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## Wealth and Envy in the Mongolian Gold Mines

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This article examines how positions of power within households are related to new modes of wealth production at a time of drastic socio-economic change<sup>1</sup>. This topic has been a cornerstone in economic anthropology ever since Bohannan's (1959) classic study of the Tiv and the incorporation of money into previously demarcated spheres of exchange. Whilst more recent approaches have considered how wealth opportunities are positioned within broader political critiques and moral evaluations of the relations of production, consumption and exchange (Akin 1999, Parry and Bloch 1989, Taussig 1980), this article proposes to take seriously both the sociality and materiality of wealth. By discussing the different ways in which wealth is produced and conceptualised, I will demonstrate the significance of visibility for an understanding of people's involvement in emerging economies.

When thinking about life in the Mongolian countryside, we might imagine the open steppe land, small clusters of *gers* (tents of nomadic pastoralists, also known in English by the Russian loanword *yurt*) and large herds of animals grazing. Whilst a household member holds the barking dog, we are let into the *ger* and are soon served a seemingly limitless amount of salted milk tea. Casual conversation concerning the health of the family and their animals proceeds, and we are showered with warm hospitality and ready generosity. Upon leaving, we are given bags of dried milk curd, layers of clotted cream and bottles of *airag* (fermented mare's milk) to take with us. Both within and beyond Mongolia, mobile pastoralism has enjoyed a prominent and somewhat romantic place in the imagination of what life in rural Mongolia is like.

However, numerous historical accounts (e.g. Dawson 1980, Huc 1937, Montagu 1956, Ossendowski 1923) describe the longevity and importance of other industries in rural Mongolia. The country has a long history of not just pastoralism but indeed also carpentry, metalwork, trading and mining. Whilst regional research has given privileged attention to practices of herding, I suggest that it is time for a more inclusive recognition of what life in the Mongolian countryside is also about: herders as well as others.

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The event that makes such a re-assessment particularly necessary is the current gold rush that has taken shape in Mongolia since the year 2000. Both men and women, young and old, are taking part, and the number of gold miners continues to rise. Although the transient nature of a gold rush makes it difficult to estimate the number of people involved, latest statistics suggest that the national total in 2003 was in excess of one hundred thousand *ninjas* (Mongolian Business Development Agency 2003:24). The term *ninja* refers to a person who mines for gold without possessing the legally required mining license and thereby evades state regulation with regards to taxation, environmental rehabilitation and land entitlement. Today, their number may have doubled. These numbers merely include those people who are directly involved in mining. In addition to the miners, there are also thousands of gold traders, shopkeepers and restaurant owners involved in the mining economy. In order to convey just how large this gold rush has become, it is worth mentioning that its estimated output by far exceeds the official production figures of the formal industrial mining sector, which alone contributes more than twenty percent to the country's Gross Domestic Product (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2006:116). Although mining is currently the fastest growing industrial sector in the country, increasing its output by more than thirty three percent per year, it is still not enough to keep up with the thousands of hands of informal sector gold miners who are panning for gold in riverbeds. Using simple washing pans, miners earn an attractive income with minimal financial investment and limited technical knowledge. Compared to the national average salary of around sixty USD per month (ibid.:261), gold miners can easily earn four times as much. The gold is there and people find gold every day.

During my twenty months of fieldwork in Central Mongolia, the district of Uyanga became the so-called 'ninja capital' of the country with a population of approximately eight thousand miners, that is, four times the entire herding population of the area. Although the physical separation between the grey, moon-like landscape of the mines and the green steppe is distinct and evident, the social movement of people and their implication in local economic circuits are not similarly confined. As people go about their daily life, they might take up alternating jobs and residence. As a result, 'ninjas' as well as 'herders' are temporal definitions of occupation that do not exclude other professions. The term *ninja* is commonly used by the miners themselves, the general population and government officials in Mongolia and beyond. Apparently the term arose from the miners' appearance when carrying the customary green plastic pan tied to their back, reminiscent of the TV cartoon series called the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Grayson 2006:37).

In the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar ninja mining is commonly regarded as an economic phenomenon driven by poverty and desperation. It is perceived as involving hard working conditions, exposing oneself to intense violence and living amidst thousands of strangers. Ninja mining also requires of you to turn your back to the nomadic pastoralist heritage of the country, where fundamental taboos and practices related to the land enjoy particular importance. As thousands of ninjas pan for gold, large rivers are turned into stagnant mud, leaving humans and animals without clean drinking water. Moreover, as fertile pastureland is perforated with deep mining holes, connected underground with unsupported tunnels, mining areas will never again become safe for habitation. Although these environmental disasters have become an unavoidable reality for the country's population, the gold rush is still depicted by advisors to the Mongolian government, including aid agencies such as the World Bank, as a "viable solution" to "the adverse effects of economic restructuring" (World Bank 2004:ii). However, to the general Mongolian public ninja mining is considered more a blemish, if not an embarrassment.

In this article I will discuss the different ways in which herders and ninjas produce and conceptualise wealth (*bayalag*) and how such differences are related to local expectations of generosity (*ögöömör zan*). Contrary to popular opinion and the convictions of aid agencies, I will show why it is that ninjas who also engage in part-time herding are rarely poor and indeed often belong to wealthy local households. Instead of viewing ninja mining as a 'poverty-driven phenomenon', I want to address in this article why wealthy herders are attracted to mining. I will suggest that this involvement in the emerging gold mining economy has more to do with Mongolian ideas about patriarchy, generosity and specifically the obligation to share wealth than it does purely 'economic' factors.

### **An obligation to give**

When arriving to the district of Uyanga, the low-lying steppe land starts to rise tall, forests appear and the distances between *gers* increase. The herding family with whom I stayed for a year lives thirty minutes motorbike ride from the nearest village (*sumyn töv*) and apart from my host father and oldest brother, most of us never go there. Instead my host mother, my eight unmarried siblings and I go about our daily chores of milking, cooking and herding. Only occasionally do we cross the mountains. The relatives of my host father live in the neighbouring valleys, and whilst he often

visits them, we women only rarely get to go. However, when we do go, it is a special event where lovely food is prepared, gossip and laughter fill the air and warm farewells prepare us for another couple of months apart. My host mother is from a region sixty kilometres away and since getting married she has never been back. At times she longs for her natal homeland (*nutag*), but my host father refuses to let her visit. My host father makes all major decisions within our household group (*ail*), which comprises the main *ger*, the *ger* of the oldest son's nuclear family and a small *ger* for storage. My host father decides when an animal should be slaughtered, when a member of the household group may seek medical attention and when the time is right for seasonal purchases in the regional capital. His decision-making power thus extends beyond his descendants and incorporates all affines who live within the *ail*. In this article I will refer to him and other household heads as 'patriarchs' since the power structure both within and beyond the household group is based on male seniority. When a patriarch dies, his oldest son thus becomes the next household head<sup>2</sup>. Compared to other regions in Mongolia, herding households in Uyanga seem to have a particularly dominant and conservative patriarchal structure<sup>3</sup>.

My host father is a well-respected herder who is in his mid-sixties. With a herd of more than three hundred yaks and five hundred sheep, he is one of the wealthiest herders in the area and he is very proud of having achieved such a large herd without seeking recourse to so-called 'money animals', that is goats. As he says, "goats are money animals. They destroy the steppe, their meat tastes bad, they are difficult to herd because they like to climb up on rocks and the like. So the only reason for having them is to get their cashmere. But a real herder (*jinhen malchin*) doesn't need money. So why have goats?" Although my host father proclaims that money is not necessary, he does go to the village a couple of times per week to sell our milk. When winter approaches he also sells off dozens of animals. He spends this income as well as their meagre state pensions on daily subsistence products, such as salt, tea, flour and the like. He is not a great spender and is indeed proud of being able to sustain his family in ways that are not too dissimilar from his father, grandfather and great grandfather. To him, being a 'real herder' means caring primarily about the animals rather than their

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<sup>2</sup> If a herding family is very wealthy, they may at times insist on uxorilocal marriage instead of the prescribed virilocal arrangements. When the household head dies, it is thus sometimes an in-marrying son-in-law who becomes the next head of the household. In this sense, patriarchy dominates concerns about patriliney.

<sup>3</sup> The presence of particularly powerful male household heads in Uyanga may not be a recent development. With regards to pre-collective pastoral residential male groups in *Arhangai* (a region near Uyanga), Simukov writes "there is a clear tendency to join up in *hotons* [*ail*] according to kinship lines in this *bag* [district]" and "agnatic kinship between household heads was most important" (Simukov 1933:24-29, quoted in Sneath, 2000:214). Although Simukov discusses kin organisation, the importance of agnatic kin may highlight a local priority given to men rather than women.

wool and fluctuating markets<sup>4</sup>. Since pastoral wealth does not necessarily include money, I will first consider what pastoral wealth is considered to be.

Herding households in the area tend to have yaks, sheep, horses and varying numbers of goats. Since it is now more than fifteen years ago that the herding collectives (*negdel*) of the socialist period were dismantled, people today rarely talk about current herd sizes as being in any way related to the past division of herding collective animals. Instead, people see large herds as reflecting admirable herding skills, peaceful relations with local spirits and the good general conduct of a household. A herder can thus be highly skilled and have detailed knowledge of pastures and seasonal changes but still not manage to sustain his herd. As herders do not willingly discuss the delicate matters of spirits' blessings (*hishig*) and household relations, they rarely disclose exactly how many animals they have. However, they spend much time attempting to quantify the herd sizes of other local herders. Daily visits therefore often involve household heads discussing how many animals herders in Uyanga might have. Their comparisons not only concern the number of animals, but also other household possessions such as animal sheds, motorbikes, solar panels and TV satellites. That is, objects that are all visible, countable and comparable. This means that even if herders do not want to disclose their wealth, it is there for everybody to see.

One day I was riding through a distant valley with my host father and with each *ail* (household group) we passed he provided an elaborate inventory of their possessions. He listed everything from the number of animals to Chinese motorbikes. I was surprised by his in-depth familiarity with households which I did not know he even visited. "It's easy", he explained to me. "When you see an *ail* you can immediately tell which animals they have got, how many of each, how they use the animal products, whether they are good herders or not, how many sons and daughters they have, etc. It's all there for you to see (*harah*). Even if you've never visited the *ail*, you can still tell how wealthy they are. Here nothing is secret (*büh yum nuutsgüi*)".

The visibility of pastoral wealth not only means that households cannot hide wealth but also that others can constantly observe it. In moving through the landscape and passing each *ail*, you can thus see not only clusters of *gers* but also clusters of observable wealth. As *ails* are referred to

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<sup>4</sup> Despite pressure to increasingly monetise pastoralism in today's free-market economy, my host father seems to hold on to the ethos espoused by the specialised herding brigades within herding collectives that organised the pastoralist economy until the collapse of the Soviet socialist regime in 1991. These herding brigades were solely responsible for herding the animals, not selling animals or dairy products.

colloquially by the household head's first name, such wealth can be seen to illustrate and objectify *his* persona rather than the collective household labour that went into its production. The household head's name and person are given a tangible material expression that can be compared to that of others, aided by its basis in quantifiable entities. In this sense the patriarch has a lasting presence in the local landscape that cannot be easily ignored. In manifesting the peaceful incorporation of affines, the patriarch's wealth asserts both his own persona and the successful continuity of his patriclan<sup>5</sup> (*ovog*). Observable pastoral wealth thus expresses the local status of household heads as well as the enduring presence of their kin group.

The visible wealth of herding households also leads to rising expectations of generosity. Whilst wealthy herding patriarchs are approached through highly respectable address and deferential demeanour, they are also met with visitors' frequent requests for monetary and material charity. Almost every day distant relatives and acquaintances arrive at my host family with the explicit purpose of asking for help, ranging from generously reduced prices for animals to particular material gifts. My host father describes proudly such requests as testimony to his recognised accumulation of wealth and claims that by giving he performs good deeds (*buyany beleg*) that will ensure a good rebirth<sup>6</sup> (*dahin töröl*). But, not all household members support his desire to be generous.

Once, in a drunken moment, he lent his beautiful saddle with big silver decorations (*möngön tonog*) to a distant acquaintance and upon returning to my host family, they all insisted that he reclaim the saddle. However, to this day he has not re-visited the household and seems visibly annoyed by his family's insistence, at times culminating in frustrated complaints about how "his own family doesn't listen to him". The conflict between the interests of the household head versus the other members is epitomised in their different interpretations of and responsibility for acts of generosity. Whereas visiting guests highlight the material achievements and personal renown of the household head, they also present a practical burden for other household members. As the household accepts the requests of visitors and thereby diminishes its overall wealth, objections are likely to arise from

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<sup>5</sup> I follow Humphrey and Sneath's description of a Mongolian clan as "an ideologically patrilineal kinship group, with its own name and identity" (1999:27). However, it is important to recognise the local variation in generational 'depth' of clans, post-marital residence patterns and clan rituals in Uyanga.

<sup>6</sup> Despite intense prosecutions of religious specialists during the Mongolian socialist period, Buddhist theologies and institutions still have a dominant presence in the country. Closely related to the Tibetan Buddhist order of *Dge-lugs-pa*, Buddhism in Mongolia emphasises the importance of *karma* (the consequences of action) for the attainment of salvation. 'Rebirth' is thus a central concept linking actions of the present with a person's future bodily manifestations, as portrayed in the Wheel of Life.

within. Since younger members of the *ail* can only obtain a share of the household's wealth upon marriage, they often prefer to retain wealth within the *ail* rather than succumbing to the numerous requests from visitors. Moreover, in the case of daughters-in-law, although their dowry animals (*injiin mal*) are legally regarded as their own, they practically form part of the patriarch's wealth and may thus risk being given away. As a result, acts of generosity may jeopardise claims to wealth advanced by both kin and affinal household members.

It is generally only the household head who makes decisions about monetary and material matters, and visitors rarely attempt to make requests to other members of an *ail*. When visitors advance their requests, they give elaborate and emotional descriptions of their dire situation with so much detail that it seems impossible for the patriarch to dismiss their requests smoothly and easily. Following such accounts, visitors usually emphasise the unparalleled wealth of the host and the ease with which his generosity can be shown. The decision is thus presented as a question of the household head's *individual* willingness to give, and not an issue of his material ability or social interest. A visitor's request presents in this sense not just a material burden, but also an invitation for the patriarch to assert his authority domestically as well as publicly. By minimising potential envy (*ataa*) and accepting the requests of visitors, the household head asserts his position both within the household and in society at large.

Since the expectations and demands of visitors appear ever growing, it seems the household head could end up surrendering the entire wealth of the *ail* to them. The patriarch must somehow decide the degree to which he shows generosity. However, when the household head refuses such a request, the visitor may become envious of the *ail*'s wealth and start spreading 'malicious gossip' (*hel am*). Any person, regardless of age and gender, can instigate malicious gossip<sup>7</sup>. The only requirement is in-depth information about the target, such as details of his or her family situation, kinship ties, number and kinds of animals, work chores and material possessions. The more detailed the information, the more powerful the malicious gossip is said to become. The calamities that are attributed to this malicious gossip concern attacks on humans and animals, causing them to suddenly and inexplicably fall ill or die. However, weather disasters, such as drought or extreme winters, and indirect human misfortune, such as encounters with thieves or murderers, are never associated with malicious gossip. Malicious gossip directly attacks the wealth that a household may

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Højer describes *hel am* as "the 'witchcraft' of ordinary life" (2003:81).

have built up. Envy is therefore to be avoided at all costs since a jealous visitor can cause serious calamities for the hosting household.

By accommodating household members' personal interests in the wealth of the *ail* and thereby refusing to show generosity, the patriarch declines an opportunity to display his status as well as invites dangerous envy. Indeed, acts of giving can be seen as essential to herding life, beyond the visiting situations discussed above. For example, giving sustains the continuity of kinship in the sense of fathers separating their daughters from the patriclan (*ovog*) and giving them to the sons of others. Without such giving, households cannot generate descendants. Also, by carrying out daily offerings to spirits residing in the hearth and in the landscape, giving ensures the health and fertility of the herds. As herders offer milk, butter and fat to the 'moody' (*aashtai*) spirits, they hope to receive 'blessings' (*hishig*), which are considered necessary for a herd to grow. However, giving is fundamental not only to the reproduction of kinship and pastoral fortune, but also to Mongolian notions of personhood. In a recent article on funerary practices in Mongolia, Humphrey (2002) describes the dangers involved when someone becomes so attached to an object that it excludes others (*horgodoson yum*). If upon death the soul (*süns*) of a person remains emotionally attached to one particular object and refuses to let go, it may bring bad luck onto his or her relatives. Ritual intervention is therefore necessary in order to separate the soul from the object, dissolving the exclusive and possessive relationship. Achieving such separation, the object is then destroyed or given away, and a person and his or her soul (*süns*) can finally travel safely from this life to the next. In both life and death, refusing to give and let others have their share jeopardises peaceful living and is essentially anti-social as well as anti-personal.

Although fundamental importance is attached to the act of giving, this does not mean that giving is necessarily altruistic and disinterested. I suggest that the Mongolian way of giving, in which a patriarch decides autonomously to part with some of his household's wealth, is not an example of a 'free gift' (cf. Parry 1986). By showing generosity, the giver receives not only public acclaim and the blessings of spirits, but also herding assistance as a form delayed reciprocity. Recipients of repeated generosity often assist the giving household in undesirable chores such as slaughtering animals, preparing hides and shearing sheep. In this sense, acts of giving assert hierarchical relationships within the household as well as far beyond it.



However, although what is given is sometimes reciprocated, it would be misleading to approach the generosity of herders in terms of the idiom of ‘exchange’ (see also Humphrey 1993:16). ‘Exchange’ implies reciprocation (whether generalised or otherwise) and assumes that what is given is indeed meant, by the actors involved, to be reciprocated. Moreover, ‘exchange’ also implies that what is given is in fact reciprocated. Such an emphasis on bilateral expectations and interactions risks misconstruing what, for Mongolians, makes giving an act of generosity. I suggest that it is actually the dissociation between giving and reciprocating that makes generosity such a strain on households (Bourdieu 1977:14, 171). With this powerful obligation to be generous, it is difficult for a herder to avoid altogether situations where he is expected to give. At the time of my fieldwork, my host father had a peculiar strategy for negotiating the social expectations of generosity.

During any given day my host father spends most of his time away from the main *ger*, which guests associate with him, and instead sleeps, works and relaxes in a small, decrepit *ger* erected far behind it. When visitors arrive, they invariably ask where the household head is, and the reply is always the same: “He went out herding the sheep” (*honynd yavsan*), even when everyone knows that he is sitting in the other *ger*. In this way he evades visitors and in particular their demands for his generosity. In his absence it becomes impossible for visitors to make requests and, even if they know his ‘hiding place’, it would be considered rude for a visitor to enter his small *ger*. Such a *ger* is usually for storage or dairy production only and not for human habitation. It is also expected that a small *ger*, if inhabited, would be poorly decorated in terms of carpets and adornments, thus not appropriate for meeting a patriarch. In this way, I suggest that the household balances hospitality with carefully crafted restraint. In identifying the demands that are undesirable for the patriarch to attain to, he restricts his exposure to the financial requests of visitors and their potential for spreading malicious gossip.

### **Concealing wealth**

Whilst I have so far shown how the possession of wealth gives rise to increasing social obligations and crystallises conflicting interests within the household, many herders are still interested in accumulating material and animate possessions. However, since pastoral wealth is constantly visible and countable, it is always on public display and not all patriarchs have extra *gers* to hide in. Instead, with *ninja* mining taking place only a few kilometres from their households, herders now

have a new way of making increased wealth less visible and measurable. I suggest that by taking part in the gold rush, herders can achieve a higher status with fewer social obligations.

In the mines of Uyanga, thousands of miners live in *gers* and tattered camping tents pitted closely up against each other. As the hillsides and valley floors gradually become perforated with mining holes, miners repeatedly relocate to different grounds in search of new suitable living areas. With mining continuing day and night, the appearance of an area changes radically within only a few months. With hardly any permanent structures, the occasional visitor relies on features of the landscape to provide orientation. However, as miners divert rivers, move excavation areas and turn hillsides into living quarters, nothing is permanent; least of all the landscape that is excavated at great speed.

Despite such transient living conditions, a long-term visit will reveal a particularly lasting feature of life in the mines. Although people move at least once every few months, they tend to reorganise themselves in relatively stable groups of three to five *gers*. Within such clusters, people assist each other in daily household tasks and work-related activities. From early morning, both men and women call on their neighbours and other friends for small favours. Whilst women rely on each other for kitchen utensils, cooking ingredients and occasional help as babysitters, men often borrow each other's mining equipment. Outside the *gers* men can often be seen hunched on their heels in a circle around somebody repairing his motorbike, sluice box or diesel generator. Packets of cigarettes and bottles of vodka are passed around and amicable banter fills the air.

These networks of friendship provide the basis for work-teams where men and women work alongside each other. Depending on the location and size of the mining hole, work-teams number from four to sixteen with some people working above ground and others inside the mining hole. In some areas the gold-ore is deep underground, located at a depth of up to eighteen meters. To reach such a depth involves several weeks of hard manual labour. Equipped with only a hand-made metal pick, miners scrape into the hard stony soil and fill tattered flour bags with gravel and dirt. As the miners slowly make their way into the underground, workers on the surface use a simple hand-crank pulley (*libotok*) to lift up the heavy bags and to transport workers up and down the hole at the change of shifts. When the miners reach the gold-ore, they dig horizontally to create a star-shape with several tunnels diverging off from the main shaft.

If the mining shaft is far from a water source, so-called “dirt taxis” (*shoroony taksi*) are paid to take the bags from the mine to the water. If the mining shaft is near a water source, the workers on the surface simply carry their bags to the water to start the panning process. Plastic washing pans (*tumpun*) are quickly filled with gravel, submerged under water and swirled around in large circles. The larger stones are taken out and the pan is then submerged again. The worker repeatedly separates out the largest gravel and eventually ends up with fine mud containing some shiny particles, mostly the size of snowflakes. The worker licks his or her palm before carefully placing the gold flakes in it. Storing the gold in paper from cigarette boxes, the workers take their findings to the locally based gold traders (*altny chanj*) and exchange the commonly called “yellow stuff” (*shar yum*) for cash. At the time of my fieldwork, ninjas received 1700 tugrugs (US\$ 1.4) per 0.1 gram of gold. From my observations among both miners and gold traders, I estimate that most miners earn a minimum of 5000 tugrugs (US\$ 4.15) per day. This is a very attractive potential income that is comparable to those of white collar workers such as legislators, senior officials, managers and other professionals (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2006:108).

In addition to the simple and low investment panning technique, ninjas also procure gold in other ways. Another option is a soft plastic mat with small indentations (*erzen*). This mat is very popular as it makes the washing process much faster by lodging gold into its indented squares, thereby catching more gold. It is sometimes combined with other techniques such as a ‘drum’ (*pajur*) used in conjunction with a ‘water canon’ (*usan buu*). This mining technique consists of a manually modified metal drum with numerous holes, a handle to turn it and a meshed slide coming off below the middle of the drum. One person turns the drum while two others feed it with gravel, and another directs the flow of the water from the water canon. Whilst the heavy stones are released through the holes in the drum, the smaller metals are lodged at the bottom of the drum. A slide, which is occasionally fitted with the above-mentioned plastic mats, catches the heaviest small particles and the lightest are pushed through with the flow of the mud. By using this equipment, a team of at least four surface workers can process an amount of gravel equivalent to about seventy bags per day, earning an estimated minimum of 15’000 tugrugs (US\$ 12.50) per day per person, whereas by panning by hand, one person can wash the content of no more than ten bags per day.

As several different mining techniques are popular in Uyanga, it is impossible for almost anyone outside the individual work-team to know how much gold a person has found in a particular day. The variables are numerous and concern anything from the particular mining technique applied, the

location of the mining shaft to the precise organisation of the work-team. Firstly, as outlined above, miners use different kinds of equipment and this leads to variations in the length of work shifts, the number of workers involved and average recovery rates. Secondly, due to varying concentrations of gold-ore, some mining shafts yield much more gold than others, regardless of the technique used. Apart from these more general variables, profitability also depends on the depth and width of the mining shaft and the number of tunnels within it. All in all, this means that income levels are as hidden as the nature of the work itself. As the miners enter underground, so does the ability of others to ascertain how much gold they uncover. The covert quality of the mining process gives rise to an income that is non-visible and non-comparative. Unless miners directly enquire into each other's earnings, it is certain to remain unknown to people other than the miner.

In addition to the varying amounts of gold that miners uncover, they also spend their earnings in diverse ways. Upon selling their gold to resident gold-traders in the mines, most ninjas immediately spend part, if not all, of their earnings at local shops. As ninjas tend to work and socialise with their neighbours and other friends, rather than kinsmen, they are under no explicit obligation to share their earnings with others<sup>8</sup>. They can therefore decide relatively autonomously how to spend their money. Since a section of a gold-trader's *ger* usually functions as a small shop, most ninjas immediately relinquish part of their earnings to the gold-trader to buy some of the goods on display. Whilst most of the products in the 'ger shops' (*geriin delgüür*) are subsistence goods, such as pasta, rice, deep-fried bread and vegetables, customers also buy sweets, cigarettes, cheap vodka and Korean beer. At the end of a long workday, miners often buy alcohol and take it to a friend's *ger* where larger drinking sessions develop. It seems that, even if there is nothing to celebrate, there is almost always a reason to bury one's sorrow in drinking. In the ninja mining areas empty bottles cover the ground and drunken people can be seen throughout the day. Having carried out fieldwork with both ninjas and gold-traders, I estimate that alcohol is the single most common and financially significant expenditure in the mines.

The intense drinking is not only a way of momentarily forgetting about the harsh working conditions and personal injuries. Indeed, in social drinking situations ninjas engage in a particular kind of giving that leaves no other traces than drunkenness and vague memories of circulating vodka bottles. The generous giver swiftly opens his or her bottle and passes it around to others who

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<sup>8</sup> Ninjas living in nuclear families do share their earnings and are expected to disclose honestly and willingly the income of the day. However, even within families ninjas often hesitate to talk about earnings and seem to try to spend at least a little before returning to the *ger*.

will then serve it to the group. Whereas drinking among herders is highly formal and ritualised, with explicit hosts and guests, drinking among ninjas does not involve the same degree of structured formality. As such, the identity of the giver in a ninja drinking situation does not endure in any social or material sense. By giving alcohol, ninjas thus give without necessarily being marked as generous. I suggest that this desire to ‘consume money’ is related to perceptions of ninja money as dangerous (*ayultai*), heavy (*hünd*) and polluted (*buzartai*). Since miners transgress taboos related to the land, their wealth is procured amongst upset local spirits. Moreover, in their search for the precious metal, miners also ignore the historical restriction on gold, associated exclusively with divine rulership (Allsen 1997:93). In pursuing the socially and cosmologically subversive acts of mining, ninjas end up with ‘polluted money’ (*buzartai möngö*) that can potentially damage its holder. Unless money earned from mining is ‘cleansed’ (*ariulah*) through elaborate rituals, its holder may suffer illness and general misfortune. As a result, people never invest such money in animals or other durable wealth objects<sup>9</sup>. Instead it is spent on fleeting subsistence goods and alcohol. However, having cleansed the money, herding families may spend it on a daughter’s education in the capital city or on a much needed operation at the hospital. That is, they would transact cleansed ninja money for transformative processes only.

All these ways of spending money earned from ninja mining are entirely private matters that are not visible, countable and comparable in the same way or to the same degree as the wealth of herders. With the absence of obvious material indicators of wealth in the mines, ninjas are not obligated, like herders are, to display or discuss their wealth. Consequently, when ninjas talk about and compare individuals who have been unusually lucky, such conversations never concern people who have made less than singular discoveries. Whilst ninjas are interested in the different luck (*az*) of particular people, they are rarely as interested in their wealth (*bayalag*). Since luck<sup>10</sup> is recognised socially through elaborate celebrations following large gold discoveries, the value of the gold discovered is publicly proclaimed and relished, whereas mundane daily accumulations of wealth remain private. As with herders, ninjas insist that wealth is not merely a question of how good a miner you are. Since the spirits of the land bestow blessings (*hishig*) upon herders as well as miners, finding gold is not simply a practical task of digging deep holes and panning the gravel for gold flakes. The amount of gold ninjas find is instead perceived as entirely dependent on the

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<sup>9</sup> See Shipton (1989) for a comparative case on ‘bitter money’ among the Luo of Kenya.

<sup>10</sup> When asking people about the idea of ‘luck’ (*az*), they explained that it was not related to spirits or their blessings (*hishig*). Instead, luck was described as an entirely unpredictable and impersonal quality manifested in the result of actions.

generosity of the spirits. Whilst knowledge of mining techniques and local geology may increase the chances of striking a gold vein, such insights alone are not seen as sufficient. Maintaining a good relationship with local spirits is thus paramount to success in mining. In this sense, ninjas may choose to keep information about wealth private for reasons similar to those of herders. To talk about one's wealth is to disclose matters that are highly personal, powerful and uncertain. Moreover, ninjas may also prefer to conceal their wealth given the prevalence of violence in the mines.

However, I suggest that people in the mines also conceal their earnings in order to accumulate wealth without becoming subject to the expectations of demanding visitors and, in turn, risk being targeted by envy and malicious gossip. As one of my ninja hosts said: "Although the mines are dirty and difficult, life here is still easier for me. Here no one expects anything". Since such expectations are particularly pronounced in the herding areas, it is not surprising that many herders supplement their herding livelihood with a monetary income from the ninja mining areas. If a herding household has at least one family member who works in the mines, its wealth can no longer be measured by counting winter sheds and animals alone. Whether a herder is rich or not, then, becomes a guessing game as the expectation of receiving charitable loans and unmatched generosity is lowered and transferred onto other herders who have taken a different stance vis-à-vis ninja mining and accepted their necessary display of income.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the question of why my host father does not want to have so-called 'money-animals' such as goats, we are now able to see that such a statement is about much more than goats destroying the steppe and climbing rocks. By considering the sociality and materiality of wealth, I hope to have shown that money is a particular kind of wealth. It is different from having wealth in animals, motorbikes and lots of grandchildren. Money earned from animals is also different from 'polluted money' earned from gold mining. However, in being concealable, all kinds of monetary wealth do not amount to as public an expression of the patriarch's enduring position in the landscape. Money does not provide visible emblems of his success at appeasing spirits and incorporating affines into his household. Also, in lowering expectations of generosity, its holder may greedily insist on his or her exclusive claim to money. In personalising ownership and excluding all others, acts of taking rather than giving characterise its handling. As such, money

negates the physical expression of wealth and minimises its social potential. By refusing to let his household be partly sustained by the sale of cashmere, I believe my host father tries to limit the extent to which money, with its individualising potential, is allowed into the household. A stubborn yak bull or a new Chinese motorbike are then better conveyors of his position as well as his household's future. Faced with a large gold rush, he insists that only herding wealth, despite its perils, presents the future for his family.

What I have suggested in this article is that Mongolian informal mining is not a simple economic phenomenon that provides opportunities for the poor. Participation in the gold rush is informed not only by economic need but indeed also, more fundamentally, by Mongolian ideas about wealth and generous giving. As mining has become one of the most important economic sectors in the country, it is important to move beyond representations of Mongolia as an essentially pastoralist country in which industrial practices are alien to rural life on the steppe. I have suggested that by examining the production and conceptualisation of wealth in the mining areas, we are better able to understand even the most fundamental notions of wealth, generosity and envy within Mongolian sociality and cosmology.

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