga*) dedicated to the lake:

'We honour the lake more than God [Buddha] itself [burhanaas iluu (Dalai) nuur shüdene]. In summer and fall, we catch from it for our daily needs [heregtsee]. Participating in this ceremony means to soothe [the spirits of] Dalai and ask for its benevolence [(Dalai) argadna buyan hishig güine]. The Chinese [note: the Barga] that live on the other side of the lake also honour it. Yes, it is wrong to catch the fish during reproduction season, but we are doing it to find money for our daily needs...'

As indicated by these comments, Tuya (and Mandaa, who has been fishing on the lake for nearly 20 years) perceives their lives to be intimately intertwined with the spiritual master of the lake. I consequently asked Tuya if, considering the amount of resources they extract from the lake, they are participating in the ceremony to draw out more resources from the land master. No, she emphasizes, there is no correlation between ritual and economic bounty:

'When we are working, we sometimes catch 200 or 300 fish, and sometimes nothing. It's a matter of luck [az an]. We only take what nature gives us [baigal ögöhiig l avna]. We use this resource for free, so we must [show our thanks] and honour the lake'

Within Tuya's formulation, Dalai Lake is presented as inhabited by a willful, powerful and capricious land master spirit. This land master is not an equal, but a commanding local spiritual being that must be shown deference and respect through veneration and ceremonial offerings. Doing so invites the bestowal of

gifts in return (in this case, fish). This quote by Tuya thus has many corollaries with the material already presented in chapter 1 on hierarchical interactions with spiritual land masters. Nevertheless, Tuya's discussion is particularly illustrative, because she is including the resources (fish) that her family utilizes to expedite a profitable business (commodity chains) into her spiritual considerations. In chapter 1, I discuss how taking from nature was historically sanctioned as long as it was required for existence (Humphrey et al. 1993). The monetization of the economy, however, stretches this definition of 'existence'—is it considered 'necessary for existence' if resource extraction funds your family's profitable business? Mandaa and Tuya navigate this tension by legitimizing their business through its ability to not only feed their family, but the village at large. In this section, I thus touch upon how concepts of cosmoeconomic and social help are fusing with monetization and economic need.

Tuya and Mandaa's interactions with the local lake master is ethnographically novel, because their resource extraction is painted as a non-controversial aspect of their hierarchical, deferential relationship with the spiritual lake master. In her ethnographic retellings of the central Mongolian Uyanga district, High elaborates how local herder communities are hyperaware of 'angered spirits' in reaction to the upsurge of local small-scale artisanal gold mining (2017). According to historic Mongolian Buddhist precepts, disturbing or breaking open the ground can cause spirits to become displeased. As a result, miners and herders are involved in various land-spirit-appeasing rituals to mitigate the spiritual anger of the newly-emergent 'black spirits'. As discussed at length in chapter three, this narrative is mostly absent from Magtaal. This is partly due to the form of resources being extracted—fish and roots (although tearing the ground) are seen as naturally-reproducing aspects of nature's bounty, as opposed to gold and oil, which are non-renewable. As a result, receiving the resources that the land masters give you and using them to create money to feed your family, is only a continuation of the natural cycle of deference and providence within the master/custodian relationship with the land master. As she emphasizes, the resource usage is not intended for pure profit, but for the continuation of her locally-embedded family. Historically, in To Van's rendition, herders gave offerings to masters, creating Buddhist merit (*buyan*), to

engender benevolence (*hishig*) in terms of herd, human and natural fertility. In Tuya's rendition, money has become central to the continued fertility of the human community—consequently, Mandaa and Tuya are giving offerings to the lake master (creating *buyan*) to engender benevolence (*hishig*) in terms of resources that are traded for money. Thus, the historical *buyan hishig* value nexus has fused with contemporary needs for money, partially explaining why local changers have become some of the most eager participants in local land master rituals to the lake.

Tuya and Mandaa thus socially legitimize the proceeds from their extractions by framing them as expressions of social relations of obligation to the village. In coining the term 'enaction', Sneath discusses how in Mongolia a plethora of one-directional or non-reciprocal transfers are carried out amongst individuals with the intent of honouring feelings of obligation (2006)—i.e. family members often feel obligated, on account of their shared relation, to provide for or help one another. By extension, he mentions how enactions often are colloquially framed as 'help' or 'assistance' (2006: 90). Indeed, Tuya and Mandaa believe that their ability to provide money and employment to the community is a form of 'help' as enactment of their shared relation as village members. As previously mentioned, Mandaa, as a changer, insists that his economic activities are 'helping' the community, because he purchases fish from other community members at an ethical price—he is trying to encourage and sustain them, not profit off of them. In elaboration, Tuya discusses how many local Dalai Village members do not even have enough cash to buy the supplies, like nets and bait, to gather the fish to sell to Mandaa and Tuya. In this case, Tuya will offer to loan money without interest to the villagers to fund their initial costs. Once again, she emphasizes, they accept payment back in terms of fish at the going rate. In contrast, non-local changers¹⁰⁶ and companies often depress the price vis-à-vis fishermen, making profit off of any interaction between the two.¹⁰⁷ Tuya thus

¹⁰⁶ Although their job functions are similar, Mandaa and Tuya prefer to avoid the term 'changer', because of its associations with profit-extractive, exploitative business. See chapter 5 on discussions on the moral ambiguity of 'translation occupations' like changers.

¹⁰⁷ Non-local changers and Ulaanbaatar-based price-fixing companies are often perceived by local residents as unnecessarily taking advantage of their local economic misery—ergo they 'hurt' local livelihoods. For example, a local fisherwoman relates how she loaned money from a non-residential changer a few years ago to buy a fishing net. The changer, knowing he could make money off of this situation, only accepted repayment in fish at the rate of 3,000 MNT per

expresses the sentiment that her and her husband's activities at Dalai are cosmological acts bolstering the longevity of their community—'When we buy fish from other local residents, we are all building merit for one another' (*neg negendee buyan bolj bairaa baihgüi yuu*). She continues by emphasizing that everyone involved in their resource networks, even Tamir and his Chinese partners, are their friends and neighbours—even our Chinese friends are normal, poor people (*engiin хүмүүс*), we are all just friends 'helping each other out' (*biye biyedee tuslah*). Bayar's wife, who we will meet in the next chapter, put it most succinctly in our discussion of good root changers and their activities—'buyan means help' (*buyan gedeg n' tuslamj*). Consequently, framed against the universality of economic need, the provisioning of economic employment and the softening of economic exigency increasingly becomes an act that honours shared obligation in a community, a form of social help and assistance that can even be conceived of as a spiritual act.

The rhetoric of 'help' is recurrent in this thesis to describe economic moments where local sociocultural, cosmological ideals and values are fused with and enabled through the accumulation and distribution of economic, monetary profit. Indeed, a vibrant literature exists on the concept of the post-socialist 'economy of favours'—where individuals rely on diverse economic transfers, sanctioned through discourses of friendship and kinship, to navigate and sustain their livelihoods in an ineffectual formal governance system. Whereas these favours are often perceived as instrumental, Reeves expands upon this concept to argue that in the Krygyz context (like Mongolia), a plethora of transfers are carried out that are not necessarily motivated by instrumental favours, but by feelings of social obligation (2017: 8). However, as Krygyz lifestyles become increasingly monetized and/or are economically dependent on legally-questionable migrant work, favours and/or obligations are increasingly framed within a setting where migrants 'help' each other negotiate illegalized tenancy conditions (Reeves 2013, 2017). Otherwise put, enactments of obligation increasingly take monetized form and/or comprise actions that help individuals 'get by' (2017: 11). Indeed, in contemporary Mongolia, the economy is

kilo—a full 2,000 MNT per kilo below the going rate. Mandaa and Tuya would accept payment back at full price, enabling the fisherwoman pay off her debt quicker.

increasingly monetized, whilst money remains scarce in Magtaal; the government promotes economic rhetoric, whilst removing itself economically from the locality; and it legally endorses entrepreneurialism that is inaccessible to local residents. Consequently, not only instrumental ‘favours’ (Humphrey 2012) but also non-instrumental ‘help’ (Sneath 2006) becomes monetized and directed at ‘helping’ one another survive in the ‘economy of abandonment’, which often presupposes breaking or negotiating a formal or legal restriction. This moral trajectory of reacting to (economic) lack of state care by focusing on (economic) networks morally undergirded by a narrative of ‘help’ pervades the contemporary moral/economic landscape in Magtaal—in chapter 3, I discuss how local morals around resource extraction are shifting to legally legitimize extraction in terms of help; in chapter 4, I discuss how gifts of money to i.e. negotiate bank restrictions comprise forms of social help; and in chapter 5, I discuss how moneylenders (like changers) implement rhetorics of help to legitimize their business. Truly, economic networks—envisioned as associations of local individuals ‘helping’ one another to economically survive—are morally rivalling the governance legitimacy of the state.

Traversing dominant paradigms

After the Bogd mountain cairn celebration, Mandaa and Tuya took me, on my request, to visit Tamir’s cousin—a fisherman on the Chinese side of the lake. As a foreigner, I was not allowed to join Mandaa and his family as they crossed through their closest border crossing at Tsogt, Bayanhoshuu. And the family couldn’t cross with me at any international border crossing, because Mandaa, like many Magtaal residents, had a special blue passport for local residents that was restricted to the border points at Tsogt and further north near the aimag centre.¹⁰⁸ Because both of those crossings, however, are only for Mongolian and Chinese citizens, I had to travel roughly 85 kilometres south along the border to the international Bayant border crossing. This border point was opened in 2014 and is mostly open during the warm months in the hopes of enticing Chinese tourists—who frequently drive up to the Mongolian border, take pictures saying they have ‘visited Mongolia’ and then drive back into the

¹⁰⁸ Likely to encourage trade activities amongst residents who might otherwise have difficulty receiving a passport.

mainland—to venture forth into Mongolia. After crossing into China, we drove back up along the border, now on the other side, back to Tümenjargal, which is located fairly directly on the other side of the Tsogt border crossing. Once in Tümenjargal, Tamir transferred me to a borrowed car with Chinese license plates, and I sat sequestered (and hidden) amongst Inner and Outer Mongolians, as we travelled to meet Tamir’s cousin. The Inner Mongolian fisherman lived within a few kilometres of the lake on the Chinese side, but as such, he lived within the border zone, a no-(wo)man’s land for an ethnographer without a Chinese border permit. Upon arrival, we shared a large meal of mutton, vodka and shrimp (*shaamii*, which my Outer Mongolian compatriots wrinkled their noses at) and discussed the many generations of resource appropriation (*hulgai*) around the lake. As previously discussed, the mutual pilfering of property, resources and land by Inner and Outer Mongolians has a long history in Magtaal. When, in 1990, the socialist system broke down, each side started illegally appropriating (*hulgai*) from one another—the Outer Mongolians (Halh) would help themselves to Inner Mongolian horses, whereas the Inner Mongolians would take the Outer Mongolian fish. Tamir’s cousin was one such appropriator. Fourteen years ago, Tamir’s cousin reminisced, he and his uncle would sit at the Chinese border of the lake at night and cross into Mongolian territory to fish when the sun went down. In his defence, he emphasized, Inner Mongolians stopped taking fish from the Mongolian side about ten years ago. Mandaa strongly disagreed with this statement. The room was plunged into a tipsy debate over who had been taken more from whom, what *hulgai* entails and why people continue to engage in illegal cross-border resource activities. When it was over, I stumbled back to our car as Mandaa joked that he thought Westerners could hold their alcohol better. Holding the car door open for me, he quietly said with resignation in his voice, ‘you know, I do it for my family; so they can live a good life’.

I hope with this snippet, and general chapter, to present a complex picture of the moral contradictions, network trajectories, internal dialogues and negotiations accompanying resource-based entrepreneurialism in the Mongolian borderlands. This anecdote reflects how Mongolians and Inner Mongolian Chinese citizens co-exist in careful partnership, as ‘neighbours’

(Zhang & Saxer 2017) in uneasy intimacy with one another on opposite sides of the border. Both groups historically subsisted together, off of and opposed to one another. In many ways, the formation of local identities has been forged more in contestation with one another than in accord with the dominant majority of their respective states. Consequently, similar to other global border populations, the identities and positionalities of Dalai fishermen (both in China and Mongolia) question and upend the dominant narratives of their respective formal state systems. Living on, in and between the margins, Dalai fishermen are becoming increasingly reliant on economic fish-based commodity chains that create economic value through the negotiation of formal/legal 'thresholds' constituted by gaps within the regulatory ability of contemporary state power. Additionally, in contrast to the dominant nation-state governance system that suppresses local livelihoods into an 'economy of abandonment', economic networks are morally sustained through a narrative of guaranteeing the continuity of local life through mutual help. Interestingly, these chains of help also partly critique dominant nation-state paradigms that produce Inner and Outer Mongolians as independent identities—as expressed by Tuya's statement—'our friends in China are just normal, poor people like us'—through local participation in Barga ceremonial rituals and shared social drinking evenings with Tamir and co. Economic chains of 'help' and the 'good life' thus transcend borders to intertwine with state-marginalized populations in both China and Mongolia, thereby guaranteeing their mutual propagation on the fringes of dominant paradigms.

Chapter 3: The route of the Fang Feng root—economic networks as reconstitutions of the moral aesthetics of social life and economic gain

We were lucky—we had encountered Amina in the evening after she had come back from an all-day picking trip. I had been warned that Amina was known as a master picker; as such, her phone was always ringing for offers to go with groups on picking expeditions in the countryside. In fact, we had twice before been up to her domicile—the furthest room at the back of a long creaky hall on the third floor of the old semi-abandoned school dorm—in disappointed search for Amina. As she later explained, Amina was a rare sight in Bayant during the summer months, because she spent every free moment combing the Magtaal countryside for the medicinal root *Saposhnikovia divaricata*, known colloquially in English as ‘Siler Root’, and, most commonly, in Chinese traditional medicine as ‘Fang Feng’.¹⁰⁹ In fact, for roughly four weeks between the end of summer and the beginning of fall, the ground surrounding Magtaal is dry enough, but not yet frozen, to facilitate the deracination of the Siler plant and its concomitant root. During this period, Bayant transforms into a virtual ghost town as every able body (including children) is mobilized to head to the countryside for picking and gathering. All the activity happens behind the scenes and outside of town—around six in the morning, a flurry of activity loads residents into busses heading to the countryside, and around seven in the evening, another flurry harbours their return. And in this way, we arrived at Amina’s door at 7:30 in the evening in early September 2017 right as she had come back from a day-long picking expedition, arms covered in plant rashes, but pockets full of money. She let us into her one-room flat to drink hot milk tea and discuss why Magtaal had become gripped by the Fang Feng craze.

Amina is the youngest sibling in an extended family of former and current pastoral herders, who complement (or comprise) their income through picking the Fang Feng root. She was born and raised in Magtaal during the socialist farm era, where her parents were herders for the state farm’s collectivized

¹⁰⁹ Also used in other Asian medicinal traditions. It is known as ‘Bou-hu’ in Japanese and ‘Bangpung’ in Korean (Kreiner et al. 2017).

herds. When the state farm collapsed, her parents and most of her siblings moved out of Bayant into the countryside, whilst Amina moved to Ulaanbaatar. Eight years later, in 2004, she returned to Magtaal and was unable to find employment from 2004 to 2009. Yet, her family had already started picking the Fang Feng root, and she earned her keep in this period, by banding together with them in roaming/picking parties. In 2009, she was offered a secure formal job as a cleaner in the school, which she happily accepted because it offered her a flat and a means to an income that did not require the hard physical labour of picking. Nevertheless, Amina's newfound formal employment in the school was deceptively positive, because it offered secure income that was nonetheless economically inadequate; and provided access to formal bank loans that nevertheless embroiled them in ongoing indebtedness. And thus, during summer vacation and on weekends, Amina continues to head to the countryside with her family to pick the Fang Feng root to supplement her formal income. Consequently, Amina is quick to sing the praises of the Fang Feng root—she insists that the livelihoods of many Magtaal residents have massively improved (*deeshilsen*) since the commencement of Fang Feng picking in the region.¹¹⁰

For Amina and many Magtaal residents, the exhaustive experience of bank indebtedness, lack of formal employment and constant cash dearth is only tenable because of the income derived from the, partly illegalized, Fang Feng plant. Fang Feng is a white-flowering plant with a large bulbous root, like a carrot, underneath the ground, whose name means 'to avert wind' in Chinese. Although, in Magtaal, it is generally not understood what the plant is utilized for—it is perceived as a 'drug' (*har tamih*)—the root of the plant is dried and ground in Chinese medicine into a powder to reduce 'wind' diseases like rheumatism, arthralgia, general aches, headaches, stroke, fever, cold and allergic rhinitis (Kreiner et al. 2017). Due to lack of larger context, the plant and its product is referred to in Magtaal simply by the term 'root' (*ündes*)—people spoke of getting, picking or living from 'the root' (*ündeseer am'darch baina*). During my time in Magtaal, the harvesting of 'the root' was initially illegalized according to the *Law on Fauna* (see Appendix C), which (similar to fish)

¹¹⁰ 'Ündes ehelseneer manai sumiin ard irgediin am'dral shal öör bolj deeshilsen'.

stipulated the solicitation of a state-approved permit to harvest it. On 08.08.2016, a bulletin was posted in the town centre of Bayant (see picture below) that stated that, according to a 2015 ordinance by the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism, any individual caught picking, buying or selling more than four kilos of the plant's root—known in formal Mongolian circles as 'Derevger Jirgerüü', likely from the word 'derverger' meaning 'funnel-shaped'—will be penalized.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, I heard rumours during my time in Magtaal that a company was applying for central governmental permission—indeed, unbeknownst to me, the 2015 decree was rescinded two months after this posting (in October 2016) to allow official companies with central governmental permission to source the root.¹¹² In the years after (2017 and 2018), the plant has been interchangeably legal and illegal for commercial companies. All of this legal deliberation, however, had no ostensible effect on Magtaal citizens—their activity was technically always illegal, since they never had the means to access governmental permission, and thus they continued picking throughout this period undeterred by flip-flopping state regulation.

¹¹¹ According to local nature protectors, an individual is required to pay 250,000 MNT for every kilo they are caught with. In practice, however, I only heard once of an individual being caught and fined in the township—one local had been caught and arrested, not simply for the act of picking, but because they had gone into the border zone between China and Mongolia to access better plants. They had been arrested by the border military guard. Otherwise, being caught (by police or nature protectors) and paying fines is rare.

¹¹² The Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism declared on 12.10.2016 that companies with permits could combined pick up to 360 tons of Fang Feng. See the governmental decree: <http://www.mne.mn/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/s8.pdf>

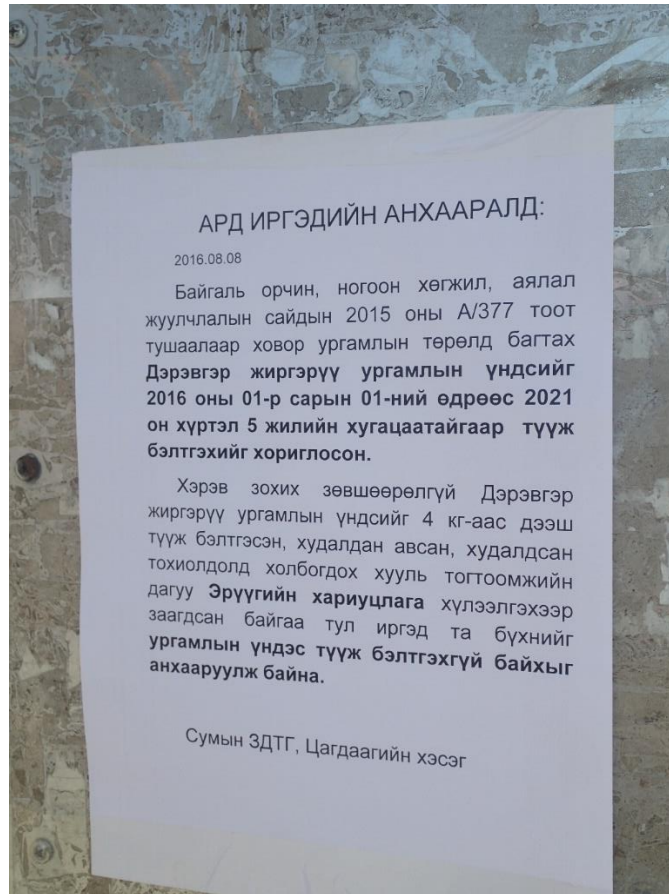


Figure 10: The bulletin in central Bayant declaring that Fang Feng is subject to environmental legislative restrictions.

Consequently, this chapter focuses on the proliferation of Fang-Feng-extractive activity in Magtaal to elucidate how the resulting economic networks, despite their patchy il/legality, comprise an industry that unites the township. In chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the contemporary perceived absence of the state—in terms of hierarchical guidance and economic provisioning—which, not only undermines the authoritative legitimacy of the contemporary state, but encourages locals to engage in illegalized economic networks to economically survive. However, in chapter 2, I focused on the legal and monetary ramifications of these networks, including how monetary wealth is created through the circumnavigation of the law. In this chapter, I focus on how economic networks are also internally bolstered by a moral, cosmoeconomic logic. Centrally, I argue that, in the past, Mongolian values and worldviews revolved around animals as the dominant signifier of wealth, but now, in contrast, money is the principal representation and enabler of dignified livelihoods. Economic networks, as a flexible mechanism designed to create

money, have thus become a pervasive local organizational form due to the universal need for money. The result has not been the flattening or eradication of historical concepts of hierarchy, affinity and morality, but rather the morphing of these narratives to accommodate and adapt to the economic network form. Consequently, Fang Feng networks incorporate historical networks of sharing, hierarchical patronage (manifested through patron/client relations) and cosmoeconomic values of *buyan* and *hishig*; and harnesses them for the maximization of monetary returns. Finally, this does not leave cosmoeconomic narratives untouched—the merging of contemporary economic needs with local value has resulted in the monetization of morality. I thus conclude the chapter with a discussion of an emerging economic moral aesthetic in Magtaal reflected through the circulation of money in the network form, which explains why residents prefer employment in economic networks over large, state-sanctioned formal business.

The rise of the *suljee*

The *suljee* has possibly become the most comprehensive form of economically-motivated social organization in post-1990 Magtaal. This term generally means ‘multiple interweaved connections’ and can be conceptually succinctly translated as ‘web’, ‘chain’ or ‘network’. Importantly, although multiple forms of interrelation have existed historically in Mongolia (discussed below), the *suljee* as descriptor is most often implemented in situations that are (in some capacity) economically calculative. For example, in my interviews with the loan lender Terbish (chapter 5), he seemed to evince a strong moral aversion to the word ‘*suljee*’.¹¹³ Upon further discussion, I realized that the word was strongly associated with either a tacit or direct acknowledgement of business motivation and/or materialistic furtherance. For example, residents used the word *suljee* in discussion of diverse debt calculations and arrangements to pay off loans (e.g. *öriin suljee*); when describing how commodities are acquired or illegally transported across the border (e.g. individuals implement their *suljee*); in elucidation of how loan-distributor businesses draw in money from urban

¹¹³ As will be discussed in chapter 5, Terbish, a loan lender, wanted to portray his economic activities as socially-motivated, in order to obviate the moral and social opprobrium often associated with the business of moneylending. Avoiding the word *suljee* confirms this assessment.

centres and redistribute locally (they create a loan *suljee*); and, finally, in how changers and pickers work together to form viable commodity chains. In short, a *suljee* in Magtaal is an economic venture that is commercially motivated (to either create profit or maintain economic tenability); and necessitates a temporal succession of resource mobilization (e.g. economic revenue or human services) that stack on one another like a chain, in order to uphold the economic viability of the overall scheme. As a result, the word *suljee* is the most commonly used term in Magtaal to describe the interweaved business networks associated with the gathering, processing and moving of the Fang Feng root from Magtaal across the border to China to sell as finished product. Although these chains do move the Fang Feng root out of its local sociocultural nexus into a capitalist commodity, I resist the urge to translate *suljee* into the English term ‘commodity chain’. Whereas the term ‘commodity chain’ accentuates the procedure that creates a commodity for the capitalist market, *suljee* emphasizes the process of forming relationships and coordinating efforts between multiple actors—it is social and relational—albeit to make capital returns. In this section, I thus investigate the historical development of Fang Feng *suljee* to analyse how these chains are and are not similar to other capitalist commodity chains, as well as how the chains are and are not different than other historical Mongolian economic *suljee*.

Post-1990 Fang Feng *suljee*

At first glance, Fang Feng *suljee*, as networks that export a product to China, are highly reminiscent of commodity chains that create economic value through ‘salvage accumulation’. For example, in her seminal book ‘The Mushrooms at the End of the World’, Tsing discusses the elaborate business networks—i.e. commodity chains—that are forged to expedite mushrooms from the US Pacific Northwest to Japan, in order to satisfy a Japanese predilection and marked niche for these mushrooms (Tsing 2017). Two points are important to understand Tsing’s view on commodity chains: First, she labels these chains as ‘capitalistic’, because they conform to a larger cultural rationality that aims to create excess wealth, in order to concentrate it (likely in the hands of the few), to reinvest it to create more wealth (2017: 62). Secondly, in order to uphold this process of ongoing wealth creation, capitalism (manifested in this case as

chains) must be able to subsume more and more stores of wealth into their logics. She thus coins the term ‘salvage accumulation’ to discuss, for example, how mushroom commodity chains absorb stores of value from the natural and human environment, in order to feed this ongoing process of capital accumulation. For example, mushroom-based commodity chains are reliant on a plethora of non-capitalist processes—photosynthesis, decomposition in the earth, rain, human reproduction, motherly care, etc.—in order to have a product (mushrooms) and workers (humans) to facilitate the function and economic value creation of the commodity chain. This term ‘salvage accumulation’ is highly applicable to the processual emergence of the Fang Feng *suljee*. For starters, as discussed below, Fang Feng *suljee* emerged at the same historical period of multiple other *suljee* that formulated in order to salvage economic value from the remains of socialist infrastructure. In addition, Fang Feng, as a plant, was practically ignored by Magtaal residents until the post-1990 era; it was previously considered an unimportant weed. Therefore, it had no value in any form to locals, but was granted significance and value through market forces from outside. Consequently, Fang Feng *suljee* evince capitalist forms of ‘salvage accumulation’, because they siphon value through materials and resources from the surrounding landscape (that are not organically or indigenously valued) and transform them through chains into economic products with monetary value.

As stated, Fang Feng *suljee* emerged in Magtaal in the post-socialist period in the context of waves of wealth siphoning and accumulation that gripped the town through the dissolution of the state farm. Prior to the dissolution of the state farm, residents had often utilised social networks of kin and affinity—described as an ‘economy of favours’ in chapter 4—to access sought-after goods and services. In the immediate post-socialist period, these networks slowly adapted to contemporary exigency. According to Bilguun, who was a secondary school teacher during the immediate post-socialist period (1990-1994), Magtaal underwent a series of economic ‘waves’ (*davalгаа*; *davalgaasan üye*) with the dissolution of the state farm—first, the system was announced as over in 1990; but the collectivized provisioning system ended in 1991. In 1992, the assets of the state farm were privatized and distributed

according to a voucher system (Empson 2011; Pedersen 2011; Sneath 2012). During this period, the local government did not have enough cash money to pay salaries, so workers on the state payroll (like Bilguun, a teacher) started receiving monthly salary payments partly in flour rations. By 1993, inflation was high and rations were irregular, which contributed to the propagation of techniques of bartering—e.g. teachers like Bilguun would commonly trade with herders for meat and wheat, respectively. From 1990 until 1994, the economy of Magtaal was stuck in a downward spiral of dwindling resources and monetary inflation. As Bilguun remembers it, local residents became very adept in this period at salvaging and scavenging value (for barter, trade or subsistence) from the remnants of both the manmade and natural landscapes around them. When the Soviet/Russian government suddenly commanded that its citizens leave the Magtaal state farm, Bilguun recollects with chagrin the ‘marauding’ (*tonoh*) citizens who stripped their flats for usable items—‘[The Russians] just took their basic stuff, passport and clothing and baggage and left everything else. Then Mongolians came in immediately and took everything, even the furniture, which was from Romania. Even the tea was still hot in its cup. After that, many families had Romanian furniture in their homes. First they would take furniture, and then flooring, and then take the bricks of the house, and then the iron, then done.’ In addition to stripping various buildings, Bilguun notes, residents learned to identify additional usable resources in the countryside. During this period, flour, because of its culinary importance and irregular supply, became a de facto bartering currency in the *soum*.¹¹⁴ Residents, Bilguun notes, would go to the old agricultural fields of the state farm where plants were now growing unattended, pick the wheat stocks and grind the flour in their homes for consumption and trade. Although, as discussed shortly, resource gathering from surrounding landscapes has a long historical trajectory in Magtaal, the economic bottleneck of the immediate post-socialist period forced residents to become reacquainted with skills of gathering, picking, salvaging and reclaiming that had been largely unnecessary during the socialist period.

¹¹⁴ Bilguun, for example, fondly remembers how he purchased an antelope (*tsagaan zeer*) from a local hunter in exchange for bags of flour.

With the opening of the border to China in 1994,¹¹⁵ however, these proclivities to salvage took on new economic significance as avenues to cash money. As indicated in previous chapters, the opening of the border to China provided new employment opportunities, because it unlocked access to a giant economic market eager for Mongolian resources. Consequently, many individuals, newly unemployed through the dissolution of the state farm, began self-employing through a variety of small-scale entrepreneurial business occupations that utilized the cross-border differential. For example, Anu, who is currently the owner of a large store in Bayant, got her entrepreneurial start by opening a small trading stall (*türgen üilchilgeenii tseg*, known colloquially as *TÜZ*) in Bayant in 1992. Starting in 1995—after the Chinese border was reliably open—Anu started offering to accept as payment and/or trade her goods in return for local scrap metal and resources. At the time, she recalls, her store accepted payment in animal skins, antlers, copper, brass, aluminium and more, which she used to finance her trading business: ‘People would scrounge [the metal] and sell it to me, and I would collect, bulk and weigh it and send it to Ulaanbaatar to a wholesaler [*böönii töv*]. That wholesaler would have a price for the product based on kilo or ton. I would reduce that price [for local residents] to make money off of it and pay for the transportation [of the goods]. Then I would take this cash [from the wholesaler] and use it to buy my goods from China and start the process over’. In short, Anu constructed a business *suljee* to gather, bulk and export Mongolian resources to China in exchange for monetary profit. In this way, the lack of local cash reserves, the preponderance of natural resources and the proximity to a border market instantiated the routine of searching the landscape for resources to exchange for cash. By 1997, residents recall, all of the former socialist infrastructure in the *soum*, including the flats which harboured now-defunct heating systems, had been completely stripped for scrap metal. Gathering resources and bulking them through chain systems to create cash value had become a customary form of economic employment. Similarly, the post-1990 economic insecurity and exigencies laid the foundation for the emergence of Fang Feng-based *suljee* networks. According to local

¹¹⁵ Diverse residents said that the border opened officially in 1992, but it was only widely accessible to residents (due to official timing restrictions) starting in 1994.

informants, the combined voucher system and the opening of the border had resulted in the founding of a private Mongolian-owned, Chinese-invested fishing company at Dalai (which Zurhee worked in chapter 2). During this period (late 90s to early 2000s), the company also hired seasonal labour from China to help with the peak seasons. During one such season, local residents recall, the Chinese workers discovered that the Mongolian countryside was awash in untouched, thereby 'organic', Fang Feng plants. The root of the plant, which much resembles a brown, lumpy carrot, is known in China as 'Fang Feng', which translates literally as 'to protect against the wind'—perhaps a double entendre on the root's dual function as ecological windbreaker in sandy soils, and traditional Chinese medicine against wind diseases. Sensing an economic windfall, the Chinese workers started solidifying partnerships with local businessmen, who in turn offered to buy the roots off of local residents. Both the Chinese workers and Mongolian businessmen profited from this venture by bringing their combined knowledge to the table. For example, the Chinese partners taught the Mongolians how to find the plant (which had previously only been considered a weed in Mongolian cultural tradition), provided the first instruments ('loom', discussed below) for uprooting it and provided cash loans to their Mongolian partners to buy off of local residents. In turn, Mongolian partners knew how to entice local residents to participate in this new scheme; they initially offered, for example, remuneration in both cash and valued consumption goods, which were highly desired in the post-1990 period. Consequently, although Fang Feng had been previously unknown and unacknowledged by local residents, it quickly proliferated because a) it conformed to the networks of salvaging and gathering of (e.g. metal) resources already underway in Magtaal and b) residents were encouraged, through lack of job options, to engage in novel forms of gathering in return for highly desired (and needed) cash, food and employment. Consequently, the contemporary example of resource-exporting *suljee* largely conforms to Tsing's description of 'capitalist commodity chains' (2009, 2013a: 149, 2017: 121–28) that absorb larger value into economic calculi through 'salvage accumulation' (2017: 63).

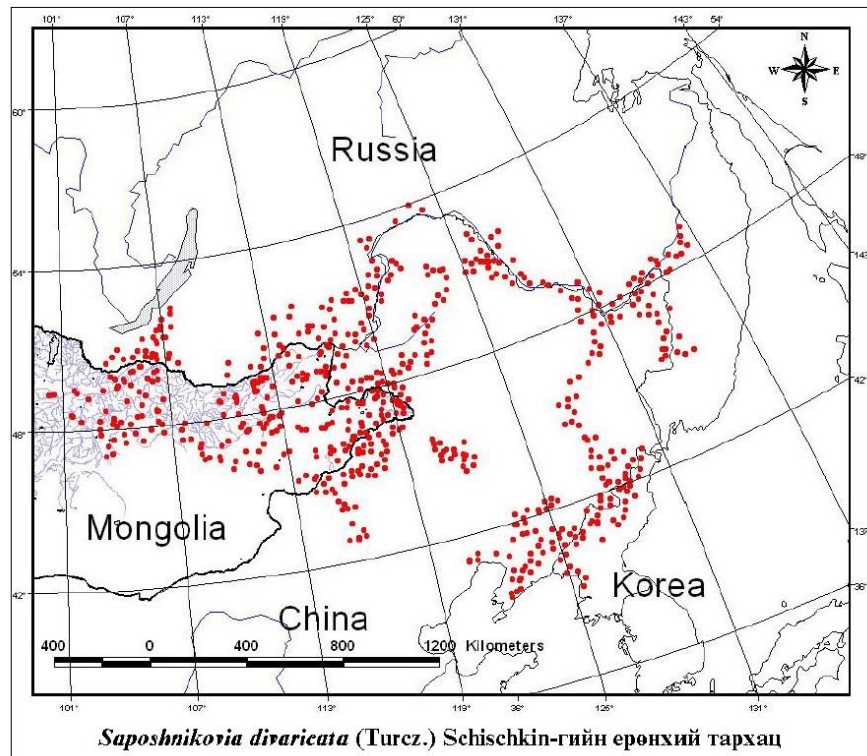


Figure 11: The distribution of Fang Feng across Asia. Wild Fang Feng is now rare in China, which encourages the expansion of trade from China into Mongolia (Photo from Urgamal 2006).

Fang Feng *suljee* have now, arguably, become the main avenue to cash money and/or form of economic employment in the *soum*. As Amina recalls, one kilo of Fang Feng was worth 150-250 MNT in the late 90s and was purchased, on the Mongolian side, by only one changer. With time, however, the importance of the root to the local economy grew and more and more residents began participating in its extraction. Each fall season, more and more Fang Feng changers, economically bolstered by a Chinese partner on the other side of the border, would arrive in Magtaal and seek local pickers to buy the root from. Efficient pickers, however, are limited and valuable, and, as a result, changers strive to build up long-standing personal relationships with valued pickers over years. As one seasoned picker explained to me: ‘Usually the changers and the collectors have a long-standing relationship, so when the picker hears that the changer is coming, s/he goes to find people to pick with them and include in the network. When a changer arrives, the picker reaches out to whomever they know, who then, in turn, reach out to their family and friends and they all tend to go [picking] together [in big groups]. Together, one network [*suljee*] is like 200 people’. Consequently, as of the 2017 fall season, over five different *suljee*

networks—which consist locally in a band of regular pickers, the changer who buys the root from them, and various additional jobs (like drivers) that are hired to move the root to an urban centre—are in effect in Magtaal and have encompassed almost every picking family into the tree of their *suljee*. Now, they each offer between 5,000 and 6,000 MNT per kilo of clean Fang Feng root.¹¹⁶ Increasingly, Fang Feng *suljee* participation is the main form of economic employment in Magtaal.

Historical *suljee* precedents

However, the existence of historical *suljee* precedents begets the question whether these chains are historically unique; or, in Tsing’s words, particularly ‘capitalistic’ (2013: 23). In fact, the expansion of mercantilist networks in the ‘long 16th century’ contributed to the proliferation of commodity chain networks in the search for new exoticized consumption objects the world over (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1986; Mintz 1985; Wallerstein 2012). Similarly, contrary to naturalist depictions of Mongolia by the Qing court in the 18th century as untouched wilderness (Dear 2014, 2017; Schlesinger 2017), Mongolia, even Magtaal, was not immune to this global tendency. For example, the decline of the Chinese Ming Empire and its concomitant replacement by the Manchu-led Qing Empire is often linked to the latter’s monopolization of trade networks funnelling rare natural resources, like ginseng root, pearls and sable pelts, from northern East Asian regions (including contemporary Manchuria, Mongolia and Korea) into contemporary China (Rawski 2016: 77–80). Schlesinger, similarly, argues that the Beijing-located Qing court’s appetite for luxury resources engendered a proliferation of resource-funnelling economic chains (2017). Fascinatingly, Schlesinger discusses how current-day Magtaal (at the time, the *Erhemseg hoshuu*),¹¹⁷ singularly, was ravished by waves of Chinese mushroom pickers every few years between the late-18th and 19th centuries. According to Schlesinger, the ‘steppe mushroom’, or *koumo*, was a neologism of the Qing era that referred to a wild-growing mushroom associated, in the imaginaries of court officials, with the wildness of the northern steppe (2017: 34). Playing on

¹¹⁶ Which encompasses both general inflation, but also increased demand from China (where, like fish, ‘organic’ Fang Feng is increasingly rare).

¹¹⁷ This isn’t To Van’s banner (*Ilden Zasgiin hoshuu*), but the one to the east of it (*Erhemseg Zasgiin hoshuu*)—both of these banners were subsumed into contemporary Magtaal *soum*.

these royal fantasies of unbridled adventuring, rugged hunting and militaristic livelihoods, properly-identified 'steppe mushrooms' were highly lucrative at the Qing court. Consequently, as early as 1759, complex commodity chains developed between current-day Magtaal and the Qing court effectuated by poor, northern Chinese labourers, who would scour the Mongolian countryside in search of the coveted 'steppe mushroom'.

Upon, albeit, a cursory, historically-removed reading, these mushroom-based commodity chain networks seem to share many similarities with contemporary Fang Feng *suljee*. Because the Qing government endeavoured to 'protect' Mongolia from the ravaging effects of economic expansion to 'preserve' its natural habitat, the Qing administrative system placed many restrictions on the inflow of goods, monies and traders from outside Mongolia (Dear 2014). As a result, the mushroom chains that emerged in *Erhemseg hoshuu* were largely illegalized and required covert operation, skill and convoluted networking with multiple actors. According to Schlesinger, in 1827, 772 Chinese mushroom pickers, mostly poor labourers from northern China, travelled into *Erhemseg hoshuu* (contemporary Magtaal), divided themselves into eighty-one camps with picking leaders and searched the countryside for the mushrooms. As stated, these men were generally poor and had to take out loans in the form of rice and other provisions from local creditors. Furthermore, they needed to hire local guides, who accepted payment in mushrooms (2017: 107). Schlesinger notes that the pickers '...were just one cog in a complex commodity chain that connected the steppe to buyers in Beijing [because the mushrooms] changed hands at least four times: Pickers returned their mushrooms to camp leaders and investors, who sold them to a wholesaler, who brought them to the shops in Beijing, who sold them to customers' (108). It is unclear how much Mongolians participated in these chains; Schlesinger, for example, notes that the Qing authorities were concerned over the marriage of Chinese pickers to local Mongolian women and resident participation as guides (121). Nevertheless, elsewhere, the Russian explorer Pozdneev, who visited Mongolia several times in the late 19th century, recalled seeing credit-based trade in the trading town of Uliastai (in contemporary Ulaanbaatar) that allowed payment from Mongolians in local resources, including mushrooms (1971: 170). Likely, both then and now,

resources, like mushrooms, were used in lieu of cash to finance Mongolian loans and the consumption needs of both Mongolian and Chinese labourers, because these resources accrued economic value through a complex, multi-actor, chain-like movement process, a *suljee*, from Mongolia to China.

Thus, I return to the question if contemporary *suljee* are particularly different in form and kind than their historical precedents. Upon first glance at the mechanisms of Fang Feng *suljee*, they are not; contemporary Fang Feng *suljee*, like 19th-century mushroom *suljee*, use chain-like patterns of linking multiple actors with various roles to effectuate an economic, monetary-profit-engendering business. However, Tsing, in deliberation of this question of the difference between mercantilist and contemporary capitalist commodity chains, surmises '[w]hat is new is the hype and sense of possibility that supply chains offer to the current generation of entrepreneurs' (149). Although the technocratic language of subcontracting, outsourcing and freelancing associated with this new entrepreneurialism has not reached the average Magtaal picker, it is true that the cultural emphasis placed on economic monetary self-sufficiency vis-à-vis other forms of value has changed. During To Van's era (the 19th century), the ultimate form of value was *buyan hishig* expressed as animal herder wealth and likely all wealth, including economic wealth, was reinvested into the cyclical nexus of cosmoeconomic fortune. Increasingly, in Magtaal, the importance of monetary wealth vis-à-vis this cosmoeconomic nexus has shifted; diverse forms of local wealth and value are funnelled through economic chains into an economic calculus, the proceeds of which can then be reinvested into other things (like schooling, education, political prestige, upward mobility, etc.). In short, the privileging of economic calculi, reified as monetary wealth, vis-à-vis other forms of wealth and value has shifted. Nevertheless, as opined by Tsing and discussed in the following, 'supply chain capitalism' (2009, 2013, 2017) is unexpectedly powerful through its reliance on sociocultural difference to create economic value—'Labour, nature, and capital are mobilized in fragmented, but linked economic niches; thus, supply chain capitalism focuses our attention on questions of diversity within structures of power' (2009: 149). Similarly, the contemporary *suljee* system is constructed around and mobilizes local forms and appearances of

value—including kinship, sociality, care, cosmology and historical patron/client relationship models—and funnels them into an economic return. I thus argue that contemporary *suljee* are different to historical examples of commodity chains and networking among Mongolians because of the privileging of economic value (reified as money) and the scope of mobilization of all forms of local value (like sharing, gift economy, expressions of favour, relatedness, mutuality, *buyan hishig*, natural landscape, patron/client relations, social standing) into an economic return. As a result, local forms of morality associated with economic behaviour are shifting—whereas in the past, actors, like To Van, might have evaluated economic behaviour based on how much an action disturbs the *hishig*/animal wealth cycle; contemporary residents increasingly morally evaluate economic behaviour based on how much the material wealth it creates (money) is reinvested into the local community nexus of wealth circulation that residents subsist from.

Social value

At the local Magtaal level, Fang Feng *suljee* are potent and popular forms of economic accumulation because they mobilize, incorporate and reinterpret indigenous social frameworks into their economic logic. As discussed at length in chapter 1 and 2, hierarchical models of separated, yet complementary social roles have a long historical arch in Magtaal and continue to manifest themselves on multiple scales in society—including between the people of a household and the male head, between commoners and the ruling banner aristocrat, the people and the nation or state, and between humans and the spiritual owners or 'lords' of the landscape' (Empson 2018a). In this section, I argue that the changer/picker role dichotomy is mimicking the historical master/custodian, aristocratic/commoner, patron/client relationship. Because the state is increasingly seen as failing in its hierarchical, obligative role vis-à-vis local citizens (chapters 1 and 2), residents, as pickers, increasingly turn to changer-led *suljee* to experience feelings of inclusion and recognition ideally associated with a holistic, inclusive, state-based governance system. I see this predominantly expressed through two key ethnographic phenomena. First, pickers sort themselves (or are sorted by the changers) into roaming bands of pickers that they self-identify as 'otog'—a term that many residents symbolically

associate with herding practices (from the similarly-sounding ‘otor’, see below), but is also the historical pre-Qing administrative governance unit for a group of people ruled by a nobleman (Sneath 2007). Secondly, changers are morally evaluated among the local populace based on how well they can ‘relate’ (*hariltsah*)—i.e. if they can build long-term relations with local residents, give pickers benefits (to persuade them to stay in their network) and show ministrations of care. In short, changers/pickers are recreating patron/client relationship understandings that are modelled on a reciprocal, innate hierarchy—‘one has to show deference and respect to the other with whom one is intimately connected and dependent upon’ (Empson 2018a). Consequently, despite the underlying material cash impetus, a changer’s effectiveness (and the chain’s lucrateness) is dependent on their ability to mimic and reproduce indigenous hierarchical models of value creation.

Going on *otog*

Root season 2017 was a total social event for the citizens of Magtaal, as every able-bodied man, woman and child was marshalled to participate in ‘otog’—multi-day picking excursions in search of the coveted Fang Feng root. During this season, I found myself sitting outside the front steps of Bayant’s kindergarten enjoying the autumn wind with Mogi, the kindergarten’s 58-year-old watchman (*jjüür*). Mogi, who had been a herder for the state farm from 1986 to 1990, started earning money after the socialist collapse by gathering wood from the countryside on a horse-drawn cart (*morin tereg*) for sale. ‘Back then we used to gather all sorts of stuff together’, Mogi remembers, ‘but it was only after the root craze started in the late 90s that we started calling it otog’. ‘Otog’, which can be directly translated as ‘clan’, ‘band’ or ‘tribe’, is the term most commonly used in Magtaal to describe the act of going in groups of usually five to ten individuals into the countryside for multi-day, sometimes multi-month, roaming trips in search of the Fang Feng root. For many residents, this practice of searching for roots in groups evokes images of nomadic herders banding together to survive in the wilderness over monthly stretches. ‘When I was a herder’, Mogi mentions, ‘we used to call it “going on otor” [*otoroor*] when we would travel over 100 kilometres from town to overnight for days with our animals. “Going on otog” [*otogoor*] is similar in meaning, because you have to

nomadize (*nuuj bairaa yum*) as well'. In addition to migrations into the 'uninhabited wilderness' (*hiir baih*), both *otor* (herding excursions) and *otog* (picking excursions) require participants to band together in group formations of mutual help, as manifested in the association of these formations with words like 'network' (*suljee*), 'team' (*bag*), 'nucleus' (*tsöm*), 'collective' (*hamt olon*), 'help' (*tus*), 'support' (*tüshig*) and 'aid' (*tuslam*). As explained by Mogi: 'If you go into the countryside alone on your own devices, you won't be able to get anything done. But if you join together [*bööndöö*, literally 'in bulk'] and you act in a network [*suljee*] and organize together, then you can provide aid (*tüshig*) to one another when you are in the countryside. Usually, the countryside is hard—there are dogs and wolves and rain. But if you work as a team (*bagaar ajillaj bairaa*), then you can reciprocally help one another'.¹¹⁸ Consequently, the implementation and implication of the word *otog* implies that a band of individuals have to think, move and act together in unison, in mutuality, in order to effectuate a shared goal. In the past, on *otor*, the goal of acting in agreement was the propagation of animal wealth; whereas, currently, on *otog*, the goal of acting in agreement is the proliferation of cash wealth.

Fang Feng *suljee* are inherently flexible and can accommodate the various time restrictions and needs of pickers to allow everyone to participate in *otog*. Whereas some routine pickers who lack other forms of employment go on *otog* for months at a time, most residents go on *otog* during breaks, holidays, weekends or days off. Mogi, for example, does shift work (*eeljiin ajil*) during the school season and works two days in a row; he spends the third day, his day off, on *otog* to supplement his regular income. During summer though, he has a lot of free time: 'I went to pick roots this summer, because I didn't just want to sit around doing nothing during my vacation. So, I went on *otog* in groups of ten people, together with my wife. Sometimes, we go in groups up to twenty people. Because people know each other and who usually goes picking, we just call

¹¹⁸ Pickers opine that they often sing, camp and share everything together on *otog*. I did not personally go on Fang Feng *otog* (due to the illegalized, precarious nature), but went on many day-long gathering expeditions with local residents for berries. The structure of these berry-picking expeditions was very similar to my informants' descriptions of Fang Feng *otog*; only slightly less coordinated, due to the lack of illegality. While on berry (*mol'*) expeditions in the summer of 2016, friends (I often went with the teenagers) would organize together, constantly sing, share stories, jokes and tea, inform one another of berry locations and generally help each other maximize their level of comfort outside in the wilderness.

each other, meet up and decide to go together'. Because the meshwork of buyers and sellers changes constantly, residents are often on the phone to each other, informing one another of the latest market landscape and making plans to pick together. A few days before talking to Mogi on the steps of the kindergarten, for example, he and his wife had come back from a seven-day *otog* trip with his friends. He explained the process to me: First, the group needs to organize food, which they can do jointly (based on size) or separately. In Mogi's case, he and his wife are two people and need food in value of around 40 to 50,000 MNT for three days. Based on the reserves of cash money they have, the group can pool money to buy a sheep; or each family can take out goods loans or open up ongoing tabs (*zeeᠯ*) from stores; or, based on changer participation, can loan (*zeeᠯ*) the goods from a changer to be paid back in roots. Secondly, the group needs to organize a car with driver and petrol. If a changer is organizing the *otog*, s/he pays for the car; if the *otog* is independently organized, the pickers pool money for petrol. Or, the pickers will take their own car (or motorcycle) out into the countryside, start picking and call a changer to come pick up their roots. It's all based on the geographic and social positioning of various actors in diverse networks around Bayant at the moment of picking. These networks are constantly shifting to adapt to and incorporate the employment desires of various actors.

Through years of practice, Magtaal-based changers have formulated an *otog* system that requires the coordinated effort of multiple people. Mogi's recent seven-day *otog*, for example, was administered by a Magtaal-based changer,¹¹⁹ which, he opines, creates the most efficient and lucrative organizational structure. 'When we go on *otog* with a changer, he organizes everything', Mogi emphasizes, 'so that we only focus on picking [and nothing else].' When preparing for a changer-led *otog*, all Mogi brings is a large canister of black tea, his *loom* (a large shovel-like instrument with a screw-like ending), a belt with an attached bag (*zamuurai*) and an extra straw bag (*shuudai*). 'So, there are two

¹¹⁹ Changers are brokers (or 'translation occupations' as discussed in chapter 5) and thus do not necessarily have to be born-and-raised in Magtaal. I was told, however, that residents prefer locally-born changers, because they can build better ongoing relations with them. A 'foreign-born' (aka not Magtaal-ian) changer, if they can relate well and offer a good price, can also be locally successful.

cars,' Mogi explains, 'First, a driver [organized by the changer] comes and picks you up [in Bayant] and drops you off at the picking location [often over 100 kilometres from Bayant]. Then that driver tells the changer where the drop point is. Three days later, the changer arrives at that spot and picks up all the roots you have picked and drives straight to Choibalsan with the roots. All the while, the hired driver is driving back and forth between Bayant and the drop-off location, giving water and food to the people and tallying the expenditures. When the changer reaches Choibalsan, he meets his partner [the second changer, who brings the product to China] and exchanges the root for cash money. The changer, who is now in Choibalsan, then transfers the cumulative earned money to the hired driver's bank account in Bayant. The hired driver then takes out the money in Bayant and drives with it to the drop-off point, where he gives the earned money to the pickers. At this point, the pickers often pay the driver for the food he has been providing'. This coordinated system can go on for days or months, based on the desires of the pickers, drivers and changers. Often, pickers can return to Bayant for a rest for a few days and rejoin the ongoing system a few days later, creating, effectively, a flexible employment scheme that people can opt-in and opt-out of based on personal need and desire. Seasoned pickers, like Amina, often stay in the changer's rotation for months at a time. Because pickers are enabled, through this organizational scheme, to concentrate their energy and time on picking, changer-organized, *suljee*-facilitated *otog* aggregate the largest root-ergo-cash bounty.



Figure 12: The 'loom'—a long device with a screw or flat end that is used to reach into the dirt and unearth the root. The first loom were made and distributed by Chinese traders. The loom end is 21-22 centimetres long (according to Amina). A loom now costs 30,000 MNT.

In many senses, systems of *otog* are analogous to historical precedents of mutual interlinking and effort in the interest of effectuating an overarching economic system. As indicated, *otog* pickers often associate this process with *otor* (or *otorloh*), because both formations require individuals to temporarily suppress their individual intentions, because joint organization and action allows all participants to not only survive, but achieve a greater communal result. Similarly, Sneath argues that the post-1990 rise in networking among households is highly reminiscent of the flexibility and adaptability of the *khot ail* residential unit (1993: 201). In the Mongolian countryside, nomadizing families often are found in grouped constellations of multiple yurts, aka family units, linked together. According to Sneath, this base pastoral residential unit of multiple *gers*, the *khot ail*, has historically been a highly flexible organizational form, in which diverse related families choose to temporarily link up to ensure livelihoods or separate based on pastoral needs and feelings of relatedness.¹²⁰ Importantly, a *khot ail* is often formed in order to join the diverse herds of various families, when doing so is in their respective economic interest. Prior to the socialist era, for example, constellations of richer and poorer households would group together in patron/client relationships manifested as a *khot ail*—families would benefit from either increased labour pools or better livelihood chances, respectively (202).¹²¹ As a result, Sneath typifies *khot ail* as similar in formation to contemporary networks (*suljee*)—‘Rather than being rigid and stable, these relations were a fluid and flexible network, based largely on kinship, but also on patron-client relations and friendship’ (1993: 202). Consequently, the unique livelihood requirements of Mongolian herders has

¹²⁰ Sneath notes that *khot ail* often form as a process and as a representation of social affinity and not as the foundation for it—in other words, connections are not created through camping together, connections are the prerequisite for camping together.

¹²¹ Sneath, citing a 1930’s study on the processual formation of *khot ail* by A. D. Simukov, notes that these social formations, contrary to the ideas of segmentary kinship, were mostly formulated on the basis of economic need and not kinship: ‘A much more common basis for co-residence [than kinship] was unequal wealth, since the head of each *khoton* tended to be relatively rich, Simukov noted, and wealth households preferred to have two or three poor households in their *khoton*, since herding work was shared between the households and thus the richer households would benefit from a relatively greater proportion of the total amount of labor being devoted to looking after their livestock’ (1993: 201–2). Importantly, Murphy notes that the re-emergence of large wealth differentials between herder families post-1990 has resulted in the re-institution of patron/client *khot ail* linkages in herding (2015). The flattening of large-scale wealth differentials during the socialist era has previously made these relations redundant.

often historically necessitated the temporary formation of economically-linked, mutually-striving economic units (Murphy 2015); a precedent that pickers are likely repeating in *otog* formations.

Importantly, not only do contemporary Fang Feng *otog* formations repeat herder precedents of mutual economic effort, but they also reinvent the historical model of patron/client relationships. For example, in *The Headless State*, Sneath discusses how steppe societies have historically been defined by state-level acephalous social organizations that a) divide the populace into ruling aristocratic and commoner lineages, and b) further allocate commoner lineages into military-civil administrative units under the leadership of a member (or family) of an aristocratic lineage (2007).¹²² Strikingly, Sneath discusses how the term *otog* has a deeper, antique meaning associated with this traditional aristocratic/commoner division. Importantly, the pre-Qing administrative predecessor to the Qing-era banner (*hoshuu*) was known as an *otog*—‘the people and territory ruled by a nobleman and the basic unit of Mongol socio-political life in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries’ (2007: 76). Essentially, the *otog* was a feudal administrative unit of commoner classes that worked and strived together under the same aristocratic lord (and later, ecclesiastical head). Elsewhere, Empson and Sneath have described how contemporary practice of usufructory, rotating access to land amongst herders is rooted in historical ‘custodial’ constructions of ownership within these aristocratic/commoner social divisions (Empson 2018a, 2018b; Sneath 2002: 107). As far back as the third century BC, Sneath notes, indigenous political institutions have combined authority over land, animals and people in the person of the lord of the local domain. Herders, as subjects under the jurisdiction of their lord, are allowed to access and upkeep (like custodians) the lands of their lord, but do not outright own the land. Various herder families likely had to learn to share, mobilize, form *khot ail* and rotate land access, so that the prosperity of all herds could be upheld. As evinced by To Van’s statements in the *Treatise*, all herds under the jurisdiction of a lord were likely

¹²² Sneath’s description of the ‘headless state’ are both analogous and applicable to the historical figure of To Van—a princely member of an aristocratic class, who had inherited his social position and title from his father’s lineage and had complete command over a specified number of commoner families.

seen as fragments of a whole—and not the distinct property of individual families—and important for the ongoing cosmological and material well-being of the banner (or *otog!*) as a complete unit. Consequently, the term *otog* is historically rooted in a conceptualization of society as divided between mutually-striving aristocratic/commoner classes in a holistic cosmo-economic formation, within which individual classes suppress individual claims to ownership, in order to effectuate an economic whole that ideally enables the prosperity of all participants. The uncanny formation resemblance between *khot ail* and *suljee*, as well as the herding associations among contemporary pickers with the word *otog*, allude to a reconstitution of historical tendencies to economically organize, mobilize and share under the jurisdiction of a patron to effectuate a larger economic return.

Building relations between changers and pickers

In association with pickers, changers must assiduously perform the role of a good provider—a patron—in order to orchestrate the economic viability of the *suljee* social formation. Earlier in my discussion with Mogi, he discussed how he had started ‘giving’ (*ögöh*) i.e. selling his roots this year to a new changer, a Bayant-born young man, in order to promote the economic sustainability of the local township. This young buyer was Jochi, a changer in his mid-20s, who was born and raised in Magtaal as the youngest of eight children. Jochi and I had first met the year before when he and his sister joined me on day-long excursions in the countryside around Bayant in search of berries. He then complained to me about how he had moved to Ulaanbaatar, became educated in mining but couldn’t find a job, and had moved back, disappointed, to Bayant. A year later, Jochi had started a new family and took up seasonal work at an agricultural company to make ends meet, but had been injured in a machinery accident. Understandably upset and disillusioned through the lack of dignified job opportunities, Jochi decided to utilize his unique knowledge of the Bayant social, natural and economic landscape to become a Fang Feng changer. As a result, I encountered Jochi a year later perched somewhat dangerously on the top of a local cabin, as he unloaded and spread over 100 kilos of Fang Feng root on the rooftop to dry in the sun’s rays. We placed wood beams around the edges of the Fang Feng-covered tarp on the roof’s rim, so that no passer-by

could see the drying roots from the street level. ‘I was sick of being treated poorly’, he explained, ‘I tried every secure job available, but they were all temporary or difficult, like coal stoker [*galch*]’. As a charming, well-spoken young man in a large local family, Jochi had many local contacts and knew that he could do well as a changer. ‘You need to have a talent for attracting people (*Hün tatah av’yaas gej baina*)’, he stated, when describing how to succeed as a changer. More than simply being able to access money, changers need to be affable, socially savvy and able to ‘forge relations’ (*hariltsah*) with residents, so that they can identify trustworthy individuals with whom to build up long-term relations for incorporation into their *suljee*.



Figure 13: The dried roots stored in a shed until they can be transported to the aimag centre.

As evinced, each *suljee* hinges on the unique social connections of the actors involved. Just like with the networks of loan-lenders (in chapter 5), a successful changer unites a) a monetary source from outside of Magtaal (e.g. a Mongolian urban centre and/or from China) with b) intimate knowledge of the local social fabric. In Jochi’s case, he initially only had access to local social connections, but no monetary source to fuel his prospective Fang Feng purchasing business. So, he partnered up with a good friend—Baatarsukh, a driver, who had moved

to Magtaal from Choibalsan when he married a Magtaal resident. Baatarsukh was not a ‘local resident’ like Jochi, because he had not been born and raised in Magtaal. However, Baatarsukh had attended primary school in Choibalsan and was well-connected through his youth and his driving activities. After being approached by Jochi, Baatarsukh called his primary school friends in Choibalsan and was able to locate a Fang Feng changer with money and connections in China. Jochi and Baatarsukh thus decided to go into business—Jochi would handle the grassroots organization and mobilization of pickers, and Baatarsukh, as a professional driver, would transport the roots and negotiate with the buyers in Choibalsan. At the beginning of 2017, the two partners took out a loan of four million MNT from the Choibalsan-based changer (who likely received the money from China) and spread the word in Bayant that they would start purchasing root at 5,500 a ‘clean’ kilo.¹²³ Their business model differs slightly from the generic one listed above, because Jochi was able to mobilize his entire extended family to help the venture succeed. Jochi set up shop in his flat and independently-organized pickers would sell their bounty to him at the end of the day after returning from picking expeditions. To maximize time, Baatarsukh transports roots in his car, or, utilizing his many connections amongst drivers, sends bags of roots with any of the many passenger heading to Choibalsan each day. When they send roots to Choibalsan, the arriving car (with roots), the Choibalsan-based changer and Jochi’s older sister (who lives in Choibalsan) meet in front of the city (to avoid police) and make a deal—Jochi’s sister gets money and the changer gets roots. In this way, the actual constellation and construction of the *suljee* can differ based on the unique circumstances and connections. Their unique constellation was successful; within a month of starting their business, Jochi and Baatarsukh had paid back the changer and started forming *otog*, to make more money, with trusted pickers. Nevertheless, like with the fish changers (in chapter 2) and with loan lenders (in chapter 5), Fang Feng changers, as business middlemen, are most effective when they carve out *suljee* niches that combine outside income with knowledge of the local social landscape.

¹²³ A ‘clean’ kilo includes roots that have been pre-cleaned to remove both the dirt and the tassels from the extracted root. When pickers bring roots that haven’t been pre-cleaned, they likely fetch a lower price.

As a result of the importance of social networks, both changers and pickers are highly cognizant of maintaining social rapport, relationship building and ministrations of care. Unanimously, the consensus among pickers is that the buying price is the most important factor in choosing a changer to sell roots to and/or work with. Beyond that, however, the social rapport and ongoing relations between pickers (and their families) and the families of changers is crucial in guiding the flow of roots. Due to the fledgling nature of his business, for example, Jochi was in the process of learning the proper social decorum of changer/picker relations—‘If you communicate well, laugh and tell jokes, then people will sell to you. When people we know go to pick roots, we can call them and say “ok, when you have roots, we can come and pick you up with a car and make everything easier for you”. If we know that government nature patrols are circling, then we offer to pick up roots directly from people [to put them at ease]. Pickers then say, “Yes, of course, come here!” People like that kind of stuff’. Changers, like Jochi, are aware of the competition for high-quality pickers and thus offer social attention to trusted individuals to maintain ongoing economic connections; in this way, seasoned pickers, like Amina, are often offered interest-free monetary loans from changers, in order to monopolize their work and attract their loyalty. Powerful pickers are often offered ‘incentives’ (*uramshuula*) in the form of higher pay for their kilos and/or monetary loans without interest to be paid back in roots.¹²⁴ On the other hand, pickers are highly swayed and beguiled by these displays of attentiveness. For example, Mogi explains that changers should properly provide benefits for people through the *otog* structure, if they intend to make a lot of profit: ‘Changers place different groups at different locations, bring the pickers to the locations, and visit, and pick up roots and deliver food and drinks and provide everything. This is how you build good relations; for example, bring people to the *otog*, asking them what they need, if they want to take a break and go to Bayant or Choibalsan, etc. This is a good relationship. If they don’t supply stuff and provide everything, it will be harder for them to get the same amount of roots [literally, the roots will not be found, *ündes oldohgüi shüü dee*]. There is a lot of competition [for roots]

¹²⁴ For example, Amina spent the beginning of the summer 2017 season picking roots to pay off a one million MNT loan from the changer that had been used to pay her daughter’s tuition and her sons’ school uniforms.

and so the changers have to do this to find reliable pickers and many roots quickly'. In Mogi's opinion, he is more likely to sell to changers who provide ministrations of care or benefits to expedite the picking process. 'No one likes to sell to changers with bad tempers', he emphasizes, when discussing how some changers complain about the quality of roots or cheat when weighing the kilogram amount. According to Mogi, changers with dishonest or mean-spirited reputations are socially reprimanded, because pickers stop frequenting their households, calling or selling to them. In short, both pickers and changers must strive to maintain positive relations and rapport in their shared economic endeavour, in order to expedite the efficiency and profitability of the overall process.

Consequently, I argue that changers and pickers are reproducing aspects of the patron/client relations associated with the pre-socialist era.¹²⁵ As discussed, historical hierarchical relations between aristocratic and commoner classes revolved around the figure of the 'master' (*ezen*), who owned the land that herders could access and embodied local authority and order. This authoritative model reproduced itself at both the household level (the patrilineal head was known as the *geriin ezen*) and state/cosmological level. Consequently, in *The Headless State*, Sneath notes that the term 'ezen' is also associated with the social role within a household of hosting a guest, which implies that the 'master' (*ezen*) also has a social obligation towards the visitor or follower. He notes, 'The position of *ejen* entails a responsibility for one's subordinates—the phrase *ejen boloh* (to become an *ejen*) means to vouch for something or someone or to take responsibility for them. This is the usage in which it most resembles our term patron—as someone who supports a junior' (2007: 235). Although changer/picker relations are chiefly oriented around material, monetary creation, they are also defined by a social aesthetic that presumes a paternalistic, hierarchical relation of care. For example, contrary to the ideals of reciprocal, equitable exchange within market relations (ch 3), pickers do not conceptualize themselves as equal actors in market relations with changers. Pickers do not talk of 'selling', but rather 'giving' (*ögöh*) roots to changers; they refer to

¹²⁵ Also the socialist era, as discussed in chapter 1, also reproduced the hierarchical relationships of the pre-socialist era.

themselves as the ‘clients’ (*üilchlüülegch*) of changers; and they talk of the economic actions and flows of changers as coming ‘from above’ (*deereese*).¹²⁶ Pickers idealize changers who provide for them and show ministrations of care, which they reward with loyalty, deference and eager provisioning. Whereas, in the Manchu era, patron/client relations were often constructed between richer and poorer herder families through a *khot ail* to effectuate a greater pastoral return; contemporary changer/picker relations are often constructed between richer and poorer (in both social and economic capital) residential families through an *otog* to effectuate a greater monetary return. As discussed in the following section, these social ministrations couched in local paradigms of care and authority are fundamental to commodity chain efficiency, because they facilitate the smooth physical and social deracination of the Fang Feng root from the local landscape.

Monetary economic value

Fang Feng *suljee* are flourishing at the local level in Magtaal, because they distribute their economic proceeds (cash money) largely in tune with local registers of social value. As discussed in the following, economic profit motivation is not ipso facto perceived as amoral or wrong; the defining characteristic of moral evaluation is how the money is distributed. To recap, I discussed how historical concepts of patron/client economic formulations in herding posited that patron and client occupied different social categories with concomitant roles, when combined, can effectuate a greater return. Historically, the ‘proceeds’ of this alliance—e.g. fortune concretized as more animals—were distributed amongst the participants in line with their social role. Contemporarily, the ‘proceeds’ of economic chains, money, must also be distributed in alignment with social categories. In the following, I discuss how Fang Feng *suljee*, like the fish *suljee* (chapter 2) and the loan *suljee* (chapters 3 and 4), forge economic value by overcoming various barriers, or ‘thresholds’, through successive coordinated action. In doing so, the Fang Feng sequentially passes through various hands, undergoes transformation (by way of ‘assessment practices’) and is incrementally removed from its original sociocultural nexus to become a capitalist commodity (Tsing 2013). In return, however, cash money flows into

¹²⁶ Similar to politicians with whom residents also use spatial terminology. See chapter 1.

the community that is morally re-entangled and entails an expectation of distribution in line with the social role or part (expressed as ‘share’ or *huv*) that one played in the *suljee*. Consequently, the distribution of money through the chain is subject to social scrutiny and modulation; if changers, for example, are perceived as siphoning too much economic value from the chain, their reputation will suffer disrepute (with an eventual effect on their efficacy). In short, local residents morally accept economic profit motivation among *suljee* participants, as long as the proceeds are disseminated in line with local social expectations (of group benefit and role appropriateness).

Following the steps to greater monetary gain

The economic fundament of the *suljee* system is built through the amalgamated effort of multiple actors, each valued as a vital cog with unique responsibilities, who performs an action in a succession to effectuate the whole. A fitting example of the power of coordinated *suljee* action is the *otog* structure formulated by Amina and her extended family. In the introductory vignette, I discussed how Amina was locally well-renowned for her picking abilities, which, she notes, is owing to her years of experience picking together with her family on *otog*. Whereas most *otog* formations are organized by changers, Amina’s family has implemented their diverse relations and coordinated abilities to self-organize into a highly-effective, assembly-line-esque *otog*. For example, during picking season, multiple members of her family often desire to go on *otog* for long stretches of time to maximize their output. In these periods, her family members have self-organized into large groups, which they then partition into three smaller groups—for example, three groups of seven individuals making twenty-one pickers in total. In order to facilitate this system, Amina’s brother takes on the role of organizer—he hires a car, purchases patrol, food and water and drives the multiple picker groups to separate locations in the countryside. Every day, he brings water and food to the groups and picks up the roots they have already picked. Every three days, he returns to the groups and moves them to a different location. In this way, Amina’s family displaces all organizing responsibility onto the elder brother, which allows them to solely focus on picking and him to administer three *otog* at once. As a result, in contrast to other systems managed by changers from a distance, Amina’s familial *otog* can

accrue root (and money, *möngö huraah*) at a phenomenal pace. Once a large resource bounty has been gathered, Amina describes, her brother goes to a changer and offers to make a deal (*tohiroltsoo*). Changers see this large amount, she asserts, and offer to buy it for more to monopolize our harvest.

In this way, in the summer of 2017, Amina's family was able to make 6,000 MNT per kilo, a full 1,000 MNT over singular pickers and other self-organizing groups, because of her brother's ability to organize, aggregate and negotiate. Everyone wins—the cost for petrol and food come from this profit margin (which means that the pickers don't cover it themselves), the elder brother gets any remainder (which is substantial) and the changer receives a huge surplus of Fang Feng root. Amina's familial *otog* is thus an exemplary demonstration of the power of sequential organization; by displacing diverse responsibilities onto various actors and creating occupational niche roles in the chain, the entire system becomes more efficient and is able to effectuate a greater economic return. Reconceptualized, To Van's model (and the herder precedent) of stratified social roles with separate obligations working together to effectuate a greater return finds new expression. In this way, Amina emphasizes, pickers do not begrudge their brother his profit, nor the economic margins of changers, because they receive money for 'facilitating the process' (*yavuulahiin tuld*), which everyone ideally benefits from.

Thus, on the one hand, the economic chain creates economic value by converting the social practices, duties, abilities and connections of people into an economic wage. In the previous chapters, I discussed Guyer's elucidation of the early 20th-century Congo River trading system as a structure of circuitous trading pathways that was enabled through overcoming 'thresholds'—i.e. ontological disjunctures in e.g. currencies, objects, desires, even enumeration understandings—through the act of 'conversion'—negotiating the asymmetry (2004). Guyer notes that disjunctive registers can never be completely matched—they are inequivalent and always leave a remainder—but this asymmetry has been historically cultivated by traders in order to negotiate 'marginal' economic gain. Adopting Guyer's concepts for the Mongolian context, I discussed in chapter 2 how fish *suljee* primarily make economic profit through navigating formal and legal boundaries, like the infrastructural border between

countries, placed and upheld by the state system—i.e. they make ‘marginal gains’ by circumventing and transcending formal thresholds. As alluded in the term *suljee* itself, which emphasizes relational connection, pickers chiefly perceive the barriers and ‘thresholds’ in chain systems to be constructed and overcome by social positionality—i.e. one’s connections, social and capital accessibility, unique skills, etc. For example, in chapter 2, I quoted Tamir, a fish changer, who described how fish commodity chains (*suljee*) relied on multiple chain-links symbolized by individual actors with unique knowledge bases and social connections (*tanil ta*). I include more of this statement below, in order to illustrate how overcoming social thresholds translates into economic profit for the individual actor.

In describing how a fish chain works, Tamir held up his hand and symbolically pointed at each finger to represent a succession of actions that allows the whole (the chain represented by the hand) to function:

‘[A fish chain] is like a suljee. The person who catches the fish from the lake receives a small amount of money. The next person gets more profit than the first. For example, [pointing at fingers] this person [finger 1] sells their fish to this person [finger 2] for 10 CNY, and the second person [finger 2] sells their fish for 20 CNY to this person [finger 3], and the third person makes the highest profit and sells it for the highest price to other people. The first person [in this case, fishermen, finger 1] can’t sell his fish directly to the last person [finger 3], because he doesn’t know who they are. You need to go through changers to enable the process. If the chain isn’t facilitated by changers, then it doesn’t survive. You just wouldn’t know the right people.’

In discussing commodity chains, various actors in networks would insist, like Tamir had, that the chain was only viable if it passed through multiple actors; in Tamir’s words, if the chain isn’t facilitated by changers, then it doesn’t survive (*Chyenjeer damjihgüi bol diilehgüi*). This is perceived by Tamir as having two main reasons—first, the chain encounters multiple thresholds, or barriers, that stifle its frictionless continuance, which the fitting actor (with their unique skills, duties and social connections) in the right position can circumvent. In Tamir’s

case, he spoke Chinese and knew Inner Mongolian fish buyers, which expedited the chain across the border. From a different angle, in Amina's brother's case, he was able to provide organizational skills and two-way connections (familial access to ready pickers and experience with accessible changers) to speed up and aggregate the functionality of the chain. Secondly, because each of these actors effectuated the performance of the chain through circumventing a barrier, they receive a cut from the overall revenue of the chain.¹²⁷ For example, similar to Tamir's statement, Mogi opines that Fang Feng *suljee* are highly profitable because they 'double' (*nugalah*, literally, 'fold') the cost of the moving product (like Fang Feng) at each social position in the chain—*Suljee* just 'double and double again' (*nuga nuga yavna shüü dee*), he says. From the perspective of Tamir, a middleman, many steps in a chain is desirable, because, the higher up he is, the more he gets to double the revenue of the product. From the perspective of Mogi, however, a picker at the beginning of the chain, he prefers it when the chain has less steps: 'Many networks in Bayant are good for us, because the changers compete for pickers', he says, 'but particularly networks with less steps, so that the price of the root isn't depressed to make profit with each step'.¹²⁸ In essence, Guyer's description of negotiating 'thresholds' to make 'marginal gains' from the 'remainder' in the conversion hold true for Fang Feng *suljee*. Although I will discuss this at length later, I wish here to emphasize that Guyer's concept of the 'remainder' that is harnessed for profit resonates with the Mongolian concepts of 'portionality'—the idea that Mongolians, historically, envisioned economics as a holistic sphere that they were entitled to a portion of. In this case, the network comprises a whole and each actor has a role they are perceived as playing that facilitates

¹²⁷ As discussed in chapter 2, Tamir is of the opinion that large monetary profit can only be achieved in a resource chain with multiple steps comprised by changers. First, he argues that resource procurers (like fishermen) who try to skip changers and sell directly to buyers will not make extra profit. For one, changers make a product look desirable and thus consumers will not trust a resource that comes directly from the procurer—in such cases, they will only buy it 'super cheap' (*hamag hyamd*). But secondly, Tamir opines that one gets a cut for providing the service of finding customers; the value of the resource doubles with every step. Skipping steps does not let the resource procurer obtain the price a changer would sell for; the resource procurer gets the same price—i.e. a doubling from 10 to 20 yuan—regardless if the product (fish) is sold on to a changer or directly to a customer. Consequently, in Tamir's, a changer's, assessment, skipping steps does not really benefit anyone economically (except maybe the consumer).

¹²⁸ Not the case for Amina's elder brother in their *otog* because the proceeds are literally kept in the family.

the overall chain; by fulfilling their requisite role, the product moves on to the next leg in the chain and the enabler takes their cut—their portion—for providing this service.

From gift to commodity

In addition to social conversion at each step in the chain, the *suljee* builds capital value through successively removing the natural product from its sociocultural mores to transform it into a capitalist commodity. For example, returning to Jochi's rooftop subterfuge, he was hiding the root on the top of a cabin, in order to take advantage of the sun's desiccating rays. In fact, the Fang Feng root is a natural product that, once picked, can start decomposing within three days, thereby losing the bulk of its medicinal efficacy. Changers in Magtaal, therefore, have two preventative options—either they move the root exceptionally quickly to Choibalsan to sell it to the next node, or they can dry out the root, thereby reducing its perishability. Most local changers, like Jochi, combine the two—not the least because, first, the illegalized nature of the root promotes quick turn-around, but because, secondly, the root increases substantially in value when dried. On the day that I encountered Jochi drying 107 kilos of recently picked Fang Feng root on the rooftop, he described to me how the process of dehydration condenses one kilo of wet root into 300 grams of dried root. Nevertheless, one kilo of dried root is substantially more valuable—in Bayant in 2017, one kilo of wet root was 5,000 (to 5,500) MNT, but a dried kilo was worth 23,000 MNT in Choibalsan. To put this into economic relation, Jochi paid roughly 588,000 MNT to purchase the 107 kilos from local pickers. Drying this amount would hypothetically leave Jochi with roughly thirty-two kilos of dried root, which, multiplied by 23,000, equals close to 740,000. Merely from the act of drying the root, Jochi's resource bounty undergoes a substantial elevation in economic value. In this action, nothing has actually changed about the material constellation of the root; it has simply become more palatable for commodity exchange, because a dried root is less perishable, but also less traceable to its original social and natural origin (particularly important for an illegalized commodity).

Consequently, hikes in prices between chain nodes incorporate not only the social matching (conversion) at each step, but also the increasing

commodification (translation) of the root as it travels further and further away from its natural origins. In chapter 5, I will extensively discuss Tsing's concept of 'translation', which describes the process of linking social and economic registers to engender an economic remainder (2013, 2017). According to Tsing, 'capitalistic' commodity chains build value by subsuming non-capitalist value—i.e. natural or social processes like photosynthesis, natural growth or the care of children—into an economically-motivated chain through the ascription of a price (2013). For example, when the Fang Feng is picked, it immediately becomes assigned an economic value according to various market factors. However, that price—for example, one kilo costs 5,000 MNT—elides the multiple non-capitalistic processes that created that market product, like the growth of that root (natural environment, weather, rain, etc.) and its production (being picked by a human, who was fed, raised and cared for). Furthermore, she suggests, translation (i.e. the fetish of price) is effectuated through 'assessment practices'—the moment where a natural product is assessed by a buyer and then categorized into an economic value bracket based on evaluation (Tsing 2013). In a sense, the root undergoes 'price fetishism' (Gudeman 2008)—all social and natural value is subsumed into a singular price at each stage in the commodity chain through an assessment of product, which elides the multifarious experience of different actors (or production trajectories of resources) and standardizes all products (that loosely resemble a type) into an enumerated category. In the case of mushrooms, sorting the mushrooms into types establishes particular price grades with particular price niches and proliferates the possibility for profit; without sorting that establishes types, there are only mushrooms. In the case of Fang Feng, Jochi describes how he evaluates if a certain kilo of roots is worth 5,000 or 5,500—when an individual enters his flat with the intention of selling, Jochi has them dump the root on the floor to remove dirt that can skew the scale weight. If the root has a 'beard' (*sahal*, i.e. the tussles on the root), is covered in dirt or is particularly thin, he is likely to offer 5,000. Thicker, cleaner roots (and, of course, the roots of trusted, respected pickers) likely receive 5,500 per kilo. Thus, in the act of assessment, the various roots, which might be similar in quality, are discerned by type and categorized into a value niche.



Figure 14: A still taken from a youtube video of a resident pulling a Fang Feng root out of the ground. The root forms a long carrot-esque shape and is tasselled (known as the root's 'beard' or 'sahal' in Mongolian). The video can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAKsAXviCM0>

In total, the Fang Feng root undergoes an arc from gift¹²⁹ to commodity that is, nevertheless, repeated at every node and results in continual price hikes. The debate around the elusive line separating 'gift' from 'commodity' is ongoing and hotly debated, but Strathern best paraphrases the distinction as follows: 'If in a commodity economy things and persons assume the forms of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social forms of persons' (1988: 134). Inspired by this conceptualization, Tsing argues that the gift/commodity dyad is animated by contrasting forms of value: 'Value in a commodity system is in things for use and exchange. Value in a gift system is in social obligations, connections, and gaps' (Tsing 2013). She emphasizes that these distinctions are oversimplified,

¹²⁹ I am using the term 'gift' here as a contrast to its paired term 'commodity' to emphasize how the same object can move from a traded item motivated predominantly by sociality to an object predominantly evaluated through market price. However, I am not supposing that the trading of roots in Magtaal resemble historical 'gift economies' (Strathern 1988); as discussed in chapter 4, rather, I follow Parry and Holbraad in assuming the gift has been 'fractured' in modernity (Holbraad 2017; Parry 1986). In focusing on individual transactions, as I do in chapter 4, I utilise the literature of 'favour' in discussing local economic actions that are couched in social motivation. Nevertheless, for the sake of delineating how objects transform along commodity chains, I leave the gift/commodity pairing in this instance.'

but she uses them, for the sake of argument, to discuss how commodity chains incrementally remove—aka ‘purify’—the social value (epitomized in the gift) from the thing to transform it into an economic product (typified as the commodity). The purification moment happens, like with the root, in the moment of assessment, standardization and formalization to lump diversity into one category. Appadurai, however, would likely disagree with Tsing’s assessment. He argues that objects are not increasingly ‘alienated’ as they travel along pathways, but that the act of exchange at each node processually and continually makes objects into commodities (they go in and out of the ‘commodity phase’) (1986a). Appadurai emphasizes that the same object can be both gift and commodity at each stage and that it itself has a ‘social life’. Rightly, Appadurai’s musings shift the focus on commodities away from framing them as purely a result of a one-directional development away from sociality (i.e. from gift to commodity) by showing, for example, that commodities can be remade into gifts (like with wedding rings). In recognition of this insight, Tsing concurs that the gift/commodity dyad is contested and also processual—for example, a mushroom can become a gift again, rooted in social relations, when it is sold in Japan, after traveling the commodity pathway, and gifted as a rare delight between friends (Tsing 2013).

In a sense, both Tsing’s and Appadurai’s processes are ongoing as the root consistently chains in meaning based on context as it moves through the *suljee*. Fang Feng is simultaneously accruing in economic value through subsuming social relations and participation (like the *tanil tal* of changer partners or the patron/client model of valued relations) at each node in each exchange along the chain, while it, concurrently, travels along the pathway, and is transmogrified into a capitalist product. In this way, the first ascription of a price to the Fang Feng—at the point of Jochi’s weighing in Bayant—subsumes local patron/client formations, forms of societal care (mutuality) and natural processes (weather, natural growth) into an evaluation of price. Then the root is moved by Jochi to Choibalsan and sold again; at this point, the price represents Jochi’s removal of the root from Magtaal, the drying of it (obscuring its natural element), as well as the myriad social relations and connections he has forged to transport the root (e.g. gift relations like performing favours for drivers, helping Baatarsukh, being

supported by his older sister in Choibalsan, obtained knowledge about where government controllers are, etc.). The root jumps in price at this stage because of the various social, legal, geographic, etc. ‘thresholds’ that are overcome (by way of both conversion and translation) (see price listing below). Although I did not witness this process myself, the root is likely moved, as the next step, by the Choibalsan-based changer also along another corridor of favours and social networks to circumnavigate the law (reified as national border) to reach China,¹³⁰ as it is also literally and figuratively converted from price in MNT to price in CNY. Therefore, the Fang Feng chain is not an economically homogenizing arc, but is powered through social difference, reinterpretation and contestation at every stage. As discussed by Tsing, capitalist commodity chains, in contrast to homogenizing theories, do not flatten cultural difference, but thrive on it—the Fang Feng chain negotiates cultural, formal and ontological difference at each stage to create economic profit (2009, 2013). In this way, the multifarious ‘thresholds’ encountered at every moment of exchange (which include ongoing social relations) are continually translated into an accumulating doubling of price with each exchange. Nevertheless, it is also true that the product, the Fang Feng, is irreversibly alienated from its original sociocultural (even naturalist) moorings as it transmogrifies from plant to root to dried root to pill—once removed, it can be re-entangled as a social gift, but never exactly returned to its original metaphysical, social and natural rootedness.

Figure 15: The Fang Feng price increase (per kilo in MNT) during the 2017 season:

	Magtaal	Choibalsan	Ulaanbaatar	Tümurjargal (China)
Wet	5,500	8,000	20,000	
Dry		23,000	45,000	100,000

An ethical price

This process, however, does not mean that this economic siphoning is without moral contestation. To throw this into historical relief, I discuss in chapter 1 how,

¹³⁰ I am told it is packaged into building material (e.g. tubes) and clandestinely sent across the border.

historically and currently, politicians who are perceived as excessively extracting wealth from the system are maligned as selfish. From a different angle, changers and the economic proceeds they (or any actor in the chain) can siphon from it is also subject to social scrutiny with the potential for judgement. As I will discuss at length in chapter 5, changers are often subject to moral scrutiny, because their occupations link economic and calculative worlds—they are, what I call, ‘translation occupations’. In fact, Gudeman notes that, like in the European Middle Ages, concerns around concepts of ‘just price’ often arise in contexts where individuals are learning to bring more and more goods from different places to a bar of common exchange—monetary value (2008: 57). This process of commensuration—where, for example, previously monetarily uncalculated spheres become monetized and must be priced for the first time—is often accompanied by moral doubt and deliberations over fairness. During the European Middle Ages, the expansion of trade and markets into more aspects of daily life necessitated a shift from anti-market mentalities to a moral account of the market that sanctioned market transactions when done for morally acceptable ends, such as raising a family or for purposes of charity (Walsh & Lynch 2008: 120). In Magtaal, a similar shift is underfoot. Economic need is now universal and historical evaluations of economic morality—expressed as actions that encouraged social reproduction aka *buyan hishig*—are shifting to the monetary form—reified as ‘just price’ or, in Magtaal, as the ‘possible price’ (*bolomjiin üne*). For example, in chapter 2, I noted how Mandaa and Tuya assert that their business is helping the local community, because they offer the fair aka accurate market price—i.e. ‘the possible price’—when they pay local residents, in contrast to a large company that often depresses the price. The ‘possible price’ is thus an ascribed amount at the moment of assessment between two legs of a chain that allows all the actors involved (in this case, pickers and changers) to economically benefit in a way that covers their expenses and allows them to live dignified lives. A possible price is fair because it facilitates the social reproduction of all the members involved in the exchange. Consequently, the actions of changers themselves are morally evaluated based on whether they offer a fair, aka social-encouraging, price or not. In discussing the ‘fair price’, I wish to emphasize that profit motive ipso facto is not perceived

as amoral—profit is a/moral based on evaluation of social usage. Consequently, similar to the case of local loan-lenders (chapter 5), changers are called different terms based on whether the speaking actor considers their business activities to be socially positive or negative. For example, Jochi does not like to use the term ‘changer’ to describe himself, because he feels that the term emphasizes instrumentality in profit. By extension, pickers who are close to him choose to describe him as ‘the buying person’ (*avj bairaa hun*) (literally, the person receiving [the roots]) and not changer (*chyen*) to emphasize his sociality. Other residents, like Mogi, do not shy away from the term ‘changer’, but distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ changers¹³¹—‘there are those that only look out for their own profit. Those are the bad changers. But people who look out for their people [*ard irgedee*] and see who all is there and what they all need, those people are ok. Good changers are those that buy [roots] at the “possible price” [*bolomjiin üne*], which means that the interaction is profitable for both sides’. Bayar, my driver during my time in Magtaal who often transported roots for changers, even went so far as calling the *bolomjiin üne* a type of *buyan*—‘they gather things from the people and then transfer it to the market; that is buyan, it is this lifetime’s buyan. If you are real [*jinhene*] changer, it is buyan’.¹³² Fascinatingly, Bayar’s comments indicate how spiritual morality, *buyan hishig*, is evaluated based on social reproduction and has shifted from the signifier of animals to the monetary form. In sum, changers that depress the price they give pickers to maximize profit ergo hurting the pickers’ abilities to support their family are considered bad, because they don’t create *buyan*. In contrast, changers that pay a ‘fair price’, which allows the pickers to feed their families, are considered good, because they engender *buyan* ergo the social reproduction of the township.

¹³¹ I asked Tamir, a changer, if he thought changers were good. He answered, ‘this depends on your perspective, if I were one, I would say good, if I were not, I’d say bad. It’s a relative understanding [*Har’tsangüi oilgolt*]’. Indeed, Tamir is right that the moral evaluation of changers (and other translation occupations) is relative, based on perception and position. For example, which price *exactly* is fair or not is based on personal feeling and not a quantified standard.

¹³² His words are: ‘*Ard tümenii yumyg tsugluulaj biraad borluulana gedeg chin’ tom buyan neg nasny buyan*’. Interestingly, Bayar also uses the term *jinhene*, which, as discussed in chapter 1, reflects that locals maintain an idealized image, like an exemplar, of how changers should behave—i.e. residents like Bayar evaluate changers based on whether they are ‘real’ (*jinhene*) or fake (*huda*) much like politicians.

Reconstituting fortune

In conclusion, the necessity of the Fang Feng root (and its economic turnaround) to the livelihoods of local Magtaal residents has instigated a gradual, yet contested, reconstitution of local cosmoeconomic morality to incorporate the root trade. In chapters 1 and 2, I noted that historical conceptualizations of *buyan hishig* posited a world where humans and nature were intertwined; creating good merit amongst humans (and towards masters) had reverberations in the natural world, which resulted in bounty measured in nature and animals, which fed back into the human reproductive cycle. Accordingly, various moral injunctions aimed to curtail unnecessary disturbance of the natural world that could interfere in social/natural reproduction and provoke anger from the land masters and spirits. Historically, this has included, amongst others, prohibitions to avoid scuffing, burying in or digging up from the ground. Contemporarily, this injunction is multiply defied—not only are Fang Feng *suljee* contingent on ground disturbance, but the recent Mongolia-wide mining boom was completely built on the (speculative) economic value of underground resources. This has not been without controversy—High discusses in her research on artisanal gold mining how this unease over digging up the ground is exemplified through the proliferation of ‘angry, black spirits’ that miners (and residents living near them) struggle to appease (2017). In Magtaal, both the Fang Feng *suljee* and the locally-active Chinese oil company are also economically dependent on and intertwined with resources that are dug up from the ground. I consequently asked Amina if she perceives a moral difference between the *suljee* she participates in and the activities of the local oil company. I quote her answer at length:

‘The [picking of the] root has really contributed to and improved our lives. We don’t really know what the negative effects of picking the root are on nature, and we don’t know why [the government] has forbidden the root picking. But you could say that all of our homeland’s people that can pick are receiving nature’s fortune (baigaliin hishig hurtej baina). We don’t get any benefit from the presence of the oil company and, yet, they are in our land so there should be some benefit to the soum or the local residents.

If I would get caught [by a nature protector], I would ask then why they forbid us to pick the roots but they allow the oil company to take everything from our land and we get nothing from it. We are just trying to make money from roots, why are you restricting it? Why don't they restrict the oil? But I think I'll ask if they come investigate me. We [who pick] don't take all the root from the ground; we take what we need [zohih hemjeegeer, literally, the appropriate measure] and on top of that we leave some in the ground. But while we do that, that oil company comes and sucks up all the oil and things of that sort and doesn't put anything back or leave anything to be rehabilitated. And so when the people (ard irged) just earn a little money to spend on their lives, why do they forbid this? Because they are sucking up everything from below and it is not illegalized, then I really think they should leave an adequate portion [of the proceeds; zohih hemjeenii huv'] for the soum's people [sumiin ard irged]. They aren't [leaving any money or oil] and so we are not getting our share [huv']. Yes, everything that is coming out of the ground and heading out of the country to be used [ashiglah], all of it should be giving to the citizens of Mongolia'.

Two aspects stand out about Amina's statement—1) she is, in contrast to e.g. To Van's pre-socialist conceptualizations, including underground resources (that rip up the earth) in her discussion of nature's bounty (*hishig*); and, yet, 2) she draws a distinction between roots and oil because the first allows her community to reproduce (by providing 'appropriate portions') and the latter does not. Her conceptual framing of nature's bounty and its portions is highly reminiscent of Empson's description of how *hishig* can be harnessed and multiplied by separation of parts from a whole to be contained and fostered (Empson 2011). To use the symbolism of animal herds, separating a piece of the herd off from the whole, like when a young couple gets married, allows this portion to be contained, nurtured and fostered into a new, full-fledged herd. Similarly, Empson notes that practices of cultivating and growing *hishig* often focus on separating portions (or sacred objects) of various sorts to store or nurture (in i.e. household *hishig* bags or chests), thereby gathering fortune over time (2011: 90–4). The sharing of *hishig* is often materialized as 'portions': a

family who gives milk, the lifeblood of their animals, to another family will often keep back a 'sacred portion' (*dee*) for themselves (72); or participants in a cairn ceremony eat the blessed meat (the offering to the land masters), as their share or portion (*huv*), which 'defines the person as inseparable from the whole' (90). Importantly, Amina's statement reconceptualizes this moral aesthetic of harnessing fortune (in terms of nature's bounty) by discussing the amount taken from nature in terms of appropriately-sized portions.

The 'adequate portion' is often conceptualized as the amount that allows the life process—e.g. the stability of the *buyan hishig* cycle—to continue and thrive. For example, Amina discusses how pickers often leave a portion of the root in the ground; particularly, parts of exemplarily large and hardy roots are left in the earth (only the top is removed) in the hopes that this piece will replicate again.¹³³ Additionally, Jochi notes how Bayant-based pickers rotate the direction they pick roots in every year (i.e. east or west), in order to give the roots a chance to recover. Consequently, Mogi notes that he feels mostly morally validated in his root picking activities—'Being spiritual [and going to cairn ceremonies] doesn't conflict [with picking], because we pick according to our needs [*öördsiihöö hemjeend*, literally, within own measure or portion]... We don't just pick wildly and lay waste to the land. We are not taking the trees, just the roots. You are just not allowed to take too much to become greedy, you have to do it according to your portion [*öördsiihöö hemjeend*]' . Importantly, his statement is not unequivocal—he notes, in his answer, that he attends cairn ceremonies to apologize to the spirits for his actions (which differs from Tuya's statements in chapter 2), reflecting pangs of remorse.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, like with the fish catching from Dalai in chapter 2, many pickers opine that taking the roots from the land is mostly ecologically and socially sustainable, because the

¹³³ Specifically, Amina says that the root can reach over 100 centimetres; they only take the portion of the root that the *loom* reaches—i.e. the first 20-ish centimetres.

¹³⁴ I have, in moments of vulnerability or intimacy, heard from root pickers that they are afraid that global warming is a sign that they might be taking too much from the ground; that the spirits are angry. Bayar, my driver, is also a herder and mostly socially sanctions the picking activities, especially when compared to the largely sociocultural situation of neglect by the government. Nevertheless, when discussing changing herding patterns due to irregularities in nature, Bayar would express internalized guilt over picking and fear regarding the prospect of future natural calamities. As a result, residents were quite open with the fact that the frequency and thickness of roots are dwindling; whereas fifteen years ago, Fang Feng could be harvested outside the gates of Bayant, now one must travel over 100 kilometres (sometimes 150) to find a high density of roots.

resource is largely being received from nature in line with conceptualizations of *buyan hishig*—each individual is taking their share or portion of nature’s bounty that is needed for social continuity and life. As a juxtaposition, residents are aware that oil is not renewable—once it is ‘sucked up’, it is gone—and that the company is making no efforts or steps to rehabilitate the area.¹³⁵ Additionally, as discussed in the introduction and chapter 1, residents rarely work (beyond entry-level) in the company and the *soum* receives no benefits from its activities (because all taxes are paid to the central government). Consequently, residents perceive a distinction between roots and oil because the first, in Amina’s words, ‘really improves their lives’, whereas the latter extracts without return.

Moreover, the Fang Feng *suljee*, in contrast to formal companies active in Magtaal, allows residents to reconceptualize and uphold hierarchical ideals of social ordering. In chapter 1, I discuss the historically-reoccurring idealization of hierarchically-segmented, yet mutually-striving social roles, typified by the nested hierarchy of the spiritual master/human master/human custodian relation. Additionally, I discuss how residents often believe that politicians are currently failing in their duties to uphold this understanding. By extension, I argue that the changer/picker relationship represents attempts to mirror, if not replace, the failed human master (politician)/custodian (citizen) relationship. For example, according to Tuya (chapter 2), the *suljee* system is morally superior to companies, because the profits of the *suljee* are distributed to all the participants, which helps a lot of people in the area and raises their livelihoods. She is of the opinion, similar to Amina, that economic proceeds from companies, just flow up to the ‘big bosses’ (*tomchuud*) and don’t leave any portion behind. Similarly, pickers opine that they like to work with changers, because the proceeds are left in the local area and they can build ongoing relations with them, which means they can engage in reciprocal processes of ‘help’ over time. These feelings of obligation are materially expressed through ongoing economic relations between changers and pickers. Furthermore, *suljee* participation helps one work together in a holistic unit (like e.g. in a *khot ail*) and receive one’s portion in line with their social duties and responsibilities. In

¹³⁵ Explaining why, for example, High’s research among artisanal gold miners was marked by more spiritual calamity than roots are (2017), because the gold is not renewable.

contrast, the workers and bosses of oil companies (as well as politicians) come to Magtaal for a limited period of time, which does not allow processes of reciprocal mutuality, obligation or help to build up with time and interaction. They do not leave a portion for the local residents to thrive off; they do not uphold hierarchical ideals of mutually-striving to effectuate an economic whole. Harkening back to the discussion in chapter 2, the neoliberal devolution of responsibilities of economic care from government to citizens has thus resulted in a reconstitution of state power that mirrors and reformulates historical indigenous hierarchies—changers, as quasi-petty bosses, uphold governance and provisioning ideals in lieu of the contemporary state-led formal system.

Finally, this leaves the question about historical novelty—what is new about contemporary *suljee* vis-à-vis the past? What makes them, in Tsing's words, 'capitalistic'? Although I cannot answer the last question conclusively, I do recognize that contemporary Fang Feng *suljee*, as indicated by residents' understanding of the term, monetizes the local cosmoeconomic sociocultural nexus. Because, in praxis, the proceeds from roots are often utilized to pay off bank loans (or when not, loan-distributor or kinship loans intertwined with bank loans), value needs to be conceptualized in terms of money. Through the mechanism of financial debt, which requires regular interest payments in terms of equivalent cash, residents increasingly mobilize all social value, kinship, networks and connections to maximize economic return through Fang Feng *suljee*, which is then reinserted into the bank finance structure. Individuals no longer, like they did in the immediate post-1990 moment, accept payment for roots in terms of food. And they don't pay back loans, like during pre-socialist times, in terms of natural resources. Rather, they prefer, and need, money. Patron/client relationships are forged, not to solely create larger herds for consumption, but to create herds or pick roots to make money. Sociocultural and kinship networks, manifested as *otog*, are absorbed into the *suljee*, translated and implemented to garner a higher economic price. Proceeds, mutual help and *buyan hishig* increasingly become synonymous with cash payments. Morality itself becomes monetized; whereas in To Van's time, moral action was perceived in terms of actions that upheld the cyclical, natural reproductive cycle, now actions are evaluated based on their economic

contributions and distribution. The cyclicity of reproductive life has now become dependent on money, as indicated by the shifting of moral injunctions from sacrilegious disturbance of the earth (because it distressed nature and animals) to the toleration of digging (because it is necessary in a mining economy to receive money). A good changer, like a good politician, helps followers or citizens in terms of money, allows fair prices (*bolomjiin üne*) and distributes portions materialized as cash proceeds (*huv*). Social value becomes funnelled into economic value to be re-entangled socially again. In describing why she considers mushrooms in commodity chains to be 'capitalist' products, Tsing writes: 'I have just argued that [the] matsutake [mushroom] is a capitalist commodity that begins and ends its life as a gift. It spends only a few hours as a fully capitalist commodity: those hours it spends as inventory in shipping crates on the tarmac and in the belly of a plane. But those are hours that count' (Tsing 2013). Similarly, multiple forms of social value exist in Magtaal, but increasingly, through the mechanisms of debt, they must go through the process of being monetized—they are translated into economic price. Transformed into cash money, this money can then be redistributed according to social values, norms and cycles of *hishig*; it can become a gift again. In turn, the next chapter is about how debt itself, as the promise of money, is itself being distributed along a gift/commodity nexus.

Chapter 4: The temporary possession of debt—the navigation of financial loans through the mobilization of social loans in the past and the present

During the 2016 election season—in the space between the induction of the new national parliament and the election of the new local-level representative body—the freshly appointed Prime Minister of Mongolia decided to take a reconnaissance trip through some of the most politically-sensitive and economically-promising areas of Mongolia. In Magtaal, it was widely known that the prior ruling government had recently attempted to implement a free trade zone in their area (see introduction)—a decree that was widely unpopular—and so locals were eager to hear what the new Prime Minister, appointed by the opposing party, would say on the matter. The town thus buzzed with excitement that morning, as teachers ran to the schools to choose the ‘cutest children’ to greet the prime minister; citizens cleaned up all the animal dung from the streets; and the bulletin board in front of the town hall was stripped of all its ads for car shares and trips to China and plastered with educational pamphlets on the importance of preserving nature and the evils of alcoholism. Within a few hours, the town was awoken into life as if to say ‘We are remote, but we are good, responsible citizens, making our lives in this place’. The local hope, talked about over cups of milk tea and chitchat in store corners, was that the Prime Minister wouldn’t let the free trade zone policy continue after seeing their industriousness and hearing their firm disapproval.

Figure 16: A line of pre-selected school children await the Prime Minister to greet him upon arrival. A faded relief of Lenin can still be seen in the background on the government building.

And thus, the Prime Minister's arrival was greeted by a formation of flower-brandishing, petticoated school children, and a red carpet that rolled past the painting of Lenin (holding a copy of Pravda) that was still visible on the town hall's exterior. Many bright-eyed faces filled the audience chairs in the town's cultural centre, expecting a discussion on the free trade zone, their local debt, herding policy and China. Instead, the Prime Minister launched into an often-broadcasted speech about his new ruling government's policy to survive the current economic crisis (*hyamra*)—i.e. how businesses were closing and they needed to revitalize the business sector to create jobs; about how to attract foreign investment; about how the national economy needed to be stabilized; how the last government smudged real economic figures and over-focused on mining; and how the mortgage market in Ulaanbaatar was distorted through the last government's loan policy... 'We can't lose this chance', he emphasized, reflecting his desire to influence opinion to vote for his party in the upcoming local election, 'with your support we can implement all these policies'. Yet, when

the floor opened for questions from citizens, their own pressing concerns were unveiled:

The ex-Agriculture Minister has illegally put up signs in the area; can you end this? The frequency of lorries driving across the steppe is increasing and throwing up dust; please change this. This year, individuals are making too much hay for sale and not leaving enough pasture for animals; please end this. The governor is not doing his job and meeting locals; make him change. Wolf attacks are increasing; can you lift the ban on killing them? We need a dentist in our town; can you supply one? Can you install heating in our apartments? Can you lower the cost of electricity? Our school needs a roof! There was little talk of macroeconomics and mortgage loans; foreign investment and mining.

A pensioner in his 60s with a weathered face stood up and approached the microphone perched in the middle of the aisle. ‘Please, dear sirs [*ezenten*, literally ‘lords’],¹³⁶ please allow me this overbearing (*davarsan*) question, there are only a few *soum* in Mongolia that are still as remote as we are, so could you please nullify [*tegleh*, literally, ‘set to zero’] our herder loans and pension loans?’ A murmur of agreement in the room reflected the local growing awareness of the weight of bank debt on the shoulders of herding families, ex-farmers, pensioners and school teachers in the community.

The Prime Minister, however, didn’t agree with this popular sentiment. In his response, he emphasized that the payment of bank debt was an individual’s and not a government’s responsibility—‘Your loans are a contract between a private company and an individual person...we can’t pay them but we can lower the interest’. And then, alluding to recent protests he said,

‘We live in the kind of society where it is our base duty to work and labour for ourselves. In this way, if you ask what kind of support and aid the government can give you; we can free you from a tax; or if you need land, we can give it to you; or we can lower restrictions to access a government service. We can only do these kind of things. So, if your town’s citizens come up with your own

¹³⁶ Reflecting his belief that contemporary politicians should be human ‘masters’ (*ezed*) – see chapter 1

initiative and say we want to carry out this kind of plan, we can give you a discounted, low-interest loan. But I want to tell you, it has to come from you'.

The juxtaposition of the Prime Minister and the pensioner evince two conceptual clashes—the first being, as discussed in the previous chapters, the role of contemporary government in economics. According to his statements, the Prime Minister's vision of society mirrors the conceptualization of motivated citizen-subjects common to Western liberalism, and arguably, neoliberalism. Within his retelling, private business entities (banks), governments and individualized citizens are separate stakeholders on the economic playing field of the market. The government as sovereign has the responsibility to play overseer and maintain fairness (through legal regulation), but not to provide nor interfere. In contrast, the pensioner, Erdene, does not agree with this sentiment that the government should neither provide nor interfere. Almost exactly a year later, in September of 2017, I found myself sitting in Erdene's kitchen, while the Prime Minister he had beseeched was in the throes of an internal-parliamentary coup (later to be ousted). The subject of *tegleh* was still on Erdene's mind, as the recently elected President, who had ridden a popular wave into victory, had made a thinly-veiled promise to *tegleh* various loans during his election campaign.¹³⁷ I asked Erdene if he had been satisfied with the Prime Minister's answer a year before. No, he answered, the Prime Minister's answer was 'wrong', because the government has money and '...in To Van's time, the prince helped the people and vis versa, and that is why I asked the Prime Minister for help...The President and Prime Minister have that kind of obligation'. Indeed, the Prime Minister and Erdene differed in their conceptualization of the role of government—to Erdene, the government has the duty to govern the well-being of the citizenry, which, in this case, would constitute loan relief; whereas the Prime Minister envisions government as a regulatory mechanism and loan relief as interference in the market.

Yet, when examined at the existential level, the disagreement between Prime Minister and pensioner reflects diverging conceptualizations of indebted subjecthoods. Again, the Prime Minister opines, 'We live in the kind of society

¹³⁷ <http://time.mn/n/mih>

where it is our base duty to work and labour for ourselves'. In other words, the central unit of society is the individual self-reliant subject. Debt, by extension, comprises a contractual relationship with another individualized entity, the bank, and is characterized by reciprocal, transactional exchange. In contrast, I argue, Erdene does not see the Prime Minister (as sovereign) and himself (as citizen) as fundamentally separated individuals. Nor does he see the bank as private entity, but rather as a component of the state that should provide for the people. Within this vision, debt is an inherent aspect of mutual relations, because one's well-being is intertwined with the well-being of others. They thus maintain a fundamentally different understanding of the loan-receiving, indebted subject—the first, an individualized, separate citizen that enters into a temporary contractual exchange relationship; and the second, a socially and hierarchically-entangled subject, already indebted to society through its multiple relationships of family, friendship and community. In the first, the goal of debt is to get rid of it; in the second, there is always debt, only its form can change.

In consequence, this chapter is about how not all debts in Magtaal are the same. Both contemporary financial appraisals and ethnographic accounts have documented the staggering levels of debt in Mongolia on both a macro and micro level. As discussed in the previous chapters, this mounting financial pressure is altering the social and cultural landscape of Magtaal, because resources are being multiply extracted (and laws are being multiply broken) to finance these aggregating debts levels.

Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that one of the reasons this debt is exponentially exploding is because certain forms of financial debt are being distributed and shared within kin and friendship groups akin to a Buddhist-inflected 'economy of favours'. Indeed, I argue in this chapter that there are two conceptualizations of 'debt' at play in Magtaal—a spiritual conceptualization of original, shared debt, which I call 'social debt'; and the transactive, material conceptualization of debt, 'exchange-based debt', which is a narrative common to the reciprocal interchange of trade and finance. Consequently, these concepts of debt, manifested as 'loans' (*zeeᠡᠯ*), are being conflated and/or form a continuum of practice internally differentiated based on social distance and feelings of mutuality. For example, residents are taking out bank loans,

according to the understandings of finance, but distributing and sharing the proceeds among friends and family according to expectations of social obligation and mutual help. Consequently, similar to Empson's discussion of the 'temporary possession' of objects and land (Empson 2018b), debt itself is being passed out, distributed, shared and mutually navigated through social relations—debt itself is temporarily and generally possessed. In consequence, a huge factor contributing to the mounting financial debt levels in Magtaal is the indigenous treatment of 'debt' like a resource in generalized exchange of favours (possibly making it all the more insidious). Consequently, as levels of financial debt accrue, residents have responded, rather than default, by feeding it with natural resources (chapters 2 and 3) and mobilizing more and more local social relations (this chapter and chapter 5) to meet the ongoing pressure. Seen within this light, Erdene's insistence that debt constitutes the most pressing issue locally becomes compelling.

Historical networks of debt

The feeling of being embroiled in networks of 'generalized debt' (Pedersen 2017; Roitman 2003) is a common experiential signifier of the post-1990 Mongolian 'zah zeeliin üye' (Sneath 2002, 2012; Wheeler 2004) as indicated by the approving murmurs in the room on account of Erdene's question. On the macro level, a combination of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, government borrowing and overly optimistic mining boom prognoses has culminated in a government debt-to-GDP ratio approaching 90 percent (Bauer et al. 2017). Consequently, the Mongolian government's 'Debt Crisis' is a common trope in political agendas, international financial forecasts, business indicators and development discourse.¹³⁸ On the micro level, this narrative is mirrored by the creeping advance of household debt—between 2004 and 2018, household debt has statistically increased from under 10 to over 25 percent of household income.¹³⁹ This number, however, only calculates formal mortgage and consumer loans and cannot evaluate the preponderance of 'debts' that individuals distribute and tally amongst each other. In my experience of 10-

¹³⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/4055d944-78cd-11e6-a0c6-39e2633162d5>
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-02/19/c_136068612.htm

<https://www.ft.com/content/da18e1c0-6a72-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>

¹³⁹ <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/mongolia/household-debt--of-nominal-gdp>

months of debt research in Magtaal, I did not encounter a single household that did not labour under financial debt.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the ethnographic record evinces an increased societal awareness of, participation in and coping strategies surrounding mounting and looming financial debts. For example, both Sneath and Marin discuss how neoliberal political trajectories in the contemporary post-1990 ‘age of the market’ have led to the preponderance of bank credit that is transforming pastoral livelihoods (Marin 2008; Sneath 2012). From an urban standpoint, Pedersen discusses how the peri-urban landscape of Ulaanbaatar has increasingly encouraged debt-burdened individuals to flee their creditors by moving to new locations (2017). Sneath’s coinage of the term ‘regime of debt’ (2012) to describe the contemporary era is telling; being burdened by debt, involved in debt calculations, dependent on debt or fleeing debt has increasingly become an everyday reality for a majority of Mongolia’s population.

Contemporary historians, anthropologists and political commentators have often remarked that the current bourgeoning of financial debt is eerily similar in character to the propagation of Chinese moneylender debts in the Qing Manchu era (1644-1911) (Batsuuri 2016; Marin 2008; Sneath 2012; Wheeler 2004). For example, the word ‘*ör zeeᠯ*’ is a compound term for ‘indebtedness’ that links the word for debt, *ör*, and the word for loan, *zeeᠯ*, and carries over from this historical period. These two terms are often utilized in contemporary discourse to describe the experience of being in arrears; for example, residents talk about having loans (*ör zeeᠯtei*), ‘living from loan to loan’ (*zeeᠯees zeeᠯiin hoorond*) or of entering into ‘a network of debt’ (*öriin suljeend oroh, ör zeeᠯend oroh*).

Sechinchogt’s Mongolian Etymological Dictionary, based on 18th century sources, traces the historical origins of the word *ör* to the Mongolian classical script word *öri*, which means ‘something borrowed from others’ (1988). This definition is then followed by an adage frequently quoted to this day—‘if you are free of illness, you are rich; if you are free of debt, you are happy’—reflecting the historical experience, and anxiety towards, the inability to pay ‘what was borrowed’. The word *zeeᠯ*, in contrast, was originally two different words in

¹⁴⁰ Only singular individuals who tended to be older people who had been born and raised during the socialist era and had a philosophical aversion towards financial debt; most youth did not share this sentiment.

Mongolian traditional script; both most likely loan words from similar Chinese terms (Hyer & Jagchid 1979). In Chinese, for example, the word for ‘street’—commonly referring to an inner-city market street lined with shops—was ‘jiē’, which was assumed into Mongolian script as ‘jegeli’. In contrast, the Chinese word ‘jiè’ means ‘to borrow’ and is a generalized term for time-deferred exchange (i.e. borrowing, loaning, temporarily giving, etc.). This word was assumed into Mongolian as ‘jigeli’. In summary, the Chinese words for ‘market street’ (jiē) and ‘borrowing’ (jiè) were mongolized as ‘jegeli’ and ‘jigeli’, respectively (U. Ujeed, personal comm.; Sechinchogt 1988; Wheeler 2004). These two definitions were frequently conflated with one another; for example, Kowalewski’s 1844-9 Russian-Mongolian-French dictionary lists the word ‘jegeli’ (i.e. ‘market street’) with two definitions—1) street and also 2) debt, borrow (1964; Schmidt 1835). This conjoining and conflation¹⁴¹ most likely arose because of the spatial location (market streets) of Chinese moneylenders during the Qing who were engaged in credit-based trade with Mongols.¹⁴²

Consequently, the word for loan, *zeel*, can be traced to an amalgamative moment during the Qing Manchu era. This word has now, by far, become the most commonly used term in the contemporary era to describe the ongoing condition of indebtedness as a blanket term for diverse forms of formal and informal lending, borrowing and distribution. In addition to etymological inheritance, other aspects of the contemporary practices and distribution of *zeel* are reminiscent of previous historical epochs. For one, contemporary Mongolian actors often draw comparisons between the current burden of finance debts and the ubiquity of Qing-era moneylender debts (Batsuuri 2016). Indeed, one local historian and expert on To Van agreed with my musings that contemporary loan behaviour in Khalkhgol is similar to To Van’s time—‘Yes, we have inherited our loaning behaviour, it’s the same, only now no one is ordering us to take them’ (*örsdöö zeel avsan hen ch albadaagüi*). With this comment, the historian is

¹⁴¹ In fact, in To Van’s *Treatise* (1853), he admonishes the implementation of interest-based loans to pay off debts to the state, but, in doing so, he writes the compound ‘*ör zeel*’ using the ‘market’ (‘jegeli’) Mongolian script character for *zeel* (U. Ujeed, personal comm.).

¹⁴² For example, Pozdneev, a Russian academic who travelled through Mongolia in the 1890s, wrote of the Mai-mai-ch’ing trade settlement in Kovdo that ‘[t]he commercial part...consists of only three streets. The first main street [*yekhe dzeeli*] passes the whole length of the city...the second [*nariin dzeeli*]...is almost an unbroken row of commercial buildings’ (1971: 206). From his descriptions, we can discern that credit-based trade during the Manchu era was spatially located in market streets in Mai-mai-ch’ing (Chinese market towns) known as ‘*dzeeli*’ (i.e. *zeel*).

referring to the 19th-century need to accrue debts in order to pay off taxation duties to the Manchu sovereigns (discussed below). In contrast, he opines, contemporary actors are not directly stimulated by an authoritative force to accrue debts. Nevertheless, as will be depicted, Mongolian actors have historically often turned to complex networks of kin and relation to navigate and pay off these debts. Furthermore, these comparisons are additionally variegated by the literature on the 'economy of favours' (Alena Ledeneva 1998), which found expression in socialist-era Mongolia. This term was coined by Ledeneva in description of social networks of distribution of goods and services that emerged in Soviet centrally-planned economies in reaction to shortages. Consequently, in this section, I discuss the historical precedents of networks of distribution amongst kin and friends that have developed in reaction to scarcity of value produced by various systems—be it to access consumption items and specie during the Qing, goods and services during the socialist period and/or money in the contemporary market economy.

Living from loan to loan in the contemporary era

Degee's bakery, the only shop in Magtaal that sells fresh cakes, economically perseveres on the nexus of a plethora of different loan types all known as *zeel*. After being educated in Ulaanbaatar, Degee moved back to her hometown of Magtaal in 2010 and decided to try her hand at baking. She launched her business in 2011 through the funds of a government-subsidized small-business loan (*zeel*), which enabled her to buy a bread oven, a freezer and supplies. Finding success, she put her flat up at collateral in 2014 and received another bank loan to purchase a new shop location. Additionally, her family participates in various local goods and business transactions—her father-in-law supplies the local hospital and government facilities with meat, she makes the baked goods for the school lunches, and sells oriflame perfumes (from Mongolia to China) on the side. Nevertheless, when I first met Degee in December of 2016, she lamented that business was not good and the economic crisis had impacted her turnover. No one has any cash, she complained, so people always take things out on loan (*zeel/eer*). Indeed, in the course of living in Magtaal, I learned that all of the local stores, if they wished to continue business, had accommodated the

lack of local cash flow to accept purchases as an IOU i.e. as *zeel*. Residents, for example, that Degee considers 'reliable' (*naidvarta*)—in other words, are upstanding local citizens, who have a guaranteed cash flow and are likely to pay back—are allowed to open up tabs at her store while their cash flow is low.¹⁴³ Once their salary arrives, the intention is to return to the store and pay off the debt. Similarly, all the stores in town have messy debt ledgers where the diverse ongoing tabs, transactions, debts and loans are recorded and tallied. Despite her dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, Degee opines that she must accept *zeel*, because, if she didn't, residents would stop frequenting her store.

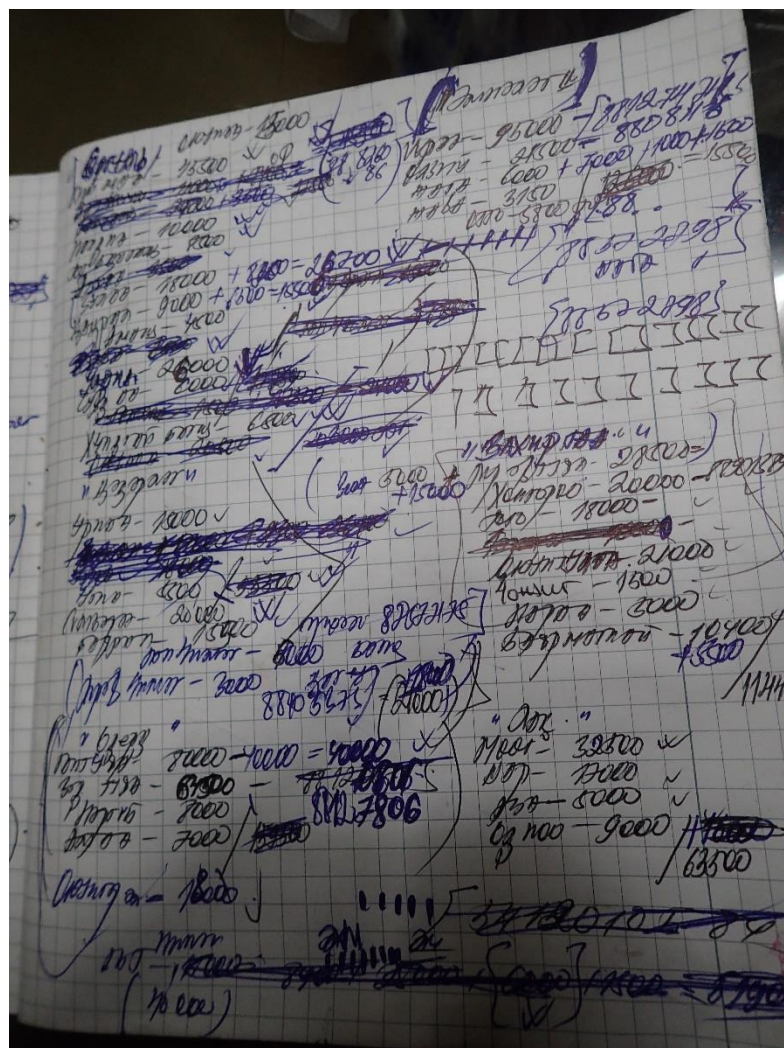


Figure 17: The messiness of this debt ledger from Degee's store mirrors the messiness of debt networks. Location terms like 'zahirga' (local government) and 'emneleg' (hospital) can be seen on the document indicating how Degee lumps and keeps track of the tabs of diverse residents who come to her for *zeel*.

¹⁴³ If the store owner doesn't know you well, they are likely to ask for a form of collateral guarantee like a government ID and/or a state welfare booklet.

Zeel, as time-deferred promises of repayment, have become the base economic *modus operandi* in Magtaal in lockstep with macroeconomic processes. On the micro level, this situation is most directly the result of residents living in a cash-based economy that, nevertheless, has few local options for cash access. Scaled out, however, this currency-focused yet currency-scarce local condition is traceable to post-1990 macroeconomic government policy. As discussed in the introduction, the post-1990 fledgling Mongolian government relied on the advice of International Monetary Fund (IMF) advisors and implemented ‘shock therapy’—a rapid programme of economic privatization and liberalization—designed to create markets and strengthen the economy (Rossabi 2005: 55–8, 105). The result, however, was that the government did not protect its industry nor infrastructure. Essentially, the contemporary Mongolian government is eternally strapped for cash and must regularly turn to foreign aid for emergency funds—i.e. the Mongolian government has received multi-million dollar cash injections (i.e. loans) from the IMF nine times since 1991.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ This ongoing indebtedness has also had an impact at the Magtaal level, because the government, under the rubric of privatization and austerity, has cut social services and bureaucratic pay and is often unable to pay out regularly.¹⁴⁶ In a poor area like Magtaal, these budget contractions combined with the lack of new infrastructure or accessible industry (ergo new sources of wage labour) has developed into a widespread dependence on bank debt.

¹⁴⁴ According to the IMF website, the Mongolian government received monetary aid as stand-by credit in 1991 (54 million USD); Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility loans in 1993, 1996, 1997 (15 million USD) and 1999 (28 million USD); a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility loan in 2001 (37 million USD); a Stand-By Arrangement loan in 2009 (229.2 million USD) and an Extended Fund Facility loan in 2017 (around 435 million USD). See <http://www.imf.org/en/Countries/MNG#countrydata>

¹⁴⁵ Not just the IMF is involved. According to a 2017 Reuters article, Mongolian also received a 5.5 billion bailout package from the IMF in 2017 and the previous three-year financial arrangement (in the same year) was carried out in combination with other partners like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, Japanese and South Korean governments. It also mentions a swap agreement worth 1.7 billion pounds with the People’s Bank of China. See <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mongolia-imf/imf-approves-5-5-billion-bailout-package-for-mongolia-idUKKBN18L0AC>

¹⁴⁶ According to regulation, families are entitled to 20,000 MNT per month per child, called ‘children’s money’, but this was irregularly paid out during my fieldwork in 2016 on account of the economic ‘crisis’ (<http://undesten.mn/11623.html>).

In consequence, all families and stores I lived with, encountered and frequented during my ten months of research in Magtaal economically persisted by living 'from loan to loan'. Increasingly, all stores in Magtaal, like Degee's, are opened and run through the funds from bank loans. Additionally, sans new forms of employment, shrinking government pay and disappearing welfare, residents become dependent on 'debt-fare'—i.e. bank loans become their source of funds for consumption, daily needs and living. This has resulted, as indicated by Degee's register, an ongoing, neverending rotation of debt at the local level. Residents often take out bank debt to open businesses or feed their families, but then are in a pinch when interest payments arise. In these moments, they often turn to diverse networks of friends, family and acquaintance for help—i.e. in the form of either reciprocal or non-reciprocal monetary payments based on social proximity. Often, families members will also go to the bank, receive funds, and give it to the entreating party, creating a rotation of bank debt, where, for example, bank debt is used to pay off bank debt. Although his model has been critiqued for the usage of the term 'reciprocity', Sahlins discusses how in close, small-scale settings—i.e. among 'kinsmen'—a system of economic 'generalized reciprocity' can result—i.e. a rotation of goods and services where individuals do not tally direct dues, but freely give and share with the tacit expectation that they will be helped by others should their need arise (1974: 194).¹⁴⁷ Borrowing this term, in a sense, there is a system of 'generalized reciprocity' of debt at the local Magtaal level, or, as Pedersen describes it, 'generalized debt' (2017). Residents, families and township members often perceive of themselves as living within close networks of kin and affinity, mutually labouring under a constant cash dearth, and therefore have the obligation to help one another. In this way, local concepts of help and assistance in mutual relations have overlapped with financial loans and debt, as diverse forms of financial debt are distributed and shared. The experiential signifier, living from loan to loan, thus describes the moment of waiting between cash influxes in a cash-scarce

¹⁴⁷ Additionally, Sahlins remarks that institutions of generalized reciprocity can involve 'pure gifts' and are often ethnographically described as expressions of 'sharing', 'hospitality', 'free gift', 'help' and 'generosity' (1974: 194). This is similar to the Magtaal context where 'loans' easily become non-reciprocal expressions of mutual help (*tus*).

economy that survives through a rotation of money that pays off interest and debts as it moves.

Becoming dependent on bank zee/

On a micro level, Magtaal residents mirror the state's growing indebtedness by turning to debt financing to maintain contemporary livelihoods through the post-1990 market fluctuations and crises. According to local residents, during the era of the local socialist agricultural state farm (1972-1990), income was plentiful, but goods were scarce. Consequently, the meaning of *zee/* as high-interest loan (from the Manchu era) fell away as moneylending and interest became taboo. Similar to 'economies of favours' in other Soviet contexts, *zee/*, during this period, became associated with goods and services accessed, distributed or borrowed through friendship and family networks (Humphrey 2012; Alena Ledeneva 1998; Pedersen 2011; Sneath 2012). In 1991, the property of the cooperative was distributed through a voucher system and ownership of the flats was transferred without cost to their occupants. The dwindling of state subsidies, the breakdown of infrastructure, and the lack of new large-scale industry and job options individualized economic risk—residents of Magtaal had no choice but to turn to self-reliant, entrepreneurial occupations in the post-1990 era. As discussed in chapter 3, Magtaal citizens economically survived the 'shock therapy' between 1991 and 94 by salvaging metal from the former infrastructure (incl. flats) and selling it piecemeal to Chinese traders. Amongst each other, residents bartered with flour, meat, foraged berries and clothing. When the border to China opened in 1994/5,¹⁴⁸ other residents (mostly female) started engaging in trade arbitrage—they would travel to China, buy in bulk at low prices, come back to Magtaal and sell at a higher price. These 'suitcase traders' (*ganzagany naimaa*)—because they literally carried their goods in a suitcase—would set up tiny stalls in Magtaal (TÜZ) or 'bargaining stores' (*tohiroltsoonii delgüürüüd*) in their homes. Because inflation remained high and the supply of cash money was limited, residents recall this period as plentiful in new goods, but lacking in cash to buy them (the opposite of the Soviet collective period). The meaning of *zee/* slowly changed with these circumstances—

¹⁴⁸ The Tsogt border crossing opened in 1992, but was only accessible to civilians starting in 1994/5.

'bargaining stores' allowed locals to purchase goods on loan (*zee/*) by negotiating the cost (with goods and money) and paying back at a later date. In this way, the meaning of *zee/* started to adapt with the influx of consumption items, and shifted from generalized borrowing to time-deferred repayment (albeit with known social contacts in the township and not with strangers). *Zee/* emerged as a means to navigate consumption desires despite low or irregular cash access. However, these store-based *zee/* were limited to single items and did not include concepts like collateral and interest.

The arrival of financial banking in Magtaal reintroduced the concepts of collateral and interest to the term *zee/*. Since the founding of the first Agricultural Bank branch in Bayant in 1998, later to become Khan Bank,¹⁴⁹ the term *zee/* is most often associated with the mechanisms of bank loans including collateral and interest expectations. When banks first entered the community, inflation was high and cash money was rare. Bank loans offered residents the first chance to engage with the consumption and entrepreneurial dreams of the contemporary era by offering large sums of cash. In order to do so, however, residents learned to collateralize the assets they had inherited from the dissolution of the state farm. In fact, in contrast to Dalai (chapter 2), Magtaal citizens at the beginning of the 90s had no cash, little food, but many had flats. When the state farm was dissolved in 1990, the ownership of the flats in the living complexes built for cooperative worker was automatically transferred, without cost, to the worker occupants of those flats. Additionally, the breakdown of universal employment had contributed to the rise of entrepreneurship as new occupational option (Lacaze 2010, 2012; Pedersen 2002). In Bayant, many residents used this automatic and free collateral resource to receive funds for new entrepreneurial businesses. For example, Chimgee is the owner of a small goods store, which she built up through repeatedly using her flat as collateral to

¹⁴⁹ In 1991, the new Mongolian government passed a law that established the burgeoning banking system, which created the Mongolian Central Bank and privatized previous state banking activities (Namjim 2004b: 884). The 'Agricultural Bank' emerged from the branch of socialist state activities that had focused on agricultural promotion. It inherited 337 banking locations across Mongolia and remains the rurally most active Mongolian banking institution. The Agricultural Bank was plagued by insolvency between 1995 and 1999, was repurchased by the government and then purchased by an American businessman (with the help of donor funding) in 2000 (Lamberte et al. 2006: 166). In the same year, it was relaunched as Haan Bank. In 2003, it was purchased by a Mongolian-Japanese consortium (Addleton 2013: 75–8).

receive loans for her business. Nevertheless, she laments that flats and bank loans have become intertwined with one another:

The only way to get [a flat] is through a bank loan. Yeah, like my family's flat, even rundown, is worth twelve million. And so, do youth have the purchasing ability to get one of those? Only people with jobs can get loans. So youth understand this flat problem as part of the economic crisis.

In Chimgee's case, she laments that younger individuals cannot access loans, because there are no new flats being built—the resource has been exhausted and is limited. In this way, many of the financial loans in Magtaal rely on 'salvage accumulation' (chapter 3) of one sort or another—they collateralized remnants—i.e. flats, pensions, socialism-created jobs—of the socialist era for contemporary bank loans. For example, over 600 local residents, as of 2017, remain on the 'government's payroll' (*tösviin ajilchid*) in the military and hospital facilities. Elders like Erdene and Toogii (mentioned below) continue to receive pensions from their service during the Soviet collective. Thus, loans were readily integrated into the Magtaal context, because everyone had a potential source of capital to collateralize—today, the most common loans are 'salary loans' that use state salaries as collateral; 'pension loans' that use state pensions as collateral; and 'small-business loans' that use the (formally state) flats as collateral. Consequently, most residents took out their first loans from the bank, because they had a ready form of collateral and the desire to start entrepreneurial businesses.

Figure 18: The chart of common bank *zeel*

Type	Collateral form	Amount of loan	Length of loan	Interest amount (annually)	Additional
Mortgage loan (<i>Ipotyekiin zeel</i>)	Two guarantors; the property itself; 20-percent up-front payment	The worth of the property minus 20 percent; local example was 24 million ₮	Dependent on amount; often 10-20 years	8 percent	A government plan that offered 5-percent mortgage loans was offered during my fieldwork in 2016

Salary loan (<i>Tsalingiin zeel</i>)	A government-guaranteed regular salary	Dependent on salary; local examples around 6 to 10 million ₮	2 to 3 years (in praxis)	18 to 20 percent	In praxis, this loan is often extended after a few months of paying off to receive additional funds; most common loan in Magtaal
Consumption Loan (<i>Heregleenii zeel</i>)	Varies; mostly flat	Based on value of collateral; local example was 5 million ₮	2 years	30 percent	Second most common loan in Magtaal, because flats (which have an average value around 12 to 15 million) can be used as collateral
Pension loan (<i>Tetgeveriin zeel</i>)	A government-guaranteed regular pension	Varies; local example was 6 million ₮	1 year (in praxis, also 2 years)	18 percent	Can be extended
Government-led small-business loan (<i>Tösöliin zeel</i> or <i>Jijig üildveriin zeel</i>)	Varies; local example was flat	Varies; local examples were 5 to 20 million ₮	3 years	1 percent	A government-led programme for small businesses ¹⁵⁰
Bank-led small-business loan (<i>Biznyesiin zeel</i>)	Varies; local example was almost always flats	Based on application; local examples range from 7 to 20 million ₮ (one outlier store had 50 million loan)	2 years	Around 25 percent	
Herder loan (<i>Malchny zeel</i>)	Animal herd	Based on herd size; local examples ranged from 2.5 to 6 million ₮	1 year (sometimes 1.5)	24-30 percent	Can get 15 percent at government bank with proven track record
Savings loan (<i>Hadgalamj bar'tsaalsan zeel</i>)	Welfare; savings; often, locally, the government allocated 'children's money'	Based on savings/welfare amount; local example was 1 million ₮	Based on savings/welfare type	6 percent	Often resorted to locally when in a pinch or very poor; usually small amounts

¹⁵⁰ I also encountered another form of government-led small-business loaning programme with no interest on first two years of payment and nine percent interest only on third year—8,000,000 loan over three years with nine percent interest (720,000) on last year.

Contrary to the idealized short-term nature of bank loans, residents often become locked in cycles of ongoing bank dependence through the vagaries of the economy and circumstance. For example, Toogii, another store owner, decided to take out her first loan in the early 2000s to improve her family's economic chances. Having been a photographer during the socialist state farm, Toogii decided to become self-sufficient in the early 90s and took up baking to support her family and put her children through college. With the arrival of the bank, Toogii was able to secure a government-subsidized small-business loan using the flat as collateral. By 2008, Toogii fondly recalls, her business was booming and profitable through the sale of over 40 loaves of fresh bread every other day. She was able to pay back her first bank loan. Yet, in 2012, the Mongolian economy underwent an economic slowdown from the slump in global coal commodity prices. This economic 'crisis' (*hyamral*)¹⁵¹ was felt in Magtaal (in 2013) through the further drying up of cash—the lack of tourists and the dropping value of the MNT vis-à-vis the CNY meant that cash money once again became a rarity.¹⁵² Toogii's business return dropped significantly in this period, and she decided to expand her business once more in order to navigate the slump. In order to do so, Toogii (again) put her flat (including the store in it) up as collateral and received a loan in May of 2015. Yet, regrettably, a few months later, her husband had a stroke. Strapped for cash for medicine and back interest payments, Toogii got a 'pension loan' (*tetgeveriin zee!*): a bank option that collateralized their pension money and allowed Toogii to receive an 'advance' on their pensions. Until the pension amount with interest was paid off, Toogii would not receive any new pension payments. Toogii's mounting bank debt post-1990 is thus the result of a series of crises in her life—a political crisis, an economic crisis and a health crisis—which have been resolved through the further accrual of bank debt.

¹⁵¹ As declared by the Mongolian government; see Bonilla 2016.

¹⁵² The remote location of Magtaal and its proximity to the border means that residents more cheaply and conveniently buy their consumption goods from the Chinese city on the other side of the border, Tümenjargal (approximately 60 kilometres away), than by traveling the 360 kilometres over unpaved road to the province centre of Choibalsan. The economic crisis meant that Magtaal residents suddenly had to spend more to buy their consumption items—either because their currency dropped in value in China, or because they now had to spend more to travel to Choibalsan to buy goods at higher prices. Either way, local prices skyrocketed as more currency was needed to maintain standards of living. Excess cash was thus perceived as non-existent.

Finally, the rollback of government presence increasingly means that (in particular, poor) residents rely on the private sector, the economic wellspring of banks, to provide funds for daily consumption and the everyday negotiation of economic waves and troughs. As discussed, the ongoing indebtedness of the public sector on foreign debt has translated into the curtailment of social services and welfare on the grassroots level. In a sense, the Prime Minister's insistence that government be the guarantor, and not provider, of economic respite finds new expression in bank loans—poor residents, in particular, use government secured assets, like welfare and pensions, to secure bank loans, but these government assets are rarely enough to pay off those loans; any exigency locks the debtor into semi-permanent bank debt. In a sense, the government becomes the guarantor for loans, but the provider (and interest extractor) is the private sector. Magtaal is not singular in this circumstance: diverse anthropologists have discussed how the expansion of private credit into poorer communities has 'banked the unbanked' (James 2015)—i.e. incorporated communities into the finance sector that previously were unintegrated—contributing to their reliance on 'debt-fare' instead of 'welfare' (Soederberg 2014). Often, as discussed by Kar in the case of government-backed microfinance in India (2018), the ongoing reliance of poorer communities on finance debt is economically profitable for providers (like banks) over time—i.e. there is little incentive to help the poor out of 'debt-fare'. By extension, a feature of debt in low-income settings (like Magtaal) are intricate calculations—i.e. variegated 'financial portfolios' (Durst 2015), the 'juggling of debts' (Guérin 2014) that drive people 'deeper into a hole' (James 2014)—that poorer residents often engage in to navigate accruing, ongoing bank debt. When I e.g. ask Toogii how she pays off her various loans, she evinces careful calculation—I pay the first loan off with the turnover from the store, and the second with our pensions, and if I can't pay off the first loan, I extend the second one to pay off the first. It sounds exasperating, I tell her, and she responds with the often-repeated truism—'we are living from loan to loan, paycheck to paycheck' (*zeeleec zeeliin hoorond, tsalingaas tsalingiin hoorond*). Most Magtaal residents never feel that their income or savings are enough, but that they live from temporary injections or flows of money—i.e. a bank loan paid here, a salary loan received there, a kinship loan paid here, etc.—that rotate in

and out of their lives. 'Living from loan to loan' reflects local residents' experience of livelihoods of permanent insolvency that are only temporarily navigable through punctuated influxes of cash from the social infrastructure of the township.

Historical precedents of indebtedness

The contemporary propensity to engage in networks of complex indebtedness can be compared to corollaries throughout the last 200 years in Mongolia. For one, Sneath compares the contemporary 'new regime of debt' associated with post-1990 market democracy with the 'old regime of debt' of the pre-socialist Manchu era (2012). During this period, contemporary Outer Mongolia was a protectorate under the suzerainty of the Beijing-based Qing Empire and, as such, was economically remotely controlled and isolated. Outer Mongolia was formally independent, but practically administered by Qing-chosen imperial residents (*amban*), who further delegated direct administration of local areas to Manchu-chosen Mongolian aristocratic lineages (Bawden 1968). The Manchu believed that Mongolia and its economy should be isolated, in order to facilitate the unfettered reproduction of its true source of ultimate value—animals, incl. horses (for cavalry). By extension, the Manchu consolidated its power over the Outer Mongolian territories through two requirements—demanding annual corvee labour for relay post stations, military duties; as well as tribute taxes officially paid in the form of animals¹⁵³ to the Manchu overlords. This economic emphasis on pastoralism had the effect, however, of creating a very one-sided economy—a system that had the goal of accumulating wealth in the store of animals (to subsist off of or be turned into tribute payments). As a result, Sanjdorj surmises that this one-sided, pastoralist-based economy led to a concrete economic demand for, and interest in, exchanging livestock and livestock products for the farm and handicraft products of neighbouring countries (1980: 3).

When the first Chinese traders entered Mongolia in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they were enthusiastically (and lucratively) received, because their

¹⁵³ This was because the Manchu idealized animals as the natural wealth form of the Mongol territories and it was prescribed into law. In fact, To Van often defied these laws by taxing his populace in the form of silver, which was considered exploitative according to Manchu regulation and was a point of contention in the claims brought by the populace against him.

trading patterns accommodated the lack of local wealth. Chinese trade in Mongolia was credit-based from the beginning (Sanjdorj 1980: 42), because Mongolian herders, also on account of Manchu directives, had little access to specie. Although moneylender debts from Chinese trading houses (*puuz*) were calculated in units of silver,¹⁵⁴ herders actively repaid them in animal-sourced products. Additionally, the concept of credit, as time-deferred repayment, was amenable to herder livelihoods, because they dealt in temporally-dependent animals products (like meat, wools and furs) that peaked at certain times of the year. Consequently, Mongolians needed to unload these products quickly and at specific seasonal intervals (Bawden 1968: 98). In contrast to this seasonal commodity availability, Mongolians desired semi-luxury foods, tea and tobacco at regular intervals throughout the year. According to Namjim, large trading houses emerged that all had similar services designed to accommodate the discrepancy between wealth options, temporalities and desires—they traded in widely consumed wares like flour, tea, tobacco, silk, cloth, saddles, and cultural goods, and they accepted animal products like sheep, leather, wool and skins (Bawden 1968: 94; Namjim 2004a: 193). However, the interest rates on these trades were often phenomenal and took advantage of Mongolians' lack of specie. By 1924, nearly half the value of all the livestock in the country was embroiled in Chinese moneylender loans (Onon & Pritchatt 1989: 4).¹⁵⁵

Fascinatingly, the pervasiveness of moneylender loans often resulted in the mobilization of diverse networks of kin and relation to pay them off. Dear, for example, claims that '...the extent of [moneylender] debt was made possible because debt was not always taken on individually, it could be acquired by the head of a banner and then distributed, and debt could also be inherited across generations' (Dear 2017). Debt, generally, lacked a sense of individual responsibility, which is made clear through the widespread sharing and

¹⁵⁴ The common term for a unit of silver at the time was a 'lan'. The weight measurement of *lan* was not always standardized—there were e.g. 'heavy' (*hund*), 'medium' (*dund*) and 'light' (*hōngōn*) versions that also differed based on area—but is now commonly considered to measure around thirty-seven grams. Nevertheless, *lan* were divided into decimal units—1 *lan* was 10 *tsen*, 1 *tsen* was 10 *pfun* and 1 *pfun* was 10 *li* (Bogolepov & Sobolew 2011: 206). The non-uniformity of these units likely allowed the further smudging and manipulation of units in the interest of moneylenders.

¹⁵⁵ Luckily for Mongolia, the political changeover to the socialist Mongolian People's Republic in 1924 wiped the financial slates clean.

distribution of debts that went on in the period. In her PhD dissertation, Dear tells the story of an elite in *Tüsheet Khan aimag*, Wang Unserbasar (2014). He had taken out debt in 1830 in order to finance his consumption desires, which he had distributed among the members of his banner. She notes that he fails to see this as unjust and describes this behaviour as ‘...following the old laws, families from within the aimag and soldiers and soldiers and officials themselves divided up the terms among all the men of the banner’ (2014: 208). Because the debt was large, it was further divided among minor aristocracy in other banners. However, when a famine hit many of the areas carrying Unserbasar’s debt ‘[w]hat followed was a complicated transfer of resources...demonstrating the long-distance networks available to some Mongolians’ (209). Relatives in Khovd, soldiers in Altai and Uliyastai, lamas in temples in Doloon Nuur, and more were called upon to put up capital for Wang Unserbasar’s debts. In summary, debt was often shared and distributed within relational networks, likely because it was not perceived as individual burden but as mutual obligation.

In addition to dispersal among relations of kin, Mongolians would substitute for one another in the payment of debts. According to Sanjdorj, payment by substitution ‘...refers to making others take the responsibility for any private or official debts which anyone owed’ (1980: 54). This meant that not only did debts transfer to the children of deceased debtors (Pozdneev 1971), but that the relatives and sometimes the *soum*, banner and/or even the entire province would pay for a defaulting debtors’ debts. In 1881, the office of the Khevei Amban ordered ‘...If the ruling prince [of a banner] cannot govern his subjects properly and allows them to get into debt, the debts of those who become poor or die should be paid by the ruling prince and high-ranking officials’ (Sanjdorj 1980: 57). According to Sanjdorj, this missive gave official approval to the practice of paying by substitution, because by saying that the prince had to pay essentially meant that all subjects of a banner would have to pay (through the taxation from the prince) (57). Accordingly, if an individual couldn’t pay and a trader complained, the office of the seal (amban) would first ask why the debt had been incurred. If it had been public, it would be paid immediately. If private, the office would ask the relatives to pay, and if they couldn’t, the banner paid.

Frequently, then, the debtor would have to wear a cangue as punishment (57). These examples depict a historical ideal or official approval of debt-burden distribution through diverse networks of kin, affinity and authority.

Of course, historical ideals were likely not always fulfilled in practice. Indeed, as the example of 'difficult' To Van evinces (appendix A), elites likely did not always live up to the ideals of distribution, contributing to unrest that ultimately destabilized the Manchu order (Bawden 1968; Sanjdorj 1980; Sneath 2012). Nevertheless, these historical discussions reveal two systemic corollaries with the contemporary era pertinent to our analysis—first, Qing-era vassals often experienced a scarcity of wealth that was navigated through the accrual of debts (for consumption or taxation); and, secondly, these diverse debts were often (ideally) navigated through the mobilization of obligation between close relations of kin, affinity and banner.

The socialist-era economy of favours

Although different in tenor, the everyday economic lives of citizens in the Mongolian People's Republic (1924-1990) were also delineated by sentiments of scarcity and social networks of distribution. Later post-socialist ethnographic studies have often characterized the social channels of access to goods and services pervasive during the Mongolian socialist era to be consonant with other studies on the 'economy of favours' common to Soviet contexts (Humphrey 2012, 2017). The term 'economy of favours' was coined by Ledeneva in her analysis of the emergence and proliferation of social networks of 'blat', or acquaintanceship, that Soviet actors often cultivated and mobilized in order to access basic goods and services within the Soviet Union (1998). Officially, according to Ledeneva, Soviet citizens were entitled without cost to many basic goods and services, which were ideally distributed through a centrally-organized administrative system. In practice, however, the economic system of the Soviet Union was often besieged by shortages, which engendered extensive formal queues and wait times. As a result, Ledeneva describes, that latter Soviet period (1960 onward) was marked by an upsurge in the usage of social, unofficial, 'unformed' blat networks as Soviet persons grew frustrated with the perceived inefficiencies of the centrally-regulated system. The term 'economy of

favours' thus refers to practices of mobilizing unofficial, social networks of kin and affinity to gain access to valued items within conditions of formal scarcity.

Ledeneva specifically elevates the term 'favour' in her coinage to emphasize the instrumentally-ambiguous, social flavour of these economic behaviours (1998; 2017). Although an 'economy of favours' undoubtedly plays a functional role in allowing access to scarce goods within a larger economy of shortage, Ledeneva multiply emphasizes that such an economy is undergirded by an ethics of social personhood—a moral conduct of giving 'help' to friends (1998: 33–38). For example, in the 'economy of favours', Soviet citizens often opened up friendly relations with different individuals by offering small gifts or doing various favours—e.g. helping with cooking, gifting a rare item, providing access to bus tickets, enabling a coveted international trip, obtaining useful insider information, etc.—which could hypothetically be answered with similar favours from the recipient. However, Ledeneva notes, this was not always the case, and individuals were often motivated by a desire to be socially-recognized as a helpful, giving person, which could or could not engender recompense. She thus argues that a central feature of 'favours' is their inherent ambiguity—they are ambivalent in form, type or size, dependent on the organic relations and circumstances between individuals and can be either instrumental, socially-motivated, or both, concurrently (2017). The proliferation of these ambiguous favours granted this economic modality its moral power—often, individuals could become entangled in networks of favours that were ostensibly non-instrumental, but, through ongoing maintenance in diverse transfers of favour, served to materially uphold local livelihoods. Additionally, although these favours likely undermined the viability of the Soviet distribution system, individuals largely felt morally justified in executing favours in the name of mutual help.

Within Magtaal, specifically, the state farm's boom period (1980s) was likely locally experienced in a manner akin to Ledeneva's 'economy of favours'. In recollecting the past, contemporary Magtaal residents often remark how, in stark contrast to the contemporary period, the era was experienced through an abundance of money and a scarcity of goods. According to Baatar's mother, who was the head of the local school during the 1980s, all workers in the state

farm (ergo all Magtaal residents) received a similar salary between 300 and 500 MNT per month. This salary was comparably higher than other areas, because Magtaal's remote location provided them with an extra 20-percent salary bonus under the socialist system. With this salary, residents were able to purchase their basic goods from the state store. However, the salary was excessive—for one, the goods of the state store were subsidized and cheap and, secondly, often irregularly available. Baatar's mother, for example, recalls that one bread cost 1.2 MNT, a kilo of sugar cost 4 MNT, a kilo of apples were 5 MNT and a flight to Ulaanbaatar cost 1,000 MNT. Because everyone had more money than goods available, Baatar's mother reminisces, money had little value.

In contrast, rare or unavailable goods were highly prized. Residents often gifted one another with goods they had access to, which often resulted in patron/client-esque formations. For example, Baatar's mother, as the head of the school, often utilized her position to 'help' her teachers with access to bus tickets or school rations. Additionally, Ledeneva notes that the 'theft of fuel'—where Soviet drivers would systematically falsify their fuel consumption and then distribute the surplus within their routine *blat* channels—was a well-known and widespread occurrence within the 'economy of favours' (1998: 48).

Similarly, Magtaal residents e.g. distributed fuel within their friendship networks unofficially obtained from the state farm's garage. In total, however, and possibly in contrast to other post-Soviet settings, Magtaal residents often emphasized the comfort of provisioning they experienced during the state farm. Although, as Baatar's mother opines, their culinary choices weren't as variegated as they are now (often limited to e.g. sugar on bread), they did not want for basic goods (likely because of the relative luxury of Magtaal's state farm). Additionally, in line with Ledeneva's discussion of the morality of favours and previous discussions of the 'inclusivity' of the state farm (chapter 1), residents felt largely entitled to these goods as workers in the socialist system.

Combined, however, these adumbrated discussions of local economic behaviours during the Manchu pre-socialist and socialist periods reflect the historical centrality of networks to navigate systemic vagaries. During the Manchu era, residents often experienced a lack of convertible wealth and

turned to moneylenders to access desired goods. As evinced, diverse forms of networks underpinned by sentiments of obligation were utilized to pay back these loans. In contrast, during the state farm period, Magtaal residents experienced a dearth of goods and utilized networks undergirded by an ethics of help to access rare items. Contemporarily, shortages of cash are similarly being navigated through networks that open both access of further cash and/or allow the repayment of loans reflecting commonalities with both pre-socialist and socialist economic behaviours. Rather than simplify contemporary behaviours to historical continuity, however, in the following I analyse the concept of *zee/* as economic expression of social personhood (already intimated in the discussion of the 'economy of favours').

A moral continuum of zee/

In May of 2016, I sat with Baatar in the kitchen of his Soviet-era flat as he bent over the table, scribbling calculations on a napkin. Earlier that month, the outgoing ruling party in the Mongolian parliament had nationally announced a newly-discounted, 5-percent-interest, government-arbitrated bank mortgage scheme, which was the instigator of Baatar's flurry of calculations. According to the same party's previous 8-percent mortgage plan, successful applicants could purchase flats by paying 20 percent of the cost of the flat up front, while the government covered the rest to be paid back at an 8-percent interest rate. In 2013, Baatar and his wife, Tsend, had had their second child and believed their children stood a better chance of receiving quality education if they moved to the nearest urban centre. Even though they lived in Magtaal, Baatar and Tsend decided to make use of the 8-percent mortgage scheme and purchase a flat in the urban centre in preparation of a potential future move. Purchasing a two-room flat for thirty million MNT in 2013, Baatar and Tsend paid six million MNT up front with a contractual agreement to pay the remaining 24 million (plus 8-percent interest) over the course of the next twenty years. Three years later, however, I moved in with Baatar and Tsend into their original Magtaal-based flat, while the flat in the urban centre remained empty and unused, the physical manifestation of mortgaged, unrealized dreams for a better future. Desiring to make some money back from this botched situation, Baatar hoped to be able to

reduce the mortgage rate on their current loan from the previous 8-percent rate to the newly announced 5-percent one.

The reason why Baatar and Tsend have not been able to enjoy the material fruits of this mortgage loan is that they, like the majority of residents of their remote township of Magtaal, are deeply implicated and intertwined in a series of ongoing bank loans and financial debts—a plethora of *zeel*. For example, at the time of receiving the original 8-percent mortgage loan, Baatar and Tsend had relatively well-situated jobs: Baatar was a teacher in the local school and Tsend worked in the local museum. Like most Magtaal residents, they had no savings to pay for the down payment of the flat. So, in order to gather together the money for the down payment, Tsend, who made 450,000 MNT a month, went to the bank and used her salary as collateral to receive a large lump sum of money. For the next three years, she would only receive 70,000 MNT a month in salary, while the remaining 380,000 would be deducted each month to pay off the loan on her salary. Baatar, for his part, was required to pay 140,000 MNT every month for twenty years for the ongoing mortgage loan, which was financially tenable until Baatar lost his job shortly after. In the wake of this setback, Baatar and Tsend never made the move to the urban centre, because their choice to purchase a flat through the 8-percent mortgage plan had resulted in a further salary loan and a small-business loan to navigate the monthly interest payments. As a result of this situation, Baatar and Tsend couldn't afford a period of joblessness due to the ongoing entanglement of their salaries in bank loan payments.

Within this setting, we sat in our joint kitchen in May of 2016 while Baatar planned his course of action to reduce their interest rate from 8 to 5 percent. He calculated that they could earn back over seven million MNT if they made this switch. However, there were several hitches in his plan. For one, the new rate required the debtor household to pay 30-percent up front (as opposed to the original 20 percent), which Baatar and Tsend were now 1,800,000 MNT short of. Secondly, because Baatar no longer had his government-secured job in the school, he could no longer, according to regulations, be the chief loan holder on the mortgage loan. They needed to find a second person who did not have an ongoing loan to sign off as a guarantor for payment. 'A person without a loan??'

he cursed his luck. 'A loan-less person doesn't exist in Mongolia anymore!' he emphasized to draw attention to the perceived unrealistic demands of the formal bank system. Upon much contemplation, he decided that his best chance was to pay off his mother's salary loan (which was near completion) and have her sign off as guarantor.

What followed was a complex transfer of resources and assets. Baatar had a close friend who was the owner of a store and known to give out short-term, high-interest loans. Only last year, Baatar had already received a loan from her (without interest) and had paid back promptly. In addition, he fixed her computer for her several times for free. As a result, Baatar called up his friend, and she transferred a few 100,000 MNT to him without expectation of return. A form of 'help' (*tus*) for a friend, he told me later. With this money, he went to the bank and paid off his mother's pension loan. At the same time, Tsend, whose salary loan was close to the three-year completion date, went back to the bank and extended her loan—she took out more money, which pushed the end date of the loan back another year. With the paperwork from paying off his mother's loan (so she could act as guarantor), and the money from Tsend's newly-extended loan, Baatar hopped on a bus to the urban centre and saved his family seven million MNT.

Although chaotic and intricate, this punctuated flurry of *zeel* activity—often to overcome bank restrictions and keep the flow of monies open—is a common occurrence in Magtaal. Within my time there, I sometimes found myself literally running with informants from one household to another, trying to scrounge up monies before the bank closed at five in the evening. Indeed, the complex transfer of resources that Baatar undertook—interestingly, in Mongolian, all subsumed under the term *zeel*—happens at least once a month for most families and often every time a bank requires an interest payment. In this example with Baatar, three actions had to happen to reach the stated goal. First, a transfer of monies happened between close friends, which is often called, in praxis, a *zeel* if the money is intended to be returned. However, in Baatar's case, his friend gave him money without condition and thus he labelled it a form of 'help'. Secondly, her mother offered her reputation as a guarantor and, thirdly, his wife had to get a bank *zeel* to gather the money for the

mortgage loan. As a result, this section is about how a plethora of economic activities happen at the grassroots level in Magtaal that are all subsumed under a common term, *zeel*, yet are internally differentiated based on concepts of social proximity and affinity.

Zeel from gift to commodity

After this event with Baatar, where I witnessed multiple forms of transactions get variously subsumed under the terms *ör*, debt, and *zeel*, loan, I became confused as to their exact indigenous meaning. As discussed above, the Mongolian compound term, *ör zeel*, which links the words for debt and loans, is an amalgamation that generally means ‘in arrears’. The compound ‘*ör zeel*’ is often translated (seemingly) uncomplicatedly into English as the popular dyad credit/debt, which supposes the credit is ‘beneficial and liberating’ and debt is ‘burdensome and imprisoning’ (Peebles 2010: 226). However, upon closer inspection, I learned that both the terms *ör* and *zeel* are internally differentiated based on the social proximity of the actors involved in the interaction; not all *ör* and *zeel* are the same. *Ör* can mean the transactional, calculated debts you owe to the bank, or a feeling of non-quantified indebtedness one has vis-à-vis close friends and relatives, especially when they have helped you out in a time of need. *Zeel* can mean the transactional, quantified relationship one has with a bank, but it also can be internally segmented into types of *zeel*. For example, events like Baatar’s mortgage drama often evince various types of *zeel*. Within Magtaal, individuals in very close relation often provide funds to each other without expectation of return or condition. If the exchange is one-directional, as was the case with Baatar’s friend, it is labelled ‘help’, but if reciprocal, it is called a ‘*zeel*’. Individuals that are not in close relation—i.e. acquaintances—will provide money, but with stipulations of either timely return or interest. This is also called ‘*zeel*’. Finally, relations with the bank—i.e. a formal institution—are largely instrumental interactions and are thus governed by strict restrictions—like collateral, interest and timely return. This is also called *zeel*. Consequently, both the terms *ör* and *zeel* gloss over internal differentiation, and seem to embody a spectrum from gifts—*zeel* effected to build social relations—to commodities—*zeel* performed to maximize economic self-interest. **The conceptualization of economic transfers in terms of gifts is often attributed to**

Marcel Mauss' seminal contribution to the field of anthropology. In 1925, Mauss wrote his classic work 'The Gift' in an attempt to ascertain why individuals who have been granted a gift (and thereby incur a debt) often feel compelled to return the favour (thereby rectifying this debt) (1993 [1925]). In order to examine this theoretical question, Mauss presented examples of competitive exchange systems that were undergirded, on the individual level, by a series of one-directional transfers that, on the whole, comprised functioning systems of exchange—e.g. the circulation of kula valuables amongst Melanesian chiefs and/or the series of gift exchanges instigated by Native American potlatches. In writing this book, Mauss aimed to counter the dominant Hobbesian political narrative of the time, which presupposed that humans were inherently instrumental and must be united in submission through the social contract with the sovereign. Instead, Mauss opined, these examples of 'gift exchange' reveal that humans sans states were equally capable of forging social contracts that were, in contrast to envisionings of Western society, buttressed by sociality and conviviality. Mauss' work was thus revolutionary in its political agenda, but also for its novel treatment of ethnographic material on indigenous economic systems. As a result, *The Gift* has easily become one of the most influential economic anthropological texts by inspiring generations of analysis on cross-cultural manifestations of and motivations for economic behaviours.

In this vein, later theorists, cogitating on Mauss' elucidation of gift-based economic systems, were inspired to discover its antithesis—the commodity. As discussed, Mauss himself was interested in using *The Gift* to draw a fundamental distinction between the types of social contract found within Western and non-Western societies. Inspired by this line of thought, later theorists comprised dualistic categories that divided societies along a trajectory from a non-Western 'gift exchange' to the Western 'commodity exchange' types (Gregory 2015 [1980]; Strathern 1988). According to Gregory, for example, who wrote in 1980, 'gift economies' were economic systems where exchange 'establishes a relation between the transactors' (2015 [1980]: 40), whereas commodity exchange, in contrast, 'establishes a relation between the objects transacted' (40). In contrast, the commodity type was associated with the tenets of neoclassical economic philosophy that posited humans as self-interested,

individual, socially-separated actors who engaged in trade to advance their self-interest.

On first glance, the *zee/*-distributing behaviours of Magtaal residents could thus be interpreted as intimating the gift/commodity distinction. For one, the Prime Minister's refusal to nullify the debt of bank loans at the beginning of this chapter are justified in terms of economic contract between individuals and banks. According to this logic, the *zee/* interactions between private persons and banks are enacted in order to maximize the participants' economic needs—both the bank and the loan-receiver economically benefit from this exchange. The *zee/* is thus conceptualized as a commodity—it does not aim to forge social relations between individuals, but is traded according to market value and concepts of equality, self-interest and individualism. As the example of Baatar's *zee/* saga reflects, however, the term *zee/* also encompasses a plethora of socially-motivated exchanges and transfers between actors who conceive of themselves, not as separated, interested actors, but as intertwined in mutual relations of kin and affinity. If one accepts the definition of 'gift exchange' as economic actions motivated by social connection and interrelation, then the variety of *zee/* exchange performed in hopes of furthering social relations could be interpreted as resembling the 'gift exchange' type.

However, later theories have fundamentally questioned the validity (and theoretical usefulness) of a gift/commodity division. For one, contemporary economic anthropologists have noted that, even within supposed bastions of commodity exchange, the distribution of money and the negotiation of contract is rarely purely instrumental (Zaloom 2003, 2006; Zelizer 2017). Additionally, at a deeper theoretical level, Parry has persuasively argued that anthropology's historical fascination with reciprocity has contributed to misappropriations of Mauss' concept of the gift (1986: 455). For one, not all transfers are inherently reciprocal (Sneath 2006). But furthermore, the concept of gift exchange has historically held such theoretical fascination for anthropologists because it is always juxtaposed to contemporary neoclassical reductions of human behaviour to economic self-interest—a 'gift' becomes a non-instrumental action, as opposed to the instrumentality of commodity (Parry 1986: 458). Consequently, he contends, this theoretical split of gift/commodity to social/instrumental

motivation, respectively, misrepresents the original significance of ‘the gift’ in Mauss’ retelling—as an economic action that precisely does *not* differentiate between concepts of interestedness (i.e. self-interest) and disinterestedness. As Parry explains, ‘[t]he ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange...It is we, [Mauss] says elsewhere, who have opposed “the ideas of gift and disinterestedness” to “that of interest and the individual pursuit of utility” ...[It is] our invention; and [The Gift] explicitly acknowledges the difficulty of using these terms for societies...[where] for many the issue simply cannot arise since they do not make the kinds of distinction that we make’ (1986: 458). Or in other terms, as formulated by Holbraad, the gift/commodity distinction might very well be a symptom of ‘the split universe of modernity’ (2017: 229). Consequently, the equivocality concerning the meaning of ‘gift’ and the (perhaps, culturally) contrived rupture between actions of interest and disinterest undermines the usefulness of the terms ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ for our theoretical positioning of *zee/* behaviours.

Zee/ as favour

Recently emerging literature probing the concept of ‘favour’ might offer an avenue out of this theoretical quagmire. As discussed, the concept of favour as anthropological analytical concept is often attributed to Ledeneva’s work on *blat* and the concomitant Soviet ‘economy of favours’. Recent scholarship, however, has aimed to elevate the concept of ‘favour’ from a term chiefly associated with a plethora of ethically-ambiguous Soviet and post-socialist economic exchanges to a subject of general anthropological concern (Makovicky & Henig 2017). Indeed, in their recent edited volume ‘Economies of Favour after Socialism’, the Makovicky and Henig have attempted to move the concept from an ‘economy of favours’ to ‘economies of favour’ to reflect on how ‘favours’ are a distinct mode of acting common to contemporary economic orders (2017). In her contribution to this debate, Humphrey opines that a ‘favour’ is an ‘independent mode of acting that is initiatory, “extra”, ethical and gratuitous’ that imparts a feeling of being chosen (as in favouritism) on the recipient (2017: 51). Holbraad has expanded upon this definition to note that favours are often associated with the glow of social warmth and are, by extension, contradistinguished with the ‘cold’ hardness of formal systems (2017). Holbraad thus loops the nascent concept of

'favour' back to the aforementioned disambiguation of 'the gift'—the 'favour' is an economic action within a universe where the Maussian gift has been fractured between a pole of 'warm' sociality and 'cold' instrumentality (2017: 228). Within this polarity, favours are transfers that gain moral power by framing themselves as *not* i.e. opposed to self-interested action. As a result, the authors of this edited volume claim that 'favours' are inherently ambiguous—an action's recognition as a favour is variable with context, culture and individual(s) and might not always be accepted as such (Holbraad 2017; Humphrey 2017; Ledeneva 2017).

These diverse deliberations beget the question—is the contemporary proliferation of socially-motivated *zee* an example of an economy of favours? From my perspective, this depends on how one justifies and defines 'favour'. For one, the initial 'economy of favours' literature has often depicted the propagation of favour in post-socialist contexts to be an extension of the learned practices of shortage-navigation common to the Soviet Union. As discussed by Chuluunbat and Empson in their exploration of contemporary Mongolian small and medium enterprises (SME), however, these depictions tend to reduce favours to a functional survival mechanism (2018: 423). Nevertheless, if one accepts this perspective, networks undergirded by favours in order to navigate scarcity were also, as described, existent prior to the socialist system in Mongolia. In this vein, the second perspective on favour—as an action of social benevolence common to systems that split the universe between the material and social—might be more productive. Chuluunbat and Empson write that this latter literature importantly 'de-centres the utilitarian function of favours' (2018: 423). For example, Chuluunbat, Empson and Humphrey opine that Mongolians often choose to perform favours even in contexts where the formal system is functioning (Humphrey 2012, 2017) and/or favours are not particularly materially effective (Chuluunbat & Empson 2018). Consequently, in the Mongolian case, the earmark of favours is their moral character and ability to allow individuals to enact 'a certain kind of subjectivity' (Empson 2014: 424)—to perform and engender a reputation as someone who does favours. If one accepts this definition, then the performance of favours in contemporary Mongolia might well be an 'economy of favours' in the general sense of performing 'a good person'

within an instrumental economic system, but not only as a specifically post-socialist survival continuity.

Zeel as cosmological help

Indeed, the distribution of *zeel* is increasingly associated with the performance of a good person within Magtaal—a person that helps others. Pertinently, Sneath has described how Mongolians (especially in the countryside) often engage in a plethora of economic ‘transfers’ (as opposed to reciprocal ‘transactions’) of goods and assistance that are materializations of various social relations (2006). These transfers, which he calls *enactions*, are less motivated by idioms of exchange, but more so by idioms of obligation: residents share and distribute resources out of a desire to enact a social role—e.g. to be seen as a good neighbour, friend or brother. Importantly, he notes that these materializations are driven by social obligation and are often vernacularly expressed as forms of ‘help’. He quotes a countryside resident who explains, ‘...if a country person helps another country person they will certainly remember it, and that’s a helpful thing...We all try to help each other as much as we can because there are only a few people with government jobs’ (2006: 95).

Whereas in the past, *enactions* might have overwhelmingly taken the form of pastoral aid or food, the exigencies of the contemporary era have contributed to the apprehension of monetary assistance as the baseline form of help—‘relations of mutual help became entangled in monetized logics, and since many people now needed cash, the most common requests for help became appeals to borrow money’ (Sneath 2012: 460). Consequently, the rhetoric of ‘help’ (*tus, tuslamj*) has become increasingly commonplace in Magtaal in description of economic moments where actors enable cash access. For example, in previous chapters, the actions of changers that gave work, economic discounts or fair prices—thereby enabling cash access to others—were labelled as acts of help. In terms of debts and loan, the action of granting an interest-free loan from another individual (as in the case of Baatar above) and/or providing money in a time of need is designated as help. In the next chapter, a resident gives a friend timely cash in order to circumnavigate a loan payment, which is interpreted by both actors as an act of help. Using Sneath’s terminology, residents often *enact*

the role of friend/neighbour/family member and/or perform being a good, moral person by providing others with and/or enabling access to cash.

The action of granting money and/or giving *zee*/ without necessitation of return overlaps with the emergent literature on favour in its emphasis on cosmological beneficence. Holbraad, in discussing the emergence of the concept, suggests that favours are likely coeval with monotheistic cosmological orders—belief systems that split the universe into a mundane, material realm and a spiritual, sacred plane of higher value (2017: 431). Within such a duality, the imparting on the sacred, a favour, onto the profane becomes a social miracle of sorts. Similarly, Humphrey often draws upon Pitt-Rivers' discussion of 'grace' to define the 'favour' (2017). According to Pitt-Rivers, grace can be 'a free gift of God unmerited by men' and associated with Christ whose death redeemed us from original sin (2011: 429). By performing gratuity—actions undertaken not to obtain a return but to give pleasure—one can reenter 'a state of grace' and become sinless, redeemed. Yet, the concept of a cosmological 'free gift'—i.e. a one-directional transfer that does not necessitate a return—is not unique to monotheistic traditions (Bernstein 2013; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986). In fact, scholars on Hinduism have often drawn attention to the concept of 'social debt' that a Hindu male acquires—through being born, the Hindu male acquires debt to the sages, the gods and to the ancestors, which are repaid throughout his life through the performance of special rituals (Gregory 2012; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986). Bernstein notes, through using the example of Russian Buryat *chöd* rituals and *ovoo* rituals (that latter being existent in Mongolia in Chapter 1), that the concept of the free gift, or *dana*, as a gift which must *not* be reciprocated (thereby improving one's karma) is common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (2013: 174). Indeed, in Magtaal, the rhetoric of help is often associated with *buyan* or making Buddhist merit and the two terms can be used interchangeably depending on the context. As intimated, the apprehension of *buyan* common to discourses of help is akin to Buddhist cosmic or karmic debt (Bernstein 2013; Chu 2010)—you do good deeds (*buyan*) to raise your fortune (*hishig*), which could lead to immediate kin and familial enrichment, but likely higher rebirth over cosmological time. These good deeds happen on two planes and thus the terms 'help' and 'buyan' are profane and sacred mirrors of one

another—on the immediate lived plane, community members help and distribute for joint prosperity, which has reverberations for the cosmological plane of rebirth. In this way, Humphrey’s description of ‘favour’, Sneath’s concept of helpful *enaction* and the Mongolian Buddhist narrative of *buyan* conceptually overlap.

Consequently, we can explain one-directional gifts i.e. ‘loans’ of money as quasi-religious acts, as money becomes increasingly important for everyday economic livelihood. For one, money in Mongolia is increasingly associated with sacred action. For example, Abrahms-Kavunenko has recently written about the burgeoning popularity of Buddhist-influenced ‘money calling rituals’ in Ulaanbaatar; in particular, a celebrity medium known as Sarandavaa has sold out stadiums, in order to perform *hishig*-calling rituals, the *tavan hishig dallaga*, with the specific intention of attracting *hishig* in the form of monetary wealth (2018). But secondly, other research on Buddhist and Hinduist concepts of ‘social debt’ have illustrated real world, material and monetary repercussions. Bernstein, for example, discusses the concept of ‘karmic creditors’ amongst Russian Buryats, who believe that the good actions of others in past lives must be paid back through material and immaterial offerings in this one (2013: 178). The investing of money into the purchase of ghost money as offerings to the ancestor, which they can then symbolically use in the afterlife, also points to the increasing imbrication of money and Buddhist morality (Chu 2010; Kwon 2007). In Magtaal, the accumulation of positive social acts and the accrual of money are often symbolically intertwined. When a local elder died during my fieldwork, Tseren (chapter 1) discussed how multiple township members donated money to the elder’s family for funeral needs—‘[Mongolians believe] if you give your *buyan* to others, you get *buyan* from others. It’s a life rule...and money rule. The more you give, the more it grows and comes back to you’. In terms of loans, one local resident discussed how the obligation to help increasingly was expressed through money—‘If you know e.g. that a friend got sick and they ask you for money because they know you have some, then it’s a sin [*nügel*] to say no. You must remember that there is a God [*Burhan baidag gedegiig sanah heregtei*]’. Consequently, the gifting of money in Magtaal differs from the Buryat and Jain examples because merit actions aren’t being presented ‘upwards’ to a

temple or sacred beings; rather, they are given outwards within networks of kin and affinity. Nevertheless, the increasing rhetorical interchangeability of acts of giving money, narratives of help and sentiments of *buyan* support the thesis that Magtaal actors are increasingly dispersing *zeel* out of an ethical sensibility as kin, neighbour and/or friend.¹⁵⁶

A blurring of social and financial debts

In conclusion, I argue that, in Magtaal, ethics of social debt undergird local treatment of financial debt. According to neoclassical economic credo, loans/debt transactions with the bank are enacted as reciprocal exchanges that view participants as legally equal, yet separate entities engaging in a profit-oriented, self-interested, temporary endeavour. Although this is the understanding of the market purported by the Prime Minister's comments and formally touted by national banks, loaning behaviour at the Magtaal level frequently differs from that model. Indeed, Empson has argued that loan interactions with banks in northern Mongolia often assume the character of patron/client relations on the part of the debtor (2014). In my experience, actors frequently make use of bank loans as sources for cash money to distribute and/or use within the social network in ostensibly non-functional ways—e.g. when Baatar blew the entire proceeds from a small business loan on Chinese fruit for his friends and family. Mirroring the sentiments of social debt, residents take out loans from the bank and pay back interest, not predominantly to pay off the loan in its entirety, but to continue having an open channel for future loans.

¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, Humphrey opines that, in the Mongolian example, favour differs from the obligation of enaction (2017: 57). She argues that the impulse to perform economic acts due to sentiments of obligation within kin relations differs from favour because these kin-focused transfers are so much expected and non-voluntary that they cannot be regarded as a form of exchange. She argues that it is precisely the non-obligative nature of favours that bestows the recipient with the feeling of being 'favoured' or chosen, as receiving a piece of grace. This concept is undergirded in the edited volume by an ethnographic retelling of the Nuosu 'Anti-Favour'—a sense of extreme obligation to kin networks often expressed as suicide in the name of promoting the lineage's interest—which is seen as incompatible with favours (Swancutt 2017). Whereas the intense feeling of self-sacrifice in the promotion of kin interest might be incompatible with light-hearted favours, I do not perceive these narratives to be as strongly delineated in the Mongolian context. The narrative of 'help', which I have identified as akin to favour, is often used when giving obligative transfers to family members as well as good friends (and network members). Because even Mongolians that are not kin related can become neighbour kinship related—thereby using kin terms for one another—the realm of kin obligation and network promotion is hazy. Because favour is a manifestation of the negotiation between self-interest and social-mutuality, the extreme pole of one or the other (i.e. extreme self-interest or self-sacrifice) is likely not a form of favour.

In this way, Tsend, Baatar's wife, had extended her salary loan from the bank—interchangeably paying back for a few months and then extending again—over fifteen times, prolonging (and making permanent) her indebtedness. The reasoning behind these actions is that superior moral value is placed not on the paying off of the bank loan, but on the social usage of the money one has received. This view of debt is not individualistic, but collective, and is not reciprocated through (economic) value equivalence, but by building community relations (ergo Buddhist merit or *buyan*) over extended time. As a result, local residents frequently loan goods and money to one another, not out of a motivation for self-interest, but out of a desire to contribute, honour and continue mutual social relations. The accruing pressures of exchange-based debt are thus being absorbed by social-based debt.

In conclusion, the internal variations in the meaning of *ör* (debt) and *zeel* (loan) illustrate both the material and spiritual/ethical considerations inherent in contemporary debt/loan relations. As discussed earlier, Sahlins made a seminal contribution to economic anthropology in his coinage of the term 'generalized reciprocity' to explain systems where goods are rotated without calculated dues with the expectation that individuals in the closed group would help should the need arise (1974). Famously, Sahlins included this concept in a larger continuum of reciprocities—a spectrum from so-called generalized, to balanced to negative reciprocity—which were internally differentiated based on kinship distance, social rank (hierarchy) and wealth. This model has been often critiqued for its focus on reciprocities, but I think it importantly draws attention to the importance of moral continuums in economic concepts. In Magtaal, similarly, residents internally differentiate their debt/loan behaviour based on expectations of social closeness and mutuality in kin and affinity. However, inspired by recently emerging literature on the concept of favour, these internal differentiations—by both Sahlins and Mongolians—might be the result of a worldview (whether religious or economic) that has fractured the social universe into two poles—the material and the social/religious. Indeed, Holbraad opines that a 'stretching, blurring, or otherwise transgressing' of the 'normative distinctions' between poles is a characteristic of 'favour'; many of the ethnographic studies of the edited volume evince negotiation within a moral

continuum (Henig 2017; 2017: 229; Reeves 2017). Whether through Marxist-inspired socialism or Christian-cum-Buddhist-inspired capitalism, contemporary Mongolians have learned that money (and by extension, debts and loans) is needed for both functional and spiritual livelihoods. Consequently, there is indeed a generalized rotation of debt in Magtaal, which could be described as an 'economy of favours', but I hesitate to label it as a solely post-socialist phenomenon. Rather, seen from one angle, the local historical aesthetics of Buddhism have likely coloured the meaning of favours in debt and loan relations, resulting in favours that are materially non-functional and non-instrumental. But from seen from another angle, the anthropology of financial debt has often elucidated how the proliferation of bank debts often recast local moral worlds in terms of reciprocal exchange, thereby forging narratives of instrumentality from morality (Graeber 2011; Han 2012). Combined, an economy of favours in debts and loans persists, perhaps, because it allows individuals to maintain an ethics of Buddhist-inspired mutually-helpful personhood within a materially-reductive and onerous system.

Chapter 5: Loan lenders as translation occupations— navigating financial debt through the conversion of social value to economic value¹⁵⁷

Saraa and her husband are herders living in a *ger* on the other side of the river and slightly outside of the township centre of Bayant. In the winter of 2015, Saraa and her husband received a ‘herder loan’—or a bank loan that accepts pastoral animals as collateral—in the amount of 2.5 million MNT. With the money, they bought presents for their extended family and guests for the Mongolian New Year’s celebration, a new yurt cover and a linoleum floor. A year later in early 2016, Saraa’s eldest daughter was preparing to leave for college and Saraa’s family contemplated how they would fund her tuition costs, considering they were already in debt to the bank for the herder loan. Aware that banks reward reliable clients with higher credit caps, Saraa and her close friend devised a plan to enable Saraa’s family to access more money. Saraa’s close friend Onoo, a teacher, went to the bank and took out a loan and then gave this freshly bank-received money to Saraa, who returned to the same bank and used it to pay off her herder loan. Through this process, Saraa officially became a reliable loan client and payee in the formal system; a person who, in the eyes of the bank, was financially disciplined and paid off their debts. Saraa then went to the neighbouring bank and, with this new improved credit standing, was able to collateralize her herd, yet again, to receive a new improved herder loan for 5 million MNT (essentially, doubling her credit cap). With the augmented amount of money from the new herder loan, Saraa returned to Onoo, gave Onoo the money she had borrowed from her, and gave her a little extra, ‘a few tens’ (*tav arvan tsaas*), for Onoo’s ‘assistance’ (*tuslamj*) in freeing up her bank credit flow.

Onoo and Saraa’s monetary manoeuvring exemplifies how social networks of obligation are implemented to carry the burdens of financial debts. Similarly, in the previous chapter, I discuss how Magtaal residents maintain two divergent

¹⁵⁷ Parts of this chapter have been published as: Waters, H. The financialization of help: moneylenders as economic translators in the debt-based economy. *Central Asian Survey* 37, 403-418.

ontologies of debt as either social loans/debts between mutually-embedded actors and transactive, exchange-based debts between actors of social separation. The logics of the latter, I argue, are being upheld by the mobilization of the former. In this chapter, I extend this argument to discuss how residents practically distinguish, link and convert between these disjunctive registers of debt. By extension, the spectrum of debts and loans in Magtaal conforms to Gudeman's insistence that societal economic behaviours are permeated by a dialectical, contradictory and historically-pervasive 'economic tension' between the realms of mutuality and market (2008). For example, in the aforementioned, Saraa and Onoo work together to effectuate a process known in business circles in Mongolia as 'loan freeing' (*zeel chölölöh*)—i.e. where funds are shifted to circumnavigate credit ceilings to access better loans. Importantly, this term emerged in post-1990 Mongolia to describe a transactive business service that can be purchased for a fee from an offering moneylender. Saraa and Onoo, however, would not use the term '*zeel chölölöh*' to describe their actions, even if they are practically identical to the business services of 'loan emancipators'. This is because, according to the moral economic sensibilities of local residents, the term '*zeel chölölöh*' would mark the action as motivated by economic profit, which contradicts the appropriate moral behaviour between residents who are socially-intertwined and mutually embedded. Essentially, moral opprobrium can result when a debt/loan action is perceived as comprising an untoward mix between social distance and profit motivation.

Consequently, the post-1990 Magtaal social landscape has witnessed the multiplying of broker-esque entrepreneurial occupations that straddle this line between local social mores and the needs for enumerated wealth creation. As bank debts continue to accumulate and lead to aggrandized downward pressure on the township, social networks alone no longer suffice to manage this financial debt. As a result, contemporary Magtaal has witnessed the proliferation of 'translator occupations' as entrepreneurial business actors who convert and absorb (i.e. 'translate') diverse forms of value in the social and natural landscape into economic returns, while, nevertheless, doing so within complicated networks of relations, connections and indigenous social expectations (Tsing 2017). Using the case study of 'loan lenders', or

community-based moneylenders, I discuss how translator actors link local mores, like social debt and neighbourly assistance, into the monetary calculations of the finance system, and, in doing so, form a bridge for the incremental movement of value into this system. As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, these nodal occupations concretized as changers are also critical for the building of community chains that stepwise remove material objects from community-embedded gift-like local ontologies and transform them into alienable market-driven commodities. In turn, translator occupations walk a moral tightrope as township community members (i.e. social closeness) with profit-oriented, transactive occupational activities. Their successful navigation of this line thus far—bolstered by the ongoing, unrelenting mounting pressures of bank debt—is contributing to the incremental financialization and monetization of local social mores over time.

Contemporary Magtaal loan lenders

Contemporarily, there are seven individuals in Magtaal, a town of roughly 1,700 individuals, that occupationally work and earn their income through the selling of ‘timely money’ (Sneath 2002: 466). According to local oral histories, the contemporary occupational category of ‘loan lender’ (*zeeldüülegch*, as opposed to usurer or *hüülegch*) (re)emerged in Magtaal in the early 2000s,¹⁵⁸ but became a commonplace feature of household calculations during the 2011-12 economic crisis. As we shall see, loan lender activities are highly intertwined with banks and have benefited from the moralities surrounding bank loaning. For example, during my fieldwork, in March of 2016, the Mongolian State Parliament banned the accrual of interest in loan contracts (*zeeliin geree*) between citizens and stipulated that only bank interest loans were legal.¹⁵⁹ Two months later, however, the Mongolian Constitutional Court ruled the aforementioned parliamentary decision to be unconstitutional—it violated the decree that ‘the rights of property owners should be protected by law’ as assured through the constitutional guarantee to ‘fairly acquire, utilize, own or inherit fixed assets’.¹⁶⁰ In Magtaal, these urban discussions were followed with

¹⁵⁸ Moneylenders existed prior to the current era as discussed in chapter 4

¹⁵⁹ It was rumoured locally that this was done, because loan lenders were not paying taxes

¹⁶⁰ The constitutional court decision can be found on the Mongolian government’s legal website at <http://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/11954?lawid=11954>

mild interest, as most residents felt that these decrees would have little impact on local activities.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, thanks to the narratives of rights and property (incl. money) of the contemporary market democratic era, loan lenders are officially seen as entrepreneurial contemporary citizens. By extension, they enjoy legal recognition and can be frequented by customers as diverse as police and power players. Yet, even though loan lenders are tolerated by the relative elite of the township, their largest client base is derived from individuals who utilize their services to navigate situations of intractable bank loan debt. In the following, I discuss how loan lending has emerged in the post-1990 social landscape as a complement to banking activities, in order to forge a bridge between the local lifeworlds of residents and the formalities of the financial system.

Bridging gaps to the formal financial system

Banks, as the ultimate arbitrator of cash access in the township, are often the first option for cash-starved residents, but their functions are carried out according to the disciplinary mechanisms of the formal financial system. Although the distinction between formal and informal has been critiqued as a misleading dyad that falsely presents interrelated processes as separate (Roitman 1990), I find the term ‘formal’ useful to describe the ‘regularity of order, a predictable rhythm and sense of control’ (Hart 2012) associated with the state-sanctioned (and implemented) finance and banking system. According to Guyer, formalization occurs when the state attempts to fix and categorize relationships ‘...usually among several different value scales: the identity of the parties (including those who will enforce the contract in case of default), the kind and quality of the goods and services at issue, the monetary value, and the timing’ (2004: 156). Additionally, she notes, formalization is often accompanied by the ‘appearance of paper’ like contracts, residence deeds, identification documents, social welfare booklets, etc., often in attempt to document and regulate relations between institutions, citizens and the state (Guyer 2004: 156; Reeves 2014a; Roitman 2005). Indeed, the formal, state-sanctioned Mongolian banking system endeavours to enter into contractual, legally-regulated relations

¹⁶¹ Even if all residents don’t agree with the decision—see section ‘The moral evaluation of moneylenders’

with individualized citizen-subjects (as opposed to families or groups) that are upheld through registers of financial discipline (like collateral concepts, documentation, guarantor signatures, monthly interest payments, etc.). In my experience, residents frequently bump up against bank-placed restrictions in line with economic visions of individualized, profit-oriented, disciplined borrowers, particularly because residents conceive of themselves as actors in ongoing economic relations of obligation and distribution (enactions of social debt); and/or the rhythms of their lifeworlds do not coincide with the temporal regimentation of the bank. In this lacuna, loan lenders have emerged as an option for quick cash that residents often use to circumnavigate the formalizations of the financial system.

Indeed, it was within the context of chasing monies to answer a bank payment that I first met Nergüi—the woman who lives over the bank.¹⁶² Naran, a regular informant of mine, works as a cleaner in the local government and receives an adequate, if low monthly salary. Needing to pay for her daughter's tuition, Naran collateralized half of her monthly salary for a bank loan, while spending the rest to pay off a bank loan she had inherited from a deceased sister. As a single mother of two children, Naran feels chronically strapped for cash and visits Nergüi when finances get too tight. In fact, I visited Naran one late Friday afternoon, as we sat together and discussed the plight of bank loans in Magtaal. Suddenly, she jumped up—my questions had jogged her memory that she had a bank interest payment due that day before the bank closed at five (and closed over the weekend). We ran together to the bank (at 4:39) and up the stairs to the flat over the bank, where Nergüi conducted her activities. Nergüi allowed Naran to deposit her state welfare booklet as collateral for a monetary loan, and we ran back down the stairs to deposit the money in the bank (by 4:50). In this way, Nergüi's services verily provide 'timely cash'—she provides money (a material form the bank accepts),¹⁶³ in an immediate fashion (whenever exigency hits), and will accept forms of collateral easily available or on-hand. In this way, her services are most often called upon by local residents, like Naran, who either a) have tied up all their institutional or formal capital in bank loans; or b)

¹⁶² As she was known colloquially

¹⁶³ As opposed to bartered goods (like dairy products), which retail stores in Magtaal will often accept in lieu of cash money

are not institutionally-recognized (the unemployed, the poor, individuals who work as resource gatherers) and thus do not qualify for bank loans.

Mimicking the logics of formal finance

Nergüi's activities differ from other forms of inter-communal lending behaviour, because she does not simply give money without expectations of return (like in inter-familial relations), but dispenses loans in accordance with expectations of exchange, collateral and interest. In fact, according to the historical memory of contemporary relations, the concepts of collateral (*bar'tsaa*) and interest (*hüü*) did not exist within inter-community *zæl* relations prior to the widespread permeation of formal banking activities. Nergüi's lending thus incorporates this financial logic by offering two types of loans with interest with collateral deposits—monthly 20-percent interest loans with a maximum period of three months, and daily 1-percent-interest loans with a maximum period of 14 days. The average amount of money individuals receive, she says, is worth around 500 to 600,000 MNT. She is flexible regarding collateral, but the most common types she accepts are the ownership deeds to flats (*ordyer*) and/or any form of social welfare booklet (*halamjiin devter*). Naran, for example, is entitled to 20,000 MNT a month from the government in 'children's money' (*hüühdiin möngö*) for their upkeep, which is registered in a social welfare booklet that is often left with Nergüi as collateral. Upon my visit, I saw over 30 flat deeds and various booklets for disability and children's money—including a booklet for the state welfare one gets for nursing a newborn baby. Interestingly, Nergüi's acceptance of collateral mimics the logics of the banking system, but does so without competing with it—she accepts e.g. minor, state-sanctioned collateral forms that the bank would not accept. Once an agreement has been made over collateral and amount, Nergüi has new clients sign in a 'Toy Story' school notebook next to their name, amount lent and phone number. When they pay back interest, she writes the amount above the line, and the date in Roman numerals and circles it. Otherwise, the exchange is based on verbal agreement and social understanding. Consequently, Nergüi's loaning incorporates concepts from the financial system, but in a socially-modulated fashion.



Figure 19: Welfare booklets (haramjiin devter) from customers that Nergüi holds as collateral. In this photo, state benefit booklets for pensioners and for nursing a newborn child can be seen.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Starting with the fifth month of pregnancy, Mongolian mothers are entitled to 40,000 per month for one year to nurse the baby.

Figure 20: Flat deeds (ordyer) being held as collateral in Nergüi's flat.

Providing temporal relief

Importantly, Nergüi's services offer temporal flexibility and respite when encountered with the regimentation of the bank. For starters, the lifeworlds of local residents are often out-of-sync with the monthly payment order carried out by the bank—residents often have seasonal cash influx when resources ripen, animals birth offspring, irregular payments come in, wares from China arrive, etc. For many residents, like Naran, who are scraping the bottom of their cash reserves, this temporal mismatch between seasonal cash influx and monthly bank interest outflow is experienced as unrelenting pressure. Loan lenders like Nergüi offer services that provide immediate cash with flexible, temporally-deferred promise, which provide great relief to this immediacy. However, this can result in dependence on loan lenders, as residents become accustomed to using Nergüi's resources to pay off their interest payment every month. For example, one of Nergüi's 'regulars' (literally: individuals 'who constantly receive [money] and give [collateral]'—*avaad ögööd / baidag*), receives a loan from Nergüi after his monthly visit to the bank below. According to his social welfare booklet, he is entitled to 140,000 MNT a month from the government. However,

a few months back, he found himself without money for food, after having used his welfare for other purposes that month. Without another option, this man went to Nergüi with his social welfare booklet and discussed loan possibilities with her. They decided that she would keep his booklet as collateral and give him 100,000 with the understanding that she would be paid 120,000 (20 percent monthly interest) at the beginning of the next month. Thus, when the next month started and he was once again eligible for his social welfare payment, he returned to her for his booklet, went down to the bank, and then up again to her and paid 120,000. At this point, however, he only had 20,000 left over for food that month, so he gave his booklet to her again, and took out another loan of 100,000. In this specific case, this client had used his resources elsewhere, but needed money to fulfil immediate consumption needs. In other cases, like Naran, residents need to stave off bank interest for another month. Either way, residents, who are dangerously low on funds, often become dependent on Nergüi to provide cash to stave off immediacy (either as hunger pangs or the threat of default).

In this way, the activities of loan lenders often construct formal and temporal bridges between the local needs and lifeworlds of residents and the formalization of the banking system. Nergüi's spatial location in the flat over the bank was a symbolic (or strategic?) expression of the interrelatedness of her activities with the financial system—in fact, the clients discussed above all had to run up and down the stairs to carry out their monetary business in tandem with the bank below. Similarly, James discusses how consumers in post-apartheid South Africa commonly have three sources of credit—1) banks, 2) legal/formal lenders, and 3) illegal/informal lenders (2014: S21). In both this case and in Guérin's South Indian study, debtors commonly '...borrow from the latter [illegal creditors] to pay back the former [legal/bank creditors] (Guérin 2014; James 2014: S21). In Magtaal, similarly, residents often borrow from lenders like Nergüi to pay directly into the financial system. Alternatively, they borrow funds to circumvent a formal restriction (like with Baatar's mortgage saga), to reproduce the bank's vision of disciplined borrowers (like with 'loan freeing'), to satisfy an impending interest payment and/or to have money for food (when all capital is tied up in bank loans). Without the presence of Nergüi,

for example, many Magtaal residents most likely would have long since defaulted on their bank interest payments. As a result, Nergüi complements the bank and expands its exchange-based logic—she reproduces the concepts of collateral and interest, dispensing the universal currency of money, but also accepts forms of collateral the bank might not, allowing the logics of exchange and finance to permeate deeper into areas previously not governed by exchange.

Moneylenders as translators between social and financial value

Not only do the functions of loan lenders provide complements to the bank, but their bridging activities between local social mores and economic imperatives allow various registers to interpenetrate. Considering that cash reserves are already stretched thinly, yet interest extraction is ongoing and unrelenting, residents also collateralize and integrate forms of value into their economic calculi not envisioned by the financial system. In this section, I argue that loan lenders are highly sought and particularly efficacious in Magtaal, not only for their conversionary tactics—i.e. buying and selling money over temporal deferment—but for their abilities to ‘translate’—i.e. incorporate social registers of value into an economic, cash-based form. Loan lenders, as ‘translator occupations’, work on the cusp between the logics of local social relations and finance, because they buy, exchange and sell monies for business profit, while, nevertheless, doing so within complicated networks of relations, connections and indigenous social expectations. In this section, I thus extend beyond an elucidation of the interrelation of the in/formal as represented by loan lenders and banks, to discuss how social and financial registers of value are bleeding into each other—how i.e. ‘...contract-centered, market-oriented economic activity has penetrated the household or community, and conversely, how the mutuality of local arrangements has affected the world of contracts and business’ (James 2015: 22). I argue that the ongoing, unrelenting weight that continues to build up from bank loan interest and disciplinary restrictions is putting downward pressure on the community, affecting the interrelation of local sociality and finance logics. As a result, local social registers of value are being collateralized for economic payments, whereas the reasoning of finance gradually permeates into mutual relations of sharing.

Translators as occupational role in Mongolian capitalism

Concepts of value linkage, or ‘conversion’ (Guyer 2004), between disjunctive ‘circuits of exchange’ (Bohannan 1959) have a long historical arch in economic anthropology. In revisiting Bohannan’s classic study of ‘circuits of exchange’ amongst the Tiv, Guyer argues that historical West African trading partners often were trading with a variety of neighbouring groups with differential access to and desire for goods (2004: 28–30). As a result, trading groups often had to engage in a series of stepwise transactions with multiple partners towards more substantial value to receive the good that was ultimately desired—i.e. local cloth was traded to the north for brass rods, which were trade to the south for firearms and cattle, which were traded to a different group for bridewealth, etc. Based on this analysis, Guyer appropriates Bohannan’s term ‘conversion’ to describe the negotiation that occurs when two groups, with disjunctive desires, currencies and expectations, meet in the moment of exchange, in the hopes of overcoming ‘spatio-hierarchical thresholds’ (2004: 38) to the next leg in the trading pathway. More than a simple exchange within similar registers of value (e.g. the same currency form), Guyer is often discussing situational matching between trading partners with vastly different registers of value and ontologies of trade. In fact, potential for gain arises precisely because the value forms of different groups are irreducible to one another; there is always a remainder and thus a potential for gain from this dance of negotiation (Guyer 2004: 51). Expanding upon this concept, Tsing uses the term ‘translation’ to discuss conversionary mechanisms that link and move between ‘sites of difference’ i.e. disjunctive ontological registers between trading partners (Tsing 2017: 64–66). As a process inherent to capitalism, Tsing contends, ‘translation’ converts between non-capitalist, social values and economic, monetary value, thereby expanding the reach of exchange-based, monetary logic. Specifically, in her seminal study on the international trade around matsutake mushrooms, Tsing discusses how supply chain capitalism takes advantage of non-capitalist processes—like indigenous knowledge (of i.e. the mushrooms’ location); the mushroom’s natural growth (through photosynthesis, sun, weather, etc.); or the human labour (created through child rearing, care, solidarity, etc.)—to incorporate them into economic value. ‘Translation’, in this rendering, is the

conversion of non-quantified social/local registers of value into an economic price to overcome a threshold in transactional pathways.

Akin to Tsing's commodity chains, a variety of 'translator occupations' have arisen with the advent of the market democratic era in Mongolia. As discussed in previous chapters, the breakdown of the centrally-planned socialist economic system, and the consequent loss of assured job prospects, provided the setting for the proliferation of entrepreneurial business occupations as Mongolians were forced to become economically free-floating actors to support themselves. Within this setting, the market transition resulted in the efflorescence of self-employed business subjectivities that earned money by negotiating the gaps between different geographical, social, cultural or financial registers.

Specifically, the post-1990 transitional moment saw the widespread emergence of occupational brokers that could produce value through the buying, selling and moving of goods, money and/or both. For example, many Mongolians earned their livelihoods by becoming arbitrage-based, small-scale traders (*naimaachid*)—who e.g. crossed into China, bought products at a low prices, returned to Mongolia and sold high (Lacaze 2010). Concurrently, pawnshops arose in urban centres—an occupational category that buys goods and sells money (Højjer 2012). Importantly, changers (*chyenj*)—an occupational designation that arose from the English word to '(ex)change'—became a pervasive job category to describe bulkers who accept resources from diverse sources, bulk, move and resell at higher prices (High 2017; Højjer 2012; Lacaze 2010; Pedersen 2002). In short, the post-1990 transition has been economically-defined by the rise of entrepreneurial occupations that make money off of moving and/or transforming resources, thereby building economic bridges between disparate markets.

Although translation is a form of conversion, it emphasizes the usurpation of non-capitalist, social-based production, know-how and value into economic registers. For example, as semantically indicated in the job description, 'changers' don't simply *convert* between stores of value, they *exchange* one ontological category of value for another. In her discussion of *moka* exchange in Hagen, Strathern notes that pigs are 'transformed' from multiply-constituted objects—as products of the multiple labours of a household—into a singularly-

authored object—as a gift being returned for a previous gift—through the act of exchange (1988). Similarly, Højer asserts that contemporary pawnshop owners in Ulaanbaatar not only effect economic transactions, but do ‘ontological business’ (2012: 46) by transforming inalienable, personal possessions into economic commodities. To a seller, an heirloom might be perceived as a highly-personal, familial-embedded, inalienable entity with various energies. Pawnshop owners thus have the spiritually-precarious job of putting a price on such an object. Nevertheless, as Guyer describes, profit can be made in this situational matching between ontological registers—considering there is no universal price for a familial heirloom, pawnshop owners set the price themselves, enabling profit (2004). Even money itself can be liable to ontological transformation. In her discussion of ‘polluted money’ earned through gold digging, High notes that store workers charge higher rates for dirt-caked, mining-derived money than for cleaner bills (presumed to be sourced elsewhere) (2013). Store owners thus effect ontological translation—turning the bills spiritually associated with unethical gold digging into indexical economic value—which provides space for economic profit in the transformation. Thus, within these diverse examples, local, spiritually-laden and socially-constituted forms of value were altered in the process of exchange into socially-disembedded, alienable commodities and fungible units of value. Translation occupations effectively earn their keep through effectuating this process of translation by pocketing the economic remainder created through the process of situational, ontological matching.

Collateralizing social registers

In order to be successful as a peddler of loans, one must combine knowledge of the financial and social landscape to turn a profit. Interestingly, during my time interviewing individuals in ‘translation occupation’ positions, I noticed a reoccurring trend—often, entrepreneurial brokers were individuals who were born in urban centres, but had moved to countryside locations as the spouse of a born-and-raised local.¹⁶⁵ For example, Nergüi herself is not from Magtaal, but she moved there three years ago when she married Davaa. Davaa works for a

¹⁶⁵ Or someone who combined these tendencies, like Jochi from chapter 3, who was locally born-and-raised, but partnered with an urban-born individual in his changer business.

local administration and was born and raised in the area, but met his wife while working in the closest urban centre for several years. Nergüi and Davaa have several children, one of which, however, was struck with a serious illness and became immobile. They negotiated this situation by moving from the urban centre to Davaa's countryside home, Magtaal, where life was less stressful and polluted for their child. But they only received 60,000 MNT a month in disability from the government, which meant that Nergüi had to find a way to take care of their child and work, simultaneously. With this predicament, her older siblings, who work in a giant department store in the closest urban centre, suggested that Nergüi participate locally in their family business. Her siblings, as individuals well placed to work with customers who wanted loans for department store consumer items, had started a small business 'freeing up loans' (*zee/chölööloh*, see intro) in the closest urban centre. Nergüi and her siblings thus formed a loaning business that bridged locations—her siblings would earn money through 'loan freeing' and give Nergüi the surplus to distribute out to individuals to accrue interest over time. When her siblings had a need for large sums of money for a particularly big loan job, they would ask Nergüi to freeze new loans, collecting the incoming money to be sent to the siblings for the loan job. In Nergüi's case, this constellation—i.e. being urban-born but married to a local—works well for her entrepreneurial activities because it allows her to combine 1) a source of cash liquidity (from outside the township) with 2) intimate knowledge of the local social landscape. From another standpoint, Terbish, who we will meet below, also upholds this combination—he is an urban-born, high-ranking military officer, who thus has access to funds, whose wife, a born-and-raised local resident, distributes loans based on her knowledge of local social registers.

A knowledge of the local social fabric is particularly useful, because loan lenders openly incorporate social registers into their lending activities. Namely, when residents are so financially extended that they no longer have any material forms of collateral (neither documentation, resources nor money), Nergüi will consider social reputation as a guarantee of creditworthiness. For example, the flat deeds and welfare booklets that Nergüi demands as collateral are not particularly legally-binding—Nergüi has never gone with a deed, for

example, to force an unpaid loan, and crafty residents could, hypothetically, just order a new flat deed or welfare booklet (without getting the original back through the repayment of a debt). Nevertheless, Nergüi is not particularly perturbed by this lack of legally-binding contract and formal paperwork, because she relies on evaluations of social reputation and prestige in her lending.¹⁶⁶ Nergüi claims that none of her clients have failed to pay her back and chalks this down to her and her husband's abilities to discern who is a reliable, trustworthy client—*naidvartai hariltsagch*.¹⁶⁷ When describing the countryside effects of the 'regime of debt', Sneath mentions that when rural economies become fuelled by credit, 'creditworthiness becomes of critical importance' (Sneath 2012: 467) because shopkeepers and other local businesses will sell goods on informal credit to local residents they know, like and 'trust'. Nergüi works on a similar principle—she only gives out loans to individuals who are *naidvartai* and the more trustworthy/creditworthy, the better the deal she gives. When a new person comes to her, she will ask her husband about their family relations, social history with other local people and connections. If they deem the person well-connected, socially-embedded (so that they e.g. wouldn't be likely to run away without paying)¹⁶⁸ and with a hypothetical source of cash, they will give them a loan.

¹⁶⁶ Roitman similarly discusses in her deliberation of un/sanctioned wealth in northern Cameroon, that the patriarchs of family, known as the *baaba saare*, often are heavily in debt, yet are offered more loans, because of the consideration of their social position and responsibilities in the community (2003: 219). She argues, similar to my discussion of social versus exchange-based ontologies of debt, that *baaba saare* are considered nodal positions of authority within frameworks of original debt in the community. Consequently, Roitman's study echoes the conflation of social and exchange-based debt in Magtaal that Nergüi also capitalizes on—individuals of high social prestige within narratives of social debt are offered exchange-based loans, because they are considered to have more resources and more leverage within local registers.

¹⁶⁷ In writing about concepts of trust among the Barga Mongols in Inner Mongolia, China, Haas discusses how both the terms *itgeltei* and *naidvartai* can be translated as 'trustworthy' and both 'designate people who are deemed to be morally upright or otherwise capable and bound to perform specific tasks' (2016: 94). Although she goes on to distinguish between the two—namely that *itgeltei* refers to morality and *naidvartai* more specifically to character traits—the moneylenders in this study did not distinguish between these two terms. Nergüi and Terbish used the two terms interchangeably to describe the 'creditworthiness' of a person, which combined both moral and behavioural assumptions.

¹⁶⁸ Another local who dabbled in moneylending quit her business because she had lent out a substantial amount of money to an individual, who, being unable to pay back, fled to Ulaanbaatar. Pedersen makes the argument that the neoliberal urbanscape of the Ulaanbaatar has encouraged 'generalized debt' (2017: 4)—individuals consistently take out debt from one another, rarely paying back fully, and move around the city freely opening and closing various debts to one another. While widespread debt is certainly a feature in Magtaal, as everyone

In this way, Nergüi translates by sublimating social registers of value into an economic form. Once, she recalls, a very well respected individual, the director of a local institution, came to her requesting a loan for a friend's wedding. The director's friend was a herder with over one thousand heads of livestock—a *myangat malchin*—but the recent drought in the area had meant that animals were temporarily selling for less than habitual price. Because the money was needed now for an immediate wedding, the director pleaded with Nergüi to loan them 5 million MNT (4 million over her accustomed maximum amount). Because, as she said, a 'local leader' came pleading, she not only gave out a larger sum, but she didn't request any collateral (*sumiin udirdlaga guisan uchraas bar'tsaagüi ögsön*). In a similar manner, my homestay family owned the flat she resided in and they often needed quick loans. As a result, she did not require any collateral (and mitigated interest rates) for my extended homestay family, citing social trust and a desire for positive local relationships. In this way, Nergüi will waive collateral, give discounts and flexible terms for individuals that are *naidvartai*—either come to her frequently, are considered respected local people and/or are socially-linked to her in some capacity—often with the intention and result of building up long-term relationships with respectable clients. This perspective on lending is not purely benevolent—individuals with higher social reputation are more likely to pay back (out of fear of losing it) and are intertwined with more resources and connections when in a pinch. In a sense, Nergüi forges a bridge between the financial system (experienced as exchange-based monetary loans) and the local social scales of value (prestige), by incorporating the latter into economic logic (creditworthiness) and financial form (monetary loans).

The financialization of help

As financial pressures mount, the collateralization of social registers seeps deeper into community frames beyond the activities of loan lenders. In the

opens up relations to one another and moves money around, these debts are commonly honoured and paid back. In contrast to Ulaanbaatar, Magtaal is a small township where all member are intertwined in almost-daily interaction with one another. The social regulator of reputation puts a check on the excessive behaviour of both moneylenders and debtors—both fear social reprisal for perceived unreliable/antisocial behaviour. It has happened, as mentioned, that people flee to avoid debt. Although, to do so is a drastic step—residents that flee to avoid debt permanently break off all contact to Magtaal.

previous chapters, I have discussed how enactments of social obligations (and, indirectly, concepts of making merit) are increasingly intertwined with monetary needs—in other words, residents increasingly ‘help’ each other, express gratitude and honour social obligations by offering, gifting and providing access to money. Because enactments and concepts of merit making have increasingly become monetized, are associated in material form with monetary distribution and revolve around a narrative of inter-communal mutual aid, loan lenders can easily co-opt this narrative of social help versus hurt as (part) community members who distribute money to local residents. Indeed, Nergüi explains her high rate of return from residents as local expression of gratitude for a favour wrought—‘I helped them in a time of need and thus they pay back’ (*Heregtei üyed tusalsan uchraas buzagaad ögdög*). Terbish, interestingly, justifies his high rates of interest by arguing that paying interest is increasingly synonymous with mutual help and assistance. Terbish—an urban-born, high-ranking government official—and his local wife—who dispenses his salary as high-interest loans—sources extra money from a friend in his home urban centre who is a changer of cars and thus has high cash turnover. Entangled in a network of cash and goods, Terbish justifies his usage of interest—both when collecting from clients and in payment to his friend in the urban location—in terms of ‘help’ (*tuslamj, tus*):

‘I also get a loan from my friend [in the urban centre] with interest. I pay interest back to him, because he is also taking loans from banks. And if the banks gave out loans without interest, then it wouldn’t matter and I’d pay him back without interest. But instead, if you need money and ask me for it and I go to the bank and get a loan and give it to you, you need to pay me back the amount with the interest. It’s like a form of help, so that you don’t hurt me and my family. I don’t want to suffer because I have helped you [tusalsnyhaa tölöö hohiroj bolohgüi biz dee].’

In essence, Terbish argues that bank debt has become so pervasive that residents, who desire to help each other, must take out bank debt to get the cash to do so. In his case, Terbish recounts, his friend gets low-interest bank

loans (between 1.5 and 1.9 interest), which he loans to Terbish for 3 percent interest, which Terbish loans out for 15 percent interest. Because the entire nexus of friendship enactments is realized through the materializations of bank loans, Terbish argues that it is only socially appropriate and proper to pay each other back with the interest in mind. Not doing so would punish (i.e. hurt) the person for their social benevolence towards you. In this way, Terbish takes the narrative of social help and favours, which is often materially articulated as a non-quantified expression of gratitude and/or a monetary gift without return, and appropriates it into a material, quantified form—a calculated loan with interest.

Although Terbish and Nergüi have material reasons for co-opting the discourse of help (discussed below) and might not be exemplary for the wider Magtaal community, their discussions do touch on the wider phenomenon of financialization within local social mores. In their 2015 manifesto, the noted authors of the *Gens Manifesto* define the term *financialization* as ‘the scaling up and growing influence of finance, and specifically the increased linking, translation, and interactions between a financial mode of apprehending the world and other social domains’ (Bear et al.). In the last chapter, I discussed how behaviours of distributing *zeel* in the local community form a spectrum from gift to commodity based on apprehensions of social distance and mutuality—i.e. residents who are close often enact social obligations and give money without expectation of return, whereas the more social distant the actors, the more the *zeel* is apprehended as exchange and profit-focused. Terbish, similarly, sat down with me and wrote out a spectrum of ethical *zeel* behaviour on my notebook: ‘If you give money to family members, it is “assistance” [*tuslamj*] unless they call it a loan [*zeel*], which is paid without interest; between friends, no interest, but if over 1 million MNT, then give with low interest; between strangers, if they are “trustworthy/creditworthy” [*itgej baidag*], high interest, no collateral; if you don’t “trust” them [*itgehgül*], high interest with collateral’.¹⁶⁹ In

¹⁶⁹ Terbish is not historically unique in his interest stacking according to social registers and proximity. Gregory argues through a thorough reading of historical Christian and Hindu interest injunctions that borrowing and loaning has often been morally refracted along evaluations of social distance and class standing. For example, Thomas Aquinas argued, inspired by Aristotle, that money was sterile; attempts to make it breed were considered heresy to a false God (Walsh & Lynch 2008: 95). Passages in Deuteronomy specifically indicate that charging interest within one’s own social group (to one’s brother) is reprehensible, whereas lending outside of the

this way, Terbish co-opts the local *zee/* spectrum differentiated through social distance and reformulates it to include the financial concepts of collateral (*bar'tsaa*) and interest (*hüü*). Because he is a loan lender whose occupation is indirectly intertwined with bank activities, Terbish's scale is particularly finance-oriented, but he is not unique in his consideration of interest in local calculations. In the last chapter, I discussed Baatar's mortgage saga and how he needed to source money quickly from multiple individuals, including a friend who he alternatively paid interest to or expressed gratitude towards through fixing her computer. By extension, Terbish is not misplaced in his analysis that the downward pressure and permeation of bank debt has not only increasingly monetized registers of help, but increasingly financializes expressions of social gratitude as interest.

In many ways, loan lenders constitute bridges between the financial functions of the bank—a social other of transaction—and local social mores based on expressions of mutuality and obligation. This brokerage role is materially manifested in Nergüi's location in the flat over the bank, and social symbolized through their kinship role as social others who married into the community. Walking the cusp between social otherness—siphoning resources from outside the community—and social sameness with intimate local knowledge, loan

community is more acceptable (Gregory 2012; Maurer 2006; Nelson 1989). In another context, Indian moral codes delineated different ethical rates if one was a Brahman, Warrior, Merchant or Sudra, respectively (Gregory 2012: 388). Even Smith's 'A Theory of Moral Sentiments', Gregory notes, surprisingly offers the prescription that '...the morality of the affective individual varies with kinship distance and along with it the morality of the interest rate that should be charged on a money debt' (2012: 389).

Interestingly, Gregory argues that Bentham was a revolutionary in regard to the social acceptance of usury. For example, Bentham rebukes the sterility theory of money and says that no man of sound mind '...out to be hindered, with a view to his advantage, from making such bargain, in the way of obtaining money...nor...[should] anybody [be] hindered from supplying him...' (Gregory 2012: 390–1). One could argue that Terbish is recreating this argument through the logic that interest is vital to not hinder or hurt 'those that supply'. In my reading using To Van's own statements on usury (see Appendix D), usury (as high rates of interest) is easily morally condemned when the base form of value is not money and thus overt focus on money draws attention or stifles the reproduction of base value. As money shifts to the central value form (as a monetized economy), money itself becomes necessary for social reproduction. Consequently, as Bentham and Terbish argue, money is important for one's own social/familial prosperity and thus should be allowed to 'procreate' (as usury/interest). This process likely overlaps with pushes towards trade as base morality form and emphasis on individual over mutual relations (Nelson 1989).

lenders are ideally placed to carry out a profit-oriented business (reserved for social others) within registers of the local social landscape (of social contemporaries), because their own social positionality lies on the spectral crossover between different registers. Functionally, their actions forge direct linkages between the banks and the local social community by often providing funds that circumnavigate the bank criteria or are needed to pay the bank. Allegorically, however, their actions allow ‘...lives and products [to] move back and forth between noncapitalist and capitalist forms[, to] shape each other and interpenetrate (Tsing 2017: 65), because they increasingly translate local social registers into a financial form—they i.e. incorporate social concepts of prestige into registers of lending creditworthiness and they link narratives of social help to an interest, financial form. In this way, loan lenders create complements to the bank, because they enable the logics of finance to penetrate deeper into the community by accepting collateral and using local social registers that the bank otherwise would not. The activities of loan lenders is a double-edged sword—they do provide temporary relief (felt as gratitude) to bank-loan burdened residents by accepting alternative, flexible forms of collateral, but in doing so, they allow more registers of value (concept of sociality, help, mutuality) to become financialized, siphoning value from the social community in order to feed the ongoing, unrelenting avarice of bank interest.

The moral evaluation of moneylenders

The positionality of loan lenders, as translator occupations, on the cusp between local social mores of mutuality and exchange-based profit narratives exposes their activities to intense moral scrutiny. The business practice of lending money at interest, despite the innocuousness of the term ‘moneylender’, is often associated in popular discourse with morally-negative and exploitative behaviour. In consequence, Graeber opines: ‘I’m not sure there is another profession (executioners?) with such a consistently bad image’ (2011: 10). Gregory, however, argues for a nuanced consideration by claiming ‘[t]here is no transcultural consistency in the moral valuation of creditors and debtors’ (2012: 386) by noting that even within historical Christian canons the moral evaluation of moneylenders has transitioned from debt creation ergo bad, to credit creation ergo good (see footnote 11). In the Magtaal case, there are often different terms

for translation occupations based on the speaker, the speaker's social proximity to the translator actor, and the speaker's evaluation of the translator actor's business motivations. For example, in the case of resource changers, a resident could call them a 'changer' (a term that come from the English term 'exchange') if they perceive the individual's intentions to be exploitative and overly profit-oriented, or they could just call them literally 'the person who is buying' (as a contextualization of sociality removing the emphasis from the business capacities) if they perceive the individual to be a well-intentioned, relatable or socially-close community member. In the case of loan lenders, residents will call individuals like Nergüi either a 'hüülegch'—a term that literally means 'the individual charging interest'—or a '*zeeldüülegch*'—a term that literally means 'the individual dispensing loans'—based on their assessment of Nergüi's activities as either exploitative or socially-proper, respectively. Essentially, different morally-tinged terms exist in Magtaal for the same general occupation based on whether or not the actor is perceived as more collectively-minded or individually profit-motivated in their business.

The example of loan lenders thus draws attention to the role of individual profit motivation in historical moral renderings of Mongolian economic life. In his discussion of idioms of morality encompassed in various Mongolian terms associated with trade and markets, Wheeler argues that the contemporary compound term for market economy, *zah zeel*, incorporates both historical acceptance of collective sharing and individualized profit motivation (Wheeler 2004: 235). I argue, inspired by Wheeler, that moneylenders' moral acceptance hinges upon their successful blending into one of these two categories—either they are viewed as social companions, whose economic behaviour is socially-inflected, or they are viewed as social others, whose profit motivation is based on reciprocal(ly beneficial) exchange. I thus offer an alternative interpretation of the *zah zeel* dichotomy—*zah*, for (social) margin or border market, as sanctioned exchanges with social others, and *zeel*, for loans or street markets (chapter 4), as sanctioned ongoing transfers with social companions. In this rendering, profit motive *in itself* is not morally reprehensible if engaged in with social others in a reciprocal, objective manner. Consequently, exchange-based trade was often reserved to border markets; and moneylenders, historically,

were Chinese and not Mongolian (see chapter 4).¹⁷⁰ Within contemporary society, however, the line between social other and social ally is increasingly blurred and thus spectrums of gradations are forged that are open to interpretation.

Consequently, economic behaviour in Magtaal is often morally evaluated based on the perception of appropriateness in its combination of social and instrumental motives. For example, residents in close social relations are expected to be largely mutually, and not instrumentally, motivated. From a different angle, Sneath also notes that the same action—namely, giving a gift after a favour—can be seen as either a sign of gratitude or an act of corruption, depending on the perspective—‘Giving help to friends and relations...lies at one end of an ethical spectrum, close to the most honourable instances of...gift-giving. However, the more instrumental, conditional and impersonal such gifts are seen to be, the more they move towards the negative end of the spectrum [as inducements].’ (Sneath 2006: 95). For this reason, loan lenders like Nergüi and Terbish try to appeal to social registers and moral categories—i.e. just being one communal person enacting forms of help—to justify their behaviour. For the same reason, individuals like Onoo and Saraa who implemented ‘loan freeing’ in the introductory anecdote would not use said term to describe their action, because it would label their motivations as instrumental. As individuals in socially-close relations, these diverse residents are trying to avoid aspersions of exploitation by emphasizing social narratives.

From the other side of the moral spectrum, Højer’s study of pawnshop owners in Ulaanbaatar and High’s discussion of artisanal gold changers evince how translation occupations that are openly instrumental and profit-oriented in motive make claims to objectivity (High 2017; Højer 2012). For example,

¹⁷⁰ Although I acknowledge that this situation was partially created by the Manchu government, which carried out an isolationist policy within Mongolian territories (Dear 2014; Pedersen 2002; Schlesinger 2017). Nevertheless, in medieval Mongolia markets were typically set up at the borders between nomadic polities, or along the liminality between nomadic and sedentary society’ (Lattimore 1988; Pedersen 2002; Wheeler 2004). In Magtaal’s general vicinity, from the late 18th-century to the early 20th-century, a yearly border market emerged at the end of August or beginning of September around the Barga monastery of ‘Ganjuur’. This market was located on the border between the Barga and Outer Mongolian territories (on contemporary Magtaal soum’s border). It ran for nearly 150 years and became formalized between governments—tax proceeds from stands were split 60/40 for the Chinese and Mongolian governments, respectively (Kormazov 1928: 95).

pawnshop owners are ‘translating’ from socially-inflected heirlooms into cash money and thus are highly aware that ‘...the more things appear as cynical exploitative business, the more spirit-like – i.e. loaded with emotions, morality and agency – they seem to become’ (2012: 46). Careful to avoid moral condemnation, Højer discusses how pawnshop owners appeal to objectivity, stating their activities are ‘just business’, in order to neutralize the disorderly elements of social idioms. Indeed, the only time I heard an open complaint about Terbish’s lending activities was when an informant declared that the government’s decision to view moneylenders as entrepreneurial, yet average citizens was false—motioning to the good’s in her retail store, she exclaimed, ‘If I pay taxes for this, why shouldn’t they?!’ Essentially, the store owner was complaining that Terbish’s business was too profit-motivated and instrumental to be considered socially-inflected local loaning; she wanted his behaviour to be formally recognized for what she thought it was—a business.

In short, I argue that ‘translator’ occupations like moneylenders, pawnbrokers and changers have two sanctioned market idioms to call on in their activities—either they are socially-local actors ‘helping out’ or they are socially-anonymous others exchanged in objective market (but also sanctioned) business. Either way, the wrong mix of social distance and individual profit motivation can result in moral scorn—if one e.g. is perceived as overly profit motivated within close social ties and relations, one can be condemned as exploitative; if one is perceived as overly socially-inclined within relations of social distance, one can be condemned as corrupt or nepotistic. Thus, whereas pawnbrokers in the socially-anonymized, neoliberal cityscape (Pedersen 2017) of Ulaanbaatar might appeal to objectivity to sanction their business, Magtaal resident loan lenders strive to be accepted as social peers (to obviate claims for taxation, formalization or condemnations of exploitation).

Consummating the future

As a final point, the community-wide normalization of the needs for cash money for economically-dignified, social lives has partially counterbalanced moral uncertainties towards loan lending. To Van, for example, condemned moneylending, because the base form of value at the time was sheep and an untoward focus on money, he argued, cut into the reproductive abilities of

society (concretized as sheep wealth) over time (see Appendix D). From a different angle, Roitman, quoting Sarthou-Lajus, discusses how individuals in northern Cameroon distinguish between concepts of un/sanctioned accumulation of wealth and debts based on the debt's ability to '...open...onto a future that represents the hope of accomplishing that for which [a subject] is responsible with respect to the other' (Roitman 2003: 222; Sarthou-Lajus 2013). Otherwise put, wealth and debts are considered socially sanctioned, if they are perceived as building towards a better future within the contemporary social moral order. Considering the widespread permeation of financial indebtedness, residents are increasingly feeling locked within constant cycles of bank interest payments without release. Additionally, the monetization of the economy has elevated the standing of monetary distribution within local registers of communal help and long-term social reproduction. Loan lenders, as translator occupations, can provide temporary relief to bank pressure and ensure the continuity of local social registers by incorporating local values. They are thus largely sanctioned because their services enable many local residents to continue their diverse circuits of debt, lending diverse transactions an air of confidence of consummation and accomplishment. Loan lenders allow the ongoing flow of wealth—upholding the fulfilment of economic promises made in the present towards the future and undergirding the contemporary moral order. Translator occupations thus fulfil an essential function in the contemporary capitalist system—they feed the financial apparatus with additional forms of social value when financial avenues are exhausted, allowing the continuance of the contemporary economic, social and moral order.

Conclusion: Becoming plugged in to the world economy—economic networks as capitalist integration mechanisms

I have hoped to show through this thesis that Magtaal is ensconced in a veritable **extractive** economy that is dominated by three processes. **First**, the entire local economy circulates by way of bank debt—through bank loans, money reserves flow into the community, but it must flow back out again in greater amount through interest payments, engendering a constant search at the local level for the added value to make up this economic discrepancy. Because this happens within each household at different temporal moments, the limited pool of money in the community—itsself predominantly funded by bank debt—is pushed back and forth to temporally defer the individual payments. But, the cycle is unceasing and, as a whole, the township is left constantly searching for new forms of value to feed into the bank system. Sans formal employment, this added value predominantly comes from natural resources. Consequently, the **second** main process is the removal of natural resources from the environment surrounding Magtaal to meet the value gap left by bank interest payments. However, as evinced, the process of extracting resources is often formally illegalized and/or the practice of taking out bank debt to pay bank debt is formally debarred. Thus, networks have arisen in reaction to the breakdown of a formal system that blocks upward mobility more than it provides for local livelihoods. Networks are flexible mechanisms that can actually capitalize on gaps in formal legalities—through circumnavigating restrictions by way of connections and knowledge they build the economic value of the product being moved. Consequently, the **third** point is that economic networks (*suljee*) have become a dominant organizational form, because they can, per definition, engender and mobilize economic value through social linkage. In this way, the economy is doubly extractive—the vacuum of value in the form of interest payments is being met by way of networks (social value) that funnel resources (natural value) to create economic value to pay back the bank. The title of the thesis—‘Living from loan to loan’—speaks to this experience, as the average Magtaal resident is left in the multifarious gap

between loan influxes and interest outputs, struggling to fill that gap through some form of locally-sourced value.

Is this neoliberalism?

In the introduction, I discussed how the post-1990 Mongolian political agenda has been highly influenced by an economic vision often defined in academic circles as 'neoliberal'. I had mentioned that this term is hotly-debated and vague, and I found, in the course of writing the Magtaal case study, that the term is only applicable in specific circumstances. Roughly fifteen years after the introduction of the market economy to Magtaal, the reverberations of structural adjustment policy have predominantly been felt in Magtaal through a) the elevation of the monetary form to the signifier of economic value; b) the contraction of the pool of this available signifier; and c) the lack of clear government mandate or action (i.e. welfare) to provide in this circumstance. Regarding the first point, it is unclear if the elevation of the monetary form to the ultimate signifier of value is a result of neoliberalism, per se, or just capitalism in general (see below). With the second, if one perceives neoliberal economies to be marked by speculative fluctuations akin to Tsing's description of resource boom-and-bust cycles in Indonesia, then Magtaal was simply undergoing a bust cycle when I was doing my fieldwork. But more than that, one cannot simply equate a contraction in the available pool of value with neoliberalism. As I have discussed in this thesis, a similar contraction happened during the Qing period, which also engendered diverse forms of networks to navigate this circumstance. The last point is the most directly associated with neoliberal policy—the idea that the governing body should not directly interfere with the economic lives of its citizens and should thus refrain from economically providing through e.g. welfare. Although pastoral herders have historically been materially self-sufficient, they have also, for centuries, been grouped in hierarchical organizational units with holistic narratives. Consequently, this hands-off approach to governance—that individuals are chiefly responsible for and answer to themselves—is historically novel. Therefore, I am only comfortable with using the term *neoliberalism* for the Magtaal context when discussing the ideological and locally-perceived absence of the state as experienced through lack of economic provisioning, direction and governance. Nevertheless, this is a

key factor in the rise of networks considering that this lack of ideological governance has engendered the search for new organizational sovereigns—a lacuna that is partly being filled through changers (and spiritual masters) linked within economic networks.

[The mirroring of macro and micro-economic processes](#)

Networks are an organizational form that is capable of linking multiple scalabilities—be it hierarchies, geographies or, as evinced, spiritual tiers—which contribute to the reproduction of macro-level economic phenomena on the micro, grassroots level. In sum, there are two contemporary political-cum-economic phenomena in Mongolia that are being reproduced both in Ulaanbaatar amongst politicians (and larger governance levels) and the remote, frontier regions of Magtaal. The first, as discussed, is the ongoing reliance on debt financing, which is being met through the rolling out of Mongolia’s environmental resources. As discussed in the introduction and throughout the thesis, the Mongolian government has itself become highly-dependent on international, debt-based financing, which has led to the curtailment of excess wealth for e.g. welfare, social projects (like To Van’s festival) and, occasionally, the regular pay-out of bureaucratic salaries. Additionally, the government has in the last decade (and before) largely looked to mining and natural resources to provide the funds to push the country out of this debt crisis—as evinced by the speculative boom-and-bust cycle between 2012 and 2015. As a direct result of the government’s ongoing indebtedness and inability to accrue wealth, bureaucrats, police personnel, teachers, military directors and more at the local level in Magtaal have resorted to debt financing, moneylending and/or resource extraction to supplement their incomes. In this way, the indebtedness of the government, and the push to rely on resources as an avenue out, is being directly reproduced by local citizens, who, also, take out debt to finance consumption and use natural resources as their value avenue out of this debt cycle.

The second point is the widespread undermining of the legal apparatus on account of the dual phenomena of cash scarcity and breakdown of hierarchical governance. Although I will come back to this point, I wish to emphasize here that the elevation of money to the central signifier of value has had multiple

reverberations in the Mongolian economic sphere; money, in contrast to previous eras, is not a resource people can grow/print themselves and they must trade to access it. At the same time that money has been made the ultimate gateway to dignified livelihoods, it is scarce. Additionally, residents no longer trust the government, nor see it as internally defined by a consistent logic that safeguards their interests to i.e. create a system that allows them to morally access money. Therefore, on both the urban/governance (as politicians) and local/citizenry (as Magtaal residents) level, the Mongolian populace is tacitly encouraged to undermine the law (incl. historical traditions and spiritual injunctions) to make money. This is most clearly represented in the dual personages encompassed by the invective *hulgaich*. In many ways, residents condemn their contemporary politicians as being fake and selfish, because they no longer represent the people and are seen as hoarding money (and undermining the democratic process) to fill their pockets. In reaction, local residents themselves openly break the law (*hulgaigaar*) and defy spiritual injunctions (*nuutsaar*) in order to feed themselves. In a sense, both politicians and residents are breaking the law (broadly defined) to elevate their own economic fortunes, although they, importantly, differ in their relative wealth. In fact, the denunciation of being selfish—literally, ‘to only think of yourself’ (*öörstdiigöö boddog*)—is not only reserved for politicians. Throughout the thesis, residents have mourned that humans, in general, have become selfish, which means that holistic models, created to govern the balance in the human, spiritual and natural universe, are multiply undermined to focus on the economic fortunes of the few—either the individual, but, more likely, the new in-group conceived as one’s network (*suljee*).

Future vistas

My understanding of both debt and illegalized resource extraction changed considerably in the course of doing this research. When I first arrived in Mongolia for fieldwork, the topic of debt fascinated me in large part because of my own cultural background. I had been taught that debt was a burden to be avoided at all costs and that accruing levels of debt represented lack of financial discipline. With this conceptualization in mind, I perceived the considerable levels of bank debt to be an indicator of either the exploitation of local residents

vis-à-vis foreign financial interests (a 'victim positionality') and/or of the lack of local knowledge on financial discipline. In addition to this, I had been aware of the wide-scale infraction of environmental laws and restrictions designed to conserve endangered plant and animal species and was distressed by this phenomenon. Both of these topics—the 'undisciplined' usage of financial debts and the thwarting of environmental regulations—are points of debate among educated urban Mongolians that are often used as evidence of rural Mongolians' 'backwardness', inability to develop and become 'cultured' and ongoing 'hand-out mentality' vestigial from socialism. In the course of doing this research, however, I realized that my viewpoint (and those of many urban-born-and-raised Mongolians and foreign-born, Ulaanbaatar-stationed advisors I encountered) were too materialist. The resource-based, debt-motivated economic networks that I have discussed in this thesis are the material expression of a deeper cosmoeconomic system with its own internal logic. Discussions on bank credit/debt and environmental restrictions completely miss the mark when they use terms like 'financial discipline' and 'legal education' to explain seemingly illogical behaviours that are being carried out as mutual aid in community and for cosmological purposes. Local residents are engaging with formal economic models and legal systems in novel ways based on their local sociocultural and belief nexus, quite unconcerned (except when disciplinarily enforced) with whether the formal system evaluates their behaviour as conform or not. Economic networks are a manifestation of this dialectical interaction of historical cosmological worldviews, local material realities and the logics of the contemporary formal system.

This is not to say that urban-based Mongolians act vastly differently than Magtaal-born residents in terms of economic behaviour, mutuality and resource-dependence. Recent ethnographies have indicated that urbanites are also sharing *zee/* in a generalized 'gift-like' manner (Pedersen 2017) and are fusing concepts of pastoral growth à la *hishig* with monetary accrual (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018). Anecdotal experience teaches me that yurt-district residents living on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar also finance their consumption through a mixture of resource extraction and debt financing. Consequently, a weakness and/or point of expansion in this thesis would be the interrelation of rural

economic networks with urban space. By this, I mean urban areas in both Mongolia (e.g. Ulaanbaatar) and China. For one, I would be interested in researching how the continuum of *zee/* behaviour as documented in this thesis does or does not change in urban space. Secondly, the economic networks in this thesis often interacted with Chinese citizens and currency. I unfortunately have little data (besides on immediate fish consumption) on what happens to Magtaal-extracted resources once they move across the border into China. I am told, for example, that Fang Feng is converted into pill form and takes on another 'social life' (Appadurai 1986b) in China. If I had had more time, for example, I would have tried to follow the Fang Feng chain into China to see just how small a piece of the final consumption price Magtaal-based pickers receive. Finally, the government occasionally intermittently legalizes Fang Feng extraction for select companies; I would be interested in seeing how this temporary legal status affects the cosmoeconomic logics of economic networks that emerge in the wake of temporary legalisation. In short, this thesis documented a snapshot in time of the economic conditions affecting one rural town and is weak on positioning this town within larger international, cross-border flows of monies and resources.

Capitalism as the elevation of the 'exchange' morality

The *economic networks* of this thesis are social assemblages that create temporary holistic trade pathways, thereby translating social into economic value. These networks are particularly effective because they recreate and absorb historical Mongolian transactive modes and repurpose them for monetary creation. For example, in the introduction, I describe Graeber's three modes of economic morality that he hypothesizes are found in dialectical tension and in localized form throughout human society. Based on my fieldwork, I tentatively elucidate a Magtaal-ian rendition of these modes:

First, hierarchy, in its most common idealized form, is conceptualized as an alliance between an authority (or authoritative body like an aristocracy) and the average populace, whereby the authority directs the populace to ensure (social, economic, fortuitous) prosperity for all. Linguistically, this is expressed through the Mongolian compound for 'economy', *ediin zasag*, which frames the material world as a configuration that must be properly governed by an authority to

ensure moral correctness (Plueckhahn & Bumochir 2018; Sneath 2002). Historically, I perceive the frequency of steppe ‘headless state’ (Sneath 2007) systems with aristocratic and commoner classes to be an expression of this governance mode. Ethnographically, discussions of ‘exemplars’ (Humphrey 1997) and custodial forms of ownership (Empson 2018b; Sneath 2002) indicate the ongoing significance of hierarchy in deliberations on morality and economics. In contrast to Graeber, who presupposes that hierarchy works on a logic of precedent (Graeber 2011: 109), hierarchy in the Mongolian case also encompasses expectations of reciprocity—the authoritative body is expected to give back to the populace in return for allegiance. Both the contemporary revitalization of To Van’s memory and the forging of patron/client relations in economic networks point to ongoing attempts to create moral models of hierarchy especially when the contemporary exemplars (read: politicians) are unable to fulfil this role.

Secondly, Graeber’s discussion of communism, which I have called ‘mutuality’ (Guyer 2012; Robbins 2008), reoccurs in Magtaal throughout the economic chains. Residents who perceive of themselves as non-hierarchical, social allies intertwined in mutual networks of care are likely to engage with one another in the manner of a gift economy—they give and share as needed according to ideals of obligation and desires for social furtherance without focusing on return or equivalence. This economic behaviour based on mutuality is, in my reading, similar to Sneath’s description of ‘enactions’—‘the materialisation of aspects of relations and persons...in terms of obligation and expectation’ (Sneath 2012: 89). I wish to emphasize that in relations of mutuality, subjects often perceive of themselves as jointly-intertwined, allocentric, mutually-constituted beings in larger bodies (like couples, families, communities, networks), not as discreet individuals with conflicting needs. These relations play out throughout Magtaal in economic networks, particularly as concretized through *otog* formations and the non-reciprocal dissemination of monies amongst close relations. I have argued through an analysis of the multiple forms of *zee/* that the more two actors feel socially separated, the more the economic interaction shifts from mutuality to instrumentality. Networks allow individuals of (possibly, social) difference to forge temporary mutual holisms; after the formation of a network,

the participants within it become a community of contributors to the function of the chain—they create a scale-able boundary of social ally versus social other. Chain participants thus often feel mutually-obliged to help one another.

Finally, exchange happens most often in relations with social others. Exchange relations, relations of tit-for-tat commerce with equivalence and deal conclusions, are somewhat antithetical to inter-communal relations because the same people see and engage with one another every day over an extended time (if not their lifetimes). I have thus argued in this thesis that ‘exchange’ was historically seen as the prerogative of the foreigner—exchange, in its purest form of instrumental transaction, was preserved for the outside margins of the holistic social collective. Consequently, another term for economy, *zah zeel*, makes reference to the historical reoccurrence of trade relations on the social boundaries and borders (*zah*) of Mongolia. Isolating trade kept its motives from challenging local modes of ongoing relatedness. In this way, trade brokers, like 19th-century Chinese moneylenders, were often foreigners.

However, the reality of the contemporary moment is that exchange, as a moral mode that focuses on tit-for-tat reciprocity in trade, is discursively privileged. In particular, money as a value form encourages trade, because individuals cannot make or harness it themselves—residents that need money *must* engage in relations of reciprocal exchange with the bank and/or elaborate networks that allow trade with social foreigners (i.e. Chinese). The exigencies of the contemporary moment—the fact that all residents need money for dignified livelihoods—creates a pressure on the community where all local relationships start to be mobilized to create money i.e. to exchange and trade. This has had an effect on the historical social boundaries for the realm of exchange—in the past, moneylenders were foreigners, but now, for example, they can be Mongolians. Specifically, the realm of trade in Magtaal—exemplified, for example, by translation occupations—has moved from social foreign other to Mongolians born in other regions that are locally married (a form of half-other and half-same). Increasingly, as the pressure of money continues and relations shift to accommodate this, I hypothesize that relations of trade will no longer be the prerogative of social others (or half-others), but will normalize for all community members.

By extension, I argue that economic networks are an indicator of an area that is *capitalizing*—where local social worldviews are reformulating for the purposes of monetary, exchange relations. I have discussed in this thesis that, similar to the foreigner/ally division embodied by the moneylender, that local relations in Magtaal evince a balance between concepts of social communitarianism and profit instrumentality—historically, social communitarian relations was mostly reserved for the social in-group and profit instrumentality was reserved for the out-group. As instrumentality increases in importance for survival, these boundaries shift. I argue that networks are not only a sign of this change, but they actively accommodate and facilitate it. For example, trade relations are hypothetically antithetical to close, inter-group relations, but networks allow these boundaries to be traversed in a manner that largely does not destabilize the internal logic of the community. For example, as evinced by *otog* and patron/client relations, local concepts of hierarchy and communitarianism are harnessed—thereby maintaining local ontological worldviews—but refashioned, when scaled out, to the purposes of trade—i.e. exchange relations. Through their chain-link form, networks allow residents to be plugged into the global relations of finance and trade/exchange, without it immediately destabilizing or contradicting local worldviews. Networks thus allow local worldviews—that might otherwise be contradictory or inimical to trade relations—to slowly change to accept, accommodate and enable trade. Within Mongolia, and, arguably, globally, networks are likely a configuration that literally and figuratively connects local ontologies to the moral modes of exchange, allowing increased penetration of trade over time.

This reformulation of the local worldview to accommodate trade relations is most evident in the shifting of local cosmo-economic values of *buyan hishig* towards the monetary value form. I hypothesize that this shift of cosmo-economic worldviews is an effect of the increased, pervasive need to access money, which can only be accessed through trade relations. For example, in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber theorizes that Calvinist conceptualizations of a spiritual calling enabled a worldview that facilitated capitalist trade (2016 [1905]). Specifically, he argues that the resulting ‘Protestant ethic’ was particularly favourable to capitalism, because individuals

would pursue worldly asceticism and create material remainders that could be reinvested into further economic gains. However, Weber's approach depicts capitalism—defined as a worldview that creates excess wealth to be reinvested—as a by-product and/or logical outcome of the calculative tendencies of the Protestant ethic. Gudeman, fascinatingly, argues that Weber approached the development of capitalist-furthering relations from the wrong angle. To him, the increased occurrence of competitive or asocial trade with e.g. social foreigners in the Western world necessitated a religious reformulation to legitimize this trade (2008: 10–1). Indeed, in Magtaal, cosmoeconomic values are shifting precisely to accommodate the increased need of locals to trade for money. Importantly, this does not mean an unravelling of sociality or an irreversible 'Great Transformation' that removes values of hierarchy and mutuality from social life (Polanyi 2001 [1944]), but it does indicate a reformulation of these values to facilitate trade. As lamented by residents who perceive a loss of balance between the human and natural world, increasingly, locally, capitalism, in the form of networks, has become multiply extractive—it reformulates and harnesses local social value (i.e. hierarchy and mutuality) and natural value (resources), encourages us to view them through 'the totalizing prism of capital' (31) and translates them into a monetary, calculative form for exchange relations. Although contested, cosmological beliefs are shifting to fit this material reality, as individuals increasingly learn to 'think for themselves' and competitively undermine historical injunctions, laws and regulations to lead monetarily-dependent dignified lives as long as nature allows.

Appendices:

Appendix A: The revolt of Daivan *soum* against To Van

In 1837, as part of his economic reforms, To Van had a large, 60-room monastery built and ordered all of the over 1000 lamas of his banner to be permanently installed there as pupils (Natsagdorj 1968: 22–3). In order to have this monastery built, however, he mobilized the resources and people of the entire province for four years—he had the locals provide all the transportation and construct the bricks and materials (he even had the disabled members of the community form a line by sitting on the ground and passing bricks) (Natsagdorj 1968: 23). This idea of having the lamas moved, however, was largely disliked by the populace, because it a) meant that the previous 11 religious schools in the area would be dissolved and therefore locals would lose independence over their practice, and b) lower lamas, who frequently lived together with their families, would have to leave their households permanently. Considering that the majority of families in the area were very impoverished, losing the labour of young men meant that families would have added work burdens. This idea was thus generally unpopular, but particularly in Daivan *soum* (one of four districts in To Van’s banner). In this district, all the residents gathered, deliberated, and declined To Van’s plan, saying that their 98 lamas would not participate in the school. To Van temporarily acquiesced after he had stupas dismantled and increased whippings and taxation in the area, but when the Manchu Dynasty declared To Van’s large new monastery an example of cultural heritage revitalization in 1839, he redoubled his efforts. When he reiterated the order for all lamas to move to the monastery, Daivan *soum* members sent the missive: ‘We are having our own religious gathering. Our people are incredibly poor, and so they attend our own gathering to read religious texts, but then must go home to help our families. We can’t separate from them... This is the religious legacy of our forefathers and not something you control’ (Natsagdorj 1963: 228, 1968: 28). With this sentiment, the locals of Daivan *soum* resolved to protest against their Van.

The disagreement between the vassals of Daivan *soum* and To Van quickly escalated into a multi-site populist battle. Fearing a swift and unforgiving reprisal from their prince (as per his reputation), the locals gathered and

decided they must take up arms and fight. As Natsagdorj (Natsagdorj 1968; Natsagdorj & Nasanbadjir 1966) describes, the people of the district and their three leaders—a commoner, a scribe and a lower lama—gathered all the religious devices, scythes, shovels, wood, and iron bars in the area, and then travelled to a leader's camp to fell trees and make wooden clubs (1963: 228–9). Newly armed, the *soum* protestors divided into two groups, in the hopes of splitting up any armies To Van might send. Indeed, To Van later sent 150 troops, who the protestors bested in an ambush. Due to the inability of the residents and the Van to reconcile their differences, however, the matter was ultimately resolved when the Manchu ambassador at Huree (current Ulaanbaatar) had to get involved and began legal proceedings between the two parties.

In the litigation claim made by the protesting *soum* residents, the appellants depict themselves as dutiful, devoted servants who have been enervated through To Van's greed. They begin by describing why they were originally unwilling to participate in To Van's new monastery—'...we protested against our two temples being pulled down and moved away all of a sudden [to the new monastery location]. For more than one hundred years, we had recited the Ganzuur there twice a year and held the ritual of Maani Rilbū once in two years in order to pray for the longevity and prosperity of His Majesty' (Veit & Rasidendog 1975: 826). As previously mentioned, To Van temporarily acquiesced to these requests, but, in the eyes of *soum* residents, continued to passively harass them through finding pretences to tax them under (827). In order to impress upon the Manchu authorities the extreme reaches of To Van's taxation policies, the grievances list 42 examples of perceived unlawful taxation between 1821 and 1833 that left the *soum* in a poor pecuniary state (Natsagdorj & Nasanbadjir 1966; Veit & Rasidendog 1975). To Van's stated reasons for duties levied included: provisions for the travel of lamas; the settling of To Van's debts with Chinese merchants; payment for gifts for the Tsetsen Khan; travel for the Van's wife; tributes to the Tsetsen Khan; *ovoo* rituals; and more. Several times (in item 13, 18, 20, 27, 28, 30, 33, 34, 39, 41), the *soum* litigants emphasize that To Van had used the fruits of their taxation to make 'profit for himself' (Veit & Rasidendog 1975: 831). They conclude that that throughout

these episodes, they had provided for the Van, but has been shown little gratitude or favour in return:

‘Although our living conditions became worse and worse, we endured all these above mentioned hardships silently; but the Wang [note: To Van] never showed us any consideration or sympathy. On the contrary, we had to suffer hardship again and again. Finally, our living conditions became more difficult and our grievances became more unbearable as we struggled to protect our religion and temples from destruction in order to continue to pray for the prosperity of His Majesty. Therefore, we...have requested...other high-ranking officials, if possible, to have mercy on us, to prevent our hardship, to maintain our two temples, to refund the losses of our animals and other possessions and to restore the peaceful way of life which we had preserved for more than 140 years in the past seven generations, founded by the Ilden Wang’ (Veit & Rasidendog 1975: 836).

Through constructing themselves as dutiful, reverent servants who have borne their social role without complaint, the litigants hope to induce favour from their political, mortal superiors. Although this petition of grievances was sent before the publication of To Van’s *Treatise*, the residents of Magtaal *soum* evoke a similar hierarchical, obligatory relationship between prince and peoples. They do not desire to necessarily escape their social role and obligation to To Van and view his debts and taxation as a duty to be carried. Similar to To Van’s own written injunctions, however, they are distrustful of signs of excess—it is particularly when To Van’s duties are seen as overtly selfish and profit-oriented that his behaviour is maligned. Because, as they see it, their prince is not fulfilling his reciprocal duties—he has never showed them any consideration or sympathy—they are reaching upward to a higher power (to the Manchu). In addition, these statements reflect that the aim of their protest was not to overturn the Van, but to have their ‘peaceful way of life’ restored. They sought rebalance, not revolution.

MONGOLIAN LAW ON HUNTING

5 May 2000

Ulaanbaatar

SECTION ONE. Purpose of the Law

Article 1. Purpose of this Law

1. The purpose of this Law is to regulate the hunting and trapping of game animals and the proper use of hunting reserves.

Article 2. Legislation on Hunting

1. The hunting legislation shall consist of the Constitution of Mongolia, the Mongolian Law on Environmental Protection, the Mongolian Law on Fauna, and the present Law and other legislative acts issued in conformity with them.

Article 3. Game Animal Resources, Possession and Use of their Habitats

1. Game animal resources shall include those mammals, birds and fish that are native to, have been reintroduced to or are migratory within the territory of Mongolia.
2. Game animal habitat shall be defined as land, forest, and water where the living conditions for game animals are found.
3. Soum or Duureg Citizen Representative Khurals may establish the zones within game animal habitats for hunting and trapping for industrial, household and special purposes.
4. Citizens, economic entities, or organizations may possess and/or use game animal habitat pursuant to relevant laws, regulations and contracts in order to protect and properly use game animal reserves and prepare animal parts derived from hunting.

Article 4. Hunting Management and Its Financing

1. Hunting Management shall refer to activities to develop the justification for the proper US conservation, and breeding of a territory's animal reserve by investigating and establishing the game animal's distribution, numbers, herd structure, reproduction, and hunting reserve.
2. Hunting Management reports and evaluations shall form the basis for the activities on the conservation, breeding, and proper use of game animal reserves.
3. Hunting Management shall be conducted by a Certified Professional Organization authorized by the State Administrative Central Organization in charge of environmental affairs (hereinafter referred to as State Administrative Central Organization).
4. The Aimag, Capital City, Soum and Duureg Governors shall ensure that, within their jurisdiction, Hunting Management is conducted once every four years and inventories conducted each year following hunting for industrial purpose.
5. Hunting Management shall be financed as follows:
 - 1) Expenses for conducting Hunting Management shall be financed by the State Central Budget and Hunting Reserve Use Fee.
 - 2) Citizens, economic entities, and organizations shall finance the Hunting Management for the land possessed or used by them pursuant to contract.

Article 5. Hunting and Trapping Payment and Fee

1. Payments and fees shall be required for hunting and trapping game animals.
2. Payment and fee rates for hunting and trapping of game animals as well as the procedure for payment, reduction of and exemption from these fees shall be established by statute.

Article 6. Right to Hunt or Trap Game Animals and Purposes

1. Those citizens who have studied the respective laws, obtained a license for possessing a gun and a permit pursuant to the relevant procedure, shall be authorized to hunt or trap game animals

2. Game animals may be hunted or trapped for the following purposes:
 - 1) industrial;
 - 2) household; and
 - 3) special purposes

Article 7. Hunting and Trapping Permits

1. Citizens who hunt or trap for household purposes must obtain a permit. Citizens, economic entities and organizations that hunt or trap for special purposes must obtain a Special Permit. There shall be an agreement signed for hunting or trapping for industrial purposes.
2. Contract, permit and special permit forms for the hunting and trapping of game animals shall be adopted by the State Administrative Central Organization.

Article 8. Establishing Hunting and Trapping limits

1. The State Administrative Central Organization shall annually establish a maximum limit for game animals that may be hunted or trapped for industrial or household purposes for the territory of each Aimag and the Capital City based on the hunting animals' reserves and needs.
2. The Aimag and Capital City Citizen Representative Khural shall establish the maximum limit for the game animals that may be hunted or trapped in each Soum or their territory within the limits set in accordance §8.1.
3. An annual list of numbers of game animals that may be hunted or trapped for Special Purposes shall be established by the Cabinet Ministry based on recommendations from the State Administrative Central Organization.

Article 9. Hunting and Trapping of Game Animals for Industrial Purposes

1. Soum Governors shall enter into a contract on hunting and trapping of game animals for industrial purposes with economic entities and organizations which meet the following criteria;
 - 1) Have obtained a decision by the Soum Citizen Representative Khural;
 - 2) Have professional personnel and hunters;
 - 3) Have a plan for the protection and reproduction of game animals and are financially able to implement it.
2. The Game Animal Hunting and Trapping Contract shall define the species, quantity, hunting season, location, types, amount and payment and fee for the animal parts to be procured as referred to in paragraph 9.1 of this Law.

Article 10. Hunting and Trapping for Household Purposes

1. Citizens referred to in paragraph 1 of Article 6 of this Law may hunt or trap game animals other than Rare Animals for their household needs after paying fees and obtaining a permit from the Soum Governor.
2. The Game Animal Hunting and Trapping Permit for household purposes shall list the names and surnames of the authorized citizen, names, species, quantity, hunting and trapping season, location, fee and payment amount of the animal to be hunted or trapped.
3. A one-time permit to hunt or trap game animals for household purposes issued to citizens of Mongolia shall be valid for:
 - 1) up to 3 days to hunt or trap birds and to fish;
 - 2) up to 5 days to hunt or trap game animals other than those referred to in subparagraph 10.3.1 of this Law.
4. The one-time permit specified in paragraph 10.3 may authorize hunting and trapping of up to 1 hoofed animal, 5 marmots, 1 other fur animal, 10 Hazel Grouse or Ptarmigan, or Rock Ptarmigan, or Daurian Partridge or Pallas Sand Grouse, 5 other forest, steppe or wetland birds, 2 Taimen and not more than 10 other fish.
5. Foreigners who temporarily or permanently reside within the territory of Mongolia may fish only for household purposes and on the basis of established fee rates for Mongolia citizens.

Article 11. Hunting and Trapping for Special Purposes

1. Rare animals may be hunted or trapped pursuant to a special permit issued by the State Administrative Central Organization. Permits for hunting and trapping other game animals shall be issued by the Soum and Duureg Governors.
2. Types of special permits for hunting and trapping of game animals:

- 1) Permits to hunt Rare animals for research, cultural, or artistic and medicinal purposes;
- 2) Permits for foreigners and Mongolia citizens upon payment of a special fee;
- 3) For purposes of managing herd structure of the game animals or treating areas where plagues or epidemics have occurred;
- 4) For purposes of sport hunting.

Article 12. Orders for Hunting Firearms and Ammunition and their Use

1. Orders for and distribution of hunting firearms and ammunition shall be planned and implemented on the basis of the maximum limits established by the State Administrative Central Organization for the game animals to be hunted or trapped.
2. Procedures for ordering and trading hunting firearms and ammunition shall be established by additional legislation.

Article 13. Permitted Hunting Seasons

3. Hunting and trapping of game animals for household and industrial purposes is permitted as follows:

- 1) Siberian Roe Deer (*Capreolus pygargus*), White Tailed Gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*), and Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) from 1st August until 1st December;
 - 2) Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*) from 1st August until 16th November;
 - 3) Sable (*Martes zibellina*), Stone Marten (*Martes foina*), Raccoon Dog (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*), Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) or Corsac Fox (*Vulpes corsac*), Brown Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*), Alpine Weasel (*Mustela altaica*), Mountain Hare (*Lepus timidus*), Tolai Hare (*Lepus tolai*) from 21st October until 16th February of the following calendar year;
 - 4) Marmot (*Marmota sibirica* and *Marmota baibacina*) from 10th August to 16th October;
 - 5) Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethica*) from 16th October to 1st January of the following calendar year;
 - 6) Eurasian Badger (*Meles meles*) from 1st September to 1st November.
- 7) 13.2 Hunting of birds and fishing for household and industrial purposes is permitted as follows:
- 8) Hazel Grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*), Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*), Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*), Pallas Sand Grouse (*Syrrhaptes paradoxus*), Black Grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*), and Western Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), from 1st September until 15th March of the following calendar year;
 - 9) Geese, ducks and other water and wetland birds from 1st April to 1st May and from 1st September to 21st October;
 - 10) Siberian whitefish (*Coregonus lavaretus*) from 20th October to 1st August;
 - 11) Fishing in Lake Buir from 1st August to 15th May of the following calendar year;
 - 12) Baikal Omul (*Coregonus autumnalis*) from 15th September to 1st December;
 - 13) Omul (*Coregonus peled*) from 15th November to 1st August of the following calendar year;
 - 14) Siberian Ide (*Leuciscus leuciscus*) from 1st August to 15th April of the following calendar year;
 - 15) Fishing for species other than those specified in subparagraphs 13.2.1 to 13.2.7 of this Article from 15th June to 1st April.
 4. For the purposes of removing the sources of infectious disease and for scientific research, animals may be hunted or trapped outside the established hunting seasons.
 5. The State Central Administrative Organization shall establish hunting seasons for animals not specified in paragraphs 13.1 and 13.2 of this law.
 6. The State Central Administrative Organization shall establish the hunting seasons and fees for Special Purposes for those animals specified in paragraphs 13.1 and 13.2 and Rare game animals.

Article 14. Prohibited Hunting and Trapping Methods, Firearms and Instruments

1. The following methods, firearms and instruments are prohibited for hunting and trapping of animals:
 - 1) using chemical substances and explosives;
 - 2) digging pits, placing triggered guns and arrows or other traps on animal paths;

- 3) stalking hoofed animals in snow and forcing them to slide on the ice or fall from rocks or cliffs or setting traps;
- 4) using smoke or pouring water into marmot dens, using a noose or intentionally using dogs;
- 5) chasing animals by plane, helicopter or vehicle;
- 6) using guns, torches, electric shocks, forks, dams, or small nets to fish;
- 7) using a net to fish for household purposes;
- 8) using guns that are not designed for hunting animals.

Article 15. Certain Prohibited Hunting and Trapping Activities

7. The following hunting and trapping activities are prohibited:

- 1) hunting or trapping animals which are unable to protect themselves during natural disasters such as storms, drought, blizzard, flood, hail or fire or when they are stuck in rivers, lakes, swamps or mud;
- 2) hunting or trapping animals which are on their way to water sources or salt licks;
- 3) hunting or trapping migrating animals;
- 4) digging or damaging nests or dens of animals;
- 5) destroying or damaging enclosures, stables, fences, or any other facilities designed to protect or breed animals;
- 6) shooting without identifying the animal or only upon hearing noises made by it;
- 7) hunting offspring or collecting bird eggs or damaging them;
- 8) transferring firearms or special hunting permits to third persons;
- 9) bringing raw marmot meat or their wet skin into cities and settlements;
- 10) hunting or trapping animals in green zones of cities and settlements for purposes other than culling or to conduct scientific research;
- 11) for purposes of fishing for industrial purposes, net grids must not be larger than 30 x 30mm;
- 12) hunting or trapping animals in Aimags, Soums, Duuregs or the Capital City which have not conducted hunting management activities within the timeframe required by this law.

Article 16. Liability for Violation of Hunting Legislation

1. The following administrative penalties shall be applied by judges, environmental inspectors or rangers to persons who violated hunting legislation:

- 1) for use of an expired permit or transferring firearms, special animal hunting and trapping permit or license to others there shall be a fine of 5,000 up to 10,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 50,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 2) for violation of 15.10 of this law, there shall be a fine of 1,000 to 5,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 50,000 to 75,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 3) for violation of subparagraph 14.1.2, 14.1.3, 14.1.4, 14.1.6, 15.1.1,15.1.2,15.1.3, 15.1.5,15.1.6,15.1.7, 15.1.11 or 15.1.12 of this law, there shall be a fine of 2,000 to 5,000 MNT for citizens, a fine of 10,000 to 60,000 MNT for officials and a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 4) for violations of hunting season provisions defined in Article 13 of this law or for hunting or trapping animals in amounts exceeding those indicated in the relevant contracts, special permits or licenses, there shall be a fine of 10,000 to 15,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 75,000 to 100,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 5) for violations of subparagraphs 14.1.1,14.1.5,14.1.7,14.1.8,15.1.4,15.1.9, or 15.1.10 of this law, there shall be a fine of 10,000 to 20,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 75,000 to 150,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 6) for hunting or trapping animals for household or special purposes without the relevant license or special permit, there shall be a fine of 10,000 to 25,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.

- 7) For hunting or trapping animals for industrial purposes without establishing the relevant contract, there shall be a fine of 35,000 to 50,000 MNT for citizens and a fine of 150,000 to 250,000 MNT for economic entities and organizations.
- 8) For repeated violations of 16.1.2 to 16.1.7 of this Article of this Law or for hunting or trapping rare animals or selling or buying their parts, there shall be a criminal penalty applied to the person found guilty.
- 9) Environmental state inspectors and rangers shall confiscate weapons and instruments, animals, and their hides, furs, meat, antlers, musk glands or any other animal parts and income from those who are responsible for illegal hunting or trapping of animals.
- 10) Persons guilty of illegal activities may be deprived for a period of up to 2 years of their driving license for automobiles, motorcycles or any other transportation used for illegal hunting or trapping of animals; as may be decided by relevant competent authorities, environmental inspectors or rangers concerned.

Article 17. Rewards for Information Provided by Citizens

1. Citizens who reveal persons liable for violation of legislation and provide information shall be rewarded by the Governor of the Soum or Duureg where such information is proved. The amount of such a reward shall be equal to fifteen per cent (15%) of the fine imposed or reimbursement for losses by those liable for violation of legislation.

Chairman of the Mongolian Ikh Khural

/s/ Gonchigdorj

Appendix C: The Mongolian Law on Fauna as found in Scharf et al. (2010).

5 May 2000

Ulaanbaatar

SECTION ONE. General provisions

Article 1. Purpose of this Law

1. The Purpose of this Law is to regulate the protection and breeding of fauna permanently or temporarily residing in the soil, water or on land within the territory of Mongolia (hereinafter "fauna").

Article 2. Legislation on Fauna

1. The legislation on fauna consists of the *Constitution of Mongolia*, the *Law on the Protection of the Environment*, the *Law on Special Protected Areas*, this Law and other legislative acts issued in compliance with them.
2. The hunting and trapping of fauna is regulated by the *Law on Hunting*.
3. The protection of livestock and domestic animals is regulated by the *Law on the Genefund of Livestock and Domestic Animals and Protection of their Health*.
4. If an international treaty to which Mongolia is a party is inconsistent with this Law, the provisions of the international treaty shall prevail.

Article 3. Definitions

1. The following terms are used in this Law as defined below:
 - 1) "Distribution area" ("*tarxac nutag*") means the territory fauna reside in or migrate through or the territory suitable for residing and migration of fauna.
 - 2) "Extremely rare animals" ("*nen xovor am'tan*") means wildlife species that have a restricted capacity to recover, a limited distribution, no usable reserves and are in danger of extinction.
 - 3) "Rare animals" ("*xovor am'tan*") means fauna which have a limited capacity to recover, limited distribution, have a small population and are potentially in danger of extinction.
 - 4) "Biotechnical measures" ("*biotexnikiin arga xemzhee*") means activities aimed at improving the habitat and forage conditions of fauna.
 - 5) "Reintroduction of fauna" ("*sergeen nutagshuulax*") means deliberately transferring fauna to their previous habitat in order to protect and breed rare fauna and fauna in danger of extinction.
 - 6) "Game animals" ("*agnuuryn am'tan*") means fauna traditionally hunted or trapped for the use of their hides, fur, meat or other animal parts and fauna which have the potential to be used.
 - 7) "Game resources" ("*agnuuryn nööc*") means the potential size or quota of animals that may be hunted or trapped from their biological reserves without affecting the normal growth and reproduction of the animal (usable potential of animals).

Article 4. Plenary Rights of Aimag and Capital City Citizens' Representative Assemblies and Governors

1. Aimag and capital city Citizens' Representative Assemblies have the following plenary rights concerning the protection of fauna:
 - 1) Approving measures and budgets for protection of extremely rare and rare fauna within their territory and exercising control over their implementation;
 - 2) Establishing limits within their territory according to provision 6.1.1 of this Law;
 - 3) Discussing the governor's reports and information from the databank on fauna;
 - 4) Other plenary rights as provided by law.
2. Aimag and capital city governors have the following plenary rights concerning the protection of fauna:
 - 1) Coordinating and ensuring the implementation of legislation and resolutions related to the protection of fauna;
 - 2) Implementing within their respective jurisdictions the provisions of articles 6.1.3, 6.1.7, 6.1.8, 6.1.9 and 6.1.11 of this Law;

government organization;

- 4) Incorporating measures for the protection of fauna within their jurisdictions in their environmental programs and implementing such measures;
- 5) Other plenary rights as provided by law.

Article 5. Plenary Rights of Sum and Dūüreg Citizens' Representative Assemblies and Governors

1. Sum and dūüreg Citizens' Representative Assemblies have the following plenary rights:

- 1) Approving measures and budgets for the protection of extremely rare and rare fauna within their jurisdictions and exercising control over their implementation;
- 2) Discussing the governor's activity reports on the protection of fauna;
- 3) Other plenary rights as provided by law.

1. Sum and dūüreg governors have the following plenary rights:

- 1) Implementing measures for the protection of the fauna within their jurisdictions according to the environmental programs in which the measures have been incorporated;
- 2) Issuing permits for the use and possession of fauna to citizens and economic entities according to the procedures established by this Law;
- 3) Other plenary rights as provided by law.

SECTION TWO. Protection of Fauna

Article 6. Methods for the Protection of Fauna

1. The following methods shall be used in the protection of fauna:

- 1) Setting limits for fauna use;
- 2) Listing extremely rare and rare fauna in international and Mongolian "Red Books" as well as other relevant treaties and conventions;
- 3) Maintaining the normal growth of fauna, protecting the territory of its distribution and ensure that their migration routes are clear;
- 4) Protecting the gene fund of fauna and their offspring;
- 5) Establishing game reserves and regulating their use;
- 6) Reintroducing fauna to its indigenous habitat;
- 7) Protecting fauna from threats by industrial and economic activities;
- 8) Taking biotechnical measures;
- 9) Assisting fauna that is threatened by disease, natural disaster or other danger;
- 10) Conducting scientific research aimed at establishing measures for the protection of fauna;
- 11) Educating the public in the humane treatment of fauna and disseminating information through the public media regarding the protection of fauna.

2. The central government organization responsible for environmental issues (hereinafter the "central government organization") shall implement the measures indicated in paragraphs 6.1.1-6.1.6, 6.1.10-6.1.11, professional environmental organizations (hereinafter "professional organizations") shall implement the measures indicated in paragraphs 6.1.4, 6.1.6-6.1.9, and citizens and economic entities shall implement the measures indicated in paragraphs 6.1.7-6.1.9.

Article 7. Protection of Extremely Rare and Rare Fauna

1. Extremely rare fauna includes the following species: Asiatic Wild Dog (*Cuon alpinus*), Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), Gobi Bear (*Ursos arctos gobiensis*), Przewalskii horse (*Equus przewalskii*), Wild Bactrian Camel (*Camelus bactrianus ferus*), Musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*), Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus valentinae*), Moose (*Alces alces pfizenmayeri*), Saiga Antelope (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*), Mongolian Saiga (*Saiga tatarica mongolica*), Central Asian Beaver (*Castor fiber birulai*), Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*), Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), Hooded Crane (*Grus monacha*), White-naped Crane (*Grus vipio*), Siberian Crane (*Grus*

4. Any construction of industrial plants, power stations, chemical plants, railways or roads and mining activity within the territory of extremely rare fauna must be approved by the government based on the conclusions of an environmental impact assessment.
5. Rare fauna may be hunted or trapped for the following purposes according to a permit issued by the central government organization:
 - 1) Scientific, research, cultural, artistic and medicinal purposes;
 - 2) According to the payment of special fees by foreigners and Mongolian citizens;
 - 3) For regulating the number of fauna or removing the sources of infectious disease in certain areas.
6. The Government of Mongolia shall approve the list of rare fauna.

Article 8. Establishing Limits for the Use of Fauna

1. For the protection and reproduction of fauna, the central government organization may establish limits for the use of fauna during certain periods.

Article 9. Reintroduction of Fauna

1. The reintroduction of fauna shall be conducted by professional organizations according to permits issued by the central government organization and based upon the conclusions of scientific organizations.
2. The reintroduction of fauna shall be conducted according to the guidelines approved by the central government organization.

SECTION THREE. Ownership, Possession and Use of Fauna

Article 10. Ownership of Fauna

1. As per the *Constitution of Mongolia*, game animals are the property of the state.
2. Unless otherwise specified by law, the raw materials of fauna hunted or trapped according to the amounts stated in the permits, contracts and agreements and following payment of the proper fees belong to the hunter or trapper.

Article 11. Possession of Fauna

1. Citizens and economic entities may possess and use fauna other than extremely rare fauna in order to protect, breed and use them under certain conditions according to a valid contract.
2. The regulations for possession and use of fauna by citizens and economic entities shall be established by the Government and regulated by the aimag and sum Citizens' Representative Assemblies.

Article 12. Types of Use of Fauna

1. The use of fauna means any activities carried out in order to use the specific characteristics of fauna according to the relevant laws and contracts without causing harm.
2. Fauna may be used in the following ways:
 - 1) For scientific, cultural, artistic and aesthetic purposes;
 - 2) For use of important aspects of fauna natural activities such as soil formation, pollinating of plant species and cleaning of nature;
 - 3) Use of animals to obtain the products of their living processes.
3. Other types of fauna use may be established by the central government organization.

Article 13. Use of Fauna for Scientific, Cultural, Artistic and Aesthetic Purposes

1. Use of fauna for scientific, cultural, artistic and aesthetic purposes, including observation, marking, drawing and photography, must be conducted without causing damage to the fauna or destroying its habitat.

2. Unless otherwise specified by law, permissions for use of extremely rare and rare fauna as indicated in 13.1 of this Law may be issued by sum and düüreg governors.

Article 14. Use of Important Aspects of Fauna Natural Activities

1. Use of important aspects of fauna natural activities must be implemented without causing damage to the fauna or health hazards.
2. Sum and düüreg governors shall issue permits for the use of fauna as specified in 14.1 of this Law.

Article 15. Use of Fauna for Extraction of Products of Living Processes

1. Use of fauna for extraction of products of their living processes, such as honey, antlers, velvet antlers or musk glands, must be implemented without causing harm or health hazards or destroying their habitat.
2. Permits for the breeding of fauna and use of animal parts for the purposes of producing medicine or any other by-products shall be issued by the central government organization.
3. Crossbreeding may be done in order to improve animal products.

Article 16. Justification for Termination of a License to Use Fauna

1. A license to use fauna shall be terminated in the following instances:
 - 1) There is no further need for the use of the fauna or its use has been refused;
 - 2) The term of the contract for the use of fauna has expired;
 - 3) The relevant fees have not paid;
 - 4) The economic entity authorized to use fauna has been dissolved;
 - 5) A violation of laws, regulations or contracts for the protection and sustainable use of fauna has occurred.

Article 17. Animal Collections

1. Animal collections ("*am'tny cug/uulga*") include live or stuffed animals, skins, fur, bones and other animal products obtained for research or educational purposes.
2. Permits for animal collection by citizens and economic entities are issued by the central government organization.
3. Permits for the export of animal collections must be issued by the central government organization in compliance with any treaties to which Mongolia is signatory.

SECTION FOUR. Fauna Databank, Fees and Financing

Article 18. Fauna Databank

1. The Fauna Databank consists of the following items:
 - 1) Data on fauna distribution, population size and assessments thereof;
 - 2) Research reports and data on fauna;
 - 3) Animal collections and embryos stored in laboratories;
 - 4) Information on the protection, sustainable use and breeding of fauna;
 - 5) Maps showing game animal distributions and population densities for each aimag and capital city.
2. Establishment of the fauna databank is regulated by the *Law on the Protection of the Environment*.

Article 19. Fees for Use of Fauna

1. The use of fauna by citizens and economic entities is subject to fees.
2. The rates of fees for the use of fauna, procedures for their payment and provisions for discounts and exemption from these fees are defined by separate legislation.

Article 20. Fauna Protection Measures and their Financing

1. Measures to protect fauna may be financed by local government budgets, financial support from citizens and economic entities, and international aid.
2. Measures to protect and define the distribution and population size of extremely rare and rare fauna must be financed from the state budget.
3. Measures to protect fauna other than extremely rare species must be financed as follows:

- 1) Measures to protect and breed fauna in a territory possessed and used by a citizen or economic entity on a contractual basis must be financed by the citizen and economic entity that has possession and use rights for the land concerned;
- 2) Measures for the protection and breeding of animals used by citizens and economic entities must be financed using their own private funding.

SECTION FIVE. Miscellaneous

Article 21. Participation of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Implementation of Conservation and Breeding Measures for Fauna

1. Fauna protection and breeding measures may be implemented by non-governmental organizations on a contractual basis to be established with local governors pursuant and according to permits issued by the central government organization.
2. Non-governmental organizations may carry out activities such as making proposals on improving measures to protect and use fauna, protect fauna and ensure the enforcement of relevant laws.

Article 22. Regulation of Population Size

1. Actions may be taken to regulate the number of fauna in order to ensure ecological balance, protect human health and their safety, prevent infectious diseases to be spread to livestock and domestic fauna, remedy the sources of infectious disease, and to prevent damage to citizens and economic entities.
2. Regulation of population size must be implemented without damaging other species or destroying their habitat and normal growth.
3. Selective culling of rare fauna must be implemented by a professional organization according to a permits issued by the central government organization based on the conclusions of a scientific organization.
4. Culling and measures to combat fauna hazardous to the health of humans, other fauna and to the environment, including animals that cause epidemics or spread rabies and other infectious diseases, and animals with excessive populations must be implemented by the relevant professional organization.

Article 23. Export of Fauna

1. The Government of Mongolia shall issue permits for the export of live extremely rare fauna in accordance with the treaties to which Mongolia is a signatory.
2. The central government organization shall establish procedures for the export of live fauna other than those covered by article 23.1 of this Law and the export of animal parts and research samples.

Article 24. Import of Fauna

1. The import of fauna must be arranged in accordance with procedures approved by the central government organization.

Article 25. Reimbursement for Damage Caused to Fauna

1. Persons liable for losses to fauna as a result of a violation of the legislation on fauna shall reimburse for the losses caused.
2. The amount assessed for reimbursement is double the ecological and economic assessment value determined by the Government.

Article 26. Rewards for Information Provided by Citizens

1. Sum and düüreg governors shall provide a reward to any person who provides information on, identifies or helps to identify violations of the *Law on Fauna*, equivalent to 15 percent of the fines and compensations paid by the violator.

Article 27. Liability for Violations

1. An environmental inspector may impose the following penalties for any violation of the legislation on fauna that is not subject to the *Criminal Code*, depending on the nature of the violation and the extent of damages caused:
 - 1) A fine of 5 000 to 10 000 MNT for a citizen or 50 000 MNT for an economic entity guilty of the use of an expired permit or of transferring a permit or license to a third party, or of an attempt to use fauna without a valid license or permit.
 - 2) A fine of 20 000 to 50 000 MNT for a citizen or 50 000 to 250 000 MNT for an economic entity guilty of hunting extremely rare and rare fauna without a valid license or special permit.

- 3) Confiscation of any animal parts and a fine of 35 000 to 50 000 MNT for a citizen or 150 000 to 250 000 MNT for an economic entity guilty of causing a decline in numbers of rare fauna, destruction of their habitat, or trading in their hides, fur and other parts.
 - 4) A fine of 35 000 to 50 000 MNT for a citizen or 75 000 to 200 000 for MNT for an economic entity guilty of reintroducing or importing fauna without a license or permit.
 - 5) A fine of 10 000 to 50 000 MNT for a citizen or 50 000 to 250 000 MNT for an economic entity guilty of the use of fauna without a license or special permit, and the used fauna must be returned to their habitat or given to the relevant organizations according to the central government organization's decision.
2. Criminal penalties shall be applied in the case of repeated violations of articles 27.1.2 to 27.1.4 of 27.1 of this Law or the hunting or trapping of extremely rare fauna, destruction of their habitat, or importing or trading in their hides, fur, or other parts.

/signature/ Chairman of the State Great Hural of Mongolia R. Gonchigdorj

Translated/Proofread by Tsagt Gombosuren, Legal and Judicial English-<->Mongolian Translator/Interpreter, Accredited by Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, Certificate of Accreditation No 22 Signature: Date: November 29, 2006

Appendix D: To Van's treatment of usury

Widespread incursion of moneylending in the lifeworlds of pastoral nomads occurred in the 18th century in the context of Chinese trading. Similar to the misgivings towards unnatural monetary accrual in medieval Christianity, To Van's own 18th-century misgivings towards usury focused on the incompatibility of (unnatural) monetary and (natural) reproductive forms of growth. For starters, diverse forms of reproduction have figured prominently in historical Mongolian conceptualizations of (economic) prosperity (Empson 2011, 2014). For example, the contemporary Mongolian word for 'interest' accrued from a monetary debt is *hüü*, which also means son, boy and child (Sneath 2012: 462).¹⁷¹ Yet, this reproductive emphasis is not restricted to humans. Similar to the resource dependence of the contemporary moment, Mongolian wealth during the Qing era was frequently measured in terms of animal herds (Namjim 2004a; Natsagdorj 1968; Sanjdorj 1980; Schlesinger 2017). In fact, pastoral consumptive debts to Chinese moneylenders during the Qing era were frequently paid back with the offspring of the major unit of currency at the time—sheep (Namjim 2004a; Sanjdorj 1980). Sanjdorj elucidates how Chinese moneylenders incorporated the natural growth of sheep into their practice—'At the end of the nineteenth century, a Chinese shop sold a brick of tea for one lamb. If the buyer could not pay within a year, the following year the debt would be changed to a two-year-old sheep...In the third year, a three-year-old sheep, plus the proper interest would be taken' (1980: 48). Sanjdorj admonishes this as extortionist, because the three-year-old sheep plus the interest (another three-year-old sheep) would equal six times the original debt of the lamb (49). Moneylenders thus took widespread advantage of pastoral wealth in store of animals by making profit in the conversion (and confusion) between pastoral temporal, ontological worlds and silver-based financing. Nevertheless, the examples indicate that natural/environmental cycles of (animal and familial) growth were central to concepts of wealth during the Qing era—as the *hüü* (interest) of the loan was sometimes literally the *hüü* (child) of the loan's collateral (sheep).

¹⁷¹ Also noting that *sanhüü*, meaning finance, is the maintenance of familial wealth (aka sons/children).

Within this setting, To Van condemned moneylending as inimical to the natural laws of (economic and spiritual) growth. In chapter 1, I discuss To Van's *Treatise* (1853), which drew ethical correlations between moral, economic asceticism in the household, the paying of state taxes and the performance of Buddhist cosmological merit. Within it, he makes the argument that animal-based wealth is spiritually superior to coinage-based wealth:

It may happen that some people with resources don't want to pay the state tax [alba] and instead have the bad thought [muu sanaa] to sell their animals for money and not give tax. If money just sits in your home, it won't increase/grow and will hurt you [Gert baraa möngö baivch ürjihgüi baisaar hohirno]. If you loan out money with interest [hüülbees] for 1 lan, in one year you would get 3 tsen and 6 fun in interest. Yet, one female sheep worth 5 tsen can have one or two lambs in a year each worth 5 tsen. If the lamb dies, you can sell the skin for 6 tsen. Because not just the lamb but the skin is more than the money from interest [möngönii hüügees üne ilüü], you will lose a large amount of money. The guardian spirits of the nation won't like this and various evil omens will result' (Lesson 3).

To Van's argument consists of three part. First, echoing Aristotle's condemnation of the unnatural breeding of sterile money (Walsh & Lynch 2008: 95), To Van asserts that money does not grow on its own (like animals). Secondly, lacking fecundity, money left sitting in a home will unnecessarily cut into the natural cycles of growth of family and herds. Thirdly, this familial 'hurt' [*hohiro*] is accentuated by the inability to money to reach the same value equivalences as animals in the same amount of time. Considering that 10 *tsen* equals 1 *lan* in Qing era denominations, one sheep can produce a value of 1 or 1.5 *lan* in one year's time. One *lan* of money, in contrast, can produce a little over 1.3 *lan* (Bogolepov & Sobolew 2011). Obviously, To Van, as a prince whose income is dependent on taxation, is partially arguing materialistically in order to secure fiscal income. Yet, he is also arguing on a philosophical, cosmological register—to him, turning animals into money unnecessarily stunts the natural accrual of economic and spiritual fortune central to the cycles of samsara. Although the religious context varies, this approach echoes medieval

Christian denunciations of usury as overly concerned with the material over the spiritual world.

Continuing this line of thinking, To Van believes that animal wealth, as opposed to coinage, is more beneficial for the community's joint well-being. Previously in his *Treatise*, he discusses how many families had gone into debt to a local minor official, a *boshgo*, when they haven't been able to pay their required taxation. Families who go into debt to the *boshgo* and then blame the local authorities for the situation are 'fit for (spiritual) punishment' (*shiiitgej tseerlel üzüülbees zohih ard mön*), he condemns. To Van echoes again that this condition can be avoided by heeding the laws of animal accrual:

'Don't enter debt by way of the interest [hüü] from the boshgo. When you have to pay taxation duties, pay using the big male animals like horses and steer, and keep the females ones, because they will reproduce and maintain the number of livestock. Sell the male ones to pay your taxes. If you don't have any animals to sell besides pregnant females, sell them within the local banner [hoshuu]. If you do this, it will be good for animal growth [lim bolbol mal ürijhed tustai]' (Lesson 5).

To Van's argument is thus partly a collective one—turning animals into economic value for debt/loans results in the removal of wealth from the local banner. Considering that banner members tended to share pastoral lands (Empson 2018b; Sneath 2002), resulting also in the intertwining of herds, the removal of animals from the banner had larger communal social and wealth repercussions. Thus, if one *must* sell female animals for money to pay back monetary debts, keep the animal transactions within the local community to mitigate the impact. In contrast, similar to Christian and Hindu arguments surrounding mortgages and usury as communally antisocial (Gregory 2012; Maurer 2006; Nelson 1989; Walsh & Lynch 2008), moneylending transactions should only occur outside of the community lest they lead to unwanted internal squabbling (like with the *boshgo*). In short, moneylending should occur outside of the local sphere, because it incises the natural and interrelated growth of both animals and the social community.

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