

Between Iron and Coal:  
Enacting Kinship, Bureaucracy  
and Infrastructure in the *Ger*  
*Districts* of Ulaanbaatar

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*I, Elizabeth Fox 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:**

Presenting an urban-focused account of life in contemporary Mongolia, this thesis moves away from the intractability of structure-agency debates to engage with the tensions between obligation and creativity, and form and failure explored through the polysemic metaphors of ‘iron’ and ‘coal’. Based on long-term fieldwork in *ger districts* on the outskirts of Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar, it examines how people make and unmake (or are made and unmade by) relationships, and how the material and linguistic *enaction* of these relations shapes life on many scales.

The thesis commits to developing its theoretical insights out of the ethnographic material. Rather than relying on conceptions of urbanity developed from sedentary societies, it develops a novel perspective on rural-urban migration in Mongolia that draws on historical links between power and movement. Likewise, positioned against the tropes of ‘sedentarised nomads’, the thesis instead traces complex lines of continuity and rupture in the *ger districts* across social spheres, focusing on: the domestic use of kin terms, the materialisation of networks through the exchange of meat and other resources, the assemblage of the state by bureaucratic technologies in the local welfare office and the ‘hosting’ of bureaucrats in *ger district* homes. Inspired particularly by approaches to language and hospitality, it examines how words and things can simultaneously be manifestations of obligatory forms *and* performative enactments of a present-in-the-making.

Attending reflexively to language, the thesis also experiments with forms of writing, its theoretical interventions embedded into the very structuring of the chapters. Such experiments in anthropological method are demanded by the nature of the study, attending as it does to iterations of daily life betwixt and between. This thesis thus not only delves ethnographically into the creative tensions between form and practice but also attempts to reconstitute those tensions.

## **Impact Statement**

This thesis presents ethnographic material from an understudied area of the world in innovative ways. While limited anthropological research has been carried out in urban Mongolia, few studies have focused specifically on the outskirts, and even fewer have been based on long-term residential fieldwork in the Ulaanbaatar ger districts. As such, this thesis is one of the first long-form anthropological studies of these unique urban areas providing insight on contemporary life in this growing city. It has wide potential outside of academia to generate evidence-based approaches to issues of infrastructure, marginalisation and the drivers of rural-urban migration.

The studies of Ulaanbaatar and the ger districts that do exist tend to reproduce standard narratives of precarity and infrastructural failure. This thesis departs from such an approach. Instead of defining the ger districts according to everything they appear to ‘lack’, it explores what is there. It examines the ties of kinship and relational networks that crisscross the country and bring the ger district into existence through the flows of people and materials that pass between countryside and city. It delves into the material culture of the ger district to explore the opportunities and hardships of life there without relying on paradigms of distance and access drawn from sedentarised models of urbanity. In presenting local perspectives and challenging existing views on a peripheralised but growing urban area, this thesis has the potential to impact how policymakers and commercial enterprises view and engage with such sites.

Other areas of study to which this thesis may provide an impact are those of the state, government bureaucracy and welfare programs. Mongolia is a country where the role of the state has changed dramatically over the last century, particularly with the transition from socialism to capitalist democracy. At a time of global economic downturn or fragile and uncertain growth, questions regarding the role of the state and the effects of austerity policies demand attention. This thesis therefore explores closely the effects of welfare programs on the urban poor. These issues have rarely been tackled in Mongolia in the way this thesis attempts, meaning that it can provide the basis

for both state and non-governmental actors to critically reassess the lived experience of democracy and post-socialism in this urban context.

Beyond presenting new ethnographic material, the thesis engages with this material using innovative techniques of writing. This is to say that it takes inspiration from the ethnographic realities of life on these urban outskirts and seeks to incorporate them into the writing of the thesis. Writing about economically precarious lives under bureaucratic surveillance requires sensitivity to the power of words to shape external perspectives. The thesis also applies creative techniques of writing to questions of state-citizen relationships. Rather than taking the state's point of view for granted, for example, it presents a counter-narrative and lets this shape the writing both in terms of content and form. Given this, the thesis has the impact of encouraging academics and others to consider how they write, not just what they write.

# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT:</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>IMPACT STATEMENT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>NOTE ON LANGUAGE</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>FIRST TASTES OF ULAANBAATAR</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>URBAN MONGOLIA</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>THE WARMTH OF THE HEARTH AND THE COST OF COAL</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>INTERVIEWS IN AGLAG AND BEYOND</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>FROM THE HOME TO THE HOROO</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>COAL AND IRON</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>ETHNOGRAPHIC COMMITMENTS</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>AGLAG AND THE MOUNTAIN OF SUFFERING HEROES</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>INFRASTRUCTURE, KINSHIP, BUREAUCRACY</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>ENACTION: MATERIALS AND LANGUAGE</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</b>	<b>40</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER ONE 'WHERE ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS, BUT NONE IS HIS BROTHER'S EQUAL': KINSHIP AS CONTEXT</i></b>	<b>45</b>
<b>BADRAXH AND ULZII</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>KINSHIP AS CONTEXT</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>CLASSIC MODELS OF MONGOLIAN KINSHIP</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>INTRODUCTIONS: BADRAXH AND ULZII'S FAMILY NETWORK (CIRCA 2016)</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>RECKONING KIN IN 21ST-CENTURY MONGOLIA</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>LANGUAGE AND KINSHIP</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>VOCATIVE USE OF KIN TERMS IN MONGOLIA: <i>AH, EGCH</i> AND <i>DÜÜ</i></b>	<b>61</b>
<b>HONORIFICS</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>RELATIONALITY</b>	<b>65</b>
<b><i>AGAAN DÜÜ</i></b>	<b>67</b>
<b><i>AH DÜÜ</i> RELATIONS</b>	<b>68</b>
<b><i>CHAPTER TWO FLESH AND BLOOD: EATING AND RELATING IN THE ULAANBAATAR GER DISTRICTS</i></b>	<b>71</b>
<b>FROM LANGUAGE TO MATERIAL</b>	<b>72</b>
<b><i>IDESH</i> AND MEAT NETWORKS</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>OBLIGATION AND BLOOD</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>NAADAM 2016</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>THINKING THROUGH BREAKDOWN</b>	<b>81</b>
<b><i>MAH</i> AS KINSHIP</b>	<b>85</b>
<b><i>MAH</i>: MEAT</b>	<b>86</b>
<b><i>OTS</i> AND <i>TEVSH</i></b>	<b>87</b>
<b>EATING THE <i>NUTAG</i></b>	<b>88</b>
<b>THE MEAT OF THE GER DISTRICT</b>	<b>91</b>

<b><u>CHAPTER THREE <i>THE GER DISTRICT</i></u></b>	<b>94</b>
URBANISATION IN CONTEMPORARY MONGOLIA	94
‘NOMAD VS. URBAN’	95
GER DISTRICTS IN HISTORY	98
BEYOND ‘LACK’	99
THE GER DISTRICT	101
BADRAKH AND ULZII’S <i>HASHAA</i>	103
MOVING TO THE GER DISTRICT: BADRAKH AND ULZII’S STORY	105
INFRASTRUCTURE OF AGLAG	111
RELATIONS AS INFRASTRUCTURE	114
UNPACKING MOVEMENT	116
UNREQUIRED RELATIONS	119
<b><u>CHAPTER FOUR: ‘LIVES LIKE OURS’: COMPARISON AND CONFLICT IN THE HOROO</u></b>	<b>122</b>
<b><u>CHAPTER FIVE <i>PERFORMING (FOR) THE BUREAUCRATIC GAZE</i></u></b>	<b>151</b>
GANBOLD VISITS DELERTSETSEG AND BATNARAN	151
LEAVING THE <i>HOROO</i>	152
DOCUMENTS AND TRANSPARENCY	154
“PAPERREALITY”	156
BUREAUCRATIC INDIFFERENCE	157
GANBOLD VISITS TUNGALAG	159
PERFORMING FOR THE BUREAUCRATIC GAZE I: LEVEL ONE	163
GANBOLD VISITS LHAGVAA	165
PERFORMING FOR THE BUREAUCRATIC GAZE II: PAPERWORK AND STORIES	167
A CIGARETTE WITH GANBOLD	170
HOSPITALITY	172
HOSTING A BUREAUCRAT	176
ZONES OF CRAFT	179
<b><u>CHAPTER SIX <i>ANTICIPATING IN-BETWEEN</i></u></b>	<b>181</b>
POST-ELECTION PAWN SHOPS AND PINE NUTS	183
UNCERTAINTY, HOPE AND WAITING	187
ANTICIPATION	190
NUTS AND SAFETY NET(WORK)S	191
ANTICIPATION AS PRE-EMPTIVE ACTION	193
ANTICIPATION AS EXPECTATIVE WAITING	194
<b><u>CONCLUSION <i>BETWEEN IRON AND COAL</i></u></b>	<b>200</b>
<b><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u></b>	<b>205</b>
<b><u>APPENDIX I: KEY MONGOLIAN TERMS</u></b>	<b>227</b>
<b><u>APPENDIX II: CMP VS. FSP</u></b>	<b>230</b>

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## Note on Language

Apart for the subsection headings in Chapter Four, Mongolian words in the text are italicised and transliterated according to the following system. Except in the case of a few well-known terms, I have used the following system:

О as O

Ө as Ö

У as U

Ү as Ü

Ё as Yo

Э as E

Е as Ye

Я as Ya

Х as H

И, Ы and ЫI as I

Ь and Ь as '

Ю as Yu/Yü (depending on conjunction with back/front vowel)

В as W

Due to there being many spellings in English, I refer to the Mongolian currency using MNT (Mongolian *tögrög*). The exchange rate at the time of writing is £1 = 3,340MNT (19 December 2018). During my fieldwork, the currency fluctuated. In early 2015 it was around £1 = 2,990MNT and when I left Mongolia in September 2016 it was around £1 = 3,320MNT.

## INTRODUCTION

### First Tastes of Ulaanbaatar

The sound of laughter and the smell of fresh paint fill the small room where two women and I sit drinking a cup of sugared black tea, taking a break from sanding and filling walls. Childhood friends born in the Mongolian countryside, Ulzii and Jargal Egch are now in their forties and work together as cleaner-caretakers at a private university's student dormitory. The women are reminiscing about their earliest experiences of Ulaanbaatar. Doubled over with girlish laughter, Ulzii recounts how she first encountered condoms with her husband in a shop.

“We didn't know about these sorts of bad things, Badrakh and I ... We thought they were plasters.<sup>1</sup> I just took a few, but then Badrakh told me, ‘Take a lot! We might need them in case we cut a finger or foot or something!’ The two girls there were laughing, thinking, ‘What's going on with these two?’ They told us, ‘those are condoms!’”

Jargal Egch interjects, “So, did you take some?”

Ulzii laughs, “No! We saw these two laughing at us, we were so embarrassed we just left! Then we were so hungry, so we saw a little *guanx*-like place (Mongolian café), we went in and we saw this thing called coffee for the first time. There was a plastic bag thing; they gave us water and a spoon. ‘Now, how do we drink this?’ we thought. We didn't know anything. It's hard to be uncivilised! (*soyolgüi hün chin hetzüü*) Then the girl came over and made it for us. ‘Drink it’, she said, we drank it ...”

Jargal Egch responds with an “Ooh” as she remembers her first taste of instant coffee, “it's awful the first time!”

“It was terrible,” says Ulzii. “It had such a bad taste. We were total failures (*bütehgüi*). Just had to leave”.

One memory prompts another. Ulzii begins to tell an older story of how both she and Jargal Egch were brought to the city for a brief summer trip

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<sup>1</sup> Band-Aids; *sharhni naalt*

<sup>2</sup> While there has been a shift towards accounting for urban life in Mongolia in recent years, it should be noted that the body of work on Mongolia has long been focused on pastoralism and countryside contexts, shamanism and other religious practices, and more recently, mining.

when they were in school. “There were seven or eight of us students. Well, you know those *marojin* (Russian ice creams); they come in a soft cone with paper on the outside. Our teacher bought us each an ice cream and – it’s funny – when we were finished she told us, ‘My children, make sure you throw the paper in the rubbish bin’. We all just looked at each other; there was nothing to throw away!”

She collapses into giggles. “All of us had eaten the paper *with* the ice cream!” she cries gasping for air. “Everything was so unfamiliar. We were know-nothing countryside children (*hödöönii yu ch meddeggüi hüühdüüd*) even though we were already in seventh grade”.

Ulzii continues to reminisce about this summer trip. The teacher had brought them to the city to show them things. Well, they were just happy to see a building each day! Walking around between the buildings was interesting enough. At that time the city seemed so beautiful to them, full of lights. The women remember being unable to sleep from all the excitement. “We were so backwards (*büdüüleg*) at that time, no culture (*soyolgüi*)”, she says, and Jargal Egch agrees.

Jumping forward to the present day, the laughter soon ends. The women drink the last sips of their teas and begin retying their scarves over their heads to protect their hair from the paint dust. Ulzii sighs pensively, “It’s strange, now it’s been about 12 years since we moved to the city, and actually I still don’t know it. Sometimes, you know, I would like to see the things there are to see but I just go back and forth from home to work”. Agreeing with Ulzii, Jargal Egch sets down her cup. We collect our brushes and scrapers and head back to work.

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This thesis follows the lives of people like Ulzii and Jargal Egch, who live on the spatial outskirts of Ulaanbaatar in areas known as ger districts. The ger districts (*ger horoolol*) are so called because they are districts of the city in which people predominantly live in Mongolian ‘yurts’ (*ger*) or small houses (*baishin*) on fenced parcels of land called *hashaa*. A long-established urban form throughout Mongolia, dating back to at least the 18th century when Ulaanbaatar was known as Urga (Rupen 1957), the ger districts were peripheralised during the socialist-era planning and re-building of the city

(Taraschewski 2008: 185, cited in Castrillon et al. 2016: 226). The architecture of the ger districts differs from the Soviet-planned centre of Ulaanbaatar because gers and *bashins* are not connected to running water, central heating or the sewage system. Instead, residents collect and pay for water from nearby kiosk wells, heat their homes with coal- and wood-fired stoves, and use outdoor toilet pits.

Based on fieldwork in an Ulaanbaatar ger district that I call Aglag, the thesis presents an intimate account of life on these urban peripheries among people who are neither inside nor outside the city. As we see from her words above, Ulzii has lived ‘in Ulaanbaatar’ now for many years and yet she does not feel she knows it. She may be registered as a city resident but she feels hardly more settled now than she did as a girl when she and her classmates innocently ate the paper around their ice cream cones. Over the course of six chapters this thesis will examine life in the ger districts from three vantage points: kinship, infrastructure and bureaucracy, examining how they are instantiated through relations, materials and language. Across the ethnographic contexts of a ger district home, a welfare office and a network of relations that spans country and city, the thesis examines how ‘structures’ such as hierarchical kin relations and associated obligations, the power of natal origin points, bureaucratic classificatory systems and ‘the state’ come to be both made and transformed through daily, routine *and* extraordinary (inter)actions. It does so by rethinking questions of structure and agency through the metaphors of iron and coal.

## **Urban Mongolia**

For a long time Ulaanbaatar was viewed by anthropologists as only a “stopover en route to the ‘real field’”, as Lars Højer and Morten Pedersen remember feeling in the past (forthcoming: 5). However, in recent years, a new generation of scholars has begun to approach Mongolia’s capital city as a field site in its own right, (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2016; Billé 2008/9; Diener and Hagen 2013; Højer 2012; Højer and Pedersen forthcoming; Humphrey 2017; Pedersen 2012, 2017; Pedersen and Højer 2008; Plueckhahn 2017, forthcoming; Plueckhahn and Bayartsetseg 2018). Thus far, anthropological

work on Ulaanbaatar has tended nevertheless to account for the ger districts from the outside.

In his introduction to the city of the 1990s, Christopher Kaplonski devotes a paragraph to the ger districts, highlighting their infrastructural situation “without running water or plumbing”, and quotes an official’s unconfirmed claim that “60 per cent of the population lives in gers” (2004: 30). Morris Rossabi’s history of Mongolia includes a short discussion of ger districts under the subheading “Poverty in Ulaanbaatar” (2005: 140-144). Rossabi also claims that 60 per cent of the population of the city lives on these “polluting fringes”, areas that have grown and taken their particular form because the “state lack[s] the resources to provide new housing and private construction companies [cannot] afford the high interest rates charged by banks” (2005: 141).

In their volume on *Mongols from Country to City*, editors Ole Bruun and Li Narangoa and their contributors deal only sparingly with the ger districts. The editors point to “the destitute life of jobless migrants in the ger districts” as one end of the extremes that are now visible in Mongolian society (2006: 7; see also Bruun 2006). Alicia Campi seeks to contextualise Ulaanbaatar with reference to Mongolia’s long-overlooked urban history, and refers to the ger districts as a form that links Ulaanbaatar “to the past and to other Mongol cities” (2006: 37). David Sneath characterises the ger district as “a form of urbanism with only some of the characteristics and amenities associated with the urban lifestyle”, and points out that while such areas were expected to disappear and be replaced with built accommodation, the urban periphery has instead “become the most rapidly expanding part of the metropolis” (2006: 158). Thus, even as scholars have begun to engage with urban Mongolia and anthropological accounts of a vibrant and contradictory city have emerged, few anthropologists have engaged directly with the ger districts, nor based themselves in these distinctive areas to carry out their fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While there has been a shift towards accounting for urban life in Mongolia in recent years, it should be noted that the body of work on Mongolia has long been focused on pastoralism and countryside contexts, shamanism and other religious practices, and more recently, mining.

Carrying out residential fieldwork within the ger district I call Aglag rather than looking out at the ger districts ‘sprawling’ across mountainsides from the vantage of the city centre, or as a border area to pass through on the way to or from the Mongolian countryside, provides this thesis with a different perspective on contemporary Mongolian life. Being present through the changing seasons over the course of five years, I watched the meadow flowers in the *hashaa* bloom high through the summer, the path to the outhouse become marked in the autumn frost and the pile of coal gradually turn to dust and debris over the choking winter months, and also felt the relief of the spring thaw and the accompanying dust storms, all of which lends an intimate materiality and particularity to my understanding of these areas. Likewise, becoming a daughter to a ger district family, moving with them between countryside and city centre, between kiosk wells and markets, and following the trials and joys of raising a family in trying economic times, shed light on the complex strategies and experimental forms of getting by that dominate in these peripheralised areas. Finally, following the daily work of a ger district bureaucrat caught between the demands of his regulated world and the overwhelming needs of his neighbours complicates simple narratives of neoliberal state neglect. These close and long-standing relationships built over many days and nights on Ulaanbaatar’s fringe form the bedrock of this anthropological enquiry, and delineate its particular contribution.

### **The Warmth of the Hearth and the Cost of Coal**

Having first met in June 2014, I lived with Ulzii and her family for 17 months between March 2015 and September 2016. I then returned to their home for the celebration of the Lunar New Year (*tsagaan sar*) in February 2017, for a further three months that summer, and for a short period in February 2018.<sup>3</sup> In the intervening months, we remained in touch, making frequent video calls and exchanging news via online messaging services. Until today, we speak at least every week.

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<sup>3</sup> I visited again for three weeks in the summer of 2018, although changes in my personal circumstances meant that I did not base myself in Badrakh and Ulzii’s home as before. We did, however, meet many times at their home and other locations.

I ended up in the home of Badrakh and Ulzii thanks to meeting two of their daughters in a cashmere factory while carrying out my master's fieldwork in the summer of 2014. I stayed in the home of Ulzii and Badrakh for about 10 nights that summer, and when I returned the following February I was incorporated into the home as a daughter. I called Badrakh and Ulzii 'father' (*aaw*) and 'mother' (*eej*), and they called me 'daughter' (*ohin*); my Mongolian siblings addressed me as their elder sister (*Liz egch*), and I called them my younger brothers and sisters (*diüü*).

Badrakh and Ulzii never demanded any compensation for my residence in their home, despite their financial hardships. I tried to do my part to bring home food or groceries, and as my Mongolian improved and I began to understand better their conversations about debts and loans I attempted to give them cash to assist with the costs of my addition to the household. The struggles that ensued from trying to hand over cash, even though it was always eventually accepted, led me to move to bank transfers sent in the name of my father. I came to understand that Badrakh and Ulzii were more comfortable with this, and that it was best to frame such transfers within the logic of a transfer of parental responsibility. In other words, my birth family had handed me over to my Mongolian family and were now compensating them with the money that they might otherwise have spent on me. This was comparable to the money that the couple received from Ulzii's ex-husband to help them with the costs of caring for his two daughters. In addition, it was normal for any money brought in by Badrakh and the children to be used for household expenses or handed in cash to Ulzii. So, over time it also became more normalised that, as the eldest unmarried daughter, I would also contribute from my salary to the household.<sup>4</sup>

I refer here directly to the ways that money changed hands because it has always irked me when this topic is avoided and accounts of anthropological research are apparently 'sanitised' of these 'anti-social' details (see Højer and Pedersen forthcoming: 7-8 for a good counter example). I find this all the more surprising when anthropological scholarship itself devotes so many pages to the ways that money circulates among kin, how it is

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<sup>4</sup> My salary was my ESRC studentship.



key to building relationships of all kinds, the variety of forms it takes and its particular uses, and ultimately the argument that money –, even cold cash – is by no means anti-social (McKay 2007; Yan 2005; Zelizer 1997, 2000). In addition, while it is not the focus of this thesis as such, and I have also resisted characterising lives in the ger district only in terms of what they might ‘lack’, the daily hardships faced by Badrakh and Ulzii’s family, and the many other people and households I spent time with, remain all too real. Throughout this thesis, the precarity and pain of trying to get by in the ‘age of the market’ (the *zah zeeliin üye*, as Mongolians refer to the current, post-democratic revolutionary period) come through. Being present in a home, eating a share of the limited food, and being warmed by the hard-earned coal in the family stove while sleeping in a bed that might otherwise have gone to one of the children was not a situation I felt was ethically sustainable, especially without contributing to the family finances. I make no claims therefore to a hands-off, methodological objectivity, should this even be an achievable or desirable aim. The heart of my research method was instead the degree to which I became bound up in the intimate life of Badrakh and Ulzii’s household, and I draw on the profound closeness that developed as a key methodological and theoretical resource in the writing of this thesis.

### **Interviews in Aglag and Beyond**

Having made the decision in autumn 2015 to focus my research on the Ulaanbaatar ger districts, and specifically the district I call Aglag where Badrakh and Ulzii live, I spent the winter experimenting with ways to carry out this research.<sup>5</sup> I began to realise that even though I had already spent many months living there, I had rarely met people outside of Badrakh and Ulzii’s family and local network of kin. Of course, this provided a key insight into the way that people in the ger district socialised, and on whom they relied to get by. However, I felt I should nevertheless try to understand Aglag in other ways. I began to carry out informal interviews around the district with the help of a friend. Zaya, a woman of my age with an anthropology degree from

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<sup>5</sup> Cutting a long story short, my PhD research was originally intended to be on contortionists, a task to which I devoted my time between February and September 2015, although I still lived mainly with Badrakh and Ulzii.

the National University of Mongolia, was an excellent research assistant, as she herself had grown up and lived in a western ger district of Ulaanbaatar. We spent many days driving around Aglag in her little three-door car, approaching households and, if we were invited in, speaking informally to people about their family histories, how and why they had moved to Aglag, their experiences of life in the ger districts, and their thoughts on the future. These interviews provided interesting points of comparison and contrast, and while they did not allow the kind of depth that came from the long-term contact with Badrakh and Ulzii, they did add breadth and a glimpse at the variety of households living in the district. Furthermore, as most homes in the ger district are hidden behind tall *hashaa* fences, these interviews allowed important visual access to the materiality of domestic spaces beyond the kinship network of my local home. Zaya and I carried out spontaneous interviews in Aglag throughout my fieldwork, focusing not only on households but also meeting shopkeepers, *guanz* owners, seasonal horse traders, shamans, pawnshop workers, members of the local branch of a multilevel network marketing scheme/health club and many others.<sup>6</sup>

The same drive that prompted me to carry out these interviews also drew me to the site that became the second key focus of my research; namely, the local government office or *horoo*.

### **From the Home to the Horoo**

Initially looking to make connections beyond the network of Badrakh and Ulzii's family, I also began to consider whether there was any way to approach the district as a 'whole'. Local interviews were supplementing my experiences with my host family but my understanding of Aglag remained somewhat piecemeal. I began, therefore, to look for some kind of 'centre'.

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, in order to be able to compare Ulaanbaatar to other urban areas of Mongolia, in the summer of 2015 I travelled to five provincial centres outside the capital, always staying with local families. These included a police accountant and his family in Choir, a red Buddhist *lama* (monk) and his household in Sainshand, a wonderfully foul-mouthed raisin-trading couple in the Mongolia-China border town of Zamiin-Uud, a market trader and single mother in Bayanhongor, and a circus school director in Dalanzadgad, who lived in a tiny bedroom in the local cultural centre. Later in my fieldwork, I also travelled to Darkhan city with my assistant Zaya and carried out a series of interviews in the Darhkan ger districts.

A theme that had been emerging in my research since the very beginning was the way that people reflected on their life experiences before and after democratisation. As most people I met in Aglag had moved to the city after 1990, ger district life and the absence of socialist state structures were often linked. As Aglag is largely a residential area in which there are some small industrial hubs but no key sites such as a big factory, I turned to the Aglag government office (*horoo*), where I thought at the very least I could collect an interview and some statistics about the district. I spoke to a language teacher about my idea, and as it happened she had a younger relative (*diiii*) who worked in that very *horoo*. She passed on Ganbold's phone number and we arranged to meet for an interview at his office.

It turned out that Ganbold was the welfare administrator (*halamjiin ajilchin*) for Aglag district, and had also grown up in the area. I conducted a fairly short interview with him at his office as he was busy, but at the end of the conversation I explained my research further and asked if I might be taken on as an intern in the welfare office. I do not know whether my residence in the area (highly unusual for a foreigner) or my being referred to Ganbold by his senior relative (*egch*) was more important, but to my surprise Ganbold accepted my suggestion and seemed to have the authority to do so. From then on I spent around two days a week at the little *horoo* office with Ganbold and the social worker Naraa Egch. In the beginning there was another intern, a university student on her workplace training, and for half the week the 'labour exchange' employee (*hötölmöriin birj*) would work there too (her time was split between Aglag and a neighbouring *horoo* until the role was furloughed following the 2016 election).

The building itself was split into three floors, each with its own entrance. The top floor was the public medical clinic, the ground floor housed the governmental staff and the basement contained the small police department, the janitor's bedroom and the citizens' meeting hall, which was used for a variety of purposes, ranging from public consultations and sessions with spiritual healers to a voting centre during elections.<sup>7</sup> I came to know

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<sup>7</sup> Until the 2016 election, the *horoo* boss also let me use the meeting room to hold the weekly free English lessons I was running with Zaya as a way to give back to the families with whom I was conducting the informal interviews.

many of the staff of the other offices in the *horoo* building and was sporadically included in the rotation of responsibility for cooking lunch. For the most part, however, I stayed close to my gatekeeper Ganbold, and focused on his work administrating the district's welfare payments and collecting household surveys.

At first, being based at the *horoo* was an uncomfortable experience. Badrakh and Ulzii had only had negative experiences with the *horoo*, including a time when Ulzii went to the *horoo* to beg for some assistance, having no food to feed her family. She recounted meeting Ganbold only for him to tell her that if the family was struggling for income, she should take her teenage children out of school and send them to work. At first, therefore, I felt guilty for associating myself with Ganbold and this institution that practically everyone I knew in Aglag and beyond seemed to feel was corrupt and self-serving. Indeed, it was difficult to watch *horoo* employees turn desperate people away or refuse them small kindnesses such as a pen with which to write an application. Furthermore, if I had expected to make more local contacts through being connected to the *horoo*, I soon realised that aligning myself with this state body was more likely to have the opposite effect.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, I knew of no anthropological research based in a Mongolian welfare office, and I began to be fascinated by the perspective this afforded me on everyday bureaucracy. Thus, despite my initial apprehensions, I stuck with the *horoo* research throughout the final year of my fieldwork and learned a great deal, including much that challenged my first impressions of Ganbold and the other state workers.

### **Coal and Iron**

In this thesis coal and iron provide a metaphorical way to engage with questions of structure and agency. Thoughts of coal initially came to me through reflection on the welfare administrator Ganbold's position, working

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<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, this did not damage the relations I had already fostered. Badrakh and Ulzii understood my research well and had seen my focus evolve over the years, from the cashmere factory, to contortionists, to life in the ger districts. I am sure things would have been different if I had already been associated with the *horoo* before we met. Indeed, I did not form any close relationships with people who visited the *horoo* and met me there for the first time.

as he does between the dictates of a distant authority and the daily realities of ger district lives. Looking for a way to write about Ganbold, I began to use the British idiom of him being ‘at the coalface’ of the state. The phrase comes from mining; the ‘coalface’ is the physical surface in a mine from which the coal is cut. The coalface is thus used metaphorically to describe a site of ‘hands-on’ work. In other words, in contrast to those higher up in an institutional hierarchy, workers at the coalface end must ‘get their hands dirty’.<sup>9</sup>

As the mining metaphor evokes, working at the coalface also produces workers with ‘coalfaces’. Blackened by the dust, those who work with raw coal cannot escape the physical impact it has on their exposed skin. It is a similar situation with the once-white felt of the gers in the ger district. As ger district homes are not connected to centralised heating pipes and residents have no access to the animal dung that countryside herders burn, the most energy- and cost-efficient way to heat a ger or *baishin* is to use coal.<sup>10</sup> In combination with a number of other factors, the burning of raw coal in ger district homes has led to a crisis of air quality in Ulaanbaatar; the city in winter now has the highest levels of air pollution in the world.<sup>11</sup> The ger districts are strongly associated with coal. For Aglag residents, a local coal depot also provides seasonal employment opportunities over the winter months. When my Mongolian father Badrakh would work there, spending eight hours outside shovelling coal into bags, he would return covered in the toxic dust. Arriving home, he would wash his hands and face outside despite the freezing temperatures.<sup>12</sup> He did so in order to prevent the black dust from dirtying the home, but Badrakh was also ashamed to be seen with a coalface.

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<sup>9</sup> I also prefer this phrase for its practice-centred metaphor, rather than the possible alternative of Ganbold working for the ‘local’ state.

<sup>10</sup> Mined in Mongolia, coal is both plentiful and relatively cheap. It is also at the heart of the Mongolian economy, which is almost totally undiversified and reliant on mining. As Chuluunbat and Empson write, “Mongolia has rich deposits of gold, copper and coal, the country’s principal minerals. As of 2016, the mining sector accounted for about 17% of GDP, 71% of industrial output and 87% of total exports” (2018: 21; see also Bonilla, forthcoming; Bulag 2009; High 2017; World Bank Mongolia 2018).

<sup>11</sup> See UNICEF (2018); Aghajanian (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Ulaanbaatar is the coldest capital city in the world. Temperatures in Mongolia range from +40° C to -40° C.

Mongolians take great care with their appearance; for example, regularly carrying a cloth or tissue to wipe the dust from their shoes, especially when transitioning from the tracks of the ger district to paved roads. Surface appearances in Mongolia are not considered superficial coverings that hide an inner truth, but are instead performative iterations of a present and future-in-the-making. To be seen with a coal-black face was embarrassing for Badrakh, as it indexed his lowly employment and opened him up to the dangerous and judgemental perspectives of others (cf. Højer 2004: 55). As it would turn out, Badrakh was not the only one concerned about the effect of his work on his face.

One afternoon, as Ganbold and I shared a cigarette in the basement of the *horoo*, he asked me what I thought of his face. I discuss this moment at length in the fifth chapter of the thesis so here I will only be brief. The question was not about what I thought of his looks in the sense of whether I found him attractive; rather, it was a question about his character and the ‘face’ (*nüür*) he shows to the people who come to his office for help. Ganbold’s question was whether he was seen to have an unkind face; the moment, however, was a reflection on the extent to which his role and his face could be distinguished from one another. Being the welfare administrator for Aglag requires Ganbold to use his face to present another face. This is what is called in Mongolian ‘the iron face of the state’ (*töriin tömör nüür*).<sup>13</sup> The imagery of the state having an iron face is used to capture its capacity to be a harsh decision-maker. The power to make decisions, even when they may not

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase ‘the state has an iron face’ is the first half of a Mongolian proverb, which goes as follows: ‘The state has an iron face; the human body has a face of flesh/meat’ (*Tör tömör nüürtei, törsön biye mahan nüürtei*). This is a fascinating binary that speaks to the cool severity of the state in contrast to the compassionate tendencies of ‘flesh and blood’ people. The contrast relies on the many material and conceptual differences between the substances of meat and iron: iron is hard, cold and un-made, while meat is soft, warm, and must be ‘born’. Unfortunately, I only came across the second half of this proverb very recently, and while I considered reframing this thesis through meat and iron, ultimately I decided that it spoke to too binary a contrast. The purpose of this thesis is to think about issues that can be glossed as ‘structure and agency’ *across* domestic and state contexts, rather than reinforce the idea of kinship and state being two separate realms. Nevertheless, the themes of kinship, meat, state and iron do appear throughout the thesis, and given the opportunity I would like to explore ideas of meat and iron in the future.

be popular, lies at the heart of this idiom. And yet, showing this iron face relies on workers such as Ganbold at the coalface to actually instantiate these decisions.

Following this brief and uncanny moment in which the faces of the state were disaggregated from within as Ganbold reflected on his own face, I came to think about Ganbold as being ‘between iron and coal’. I then began to trace similar tensions between what could be glossed as forms of structure and agency or form and practice that had appeared throughout my fieldwork until a kaleidoscope of potential comparisons and contrasts emerged. Having arisen from the particularities of this time in the ger district, I suggest that iron and coal are good tools to think with because they contain a productive ambiguity; they are different without being opposites, and they do not reproduce a nature/culture or natural/artificial divide. Moving beyond static binaries of pre-existing states, iron and coal instead *both* require enaction. The coalface comes to exist as such only through the actions of miners, and as the Mongolian proverb goes, ‘As strong as iron may be, without being polished it rusts’ (*Tömör hedii böh ch zülgehgüi bol zewerne*).

Throughout the thesis, therefore, I activate different aspects of the idea of being ‘between an iron face and a coal face’. At times I focus on iron and coal as contrasting and draw out analogical contrasts, at others I highlight how the ‘face’ of each requires performative enaction of one kind or another; finally, reflecting back on Badrakh’s coal-blackened face, I also draw on the physicality of iron and coal as indexes of the materials that shape daily life in Ulaanbaatar ger districts.

### **Ethnographic Commitments**

While there were many differences between conducting research in a government office and in the intimacy of a home and family network I came to know well, across these sites I maintained a similar methodology. That is to say, I devoted myself to tracing how people were living in terms of ‘the social’, ‘the material’ and ‘the linguistic’. I followed social networks and kept track of the ways in which people reckoned their relations to one another, I attended to the material dimensions of these relations and the ways that particular material things afforded certain relations to come into being, and I

took over one hundred hours of audio recordings of interviews and everyday interactions.<sup>14</sup> My aim for the thesis is that it be ethnographic in three senses. Firstly, I present an extended ethnography to allow for comparative and critical analysis now and in the future; secondly, I attempt to allow any wider theoretical insights to emerge from the ethnography, rather than ‘applying’ pre-existing theoretical models; and thirdly, I extend this ethnographic commitment as much as possible into the very writing of the thesis. This ethnographic commitment has had consequences for the structure of both the chapters and the thesis as a whole. First and foremost, it has consequences for the shape of this Introduction.

For example, at this point, part of me would like to provide the reader with a series of facts regarding Mongolia’s capital city. I would like to give the population statistics for Ulaanbaatar, a map of the city with Ulaanbaatar highlighted, and figures regarding the growth of the ger districts both in terms of expansion over land and population growth. In other words, I would like to *contextualise* the ethnographic material for the reader. This is standard practice in an Introduction and does provide a conceptual entry point to the work, but here I resist the temptation to pre-emptively establish a series of boundaries for the work, both spatial and structural. The main reason for this is that, in the writing of the chapters I have tried to approach wider topics such as kinship, infrastructure and bureaucracy in creative and ethnographically driven ways that deliberately stretch the concept of context and play with the relationship of form to content.<sup>15</sup> So, to then encase the thesis within a non-ethnographic contextualising framework, as a standard facts-and-figures introduction would do, would either be to shy away from experimentation at

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<sup>14</sup> Recordings were always taken with permission and on the condition of anonymity. I found recording was vital to capture “as accurately as possible the structure of events in [my interlocutors’] world as they unfold in the ordinary settings where they habitually occur” (Goodwin 1990: 35, emphasis removed), and the recording of “happenings between persons regardless of how uninteresting and picayune” (Goffman 1953: 3) led to unexpected insights that might have otherwise been missed.

<sup>15</sup> A reader seeking statistical information about Ulaanbaatar will find it is readily available elsewhere. The government of Mongolia issues regular statistical bulletins about the city (available at <http://ubstat.mn/Home%20page>) and the country (available at <http://www.en.nso.mn/index.php>).



the last moment for the sake of seeking safety in disciplinary convention, or to undermine the very arguments I later put forward.

To be clear, I do not reject the usefulness of facts and figures, and I refer to such things when relevant; neither do I claim to be presenting a more ‘authentic’ picture (cf. Herzfeld 2015: 24; see also Handler 1986). I am not suggesting, for example, that my Mongolian interlocutors do not engage with quantitative data regarding their country or city. On the contrary, people regularly watch the news and are exposed to all sorts of information online that comes in the form of maps, graphs and statistics. Indeed, a significant proportion of this thesis looks at the daily work of bureaucrats in the district’s welfare office, who know these numbers very well. Nevertheless, I have tried to trace ethnographically how the ‘facts’ and ‘structures’ that feature in these chapters come to be as they are and, and furthermore, to question at various points taken-for-granted ideas of context and the way that the capacity to contextualise masks underlying hierarchies of power.

I am inspired here particularly by the work of Nurit Bird-David, who has critiqued the anthropological use of maps, population figures and certain ethnonyms to ‘contextualise’ studies of hunter-gatherer-cultivator communities (2017a, 2017b). Therefore, instead of beginning with maps and facts, I begin with the name of a mountain.

### **Aglag and the Mountain of Suffering Heroes**

Ask any Aglag resident and you will be told that the local mountain’s name is Baatar Hairhan. Hairhan is a general term that can be used either instead of the name of a mountain or as part of it (Højer 2004: 58). It is a respectful or euphemistic way to speak about sacred mountains, a way to speak without ‘naming’, essentially meaning ‘our loved one’. Baatar means ‘hero’. In English, therefore, the mountain could be called ‘Hero Mountain’ or ‘Our Beloved Hero’.

Once I had settled on researching Aglag, it seemed to make sense to me to start with the local mountain because mountains are living features in the Mongolian landscape whose myths and names provide a way to trace people’s relationships with the land. Those who live in the countryside are almost always familiar with the myths and stories associated with their local

mountains. The names of mountains may even recall a deep and ancient past before a mountain settled into its present-day shape and location (Empson 2011: 31-32). Knowing a mountain's sacred name and story is a part of enacting one's identity as being of that 'land' (*nutag*). The existence of these names and stories, their remembrance by older generations, and the ways in which they are shared and passed down to later generations is part of the rich tapestry of linguistic and material practices that link Mongolians to their landscape.

In one sense, my search turned out to be a failure; I could find no one who knew an ancient, sacred name for the mountain, nor a myth about its formation. However, in another way, following the name of the mountain prompted me to re-think the way I was approaching my research. I was told by many people in Aglag that the area had been a military zone until 1990, when the army left the local barracks and people from the countryside began to move in, creating the largely residential district that exists today. The name Hero Mountain was therefore a reference to the soldiers. Looking for a story that went back a little further, I continued to ask people about any name they knew for the mountain that pre-dated the late-socialist Baatar Hairhan, but was always met with the same answer: 'I don't know, I haven't lived here that long'. Indeed, I could find no evidence of any name before Baatar Hairhan until I was invited into the home of an old man who had actually been one of the soldiers stationed in Aglag in his youth. He had spent most of his life stationed elsewhere in Mongolia, but had retired to Aglag, purchasing a large fenced-in piece of land (*hashaa*) near the bus stop and building a two-storey house where he grew many types of fruit trees.

After describing his memories of being a young soldier in the area and the exercise drills they would do, like running up and down the mountain, the old man confirmed, "Yes, the mountain was named Baatar Hairhan after us soldiers". Then following a pause he continued, "Well, we actually called it Zowlontoi Hairhan (Suffering Mountain)". He explained that this was a joke the soldiers shared about the mountain and the hardship its steep sides caused them. My assistant Zaya joked with him, "It must have been because you all ran so well that afterwards they named it Baatar Hairhan (Hero Mountain)". "Yes!" the old soldier replied emphatically.

The soldier's story added something to my image of Aglag, but if I had been hoping for a deep and mythical history, I was bound to be left disappointed. If there had been a name for the mountain that existed before the soldiers, this knowledge was clearly lost. Instead, Aglag is a place that has come to exist as such only in the last quarter century. Its population is heterogeneous and constituted by people who maintain connections to land elsewhere, generally in the places they were born or consider their 'homeland'.

In his monograph on *Saigon's Edge* (2011), Erik Harms introduces the reader to his field site, an outer "fringe zone" of Ho Chi Minh City, by pointing out that there are no Vietnamese poems and no karaoke songs about Hóc Môn. Harms argues that this landscape, "marked with the 'creative destruction' of global industrial expansion and unbridled urbanization" (2011: 3), lacks the beauty to inspire poetry, and "cannot represent the kind of idealised space such sentimental songs require" (2011: 18). Similar sentiments were expressed in Mongolia. The ger district is a place wedged between two "contrasting aspects of contemporary Mongolian society" (Sneath 2006c: 91): the urban (*hotin*) and the rural (*hödöönii*). While the urban – particularly Ulaanbaatar – represents cosmopolitanism, technology, money, multi-storey buildings and modernity, the rural is associated with 'nomadic' mobile pastoralism, tradition, animal forms of wealth, ideas of homeland (*nutag*) and local conceptions of 'real Mongolian-ness' (*jinhene mongol*). The ger districts are neither completely inside the city nor entirely outside.

When I asked people who lived in the ger district about how they identified themselves, even if they were born there, they almost always referred to a countryside *nutag* or the birthplace of their parents. Those with long roots in Ulaanbaatar would identify as *hotihan* ('of the city'), without reference to the ger district. When I asked one young woman why she would not consider herself 'Aglag-ian' despite being born and raised there, she replied that there was nothing in Aglag to be proud of. This remark immediately brought to mind all the monuments and commemorative walls I had seen around Mongolia that celebrated the 'local heroes' of a rural *sum* or *aimag* who had gone on to great things. Nothing like that exists in Aglag and, for the most part, it seems nobody expects it to.

There may be no karaoke songs or poems about the ger district, but one genre that does find things in the ger district to be proud of is Mongolian gangsta rap. Such music tends to glorify the hardships and dangers of ger district life, describing it variously as “a place well below what would be considered civilised” (*soyol irgenshliin tegsh hemees ene gazar dendüü doosh*), a “gangsta homeland” (*gangsta nutag*), “beyond the law” (*huulias gaduur*) and very dangerous for outsiders, who will be “played with if they enter at night” (*udesh oroin tsagaar enchee gadnii huneer naadna*).<sup>16</sup> The vulgarity and threats of such lyrics are a defiant re-appropriation of the derogatory attitudes that many city-centre dwellers hold about people who live in the ger districts. In fact, ger district dwellers are usually only referred to collectively, and in either disparaging or victimizing terms.<sup>17</sup>

One basic question I faced, therefore, in writing this thesis was how to refer to my interlocutors in the plural (Bird-David 2017a: 213-215, Tsing 1993: 52-53). This is both a question of scale and perspective. For the most part, I tend to use the terms ‘ger district residents’ or ‘ger district dwellers’ as descriptive nouns without framing them as local ethnonyms or projecting any essential identity onto them. In doing so I prioritise a methodological perspective in the sense that during my fieldwork I *lived* with people in the ger district, and while people self-identified in a variety of ways, residence in the district was a point of commonality that produces some common experiences, especially those regarding navigation of the particular material infrastructure characteristics of ger districts. These include fetching water from kiosk wells, the work of procuring fuel and lighting the fire, paying for occasional showers in district bathhouses, and finding one’s way along paths that are not planned or paved but simply arise in the negative space between *hashaa* fences. These material elements produce a phenomenon (the ger

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<sup>16</sup> Lyrics are quoted from the song ‘Hood’ by Vanquish featuring Gee, TG and Desant <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3Lh43hJyO4>.

<sup>17</sup> The slur *ork* was being used in this way during my fieldwork (cf. Fox forthcoming). It is also true that the word *hodoonii* (countryside) is used as an insult to refer to recent arrivals in the city who have not yet adopted the habitus of city dwellers. However, the countryside has so many valorised sides to it; it is different from the ger district as a way to speak of identity.

district) that is visible from the outside but inside is remarkably heterogeneous and effervescent.

### **Infrastructure, Kinship, Bureaucracy**

While the question of infrastructure has tended to play a central role in conceptualisations of the ger district (most notably in the sense that it is common to describe the ger district in terms of everything infrastructural it ‘lacks’), in this thesis, I take a different tack. Referring to the point above about different views of the ger district that become visible from ‘the inside’ versus ‘the outside’, I begin with the suggestion that while infrastructure dominates external perspectives, internally, ger district dwellers’ conceptions of their neighbourhood’s materiality do not necessarily match scholars’ assumptions. For example, for many, their infrastructural frame of reference is not that of the urban core or the sedentary societies of external commentators, but experiences and living memories of Mongolia’s rural centres and steppe-based mobile pastoralism. I am moved, therefore, to address questions of ger district infrastructure through a different ethnographic lens that takes into account the particularities of this distinctively Mongolian urban form (see Chapter Three). Such an approach sits in a productive and yet somewhat uneasy articulation with the infrastructural ‘turn’ in contemporary anthropology.

Over recent years, infrastructure has become a central focus of research, not only in anthropology but in a variety of social science disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary studies (most notably at the interface between Science and Technology Studies [STS] and anthropology). The infrastructural turn has been characterised by an attention to materiality, a focus on hidden, invisible or taken-for-granted material or technical processes, and a recognition that infrastructural systems exist in dialectical relation with political and economic systems and hierarchies. For many scholars, infrastructures are productive sites for analysis because of their inherent relationality. As Brian Larkin suggests, “Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the fact that they are things and also the relation between things” (2013: 329). This point is echoed by Matthew Carey and Morten Pedersen, who quote Larkin, “what

distinguishes infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems” (2013: 329). And in the Introduction to the recently published volume *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, the editors attempt to define their object of study thus:

Infrastructures are extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities. Seen thus, infrastructures are doubly relational due to their simultaneous internal multiplicity and their connective capacities *outwards* (Harvey et al. 2017: 5, original emphasis).

This burgeoning topic has produced a number of fascinating studies that raise important questions regarding the role material systems play in social life, whether in the case of a Calcutta river system subject to extractive austerity policies by the state (Bear 2015), struggles over land occupation and the co-construction of urban provisioning in the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, Brazil (Amin 2014), a study of water access in the Mumbai slums that reveals new aspects of urban citizenship, geography and “microspheres of negotiation” (Gandy 2008: 125, cited in Anand 2011: 544), or the ethnographic entanglements of an urban wasteland with the bodily waste of a transient and marginalised population (Chalfin 2017).<sup>18</sup> As infrastructures are recognised to often be sites where the “projects of the powerful” become entangled with the “engagements of the poor” (Harvey et al. 2017: 5), such studies have done much to challenge simple narratives of ‘haves’ versus ‘have-nots’, even in contexts of apparent state neglect (Anand 2011: 543). Research on infrastructure can also usefully reframe concepts of centre and periphery, tracing the ways “that, rather than being developed and disseminated from centres to peripheries, infrastructures are part of *making these geographies*” (Harvey et al. 2017: 17, original emphasis).

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<sup>18</sup> As the recent literature on the infrastructural turn has been well covered in a series of papers, review articles, Introductions to special issues and book chapters, I will not provide a repeat summary here (see Amin 2014: 138-140; Carey and Pedersen 2017; Harvey et al. 2017; Larkin 2013; Jensen and Morita 2016).

The topic of infrastructure has thus provided productive ways for anthropology and related disciplines to examine questions of power and inequality. For example, studies of sewers, power supplies and water systems – these ‘hidden’ or ‘buried’ systems – reveal hitherto unseen “aspects of distributional justice and planning power” (Star 1999: 379). Sensitive studies of infrastructure, even as they level political critiques at the powerful for infrastructural failures, also disrupt assumptions about the relationship of infrastructure and progress which rely on reductionist logics regarding the capacity of either material conditions to produce particular social effects, or the ability of even the most powerful to entirely subjugate a material form to their own ends (Harvey et al. 2017: 10; Reeves 2017). Instead, they trace how infrastructures so often blossom with conceptual excess and unexpected consequences, thereby “acting as if like a prism: gathering meanings and scattering them again, yet not randomly” (Humphrey 2005: 55).

While I recognise the merits of this fascinating body of scholarship, for the reasons outlined at the start of this section, my exploration of ger district infrastructure (particularly in Chapter Three) is not positioned as an explicit contribution to this ‘turn’. Nevertheless, the research on infrastructures discussed above has inspired my work in a number of ways.

My approach answers the call by Harvey, Jensen and Morita to experiment with the question “What is infrastructure” (2017: 6) and heeds the reminders throughout the literature that “the act of defining an infrastructure is a categorising moment” (Larkin 2013: 330). I do so, firstly, by prioritising how ger district residents experience their own material environment over the assumptions of external analysts. Secondly, building on the work of those such as AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) and Nikhil Anand (2011), who have each engaged with the intersections of urban material and social infrastructures, I attend to the *social forms* that are constitute infrastructure in the ger district. This approach likewise draws on the capacity for ‘infrastructure’ to facilitate theorisation across empirical and conceptual boundaries, or indeed makes the distinction between the two blurred or “unstable” (Harvey et al. 2017: 5), another key part of its scholarly appeal. Given that this thesis attempts to speak to questions of contextualisation – and to do so in ways that cross

empirical-conceptual divides, even where it is not rendered explicit – this stance can be considered tied to the work of the infrastructural turn.

Furthermore, attention to infrastructure in terms of both material forms and conceptual heuristics can be seen to provide a link between the thesis' focus on the physical ger district and questions of relations with the state or powerful elites that are explored across Chapters Three through Six. This can be seen in relation to questions of visibility and surveillance; this was termed “infrastructural visions” by Madeleine Reeves (2017: 730), whether in the sense of the Mongolian state ‘turning a blind eye’ to the hardships of ger district life through its failure to invest in improving material infrastructures such as water supply, or in its ever-more rigorous and comprehensive subjection of ger district residents to its bureaucratic gaze. Bureaucracy and infrastructure are also two sites at which the state performs itself in particular ways and demands particular performances from its citizens (see Chapter Five). As Larkin writes, “Infrastructures are the means by which a state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts. It creates a politics of ‘as if’” (2013: 335). The recognition of the power of ‘as if’ serves as a reminder that even the systems that appear most established or dominant are subject to a host of contingencies and made through ongoing processes of performance. Harvey and her co-authors highlight this by thinking about infrastructures as Deleuzian machines that *work by breaking down*; as they suggest, “Infrastructures work *through* their own internal inconsistencies” (2017: 13, original emphasis).

It is work such as this that highlights the capacity of ethnographic research on infrastructure to speak to wider questions of ‘structure’. As Carey and Pedersen write,

the recent turn to infrastructure has allowed anthropologists to analyse some of the same social and cultural phenomena, and to make some of the same analytical and contextualizing moves, that the concept of ‘structure’ ... accomplished during anthropology’s mid-twentieth-century heyday ... However, and crucially, whereas the structures that so interested our modernist predecessors were understood to be abstract by virtue of their supposedly mental, cognitive and linguistic



nature, the infrastructures of current anthropological/STS inquiry are imagined to be concrete and material (2017: 23).

Here, infrastructure returns us therefore to the way that this thesis engages with iron and coal, the explicitly *material* and ethnographic metaphors I develop to reopen questions of structure and agency in this study of the ‘in-between’ of Aglag.

While I was ostensibly carrying out fieldwork *in* Aglag, I nevertheless found it very hard to delineate any kind of ger district boundary to people’s lives. People did not move ‘around the district’, they navigated to and from places that they needed or wanted to go, along familiar paths, between the familiar faces of kin. Although school meant that children’s lives were more contained there, work generally took the adults out of the district, and shopping likewise was usually done at the large market in the south-east of the city. The flow of relatives in from the countryside, and their transportation of meat, dairy and other products, meant that little sustenance was generated *in* the ger district. Furthermore, people spoke of themselves in terms of their relations and their countryside birthplaces, not in terms of any ger district communal identity.

As I began to trace kinship networks, however, looking beyond the reckoning of relations to the material enactment of kinship obligations, the ger district came back into focus, its materiality bursting into the ethnography as it shaped various possibilities for life. Tackling this led to questions of power and governance, which in turn drew the conversation towards the state, for it is the state that can be seen to provide one set of ‘boundaries’ for Aglag. Indeed, above all, the ‘place’ only exists because of the bureaucratic designation of Aglag as an administrative sub-district of Ulaanbaatar.<sup>19</sup> The assemblage containing the local welfare offices, police and health clinic in the two-storey building at the new bus terminus indexes Aglag’s sub-district (*horoo*) status. According to the state, people cannot be ‘between’; they are

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<sup>19</sup> *Horoo* – 1. An administrative subdivision of Ulaanbaatar. The nine boroughs (*diiüreg*) of the city are each broken down into *horoos*, which are usually numbered. There are now 151 *horoos* in the city 2. The government office that is responsible for administering a *horoo* of Ulaanbaatar; each *horoo* (subdistrict) has a *horoo* (office).

either *in* Aglag or *outside* it, and their access to state assistance at the *horoo* is determined by this designation.

The state in Mongolia has both been a point of contention and the focus of fascinating research. Although many are familiar with the empire of Genghis Khan (Chinggis Khaan), for a long time nomadic Mongolian society was considered a non-state, or kinship, society. This idea was challenged most notably by David Sneath, whose book *The Headless State* (2007) sought not only to break down the traditional dichotomy between state and non-state societies (and contest Mongolia's inclusion in the latter), but also to introduce a new conception of a state in terms of decentralised aristocratic power. Since Abrams's (1998) division of the state into a state system and a state idea, both aspects of the Mongolian state have been covered in scholarship. I would suggest, however, that there has been a greater focus on historical techniques of governance (Humphrey 2014; Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Sneath 2006b, 2007), and both historical and contemporary ideas of the state (*tör*) (Boldbaatar and Humphrey 2007; Buell and Kolbas 2016; Dulam 2006, 2009; Humphrey 1992, 2006; Munkh-Erdene 2011; Schwarz 2006; Sneath 2003b) than has been devoted to the contemporary Mongolian state system. This thesis thus offers a contribution to the ethnographic study of the Mongolian state in that it provides a view on how the institution of the state is constituted in everyday bureaucratic practices in the eyes of both bureaucrats working within the state and citizens seeking to access its services (cf. Sharma and Gupta 2006: 11).

One of the contingencies of the way my fieldwork progressed brought about a situation whereby, even though my host family and the welfare bureaucrats were well aware of each other and lived in close proximity, they almost never interacted.<sup>20</sup> This ethnographic reality has had three consequences for this thesis. Firstly, it served as a reminder of how much happens outside view of the state, something that might have been lost if I had been only based in the *horoo*. Secondly, the series of events that caused the

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<sup>20</sup> By this I mean they almost never had a physical or face-to-face interaction. However, they were always curious about each other. I would discuss my days at the *horoo* with Badrakh and Ulzii, and Ganbold also used the tools at his disposal (such as the household database) and the knowledge of the sub-sector worker to find out more about whom I was living with.

family and the *horoo* to intersect at one particular point during my fieldwork then stood out in stark relief (discussed in Chapter Six). And thirdly, it produced a schism in the thesis: five out six chapters deal primarily with one field site *or* the other. Instead of approaching this schism as a failure, I have embraced the contradictions that fieldwork in the ger district brought to the fore and let my writing follow the ethnography in terms of content, structure and theory. This commitment has shaped the construction of the individual chapters, pushing me to experiment with new forms of writing. As questions of form and practice, structure and agency, emerged throughout my fieldwork and post-field reflections, I have attempted to incorporate these into the writing itself in various ways. It also emerged in the structure of the thesis, which sees the chapter ‘on the ger district’ become wedged between those on kinship and the state, brought into being between them.

As Michael Herzfeld suggests, while all anthropologists acknowledge the serendipities of fieldwork, “virtually no one has recognised the serendipity of the writing process” (2014: 4). He goes on to describe ethnographic writing through the metaphor of sculpture, suggesting that:

in virtually every ethnography, some parts are fine-tuned, polished, and attentive to every conceivable detail, while other aspects of social life appear as a sketchy presence, fading in and out as the demands of ‘context’ shift according to the author’s focus as well as the available data and the recording techniques used (*Ibid.*).

Drawing on this idea, I argue that life in Aglag can be approached from the vantage point of kinship, infrastructure or bureaucracy, and like a lenticular photograph, my fieldwork opened up to me three different perspectives that each contained their own possibilities for contextualisation.<sup>21</sup> When it came to writing, I found that kinship almost erases Aglag and the ger district, highlighting instead networks and movements that snaked across the city and country. Infrastructure brings aspects of urban Mongolia to life, allowing a ‘trampolining’ between the materiality of past urban forms, Aglag and other Ulaanbaatar ger districts, and urban centres in the countryside. Bureaucracy

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<sup>21</sup> The idea of the lenticular is drawn from Ghassan Hage’s use of the term with regard to the Lebanese diaspora and what he terms ‘lenticular dwelling’ (UCL Anthropology department seminar 25 October 2015).

reinstates Aglag and allows the analysis to shift between individual and collective scales, along lines of classification, collation and comparison. The state provides an entirely different vantage point on life in the ger district. This thesis engages with all three.

Doing so creates some uneasy articulations between the arguments because, while they may overlap and intersect, they do not create an integrated whole. Nevertheless, while the outcome may lack a certain slickness, the theoretical underpinnings are at least not entirely free-floating. Instead, each chapter has its foundations in a commitment to the ethnographic, a stance I have attempted to write into the thesis on every level, including that of its structure. In the end, this also led to the central focus of the thesis: how people navigate between various types of metaphorical iron and coal, being made and unmade in the space between reckoning and enacting. I engage with this question through the exploration of three ethnographic touchstones: relations, materials and language. Separated here only for heuristic purposes, the different chapters likewise highlight one aspect or another, letting each emerge to the theoretical foreground in turn, without denying the underlying reality of their mutual implications.

### **Enaction: Materials and Language**

At first glance, my use of the term enaction may seem like an odd choice, especially as it is being used here to engage with issues of structure, agency and practice. ‘En-action’ has more generally been associated with conceptions of human action as determined by rules and norms.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, two key theorists on the issue of structure and agency, namely Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1979), notably each launched their respective reconceptualisations of social action through critiques of en-action paradigms (see also Ortner 1984: 150). Here, however, the use of the term is not intended as a return to structural functionalism. Instead, the concept of enaction is drawn from the work of David Sneath, who has studied relational networks in rural and urban Mongolia across historical eras (1993, 2003b, 2006a, 2006b,

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<sup>22</sup> Although Talcott Parsons (1949 [1937]), for example, used the term ‘action’, subsequent critics of his work such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens have pointed out that his concept of action was closer to ‘en-action’ (Ortner 1984: 146).

2007). Most studies of such networks, whether in Mongolia or as they have manifested across the post-socialist world, rely on a reciprocal framework. Sneath, however, critiques anthropology's preoccupation with reciprocity and exchange, arguing that it is an imposition that distorts local conceptions of the material activities of relation-making (1993, 2006a). Instead of seeing the movement of things between people and preconceiving the act as a transaction, Sneath urges an approach that takes into account the ways that people themselves understand such acts. His suggestion is that "transfers of goods and assistance are better viewed as materialisations of various types of social relations" (2006a: 90).<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of Sneath's use of the term *enaction* is thus to provide an alternative vocabulary to that of *transaction*, one that does not presuppose an exchange paradigm. I likewise use the term for its capacity to direct attention to the material instantiation of relations and the meaning these instantiations hold for people engaged in such actions (in other words, not in terms of an outside view such as one that already expects to find a network of reciprocal exchanges). Secondly, although Sneath does not expand beyond material transactions and what he calls 'acts of assistance', I suggest that the term is not so bound to a materialist perspective that it cannot be widened to include linguistic aspects. Indeed, there is a performative side to the idea that can be

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Sneath's conception of the transfer is drawn directly from the work of Robert Hunt (2000) who outlines his anti-exchange theory in the context of food (meat) sharing among hunter-foragers in various areas. Reviewing a body of literature on meat distribution, Hunt suggests that while the sharing of raw meat in forager camps sometimes involves exchange, many important transfers take place "without an exchange" (2000: 14). Such transfers instead take place along "pathways of partnerships composed of linked dyadic relationships", and while apparently reciprocal transfers may take place between partners, their identification as an (economic) exchange by an outsider is only relevant if it is likewise recognised as such by the people involved (*Ibid.*: 17). Hunt's article on the 'Forager Food Sharing Economy' is published in an issue of *Senri Ethnological Studies* that deals specifically with *The Social Economy of Sharing* and contains many fascinating papers on transfers, exchanges and the sharing of meat (e.g. Bodenhorn 2000; Hovelsrud-Brora 2000; MacDonald 2000). I would suggest that there could be a very productive comparative analysis in future research of contemporary Mongolian meat sharing in the ger districts, and in other ethnographies of meat allocation among foragers, particularly perhaps the relationships between meat sharing and egalitarian vs. hierarchical modes of sociality.

applied to the linguistic as well as material aspects of social life. Using a term that bridges material and linguistic forms of materialisation is vital to the approach of this thesis.

As Herzfeld has noted, the separation of everyday linguistic gestures into “a separate domain of ‘linguistic anthropology’ has not served anthropology well, given that they are no less constitutive of social reality than the more obviously material dimensions of social interaction” (2015: 20). This thesis thus draws on language as “a form of social action, a cultural resource and a set of sociocultural practices” (Ahearn 2001: 110). I approach language as “communicative practice” (Hanks 1996: 229), and suggest that language and sociality are not only utterly implicated in one another but are together engaged in continual processes of co-constitution (Hymes 1973; Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). This perspective treats language as being fundamental to both the construction of and engagement in social relations and hierarchies of power (Philips 2004). It is not a static and pre-existing conduit for communication or the simple transmission of meaning, but a productive site of interaction in which meanings are dialogically constructed by participants engaging in particular contexts with particular access to linguistic resources and strategies (Blommaert 2005). This approach is tied to work on performance and performativity (Butler 1988, 1993, 1997; Callon 2007), language as action (Austin 1962), a move away from representation to embodiment and the rejection of the radical separation of the sign from the material world (Irvine 1996: 258; Keane 2003: 410).

While the properties of language discussed above have been demonstrated in many ethnographic contexts, such an approach in Mongolia is especially vital because its linguistic context is one in which words are widely recognised to have power; once spoken, they can readily go on to have effects beyond the control or intentions of the speaker (Højer 2007, 2009; Swancutt 2012). The Mongolian language ideology – “the complex systems of ideas and interests through which people interpret linguistic behaviours” (Humphrey 2006: 168) – is distinctively performative. In other words, speaking something can call it into existence, and the utterance of a name has the power to direct attention. Such actions can be dangerous or injurious; for example, speaking negatively about the future can bring about bad effects, to

utter the name of an authority (human or non-human) would be to inappropriately demand its attention and risk punitive consequences, and speaking the names of vulnerable persons such as babies can attract unwanted malevolent forces (Højer 2004; Humphrey 2006).

Conducting research in a context where speaking about others either in praise or denigration may have powerful effects on the lives of those spoken about – whether intentional or not – has had particular consequences for the writing of this thesis. Firstly, it compelled me to pay close attention to language use during my fieldwork, and to explore linguistic practices, especially in Chapters One, Four and Six. Secondly, recording and transcribing everyday linguistic interactions drew my attention to certain formal aspects of the Mongolian language that prompted me to think beyond the referential content of ethnographic ‘information’ and engage also with its ‘structure’.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, I have tried to be methodologically creative in order to navigate the potential dangers of writing (about) people’s lives. As I will discuss below, this has had consequences for the chapters in terms of both content and form.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, my conception of the between has been inspired by a particular Mongolian linguistic convention that is fundamental to the language, namely *horshoo üg*, or dyadic pairs. Dyadic pairs are a distinctive feature of the Mongolian language and can be summarised as the use of two terms to express a ‘single’ concept; for example, *enkh taiwan* (peace tranquillity) ‘peace’; *gem buruu* (defect wrong) ‘transgression’; *etseg eh* (father mother) parents; *haluuun hüiten* (hot cold) ‘temperature’ and so forth (Batchuluun 2013: 292; Vacek and Pürev-Ochir 1987). The two terms can be related to each other in any way along a spectrum between synonym and antonym, and when uttered, express something that transcends the two. The importance and abundant usage of *horshoo üg* in Mongolian has been linked by linguists and other scholars to two fundamental aspects of Mongolian philosophical thought (both of which are themselves expressed through dyadic pairs). The first is *arga bileg*, which is often glossed as the Mongolian version of yin and yang; it is the idea of worldly harmony emerging through complementary division (Batchuluun 2013: 293). The second is *oyun hatan*, the capacity for flexible, dynamic thought, argued to be at the heart of the Mongolian capability for survival in an often harsh environment. The form of the *horshoo üg* reflects both these aspects. On the one hand, *horshoo üg* provides a template that allows an unlimited capacity for the creation of terms to express new concepts; and on the other, its structure is that of two terms that are delineated (only) for the purposes of allowing the emergence of something further in the space between.

## Structure of the Thesis

As I have emphasised, the aim of this thesis is to address two understudied aspects of life in contemporary Mongolia. The first is the Ulaanbaatar ger districts as a distinctive social and material space, and the second is the daily instantiation of the Mongolian state through its welfare bureaucracy. This thesis does so in ways that take into account social, material and linguistic aspects of life in conjunction with three theoretical frames: kinship, infrastructure and bureaucracy. Throughout, the thesis examines the interplay between structures and actions, whether in domestic or bureaucratic context, and draws its inspiration for their navigation from the position of the ger district. This is captured in the metaphors of iron and coal, and through the ethnographic interrogation of ‘the in-between’. Having introduced these key aspects of my methodology and theoretical approach, I now address how each chapter tackles an aspect of life between iron and coal, and the forms of life that emerge from the tension between continuity-in-the-making and constant change.

Chapter One traces the kin relations of Badrakh and Ulzii, my ‘Mongolian parents’, exploring how the family network reaches out across the ger district, countryside and city. Against a backdrop of historical literature on Mongolian kinship as a formal system, it presents instead a celebration of all the excesses and ‘remainders’ that make up the lived reality of making and maintaining kin relations in contemporary Mongolia. Presented deliberately as a ‘context’ chapter, it makes the argument that in Mongolia, relations *are* the context, and these relations are generally configured through the idioms of kinship. To do so, it traces some of the norms of everyday speech in Mongolia that capture not only how relations are configured along kinship lines, but also the types of obligations that are encoded into ways of speaking of oneself and to others. This analysis adds specificity to the argument regarding kinship being context, revealing the ways that relations in Mongolia are imbued with particular hierarchies that render relations mutual, imbued with obligation but not equal.

Chapter Two remains in the realm of kinship but turns its attention from language to materials. It both takes up and re-examines the arguments of



the previous chapter, namely that kinship is context and kinship is structured by ties of hierarchical obligation. In contrast to the first chapter, which focuses on the abundance of kinship relations and their expansion through the daily use of kin terms, Chapter Two examines how lines of exclusion may come to be drawn among kin via the withdrawal of materials. It traces transfers of meat and other goods and acts of care among Badrakh and Ulzii's family network. Doing so extends the contribution to the literature on processual ways of instantiating kinship in Mongolia (and elsewhere), but a focus on failure and breakdown charts a course between 'kinship ideology' as it manifests ethnographically in people's expectations of one another and the material realities of how relations are, in fact, enacted (or not). The focus on meat and the manifestation of kin relations also leads to a discussion of how kinship is shaped by changes to people's living conditions, specifically the distance between the countryside and the ger district. The chapter thus argues that meat networks are a relatively new means by which Mongolians are reckoning and maintaining relations in the context of rural-urban migration, and it focuses on the specific challenges that ger district-dwelling households face in maintaining kin-*cum*-meat networks.

Chapter Three continues to explore how wider material realities shape life among kin in contemporary Mongolia. While much of the literature on the so-called 'sprawling outskirts' of Ulaanbaatar is negative and focuses on everything they are said to lack (i.e. infrastructure), this chapter adopts an ethnographic stance that thinks *with* the ger districts. Instead of comparing the ger districts to urban forms that are considered 'proper', this chapter continues the focus on the entanglement of sociality and materiality to chart how the ger district has come into being as a manifestation of changing social relations in Mongolia, particularly since the democratic revolution. Challenging standard economic push-pull models of migration, this chapter recounts the history of how the family introduced in the previous chapters came to live in the district. Scaling up from a family history to wider histories of mobility in Mongolia, the chapter then asks how we might reconsider the concept of infrastructure in a historically pastoral-nomadic context. Doing so leads to a more socially oriented conception of infrastructure that is not only mobile but interwoven with hierarchies of power. The aim of the chapter is therefore not only to

present a new perspective on the ger district built out of local histories and perspectives, but also to give a critique of the hardships of life there that does not rely on conceptions of urbanity and infrastructure that have been modelled on sedentary societies. Instead it traces histories of power, mobility and urban forms in Mongolia to demonstrate that the ‘problem’ of the ger district is political. Doing so leads to questions of how power comes to be consolidated in assemblages that may no longer be mobile centres but nevertheless come into being through movements of people and things such as paperwork in and out of homes and bureaucratic offices.

The most experimental chapter in terms of structure, Chapter Four examines how the state is manifested in the ger district. Rather than introducing the local government office and its welfare programs from ‘their own’ perspective, it traces an argument that took place between a woman who lives in the district and the district’s welfare administrator and social worker. The chapter covers the documents used by welfare staff, and the techniques of classification and comparison upon which Mongolian welfare programs rely. Using words uttered in the exchange as subheadings and the structure of the woman’s various arguments, it manifests an alternative way to write about state bureaucracy that does not reproduce its structuring formality. Harking back to the discussion of kin terms and social hierarchy laid out in Chapter One, this chapter takes seriously the ways that life and relations are shaped by language, both in the sense of words on a page and in oral disputes that can be understood as competing projects of rhetorical world-building. The chapter approaches the state not as a pre-existing entity but as an assemblage that makes its claim to existence via the work of local bureaucrats and their daily labour, appealing to documents and a rhetoric of rationality and transparency.

Chapter Five engages further with the daily labour of Ganbold, the welfare administrator introduced in the previous chapter. It follows Ganbold as he visits homes in the district on state business of one kind or another. The chapter focuses on three home visits that not only cover different aspects of the welfare administrator’s work, but also reveals how people are required to make themselves visible to his bureaucratic gaze in particular ways, according to the types of household that the state deems eligible for care. It examines these exchanges closely, focusing on how interactions with citizens being

visited exceed the limits of bureaucratic care, before turning attention to the effects of these visits on Ganbold himself. Returning in this way to the domestic realm where the thesis began, this chapter takes inspiration from the ethnographic juxtaposition of bureaucracy and hospitality that takes place when the welfare administrator enters a home to explore the theoretical capacity of one to speak to the other. The chapter argues that hospitality provides a productive theoretical basis through which to re-approach bureaucracy in anthropology, particularly with regard to affective tone and the performative mediation between the expectations of custom and individual motivations. Turning to hospitality, it argues, avoids teleological perspectives that explain state failures to provide care as the unavoidable outcome of bureaucratic structures ('the system'). Instead, it returns to questions of belonging and exclusion, custom and creativity, structure and agency, that shape not only bureaucracies but also many other aspects of social life covered in the thesis.

Finally, Chapter Six builds from the particular ethnographic moment in which the lives of Badrakh and Ulzii intersected with that of Ganbold. Focused on the late summer of 2016, it examines an election-triggered period of particular uncertainty in light of the wider context of Mongolia as a (post-)post-socialist society, the ger district as a liminal space between countryside and city, and the many instantiations of continuity and rupture that have appeared throughout the thesis. Tackling questions of temporal orientation and some of the terms that have been proposed to capture the way that people negotiate precarious times, the chapter proposes instead the concept of *anticipation*. Inspired by tracing oscillations between metaphorical forms of iron and coal, and by the attention to manifestation and performance that have shaped the thesis thus far, it argues that anticipation contains within it two ways of navigating the future that are both characteristic of life in transition. These two aspects of anticipation are expectative waiting and pre-emptive action, and I suggest they are not only present in the English term but also in the distinctively Mongolian orientation to the 'future' that is contained in the idea of '*amni belge*': the omens of the mouth.

The thesis ends by exploring the ways in which ger district-dwelling Mongolians 'speak' the desired but, as yet, abeyant future into existence.

Anticipation is revealed to be a performative and valorised *Mongolian* way of being in a world in which the present and future are mutually implicated (Højer 2004: 57), as it provides a flexible, performative and relational framework through which to explore how, during the present period of collapse, people oscillate between waiting in expectation that their hardships may yet be resolved and speculatively reaching out towards relations that may yet engender new futures.

## CHAPTER ONE *'Where all men are brothers, but none is his brother's equal': Kinship as Context*

### **Badrakh and Ulzii**

In an eastern ger district of Ulaanbaatar, far enough from the city centre that one might almost feel outside the city entirely, stands a small brick and wooden house nestled in the north-west corner of a fenced 900m<sup>2</sup> plot of land called a *hashaa*. Looking to the east and north one sees only mountains, white with snow through the winter, lush green in summer and dusty brown in autumn and spring. To the south lies another mountain topped by Ulaanbaatar's Sky Resort, skiing playground of the elites. To the west the ger districts stretch for ten or so kilometres, reaching towards the clustered skyscrapers that surround Chinggis square at the heart of the city. In this modest two room house live Badrakh and Ulzii, a couple in their mid-to-late forties.

Badrakh is short and stocky, with a mop of jet-black hair and smiling dark brown eyes. He has few teeth left on his top jaw; his wife, Ulzii, jokingly calls him 'rabbit' for his prominent and lonely incisors. His arms are strong, his chest a barrel, and his legs slightly bowed. His movement is quick but ungainly owing to the metal pegs in his leg since a workplace accident shattered his tibia years ago. Cold weather causes this leg to ache, but one can only tell by his increased limp. He is not the type to complain. Badrakh dotes on his wife of almost 20 years, Ulzii, and his five children, especially the youngest, Ankhaa. Affectionate and always joking, he is a constant source of levity in the household, sharing jokes, pulling faces, teasing and play fighting with his sons and their visiting cousins. He is above all sweet-natured, calm, slow to anger and silent, but never violent when he reaches the limits of his patience.

Ulzii, Badrakh's wife, is a handsome woman. Only slightly shorter than her husband, she is likewise strong and stocky but also plump and warm. Her broad face, with its characteristically high Mongolian cheekbones, has a calm beauty. Her smile is white, and it took many months to realise most of her own top 'teeth' are artificial, attached to a removable retainer since a goat

knocked out her original set with a horned head-butt. If Badrakh is the light in the home, Ulzii is the hearth. Generous almost to a fault, she never lets a guest leave empty-handed, giving away whatever she can, down to the last jar of precious hand-gathered berries. Much quicker to anger, she is the disciplining force in the household; she controls the family finances and is the breadwinner.

Badrakh and Ulzii have suffered hardship like so many Mongolians trying to raise and support a family through the ‘storms’ of the post-socialist era, but there is one thing that they ultimately credit with their continued survival and that is their love for one another. Their love is the beating heart of the family, and their care for one another has seen them through hunger and homelessness. Many men and women in their situation have fallen into alcoholism and violence, Ulzii would tell me (she, more than Badrakh, speaks openly about the things they have been through). Many times things almost became too much to bear, she confesses, but thankfully they managed to stay together. If they hadn’t, then surely everything would have been over.

Ulzii is fortunate to have a full time job at a dormitory of a private university. The head of the university is originally from the same part of the country as Ulzii and many of the staff. Indeed, Ulzii was surprised to find the job reunited her with a childhood friend with whom she had lost touch many years before. Badrakh finds occasional employment throughout the year: construction or countryside work in the summer, and at a nearby coal depot in the winter. Just as Ulzii found her job through personal connections based on a common ‘homeland’, or *nutag*, Badrakh is always employed by or through relatives or similar homeland connections. Despite his best efforts, unlike Ulzii, Badrakh struggles to bring in any regular income, especially in winter, and often spends his days with his brothers-in-law gambling over cards and dominos in one of their nearby gers.

The *hashaa* in which Badrakh and Ulzii live is usually full of the sounds of children playing, especially through the summer months. During term time, the children and their cousins get up early for school. They walk together through the dusty or snowy tracks between *hashaas* to the local school, young children led hand-in-hand by their older cousins over rocks, puddles and ice. Dogs guard the *hashaas* when the human occupants are gone.

The district is full of fierce animals that bark ferociously at the limits of the chains that may bind them their entire lives, while others patrol in semi-wild packs.

Returning from school, it is time for housework and homework. Most months the coal fire needs to be lit throughout the evening, and the collection of water from the local kiosk well is at least a semi-weekly chore. If Badrakh returns with money in hand he will send a child to the local store to buy some vegetables or rice for the evening meal – meat is usually bought in bulk or sent by countryside relatives and stored in the chest freezer. A young cousin may come over to borrow the water cart, and she or he will always be given a bowl of whatever food has been prepared. After dinner, Ulzii and Badrakh may visit their daughter's ger on the south side of the *hashaa* to chat with her and play with their little grandson. Or they may visit Ulzii's brother, where Badrakh spent the day gambling, to share a bowl of tea and a discussion. Many evenings are spent at home, playing cards, watching a Korean drama or a dubbed foreign film. At nightfall Ulzii and Badrakh prepare their bed on the floor of the kitchen, laying down a few mats and a duvet. Ankhaa, their six-year-old daughter, has slept with her parents since infancy and usually snuggles in between the couple. Brothers find one bed, sisters another, the fire crackles away in the darkness.

### **Kinship as Context**

Despite the majority of my fieldwork being carried out in this Ulaanbaatar ger district, I came to see that my hosts' lives were never really bounded by it. This was true in two ways. Daily life and the possibility of making a living always extended beyond the limits of the district, reaching out into the countryside and into the city centre; at the same time, despite their long-term residence in the area, their 'local' links remained relatively undeveloped in the sense that, out of all the possibilities for relations (the district contains more than four thousand households), they continued to interact almost exclusively with those to whom they were already connected, generally in the sense of considering one another kin. In other words, as opposed to a 'communal' sense of connectedness, my interlocutors' relations manifested more as a 'network' that cut across space and time. As this

network of relations was mostly understood and activated through concepts of being ‘kin’, this chapter interrogates kinship in the contemporary ger districts of Mongolia. In doing so it also makes the argument that for Badrakh and Ulzii, their primary ‘context’ was their kinship network.

### **Classic Models of Mongolian Kinship**

Historical texts assert that Mongolia’s kinship system has long provided the basis for Mongolian social organisation. Herbert Harold Vreeland’s 1957 comparative study of *Mongol Community and Kinship Structure* deals at length with circa 1920s Khalkha kinship structure. In classic mid-century style, Vreeland concludes that it is most accurate to classify the Khalkha kinship as belonging to the ‘Normal Omaha’ type due to its patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence and ‘Omaha kinship terminology’ (1957: 285; see also Atwood 2004: 313). Laurence Krader’s study of the ‘Principles and Structures in the Organization of the Asiatic Steppe-Pastoralists’ is interesting for its comparison of “native concepts” with “concepts of social anthropology” (1955: 67). A contemporary of Vreeland, Krader also asserts that patrilineal descent is the foundation of Mongol social structure: “Consistent with the principle of patrilineal descent, the unit of exogamy is a patrilineal unit; the rule of residence is patrilocal; authority is patriarchal or generally vested in the senior male” (1955: 70).

In contrast to accounts that revolve around purely agnatic models of Mongolian kinship, other scholars have presented evidence of a matrilineal clan system that developed in the Mongolian Gobi in the 19th century and lasted until the 1950s (Atwood 2004: 343). However, these clans were broken up by the middle of the 20th century by the combined forces of collectivisation, anti-religious pressure and the introduction of the concept of “the modern ideal of the nuclear family” (*Ibid.*). By the middle of the 20th century, Jagchid and Hyer classified the kinship structure in the following way:

The traditional Mongolian social system was based on kinship. The stem or nuclear family is the primary social unit, and the nomadic encampment is the secondary social unit. A third key unit is the common descent group of clan-lineage, usually referred to as obogh.



As the number of clans increased, subdivisions called *yasun*, ‘sublineages,’ were developed. Naturally, clan, lineage, or sublineage shared the characteristics of a common blood relationship (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 245).

While the above material may be accurate for its time, the primary scholarly concern at the time was how to link kinship structures to ‘types’ of social organisation.<sup>25</sup> In combination with the assumption that ‘nomadic steppe peoples’ were organised into stateless kin- or clan-based political societies, the dominance of overly schematised approaches to kinship encouraged a focus on kinship ideologies and ever-more reified and abstracted models.<sup>26</sup> Lack of access to living Mongolian families (Vreeland’s 1957 work is based on the memory of a single male informant who left Mongolia), compounded with this lack of interest in the messy realities of the everyday, contributed to the dominance of ossified kinship models.

While the following ethnographic material challenges the historical texts above both in ethnographic and methodological terms, I include them here because normative ideas of kinship structure remain salient to Mongolians today, including those living in the ger districts. I once asked Ulzii what the most important Mongolian custom (*yos*) was, and she answered without hesitation, “to know one’s ancestors”. For Mongolians, knowing who one is relies not just knowing from where one comes and also attending to these connections through regular practice (Empson 2011). This chapter therefore delineates some of the key relations in Badrakh and Ulzii’s network before exploring how the everyday use of kin terms helps deepen understandings of how relations in Mongolia are both enacted and come to be. The chapter focuses on the *linguistic enaction* of relations, in this case through the everyday use of the respectful kin terms ‘*ah*’ and ‘*egch*’. The utterance of these terms can be considered constitutive of particular relations in the sense of working as speech acts (Austin 1962), or as performative acts of naming (Althusser 1971; Bourdieu 1992; Hanks 1996). However, the significance of such terms goes even further when the Mongolian linguistic context is taken into account, as the Mongolian language ideology

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<sup>25</sup> David Sneath, however, disputes the historical accuracy of this material.

<sup>26</sup> See Empson 2011: 15-16 and Sneath 2006a, 2006b for this critique.

consistently prioritises the capacity of utterances to act on the world (Humphrey 2006: 168).<sup>27</sup> Drawing on the performative capacities of language, I therefore engage with the kinship relations of Badrakh, Ulzii and their family, in terms of their daily linguistic enaction, to illuminate the particularities of life among kin.

### **Introductions: Badrakh and Ulzii's Family Network (circa 2016)**

Over the many months that I lived with Badrakh, Ulzii and their children, I came to know their family relations through a combination of observation, introduction and being didactically instructed on who was who, especially by Ulzii. Unravelling all the threads as best as I could was a fascinating process that took place throughout the course of my fieldwork and continues to this day. Being privy to this kind of complicated personal information was also a fundamental index of having been incorporated into this network, the secrets and idiosyncrasies of which were not the subject of general conversation outside of kinship circles.<sup>28</sup> As existing studies have been largely based on fieldwork in rural areas of Mongolia, there have been few studies of kinship networks in urban Mongolia, and even fewer specifically centred on life in the ger district.<sup>29</sup> I offer the following account of Badrakh and Ulzii's family relations as I came to know them, in order to engage existing models in conversation on questions of patrilocality, patrilineality and the idea of the 'nuclear family', and in hopes of generating comparative analyses of how ger district kinship may differ from other Mongolian contexts.

All kinship systems have 'remainders': messiness and exceptions that do not fit neatly into the supposed categories. Generally, the scholarly pursuit

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<sup>27</sup> See Duranti 2009; Irvine 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000; Kroskrity 2000; Silverstein 1979 on language or linguistic ideology.

<sup>28</sup> While the following ethnographic material may seem long, in fact I did not include the most sensitive stories that were not discussed even among the immediate members of the household, and that I had only learned about through private one-on-one discussions.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Empson (2011: 58) and Sneath (1993) on social relations, networks and social organisation in post-socialist *rural* Mongolia. See also Ariell Ahearn (2016) for an excellent ethnography of the role of kinship networks in negotiating pasture access in rural Mongolia.

of clarity means that the system is foregrounded in spite of its exceptions. Here I reverse this approach and foreground the messiness. Rather than excising this complex material or relegating it to an appendix for the sake of ‘clarity’, I prioritise the inimitable intricacies of intimate life, a marked contrast to the clarity of much of the preceding scholarship on Mongolian ‘kinship systems’. I organise the material under eleven thematic subheadings for two reasons: first, for the simple fact of making things at least legible, and second, in order to subtly juxtapose the concept of kinship ‘themes’ with the complex reality of family relations *as lived*.

In tracing Ulzii and Badrakh’s ‘kinship network’, the reader may also notice that either ‘Ah’ or ‘Egch’ follows many of the names, while others stand on their own. This is because the ethnography is not written from “the view from nowhere” (cf. Nagel 1986: 70), but from *my* perspective. As I have said, I was incorporated into Ulzii and Badrakh’s family as a daughter and, to be more specific, as ‘*manai tom ohin*’ (our eldest daughter).<sup>30</sup> This gave me a particular position, not only in the home but also within the entire extended network. A key way that I enacted my particular position was through the use of the respectful kin terms *ah* and *egch* for those older than me; this became my ubiquitous practice, and I continue it in the writing of this ethnography.<sup>31</sup> I use this *ethnographic practice* (both in the sense of methodology and writing)

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<sup>30</sup> At times that brought more distant relatives together, such as the celebration of the Lunar New Year or visits to the countryside, Ulzii and Badrakh loved to joke that Badrakh had had an affair or a previous foreign wife, and that I was the result of the relationship. Ulzii would say she used to be angry about this, but now she had come to accept me. Badrakh was already felt to have a somewhat ‘foreign’ face (mostly due to his nose, which has a relatively high bridge), and somehow we do look quite similar, making this a very effective joke.

<sup>31</sup> I faced a conundrum, however, when it came to writing about Badrakh and Ulzii. During my time in Mongolia, I referred to Badrakh and Ulzii as *aaw* and *eej*, using the Mongolian terms for ‘mother’ and ‘father’. I considered using *aaw* and *eej* in this thesis in place of their names as I certainly never addressed them by name but eventually decided, somewhat reluctantly, to use names. I also decided not to add *ah* or *egch*, as this would be a further distortion, even if it would help with my discomfort at not referring to them with the ‘appropriate respect’ in the writing of the thesis. The fact that the names are pseudonyms also helps, as it is the *sound* of a real name that is considered most injurious (writing is considered a form of sounding) (Humphrey 2006: 166-167).

as a link to the subsequent theoretical discussion of the instantiation of kin relations through everyday speech.

### ***Remarriage I***

Badrakh and Ulzii have been together for 18 years and have two sons, Batbold (18), Chuluunbold (16), and one daughter Ankhaa (6). Before they got together Ulzii was married to Baatar Ah, a man eight years her senior. Baatar Ah and Ulzii had two daughters, Anar (24) and Enerel (22). Ulzii and Baatar Ah were married for nine years, but Baatar Ah's tendencies to both disappear for days and be aggressively jealous when he was present drove the couple apart. Upon her separation from Baatar Ah, Ulzii and Badrakh established a new home with the two young daughters. Badrakh immediately assumed fatherly responsibility for the young girls, who call him 'father' (*aaw*). Nevertheless, they have the 'last name' of their birth father and maintain a relationship with him.<sup>32</sup> He likewise contributes to family expenses, such as Enerel's tuition fees.

### ***Matrilocality***

The family's eldest, Anar, is married to Baterdene (25), and the couple have a son Bayarhüü (1). The young family live together in a ger in Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*, although Baterdene's profession as a driver means he is often away travelling back and forth between countryside and city. Baterdene's parents are herders who live in the Mandalhairhan countryside, where Badrakh and Ulzii were also born. The young couple did live there for a short time after Anar recovered from her caesarean, but tensions between Anar and her mother-in-law, along with the couple's desire to find city jobs, brought them back to the ger district.

### ***Siblinghood***

Ulzii has several brothers and sisters, some born to her father before he married her mother, one born to her mother after her father's death, and six

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term 'last name' for simplicity's sake here; however, in Mongolia people take the first name of their father as a patronym to which a genitive ending is added. This name is placed in front of the child's first name and usually abbreviated to a single letter when written; for example, Baatarsogtiin (father's first name+GEN) Enerel – B. Enerel.

born to the pair. The sister directly elder to Ulzii is the one to whom she says she is the closest. Namuun Egch and her husband Bataa Ah are based in the Mandalhairhan countryside with their large herds, living close to the encampments (*hot ail*) of Bataa Ah's many brothers. For some time the couple's two younger children (18, 9) lived in their own ger in Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*, attending the local school. Their eldest son is disabled and lives with his parents in the countryside.

### ***Teenage Pregnancy***

Living only a five-minute walk away is the family of Ulzii's younger brother Bagbandi Ah. Bagbandi Ah is a heavy drinker, a smoker and a gambler. Ulzii jokes that the only male vice he is missing is being a womaniser. His wife is Oyuntuya Egch, and the couple have six children. Five of the children live at home, attending the local school with their cousins. The eldest daughter, Sarnai, is married to a man from Sukhbaatar *aimag* (province), who is deaf. The couple have a daughter just slightly older than Anar and Baterdene's son, Bayarhüü. Sarnai and her husband have moved back and forth between the *hashaa* of Bagbandi Ah and Oyuntuya Egch, the small plot of land adjacent that was bought for them as a wedding present, and the countryside home of his parents. When Sarnai was 15 she fell pregnant and gave birth to a son.

### ***Intra-familial Adoption***

Since Sarnai was considered too young to raise the child herself, the boy she gave birth to was given to her uncle (another of Ulzii's younger brothers), Chinzorig Ah, to raise. Chinzorig Ah lives in another area of the city with his wife and three children. The eldest daughter is his wife's from a previous relationship, the middle boy is the son born to Sarnai (who lives permanently with his adoptive parents) and the youngest is a son born in late 2015.

### ***Remarriage II***

There is one brother between Bagbandi Ah and Chinzorig Ah. Jawkhlan Ah lives in Aglag near to the bus stop, in a four-walled ger in a large *hashaa* that contains an abandoned building. Jawkhlan Ah is married to

a woman he met in Aglag called Hongorzul Egch, and they have three children: a daughter, Anujin (8), and two sons, Bayraa (5) and a two-year-old nicknamed Shar (Yellow) for his light hair. Jawkhlan Ah was married once before, and used to live with his wife in Mandalhairhan. He had three children with his first wife, but after their separation he moved to the city and lost contact with them.

### *Uncertain Paternity*

Around the Lunar New Year in 2016, Chinzorig Ah visited the family with his wife and children, excited to show his elder siblings his first biological child. However, some days later Chinzorig Ah came again to visit with his middle son, and the men began to drink vodka. Bagbandi Ah, (the grandfather of his elder son born to Sarnai) began to insinuate that the new baby looked nothing like Chinzorig Ah; the child's skin was too brown. The sisters and sisters-in-law present at the time oscillated between on the one hand agreeing amongst themselves that the child was unlikely to be Chinzorig Ah's, and on the other trying to downplay the visual differences between the boy and his father in order to prevent the drunken banter from coming to blows. The women said they had always assumed their brother to be infertile – hence the adoption of Sarnai's baby – and furthermore, they deduced that the child might have been conceived while Chinzorig Ah was away working on a countryside construction project, during which time his wife had been working at a hotel. Hospitality is a profession known to bring a lot of contact with drunk guests, as small Mongolian hotels often sit above karaoke bars and provide rooms as spaces for people to party 'away from home'. Bagbandi Ah's increasingly explicit teasing eventually brought his younger brother to drunken tears, although Chinzorig Ah continued to insist that the infant looked just like he himself had as a baby. Chinzorig Ah's other son, only four years old, rose to his father's defence against his grandfather/uncle, threatening him with a raised fist and exhorting him angrily to leave his father alone. Eventually the brothers did begin brawling but were separated by the women who, for the sake of peace, insisted in the moment that the son was surely Chinzorig Ah's own.

### ***Domestic Violence and Temporary Separation***

Ulzii and Badrakh have many other relatives in the Mandalhairhan countryside or district centre. These include a young woman who came to live in Ulzii and Badrakh's *hashaa* for a brief period of time. She arrived almost without warning in the summer of 2015. Accompanied by her mother, Baaska Egch, and her own four-year-old daughter, the relative set up her new ger. It transpired that she was in the process of leaving her violent husband, who lived elsewhere in the city. However, within days of her arrival her husband had located her and came with a truck to pack up the ger her mother had bought her and took her away. She did not return.

### ***Infidelity II***

Another couple in the countryside is related to both Ulzii and Badrakh. The husband, Dashgombo Ah, is the brother of Süren Egch (Ulzii's brother on her father's side). His wife, Bayrmaa Egch, was raised by the same couple as Badrakh. Dashgombo Ah and Bayrmaa Egch have two single daughters. Their eldest daughter lives in the countryside and has a three-year-old son. Their younger daughter, Bulgamaa, also has a son (18 months), who generally is taken care of by his maternal grandparents. Bulgamaa was studying in Ulaanbaatar and living with Badrakh and Ulzii for her final year 2014-2015. During this time, Anar (Ulzii's eldest daughter) and her husband Baterdene were also living in the house, while Anar was nearing the end of her pregnancy and then recovering from her emergency caesarean. Bulgamaa's residence in the home came to an abrupt end in the summer of 2015 following her graduation, when Ulzii found out that Baterdene and Bulgamaa had been having an affair. Having suspected their illicit involvement, Ulzii managed to trap them into revealing their secret by sending text messages from her colleague's mobile phone to each of them pretending to be the other. Having exposed their affair, Ulzii immediately expelled Bulgamaa and sent her back to the countryside. Baterdene has long been known to be a womaniser, as many drivers in Mongolia have been since socialist times, but for Bulgamaa to have seduced her elder cousin's husband (as the affair was seen) under the family's own roof was a step too far. It was said that Bulgamaa's son was conceived on a drunken evening, and that she had no idea who the father was,

so it was assumed that she was looking to ‘steal’ a father for her child. Although Ulzii was also furious with her son-in-law, it was felt to be too late for the couple to separate; Anar had, after all, just given birth.

### ***Estrangement***

Following the death of her husband, Ulzii’s mother, Emee, had a relationship that produced a daughter, Ariuna Egch.<sup>33</sup> Emee has her own ger in Ariuna Egch’s *hashaa* in the Mandalhairhan district centre. Emee often looks after Ariuna Egch’s eldest son, Munkhochir, born when Ariuna Egch was only 15. Ariuna Egch has two young children with her new husband, and the couple is known for being harsh parents to her eldest son. Given Ariuna Egch and her mother’s closeness – a closeness those on the outside usually consider ‘aggressive control’, citing incidents of Ariuna Egch’s violence against her mother – both women have become more or less estranged from the others (namely, Ulzii and her five full-blood siblings). Ulzii and Ariuna Egch’s relationship has long been particularly acrimonious, and the list of Ariuna Egch’s wrongs against her mother, siblings, their children and even strangers is too long to articulate in full. She is said to have played a role in the end of Jawkhlan Ah’s first marriage by stirring up trouble, and she also interfered in the marriage of Anar by contacting Anar’s mother-in-law shortly before the wedding to slander Anar’s reputation, saying she had had abortions and had been known to be seeing 14 men in the city. This led to no one attending Anar’s wedding, and is the original source of the tension between Anar and her in-laws. Allegations of theft, violence against Ulzii’s daughters, fraud, spurious lawsuits and spiritual misfortune are also levelled at Ariuna Egch by her relatives.

### ***Inter-familial adoption***

Unlike Ulzii, Badrakh is said to have ‘few relatives’. When Badrakh was a baby he was given away to a couple who had also adopted Bayrmaa Egch (Dashgombo Ah’s wife, introduced above). Badrakh’s birth mother had lost a number of sons, and had been instructed by a Buddhist lama that this baby’s life could only be saved if he were raised by others. Badrakh had little

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<sup>33</sup> I use the Mongolian term for grandmother (*Emee*) here as this elderly woman was never named (cf. Humphrey 1978: 81).



relationship with his birth mother until the death of the parents that raised him. Since moving to the city and being based in the same ger district, Badrakh and his mother have renewed their relationship to a certain extent. He was also reunited with his birth sister, who was, like him, raised by other parents. Badrakh's mother is now elderly and frail, but his sister and her husband have three children, two of whom have had children of their own. Although Badrakh had no contact with his birth mother following his adoption, he is now expected to take care of her like a son. He, Ulzii and their children visit the elderly woman to pay their respects during the Lunar New Year, and during her recent bout of ill health he arranged her care in hospital, while Ulzii and Enerel assisted by visiting her there to deliver food and medicines. Such acts were usually dutifully carried out, but occasionally in the privacy of their home Ulzii would complain at the strain that it put on the family's limited finances.

### **Reckoning Kin in 21st-Century Mongolia**

The material above is undoubtedly complex and particular. I have presented an account of Badrakh and Ulzii's relational network in an ethnographic style that seeks to draw out the absurdity of reducing such material to a 'system'. Instead of aggregating many 'particular' networks and taking a birds-eye view of kinship in contemporary Mongolia, I have teased out the interwoven relational strands in terms of how people themselves understand their connections to one another, revealing a snapshot of how kinship is being reckoned in 21st-century Mongolia.

As we see, formalised marriages do not always stand the test of time, while secondary partnerships may produce life-long bonds. As is referenced in the literature, infidelity is common among both men and women, and while it is generally not looked upon favourably, it is also understood to be a fact of life and not something that should end a marriage (Vreeland 1957: 67). Descent is still tied closely to paternity, but inter- and intra-familial adoption and step-parenthood are generally subsumed under the idiom of 'fatherhood'. For example, Ulzii's two eldest daughters were said to have 'two fathers', not a father and a step-father. Nevertheless, even formalised adoption does not erase ties reckoned by blood: there is no attempt to disguise that Chinzorig

Ah's eldest son is the child of his (Chinzorig Ah's) niece and the grandson of his brother; nor can Badrakh escape his filial duties to his birth mother, even if he did not inherit even his birth father's name. Patrilocality can still be found, but it is strongly influenced by other factors, especially as so many young people seek their fortunes in the city. If the husband's parents live in the countryside and the wife is in the city, a new couple such as Baterdene and Anar will gladly take residence in the wife's parents' *hashaa*. This, however, does not mean there will be no tension. The idea that a woman is always destined to be another family's girl (*ailin ohin*) remains, and while the couple live with the wife's parents she is not necessarily entitled to share in her parents' 'wealth'. Indeed, Badrakh and Ulzii rarely offer their daughter's family financial assistance nor benefit from her salary, while the workshy Baterdene regularly collects Anar's pay check and uses it to support his parents in the countryside, who are caught in a cycle of debts.

In cases of separation, there was little evidence that children would be tied to their fathers. Almost invariably, children remained with their mothers, and in some cases took their maternal grandfather's name or even mother's name as a 'last name' (*öwlögdöh*) if no father was involved. Interestingly, siblinghood emerged as a fundamental type of relation. Ulzii and her brothers and sisters may not have been equally close, but there remained a sense that they were a cohort of sorts. Each had received an inheritance of animals and goods from their father, and from there had had to forge their own paths within the post-socialist reality that neither their education nor domestic upbringing (*hümüüjil*) had prepared them for. Among the range of adult-adult ties, the bonds between siblings were the most enduring. This produced acts of assistance, from small everyday interactions – the lending of a rice cooker, 'borrowing' a little sugar, passing on news of a job opportunity – to more life-changing events such as giving a grandchild to a childless brother, as Bagbandi Ah had done for his younger brother Chinzorig Ah. Such ties could also bring costly obligations and great stress. For example, Ulzii's younger brothers had gambled away their inheritances in the 1990s and ended up drawing on their elder sister's animals to cover their debts. The siblings had inevitably quarrelled and fallen out from time to time, and no one had

anything good to say about their youngest half-sibling, Ariuna Egch.<sup>34</sup> And yet, even in the case of this least-favoured sibling, it was considered better to be open to relations if possible.

Reflecting on the importance of sibling bonds to Ulzii, I came to see that I was not only tracing their instantiation among adults but also witnessing their inculcation in Badrakh and Ulzii's children. Sibling bonds in Mongolia are termed 'ah düü' relations, and constitute one of the most fundamental relational categories that structure people's interactions (Humphrey 2014: 46). Part of their power, I suggest, comes from the fact that they are evoked ubiquitously in linguistic interactions.

### **Language and Kinship**

Lists of kin terms feature prominently in classic kinship analyses and provide the basis of kinship classificatory systems (Agha 2007: 342), but the daily use of these terms in domestic and social interactions has generally remained less explored or kept fairly distinct within linguistic anthropology. I bridge that gap and explore the extent to which the use of kin terms in Mongolia can be seen as a means of manifesting relations.

In a recent article in the journal *Anthropological Linguistics*, Ian Keen (2014) tackles the space between social and linguistic anthropological writing on kinship, which he describes as developing thus far along parallel trajectories. The article covers a variety of ways that kinship is reckoned and rendered in language, providing a wide range of ethnographic examples. Keen understands kinship to exist first as cognitive models that are then mapped onto persons to whom kin terms apply. However, he also argues that "the use of language in the enactment of relations may be also said to 'constitute' kin relatedness" (*Ibid.*: 34). He identifies a series of constitutive practices by which people use language in the observations of kinship norms, particularly the use of specific speech registers within certain relations. These registers include baby talk; deference; reverse role vocatives; and civility, joking and

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<sup>34</sup> Reference to Ariuna Egch being a half-sibling (Ulzii and Ariuna Egch had the same mother but different fathers) was common.

avoidance.<sup>35</sup> While I do not adopt Keen’s cognitive approach, I appreciate his attempt to draw together these two bodies of literature, and take up his assertion that we may look at kin terms and language use as being constitutive of kinship without becoming reductionist.

The key to avoiding reductionism is the recognition that “the language people use to describe and address one another as kin is performative. It does social work” (Ball 2018: 57). This is the central argument of Christopher Ball’s recent *Annual Review* of the ‘Language of Kin Relations and Relationlessness’. Ball traces how studies of kinship and language have shifted from a focus on language “either as an empty vessel that merely reflects preexisting social relations or, in a more constitutive mode, as a static terminological grid or system that structures social relations” to a practice-centred approach that takes seriously “the processual, multimodal, pragmatic, performative, tropic, and transgressive aspects of kinship in relation to language and other semiotic media” (*Ibid.*: 48). A central figure who has driven the study of language and kinship towards a more reflexive approach, navigating deftly between the twin pitfalls of structural determinism (linguistic or otherwise) and radical social constructivism, is Asif Agha, whose 2007 work *Language and Social Relations* remains a foundational text.

Agha begins his study of language and relations by firstly asserting an approach to language that recognises its materiality and highlights its relationship to other material things, including behaviour (2007: 1). Following this, he rejects approaches to society that rely on static or functionalist taxonomies, and asserts instead that “the organization of social life is shaped by reflexive models of social life, models that are made through human activities and inhabited through them, though not always by the same persons” (*Ibid.*: 1-2). Agha’s conception of a model is different to that suggested by Keen above. Rather than being an abstract, cognitive model, for Agha a model (or idea, image, discourse, position, etc.) is an “enacted representation”, and he suggests attending to “the moments of making and

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<sup>35</sup> “Reverse role vocatives – called ‘inverse address terms’ by Braun (1988) and ‘bipolar kin terms’ by Yassin (1977) and Schmidt (1993) – are those in which the senior (by generation, age, or relative social position) in a dyad addresses the junior by using the (usually kinship) vocative that juniors use to address seniors in that relationship” (Rieschild 1998: 620).

unmaking” through which reflexive models of language and culture come to have a social life (*Ibid.*: 2). The final chapter of Agha’s work puts his reflexive methodology to work on the study of kinship relations.

Agha grapples with many of the key debates that have surrounded the study of kinship and the concept of kinship systems. For Agha, kinship systems are neither “closed formal systems isolable from the rest of social life” nor “shared mental models”, and he rejects approaches that have reduced kinship systems to either the biological or genealogical (2007: 342). Furthermore, Agha critiques the way that kinship systems have been ontologised from kin terms. He writes, “The reason that the ontological projection is unstable – and its systematicity doubtful – is that traditional views about kinship systems are based on highly selected data of kinterm usage and, more poignantly, on a very limited conception of the role of language in human affairs” (*Ibid.*, emphasis removed).<sup>36</sup> In particular, he rejects the idea that kin term structure can be mapped directly onto human behaviour. And yet, according to Agha, “the only evidence for isolating [kinship] as a distinct realm is the *existence of kinterms as their semiotic and metasemiotic uses*” (*Ibid.*: 344, emphasis added). Thus, instead of studying kinship *systems*, he proposes the study of kinship *behaviour*, defined as “behaviours *performed* through the use of kinterms or behaviours *construed* through the use of kinterms” (*Ibid.*, original emphasis).

Agha’s commitment to a performative approach is revealed through his focus on the *vocative* usage of kin terms; namely, how kin terms are used in address. In this way, his study retains an empirical boundary tied to local conceptions of ‘kinship’ (whatever that may mean), which does not concern itself with getting to the root of what kinship *is* (genealogical, blood-based, milk-based, etc.) but rather what it *does*, and how.

### **Vocative Use of Kin Terms in Mongolia: *Ah*, *Egch* and *Düü***

The thrust of this chapter is the argument that kinship is not made in the context of the ger district’s material surroundings, but that kinship *is* the contextualising material that brings wider forms (homes, meals, etc.) into being. I find the vocative use of kin terms to be a productive way to explore

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<sup>36</sup> Agha uses the word ‘kinterm’ so I reproduce it here in his quotes.

kinship as context for a number of reasons. Firstly, the use of kin terms in daily speech in Mongolia highlights the ways in which people refer to themselves and others in ‘relational’ terms, linking back to the idea of kinship as context. Secondly, kin term use illuminates the instantiation of certain kin-based ideas of obligation. Thirdly, the wide use of kin terms beyond those considered ‘birth kin’ (*töröl sadan*) or ‘relatives’ (*hamaatan sadan*) complicates productively any simplistic bounding of kinship as a category in Mongolia, allowing a vantage point on how kin-type obligations infuse wider networks of relations across Mongolian society. Finally, attention to the use of kin terms in domestic settings provides more of a diachronic perspective on how the obligations that bind people come to exist. The socialisation of children into familial hierarchies is achieved through a range of activities and materials, but central to these is language socialisation (Ochs and Schieffelin 2011; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b) a key part of which in Mongolia is learning to address one’s elders with the appropriate terms of respect (Michelet 2013).

Mongolian has no words for ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ as the terms exist in English. As with other languages, instead of reciprocally used ‘brother-brother’ or ‘sister-sister’ terms, Mongolian kin terms specify the relative age of the speakers (see e.g. Sidnell and Shohet 2013: 619 on Vietnamese; Simpson 1997: 41 on Thai; Kim 2018: 41 on Kazak speakers in Xinjiang). Thus, *ah* means ‘older brother’ and *egch* means ‘older sister’. The term for ‘younger sibling’ is *düü*, and is gender non-specific.<sup>37</sup> While there are many kin terms in Mongolian that refer to specific relations, such as ‘cousin’ or ‘nephew’ (these, of course, were the basis for the classification of Mongolian kinship as ‘Normal Omaha’ in historical studies), in the course of everyday life *ah* and *egch* are used for practically all older male and female relatives. The exceptions are for grandparents, for whom *emee* (grandmother) and *owoo*

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<sup>37</sup> *Düü* can be gendered with the addition of ‘*emegtei*’ (female) or ‘*eregtei*’ (male) before *düü*, but these terms are not used in contexts of address. *Minii düü*, ‘my younger sibling’, is, however, a common form of address.

(grandfather) are used. Grandparents still tend to use *düü* when addressing their grandchildren and others of that generation.<sup>38</sup>

Vocative kin term use in Mongolia goes far beyond the bounds of kinship, as would be expected by genealogical or biological delineations of the concept. *Ah* and *egch* are basic terms of reference for all those older than the subject, whether they are considered relatives (*hamaatan*) or not. Other more specific terms may replace *ah* and *egch* when appropriate, such as ‘teacher’ (*bagsh*) or ‘monk’ (*lam*), but younger people should never refer to their elders without either using a deferential term instead of a proper name, or adding a kin term or honorific following the elder person’s given name. *Ah*, *egch* and *düü* therefore cannot be understood as clear boundary markers in how Mongolians reckon their relatedness to one another.<sup>39</sup> However, they do evoke these older-younger sibling dynamics and establish kinship as a fundamental orientation shaping relations between people.

### **Honorifics**

*Ah* and *egch* are common nouns, but in the vocative they are used as honorifics or terms of deference. They may be used alone to refer to those older than the speaker, and they *must* be added following the use of an older person’s given name. Older people can refer to their youngers with the term *düü* but do not append it to the name of a younger person when addressing him or her. As we see from the ethnography above, I refer to Ulzii’s elder sister as *Namuun Egch*, as she is a woman in her forties and therefore my senior, but simply write the name of Anar, Ulzii’s 24-year old daughter. This written usage follows the spoken usage. To reverse the above examples, when Anar spoke to me she called me ‘Liz Egch’, whereas *Namuun Egch* would use only my name.

The use of *ah* and *egch* among relatives is ubiquitous, and is observed even when the older person being referred to is not present, no matter the

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<sup>38</sup> Being fairly non-specific with kin terms is preferred and customary (Humphrey 1978: 176 n.19).

<sup>39</sup> I somewhat enjoy the fact that Agha’s (2007: 344) attempts to delineate the empirical limits of kinship away from the boundless concept of relatedness through attention to vocative kin term usage is rendered once again nearly boundless in the encounter with *ah*, *egch* and *düü*.

tone/content of the conversation. For example, one day I was sitting with Bagbandi Ah (Ulzii's younger brother) and Baaska Egch, the mother of the female relative who briefly left her abusive husband and moved into Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*. The two began to speak about a third relative, 'Goo Egch'. The interchange went as follows:

Baaska Egch: *Haayaa Goo egch megchid helmeer yum* (Sometimes I want to speak to Goo Egch)

Bagbandi Ah: *Goo egch oilgoh ch vgvi* (Goo Egch won't understand anything)

Baaska Egch: *Uhaan muutai am'tan te?* (She's a stupid creature, isn't she?)

Here, the two speakers are clearly talking about an absent third person whom they don't much like or respect, but as this woman is their elder, they use *egch* regardless.

The use of respectful kin terms and honourifics has been documented in languages across the world, and is often linked to wider practices of avoidance and deference between kin or affines (Agha 1993, 1994; Howard 2007; Kim 2018; Mitchell 2018; Philips 2011; Shohet 2013; Sidnell and Shohet 2013; Simpson 1997; Stasch 2003). Such practices are also well documented in Mongolia. Historically, for example, when a woman married she was prohibited from using the names of her male affines or even the common nouns that made up those affines' names (Hamayon and Baasanhoff 1973; Humphrey 1987). Although this particular prohibition is no longer upheld, as we see from the above, Mongolians continue to offer respect to those older and more senior with honorific terms of address. Such practices are set inside a wider linguistic context or ideology in which all utterances are held to have effects on the world, and in which one must avoid certain utterances, such as names that could 'call' or demand the attention of someone more senior.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, being named and being respected are inversely related in Mongolia such that, "by old age a person who is able to ensure respect from others will maintain this status by having their name erased from all

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<sup>40</sup> The names of ancestors, for example, must not be spoken aloud as "the sounds of the name will call the 'bones to wring out' (*yasan hanggina*)" (Humphrey 2006: 167; see also Humphrey 1978).



encounters” (Humphrey 2006: 159). The focus on honour and respect for elders is clearly fundamental, and its linguistic instantiation certainly fits with wider literatures on respect. However, first I wish to highlight an aspect of Mongolian linguistic ideology that is less accounted for than respect; namely, that everyday kin term usage in Mongolia prioritises relationality.

### **Relationality**

While Mongolian has ways that people can refer to themselves and others as ‘individuals’, such as first-person pronouns and proper names, people regularly use more relational ways to address others and refer to themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Later in the conversation between Bagbandi Ah and Baaska Egch, the two were sitting on the grass attempting to glue together a part of Baaska Egch’s daughter’s new ger, which had broken during transport. The conversation turned to Baaska Egch’s plans for the near future, now she had set up her daughter with Ulzii and Badrakh. She says:

“*Odoo egch n’ yu yaalaa ... nutag yawlaa ... odoo ah düü nartai n’ orhij baigaam chin’ yaw l gej ajil olj hiideg yum baigaa biz ...*”<sup>42</sup>

“Now I guess I’ll ... go back to the countryside ... Now she’ll be living with relatives, it’ll be alright; she should be able to get a job ...”

I translate Baaska Egch’s words as ‘I will go to the countryside’.<sup>43</sup> In English Baaska Egch’s self-reference is done through the first person pronoun ‘I’. Mongolian also has a first person pronoun ‘*bi*’; however, native speakers

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<sup>41</sup> The use of kin terms can be considered ‘relational’, as kin terms are semantically two-place predicates, meaning that they refer to a *relation* between two terms (Agha 2007: 346)

<sup>42</sup> This is a glossed (i.e. non-literal) translation of a highly colloquial utterance. It should be noted that Baaska Egch uses no pronouns to refer to her daughter. This is very common in Mongolian, and the fact that she is speaking about her daughter is gleaned from the context.

<sup>43</sup> I added ‘back’ to the translation above because I know Baaska Egch lives in the countryside and has only come to the city to install her daughter in her new home. The verb *yawah* is generally translated as ‘to go’. Also, here I gloss the term *nutag* with the translation ‘countryside’. Normally countryside would be a translation of ‘*hödöö*’, but as delving into the complexity of the Mongolian concept of *nutag* here would only add distraction and I know Baaska Egch lives in the countryside, I stick with countryside for simplicity’s sake.

rarely use it. As we see here, instead of saying “*bi ... nutag yawlaa*”, which would also be grammatically correct, Baaska Egch says “*egch n’ ... nutag yawlaa*”. This construction is used frequently, and the *egch* can be substituted for whatever the relevant relation may be. It is used also by younger relatives (*düü n’*) and with non-kin terms, such as teacher (*bagsh n’*) or friend (*naiz n’*).<sup>44</sup>

Another way that Mongolian speech prioritises relationality is with a dyadic double reference to both oneself *and* one’s interlocutor. In this form the speaker references both sides of the relation. For example, ‘*agaan düü*’, ‘older brother’s younger sibling (*aga* is a colloquial form of *ah*; *-n* is the genitive ending); the speaker is the ‘first kin term’ of the ‘second term’ addressing the person referenced by the second term. The following example contains all the elements mentioned so far, and should help elucidate the matter. The speaker is Batbold, the 18-year-old son of Ulzii and Badrakh, at home one evening:

“*Tendees us hiigeed butsalgachihdaa, **agaan düü. Ah n’** tüürüü saya **Bagbandi ahin**haas us awchirsan.*”

“Take some water from there and boil it, brother. I just brought water from Bagbandi Ah’s place.”

The statement was made to the room, but from Batbold’s word choice it is clear he is speaking to a younger sibling, in this case his brother

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<sup>44</sup> The interesting thing about this construction is that while in English it might be translated as ‘your older sister’, such as in the example above where Baaska Egch is speaking to Bagbandi Ah (who is younger than her), Mongolian does not use the second-person possessive pronoun. To do so would be to be referring to a third person outside of the conversation, some other elder sister of Bagbandi Ah. Instead this construction uses the *n’* particle, which is a form of the genitive third-person pronoun. Thus, the literal translation would be closer to, “‘his/her older sister’ will go to the countryside”. It is hard to pin this construction down, partly because the *n’* particle is so multivalent; its uses go well beyond being a third-person possessive particle. According to Ákos Apatóczky, the *n’* particle should be considered a “topic marker” (2003: 1). This in contrast to other scholars, who have called *n’* a subject marker particle, such as John Hangin (1968), Kara et al. (1992) and Rita Kullman and D. Tserenpil (1996). However, Apatóczky’s paper does not refer the type of usage I am covering here at all. I leave this question to the linguists; my focus is on the fact that people in Mongolia use this kin term construction to refer to themselves in the way English would use the pronoun ‘I’.

Chuluunbold. He addresses Chuluunbold as ‘*agaan düü*’, ‘older brother’s younger brother’, instructing Chuluunbold to put the water on to boil. Batbold then continues, saying, “I just brought water”, using the construction discussed above to refer to himself as Chuluunbold’s older brother (*Ah n*). Finally, in saying where he brought the water from, Batbold refers to Bagbandi Ah using the respectful kin term *ah* after his uncle’s name.

Batbold’s utterance discussed above has two parts: the first is a command and the second is a statement. In the first part, Batbold tells his younger brother to boil him some water; in the second he tells his brother about something he has done. This is a helpful sentence to examine, as not only does it contain multiple forms of kin term usage in one place, it also demonstrates the subtle interplay of how Mongolians use kinship terminology to oblige their interlocutor to take note of their relative relational positions.

### ***Agaan Düü***

As it happens, Batbold was speaking on the night of the 2016 parliamentary election, a national public holiday when all the water wells were closed. As the water at home had run out, it had had to be collected from Bagbandi Ah’s home, meaning someone had to go over there with the old ‘petrol’ jug and ask for water, an example of an everyday micro-transfer between related households in the ger district. Collecting water from the kiosk wells – and occasionally from other sources such as the homes of relatives – is often the responsibility of children. If the family has a little metal trolley (*tereg*) it is common to see children under the age of ten fetching water. In Badrakh and Ulzii’s home, each child has had their turn being responsible for water collection, passing the job down to their young sibling as each became capable of carrying out the task. As Ankhaa, the six-year-old youngest daughter, is not yet ready, Chuluunbold is generally the water collector. On this evening, however, Batbold had gone to Bagbandi Ah’s home to fetch water. Now, having arrived home, he instructs Chuluunbold to take some water from the can in which it is stored and put it on to boil.

In Batbold’s first statement, his command to his younger brother, he addresses his younger sibling using the dyadic kin term ‘older brother’s younger brother’ (*agaan düü*). As the older one, Batbold has the right to

demand that his younger brother carry out a task for him. Despite their strong friendship and the age gap being less than two years between the young men, they will continue to call each other *ah* and *düü* for the rest of their lives, and Chuluunbold will continue to use the respectful pronoun *ta*, no matter how close they are or what paths their lives take. The term that Batbold uses for his younger brother is thus significant: he does not name him – although he has the right to – likewise, he does not use simple pronouns such as ‘you’. Instead, he invokes the implied and expected relations of care and obligation between brothers to say, ‘You are my younger brother, I am your older brother, put some water on to boil for me’ through his use of *agaan düü*. Batbold follows this with another subtle reference to the obligations of their relationship: *Ah n’*. ‘I, your older brother, fetched the water from Bagbandi Ah’s home’. Batbold is here reminding his younger brother that he, the elder, has essentially done his brother a favour by taking care of both the family and his brother’s task.

### ***Ah Düü Relations***

In the examples above, we see customary turns of phrase by which people refer to themselves (and others) in terms of their *relations* with those around them: *egch n’*, *agaan düü*, and so forth. I highlight this particular aspect of Mongolian speech in order to return to the question of kinship more generally, and my assertion that kin relations stand as the ‘primary’ context for my interlocutors’ lives.

*Ah düü* is a central pairing in Mongolia. Coming of age in Mongolian society has been characterised by the anthropologist Aude Michelet as a process by which children learn to “enact relationships according to the *ah düü* mode of relating” (2013: 258), a phrase she uses to describe “the particularly Mongolian hierarchical mode of relating to others” (2013: 20). The dyadic pair term *ah düü* is used to refer to one’s relatives in a general way that highlights bonds of care and duty. As can be seen in the words of Baaska Egch above, she is reassured that her daughter will no longer be living with her violent husband, and instead will be among relatives (*ah düü nartai n’ orhij baigaam chin*). The signification of *ah düü* scales out even to the level of international politics, including prominently in the case of the Soviet

Union, which was designated as the older brother to the socialist Mongolian state (Sneath 2003b: 48-49).

Foregrounding kinship in a study of contemporary Mongolian life might seem like a step backwards, as so much scholarship has sought to critique past representations of Mongolia as a ‘tribal’ or kinship society (Sneath 2006b: 4). However, my intentions are neither to suggest that kinship is a privileged domain of solidarity in Mongolia, nor to ignore the other structures that feature in Mongolian conceptions of ‘society’. This chapter instead arises from the concerns of my interlocutors themselves, who not only spoke of the importance of knowing one’s ancestors, but also brought me into their lives by integrating me into a network of relations reckoned in terms of kinship. Rather than begin with a geographical conception of context, therefore, this chapter has sought to trace ethnographically how my interlocutors relied on an idea of ‘context’ that was assembled through the consideration of one another as kin. Highlighting how bonds of siblinghood, known in Mongolia as *ah düü* relations, are built and enacted through the vocative use of kin terms, I have sought to add specificity to the argument regarding kinship being context, revealing the ways that relations in Mongolia are imbued with particular hierarchies that render relations mutual and imbued with obligation, but not equal.

I argue that the various options available to Mongolian speakers to reference themselves and others are thus not used randomly, but are specifically invoked in order to first draw attention to certain relations, and then to harness the social and material potential contained within the hierarchical relational status. This supports my assertion that kinship is context but also specifies that kin relations are not necessarily about solidarity or mutuality. They are instead marked by their distinctiveness. Reciprocal equality in relations is possible in Mongolia, but this is something that must be *made* (like *anda* ([blood] brother) relationships or classroom friendships), in contrast *ah düü* relations, which are something that are already there and are always imbued with a naturalised conception of order or sequentiality.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This is true even in cases of rebirth, where young children are addressed by adults as elders, and in twins, where the second born is considered the eldest.

Paraphrasing Krader (1955: 84) we might say that in Mongolia, all men are brothers, but no man is his brother's equal.

## CHAPTER TWO *Flesh and Blood: Eating and Relating in the Ulaanbaatar Ger Districts*

My first morning back in Mongolia in summer 2017, I awoke to find Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa* had been turned into an impromptu outdoor abattoir. Namuun Egch and Bataa Ah had driven overnight into the city with 15 live sheep and one goat on the back of their old 'pick-up' truck (*portr*). All of the locally dwelling relatives introduced in the previous chapter had come to take part in processing the animals. One by one the animals were slaughtered by one of the men.<sup>46</sup> The process is relatively fast: the sheep is held on its back by one man while another slices with a knife through the animal's chest – vertically over the breastbone – before plunging his hand into the animal's chest cavity to sever the aorta with the stroke of a finger. The animal quickly bleeds out into its own body, ideally meaning that not a drop of blood falls to the ground. This is as much an act of respect for the animal as a way to avoid wasting a precious food resource. Once the animal has bled out, the cut is extended down the belly and the innards (*gedes*) are removed into a low metal bowl (*tumpun*); the blood remaining is collected in another container, scooped out of the carcass' body cavity with a bowl (*ayaga*). While the women begin the work of sorting out the edible innards from those that will go to the dogs, and washing the former, the men hang the carcasses by the ankle to skin and butcher the meat. Processing 16 animals took all day. Children helped with the labour according to their gender, or were sent to sell sheep heads and innards to passers-by who called through the gaps in the *hashaa* fence. Once the work was complete, the relatives enjoyed the usual meal that accompanies a day of slaughter: boiled offal, cooked on a household stove that had been brought outside. Every household was also given a little meat to take home that night. The next day Bataa Ah drove the remaining carcasses to the market to sell, thereby transforming his animal wealth into cash the family needed to pay for their children's upcoming school fees and a visit to the dentist for his wife, Namuun Egch.

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<sup>46</sup> This included the teenage boys.

## **From Language to Material**

The previous chapter established the argument that kinship is context, a position supported by an exploration of aspects of everyday speech in Mongolia regarding the capacity of language – especially relational and deferential kin term usage – to enact relations of obligation and hierarchy among people who call each other kin. Language use – especially kin term use – was singled out as a clear manifestation of ties of hierarchical obligation rooted in conceptions of being kin; however, such utterances are only one part of a multi-layered and complex assemblage of practices and substances by which relations among kin are reckoned and enacted in Mongolia. The move from language to materials (which can only ever be heuristic!) echoes the wider disciplinary move from genealogical models of kinship to studies of relatedness that took place following the critique of David Schneider (1972) on the anthropological concept and study of ‘kinship’.

Schneider’s critique centred on his argument that ‘kinship’ was not a human universal but an ethnocentric projection of the European folk concept of blood ties and ideas of biological relatedness rooted in a particular notion of descent; in other words, “an artefact of the anthropologists’ analytic apparatus” which “does not exist in any culture known to man” (1972: 59). Schneider’s revelation led to new directions in studies of kinship, which were recast as studies of ‘relatedness’, a turn which recognised that while the idea of being ‘related’ might be universal, their form and substance were highly diverse (Carsten 1997, 2000, 2004; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). In these new studies, anthropologists turned away from making distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘classificatory’ relations, and abandoned the assumption that sexual intercourse was the fundamental technology for producing relatives. Instead, substances of all kinds were demonstrated ethnographically to make kin, including, for example, breast milk or rice (Carsten 1991, 1997; Parkin and Stone 2004). The focus on substance followed the general disciplinary turn from concerns with structure to practice. As such, processual studies of relatedness developed around ethnographies of particular forms of cohabitation, commensality or practices of tending to a hearth, altar or household chest, to name but a few (Bloch 1995; Carsten 1995; Carsten and



Hugh-Jones 1995; Empson 2011; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Rosaldo 1980). Based on research in rural Mongolia, Rebecca Empson's work, for example, focuses on the daily, lifelong material practices of separation and containment that constitute what she calls relatedness and personhood (2011: 16-28). These may include placing certain items inside a household chest, such as umbilical cords and pieces of tail hair from herd animals, or viewing oneself in the triptych mirror that sits on the household chest, reflecting on one's place among the pantheon of relatives and ancestors whose photographs surround the viewer's reflection.

As is demonstrated by Empson's description of the tail hair cutting kept in the household chest, as well as descriptions of other practices such as wiping one's *deel* (Mongolian robe) or coat lining over the muzzle of an animal who is about to be separated from the herd and sold (Empson 2011: 67) herd animals have long been demonstrated to be important in rural Mongolia in terms of reckoning and constituting one's place in a living universe of relations, both human and non-human. However, most families in the ger district, including that of Badrakh and Ulzii, do not keep animals. No longer having access to animals, however, has not changed ger district families' desire to eat meat, especially meat that comes from their countryside homeland (*nutag*). Over the course of my fieldwork, the meat of animals emerged as a key material being transferred along relational networks. In this chapter, therefore, I explore how relations are made through and broken over this fundamental Mongolian 'matter', and how the tracing of meat networks may shed light on some of the particularities of life in the Ulaanbaatar ger districts. The chapter devotes attention to ideas of flesh and blood on two levels: firstly, the continued, conceptually flexible relevance of idioms of flesh and blood (*mah tsus*) to how Mongolians are reckoning relatedness, and secondly, how these very ties are being enacted through transfers of animal meat (*mah*).

More than thirty years ago, Schneider argued that an ethnocentric 'rot' lay at the heart of anthropological analyses of kinship. This, he asserted, was the unspoken assumption that "Blood Is Thicker Than Water" (1984: 165). This chapter revisits that provocative phrase in a new way, not only through attending to animal blood and flesh in the enacting of kinship but also through

a deliberate focus on the potential for ‘breakdown’ in kin relations being enacted in this way. While attention to the material enactment of kinship has indeed shifted the conversation away from reciprocity to obligation (Sneath 1993: 197, 2006: 90), the question remains regarding the extent to which obligation-based models of kinship can account for times when people *fail* to enact their obligations to one another. This chapter therefore tackles the questions of when and how blood is thicker than water via the very enactment of ‘blood relations’ through the flesh and blood of animals.

### ***Idesh and Meat Networks***

Meat is available to Ulaanbaatar ger district residents in three primary ways. The first is the local shop, which will have a limited stock of frozen meat cuts and offal in plastic bags; the second is a small wholesale butcher at a ger district commercial centre such as a bus stop; the third is at one of the city’s large markets such as Narantuul or Khar Khorin. Aglag, on the east side of the city, is closer to Narantuul than Khar Khorin market, but without private transportation it would be hard to transfer anything large like an animal carcass back to the ger district. The local shop is only a minute’s walk from Badrakh and Ulzii’s *hashaa*, but the per-kilo price is much higher for the small cuts of meat sold there. When cash is tight it is the only option, as the family cannot amass the capital to afford a whole animal. Nevertheless, when Ulzii’s salary comes in, she prefers to buy meat from the wholesaler. The providence of this meat is easier to account for. “All Mongolian meat is good”, she tells me, “but we prefer the meat from the east, from our own *nutag* (homeland, birthplace) if we can get it”. Ulaanbaatar, like Mongolia, is split along an east-west axis, and generally speaking people from the eastern provinces, such as Badrakh and Ulzii, settle in the eastern ger districts.<sup>47</sup> Aglag is an eastern ger district, so fortunately most of the meat that passes through comes directly from the eastern countryside areas such as Hentii *aimag* (Badrakh and Ulzii’s birth province).

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<sup>47</sup> Differences between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ Mongolians are reckoned along many lines and often discussed. One key difference relevant here is a culinary-based marker of distinction. Western Mongols drink salty tea and eat unsalted food, whereas Eastern Mongols, such as Badrakh and Ulzii, eat salty food and drink unsalted tea.

Above all these, however, it is preferable when possible to have meat from one's own relatives; meat thereby becomes the key material moved between countryside and city along family lines. It is given by countryside relatives, sent in exchange for goods or assistance provided by ger district residents, and brought or sent to the city to be sold for cash. Ger district families with access to *idesh* (a large amount of meat that will see you through the winter) may be understood to have maintained relations with countryside relatives with herds. No longer having relatives who can send *idesh* can mean a number of things: it may be that relations have broken down between city and country, or that there are no countryside relatives left to provide their city kin with meat. It can also be an index that the family has laid deep roots in the city, a sign that they are no longer liminally based in the capital, even if they still live in the ger district. Living without access to *idesh*, however, can also be a depressing indicator of isolation and precarity. None of the families I met in the furthest outskirts of the ger district – who have no registration papers, access to government assistance, or connection to the electricity grid – had countryside relatives who sent them meat.

Badrakh and Ulzii, as described in the previous chapter, initially appear fortunate to have a combination of locally based relatives and countryside relatives with herds. When the couple left the countryside to move to the city (see Chapter Three for more on this journey) they left their remaining animals with Ulzii's half-brother Dashgombo Ah. There was no formal agreement drawn up between the relatives, and the animals were immediately incorporated into Dashgombo Ah's herds, continuing to exist as Ulzii and Badrakh's only as 'non-specific animals' or animal potential. When Ulzii and Badrakh need meat, they should be able to call on Dashgombo Ah and, if transport can be found and the season is right, he will provide a sheep or goat.

Ger district dwellers, in turn, provide valuable access to city markets for countryside relatives who may be rich in animals but cash poor. Indeed, often meat sent from the countryside is meant for sale. Namuun Egch and Bataa Ah are the most regular visitors to bring meat to Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*. They also bring dairy products: yogurt and *tsötsyii* cream in summer, and milk year-round. Baterdene usually brings meat and dairy back from his

parents, which Anar occasionally shares with her parents. Badrakh and Ulzii also buy meat from their relatives when they can, sending money directly to the relatives' bank account. They may also barter, exchanging city goods for meat or dairy. Providing shelter and care for the children of countryside relatives, however, is perhaps the best way to acquire meat. The three sets of relatives with whom Badrakh and Ulzii had the most developed meat-based relationship were Namuun Egch and Bataa Ah, whose two children (17, 9) lived for over a year in a ger in their *hashaa*; Dashgombo Ah, whose daughter Bulgamaa lived in Badrakh and Ulzii's home while attending university; and the couple's own daughter and son-in-law, Anar and Baterdene.

### **Obligation and Blood**

There are many lenses through which to approach these networks of kinship and meat. Similar networks of exchange and transfer have been understood in socialist and post-socialist contexts as economies of favour (Henig and Makovicky 2017; Ledeneva 1998). Another approach has been to explore the extent to which 'kincare' has filled the void left by the so-called neoliberal retreat of the state, particularly in disadvantaged urban communities – asking how, in the absence of formal structures and institutions, people negotiate relations to make a living on the margins (Han 2012; Harms 2011). Another, more context-specific, approach has been that of Sneath (2006), who approaches these networks in Mongolia through the idioms of enaction and obligation. Sneath asserts that the Mongolian kinship ideology establishes between people various obligatory ties, which are then manifested through material transfers, a process he calls enaction. Sneath's focus on obligation draws on his early work on social relations and networks in post-socialist rural Mongolia (1993), wherein he argues that "the network of social relations of obligation is generated by the action of several factors, the first being kinship. In general, kinship provides the most intense bonds of obligation, and the most numerous" (1993: 197).

While Sneath, in this paper, does not elaborate on what constitutes kinship as such, the work of Hwang-Young Park (2003) is helpful in this regard. Park investigates how metaphors and ideologies of kinship have changed in post-socialist Mongolia. He draws attention to the gap that has

opened up between the “theory” that “the metaphor of bone (*yas*) is employed to refer to patrilineal kinship, while blood (*tsus*) or flesh (*mah*) is used to indicate matrilineal kinship” and actual “practice”, namely that today, “blood is used to signify both sides (bilateral kinship)” (2003: 144).<sup>48</sup> Having identified blood as the key metaphor at the heart of post-socialist kinship, Park then ties kinship back to obligation, suggesting that, as “strong moral values are associated with kinship, people will never completely neglect their kin” (2003: 158). Park also links the ‘expansion’ of kinship networks through increasingly flexible bilateral idioms to the extension of kinship metaphors ‘beyond kin’, and makes the argument that “the trust and reliability associated with kinship relations are highly valued among people in the transitional period of post-socialist Mongolia” (2003: 159).

The above material may be summarised thus: bilateral idioms of being linked through blood are said to underpin conceptions of relatedness in Mongolia; these ties of blood then oblige people to act towards each other in particular ways. Such actions appear as exchanges or transfers of various goods, materials and services; however, a focus on the exchange aspect of these actions is misleading, as the Mongolian people actually engaged in these activities do not conceive of them as reciprocal transactions but enactments of their relations of obligation with one other. This obligation-based perspective is well substantiated, ethnographically speaking. We may consider the relationship between Badrakh and Ulzii, and Dashgombo Ah and his daughter Bulgamaa, in this way. As Ulzii’s *ah*, Dashgombo Ah took care of his *düü*’s animals when Badrakh and Ulzii left the countryside; and as *ah* and *egch* to Dashgombo Ah’s daughter Bulgamaa, the couple hosted her in the ger district while she attended university. Each was an enactment of obligations between

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<sup>48</sup> Park expands on this discussion: “The symbolic elements of kinship in Mongolia, particularly ‘blood’, provide a broad sense of kinship. I would suggest that for the Mongolian people there are five categories of ‘relatedness’ (i.e. ways in which people can be ‘related’). These are: (1) belonging to the Halh Mongolian ethnic group; (2) being from the same *nutag* (native place, particularly, the same *aimag* or *sum*); (3) being good friends and neighbours; (4) being *huurai* kin; and (5) being real kin (both consanguineal and affinal kin). It appears that the element of ‘blood’ is placed in the centre of the ‘relatedness’ of all five since this symbol is often used in separating people into kin and non-kin” (2003: 156).

kin (*ah diüü*). The following ethnographic fragment, however, complicates this picture somewhat. In the previous chapter, I described how Bulgamaa had been sent back to the countryside following her affair with her *egch*'s husband. I now address the breakdown in the relationship between Ulzii, Badrakh and Dashgombo Ah that took place in the summer of 2016.

### **Naadam 2016**

For the summer Naadam national festival in 2016, Badrakh, Ulzii, their children and I spent a few days visiting their '*törsön nutag*' (birthplace, homeland) a small *sum* (district) in the province of Hentii that I will call Mandalhairhan. Both Badrakh and Ulzii were born and raised in herding families in the district, and all their countryside-based relatives live in the area. When we arrived in the small district centre of Mandalhairhan *sum*, we put our things in Bataa Ah's place. The electricity there had been disconnected as the couple had been living out in the pastureland with their herds during recent months and had not kept up with the payments for their house in the district centre. As it was already getting dark, there was a plan to visit Dashgombo Ah for the night at the ger in his summer pastures. Calling on relatives in the countryside is not only expected, it generally requires no forward arrangements. Indeed, it is a long-standing Mongolian custom that anyone (kin, friend or stranger) may enter a ger at any time, no need to even knock. We were all ready to go in Bataa Ah's old red 'jeep' when Badrakh decided to call, just to check that Dashgombo Ah was home. When Badrakh called, however, Dashgombo Ah said straight away, "We don't have any food", an extremely rude way of saying 'Don't visit', as Mongolians are always expected to offer tea, food and shelter to visitors (Humphrey 2012). Having been turned away by Dashgombo Ah, we stayed in Bataa Ah's dark, wooden house in town, eating instant noodles we boiled on the gas burner we had brought with us from the city.

That night the local Cultural Centre (Soyolyn Töw) was holding a concert and dance. At the door of the cultural centre we ran into Bulgamaa (Dashgombo Ah's daughter), who, since being sent home following the affair with Baterdene, had not made contact with her former hosts, Badrakh and Ulzii. We all exchanged pleasantries, and Badrakh paid for her entry ticket to

the show. At some point during a break between acts, Badrakh found time to mention that Dashgombo Ah had turned the family away, and teased Bulgamaa a little about her father's lack of hospitality. Early the next morning, Ulzii called Dashgombo Ah about collecting a couple of their sheep and goats to take back to the city for meat. Shortly afterwards, Bulgamaa arrived at Batagaa Ah's place with her son and an *ah*. She brought a marmot that she specifically gave to me.<sup>49</sup> Although Bulgamaa's visit passed pleasantly enough, once she had gone, the tension was palpable. It emerged that Dashgombo Ah had said on the phone to Ulzii, "Oh! You didn't tell me your foreign daughter was here. If you'd told me she was coming I would have said come visit".

Later that afternoon Badrakh called Dashgombo Ah back to confirm that Ulzii and he would be visiting to collect some of their animals from Dashgombo Ah's herd. The conversation between the brothers-in-law, however, was sour from the beginning, as Badrakh was unable to let the events of the last 24 hours pass without comment. He said bluntly to his elder relative, "We never asked you for food, we were just thinking of visiting. If you had only had black tea that would have been enough. If you had had nothing it wouldn't have mattered. We never asked you for food". The argument was abruptly concluded by Dashgombo Ah, who retorted that Badrakh and Ulzii's animals were "finished" and they could forget about coming to collect meat for the winter or ever being able to call on him, as none of their animals existed any more. Ulzii in particular was devastated by the news, and scolded her husband for having spoken to his older brother-in-law like that. She also insisted that if she, a woman, had made the phone call the conflict would have been avoided, as she would have spoken more softly (*zöölhön*).

The day before we left, Bataa Ah brought a live sheep to the district centre from his nearby summer pasture. The plan was to butcher it and take it back to the city. Ulzii instructed Badrakh to take care of the sheep that afternoon, but with all the events of the Naadam, Badrakh ran out of time.

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<sup>49</sup> This was perhaps because after Bulgamaa had left Badrakh and Ulzii's, I visited her when her son was hospitalised and brought her some warm clothes and other supplies.

Ulzii and Badrakh had been asked to attend a meal and family gathering at the home of a relative of Ulzii's mother. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss holding a 'lineage party' to honour and celebrate the seven elderly relatives who were still alive. Those in favour of the event wanted to collect money from all the branches of the family and organise the purchasing of silver bowls for each of the relatives to be celebrated. The event would be held in the countryside, would be catered using the collected money and donations of animals, and would feature some sporting competitions for the young men and women of the extended family to get to know each other, as many had never met. Not everyone, however, supported the idea. There had been a recent death in the family, and those closest to the deceased felt it was too soon to celebrate. Others, including Ulzii and Badrakh, joined this chorus, insisting in public on the principle that it would be inappropriate at a time of mourning, but later privately confiding that for most people the issue was financial. Ulzii also told me that she was not very enthusiastic about celebrating her mother's side of the family, given their estrangement. She would much rather spend precious money on her father's side, she said; he had truly been a remarkable man. The negotiations carried on long into the night, and upon Badrakh and Ulzii's return to Bataa Ah's *hashaa* they found, tragically, that the sheep that had been tied up there had been killed by a dog. Badrakh felt it might still be possible to save the meat and began to butcher it, but when Ulzii heard his intentions, she furiously threw the carcass behind the pit latrine and scolded him for suggesting such a thing.

The following morning, I woke to find Namuun Egch and Ulzii packing pieces of sheep carcass into a large plastic bag. Bataa Ah had provided another sheep. Although Bataa Ah's children lived in Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*, housed in their own ger, they had their own supply of meat from their parents. Normally, Badrakh and Ulzii would not ask for meat from the children, and vice versa, although occasional exceptions would be made, and cooked food would gladly be shared. However, as Badrakh and Ulzii were transporting the children and therefore any meat that would be brought back for them to the city, it would have been effectively impossible for Bataa Ah to provision his own children without offering something to his sister and



brother-in-law. Thus the remaining sheep was to be portioned between us. Packed into a van, we left the countryside to return to the city.

Aside from the shock of having lost the last of their animals to the angry words of a relative, the countryside Naadam that Badrakh and Ulzii had looked forward to for weeks had been something of a disorienting disappointment for other reasons. On the long drive home, Ulzii and Badrakh mused over a strange feeling of alienation from their homeland after years of absence. Their excited expectations of being reunited with friends, classmates and relatives from their respective youths had been dulled by the reality that, like them, so many have left the countryside, and many cannot or do not return for Naadam (as they also had not for many years). Their sons had likewise felt the effects of many years away from their *nutag* homeland. A fight that had broken out at the cultural centre's dance hall had revealed the two young men to be without many allies. Only the last minute intervention of a distant relative (*ah*) had saved them from trouble with the police.

The family thus returned to the city from the countryside Naadam with bruises and the sudden insecurity of no longer having an animal to their name. A final blow came on our arrival: upon unpacking the van, Ulzii discovered that much of the meat they had brought home had gone green and mouldered, packed in plastic for too many hours in a hot van.

### **Thinking through Breakdown**

As we see from the above, to be related to someone is to be able to expect particular things from them, things that include practices or materials, and even ways of behaving. These expectations are encoded in relational forms of obligation that are specific to the kin relation in question. However, as we have seen thus far, nothing about this is simple or static. Competing and contradictory forces shape these relations. On the one hand, there is the desire to expand, to seek and build more relations, such as through a return to one's homeland to be reconnected with distant kin and people from one's *nutag*, but on the other hand, one needs to resist being spread too thin, and has to make choices about where to 'cut the network' (cf. Strathern 1996: 523). Sometimes, in the case of a relationship breakdown such as the above, one

runs out of choices, and through one circumstance or another, finds oneself outside the limits of care.

Thinking through a breakdown is productive for many reasons (Appadurai 2015: xii; Carroll et al. 2017: 14), in this case because it helps bring affect and emotional intimacy back into the study of kinship. It is perhaps strange that the study of kinship in anthropology suffers from a dearth of feeling, for in fact, as we see here, family members taking or causing offence can have profound social and material effects on relations. When Bulgamaa was sent home following her affair, Ulzii did not hold a grudge against her for her actions as much as she felt upset that Bulgamaa had lived in her home for over a year, yet now never bothered to call and say hello. Badrakh had been so disturbed by Dashgombo Ah's refusal to host his relatives that he had complained to Bulgamaa and then quarrelled with Dashgombo Ah himself. Finally, Dashgombo Ah had been so angered by Badrakh's words that he severed the connection between Badrakh and Ulzii and their animals. What are we to make of these everyday emotions and their consequences?

Feminist scholars have rightly pointed out that the focus on 'obligation' as a key moral concept through which to understand relationships has led to rule-bound, jural-style images of interpersonal behaviour that overlook intimate, non-prescriptive forms of everyday interaction (Baier 1995; Overing 2003: 295-297). In place of obligation, which is seen to be "linked to the idea of punishment and the justified limitation of freedom" (Overing 2003: 296) such scholars suggest a turn towards 'care'. Ethnographies that attend to previously overlooked forms of everyday care are generally aligned with processual approaches to kinship, and even as they have tended to better account for the affective bonds that move kin to attend to one another they are also particularly effective at charting the so-called 'limits' of care (Biehl and Eskerod 2005; Das 2008; Das et al. 2000; Han 2011; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Indeed, the breakdown of the relationship between Dashgombo Ah and Badrakh and Ulzii cannot really be understood through a logic of obligation, but instead requires careful attention to *how* people are enmeshed in relations with one another (Han 2011: 21).

Feelings of hurt, abandonment and betrayal have material effects. The subtleties of how people attend to one another are laced with affective and moral dimensions. It is not that these could not be seen from the perspective of obligation; indeed, we might say that from Badrakh and Ulzii's perspective, Dashgombo Ah's behaviour was considered a moral 'failure': kin *should not* behave like that towards one another. And yet, there has long been a contradiction at the heart of the most intimate relations: how can they be at once a haven of solidarity and trust, and the site of the most devastating betrayals and violence?

There are many proverbs and sayings in Mongolia that complicate a rosy view of kinship, such as "Better to have your blood relatives far away, better to have mountains and water close" (*Urag törliin hol n' deer, uul usni oir n' deer*). Indeed, Lars Højer has characterised rural northern Mongolian society as imbued with mistrust, enmity and suspicion (2004: 60). Kinship bonds produce a double bind. They require careful tending at the best of times, and are dangerously thorny when they breakdown. For example, Badrakh and Ulzii had relied solely on the kin bond in their arrangement to leave their animals with Dashgombo Ah (no formal contract was drawn up), and Dashgombo Ah was able to dissolve this arrangement with a single utterance of anger.<sup>50</sup> This raises the question of whether the breakdown is the antithesis of kinship, or whether it is part and parcel of it.

The crux of this question, which lies at the heart of many anthropological debates, is whether structures and institutions tame 'natural' violence (in the Hobbesian sense) or in fact produce it (Holbraad and Pedersen 2013: 6). The structural functionalist approaches to society that shaped the classic kinship models were predicated on the idea that institutions such as kinship were integral to a 'functioning' society (Sahlins 1974: 176). In other words, violence and breakdown were aberrations in the same way that disease affects the 'proper' functioning of an organism. Analogous arguments have been made in studies of war that draw on Hobbesian conceptions of the state and understand violent conflict to be caused by the state of nature disrupting the balance. Post-WWII attention to the state as a violent institution

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<sup>50</sup> See Murphy (2015) on formal and informal herding contracts between kin.

in itself have turned this argument on its head by showing how institutions, especially the state, not only are characterised by violence but ‘function’ by force of coercion. In other words, society does not exist in opposition to violence, but contains violence.<sup>51</sup> Returning to the question of kinship and violence, might we understand, in a non-pathologising way, the ‘violence’ of Dashgombo Ah, who refused to offer hospitality to his younger sister and then reduced her to an animal-less existence after his own daughter had interfered in the marriage of her elder cousin? In other words, do Dashgombo Ah’s actions index a kinship ‘failure’ or are these breakdowns part of kinship – its dark side, perhaps?

Peter Geschiere has written at length about the “dark side of kinship” in Cameroon (2000 [1997]: 11). In that postcolonial African context, Geschiere characterises it as taking the form of witchcraft, which at first glance may seem very different to the breakdowns above. And yet, there is much to compare with Geschiere’s work. First and foremost is the idea that intimacy and violence are more likely than not to be found together. As Geschiere writes, tracing witchcraft leads to the “frightening realisation that there is jealousy and therefore aggression within the family, where there should be only trust and solidarity” (2000 [1997]: 11). In his later writings on the subject, Geschiere tempers his initial moralistic stance about what a family ‘should’ be, drawing on Simmel (1990 [1900]: 174) to argue for a more situational and precarious conception of trust (2013: 32). Nevertheless, his early insights regarding the complexity and ambivalence of kinship relations remain pertinent in three ways. First is the above-discussed recognition that kinship has a violent dark side. Second is the innovative way he approaches the relationship between kinship and social change, which I will explore in the following section. Third is the way he tackles the fact that, despite indigenous ideas that kin are the only ones you can trust *and* the seemingly contradictory

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<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, studies that draw on ethnographies of Amazonian warfare have argued that war is not the outcome of the failure of exchange, but instead that the two exist on a continuum, or are two sides of the same coin. Pierre Clastres famously argued that violence in Amazonian societies is, in fact, an internal and essential form of self-immunisation against the formation of a ‘state’, which, once established, will lead to fascistic violence on an entirely different scale (1987).

reality that most witchcraft accusations are among kin, the thought of severing ties with kin or refusing to maintain them is nearly inconceivable (2000 [1997]: 212).

This recognition seems important, as it speaks to the tension between normative ideas of relatedness and processual means of maintaining kinship. In fact, a year after the events of this Naadam, one relative indeed sought to repair relations between Badrakh and Ulzii and Dashgombo Ah, explaining on Dashgombo Ah's behalf that it had all been a misunderstanding. There had been rain in Mandalhairhan for a couple nights, and as Mongolians do not slaughter sheep when their wool is wet, Dashgombo Ah had had no option but to say there was no food. This relative was none other than Ariuna Egch, Ulzii's youngest sister, who had had almost no contact with Badrakh and Ulzii for years, and whose long list of injurious actions was outlined in the previous chapter. I include this point here to demonstrate that even in dire circumstances it seems that the obligations of relatedness are not easy to cast aside. In fact, it seems that people oscillate between times of exchange and times of violence. Violence may seem to stretch kinship to its limits, but these limits, instead of being found at the edges, are actually at the heart of relations (cf. Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 538). The oscillation between care and violence *within* kinship is identifiable by anthropologists not because there are only two ways of approaching kinship – normative vs. processual – but because people themselves move between these perspectives. Relationships of mutuality that have apparently broken down can be rehabilitated through appeals to blood and obligation. Blood may perhaps be thicker than water, but what of flesh?

### ***Mah* as Kinship**

This chapter has explored kinship in Mongolia through metaphors of blood, processual means of enacting relations, and measuring the extent to which following the exchange of meat between people can index their relational networks. While any of these three can stand alone as approaches to kinship or relationality, I now would like to unite them through a consideration of *mah*: flesh (as it can also be translated), both in the sense of the 'flesh and blood' of kin relations *and* of animal flesh, blood and bones.

Following Henare et al. (2007: 2) I ask here what Mongolian kinship might look like when the materiality of meat is taken seriously, when meat-as-thing and meat-as-concept are analytically separated. Thinking through *mah*, I argue, provides a new perspective on kinship in Mongolia in a number of ways. Primary among these is that *mah*-as-kinship unites disparate approaches that thus far have been considered only symbolic/theoretical ‘concepts’ attached to meat, but not integrated with it. Secondly, I will demonstrate that thinking through *mah* reveals a distinctive and particular form of kinship in Mongolia, namely one that speaks to and emerges out of the specific reality of peri-urban, age-of-the-market relational networks such as those in the ger district.

### ***Mah: Meat***

As will already be clear, animal meat is a rich topic for research in Mongolia. It is perhaps an ideal object of material culture study as it is considered fundamental for sustaining physical life in Mongolia. Meat also enacts and enables a wide range of social relations, and is thoroughly imbued with symbolic, emotional and existential meaning. For many, herds – and the meat, blood and bones they provide – define Mongolia as a nation, are a key source of economic and social potential, and materialise the temporalities and possibilities for life (Bristley 2017). Ethnographies of pastoral life in Mongolia abound with descriptions of the close symbiotic relationship between mobile pastoralists and their herds (Fijn 2011). While there has been less anthropological focus on food in Mongolia (but see Ruhlmann 2006), it is well known that meat is fundamental to the cuisine to the extent that it is common to say, “food without meat is not food!” (*mahgüi hool, hool bish!*)

The role of food in Mongolia has been better explored in studies of its ritual uses and hospitality (Humphrey 2012: S66-67); however, perhaps not enough focus has been put on commensality. It is difficult to overstate in how many ways meat (food) orders and manifests relations in Mongolia: different parts of the animal are reserved for different members of the household (most famously, the shoulder blade of a sheep/goat always goes to the eldest male). The physical experience of eating from a central plate of boiled animal bones is also integral to the Mongolian experience, each person with a knife in hand,

slicing the tender meat from the bone held in the other hand and bringing the morsel wedged between knife and thumb to the mouth; the obligation to clean a bone until it gleams only white; the crowding of eager children, who wait for an older relative to break open a bone with the back of a knife so they can suck out the oily marrow. Meat is thus not only at the heart of Mongolian commensality, it manifests domestic hierarchies and is also a key pleasure of life.

### ***Ots and Tevsh***

Introduced above, Park's study of post-socialist kinship in Mongolia generally maintains a focus on meat, blood and bone as *metaphors* and *idioms*, generally drawing their significance from the realm of human reproduction – “It is said that the father's semen provides the bones of the child while the mother's womb supplies the flesh and blood” (Park 2003: 144; see also Vreeland 1957: 56). However, it is interesting to note that animal meat and human flesh appear in his discussion in two particular ways.

The first way is in relation to the ritual preparation and eating of mutton during celebrations such as Tsgaaan Sar (Lunar New Year). Park writes, “It is possible to see *ots* (meat from the sheep's back) and *tevsh* (the wooden plate upon which it is placed) representing flesh and bone as kinship metaphors in these rituals ... When *ots* is consumed, only the *tevsh* remains. This is similar to the way in which human flesh decays after death, leaving only bone” (2003: 148). In the rest of the paragraph, Park's material moves from the metaphorical to the literal as he mentions that the *tevsh* is also literally inherited down the patriline. In fact, it may even be broken and distributed among kin members, who keep their piece at home and “show it respect” (*Ibid.*).

The second way that animal meat features in Park's discussion is as an object of exchange between fictive kin. Park remarks that in contemporary Mongolia *huurai* (lit. dry) or “fictive” kinship bonds established among adults are a key way to “broaden” core kin relations (2003: 152). He presents three points on these relations. First, *huurai* kinship relations are “one of the most distinctive features of post-socialist Mongolian kinship” (*Ibid.*); second, they are “as strong as those of real kinship in terms of people's commitment to

mutual assistance” (*Ibid.*: 153), and third, they involve “moral obligations similar to those between real kin” (*Ibid.*: 154). Park then illustrates his argument with reference to a number of informants who have established *huurai* kinship relations across the city-countryside divide, as these in particular demonstrate “the distinctive features of this relationship” (*Ibid.*: 153). In the examples Park presents, *huurai* relatives engage in very similar practices of exchange and mutual assistance to those included in my description of ‘meat’ networks. City residents acquire quality meat and dairy products from their countryside counterparts, and can rely on them for warm hospitality and assistance if they visit the countryside. Park does not specify what countryside *huurai* relatives gain from the relationship, but it would be reasonable to assume that aside from cash for meat and other animal products they can also rely on a place to stay in Ulaanbaatar should the need arise. Park understands *huurai* relations to be a middle ground between “real” kin and “non-kin”: relations “based more on spiritual and moral bonds” (*Ibid.*) than on either ‘real’-*cum*-blood relations or ‘non-kin’-*cum*-economic ties.

I would argue that both of these distinctions somewhat miss the point. In other words, it is not helpful to begin with an assumption of any distinction between “real” and “fictive” kin, nor between “moral” and “economic” relationships. Instead, as I have suggested, it might be more productive to examine meat as an index of changing relations in Mongolia at a time of significant rural-urban migration. My attention to meat is thus also an attempt to see what exactly is changing and how it is changing in contemporary Mongolia among people who have moved to the ger district.

### **Eating the *Nutag***

As I mentioned above, those in the ger district often seek out meat from as near to their homeland as possible, if not from their own relatives’ herds. This desire, however, goes beyond a matter of taste preference. In the context of the ger districts, it is important to understand how meat is a means of continuing to nurture and constitute one’s body with the substance of the *nutag*. Recognising that people in the ger districts generally no longer live with their own herds, and indeed that they often live a great distance from their homeland/relational heartland is the first step in unpicking the



particularities of *mah* as kinship. Making and reckoning kinship over long distances and significant periods of absence, however, is nothing new or remarkable in Mongolia. In fact, in drawing inspiration from the methodological provocations of the volume *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007), it behoves me to acknowledge that a chapter in that very book deals with reckoning kinship in Mongolia through things.

In her chapter, Empson demonstrates how the separation of bodies and the assemblage of certain things produce kinship in Mongolia (2007). Empson's chapter features a detailed ethnography of household chests (*awdar*) among Buryat-Mongolian households in north-eastern Mongolia. She describes how the movement of houses and people engaged in nomadic pastoralism produces separations that are generative in a number of ways. She mobilises the concept of *hishig* to explore how containing parts of people and things within a household chest keeps people attached to a (mobile) home they are no longer physically present in. The things displayed on the chest and hidden within it also reckon different types of kinship relations: inherited agnatic kinship visible to all in objects and photographs outside, and more horizontal blood relations that cross agnatic lines hidden from view within. Empson's work reveals one possibility for how one might "understand kinship through things" in Mongolia (2007: 117), one that, as she writes, "shatters our own anthropological understandings of 'blood' and 'bone' as the foundation of kinship in Mongolia, allowing us to see beyond these ideas" (2007: 138 n.28). I welcome Empson's disruption of anthropology's restrictive blood-and-bone metaphor of Mongolian kinship; however, while it may indeed be productive to see beyond them, I first would like to question the extent to which the materiality of blood and bone has actually to be considered.

There are many ways people that reckon their connection to particular places in Mongolia, especially through their bodies (Empson 2007: 123). By being born onto a specific piece of 'earth', bathed first in a specific water and having one's placenta buried in a specific location, one has one's 'birth place' (*törsön nutag*) established. This connection lasts a lifetime, and in times of illness a Mongolian may return to the same spot to renew his or her vital energy in its dusty ground. Such measures, however, are rare in comparison to the daily renewal of one's connection to the *nutag* through eating animals that

graze there. There are literal substantive connections at work here. People make their bodies from the meat of animals that graze on the grasses where their (both the people's and animals') ancestors lived, died and returned to the earth, from whence the grass grows. Meat from different areas of Mongolia tastes different because the herds graze on different wild grasses and herbs. People know well the taste of meat from their own homeland, and for most herders access to this most-savoured staple is taken for granted. However, for those who no longer have their own animals, who no longer live in the countryside among herds, who have moved great distances away from their birthplace, constituting one's body with the homeland no longer goes without saying.

Throughout my time in Mongolia, it was usual for people to ask me how much meat cost in my homeland (*nutag*). My ger district companions were constantly asking for a price per kilo, which would be expected to differ according to the animal.<sup>52</sup> It was impossible, however, for me to provide a simple answer to this question, as I was accustomed to meat being sold by 'cut'. For my interlocutors, the idea of cuts was easily understandable (all men had personal experience butchering animals, and different cuts are designated to different categories of people) but the idea that cuts would be sold at different prices was a surprise. Different types of meat have different values, but these are not expressed in financial terms. Instead, the value of animal parts resides in their mimetic capacity to manifest growth and wholeness, such as in the case of anklebones (*shagai*), which are collected in a household from every slaughtered animal. Herd animals and their parts manifest growth, but the value of those parts is predicated on the ability to trace the parts back to their original 'wholeness'.

In his famous paper 'Almost Eating the Ancestors', Maurice Bloch argues that "eating is the destruction of the specific individual form of the object eaten but the retention of its substance" (1985: 634). The eating of an animal indeed destroys its individual form; however, I wish to draw attention to the step just before eating, namely the breaking down of the animal into

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<sup>52</sup> Questions about the various values of meat and parts of animals would be another good point of comparison with hunter-forager literature, particularly studies of meat sharing and allocation (cf. Hunt 2000; Damas 1972).

parts. Animals are whole and partible at the same time: when they split they grow, either producing young or producing multiple relations enacted through the sharing of a carcass. These are then broken down again in the meal and turned into people's bodies. When people eat meat in Mongolia, they are thus eating more than just flesh and blood; they are eating their *nutag*, the relationality of the animals, humans, and particular products of growth, care and land.

I argue, therefore, that eating one's herds in the countryside is a means of sustaining much more than one's physical body. The substantive connection between land, animals and people is fundamental and generative. Access to this capacity takes daily effort and struggle, but remains more or less possible when people live in the countryside; in other words, when they have access to their own animals. As such, while eating their meat is generative, it is not the primary means by which countryside people build relations among kin. This brings us to the crux of my argument that kinship in urban Mongolia is not enacted in the same way as it may be (or may once have been) in the countryside.

### **The Meat of the Ger District**

Enacting kinship networks in the countryside is not primarily done through transfers of meat; enacting kinship in the city centre is also not done through meat. I suggest that enacting kinship through meat is, in fact, emblematic of the ger district, taken as a space *between* countryside and city. Compared to the breakdown with Dashgombo Ah, the final events of the Naadam 2016 trip – namely, when the family returned to the ger district to find the meat had begun to rot – might seem simply contingent or unlucky, but I argue that this is not the case. In fact, they reveal something profound about kinship, meat and why one cannot simply import or impose models developed elsewhere. In fact, in the same way that the meat spoiled from the heat during the long journey between country and city, models of kinship developed from countryside ethnographies are likewise denatured by the time they reach the outskirts of the capital.

Thinking through the spoiling of the meat draws attention to the physical distance between city and countryside. While people in the ger

district try to maintain connections to the countryside even as they seek to build them in the city, ger district life has a way of disrupting networks that can lead to a paradoxical form of isolation – paradoxical because one is surrounded by many more people in the city yet may struggle to cultivate the connections necessary to make a living. Distance from meat indexes distance from kin. In this case, where kin networks become meat networks, social isolation can mean intense food insecurity and even starvation. While a small number of people move to the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar with their animals – and a limited proportion of those manage to successfully maintain their animals in the peri-urban grasslands – for most people in the ger districts, their presence is indicative of their separation from an animal-based subsistence and access to *nutag* meat through kin networks. Widening this understanding, one could say that the meat mouldered *because* Badrakh and Ulzii live in the ger district. The meat was only being transported like that in Baterdene’s van because the family live in a space that both exists at a physical distance from the countryside and demands distinctive types of relational enactions, namely those of meat.

Like the meat of the *nutag*, the obligations of kinship are venerated as an ideal, but performing these obligations involves overlooking the times of violence and breakdown. As we have seen, links to the countryside can be maintained, but they are tenuous and often do not live up to expectations as they cross city-countryside divides. This point is also indexed in the meat that arrives in the ger district. People living in the ger district try to maintain their bodily connection with their homeland by eating meat from their relatives, but more often than not they are left with little choice but to buy pieces of animals whose parts have lost all connection to their former wholeness. Shop meat in the city does not have partible potential; it has become simply dismembered pieces of flesh. In Mongolia, where meat is much more than simple sustenance, anxieties over the provenance of the meat with which one nourishes ones family are profound. Not knowing where the meat is from produces an analogous anxiety over where people are from in the present-tense sense that a body constituted by unknown material cannot be traced to any relational wholeness. This is echoed in the disquieting reality that the children of Badrakh and Ulzii raised (and two born) in the ger districts found

themselves out of place and lacking allies in their homeland, a place in which they expected to feel at home.

This argument has brought attention to the importance of thinking deeply about the social and material effects that rural-urban migration can produce in Mongolia. I have sought to argue for a way to go beyond concepts of Mongolian kinship that have emerged from rural ethnography. Idealised kinship based on nostalgic ideas of the countryside or an imagined deep past of solidarity (in the sense of categories and concepts of obligation) do continue to shape people's interactional aspirations in the ger district, but the particularities of life in neither the city nor the countryside play a part in disrupting those ideals. In other words, we may draw a heuristic analogy between the bricolage of the ger district as a material form and the types of bricolaged relationship that emerge *with* it.

## CHAPTER THREE *The Ger District*

### Urbanisation in Contemporary Mongolia

Few accounts of life in contemporary Mongolia now start without reference to the ‘great migration’, or *ih nüüidel*, that has taken place over the last two decades.<sup>53</sup> Among other recent phenomena-*cum*-keywords such as ‘the mining boom’ or ‘the age of the market’ the urbanisation of Mongolia – specifically the rapid growth of the capital city, Ulaanbaatar – has underpinned much of recent scholarship in sociology, development studies (including research and reports by both the government and non-governmental organisations), urban planning, waste management, demography, economics and so on. The standard format of such studies and reports begins with statistical data; for example, “Mongolia is ... experiencing dramatic rural-to-urban migration, with the urban population as a percentage of the total having increased from 57 per cent in 2000, to over 72 per cent in 2015” (UN 2017: 1-2). According to a report co-written by the head of the Ulaanbaatar Statistics Department and the Ulaanbaatar Economic Statistics sub-Department, data from the 2010 census shows that “two of every three citizens in Mongolia live in urban areas” (Chilkhaasuren and Baasankhuu 2012: 1). Having established as a baseline the remarkable fact that more than 72% of the least densely populated country in the world now live in urban areas, two specific qualities of Mongolia’s great migration are drawn to the fore.

The first is that Mongolia’s urbanisation has not been distributed throughout the country, instead being tightly focused on the capital city. As the statisticians continue, “The majority of the Mongolian population, around 64.2%, is living only in Ulaanbaatar city. Erdenet and Darkhan cities are after Ulaanbaatar and around 26.9% of urban population is living in other cities and urban areas” (Chilkhaasuren and Baasankhuu 2012: 1). The second is that, as the Ulaanbaatar downtown area was built with a maximum projected population of approximately 500,000, the settlement of the city is taking a particular form. As the report from the UN International Organization for

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<sup>53</sup> Lindskog (2014) is specific in using the term *ih nüüidel*.

Migration explains, “Most internal migrants in Mongolia settle in *ger* districts on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, which make up close to 60 per cent of Ulaanbaatar’s population” (UN 2017: 4; UNDP 2016: 112).

### ‘Nomad vs. Urban’

In most such studies, it is a short step from this statistical data to comments on the state of life in the *ger* districts. For example, as Terbish and Rawsthorne write, “Recent years have seen the explosion of *ger* settlements on the fringe of the City, which are now home to some 900,000 people, creating policy concerns about pollution and poverty” (2016: 88). Or as Jörg Janzen writes, “In the new *ger*-settlements of Ulaanbaatar, the widely uncontrolled sedentarization process causes a lot of social, economical, ecological, legal as well as infrastructural and hygiene problems” (2005: 86). Another trend in this type of writing is to contrast the recent urbanisation with a view of the Mongolian past that is captured in the trope of the ‘*nomad*’.<sup>54</sup> Thus many papers, reports and documentaries rely on the idea of Mongolians as nomadic (archetypal non-sedentarised) people who are now moving to the city and must adapt to urban life. Take, for example, the words of Bolchover: “Over the last quarter-century, labour prospects linked to the discovery of exploitable natural resources have drawn former nomads to construct their traditional tent-houses in an ever-expanding, infrastructureless sprawl around the Mongolian capital” (2016: 22). From this perspective, nomadic herders are seen as involved in a process of uneasy transition to sedentarised urban lifestyles, and commentators wring their hands about the ‘loss’ of nomadic traditions or culture that this is seen to entail, or about the incompatibility between urbanism and nomadism. Concerns about pollution and poverty are also framed in this way: key aspects of nomadic life such as burning fires or herding animals, while perfectly suited to rural settings, are seen as incompatible with urban life. Nomads are depicted as having brought these aspects of rural life to the city, and in doing so disrupting the urban order,

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<sup>54</sup> In the following paragraphs I adopt this term ironically, as it is used in such literature. While Mongolians speak of themselves as *nüüdelchid*, a term which is translated as ‘nomad’, the romanticised connotations of the English term have been disavowed in anthropological approaches and replaced with pastoral herding (Empson 2011: xiv; Humphrey and Sneath 1999).

creating chaotic urban fringes and having undesirable effects on the existing urban population with their burning of coal and willy-nilly trash and waste disposal habits that pollute the air, the groundwater, and even the concept of the urban city.

Elements of these perspectives are found throughout the literature, much of which characterises the ger districts as either temporary or informal. This perspective can be traced back to socialist-era directives. As Jagchid and Hyer reported on socialist Ulaanbaatar, “In the present transitional period, the use of both traditional and modern forms of dwelling is mixed uniquely. Mongols may dwell in modern houses or apartments during part of the year, but many have a strong nostalgic urge during the summer season to move out and live in the dwelling of the past” (1979: 377-378). Furthermore, commenting on the existence of peri-urban ger districts, they claim that it is “difficult to say just how long these old dwellings will continue to be used” (1979: 69). Even one of the few anthropological books that examines urban Mongolia specifically approaches the ger districts in this way. Bruun and Narangoa characterise the movement of people from the countryside to the city as a temporary migration, suggesting that “because of the limited opportunities for life [in the ger districts] many have brought a few animals and unpacked the family yurt in order to move back to the steppe” (2006: 6; see also 7).

The ger districts provide a visual image onto which this perspective is easily projected. The nomadic dwelling, the ger – once imagined in free motion across the wide steppe – has become rooted in the urban outskirts. The image of the ger districts is that of the ‘fixed ger’. Echoing the central tenets of the nomad vs. urban paradigm above, the sedentarised ger is taken as a key metaphor in understanding ger districts. Ger districts take their name from the word *ger*, the Mongolian term for ‘home’, as well as the felt-wrapped, wooden-lattice-walled, circular dwelling of the Mongols for centuries. Bypassing the history of urban forms that embed the ger in the very origins of urban life in Mongolia, the term ‘ger district’ serves to conceptually separate ger-dominated areas from the urban centre proper. This distinction not only denies the reality that all parts of Ulaanbaatar – including the ‘downtown’ – are dotted with gers and *hashaas*, but also the fact that people in the ger



districts are as likely – perhaps more so – to live in wooden or brick houses (*baishin*) as gers. Nevertheless, the image of the fixed ger dominates, and fits neatly with the idea of Mongolian herders packing up their distinctive portable dwelling and moving towards the city. They are imagined to pick an uninhabited plot on the urban outskirts and – regardless of the lay of the land, whether mountainside or valley – to pitch their ‘tent’ where it stands. For those still clinging to the idea of the nomadic ger moving endlessly across the “smooth space” of the steppe (Deleuze and Guattari 2002: 380), and for the overlapping group who equate ‘authentic’ Mongolness with such mobility, it is no wonder that the ger district appears either as a tragic descent of the *nomos* into the *polis* (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s 2002 terms), or as a quaint, romantic trace of Mongol/nomadic identity that perseveres *despite* the city.

Anthropological writing on the great migration or the ger districts is sometimes subtly influenced by ‘nomad versus city’ paradigms; however, it also produces some vital counter-narratives to the simple contrast between the ‘pure’ Mongolian nomadic past and the messy urban present. Anthropologists have been hard at work disrupting both sides of this fantasy. Much has been written against the idea of Mongolians as ‘nomads’ in the colloquial and/or Deleuzian sense. Humphrey and Sneath’s seminal book, *The End of Nomadism?* (1999), argues strongly that pastoral migration has never been free-floating movement (see also Khazanov 1994; Sneath 2007). Orhon Myadar (2011) takes aim at the “myth” of the nomad in both representations of Mongolia as a tourist destination and in Western scholarship – particularly that of Gilles Deleuze, demonstrating it to be bound to reductive and essentialising orientalist fantasies. Myadar writes, “The myth of the Mongolian nomad is partly a product of pervasive orientalist discourse and romanticisation of an exotic lost world” (2011: 342). On the other side, some anthropological writers have provided histories of urban forms in Mongolia.

Alicia Campi, for example, traces the rise and impact of Mongolian cities during so-called ‘nomadic’ times (2006). The edited volume in which her chapter appears likewise begins with an introduction to Mongolian urban forms, arguing that towns and cities have been “part of Mongolian civilization

since early times” (Bruun and Narangoa 2006: 2). These writers offer what might be called a ‘revivalist’ approach to Mongolian urbanisation.<sup>55</sup>

### **Ger Districts in History**

Historians and anthropologists of Mongolia have demonstrated that ger districts are a long-standing urban form in Mongolia, dating back at least to the 16th century (Byambadorj et al. 2011; Sneath 2006). Their presence is not limited to Ulaanbaatar. As anyone who has been to other Mongolian urban centres will have seen, *sum* centres are, in fact, ‘ger districts’ and *aimag* centres similarly consist of a combination of commercial and residential buildings surrounded by and interspersed with the same type of *hashaas*, gers and wooden/brick houses as the Ulaanbaatar ger districts. The smaller cities, such as Darkhan, Erdenet and Khovd, likewise have ger districts (see Strickland-Scott 2001 on Erdenet). Even Ulaan-Ude in the Buriad Republic, Russia, is surrounded by ger district-like settlements (Brezlavsky 2016).

Indeed, Urga, the precursor to modern-day Ulaanbaatar, began as a collection of gers arranged around a large central ger that was later replaced by a Buddhist temple. Robert A. Rupen charts this history, describing how, following the establishment of a monastery in 1778, Buddhist lamas moved from yurts to “rows of tiny unpainted wooden houses grouped inside high wooden palisades which surrounded the temple” (1957: 158). By the 19th century, lay Mongols in Urga were living in “yurts grouped in various-sized blocks or, as the Mongols termed them ‘khoros’” (1957: 162). Rupen suggests that the fencing probably came from the Chinese, as the Chinese merchant district of the city (Maimaicheng) had the same form, and his description of the *khoros* is not far from that of the ger district today. These areas were said to contain vicious dogs that ran free, and entry was often dangerous, but these urban homesteads also provided important bases for countryside relatives who would come to stay. At the end of his history, Rupen argues that despite changes, much of the ‘old’ Urga remains visible in modern, mid-century Ulaanbaatar, including the basic layout of the city and the palisades that surround gers (1957: 169).

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<sup>55</sup> This is reminiscent of Wheeler’s (2004) argument on markets in Mongolia.

As this history shows, it was only during the socialist period that the ger districts were ‘peripheralised’. In the mid-20th century, there was “increasing pressure to reduce the use of the traditional yurt” as part of the development of the modern city of Ulaanbaatar (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 377). Mongolian scholar Buyandalai Duurenbayar, who has examined the various master plans for Ulaanbaatar over the course of its existence, likewise argues that it was only when the mobility of the ger was cast as incompatible with Soviet conceptions of modernity that the ger districts in their contemporary ‘peripheral’ state came to be (2016: 35).

Drawing on this dynamic history and challenging standard conceptions of centres and peripheries by ‘thinking with’ the ger districts will be a central theme of this chapter, and here we have its first instantiation. Both historically and regionally speaking, ger districts are neither just the outcome of migration in the age of the market nor the simple manifestation of a nomadic culture caught in the middle of a transition to urbanism. They are in fact a central urban form of Mongolia, one that long pre-dated other urban architecture, and one that is spread throughout both the country and the wider Mongolian cultural region.<sup>56</sup>

### **Beyond ‘Lack’**

Wider research circles have been strongly influenced by the decision of the UN in 2007 to classify the Ulaanbaatar ger districts as ‘informal settlements’.<sup>57</sup> This tag of informality pervades the international (English-language) development scholarship on ger districts (Byambadorj et al. 2011).

Generally speaking, the UN defines informal settlements as the following:

1. areas where groups of housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to, or occupy illegally;
2. unplanned settlements and areas where housing is not in compliance

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<sup>56</sup> The ‘Mongolian cultural region’ is a term coined by Empson that refers to regions populated with various ‘Mongolian’ or Mongol peoples, and that both includes and extends beyond the contemporary nation state of Mongolia (2006).

<sup>57</sup> Fascinatingly, Byambadorj et al. mention that the Mongolian translation of the UN document, however, did not use the term ‘informal’ (2011: 167).

with current planning and building regulations (unauthorized housing) (UNSTATS Environment Glossary).<sup>58</sup>

Despite the majority of ger district homes being built on land that is owned by the residents, and despite the historical significance of the ger in Mongolia, the ger districts themselves are defined as informal settlements by the UN for the following reasons:

In recent years, Ger area population in Ulaanbaatar has grown rapidly. Although over 50% of the population resides in Ger areas, these traditional settlements are not recognised as a formal part of the city. They are viewed only as temporary settlements. The informal status of Ger areas is rooted in the lack of appropriate laws, and urban development policies and regulations for the improvement of Ger areas. This has resulted in unplanned and haphazard expansion of Ger areas, especially since the mid-1990s. The lack of basic urban services and infrastructure in Ger areas has become a major source of urban environmental problems such as air, water and soil pollution and the Ger area residents suffer from poor living conditions (Cities Alliance 2010: i).

Most literature on the ger districts displays overwhelming negativity in two senses: first, in the almost uniformly depressing and despairing portrayal of life in the ger districts, and second, in the consistency with which ger districts are described in terms of that which they ‘lack’.<sup>59</sup> I therefore respond ethnographically to the existing literature by thinking ‘with’ the ger districts, attending to life there without beginning with the question of what it may or may not ‘lack’.

In the opening chapters, I explored the kinship network of a Mongolian family and the ways that relations are maintained and/or lost by

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<sup>58</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/environmentgl/gesform.asp?getitem=665>

<sup>59</sup> Even scholars who reject the UN’s label of informality and champion the ger districts as “unique” still tend to provide a negative perspective. Byambadorj et al., for example, argue, “the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar [are] a unique urban form that aligns with neither the informal settlements, which dominate cities of the developing world nor with the private formal ownership systems, which operate in market economies. Rather, ger districts should be positioned as something in between, a delicate balance of history and identity with ambiguity and *lack of infrastructure*” (2011: 168 emphasis added).

their ‘enaction’ in the form of sending meat. This discussion of meat now provides a backdrop for the exploration of how these relations constitute a primary infrastructural form in a material context so often depicted as infrastructure-less or infrastructurally lacking. In the first two chapters, attention was paid to material flows in order to disrupt assumptions that kinship relations are static or exist *sui generis*; in this chapter, the focus on social relations is mobilised to complicate understandings of migration that are overly reliant on economic explanations (e.g. push and pull models). Indeed, while both people and things were shown to move between countryside and city in the previous chapters, this was mostly part of a synchronic approach in which the different ‘nodes’ of the family network were described as relatively fixed in space (e.g. Badrakh and Ulzii living in the ger district, Dashgombo Ah living in the countryside). In contrast, this chapter takes a more diachronic approach, addressing the history of how Badrakh and Ulzii came to live in Aglag as a way of introducing the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar.

### **The Ger District**

For many in the ger districts, the material culture of life there provides two primary benefits: feelings of ownership and freedom. Most of the ger district residents I spent time with, including Badrakh and Ulzii, own the plot of land, the fence, the house and/or the ger where they live.<sup>60</sup> I was often told by those I lived among that they enjoyed opening their door and looking out over their *hashaa*, knowing that all they surveyed was theirs. Within their fenced walls, they could do as they pleased. Former ger district residents who moved into apartments reported struggling with mortgage and loan

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<sup>60</sup> References here to ‘ownership’ are something of a gloss. The systems of land and home ownership rights are complex and complicated in Mongolia (see Endicot 2012; Pedersen and Højer 2008, forthcoming; Plueckhahn 2017; Sneath 2001). I write here of ‘ownership’ as a deliberate contrast to those who have mortgages on apartments or pay rent, in the sense that whether the ownership was legally ratified or not, my ger district interlocutors could live in their homes without the pressures of payments to the bank or a landlord. This, of course, is not always the case across the ger districts, especially as increasing economic pressures encourage more families to use their land titles as collateral for loans. Badrakh and Ulzii, however, avoided this, considering it a last resort.

repayments. One Mongolian teacher and friend – a 30-year-old woman who had lived for over a decade in the ger districts with her husband and child since moving from the countryside – recounted that she had been surprised at the restrictions she felt in her new apartment block: “I used to open the door and everything was mine. Now I open the door and I am in other people’s space”. The materiality of a ger district homestead affords these twin feelings of freedom and ownership. Most families live on land that they own themselves, and in a house they built themselves or a ger they own and assembled. A survey-based paper on housing and living conditions in the ger districts, Caldieron 2013, reports that 79% of those surveyed own their own land, that 50% live in their own ger and that 70% built and own their own house.

The classic structure of a ger district homestead is a fenced plot of land measuring approximately 700m<sup>2</sup> (this is the size of the land allocated to each citizen according to the 2002 land law). It is usual for the fence that surrounds the land to be made of planks of wood around two metres high, but other materials are also used, ranging from half-buried tyres that simply demarcate an area, to irregular pieces of scrap wood or metal, concrete bricks, large metal sheets, or even elaborate wrought iron fencing. Sometimes there are extraordinary fences made from the carcasses of abandoned buses, either incorporated wholesale into the fence or the sliced-off top used like an oversized metal sheet. The *hashaa* usually has a large wood or metal gate; the more expensive ones slide open and closed on rails, others open on hinges. There may also be a smaller metal door for visitors on foot. As can be imagined, from there on *hashaas* vary enormously depending on the topography of the enclosed land, the number and type of dwellings and the activities of the residents; for example, if a household has a scrap metal business, a mini concrete block factory or a vegetable plot. Rather than continuing with a general picture I will turn now to providing an ethnographic account of the *hashaa* where I lived, which was a relatively ordinary plot of land.

## **Badrakh and Ulzii's *Hashaa***

Badrakh and Ulzii have lived in their current 900m<sup>2</sup> *hashaa* since 2010, when they purchased the land from a relative (Ulzii's younger brother's wife's younger sibling). The fence is made of wooden planks and has a metal gate which had been blue until one day in 2016 when I came home to find that Ulzii had repainted it rust red. When I asked why she had done so, she told me that while blue is a very good colour, it is also the colour of flowing water, and having a gate painted blue would encourage things such as money and fortune to flow out. The red-coloured gate would help keep things, material and immaterial, safely contained within their *hashaa*. Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa* is located a few hundred metres from the foot of the local mountain. As such, it is on flat ground, as opposed to the steep mountainsides of those who live to the couple's east. The Aglag river flows between the Baatarhairhan mountain of Aglag and the built-up ger district to the west, called Sharhad. Once it was a roaring river, and I heard tales from an old soldier of the storm of '68, during which the entire valley had been flooded and the high water mark could be seen on the side of Baatarhairhan mountain. These days the water barely trickles by, if at all, and the river bed has been transformed into an informal marketplace for horses in the spring and winter fodder in the autumn. The river's source is many miles away, but the grassland of the valley is fed by a number of natural springs. One such natural spring is located just outside the gate of Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*; this causes the surrounding area to be very marshy in the summer months and a continual ice rink during the winter.

The summer grasses grow beautifully in the family's *hashaa*, an untended flower meadow rises in the spring and blooms all summer. The downside to the moisture is twofold: first, during periods of rain the land becomes sodden and muddy, and second, the height of the ground water prevents the family from being able to dig a deeper latrine. Ger district toilets, like those in the countryside, are long-drop pit latrines: the longer the drop, the cleaner and less smelly the toilet. Ulzii and Badrakh's latrine is located at the far south-east corner of the *hashaa*, while the house is in the north-west corner. They had a single latrine at first, but as the waste filled the space,

eventually reaching the wooden planks on which one stands or squats, the men of the family dug a new pit next to the old one. Ulzii often complained that she would like to have a deeper pit but they can only get about a metre down before they hit water. The latrine is encased on three sides and above with wooden planks and scrap metal; the open side faces the *hashaa* wall.

Ulzii and Badrakh's *hashaa* has housed many different combinations and configurations of relatives and gers, even in the years that I have known the family. For much of my fieldwork the *hashaa* held one house and one ger. The ger belongs to Ulzii's eldest daughter, Anar, and her husband. It was bought for them, as traditionally it must be, when they were married and formed their own household. Anar's husband, Baterdene, works as a driver, and as his parents live in the countryside he is often away; the young family's ger is therefore usually occupied by Anar and her little son. Anar and Baterdene's ger is located on one of the *geriin buur*' in the *hashaa*; *buur*' is the name given to the circle left on the ground that marks where a ger has been. It is customary to place a ger on the *buur*' of a previous ger, as it likely to be a suitable place, cleared of stones and stable ground. Baterdene's ger is placed in the south-west of the *hashaa*, next to the little wooden shed that occupies the south-west corner. The shed contains miscellaneous items, including the ger that Ulzii and Badrakh had scrimped and saved to buy, having moved penniless and 'ger-less' to the city in 2008. The family refer to the little house as 'the north' and the Mongolian ger as 'the south' according to their relative locations.

Between the two homes is a mound of coal debris, left over from previous winters when the family bought a winter supply of coal from the local depot where Badrakh and other relatives find day labour in the winter months. The centre of the *hashaa* contains a *geriin buur*' that had been home to different relatives over the last years – Baterdene and Anar also at first had their ger in this spot. In summer 2017 Badrakh transformed the space into a little gazebo. He installed five wooden logs around a taller central log and constructed a slanted roof out of scrap metal sheets, painted with the same rust-red paint as the gate. The wooden flooring of the old ger was repurposed into a circular gazebo floor and a small wooden table placed in the centre. That summer we enjoyed many meals outside in Badrakh's gazebo and passed



many peaceful afternoons playing cards or chess, then having impromptu family dance parties when the sun set and the light grew too dark for cards.

Any description of the *hashaa* can only ever be a snapshot, or an amalgamation of snapshots, as the space is in constant flux. The change of seasons, the movement of people, and the weathering and decay of the *hashaa* fence write the *hashaa* anew every day: the path worn in the grass from the front door to the fence gate, from the house to the latrine, and the perimeter track drawn by the movement of the dogs marking and remarking their territory are continually inscribed and iterated. Gers are moved as people migrate in and out of the *hashaa*, the gers also sink into the marshy ground, a fierce storm may rip bricks from the house or tear down planks from the *hashaa* fence, and the radical seasonal flux causes cracks in windows and walls as the wooden house expands and contracts. The air of the *hashaa* and homes is also in constant motion. Spring dust storms howl through, carrying dirt and debris; summer rains enhance the fresh smell of grass. As autumn turns to winter ger district homes stock up on wood and coal, and people begin to light their stove fires, at first only at night and then as the deep winter sets in, whenever the home is occupied. For much of winter the whole city descends into a thick fog of coal smoke. Ger districts are particularly affected by the toxic aerial soup, and visibility is reduced to a few metres. Stepping outside, the air is no longer an invisible background substance. Instead, the frigid cold transforms the body instantly: tear ducts and nostrils freeze, the choking strength of the smoke grabs the throat as if by an invisible hand. Filled, suffocated and whipped by the air and winds, blinded by snow and smoke, winter in the ger district is a fearsome time.

### **Moving to the Ger District: Badrakh and Ulzii's story**

When I first arrived at their home in June 2014, I asked Ulzii and Badrakh in my broken Mongolian when they had moved from the countryside and why? I was told that they had been living in this *hashaa* since 2010, and that they had moved because of the *zud*, the winter disaster. Indeed, this is the simple story and the story that often appears in the literature – literature based on surveys and short-term research. I aim to complicate this picture in a number of ways in the following section.

Badrakh and Ulzii both grew up in herding families in the Mongolian countryside, in a province of Hentii *aimag* I call Mandalhairhan. Until their first migration to Ulaanbaatar, neither had ever owned land or a building. Ulzii separated from her first husband after eight difficult years coping with a jealous and often absent partner. A mother with two young daughters, she soon began a new relationship with Badrakh, who had been a classmate of her elder sister. The couple had their first child, a boy, in 1998. Soon after, Ulzii's youngest sister, Ariuna Egch, also gave birth. Barely 16, the birth was a total surprise. Indeed, it was not until they were driving to the hospital to see a doctor about the girl's stomach pains that the father of the child even realised his girlfriend was pregnant, as Ariuna Egch went into labour in the back of the car. The boy born was small and weak, and it was felt they should move to the city to be nearer the urban hospitals. Ulzii and Ariuna Egch's mother was living with Ariuna Egch at the time, and the two were inseparable. Thus, they moved to the neighbouring ger district of Aglag, bringing their ger and settling in the *hashaa* of a family also originally from Mandalhairhan. Having moved, Ulzii's mother encouraged Ulzii and Badrakh to follow them to the city. The couple then proceeded to sell almost all their remaining animals. In preparation for the move to Ulaanbaatar they moved into the rural centre, staying with a much older half sibling of Ulzii (a daughter of Ulzii's father from an earlier relationship) and her husband, a successful herder. While they were staying there, they stored the money they had collected from the sale of their herds in the household chest, or *awdar*. Mere days before they moved, somebody who knew where the money was hidden entered the home and stole the over one million MNT. The family was plunged instantly into poverty. Having already liquidated their animal wealth, leaving an unsustainably small number of sheep and goats to feed a family of five, the couple went ahead with the move.

Like her mother and sister, Ulzii and Badrakh moved the family to the *hashaa* of a person from their homeland in the ger district west of Aglag. The year was 1999 and the economic situation was dire. The family survived by collecting scrap metal and selling candy on the street. When retelling this story it was not unusual for Ulzii to begin to cry, remembering their sudden hardship. "Badrakh and I, we have done every job you can imagine, we did

anything to survive except steal,” she would repeat to me. Ulzii fell pregnant again, and in 2000 gave birth to the couple’s second son. The elder two daughters, now in primary school, would divide their daytime between lessons and taking care of their two infant brothers, and spend their nights and evenings on the street selling firewood. The parents managed to acquire a horse and cart, and began to collect wood from the nearby mountains. Gradually they used the wood they collected to build a *hashaa* on a mountainside in Aglag, near to the *hashaa* of a relative, the son of the Ulzii’s older sibling at whose home they had stayed before the move to the city. In those days, land could be claimed by first constructing a fence and then later applying for legal ownership and documentation. With the timber they collected, Badrakh and Ulzii built a very small wooden house. “It was really a cute little house [*hoorhon jijig baishin baisan shüü*],” Ulzii would say, “It looked like nothing from the outside. So tiny! But when you went inside it was just right”.

Life slowly began to improve during Badrakh and Ulzii’s time perched on the mountainside. Collecting and selling wood with the help of the horse and cart grew gradually profitable, and the *hashaa* became a kind of wholesale wood processing site. A young girl from the local area came to work for them, as did one of Ulzii’s younger brothers. The two soon fell in love and started their own family. While Badrakh and the older children took care of the wood business, Ulzii tried her hand at trade. She obtained an international passport and took the train to the Chinese border city of Ereen. Buying cheap Chinese goods from traders there, she returned by train to Ulaanbaatar before finding transportation to her countryside homeland and selling the useful goods, sometimes in exchange for money, but often receiving meat and other vital countryside products with which to return to their *hashaa*. Following a miscarriage caused by overexertion from breaking stones with a heavy tool, Ulzii became pregnant with her third son. The boy was born in 2005 and was by all accounts a remarkable child. He had large, wide eyes and babbled speech before he was even six months old. For the family it seemed as if their luck had really turned around following the disaster of the theft. Unfortunately, the happiness was not to last.

Ulzii's second daughter was playing with the youngest boy when he was around six months old and, only a child herself, she must have been a little rough with him. She pulled him up by his arms and possibly dislocated his shoulder. Although it was the depths of winter the family had no choice but to take him to the hospital. By the time they returned, the infant was very unwell with some kind of flu, and passed away soon after. Around the same time, Badrakh was in the forests with the horse and cart when a possible mis-loading of the heavy logs caused the horse to fall down the mountainside to its death. Ulzii attempted one more journey to China but found that small-scale trade was no longer profitable due to the shortage of cash among countryside-dwellers. Ulzii fell into a depression, no longer able to bear living in the house where her son had once played and laughed. It was then that Ulzii's elder sister, the one to whom she had always been closest, intervened. "Return to the countryside", she urged Ulzii. Her husband, Bataa Ah agreed, "City life is unnecessary [*demi*]"'. They offered Badrakh and Ulzii the chance to herd Bataa Ah's animals back in their homeland.

Thus, once again, the family sold everything they had in the city, and for 700,000 MNT acquired the *hashaa* and wooden house adjacent to that of Bataa Ah and Ulzii's sister Namuun Egch in the *sum* centre. The parents left their children – now 14, 12, 8 and 6 – in the little urban centre to take care of one another while they went out to the countryside with the herds of their relatives and the few animals they had left behind all those years ago. Badrakh and Ulzii spent one year herding their relatives' animals, supplementing their herding with Badrakh's work as an expert hunter. It was a difficult year, especially for their youngest son. The elder children would leave him alone in the house when they went to school in the morning. The small boy had a dimple in his right cheek, the physical manifestation of his intense emotional connection to his father, and the abrupt separation from his father left him distraught. Alone in the house, he would urinate in his trousers, and was unable to follow his lessons at the countryside school. Badrakh and Ulzii were also unaccustomed to being hired herders, as it were. They gradually ate their way through the few animals left to their name, devoting their labour to their relatives' herds. When their animals all but ran out, they also fell out with these close relatives, and at the height of the dispute were in fact abandoned in

the countryside with only the clothes on their backs. They hitched a ride back to their children in the *sum* centre, packed up their minimal belongings, and returned – once again penniless – to the ger district.

The family of six moved into the tiny four-walled ger of Ulzii's younger brother Bagbandi Ah, who lived there with his wife and five children. Once again they returned to life on the edges of survival. The parents began to work in the local coal depot, breaking up the black boulders that arrived on the train line, and sorting and packing the coal into bags for sale by the kilo. The long hours of work in bitterly cold conditions were exhausting and very low paid. The children attended school and returned to work, collecting plastic bottles along the side of the river to help scrape together the money for daily food. The youngest son was still traumatised, and continued to cry and wet himself. The teachers he had impressed in his first year of school now dismissed him as useless. One day a local NGO worker spotted the children in the street collecting scraps and playing in the dirt and suggested that Chuluunbold, the youngest, might be a good candidate for an international virtual adoption program. They sent his photo to a foreign family, who sent money and clothes. According to the rules of the program, Ulzii and Badrakh could not collect the monetary donation in cash, but instead received monthly sacks of flour and rice with which to make food.

“Night after night we went hungry”, Ulzii would cry, recounting this second devastating period of their lives. “All we could do was try to provide one meal for the children, but even this would often be boiled water mixed with flour. That was all we had. Even after a year of herding, we had no meat, nothing”. In 2009, Ulzii became pregnant again. She worked tirelessly in the coal depot throughout the winter months despite her advanced pregnancy, until, in early January, she collapsed (*shoknd orson*) and was rushed to hospital. She gave birth to her youngest daughter at the age of 37 (an auspicious year for a final child) on 13 January 2010, the fifth anniversary of her previous son's death. She called the girl Amin-Erdene, meaning ‘life's treasure’, taking the Erdene from her late son's name, Erdene-Bold.

With the fractional amounts of money they were able to put away, generally by going hungry or relying on the NGO-provided staples, the family eventually saved enough to buy their own ger. By 2010 they had saved

enough to buy a *hashaa* from another of Ulzii's younger brothers, who gave them a 'family discount', selling them the land for only 100,000 MNT. Thus, they came to live on the land where they reside to this day.

While the familiar story usually involves moving the countryside ger to the city, in fact there is another process that is almost never described (I have yet to come across it in any literature). Once they had the land and a ger, Ulzii and Badrakh sent for the house they owned in the countryside. The wooden house was dismantled beam-by-beam and loaded onto a truck, which transported it to the city to be reassembled by the family. This is the house they live in today. They also bought some bricks at the building materials market in the city at 700MNT per brick to supplement the imported wood of their former countryside residence. This remarkable process, which I am assured is very common, means that the family's wooden house is actually the mobile architecture from the countryside, while the ger was the urban purchase.

I have written out this history in full for a number of reasons. Firstly, Badrakh and Ulzii, who brought me into their home and hearts as a daughter, wish to have their struggles and triumphs recorded and recognised. Secondly, bland and repetitive push- and pull-factor narratives of urban-rural migration dominate the literature to such an extent that they hide the complexity and contingencies of why and how families such as Badrakh and Ulzii's come to live in the ger districts. Indeed, this is not always the fault of researchers. As I mentioned previously, I was originally told a single-sentence version of this story, and it took years of developing intimacy to eventually come to know the history as a whole. Badrakh and Ulzii's story also complicates simplistic approaches to migration that characterise it as unidirectional, from rural to urban. Eventually the couple did end up making their lives in the city, but that does not mean that this is where they plan to stay, nor that their future movement will take them ever closer to the urban core.

Many families including that of Badrakh and Ulzii, still hope for the day they can return to the countryside.<sup>61</sup> Some plan to return to herding, and

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<sup>61</sup> Here I am reminded of Højer and Pedersen's discussion of dreams and daydreams (forthcoming: 37), as so many evenings with Badrakh and Ulzii were spent discussing and imagining our various dreams and ideas for the

see their time in the city as a chance to accumulate the financial capital to reacquire lost animals. Others know that low salaries and occasional labour will keep them in the ger districts for their entire working lives; a return to the countryside will only become possible with the support of their children after retirement. Young families are more likely to be focused in the other direction, dreaming of apartment dwellings and city-centre life. It also remains common to split the family and divide time between locations. Badrakh, for example, spends months at a time on countryside construction jobs, helping relatives with shearing work or harvesting hay for winter fodder; in other words, going wherever there was a chance for work. Returning to the characterisation of the ger district as an “infrastructureless sprawl” (Bolchover 2016: 22), I will now move out beyond the *hashaa* to give a brief description of the physical infrastructure of Aglag. Remaining with the theme of movement, I will then examine this infrastructure through a paradigm of desirable and undesirable movement.

### **Infrastructure of Aglag**

Life in Aglag is primarily centred around the home and visits to the gers of relatives. Access to home, however, is mediated by a series of places and paths. The first of these is the bus stop that forms the governmental and commercial centre of the district. Described elsewhere, Aglag is located at the terminus of one of the Ulaanbaatar bus routes that runs eastwards. As such, it is a turning circle for buses and the last place that is paved. Vehicles flow from the city centre, turn around a small fenced enclosure of soil (or, in winter, snow; the flowers planted occasionally by *horoo* employees are usually soon dead) and return to the hustle of the main arterial road back to the centre. Encircling this paved area are a number of small private businesses: a small supermarket with an ATM, a couple of general stores (*delgüür*), a *guanz* and *tsainii gazar* (Mongolian food café), a shop selling second-hand clothes (*koms*), a hairdresser, a vegetable stall, a butchers, a road-side kiosk (*tuuz*), a small Buddhist temple, a concrete basketball court,

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future, most of which centred around ideas of movement; either moving back to the countryside, moving to a better ger district *hashaa*, or ‘moving’ the *hashaa* closer to various imagined ideals (growing vegetables or fruits, for example). Life as it stood in reality was never static in the imagination.

an internet café, a public toilet, a *haluun usnii gazar* (lit. hot water place – a privately owned public shower place), and a few private *hashaas*. The government office, the *horoo* and the district medical clinic are also here, opposite a monument to the first soldiers stationed in the area. Just behind this square is the local district school, and as of late 2017, a brand new two-storey police headquarters (having moved from the basement of the *horoo*). Between the school and the bus stop are a pharmacy, a private kindergarten and a school supplies shop. On the 15 minute walk from the bus stop to Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa* we pass another handful of very small general stores, electricity pylons, one or two well kiosks for water, and a number of *hashaas* with advertisements pasted or painted on them: 'Nalaikh coal 3500', 'We buy nuts', 'Scrap cars bought'. Fliers for private loan services also dot the area, including attached to the recently installed lampposts along the main arterial way.

To define a place as infrastructureless or lacking in infrastructure is to take a position already imbued with a certain morality or set of expectations. On the one hand, let us question – infrastructurally speaking – what Badrakh and Ulzii are said to 'lack'. The walk from the bus stop (and all its amenities, including the local school) is along dirt roads, there is no running water, the toilet requires occasional reconstruction, there is no connection to central heating or hot water and the collection of rubbish is sporadic. On the other hand, a 15-minute walk from a bus stop is not extreme and there are fixed-price drivers at the bus stop at all hours, there is a well-stocked local store two minutes around the corner, the house has electricity and a television signal year-round, the water kiosk is within three minutes walk with the little metal water trolley, and there is no shortage of relatively cheap coal for burning. My point is not to weigh in on whether the ger district does or does not have infrastructure. As I will discuss now, the issues above are indeed experienced and commented upon in negative terms by residents. Nevertheless, as a comment upon the state of the literature on ger districts, I wish to complicate the image conjured by the use of such terms. There are distinctive structures to the 'infrastructure' of the ger district; it is neither a chaotic sprawl nor a mass of indistinct human and non-human matter.



I began this chapter arguing that many ger district residents see positives to the particular material culture that shapes their lives, especially the senses of privacy and ownership that the *hashaa* affords. In the context of the existing literature, this is an important intervention. Nevertheless, although the word ‘infrastructure’ was never used, it would be reasonable to classify many residents’ complaints this way. The winding roads are unpaved, and many live far from the nearest bus stop with all its public and private amenities, such as the local school and health clinic. There is no running water, only local water kiosks; there is no sewer system; there is no connection to central heating, and the collection of rubbish is sporadic. Some people struggle immensely to access water, especially those who do not have a water trolley or live on steep mountain sides, and many are suspicious about the quality and cleanliness of the water that is available, or indeed the plastic jugs and other repurposed receptacles that are used to collect and store water. Pit latrines are frozen in winter, but thaw in summer and become festering maggot breeding grounds; a change in the wind can blanket a home in the smell of faeces, and fat black flies become a constant, contaminating nuisance. Roads cycle between dust, mud, ice and snow: each one is hazardous terrain in its own way, sometimes even more so for cars than pedestrians.

Given all the ger district *does* have, perhaps we might approach the perceived ‘lack’ of infrastructure in the literature as a question of distance. In comparison to those with cars that take them on paved roads to their doors, hot-and-cold running water in well-appointed baths and kitchens, heating activated with the flick of a switch, toilets connected to sewage systems and trash chutes, ger district residents must work harder and move farther to achieve comparable standards of warmth and cleanliness. However, Mongolia has long had a more positive conception of distance and the productive separations it produces.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, for those who have moved from the countryside, water kiosks are not considered a ‘lack’. Compared to countryside wells – often remote and powered by herders’ own generators –

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<sup>62</sup> Literature on Mongolia deals at length with this subject; for example, Benwell (2013); Bruun and Narangoa (2006); Empson (2011); Fjeld and Lindskog (2017).

the manned or automatic kiosks are, in the simplest of senses, 'infrastructurally' more convenient.

Thus, if the problem is not distance as such, perhaps there is something *undesirable* about the movement that is compelled by the particular infrastructural setup of the ger district. Is the problem that the types of physical movement the ger district infrastructure compels are felt to be linked to a lack of social mobility? Writing of physical movement, Fernando-Gimenez and Batbuyan (2004) argue that the poor in Mongolia have become more mobile and the rich more sedentary. Terbish and Rawsthorne, in turn, argue that fluidity can actually lead to social exclusion (2016: 97). I will explore these ideas of desirable and undesirable movement in a moment, but first I address the concept of social mobility. I suggest that a focus on social mobility leads to another way of understanding ger district infrastructure. This is the idea of relational networks as infrastructure.

### **Relations as Infrastructure**

The concept of 'people as infrastructure' was introduced to anthropological scholarship by AbdouMalik Simone, who develops the term in order to "extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's activities in the city" (2004: 407). Writing on Johannesburg, Simone explores the inner city not simply as a space of ruin, but one in which the absence of effective political governance and formal economic opportunities in fact creates the conditions for a particular *social infrastructure* to emerge. For Simone, the inner city is a space of dynamic movement in which a person's capacity for success is tied to his or her ability to improvise and "derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements" through a "process of conjunction, which is capable of generating social compositions across a range of similar capacities and needs" (*Ibid.*: 410-411). In the case of Johannesburg, the city allows a space for distinctly heterogeneous interactions between people *despite* their backgrounds. As Simone explains, "*people as infrastructure* indicates residents' needs to generate concrete acts and contexts of social collaboration inscribed with multiple identities rather than in overseen and enforcing modulated transactions among discrete population groups" (*Ibid.*: 419, original emphasis).

I am inspired by Simone's move to reconsider what may be termed a form of 'infrastructure' in an urban context, particularly the way he advocates an attention to the role of particular social forms and the conjunctions they enable through use of the term 'infrastructure'. Here I build on Simone's work but shift attention away from heterogenous conjunctions among people to focus on how relational networks in Mongolia can be seen as a form of infrastructure. I therefore adapt Simone's useful term 'people as infrastructure' to the Mongolian context through an attention to 'relations as infrastructure'.

In Mongolia, there is a long history of people relying heavily on their networks of relations for material survival: from pre-socialist kinship networks among herders and protective/patron-client relations with local leaders or lords, to the socialist informal economy of favours (known as *blat* in the Russian literature). In 'the age of the market', Mongolians' primary means of getting by almost always involves personal networks based on the connected concepts of kinship and belonging to a particular *nutag* or 'homeland/birthplace'. At all levels of society, people rely on relatives for material and informational resources. It is arguable whether these networks are more or less relied upon in the areas of Mongolia where material infrastructure is more or less established. For ger district residents, relying on occasional or informal work, knowing whom to call (or even having someone to call) can be the difference between being employed or not, or even accessing state services or not.

As Bruun (2006) and others argue, the difference between making a life in the ger districts or not after a move to the city is the extent of one's network. Those with good connections can, as Bruun puts it, "successfully transition", but for those without such social infrastructure, attempts to transition to life in the ger districts can end up "ghastly failures" (2006: 180). For recent arrivals, there are great benefits to having already-urbanised relatives (Benwell 2013). And research such as that of Terbish and Rawsthorne (2016) attests the extent to which social embeddedness in an urban context can shape the experience of life in the ger districts. Indeed, as I have demonstrated, ger district life is profoundly shaped by one's social connections. For my interlocutors, despite the administrative bounding of

their district by geography, and the fact that access to state services such as healthcare and education are tied to sub-district of household registration (common in socialist/post-socialist contexts), people do not identify with the district as a ‘whole’. Instead, they navigate through it according to their own networks. They move between the homes of nearby relatives, the shops where they have a relationship with the shopkeeper who may offer goods on credit, and places of work acquired through phone calls or connections to countryside homeland associations.

This social approach to the concept of infrastructure is not only well-suited to the Mongolian context, but also reconfigures both a straightforward understanding of rural-urban migration, and also standard models of centre and periphery (Pedersen 2006). Despite the material infrastructure of the city centre and assumptions that local contacts are a necessary precondition for building a successful urban life, for those in the ger district, connections to the countryside remain indubitably vital. As the previous chapters have discussed, maintaining connections to relatives with herds in the countryside means that (at least in theory) a family can rely on these connections for winter meat provisions – a time of year when informal employment in the construction sector, for example, completely dries up, leaving many families with no income. Thus, I argue that in Mongolia, centres and peripheries are not shaped by material infrastructure as such, but shift according to the movement of the people with whom one has relations. I would now like to push this one step further from a perspective that sees social connections as a fundamental form of infrastructure that creates inherently mobile centres.

### **Unpacking Movement**

Here I bring together historical perspectives with a focus on material *and social* infrastructures, drawing together the themes above to suggest a potentially innovative way of understanding the Mongolian ‘great migration’ and the ‘problem’ of the ger district.

I begin by returning to the question of movement, which so far has been argued to be generally productive in the Mongolian context (including in the generative potential of separation). I want to now qualify this point by looking more specifically at how particular forms of movement are considered

to be more or less desirable (linking back to the question I raised about ger district infrastructure compelling particular types of movement through the relatively distant location of key material infrastructures such as water).

Historically speaking, patterns of movement in Mongolia have always been tied to particular social conditions. For example, while the seasonal migration of herds is a good and productive thing, long-distance migration with animals is something usually driven only by a disaster, such as a *zud*, that has rendered the risks of staying still higher than the dangers of extreme mobility.

In conjunction with this, social and economic success in herding life leads inevitably to positive forms of dispersal: herds and families begin to split as animals multiply and children start to form their own marital units. Here we might identify a principle of moderation (or ‘the avoidance of excess’) both in the case of movement and proximity. Being unable to move is highly undesirable (and unsustainable for pastoral livelihoods), and yet moving too much (i.e. long-range migration) is excessive and dangerous. Likewise, social proximity is productive but with a scalar limit – once herds and families grow too large, they must disperse. However, to disperse too far would be to lose connection, preventing the productive flows of people, animals and things among dispersed people, i.e. severing or cutting the network. In a context where moderate movement between moderately dispersed relations is idealised, a relatively extreme migration to a relatively densely populated social collective is problematic.

Returning to the historical record, the primary reason for such an undertaking would be some kind of hardship; for example, a winter disaster that wipes out one’s herds. The traditional response to such an occurrence would be to relocate closer to a more powerful (rich in animal terms) centre. In a context where infrastructure is *mobile, socially oriented* and *socially mediated*, this would mean the encampment of an aristocratic ‘lord’. People impoverished by disasters would thus move towards local centres of ‘infrastructure’ (in the specific sense I have been outlining above) and activate

obligatory relations between themselves and such authorities, exchanging labour for sustenance (Sneath 2007: 18).<sup>63</sup>

I argue that this is what can be observed in Mongolia in the difficult years since the democratic revolution of 1991. Indeed, the standard narratives invariably highlight the winter disasters of the last two decades as primary drivers of rural-urban migration, and therefore the growth of the ger districts. One aspect of my argument is that a historical perspective reveals the continuity of these Mongolian-specific conceptions and forms of long-distance migration and collectivisation. Pushing this one step further, this perspective might also address the question of ‘Why Ulaanbaatar?’

I suggest that the extreme concentration of migration to Ulaanbaatar (nearly half the entire population now lives there!) has been shaped by the way that 70 years of socialism reconfigured and centralised the power relations that had once been dispersed across the country.<sup>64</sup> Writing about Mongolia in the middle of its 70 years of socialism, Jagchid and Hyer noted, “Naturally, there has been a transfer of values from the princes and khans to the new state and from the old religion to the new dogma of socialism” (1979: 387). In other words, having done away with the pre-socialist headless state of aristocratic lords (Sneath 2007), the socialist state – centred firmly in Ulaanbaatar – manifested itself as the ultimate Lord, the patron responsible for the wellbeing of its citizens, who traded their labour for sustenance.<sup>65</sup>

During socialism, the state took responsibility for the survival of its citizens. The preparation of winter fodder was organised and directed by the state, which invested heavily in material infrastructures to support countryside herders (Lindskog 2014). Thus, while it could not control the climate, the state helped people weather the storms, distributed national resources and managed the collectivisation of herds on national pasturelands. With the end

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<sup>63</sup> *Süreg taiwih* is the Mongolian term for “placing herds” owned by one person/family into the hands of another to take care of, and according to Sneath is “one of the most fundamental relations of historical pastoralism” (2007: 17). It continues today in the form of formal and informal “hire” herding (see this chapter, Chapter One and Murphy 2015).

<sup>64</sup> In Sneath’s (2007) terms this might be understood as a transition from a decentralised, headless state to a centralised one.

<sup>65</sup> Here, I also follow Sneath, who proposes approaching “the [Mongolian] state as a form of social relation rather than a central structure” (2007: 1-2).

of state socialism came the end of this investment in countryside infrastructure.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the advent of Mongolian democracy in 1991 was followed by ‘shock therapy’ privatisation and the rapid redistribution of collective herds into private hands. The sudden withdrawal of the Mongolian state did not simply ‘occur’, but was actively directed by the country’s creditors, including the World Bank and the IMF. The shocking collapse of state-controlled industry, both in Ulaanbaatar and countryside urban centres, was followed by a return to the land. This produced an atomised herding population that was no longer underwritten either by a centralised state power or a network of aristocratic local lords (Sneath 2003b: 43). Thus, when winter disasters inevitably occurred, as for example in 2010, their devastating effects were amplified, animals perished in the hundreds of thousands and families were plunged into poverty.

### **Unrequired Relations**

In contrast to the standard ‘natural’ disaster argument that unfortunate but unavoidable natural disasters have pushed herders to the city, I argue that intentional abandonment by the state has driven outmigration from the countryside; in other words, a state-orchestrated ‘infrastructural disaster’ (see also Lindskog 2014). Harsh winters and summer droughts have always shaped life in Mongolia. Pre-socialist Mongolian pastoralists had strategies to cope with such disasters, as did the socialist state. In the age of the market, however, herders were deliberately left at the mercy of the market and the elements (it is no wonder that Mongolians refer to capitalism as a ‘storm’).

The withdrawal of state-directed countryside infrastructural support, in conjunction with the already radically Ulaanbaatar-centralised reconfiguration of political power, pushed people to orientate themselves towards a single site, namely the capital. Those whose pastoral livelihoods were wiped out by exposure to harsh weather and the ‘shock therapy’ regime responded as Mongolians have long done. They undertook long-distance migrations towards a centre of power, which by then had been largely reduced to the single centre of Ulaanbaatar, and sought to activate the relations of obligation

those in power should honour. But, in the age of the market, the networks that bind elites have not been extended to those who arrive on their doorsteps.

My argument is ultimately that the ‘problem’ with the ger district only becomes visible in relation to power. The difficulties of life in the ger district are not caused by a lack of material infrastructure as such. Rather, they are felt in the dismay of ger districts residents who have made long and hazardous migrations in order to engage in social relations with those who control material infrastructures, but are instead left abandoned as if they remained a great distance away.

Ger district residents have thus experienced a double abandonment by their state.<sup>66</sup> Unsupported in the countryside, they moved closer to this powerful socio-material infrastructural centre.<sup>67</sup> Having moved into closer proximity, the material riches, expensive cars and luxury apartments of the powerful (*qua* Mongolian elites) become highly visible, as a rich herder’s sheep would appear on the steppe, but in the city everything is kept out of reach. Furthermore, while the surveillance and regulating capabilities of the state grow ever stronger, the contemporary state appears only to activate its remaining infrastructure towards its own interests.

In making this argument, I join the small chorus of scholars that understand the existence of ger districts and their infrastructural abandonment to be fundamentally *political* (e.g. Byambadorj et al. 2011; Duurenbayar 2016; Janzen 2005; Lindskog 2014). I argue that the radically social and historically specific perspective I present here reveals that the hardships of life in the ger districts are not confined to an everyday struggle with relatively distant material infrastructure, nor can they be resolved by transforming the ger districts into apartment blocks (as many have suggested and a few have tried), even if they were, infrastructurally speaking, state-of-the-art. The

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<sup>66</sup> Lindskog’s (2014) powerful piece on the state of the Mongolian healthcare system in the context of the ‘great migration’ captures in stark relief the abandonment that many in the ger districts (and other non-elites) experience in relation to the state, both as a contemporary concept and as a historical provider. She writes of a strong feeling of an “absent state that no longer cares” (2014: 890).

<sup>67</sup> This includes the lack of post-socialist investment in health and education in the countryside, not just the lack of pasture management. Health and education are the other key reasons why people move to Ulaanbaatar.



hardship is living with a state that is unwilling to engage in reciprocal relations with those who arrive at its doors, relations that might in fact permit the mutual growth of resources and thereby facilitate a successful re-dispersal of some kind. The powerful remain unwilling to act even though there is no doubt that the smoke of coal fires is choking everyone in the city. Ger district residents have been compelled to move too much; they continue to move more than others in the pursuit of daily sustenance, yet are unable to get anywhere. Feeling stuck in the ger districts is thus not about contrasting ‘fixed gers’ against a free nomadic past, but is a feeling produced by the daily hardship of coping with these contradictory dynamics of movement and unrequited attempts to cultivate relations. The following chapter engages with one woman’s attempts to make and reconfigure such relations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: *'Lives like ours': Comparison and Conflict in the Horoo*

*Номин: “3-р түвшинд орчихсон байна шүү дээ. яагаад 3-р түвшинд орсон юм бэ?”*

*Nomin: “I am in the third level. Why am I in the third level?”*

The argument between Nomin and Ganbold began innocuously. The *horoo* that morning was particularly busy. In the welfare office, Saraa the social worker was helping an elderly lady, Ganbold was carrying out his usual work of checking citizens' details in the computer system, troubleshooting why they might not have received some welfare payment or another that month. Another *horoo* worker was sitting next to the old lady on the small leather sofa in the office assembling the 'material' or paperwork for the women of the district registering as pregnant that week. Phones rang intermittently, and multiple conversations filled the small space. On the surface, Nomin's question seemed to be answerable in the same way that Ganbold responded regularly to questions as part of his daily work.

The most common question was usually, 'Why hasn't my children's money come this month?' Children's money, *hüühediin möngö*, is a monthly payment available to all Mongolian families with children (until the child is 18 years old).<sup>68</sup> A parent is entitled to 20,000 MNT per month per child, a relatively tiny sum that should be automatically transferred into the parents' account.<sup>69</sup> Although the amount is insignificant compared to the incomes of middle class and affluent families, it is very important to poorer families, who almost always follow up when it goes missing. In response to the question, Ganbold asks for the citizen's registration number and enters it into his computer. Generally speaking there are only two responses, the first being that the child has not been correctly registered to the person asking the question, the second being that Ganbold's computer system shows that everything is in order. In the latter case, Ganbold replies, "There's no problem

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<sup>68</sup> See Appendix I for a discussion of children's money and the food stamps programme.

<sup>69</sup> This payment follows on from the 40,000 MNT/month to which all pregnant women are entitled.

here; go ask the bank”. In the former, the citizen is advised on how to properly register the child. These interactions are usually short and polite. Even if the citizen says, “I asked at the bank and they told me to come to the *horoo*”, they would usually be met with Ganbold’s quiet insistence that “There’s no problem here; go back to the bank”, and the person would usually leave.

Nomin’s question, however, referred to the household-level database, and her discovery that her household was registered as being in ‘level 3’. Ganbold responded to Nomin’s question factually: “We took this survey from you. After it was taken, you[r information] was entered [into the system] on 2 February ... I didn’t look at your household and say you are [level] 3. It is calculated by the computer method”. As will be discussed over the course of this chapter, these four sentences constituted the core of Ganbold’s archetypically bureaucratic position on the matter. Simply put, the level of Nomin’s family is neither his responsibility nor his fault. Levels are calculated and issued by the ‘computer’, not him; his role as care administrator is to manage the collecting of household surveys and the passing on of the data. The survey was completed by Nomin and entered into the computer; whatever number comes out has nothing to do with him. Over the course of their dispute, Nomin and Ganbold mobilised a series of competing discursive arguments that appealed to different regimes of morality, techniques of comparison and rhetorical world-building, in hopes of persuading one another to see things from their perspective. While Ganbold embodied the official position, Nomin produced a sharp counter-narrative, laced with both frustration and irony, that critiqued the inherent absurdities of the state’s bureaucratic structures.

The structure of this chapter is drawn directly from the argument that Nomin herself made that day in the *horoo*. In doing so, the reader is introduced to a number of key aspects of the Mongolian welfare system in a way that presents government policies as lived experience. As an experimental form, I acknowledge that to follow Nomin’s argument is to differ significantly from a classic anthropological style of writing; for example, Nomin is at times repetitive and contradictory. Nevertheless, I remain as faithful as possible to the actual unfolding of this single 30-minute

interaction, using the words of Nomin, Ganbold (welfare administrator) or Saraa (social worker) as subsection headings.

I do so for a number of reasons. Firstly, I suggest that to reproduce the formal structure the state claims for itself is to implicitly re-legitimize it (Argyrou 2002: 2-6) Thus, this chapter does not introduce the reader to the Mongolian state as a series of hierarchical structures nested in one another until we reach the ‘local state’, manifested in a ger district welfare office, and then eventually to a dispute that took place there.<sup>70</sup> To do so is to reproduce the state as an entity that precedes or precludes Nomin’s capacity to question it. Instead, following Aretxaga, I propose this experimental style of writing in order to “leave the state as both an open notion and an entity, the presence and content of which is not taken for granted but is the very object of inquiry” (2003: 395). The aim is instead to let Nomin’s argument provide the structure, and guide the reader through the various aspects of the welfare bureaucracy as they were invoked, manifested, debated, contested and enforced throughout the encounter.

In doing so, I pay particular attention to the language of the encounter, including the documents in question and the rhetoric of the interlocutors. I argue that adopting this experimental style not only helps avoid reproducing the state, but also locates a deeply ethnographic vantage point from which to view *how* that state seeks to mark itself as distinct from the ‘rest’ of society (Mitchell 1991: 78).

Foucauldian and feminist approaches have generally sought to critique the state-society divide, reveal its porousness and deconstruct its claims to a coherent structure:

Despite the almost unavoidable tendency to speak of the state as an ‘it’ the domain we call the state is not a thing, system or subject, but a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules and practices cohabiting in limiting,

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<sup>70</sup> Indeed, following Gupta, I do not consider my work a study of the ‘local state’ at all. As Gupta writes, “With a concept of nested hierarchies, it makes sense to speak of the local state, which can be contrasted to the regional state or the national state. If, however, the state at the local level is complexly mediated by regional, national, and transnational discourses and practices, of what analytical utility is it to label it the local state?” (2012: 29).

tension ridden, often contradictory relation to each other (Brown 1995: 174).<sup>71</sup>

In many ways this chapter is no different; however, there are certain times and places where the boundaries of the state are explicitly manifested in particular interactions between people, such as between Ganbold and Nomin at ‘the *horoo*’. In such encounters, the state ‘effect’ (Mitchell 1991) is produced through two key technologies: discursive techniques and written documents. This chapter therefore does not seek to pre-emptively impose a theoretical position on whether the state is separate from society or not, but instead traces Ganbold and Nomin’s interactions with each other and a series of paper materials to pursue this and other questions.

***Ганболд: “Энэ хараа асуулгууд байгаа биз”***

***Номин: “Ийм юм надаас асуугаагүй”***

***Ganbold: “Look, these are the surveys”***

***Nomin: “I was not asked these things”***

Unlike many other citizens, Nomin did not accept Ganbold’s answer, telling him instead, “I said at my home I have only a TV and a cooking pot, apart from that I have nothing”. But Ganbold gestures to the household survey, a double-sided A3 sheet of paper folded in half, and reads off some of the questions.

The top of the first page reads, “Research survey to determine the domestic and standard of living level”, subtitled with, “Confidential information ‘About a private person’s secrets’ and ‘About statistics’ kept confidential according to clause 3 of the 22nd dictum of Mongolian State law”. This title is overlaid with two official state stamps in the classical Mongol *bichig* script.

The survey is divided into three sections: ‘General Survey’, ‘Private Information’ and ‘Domestic Index’. The General Survey section collects name and address information, a coded index for which a *horoo* employee collects the data, and the date of collection. It also contains a subsection titled ‘Result’.<sup>72</sup> Finally there is a verification subsection, which reads, “I confirm

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<sup>71</sup> See also Navaro-Yashin 2002.

<sup>72</sup> *Ür dūn*. Under ‘Result’ the *horoo* employee must provide an answer coded 1 to 6. 1 is “complete”, 2 is “there was no one to give a response”, 3 is “the

that everything said and the household information are correct and true, and I agree to the use of this research”. Under this declaration, the citizen must print and sign their name.

Section 2, Private Information, fills almost an entire side of the A3 page. It begins with a list of household members, their registration numbers, birth dates, sex, whether everyone in the household has been living there for the last six months, and if not, why not (overseas, student, soldier, prison, other). Each person is also assigned a particular code: 01 head of the household, 02 wife/husband, 03 son/daughter, 04 father/mother, 05 older brother/older sister/younger sibling, 06 father-in-law/mother-in-law, 07 son-in-law/daughter-in-law, 08 grandfather/grandmother, 09 grandson/granddaughter, 10 other relative, 11 non-relative. A number of follow-up questions must be answered for each household member listed.

The questions are as follows:

- Do you have health insurance?
- Do you have any disability?
- Do you have written proof of your disability?
- If you have a disability please state its particular form (sight, speech, hearing, movement, emotional/intellectual, multiple, other)
- Are you currently enrolled in any form of school or pre-school education?
- If you are enrolled, what level of study are you in? (kindergarten, YeBSchool?, MSÜT?, college, university, other)
- What is your highest completed level of education? (no education, lower, foundation, middle, technical/vocational, higher)
- Examine whether the person was born before 1998 (yes or no)
- Have you been engaged in any work in the last week?

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home was temporarily empty”, 4 is “postponed”, 5 is “refused” and 6 is “didn’t find the home”.

- If so, what kind of work have you done in the last week (work with a salary, unpaid work, looking for work, [doing private work]: herding, agriculture, private business, other).
- Please state why you have not done work in the last week (student, pensioner, ill, child/caring for others/pregnant, temporarily stopped/seasonal work, low salary, unable to find suitable work, 'speciality rejected', other).
- If you have not worked in the last week, have you worked in the last 12 months?
- In the last twelve months, how many months of work have you done?
- Are you participating in social insurance/security?
- If not, why are you not participating in social security? (no regular income, don't know the value/benefit, don't know how to participate, not enough time, no reason, other)

The final section of the survey, 'Domestic Index', focuses on the material possessions of the household. It scales in from general living conditions to details like home appliances.

The questions read as follows:

- What is the ownership of your place of residence?: (private, not owned rented, not owned not rented)
- Are you in the process of acquiring your place of residence or house and homestead with a commercial bank loan? [i.e. do you have a mortgage?]
- In what type of residence do you live?: (*ger* [building:], apartment block, self-constructed house, residential house, student or workers dormitory, public housing, no designated housing, other [write:])
- How many rooms does your house have (not including kitchen, corridor, laundry room)?

- How many walls is your *ger*?
- Do you have internet at home?
- In the last 12 months what source of fuel and energy did you have? (all that apply): (electric, wood, coal, animal dung, gas, other)
- Is a member of your household the owner of your land?
- Does your household have animals or herds?
- How many animals does your household have?: (cattle, horses, camels, sheep, goats, other, other, other)
- Which (and how many) of the following possessions do you have?:
  - Fridge
  - Freezer
  - Washing machine
  - Electric stove
  - Oven
  - Rice cooker
  - Computer
  - Television
  - Radio
  - Generator
  - Truck
  - Car
  - Motorcycle
  - Tractor/Combine harvester

The final space allows the *horoo* worker to rank the household's standard of living from 1 to 5 (1 very bad, 2 below average, 3 average, 4 good, 5 very good), and provides a place for notes, usually the telephone number(s) of the person whose information they are collecting.

Ganbold's first response to Nomin, therefore, was to show her the survey and insist that she had been asked the necessary questions. Nomin argued against this, at first suggesting she had not been asked all the questions. Ganbold said that this was nonsense: the survey is always asked



and answered in one go; it was not possible that certain questions had been forgotten.

Ganbold's turn to the survey to answer Nomin's question is emblematic of a bureaucratic response at multiple levels. As many scholars have emphasised, the ability to create and maintain files is the core of modern bureaucracy (Dery 1998), and "a profound reliance on paper/documents/files is the constitutive feature of bureaucracy, as Weber has noted and the fiction of Kafka, Gogol, and Orwell has illustrated" (Mathur 2016: 6). Recent ethnographies have demonstrated the importance of documents in a variety of contexts, whether private organisations, public-private partnerships, auditing regimes or state administrations (Graeber 2015; Harvey 2005; Mathur 2016; Navaro-Yashin 2007, 2012; Riles 2000; Riles 2006, Strathern 2000), even as anthropologists have struggled with ways to write compellingly about these "most despised of all ethnographic subjects" (Latour 1988: 54). For Ganbold, directing Nomin's attention to 'her' household survey is a way to answer her question with reference to a durable report that apparently stores an impartial and binding picture of reality (paraphrasing Dery 1998: 677). The survey is assumed by Ganbold to do this because bureaucratic systems function based on the idea that documents are 'transparent' (Brenneis 2006). According to protocol, if Nomin's file has a completed survey, the situation of her life has been recorded and the documents now direct the appropriate course of action. Nomin herself need no longer be involved.

***Номин: "Яахаараа 3-р түвшин байдаг юм? Сургуульд сурч байгаа хүүхдээ би сургуульд сураагүй гэж хэлэх ёстой юм уу?"***

***Дорж: "Үгүй ээ үнэн зөвөөрөө л гарга л даа"***

***Номин: "Би тэгээд үнэн л хэлсэн шүү дээ. бүх юм аа, тэгэхээр яагаад 3-р түвшин байдаг юм"***

***Nomin: "On what basis am I in the third level? Should I have said that my children who are studying in school are not studying in school?"***

***Ganbold: "No! Just give the facts"***

***Nomin: "I told only the truth! To everything. So why am I in the third level?"***

The fact that Nomin had completed the survey, according to Ganbold, should have been the end of the discussion. And yet, Nomin did not accept

this. She immediately began to question whether she had filled out the survey ‘correctly’. As she made repeatedly clear, she had answered all the questions *honestly*. At the time, being honest had seemed to be the correct way for Nomin to engage with this bureaucratic apparatus, and yet, the outcome was not what she had hoped for. Openly speculating on this, she asked, “Should I have said that my children ... are not studying in school?” The question is a provocation regarding the apparent transparency of documents that Ganbold is relying on. Ganbold responds to the question she poses about her children’s schooling with an emphatic reference to truth and honesty, telling her to stick just to the ‘facts’ (*ünen zöbөөрөө*).<sup>73</sup>

**Номин:** “*Би талонд ормоор байна аа, нэгдүгээр түвшинд очих ёстой ээж.*”

**Nomin:** “*I want to enter the talon [food stamp program], I need to be in the first level*”

Ganbold asks Nomin, “Which level do you want to be in?” Nomin’s response clarifies the situation: she wants to be in level one because she wants to access state-subsidised groceries. Based on the results of the household survey described above, all Mongolian households are assigned a level between 1 and 20, and while some types of benefits or welfare payments are open to many or all households, others are tightly restricted. The food stamps program known as *talon* that Nomin wants to be enrolled in is only available to the poorest of the poor: those in level 1.

The *talon* program provides level 1 households with a small monthly stipend for groceries. Each adult is given 10,000 MNT per month, and each child 5,000 MNT.<sup>74</sup> Like the children’s money, this is a relatively tiny amount of money; but, for example, a household of four adults and three children can collect a combined 50,000 MNT per month. Combined with the children’s collective 60,000 MNT per month, it is possible to avoid starvation on

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<sup>73</sup> This dyadic pair brings together *ünen*, meaning truth, and *zöb*, meaning exact or correct. Together they mean truth, facts, or refer to something without fault.

<sup>74</sup> By June 2016 this had risen to 1,300 MNT/month per adult and 6,500 MNT/month per child.

110,000 MNT per month.<sup>75</sup> The central difference between the *talon* program and other forms of state aid payments is that the money is not transferred into the recipient's bank account. Instead, the recipient is given a card that can be used at a single small supermarket in the local area. They are therefore restricted in their purchases and cannot spend the money on alcohol or cigarettes, for example. Recipients must also come and sign their names every month at the *horoo* on a list that is posted on the board in Ganbold's office.

The names on that list do not 'represent' people as much as, by being printed there, it creates a certain category of person. As Foucault argues, disciplinary power works "not by constraining individuals and their actions but by producing them" (in Mitchell 1991: 91). In other words, bureaucratic paperwork does not represent but *interpellates* certain categories of 'person' into existence (Althusser 1971). As we have seen, this is a multi-step bureaucratic process that culminates in the interpellation of that particular group of people as legitimately talon-entitled subjects. The list 'hails them' as the poorest of the poor, demanding their presence at the *horoo* in exchange for their food stamp allowance. Further evidence of the point is the list – not the reality of the lives of the people on the list – can be seen in the fact that talon recipients who fail to sign their name each month are removed from it. Without being on the list, they no longer have the right to collect groceries, no matter their living circumstances.

***Ганболд: “Би нэгдүгээр түвшинд очно гэж хэлэхгүй шүү дээ. Энэ чинь компьютерийн аргаар бодож байгаа”***

***Ganbold: “You must not say, ‘I will enter the first level’. That is calculated by the ‘computer method’”***

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<sup>75</sup> For reference, the minimum wage in Mongolia when I began my fieldwork was 190,000 MNT/month. This rose to 240,000 MNT/month in 2016. Tuya's salary as a cleaner is around 500,000 MNT/month. This is a relatively solid salary that can theoretically allow the family to eat and clothe themselves. This amount, however, will not cover any fees for education or medical expenses, nor does it take into account the burden of the debt repayments that practically all Mongolian families bear. Ganbold told me in 2016 that his salary is only 380,000 MNT per month. According to a recent news report (23/08/2018) the current salary for civil servants is now 630,000 MNT/month (255 USD). [http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off\\_the\\_Wire/2018-08/22/content\\_59764570.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2018-08/22/content_59764570.htm)

Ganbold asked Nomin what level she wanted to be in; she responded that she wanted to be in the first level in order to qualify for the food stamp program. But Ganbold's immediate retort is to reprimand Nomin and remind her that she has no right to nominate herself; that is the work of the 'computer method'. As will be demonstrated throughout the chapter, whether Ganbold truly has faith in the computer to produce fair outcomes or not, he relies on the fact that it is a distant and rule-based technology 'out of his control' to justify his inaction in the face of Nomin's demands. He presents the Weberian ideal that bureaucracy is a logical and impartial application of rules: 'rational-legal authority' with an administrative staff (1968). In the words of Akhil Gupta,

In Weber's (1968) view, the very distinction between power in a personalistic social world and a modern bureaucratic one is that, in the former, replicability and consistency are neither valued nor produced systematically, whereas in a bureaucracy the person performing the role is (ideally) irrelevant to the outcome. In other words, in a bureaucratic system no matter who occupies an office, the rules governing decision making deliver consistent outcomes (2012: 24).

These rules, such as 'only those in level one are entitled to enter the talon program', or the rules that have been coded into the computer algorithm – which, based on household survey data, produces a number between 1 and 20 – may indeed be applied consistently, but this apparent replicability hides the multi-layered work of classification and comparison that already underlies it.

In his discussion of Jehovah's Witnesses struggling to get identity cards and voter registration documents in Greece, Herzfeld evokes "the structuralist view of pollution" in order to understand the "peculiar tyranny of bureaucratic classifications" (1992: 67). Drawing on the famous maxim of Mary Douglas, structuralist arguments focus on the consequences of being considered 'matter out of place' (1966) in bureaucratic contexts. Having been enshrined in law, categorisations provide state-legitimated ways of defining those who do and do not belong (Herzfeld 1992: 66). Following structuralist logic, such classificatory systems are not troubled by insiders or outsiders as such, but instead struggle with those who cannot be fit into either category.

Anomalies, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses discussed by Herzfeld, are considered polluting and dangerous.

Bureaucratic systems do their utmost to deny the existence of anomalies. Indeed, the point of forms and algorithms is, in fact, to make sure that no 'matter' ends up out of place, everything becomes categorised one way or another. Thus, I suggest in the case of bureaucratic systems it is also important to attend to matter *in* place; Nomin's case demonstrates this powerfully. The problem for Nomin is not that she cannot be categorised, but that she *has* been classified as matter in a particular place. As Ganbold tells her, "If you were in the first level it would be possible for you to be enrolled [in the food stamp program] but because you are in the third level there is no way".

Michel Foucault argues in *The Order of Things* (1973) that taxonomic ways of perceiving the world must be historically contextualised. According to Foucault, the birth of 'rationalism' in the sciences took place in the Classical Age (around the 17th century), and demonstrates how this mode of perception was taxonomic in nature:

The ever more complete preservation of what was written, the establishment of archives, then of filing systems for them, the reorganisation of libraries, the drawing up of catalogues, indexes, and inventories, all these things represent, at the end of the Classical Age ... a way of introducing into the language already imprinted on things ... an order of the same type as that which was being established between living creatures (1973: 131-132).

Drawing on Foucault, Handelman identifies the expansion of taxonomies into social realms "where the scheme is inscribed, quite to scale, on social space and person" as being "proto-bureaucratic" (1981: 7). He also argues that certain assumptions embedded in taxonomic organisation underpin Weber's conception of bureaucracy. Handelman argues,

The idea of taxonomy, as this came to be constructed in Western culture, is embedded in the idea of bureaucracy, whether as one of social-science (cf. Fabian 1979: 14-15), or as one of common sense. The cultural *raison d'être* of the bureaucratic form is systematic

taxonomic work: not because the form is a normative idealisation, but because this is the kind of work it is designed to do so well (1981: 9). Herzfeld suggests this is part of the power of bureaucratic paperwork – the tautological forms that bureaucratic pronouncements take allow inconsistencies to be maintained when daily practice renders them painfully obvious (Herzfeld 1992: 121). This is Nomin’s next point.

**Номин: “Бид нар шиг амьдралтай хүмүүсийг ‘яхын’?”**

**Nomin: “So what about people with lives like us?”**

Having been told that her life level can only be determined by the computer, Nomin asks Ganbold, “So, what about people with lives like us?” These words capture a profound difference between the way that Ganbold (*qua* bureaucrat) and Nomin see the world. As Graeber suggests, the bureaucratic view can be described as utopic because it reveals “a naïve faith in the perfectibility of human nature and [a refusal] to deal with humans as they actually are” (2015: 48). Ganbold does not speak about life at all; he refers only to the computer and its exclusive right to calculate a life level. The word computer, despite being grammatically embedded into Ganbold’s sentence, remains easily identifiable as a foreign term.<sup>76</sup> I suggest that in this context, distinctively non-Mongolian terms work, like jargon, to mark the distinction between bureaucratic order and the ‘raw’ material it classifies. Nomin’s question, in contrast, relies on the colloquial “*Yahin?*”, a placeholder of a verb that is without a specific semantic meaning. Its open-endedness is evocative; in its use the distance invoked by Ganbold’s bureaucratic terminology is transformed into a loss that cannot be precisely expressed. For Nomin, the only surety is that there is life and, in Nomin’s case, a life that is unsustainable. Disputing the wisdom of the distant computer, Nomin desperately works to return the conversation to life outside of formal categories and bureaucratic classification.

Focusing on the language that Ganbold and Nomin use reinforces the need to focus on language in bureaucratic encounters more generally. More or less implicitly, this discussion of forms, documents, classifications and

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<sup>76</sup> Foreign loan words are easily identified in Mongolian because they do not follow the rules of vowel harmony that Mongolian words do (see Billé 2010; Dovchin 2011, 2017).

algorithms has been building towards the point that bureaucracy is an exercise in rhetorical world-building. But, as is well known, there is nothing ‘mere’ about state-legitimised rhetoric. As Herzfeld puts it, “An open society must resist the idea that classification is ‘only language.’ It is precisely in the absence of such warnings that bureaucratic language can acquire, by default, its sometimes seriously disquieting autonomy” (1992: 182).

Between Nomin and Ganbold’s statements we can also recognise the different forms of comparison that each relies on. Bureaucratic comparison relies on an initial, formal process of classification, whereas non-bureaucratic comparison is affective and unformalised. Thus, when Nomin speaks of ‘people with lives like ours’ she is not referring to the results of any survey, but a more diffuse and non-taxonomic experience of common hardships. These two modes of comparison were at this point brought together by an interjection from the social worker Saraa.

As I mentioned, during this exchange an elderly woman had been sitting on the small office sofa speaking to Saraa, who now attempted to pacify Nomin: “I’m sorry, my younger sister, this older sister here now is a pensioner looking after three or four children who have no parents ... She is a pensioner isn’t she, but she is also in the third level”. Saraa was attempting to assure Nomin that ‘people with lives like hers’ were also in level three, difficult though those lives might be. In other words, the bureaucratic classification system fits with what Nomin sees around her.

Saraa’s words, however, had the opposite effect. Nomin immediately replied, “You can live on a pension! I have never had the chance to pay social insurance. What can I do, I have two sick children, what can I do? I have no chance to work, do I?”<sup>77</sup> Inadvertently, Saraa’s attempt to compare the lives of Nomin and the elderly woman had only reinforced Nomin’s conviction that the system is rigged. How can Nomin be calculated to live at the same level as someone receiving a regular pension when Nomin lives on only the 60,000

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<sup>77</sup> Employed people in Mongolia pay a portion of their salary each month towards social insurance, which then determines their state pension level. Herders are entitled to a pension without paying social insurance. Those who are paid cash-in-hand usually do not pay social insurance (often they cannot afford to) and will only be entitled to the minimum state assistance (see Ichinkhorloo 2018 for more on post-socialist social insurance).

MNT children's money? The theme of comparison continues, this time regarding corruption.

Following Saraa's words, Nomin changed tack again. Leaving the arguments about the survey and the computer program aside, she turned to the issue of how others come to be collecting *talon* without seeming to be living in the same harsh conditions. While people in the ger district usually do live among friends and relatives, many strangers also surround them. *Hashaa* walls separate households from one another, and rumours of how people may be living on the other side of the fence abound. Nomin explains, "Because I heard about [people in level 1 living nice lives] I came myself today; because I live like this [so poorly] I came here myself in order to be included". According to Nomin's experiences, the bureaucratic system's mode of classification and comparison does not seem to be working. In contrast to the ordered and impartial social taxonomies Ganbold and Saraa insist are functioning, Nomin insists that she sees people with good lives collecting the talon while she has been deemed 'equal' to a woman with a state pension. Seeking to differentiate herself from the pensioner, she continues to explain the circumstances of her life: "So will someone who [lives by] collecting rubbish enter the first level? My family are just like that; we live next to the river, we live collecting and burning the rubbish from the river. How else? How can I live on 60,000 MNT?"

But instead of her words eliciting sympathy, Ganbold begins to get frustrated with Nomin's apparent inability to see that her life stories and amateur comparisons have no bearing on the situation. He tells her to calm down and try to understand things first. Rebuffed, Nomin begins to meet him on his own terms, referring instead to how long she has been waiting for answers on her situation, something for which Ganbold cannot as easily deny responsibility.

***Номин: "Ерөөсөө нэг сарын дөрөвнөөс очисон чинь та, он гарахаас өмнө очсон чинь он гараад ирээ гэсэн, нэг сарын 4 нэгдэхь өдөр байсан тэгэхэдби ирсэн. Тэгсэн та энэ амжиргааны түвшингийн юм бөглүүлсэн надаар ... бөглүүлсэний дараа нь за дараа долоо хоногт танай гэрээр явна гэсэн тэгсэнээ бүр 2 долоо хоног өнгөрсөн, 2 долоо***



*хоног өнгөрөөд 3 дахь долоо хоног дээр нь би ирсэн, ирээд би амьжиргааны түвшин ийм юманд яаяа гэсэн...*

*Nomin: I have been coming since 4 January, and you said you've come before the result has come out, come back after it comes out, 4 January; it was a Monday, that was when I came. Then you filled out this life level thing for me ... after it was filled out ok next week [you] said you would come by my house, from then two full weeks passed. After two weeks passed. Then after another three weeks I came here. When I came I said, "What happened to that life level thing?"*

It becomes clear that Nomin has been waiting a long time for a resolution. She has been coming to the *horoo* repeatedly looking for answers, and has been sent home to wait for a visit for weeks at a time. Bureaucratic encounters and waiting appear to go hand in hand. As Herzfeld describes, in bureaucratic encounters time becomes a social weapon as state actors routinely refuse to acknowledge how they waste the time of their clients and instead "absorb" the client's time into the bureaucrat's space (1992: 162-171). However, Nomin does not focus her argument here on being made to wait. Instead she pivots back to the question of honesty and takes a new tack.

*Номин: "... би байгаа юмаа л хэлэхгүй яадын, би сургуульд сурдаг хүүхдээ би хөгжлийн бэрхиээлгүй хүнийг бэрхиээлгүй гэж хэлэх юм уу. худлаа хэлдэг хүмүүс зөндөө байгаа за юу, би тэгвэл худлаа хэлээд бүртгүүлчихье за юу"*

*Nomin: "... Why wouldn't I just tell things as they are? Will I say that my children studying in school are disabled even if they are not disabled? There are so many people lying, I'm going to tell lies and register again, ok!"*

This is the centre of Nomin's ironic strategy, by which she attempts to demonstrate the fallibility of the *horoo*'s system, turning its own techniques against it. Ganbold's argument is simple: the citizen fills out the survey, the state employees enter the information into the computer, the computer program returns a number. According to Ganbold, this system is logical, impartial and fair; each citizen is subject to the same examination and the same computer algorithm. Nomin, however, cannot accept this, because unlike the rigid data processing power of the computer program, she knows very well that, firstly, life does not always fit into the neat categories of the

survey, and secondly, that people lie. Indeed, it might take a single lie to completely change the output of the computer program. Ultimately and ironically, the system's impartiality rests on unavoidably non-impartial, human foundations.

**Saraa:** “*Чи дуузгүй байж бай, би ч гэсэн хүний сэтгэл байдаг юм за юу*”

**Saraa:** “*You be quiet now! I also have human feelings, ok!*”

While Nomin's strategy may not have been particularly effective on Ganbold, her continued impassioned protests, her reiteration of her life's circumstances and her insistence that she would be satisfied by filling out the survey again – doing whatever it takes to obtain the support she needs – suddenly became too much for Saraa. The social worker leapt to her feet behind her desk: “*Chi haashaa yum?*” she cried, or “What is your problem?”<sup>78</sup>

Saraa continues to shout, “I did everything I could! I said you were a single mother and wherever I could I filled the survey with ‘zeros’, but I don't know how they calculate it over there, how they come to a calculation. I don't know!” Nomin interjects, “My home doesn't have a vacuum, my home doesn't have an oven, *yahin?*” Ganbold speaks over her, “Those things don't matter to the score”. Nomin continues regardless, “My home has a 14-inch TV”. Saraa shouts, “I wrote that you didn't [even have one]!”<sup>79</sup> Nomin retorts, “I have a TV but I live a primitive life.<sup>80</sup> I can't even watch the TV – that's what I have been trying to tell you!”

By admitting in the heat of the moment that she altered answers on Nomin's survey to give Nomin the best chance of being granted assistance, Saraa has, in effect, undermined Ganbold's argument about the purity of the system. With this first chink in the armour of the *horoo* workers' position, Ganbold and Saraa are pushed to reorient themselves. Yes, the survey can be manipulated, but the computer program remains out of their control. They shift focus from ‘honesty’ to ‘distance’: “We don't know, we don't know; the numerical outcome of this survey is calculated up there by the computer!” Ganbold insists.

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<sup>78</sup> Literally, “Where are you going?” the expression has the sense of, “You are going in the wrong direction”.

<sup>79</sup> Literally, “I went only by nothing, for sure!” “*Baihгүйгээр л явсан шдее!*”

<sup>80</sup> “*Bi hui negdeld amidarch baina aa*”

**Номин:** “*Та нар танил хүмүүсээ оруулдаг биз дээ, би мэднээ за юу*”

**Nomin:** “*You let your ‘associates’ enter [into level one], I know [you do], ok?*”

Saraa’s outburst, for better or worse, introduced a human side to the *horoo* as the face of the state. Saraa had done so with the intention of calming Nomin or appealing to her sympathy; however, Nomin used this opening to her advantage. If the *horoo* is human, it must also be a place of human relationships. As I have explored elsewhere, Mongolian relations are often described as ‘networked’ because of how they extend across space and time. These networks are usually based on bilateral kinship relations, and are thus imbued with hierarchical relations of ‘older’ and ‘younger’ siblinghood.<sup>81</sup> Enacted through the transfer of materials and complex webs of obligation, Mongolians rely on their networks in daily life for everything from material sustenance, childcare, financial loans, education and employment opportunities (see Chapter One). If the *horoo* consists of people “with human feelings” who act towards each other in caring ways, it is undoubtedly also a site at which networked relations play a role in who receives what kind of help.

Nomin’s position thus encompasses Ganbold and Saraa within a world of relations – in other words, life in Mongolia as Nomin knows it to be – in spite of their claims to somehow stand outside it. She wielded the idea that she “knew” this as a weapon, “I know. I know a great deal. I have heard so many things ... People who are just familiar with the *horoo* boss, they say, ‘Enter me [into level 1]’, I know all about this”. Ganbold countered with technocratic certainty, “Since this [computer] ‘program’ was introduced that doesn’t happen any more”. And even the elderly woman, perhaps offended by Nomin’s insistence that life on a pension was relatively easy, chimed in, saying, “It doesn’t happen, get it!”

The argument began to circulate back through the previous themes: the *horoo* staff maintained that they had no control over the computer program

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<sup>81</sup> See Chapter One on how hierarchical kinship relations shape social relations in Mongolia, and how this is manifested in the ubiquitous use of kinship terminology. For example, refer to earlier in this chapter when Saraa calls Nomin ‘my younger sister’ and the elderly pensioner ‘this older sister’.

and knew nothing about how it was calculated, Nomin continued insisting on the reality of her life, and her incredulity that a person suffering hardships such as hers would not be in level 1. Ganbold, growing exasperated, told Nomin to go herself to the person who designed the computer program and ask how to get to level 1, Nomin countered that she would go the central care office (Ganbold's bosses) with her anger and complaints. Ganbold insisted he had done his job, collecting her survey data; Nomin returned to the argument that she might lie. Ganbold warned her that if she lied they would inspect Nomin's house and see immediately that she is lying.

***Ганболд: “Танайх худлаа хариулах юм бол би гэрээр чинь очиж шалгаад худлаа байна аа гээд гаргаад ирнэ шүү дээ”***

***Номин: “Үгүйээ тэгээд очоод шалгаач манайд юу байгаа юм бэ, хөргөгч байгаа юм уу угаалгын машин байгаа юм уу?”***

***Ganbold: “If you lie about your situation, I will come to your home, inspect it and your lies will be revealed.”***

***Nomin: “No! So come and inspect my place for what is there. Is there a fridge? Is there a washing machine?”***

Rather than reacting fearfully to Ganbold suggesting a home inspection, Nomin replies angrily, “So come and inspect my place! ... My three children are there, will you come and see my three children at home? Is there anything else there?” Nomin's words mock the questions of the survey that require citizens to list their basic household items (See Box 2 above).

Ganbold, undeterred, does not stop appealing to the transparency and objectivity of the system. He repeatedly exhorts Nomin to “speak with evidence!” Ganbold then gestures to the far wall of the office. “It's there on the board”, he says, “the 71 families in the grocery *talon* [program] are there. I'm not hiding [it]”. He continues, “You'll find none of my associates or relatives (*tanidag töröl sadan*) are there”. Nomin, sharp as ever, retorts, “Your relatives must be better off then!”

Nomin is unwilling to abandon her accusations of corruption and, in the vein of the mocking repetition of the survey's questions, begins to insist that *she* is going to carry out home inspections of the 71 families on the *talon* list. She threatens that she will take pictures of what she finds, and come back if she sees level 1 families living better than her. Nomin's words suggest that

there are two layers to the *horoo*. On the surface, there are the clean bureaucratic forms that must be filled out honestly, and below, a shady world of phone calls between friends and relatives by means of which unworthy associates of *horoo* employees enter particular levels and gain access to government help. In her suggestion that she will visit the families on the *talon* list herself, Nomin is threatening to appropriate the techniques of the bureaucracy to expose this dark side.

Ganbold again protests his innocence and argues that he has done no such thing. He invites Nomin to look at his computer screen, showing her the program and how he entered her information in correctly. Nomin then argues that Ganbold did not visit her home, but Ganbold again passes on the responsibility, this time up to the highest levels of government. In response to Nomin's point that Ganbold had failed to visit during the week he had said he would, Ganbold replies, "But then those 76 people [76 members of the Mongolian parliament] were meeting for three weeks. In January, that didn't depend on us, that didn't depend on us. Go get angry with those people!" Ultimately Ganbold wants Nomin to understand that her anger is misdirected. He engages in the classic bureaucratic strategy of 'passing the buck' (Gupta 2012; Herzfeld 1992: 70;). Whether it is the responsibility of the computer program, the person who wrote the program, the parliament members or whoever else, *Ganbold* has done all his work correctly and does not deserve to bear the brunt of Nomin's fury. He tells her, "So, when you get angry, get angry correctly! Understand and *then* get angry".

***Ганболд: "Хороо гэдэг чинь миний нэр"***

***Ganbold: "The name of the horoo is my name"***

In contrast to Ganbold's general position of wanting to distance himself from anything other than the narrowest definition of his work/responsibilities, there was a moment in which he instead emphasised strongly his connection to the institution of the *horoo*. Ganbold's hand was forced by Nomin's return to the idea that she would carry out her own inspection of the *talon* families in order to find out who is happily collecting undeserved groceries while she is being forced to "run after a single bag of flour". If she sees any excesses, she threatens, "I will enter, saying I am from the *horoo* and take a real photo". Ganbold chastises, "You

mustn't take someone's name". Nomin protests that this is the only way for her to uncover the truth. Ganbold counters that, far from dealing with truth, Nomin will gain nothing from "saying this and that, sowing gossip and sowing all kinds of (illegal) trouble" [*iimee tiimee hel am tariad hereg töwög tariwal yahin*].<sup>82</sup>

Nomin argues that she is not gossiping, but Ganbold continues, saying, "You mustn't go around taking the name of the *horoo*; you have no right to take my name". Nomin disputes this, saying, "I will not take *your* name", to which Ganbold replies, "*The horoo's name is my name!* Those grocery *talon* families are my responsibility". Frustrated, Nomin returns to the idea that the system is being corrupted. She uses now a different idiom for corruption: the 'back door'.

**Номин:** "Арын хаалгатай байна, арын хаалгатай байна зайу мэдэж байна" **Nomin:** "There is a back door; there is a back door, ok? I know."

The return to corruption comes at the same time as Nomin's emotions spill over from anger to tears. Her protests become increasingly vague and repetitive, claiming over and over to "know" something that she cannot be specific about. Ganbold sweeps her claims aside, demanding that she produce some kind of evidence, even as her earlier plans to collect such evidence (namely, by taking the name of the *horoo* and carrying out her own research on her neighbours' lives) were dismissed as illegal. Ganbold then harnesses the power of his title, or 'nomination'. According to Bourdieu, nomination is "one of the most typical expressions of that monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence which belongs to the state or to its representatives" (1989: 21). Appealing thus to the authority of the state vested in him via his title, Ganbold commands Nomin not to attack the reputation of a state worker (*töriin alban haagch*). Nomin, in turn, demands that Ganbold then conduct himself "like a state worker", and begins to cry.

**Номин:** "Чиний хүүхэд чинь надаас долоондор амьдарна даа за юу, мэдэв үү хараарай за, хараарай за"

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<sup>82</sup> Three lexical pairs used: one echo pair '*iimee tiimee*'; two *horshoo üg*: '*hel am*' lit. 'tongue mouth' = gossip, '*hereg töwög*' lit. 'affair/act bother' = trouble/illegal activity.

***Nomin: “Your children will live lower than me, you know. Wait and see, okay? Wait and see”***

Calm as ever, Ganbold informs Nomin that she has no reason to cry. Incensed, Nomin replies with the foreboding words, “Your children will live lower than me”. Ganbold tells her, “You are nothing; you can curse and bless ok, go ahead”. Nomin repeats her warning, “Wait and see, ok, like me you will live on the 60,000 of three children”. The ruckus has drawn other *horoo* workers into the room, and at this point one of them begins to film Nomin on a mobile phone. Ganbold states to the room, “Make a video. You are threatening a state worker”. Nomin responds at length, “There was no threatening. Only you are threatening me ok ... I am a ‘citizen’ [*uls amitan* state/country being/animal]!” and so on, until Ganbold cuts her off. “Enough, enough, enough! You are in the third level”.

At this point, the coalface of the state is transformed into an iron face. Closing ranks around one another and employing the intimidating technique of the video recording, the *horoo* is revealed as a place of distinctly limited protest. Nomin has crossed too many lines, particularly in her persistent questioning of Ganbold’s (and thereby the whole *horoo*’s) reputation. Nevertheless, Nomin attempts one more argument. Her final approach circles back to her original claim that she was not asked all the questions on the survey, but now marshals the distance that Ganbold has attempted to place between him and the ‘survey and program’ technology for herself. Nomin points out that nobody showed her what had been recorded on the survey. She protests that she had not been allowed to fill in the paper herself, nor had she been asked to read it, and shouts angrily, “What a stupid thing you are. How can I know what you are writing sat behind this computer here?” But here her words are ineffectual, as Ganbold appeals to the ultimate bureaucratic technology: the signature. He teases Nomin over whether she would sign something at the bank without looking at it. Then he simply tells her, “When you signed your signature that was you saying, ‘This is correct’”. Indeed, there is now nothing that Nomin can say or do. Her signature is the indisputable index of her acquiescence to the system she has tried to confront (Herzfeld 1992: 122). Having signed, there is no way back.

The confrontation ends with a sarcastic exchange, in which Ganbold tells Nomin she must be more careful in future about what she signs, and Nomin replies that yes, she must, “especially at the *horoo*”. Nomin warns for the last time that she is leaving to make a complaint. Ganbold tells her she is free to do so. Nomin then exits, telling the room that whatever video they made of her contains nothing and is evidence of nothing.

***Сараа: “Хүнсний талонд орсонгүй гээл, Монголоор дүүрэн ийм амьдралтай хүн байна”***

***Saraa: “Mongolia is full of people with lives like this, who don’t get into the grocery talon”***

After Nomin’s departure, Gandbold immediately moved on to helping the next citizens waiting in the office. Saraa, however, had a final word to say. She announced to the room that there was nothing extraordinary about Nomin’s situation; that people living a ‘life like hers’ do not necessarily get to enter the food stamps program. In Saraa’s words, “Mongolia is full of people with lives like this”. Saraa’s words return to the issue of comparison, and apparent bureaucratic indifference in the face of human suffering. Instead of questioning the system, Saraa seems to take some comfort that Nomin has not been singled out or discriminated against, but in fact that many people with lives like Nomin’s do not receive help with their food expenses. Indeed, according to Ganbold’s position on the matter, bureaucratically speaking, people with ‘lives like Nomin’s’ *must* not enter the talon program because they do not meet the criteria to be designated as level one.

As has been shown, at the heart of Ganbold and Nomin’s dispute is the question of what it means to have a life ‘like’ somebody else, how to make such a calculation and what the consequences should be. In the Introduction I characterised the argument above as emerging from competing projects of encompassment that are so radically opposed they might be considered as different regimes of world-building. I now explore this position further, asking what the differences are between these two regimes, how do they seek to encompass one another and how they might even converge.

Ganbold’s bureaucratic perspective is necessarily top-down, not only relying on quantitative data but also on the legitimacy of quantifying lives. It thus operates on a universal scale, produced by technocratic means that have



the power to convert the particular into something legible and comparable. Ganbold's arguments might have been drawn from Weber. For him, bureaucracy is rational legal authority. He is impartial, as he should be, and the system is fair because it is indifferent and rational. For Ganbold, the rationality of bureaucratic techniques is ensured by the computer program. Many scholars have noted the similarities between state bureaucracies and ritual practices.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Herzfeld's entire book on the subject is based on an approach that treats "nation-state bureaucracy as directly analogous to the ritual system of a religion" (1992: 10). In the Mongolian welfare system it is clear that the computer program has a sacred quality to it that for these *horoo* workers is directly linked to its distance from their everyday work. They refer to it as 'up there' or 'from there', always referencing its spatial and hierarchical distinction from their simple office. Unlike Ganbold, the computer is deemed the only legitimate authority capable of calculating levels, and its word is irrefutable. Ganbold enters the numbers and the computer gives the answer.

And yet, there are serious flaws in the logic of this system. Even if we add Ganbold to the list of Weber and Foucault, described by Graeber as "the only two intelligent human beings" who honestly believe that "bureaucracy really works" (2015: 55; see also Handelman 1981: 9), Nomin is never convinced. Her argument reveals "the rhetorical character of the numerous ways in which state functionaries conjure up, and conjure with, the very notion of "rationality" (Herzfeld 1992: 62). The rhetorical aspect here is key, as Nomin's whole argument centres around a critique of the capacity of bureaucratic paperwork to capture lived reality, especially when it is based on people answering questions. In their dispute over *how* to answer the household survey questions, while Ganbold speaks of honesty and just sticking to 'the facts', Saraa's interjection reveals that providing an honest picture of the hardships of Nomin's life challenges the idea of transparently reporting the facts. Saraa admitted that she filled the survey with as many 'zeros' as possible, apparently to give Nomin the best possible chance of being placed in the first level. Nomin, for her part, has little time for honesty

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<sup>83</sup> Particularly Kapferer (2011); Taussig (1997).

when it proves to be so ineffective. Threatening to fill in another survey with lies, and claiming that many others do so is a challenge to Ganbold's assertion that rationality is the basis of the system. Nomin's argument attempts to throw back the curtain on the mysterious and all-powerful computer program. It is not a god, but a mere thoughtless calculator, mindlessly spitting out numbers whether the inputs are true or not.

In contrast to Ganbold's bureaucratic universalism, Nomin's perspective is rooted in the particulars of her own experience. Her daily reality is representable only by qualitative means: the little stories and snippets she interjects into the debate. In a world of relations, both social and material, the reduction of persons and things into points of data is practically impossible. Nomin's perspective is based on lived experience of how people and things interact in Mongolia. As we saw in the earlier chapters on kinship and the ger district, Mongolians rely on networks of friends and relatives engaging in exchanges of material things, care, labour and so forth to 'make a living'. People are bound together in particular webs of obligation (speculative and/or trustworthy), and call on these connections in a myriad of ways. Networks have their limits and relationships break down, but the concept of a purified, quantified and wholly rational apportionment of obligated care (i.e. the ideal welfare system) is the opposite of many Mongolians' experiences. Hence, Nomin's perspective, while radically non-scaling (in other words utterly bound to the particular), is nevertheless encompassing. She seeks to draw Ganbold into her perspective in different ways, whether appealing to his obligation to care for someone living in such hardship as herself, or to consistently argue that he *must already* be engaged in 'corrupt' activities; namely, preferentially assisting his own 'associates' (*tanil tal/tanidag hümüüs*).

On the one hand, in arguing that the system is not rational and the *horoo* is corrupt, Nomin is presenting the opposite opinion to Ganbold. However, on the other hand, by critiquing the *horoo* as non-rational and nepotistic, she seems to be expressing a desire for the very system that Ganbold claims already exists. Indeed, as Herzfeld argues, when people complain about bureaucratic failures they are nevertheless stating their desire for a "source of justice in their lives" (1992: 10). Or as Lazar (2005) has

described, critique of the state does not necessarily mean that citizens are ‘against’ the state. Instead, they may consider themselves citizens *despite* a state that is failing to live up to its obligations. When Nomin answered the household survey questions she did so honestly, and yet, despite having nothing at home, the state is not meeting its obligation of care, and instead appears irrational or perhaps corrupted. Thus, when Nomin attacks the rationality and impartiality of the system, it is not because she is denying, for example, the legitimacy of state enquiries into what household goods she possesses. Instead, she is demanding that if they do make such inquiries that they then follow up in a way that is actually rational. Surely, she argues, a woman living with sick children, who has no chance to work, and is heating her home with rubbish that she collects from the river bank deserves to be classified as ‘level one’ and given help with her food expenses.

Saraa complicates the picture. Unlike Ganbold, who is steadfastly official – a paragon of bureaucratic indifference, Saraa moves between positions. In his ethnography of a bureaucratic encounter in rural India, Gupta describes how an elderly man, standing at the front of a waiting crowd, is addressed by the visiting bureaucrat (2012: 12). The state official asks the man, “Who are you? Why are you standing here?” The bureaucrat is there to identify local headmen, but instead of responding with his rank, the man replies, “I am a man”. Gupta remarks:

the headman chose to respond to the [bureaucrat’s] initial challenge not by affirming his privileged bureaucratic role as a headman, but by declaring his rights as a human being ... The context makes it clear that the man was asserting not just his rights as a human, but also the more specific claims of citizenship, of membership in the national community. He was asserting his right, as a citizen, to be treated with respect by the bureaucrat (Gupta 2012: 12)

Saraa’s interjection can be seen as the reverse of Gupta’s case. While Nomin largely stayed within the bureaucratic parameters at first, speaking of levels, it is Saraa, the state official, who demanded that her humanity be recognised. She was the one who rose from behind her desk, and in stark contrast to the stereotype of the indifferent bureaucrat, cried, “I too have human feelings!”

How might we understand this outburst? Is it, like the headman in Gupta's example, an assertion that Saraa is also a citizen worthy of respect? Is it evidence that beyond their cool exterior, the officials in the *horoo* are indeed sympathetic to the lives of the citizens under their care? It may be both of these, but here I wish to tie this back to the question of comparison and recognise that, while the headman declared himself 'a man', conjuring the power of discourses of human rights and respect for citizens, Saraa's words were comparative. Saraa said, "I *also* have human feelings".

For that moment, Saraa acknowledges that she is capable of comparing, as Nomin does, not according to facts dictated by a survey but in an affective and non-scaling way. In doing so she builds a new relation: As Strathern writes, "To draw a comparison, or make an analogy, is not necessarily to impute connection: it may indicate a resemblance, rather than a relation ... yet the very act of comparing also constitutes a making of connections, and evokes a metaphorical relationship" (2004: 51). The nature of this relation, however, is ambivalent.

Nomin's ultimate failure to convince the *horoo* to readdress her case in fact reveals that while "cracks may appear in the bland surface of bureaucratic indifference ... the results do not necessarily benefit the clients" (Herzfeld 1992: 87). Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, we see that Saraa's appeals to Nomin on 'Nomin's terms', or in the style of her argument (non-bureaucratic comparisons and more emotional narrative-style explanations) consistently backfire. This leads back to the question of how much distance there really is between Nomin and Ganbold.

Nomin, dissatisfied with corruption and incompetence, wants a rational welfare system that makes decisions based on better comparisons that the survey seems to provide; she wants justice for people who actually live like her. Ganbold steadfastly presents the argument that this system already exists. Much of the writing on bureaucracy, whether in literature or academic texts, focuses on the question: 'Does it work?' In her monograph, *Paper Tiger*, Nayanika Mathur approaches the question of the effectiveness of bureaucratic statecraft from another angle. Rather than being concerned with the straightforward question of whether it works or not, she inverts Scott's (1998) position that modern statecraft is an exercise in legibility, and instead

examines what work state agents must carry out in order to maintain the appearance of legibility in a context where it is already “*believed to have been achieved*” by the state (2016: 3, original emphasis). Instead of agonising over bureaucrats in terms of their humanity, agency or the extent to which they identify with the structures that employ them, Mathur draws on her ethnography to argue simply that, “Agents of the state *know* that rules can never be followed to the letter. Their energies are directed instead at making it *appear* as if the illegibilities have been overcome, as if orders have been followed, as if the [regulations they are charged with instantiating] have been made real” (2016: 3, emphasis added; see also Dubois 2014: 44).

**Ганболд:** “*Төрийн албан хаагч шиг байгаа биз дээ, би ажилаа хийгээд сууж байгаа биз дээ*”

**Ganbold:** “*I am like a state worker! I am sitting here doing my work!*”

This chapter began by describing Ganbold and Nomin as radically opposed to one another. I would now characterise this as the first level of analysis. Their interaction was highly conflicted, and Nomin was ultimately forced to concede and leave the office; however, comparing their positions did not always reveal them to be at odds. Rather than representing two ends of one spectrum, their arguments ultimately appeared to be folded into one another, and to converge around a point of mutual aspiration or desire: they both appear to want a Weberian legal-rational bureaucracy. Nomin is therefore not protesting against the state; she is in fact challenging Ganbold’s claim that the state already exists. This can be understood as the second level of analysis. The third level of analysis suggests that, in fact, Ganbold (like perhaps all bureaucrats) is *well aware* that the system is highly flawed, but in the end, he is not paid to manage the welfare payments of poor citizens in Aglag, but to labour to manifest the state effect in a small office in a little concrete building next to a bus terminal on the north-eastern outskirts of the city. The primary means by which bureaucrats like Ganbold can make state appearances real is through the paperwork – the production, circulation, reading and filing of documents (Mathur 2016; see also Dery 1998). Thus, Ganbold sticks steadfastly to the documents. Knowing full well that it is utterly non-transparent and non-rational, doing his paperwork nevertheless

creates the all-important appearance of legibility.<sup>84</sup> He is obliged to make this his position because the state demands that it already exists. The next chapter thus follows Ganbold out of the *horoo* to trace his daily creative labour making the documents that then make the state.

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<sup>84</sup> This is similar to Navaro-Yashin's discussion of fantasy and cynicism, in which she draws on Žižek's reworking of the Marxist idea of false consciousness: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Žižek 1995: 2, in Navaro-Yashin 2002: 159).

## CHAPTER FIVE *Performing (for) the Bureaucratic Gaze*

### Ganbold Visits Delertsetseg and Batnaran

One afternoon an elderly woman in a smart but faded *deel* (Mongolian robe) came to see Ganbold about accessing money for her sick husband. The following morning Ganbold, a *hesegin ahlakch*, and I went to visit them.

We found the couple in a dark but tidy home. The husband, Batnaran, lay on a small bed against the wall. When we arrived the old man struggled to get up to greet us. “Sit, sit,” urged Ganbold, “Both of you please have a seat”. There followed a moment of awkward activity as his wife, Delertsetseg, fussed about her husband and he struggled with his moth-eaten cardigan. “Shall I get him dressed?” she asked. “Don’t worry about that”, Ganbold replied.

Ganbold asked Batnaran what was hurting him. The old man began to explain about the prostate problem he had been suffering for the last two years, and how it had left him unable to walk. The old couple talked simultaneously at Ganbold, Batnaran gesturing that he had been fitted with a catheter but something had become infected, Delertsetseg repeating that her husband was no longer able to get around at all. Ganbold asked them how many children they had. The couple have five children but all have left home and live elsewhere. Ganbold asked if the children come to visit? Delertsetseg answered that the two who live nearby visit sometimes. The elderly couple continued to speak over each other about their children until Batnaran’s rasping breath catches in his chest. Mumbling now incomprehensibly, the old man began to cry. Ganbold spoke, “*Za, za*, there’s no need to cry”. “Yes”, Batnaran replied firmly, but as he tried to continue his voice broke and faded again into sobbing breaths.

Ganbold spoke up, “Your wife here is going to receive money to take care of you, ok? I have come to your place today to arrange things according to this protocol”. Batnaran answered that he understood, and then continued, crying, “I’m stuck right here all day and night. I can’t sleep at night”. Delertsetseg and Ganbold both repeated this last statement, one confirming

and the other checking, “Can’t sleep at night(?)” The old man assured Ganbold this was the case. Delertsetseg explained it was due to the catheter, which had caused an infection. Batnaran used to be able to walk to the bus stop but he can’t even do that any more. Delertsetseg said she had been to the doctor at the *horoo*, but they had told her to go to the senior citizens’ bureau. The two voices fell silent. “*Zaa, zaza*,” Ganbold said, “Ok, we are leaving now. Please come to my office tomorrow”. As he was clarifying with Delertsetseg that she would need to sign some paperwork at the *horoo*, Batnaran asked, “Are you a doctor?” “No, no,” Ganbold replied, “I’m from the *horoo*. I’ll prepare everything today; come and sign tomorrow”. “Ok. Won’t you drink some tea?” the old woman offered. “Don’t worry about tea; we’re fine”, Ganbold said. He turned to the old man, “Please take care of yourself”. “Thank you”, Batnaran replied.

Delertsetseg stood to escort us out. “Won’t you put on something warm?” Ganbold asked. “You’re going to get cold!” “I won’t be cold”, the old woman answered. Ganbold checked again, but she was sure. Reaching the gate of the *hashaa* fence, we saw a pile of rubbish in the street outside. Ganbold asked, “Who is dumping their waste here?” Delertsetseg replied, “All the families around here. I always tell them but nobody listens. I cleaned it up last fall but it was no use. They dump it at night. All these families are just throwing out their trash here”. Ganbold said, “You should go back in, you’ll get cold!” and we began the walk back to the *horoo*. The old woman, however, remained at her gate and continued to speak after us about the state of the road, her words being whipped away by the bitterly cold wind.

### **Leaving the *Horoo***

While the previous chapter remained within the walls of the *horoo*, dealing with the bureaucratic technologies of the welfare state such as the household survey in their completed form, this chapter follows Ganbold out of his office and into local people’s homes. When Ganbold enters a home to complete a survey or carry out an inspection he is there, on the one hand, to subject the residents to the regulating gaze of the state, to register their details and thereby render their lives legible. On the other hand, he is also there to help and bear witness to the everyday suffering of those under his jurisdiction.



For some residents, such as Delertseteg and Batnaran, Ganbold's presence can be a momentary panacea: the materialisation of a state that cares about them, an official line to the powers that be. His visit can be a desperate, critical moment: a time to list at length a number of problems that these people and their families are facing in hopes that the state body will find a way to assist them. Alternatively (and even simultaneously), the visit can be a frustration, felt to be a waste of time for everyone involved; a ritualised interaction during which everyone plays their part, knowing full well that nothing will come of it except another entry in the computer system and a number spat out by the 'computer program'.

This chapter features three different home visits made by Ganbold in his capacity as the care administrator for this large and largely impoverished district. The first visit, which opened this chapter, was to the home of the elderly couple who Ganbold was helping to register for 'care' money, two small monthly payments of 60,000 MNT to Batnaran for medical costs and 58,000 MNT to Delertseteg to compensate her for caring for him. The second visit is to re-evaluate the living circumstances of a single mother, Tungalag. The third is to the home of a family who have been designated level one and entered into the grocery *talon* program. Each visit reveals different aspects of the Mongolian welfare system and the variety of bureaucratic tools and techniques that facilitate or hinder Ganbold's work.

Many visits were similar to the ones described in this chapter. Ganbold would pick up a blank household survey and, come rain, snow, dust or wind, we would walk or drive across Aglag to meet with residents. Given the large size and population of the district, Ganbold himself cannot visit all the families. This is the job of the 13 *hesegiin ahlagchid*, the 'sector workers'. Each *hesegiin ahlagch* is assigned a subsection of Aglag to administer. They must collect the survey data for all the households in their subsection. They pass the completed surveys on to Ganbold, who takes them to the borough's D $\ddot{u}$ ereg Office. There are nine 'boroughs' (*d $\ddot{u}$ üreg*) in Ulaanbaatar, and a D $\ddot{u}$ ereg Office (usually referred to simply as the *d $\ddot{u}$ üreg*) administrates each borough. Thus, Aglag, being located in Bayanzurkh D $\ddot{u}$ ereg, is administrated by the Bayanz $\ddot{u}$ rkh D $\ddot{u}$ ereg Office, along with Bayanzurkh's 23 other

‘districts’ (*horoo*).<sup>85</sup> The current household survey had been introduced with a nationwide collection of data in 2013, the year that Ganbold began working at the *horoo*. The government planned to repeat the survey every three years. However, due to a number of factors, including the election in 2016, the follow-up was not carried out. As such, I was not able to accompany *hesegiin ahlagchid* as they carried out large-scale survey collection and household visits. Instead, during my fieldwork, the *horoo* was mostly engaged with maintenance: trying to keep up with the new arrivals to the district (those who lived on registered land) and those who requested a re-appraisal in light of changed living circumstances. Both Ganbold and the *hesegiin ahlagchid* carried out these visits; however, Ganbold, as the head administrator, was called on upon in circumstances that required either more authority or a professional grasp of the care laws that determine the state’s obligations to its citizens. Ganbold is also the primary connection to higher bureaucratic bodies. Thus, should a *hesegiin ahlagch* want to help a family access a particular program or care fund, it was good to have Ganbold involved, as he could then advocate for the citizen or family at the *horoo* meeting or at the *düüreg*.

## **Documents and Transparency**

The previous chapter introduced the household survey used by the *horoo* staff to report the living conditions of the people in their area. Although the task is not without dangers (Graeber, for example, quips the only thing that would take more effort than writing a Geertzian “thick description” of a mortgage document is finding someone to read it [2015: 52]), a small number of social scientists have tackled the study of such documents (Riles 2006).<sup>86</sup> What such studies invariably reveal is that paperwork is locked in a complex relationship with the idea of ‘transparency’ (Brenneis 2006; Strathern 2000a). On the one hand, transparency is assumed to be the primary goal of communication, and written forms are a key means of achieving

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<sup>85</sup> It is interesting the way that Mongolian often uses the same word for an area and a centre of some kind relating to that area, e.g. *horoo*, *düüreg*, *aimag*, *sum*, etc. This is similar to the term *hashaa*, which means both fence and fenced-in parcel of land.

<sup>86</sup> Foucault, in fact, once summed up his life’s project as “the questioning of the document” (1972: 6, in Riles 2006: 11).

communicative transparency. On the other hand, the more transparent the document is intended to be, the more opaque it may become. Indeed, under ethnographic analysis, documents always seem to reveal themselves as far less transparent than meets the eye. This point was first evoked in the previous chapter, when Nomin questioned why, having filled out the household survey honestly, she had not been registered as appropriately poor. Here I take up the household survey as Ganbold does, as a piece of paper that is literally carried into the homes of people in the district in order to be filled in. The visit to Tungalag described in the following section allows a glimpse into the type of situation that preceded the argument between Nomin and Ganbold. Riles suggests, “To critique bureaucratic processes for the way they assert agency over us, and for the limitations they place on our own creativity and agency, would be to miss the very means by which bureaucratic processes compel ‘others’ creativity in the first place” (2006: 21). If the last chapter captured Ganbold embodying the iron face of the state, this chapter deals with how Ganbold navigates between the technologies he is required to use (such as the survey) and the reality of the homes and households he visits. Thus, it traces the creative work he is compelled to do in order to make it appear as if transparency is achievable (cf. Mathur 2016).

Bureaucratic ‘creativity’ is by no means an oxymoronic phrase, especially in the welfare sector. In his ethnographic work on French welfare control, Vincent Dubois reveals the importance of documents and forms such as household surveys to inspectors charged with investigating and regulating the proper distribution of welfare payments (2010, 2014). In other words, echoing Mathur’s (2016) argument, the investigator’s job is not about representing the *truth*, but about “regularizing the files”, and they therefore encourage welfare recipients to make the “*right*” statements regarding their situation (2014: 52, emphasis added). The gap here between ‘right’ and ‘true’ is shaped by investigators’ own prejudices. For example, when it comes to housing, as Dubois describes,

it is impossible to acknowledge the possibility of long-term free accommodation without having in mind the forms of solidarity specific to the most underprivileged classes. Judging such a situation on the basis of the middle-class standards of domestic economy, the

investigators are more likely to consider it as an unreported sublet (2014: 51).

While the bureaucratic jargon refers to the documents as being about “establishing the situation”, investigators ultimately must navigate the gaps between “the situation” and the paper template in order to produce an “acceptable version” (2014: 50-52).

### **“Papereality”**

The issue is, of course, that once this ‘acceptable’ version has been written, the creativity that went into it may then be denied by the documents’ very creators. Indeed, in the case of the household survey, the transparency of the document is vital to the following stage of the document’s ‘career’ (Harper 1998), as the hand-written paper must be entered into a computer system for processing by an algorithm. Before even this stage, however, Nomin’s case demonstrated how the completed paper can become ‘more real’ than Nomin’s own account of her life. David Dery has described how organisations, as they become ever more reliant on written record keeping – ostensibly in order to create “durable reports” that “foster continuity, and to keep people fair and honest” – in fact create a new reality he dubs ‘papereality’ (1998: 678). Papereality is an uncanny state in which the distinction between things and words about things is entirely eroded, a world in which that which has been written cannot be forgotten, and that which cannot be located in a document cannot be remembered. Papereality sets the stage for many haunting works of film or literature that deal with the intractability and circularity of the worst kinds of bureaucratic encounters. Indeed, it is a world we have all entered: there will be few among us who have not found ourselves at some point in our lives at a Kafkaesque, “computer says no” dead end, (on one side of the desk or the other).

As Dery continues, “This world deserves to be called papereality, not because it may misrepresent reality but because it functions as a binding representation” (1998: 687). As Strathern writes on the introduction of auditing procedures into higher education in order to improve ‘transparency’, if at first the rules were written down to appease the ‘higher ups’, once on paper they had a curious power to become gospel, especially in the case of

disputes (2000b). The world of papereality does not remain ‘only on paper’, even if it apparently starts life that way. It is also the binding power of written documents and rigid protocol that gives bureaucracy its dead-eyed reputation of mindless rule-following and infamous inflexibility. But beyond being a fact that causes something between annoyance and total devastation in a person’s life, depending on the context, when it comes to its analysis in social science, I argue that bureaucratic fixity lends itself to structure-focused approaches. In other words, the power of bureaucracy is not seen to lie in individual actors or on particular pieces of paper, but in the structures which assemble and regulate paper and people. Since Weber and ‘the iron cage’, social science has remained wary of the power of bureaucracy to render things as fixed, and yet it can be suggested that the very focus on structure can itself lead to teleological arguments that either fail to account for creative bureaucrats or simply replicate the structures they critique.

### **Bureaucratic Indifference**

Fighting against such approaches is the work of Michael Herzfeld, who challenges the “hopelessly teleological” explanations of bureaucratic indifference as “the more or less automatic outcome of bureaucratic structures” (1992: 159).<sup>87</sup> Few anthropological studies of bureaucracy fail to reference Herzfeld’s monograph *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (1992). However, while it has achieved widespread recognition, it sometimes becomes apparent that the keyword ‘indifference’ has found more traction than the subtleties of Herzfeld’s argument.

I find Herzfeld’s analysis particularly insightful for the way it looks beyond conflicts between citizens and bureaucrats, and instead of pitching one against the other, draws out a number of underlying commonalities. Herzfeld builds his argument on the work of Mary Douglas, who asserted that the

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<sup>87</sup> “Such arguments, being hopelessly teleological, are far too close to the predestinations advocated by some of the more totalitarian forms of nationalism. If social boundaries emerge in social interaction, where they are constantly negotiated and redefined, blaming ‘the system’ is implicitly to accept the argument of those who defend their territories, and who excuse their less laudable actions on the grounds that these were dictated by the system or by its supreme officials” (*Ibid.*).

importance of scale and sociocultural complexity have been overestimated in terms of “determining the relations between institutions and how people think” (1986: 13). This foundation shapes Herzfeld’s argument in two ways. Firstly, it justifies his symbolic analysis: if there exists only a false dichotomy between ‘small-scale’ and ‘complex’ societies, the same techniques of analysis can be applied to both, revealing nation-state bureaucracy to be “directly analogous to the ritual system of a religion” (1992: 10). Secondly, it allows him to bypass the ‘common-sense’ notion that state and society (viz. bureaucrat and citizen) are distinct, and instead trace the effect of symbols in the thoughts and actions of people in bureaucratic encounters no matter which side of the desk they are on. He argues that bureaucracy draws on social forms of exclusion through symbols that also allow members of the public to conceptualise their own failures and then – in certain circumstances – to “acquiesce in the humiliation of others” (*Ibid.*: 13). This is what he calls the social production of indifference.

Finally, Herzfeld’s approach brings us back to the issues of classification and papereality, as he recognises that, “bureaucratic procedure typically objectifies society as a model made out of language, and then performs certain operations upon that model” (1992: 62), a process he relates to sorcery. Indeed, Herzfeld ultimately argues that we relegate language and symbols to the realm of the ‘mere’ at our own risk. While I do not directly follow Herzfeld in carrying out a symbolic analysis of Mongolian bureaucracy, this chapter nevertheless pays heed to many of his insights, and attempts also to develop some of the suggestions he makes regarding the productive ambiguities found in both bureaucracy and hospitality.

Ultimately, this chapter examines what it means to be employed at the ‘coalface’ of the state in the ger districts. It explores the experiences of bureaucrats such as Ganbold, who must not only instantiate welfare policy but also then personally face the material effects of government strategies on people’s lives. The chapter continues to tackle the questions raised in the previous chapter regarding bureaucracy and its structural capacity to generate care or indifference, the transparency of bureaucratic documents, and the interaction between bureaucratic regimes and alternative perspectives. Unlike the previous chapter, however, this chapter is shaped by movement: the

entering and exiting of Ganbold from homes, the process of manually filling in the household survey, the changing circumstances of people's lives, and his oscillation between care giver and care regulator. In addition, it explores how Ganbold's visits force into juxtaposition two ritualistic interactional modes: the bureaucratic and the hospitable.

### **Ganbold Visits Tungalag**

Ganbold's visits to residents' homes were usually impromptu affairs. Despite this being a key part of his work as a welfare administrator, home visits did not follow a schedule and could be triggered by a wide range of circumstances. One morning, I was sitting in a different area of the *horoo* looking at the receipts of citizens who had migrated in and out of the district that month when I heard Ganbold calling from his office, "Litzaa! *Yawiiyaa!*" ("Liz, let's go!"). Ganbold had telephoned one of the two informal taxi drivers he relied on to visit distant *hashaas*, and the man was waiting outside. We climbed into the battered old car and headed through the unpaved streets towards the mountain, avoiding the crevasses caused by melting snow earlier that month. Within a few minutes we arrived at the home perched in the shadow of the mountain. Ganbold called out, and a young boy ran out to hold back a viciously barking dog while his mother ushered us inside. The house was small and made of concrete bricks; we entered and were offered a seat on little plastic stools at a low table. It is customary when entering a home not to take off one's jacket, but inside this house it was also a necessity: the roof at the back of the home had collapsed, and not only was the mountain visible through the hole in the ceiling, but brisk gusts of spring wind were rushing through. We sat without much ceremony and Ganbold got straight to work. He grabbed the damp cloth on the table, hastily wiped the plastic tablecloth in front of him before unfolding the A3 paper survey and taking out his pen.

Ganbold asked for the family's identity documents and began to copy the names and details of each family member onto the first section of the survey. As he did so, the woman, Tungalag, said with a nervous laugh, "Because we don't have any cables we have to ask the neighbouring families to let us watch movies". Ganbold counted through the documents and asked, "How many of you are there?" With some hesitation Tungalag answered, "We

are five with the eldest but the eldest hasn't lived here for a year". "Ok," replied Ganbold, "Should I enter four?" "Yes, let's go with four", she agreed. Ganbold asked, "How old is the eldest?" "21".

A silence followed as Ganbold continued to enter the details. Then he said, in an almost playful tone, "Now, you know very well about this research". Tungalag agreed this was not the first time she had taken the survey. He continued, "If you enter the first level, then it will be a matter for me", Ganbold continued, "but if you don't enter the first level, then no matter what, I can't do anything".<sup>88</sup> Tungalag didn't respond.

Ganbold began to ask through the questions on the survey. Almost immediately the form was out of sync with the realities of Tungalag's situation. The land on which she lives is not officially in her name. The owner of the land split the *hashaa*, dividing it into A and B parcels of land. Tungalag lives at 205A, but neither she nor the land owners, who live at 205B, have the money to complete the paperwork that would formalise the splitting of the plot.<sup>89</sup> It was actually from talking to the family in 205B that Tungalag learned of the food stamps program. Her neighbours, a family of six, are on the list. Ganbold asked a few questions about the 205B family, and Tungalag replied with their names and some information. Ganbold said, "No, there's no one called Sansaraa living there". Tungalag insisted, "That's the husband's name". Unsurprised, Ganbold suggested that the family must have hidden the husband from the household survey.

Tungalag's situation was difficult for a number of reasons. She had given birth to her eldest child while married to her first husband. After her husband's death, she found a new partner and had two children, now 15 and 8. This second man had left her with the children and refused to pay anything for their care, nor hand over the 20,000 per month he was receiving from the state for the child who bore his name. "It was such a mistake to give my child his

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<sup>88</sup> "Za ta ch barag sudalgaa meddeg bolloo biz dee"  
"Ogsooreed l oo" (?)

"Tii ... Nadad shaltagah vv gej medej baiga tii ... I dugeer tuwshin orchin bol bi.. nadad hamatai bolchin, neg der orchigvi bol bi yagaach nemerehgyi shde"

<sup>89</sup> This is a precarious and common situation that can be abused in a number of ways.



[last] name”, Tungalag mused. When it came to the question about whether the family lived in a house or a ger, Ganbold’s efforts to complete the survey once again got stuck: how to record the fact that the family lived in a house with a collapsed roof? “It’s hard to call this a house”, Ganbold said looking around. Tungalag laughed anxiously, “Someone told me to call it a ‘summer shack’.<sup>90</sup> It’s not a house. It’s like a shack because we can’t keep it warm”. But, of course, ‘summer shack’ is not an option on the survey.

Having checked the education and employment of the household members – Tungalag had a high school education but was unemployed, her elder daughter had left school after ninth grade and the youngest was in third grade – Ganbold went through the checklist of consumer goods. He first confirmed that they burn coal and have no animals, then asked whether the refrigerator worked. Tungalag said it did. Ganbold then asked, “Ok, you have nothing other than a fridge and a TV?” Looking around the small home, I could see a manual washing machine and a cooking pot. Both items are common in ger district homes. Without a supply of running water, automatic washing machines are out the question; likewise, as the main purpose of the home stove is heating, and as coal and wood are hard to afford even during the harsh winter when they are the difference between life and death, families do not usually cook on the fire when it is not cold. As most dishes in Mongolia are cooked in a single pot, there is no need for a separate electric hob or stovetop. The electric cooking pot has an element built into its base, and can be used equally well for ‘dry’ dishes and soups (the two main categories of Mongolian meals).<sup>91</sup> Perhaps following my gaze towards the washing machine, Tungalag said, “The washing machine is broken and so is the electric cooking pot”.

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<sup>90</sup> *Zuuni ambar*

<sup>91</sup> Most families also own a few metal trays that can be fitted on top of the pot for steaming *buuz* (dumplings). In addition to the electric cooking pot, Tuya’s family, for example, owned a rice cooker and a kettle. These were fairly standard items, although, bought cheaply from Narantuul market, they were prone to break. Whenever possible, broken electric appliances were repaired at home by Gerelt or one of his sons until the occasional smoking plug caught fire one too many times and the whole cable or device would have to be replaced on the arrival of Tuya’s salary.

The list of household goods was felt by ger district residents to be one of the most infuriating parts of the survey. When I began spending time at the *horoo*, I often came home in the evening to talk with Tuya and share some of my experiences with her. When we spoke about the survey, Tuya's annoyance was palpable. She said, "Those stupid *horoo* people; they ask you if you have a fridge, and if you do they say you are rich, but what does it matter if you have a fridge? When there's no food can you eat the fridge? Can you eat the cooking pot? The TV?" Measuring a household's need for assistance according to a list of items was felt to be missing the point. The survey counts these items only according to their presence and quantity. There is no space allocated to the value of the items or indeed whether they are owned outright or on credit.<sup>92</sup>

Frustrations with the household survey, however, are not just felt by residents. In the privacy of the *horoo*, the staff also discussed their reservations. For example, during the lunch break on the day of the argument with Nomin (see Chapter Four), Jawhlan said, "The entire survey methodology needs developing doesn't it?"<sup>93</sup> "Including the 'scores'", Saraa agreed. "A 14-inch [TV] should be like this, a black and white TV should be like that and so on".<sup>94</sup> During a home visit, Ganbold tended only to manifest any ambivalence he felt about the survey by taking people at their word. In fact, I never saw Ganbold express any doubt or suspicion about a person's self-reporting of their household goods. If something was obviously present, Ganbold might ask a question, but if the person said the item was broken he would leave it off the list. That morning in Tungalag's home, then, Ganbold did not investigate further her claim to have a broken washing machine or electric cooking pot. Then, having completed all the questions, Ganbold checked that Tungalag's phone numbers were correct and stood up saying, "Sign here. Now, let's get going".

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<sup>92</sup> A similar issue can be found in many peripheral areas subjected in this way to the bureaucratic gaze. Clara Han (2011), for example, documents comparable failures and bureaucratic misunderstandings in the outskirts of Santiago, Chile.

<sup>93</sup> "Ene argachlala bur nariin bolgoh yostoi yu asuulga aa"

<sup>94</sup> "Tegeed bur onoogoor 14 inchiinh bol tiim har ungu TV bol tiim geed tee"

Tungalag's 15-year-old daughter stood between Ganbold and the door, watching shyly. Off-hand, Ganbold said, "You should get her employed!" Tungalag responded, surprised, "She's a minor. Is that legal?" Then she clarified, "She turns 16 in August. I should have enrolled her in some sort of education course". Ganbold told the girl he could help her enrol in a free hairdressing course. Tungalag asked her daughter, "Do you want to take a sewing course?" but Ganbold interrupted, "Sewing is hard. Hairdressing is easier on a small budget. You can rent a chair for 8- or 10,000 MNT per day and then keep the rest of the profits". He asked the girl what she wanted to do in the future. "I like designing", she answered and her mother agreed, "She's talented in tailoring". Ganbold explained again, "Well, it's going to be a tough budget to raise for the sewing machine and everything. If you don't get work, you'll just be sitting there". He joked with the 8-year-old boy, "Come on, Boss, go grab the dog so we can leave safely".

Turning to Tungalag, Ganbold asked, "This is the third or fourth time you've completed the survey, right?" "Yes", she said. "Ok", replied Ganbold, "I will notify you if you are put in the first level. But remember, there's nothing I can do about it". Taking out a little digital camera, Ganbold took a photo of the home with the family, and we headed out to walk back to the *horoo*. Once outside, Ganbold repeated to me, "Her house is really in a state; it's bad and they don't have any money to fix it. It's hard to call it a house".

### **Performing for the Bureaucratic Gaze I: Level One**

As we saw in the previous chapter, the *hunsnii talon* program is only open to households that are assigned to level one. The program is designed to cover the most basic subsistence needs of a family according to how many people are registered to that household. Each month, the household can use their card to collect a set amount of basic food goods such as rice, flour, meat and oil from a particular supermarket in the area. It is a vital resource for families without other sources of income, and Nomin is one of many who were counting on being registered as level 1 and being registered for the program. Although Ganbold and Saraa claimed during the argument with Nomin that they did not know how the computer program calculated the

levels from the household survey, the *horoo* staff were well aware of what might put a household above level one.

Similar to the situation Dubois describes for French welfare inspectors (2014), Ganbold's visit to Tungalag draws attention to the translation work that must be done between a live situation and its formulaic representation on paper. Such representations are always partial, always mediated, and even when completed in good faith can have unintended outcomes. Bureaucratic paperwork is not at all transparent. Even if it is purported to be one of the least creative textual genres (even when anti-creativity is its entire purpose!), the question of *how* to fill it in complicates any simple argument regarding its capacity to represent. It was not for nothing that Ganbold said repeatedly, "It's hard to call it a house".

It was hard because the physical structure did not fulfil the basic criteria of providing shelter from the elements, and hard because to define her in the survey as living in a house with more than two rooms might push her up and out of the first level. I asked Ganbold about the house as we walked away down the mountainside in the driving snow, but he spoke about Tungalag's personal situation. He told me about how her first husband had passed away, and that the second one had abandoned her and the children. He told me, "Things are hard if you don't make good choices". The statement referred to Tungalag marrying an 'irresponsible' man (*achaagvi hvn*).<sup>95</sup>

Conversations in bureaucratic encounters among state workers and those seeking government help often invoke the concept of choice in complex and contradictory ways. Although Tungalag and her children have their own registration numbers, the names of the children tie them to other people – one to a deceased man and the other to an absent and unsupportive father. The registration of these children produces a particular household, as does the residential absence of the men. Bureaucratically speaking, Tungalag is a 'female household head' (*örh tolgoilson emegtei*). The Mongolian state recognises that the burden of childcare usually falls on mothers, and thus single mothers are registered lower in the household levels. As we saw from Tungalag's neighbours, who are suspected to have hidden the man of the

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<sup>95</sup> Other possible translations for *achaagvi* include 'empty' or 'dead-head'. Literally, the term refers to something without a load or weight.

household from the survey, it is common knowledge that having working-age men or childless women registered in a household will hinder a family from qualifying to receive aid.

Ganbold himself sometimes advises people to find ways to cut such family members from the household if they want to access level 1 food stamps. In contrast to the argument recounted in the previous chapter, another time a woman came to see Ganbold asking why she had been put into level 3 when no one in the family had any income and she was taking care of her young children. Ganbold looked at her household on the computer and explained that of the eight people registered in the home, four were adults born between 1970 and 1990. These people were considered ‘working age’ so there was “no chance” that such a household would receive food stamps. He suggested that she fix the situation. If the household could be registered without those people, she could request a re-evaluation by household survey and then might have a chance to enter the first level and receive *hunsnii talon*.

### **Ganbold Visits Lhagvaa**

The families that qualify for food stamps by being put in level 1 by the computer program also receive a visit from Ganbold. The household has already been rationalised and classified bureaucratically, so this visit is more about organising the household members, making sure that they have their documents in order.

Ganbold paid one such home visit to Lhagvaa, a married woman in her thirties. Lhagvaa’s 13-year-old daughter sat on the floor with her 11-year-old sister, who was watching cartoons on the television. A small baby swaddled in blankets slept on the bed. Lhagvaa brought us each a small bowl of boiled water, which we accepted with customary silence. Ganbold began asking questions: “How many of you are there”? Lhagvaa answered, “Four or five; three kids”. Ganbold then asked about her husband and whether he was working. Like a number of men in Aglag, including my adoptive ‘father’ Badrakh, Lhagvaa’s husband found casual work at a local coal depot. She explained that although the family had moved to Aglag in 2010, they hadn’t gotten around to completing the registration papers for their current *hashaa*.

Ganbold gently reprimanded her and told her to get her registration sorted as soon as possible.

The cartoons in the background made conversation difficult, so Ganbold called to the children to turn down the volume. Then he began to enquire about the eldest child. Lhagvaa told him that her daughter was now 13 and was not attending school. The girl was suffering from a health problem; she had had an operation the previous November, but was deaf and had a developmental problem that affected her memory. “I don’t know if her brain works”, she said, “She’s like a little child”.

Having asked for the ages of two other children, (11 and 6 months) Ganbold continued, “Ok, the reason I am here is because we are going to enrol you in the food stamps program. Do you know about this service? You need to photocopy your ID card and your husband’s ID card”. At this point, Lhagvaa interrupted, “Oh, my husband lost his card and we haven’t had a chance to order a new one”. “Do you have the application?” Ganbold asked. “I do”, she said. “Ok”, he replied, “please order it as soon as possible”. Lhagvaa explained, “Ok, we will do it when my husband’s salary is paid”. He tells Lhagvaa that she must make photocopies of her children’s birth certificates, get two passport-sized photos of her husband and find the 7,500 MNT to order his new ID. He returns to the purpose of his visit. “Do you know about the food stamps program? Every month you will buy some groceries from the shop and the *horoo*’s care money will pay for it, ok?” “Ok”, Lhagvaa answers. “That’s the program”, he repeats. Ganbold tells Lhagvaa to come with the application materials the next day and goes to leave.

Lhagvaa seizes the moment to ask Ganbold about her 13-year-old daughter. She asks whether it is possible to get her disabled daughter into the care system. There is a school that takes care of disabled children, but it is far away. There is no one to take the child to and from school, and the girl herself does not understand where she lives. Ganbold responds by asking about the family’s income. “At the moment we’re living on the 60,000 children’s money”, she tells him. Lhagvaa had been working as a cleaner at a university until she gave birth, but since then she has been taking care of the new baby

and her disabled daughter. Ganbold does not respond to her request. He simply says, “*Za*, see you tomorrow”.

### **Performing for the Bureaucratic Gaze II: Paperwork and Stories**

Although it is possible to approach this visit from multiple perspectives, here I will focus on the demands the state bureaucracy puts on its citizens to make themselves visible. In other words, people need to produce certain *things* and send them to the state in order to make themselves legible (eligible) for care. The fundamental thing that is produced is a performance of a particular life, for this is what the survey ultimately elicits and captures. As demonstrated above, households are encouraged to present themselves in abbreviated forms (without working-age men and childless women, for example). But even when the performance is ‘successful’, it leads to the burden of more production. In this visit, despite its brevity, glimpses of two different household productions are apparent.

The first of these is the various forms of paperwork Ganbold asks the family to produce. This begins with the land registration documents. As we saw in Tungalag’s case, neither of the two families sharing the *hashaa* can afford to formalise the split. Similarly, in Lhagvaa’s case, the family’s address in the district is required to be on their registration cards, but although they are living on land that they have paid for, it is not in their names. This precarious situation, which we also saw in Chapter One, can have dangerous consequences (see also Pedersen and Højer, forthcoming; Plueckhahn 2017). Should the administratively recognised owner of the plot dispute the family’s claim to the land, the family would have little recourse in the eyes of the law. It was not uncommon for people to come to the *horoo* with stories of being swindled by relatives who took money for land and then returned to occupy the plot themselves or sold it again. In this situation, there was nothing Ganbold could do to help the claimants besides advising them to mount a lawsuit, though this could prove both financially and socially expensive.

Lhagvaa is also required to apply for her husband’s new ID card, and to produce two passport photos of her husband and photocopies of the children’s birth certificates. The price of the new ID application is only 7,500 MNT, and photos and photocopies would not be much more than a couple

thousand MNT in total. Nevertheless, for the average ger district family – let alone for a family in acute financial difficulty – any unexpected expenses, no matter how minor, can cause a crisis. Daily survival is only possible living loan-to-loan, or for the more fortunate, salary-to-salary, in combination with utilising local services such as pawn shops. For a family like Lhagvaa's, then, even finding an extra 10,000 MNT is a burden. The sum constitutes over 16 per cent of her monthly children's money 'income' until her husband's first salary payment materialises, something that is never guaranteed. Should it arrive on the fifth of the month, as the family expects, they will be able to put it towards this application. However, it was clear from the conversation that the husband had only very recently been put in contact with the local coal company after registering as unemployed at the 'labour exchange' in the *horoo*. In a context where many people actually have to pay to secure employment, work for a period of time without pay, or have highly uncertain and unreliable incomes, there could be little certainty over whether the husband's salary would really arrive. It is also possible that if the husband does end up with regular employment and the household is reassessed according to the computer program, they may be pushed out of level 1, thereby losing access to the food stamps program anyway.

Even as concepts of the household and bureaucratic technologies work to contain and regulate the complexities of daily life, Ganbold's visits bring to light the ways that life continually exceeds these various regimes. Unregistered homes, houses that cannot be defined as such, children with unsupportive fathers all defy the organising promises of the survey in obvious ways, but so too do the stories that people tell Ganbold about their lives during his visit. In Lhagvaa's case this is most obvious when she entreats Ganbold to help her with her disabled daughter. It is likely that the daughter being registered as disabled in the household survey has played a role in the family's classification as level 1. However, the family's needs extend beyond food stamps. As Lhagvaa herself explains to Ganbold, her childcare requirements prevent her from finding work. She used to receive a decent salary (400,000 MNT/month) as a cleaner, but unless there is someone to take her daughter to and from school, she cannot return to work. Even though her husband now seems to have found employment, unskilled labour at a coal



depot is likely to be a seasonal job. Cleaning jobs such as her previous one at a university are offered almost exclusively to women. Thus, for the family to meet the ‘ideal’ of hard-working, self-supporting citizens, it is imperative that Lhagvaa be given support to return to the workplace.

While food stamps may be essential for the family’s survival in the here and now, most people’s dreams for themselves and the future lives of their children exceed the idea of basic subsistence. In addition, I would like to highlight the timing of Lhagvaa’s request for help for her daughter. As seen above, Ganbold felt that the meeting was concluded following his introduction to the food stamp program and the agreement that Lhagvaa would visit the *horoo* the following day. He had already stood up to leave when Lhagvaa began to speak; the needs of her life exceed both the meeting and the state’s attempt to address its ‘understanding’ of level 1 poverty.

Similar to the discussion in the previous chapter, we can see here again from Lhagvaa how in her narration of her life circumstances she goes beyond the limits of the ‘visit’, insisting on telling Ganbold that her family’s dilemma cannot be mitigated by the food stamp program alone. Returning to the vignette that opened this chapter, the visit to Delertsetseg and Batnaran stood out for its ‘narrative excess’. From a bureaucratic perspective, Ganbold’s visits have a set of requirements that must be met. These visits are generally structured by forms that have to be filled in: an incomplete form is unacceptable, and the form also leaves no space for anything that exceeds its limitations. Ganbold’s visits are supposed to be like his forms, prescribed and limited. However, it was clear that Delertsetseg and Batnaran were both desperate to speak to Ganbold, and to be listened to. The visit was just supposed to allow Ganbold to tell Batnaran that he had been accepted for care money, but the elderly couple were eager to share as much as they could before Ganbold’s inevitable departure. They spoke simultaneously about their children, and elderly Batnaran poured out the details of his medical condition, even attempting to show Ganbold the site of his infection in case Ganbold might also be a doctor. Delertsetseg did not stop even as Ganbold was departing their home, continuing to explain about the trash dumped in the street long after we were out of earshot.

There is little that Ganbold can do with narratives that cannot be put into the paperwork he is given to work with. As we have seen in these ethnographic examples, sometimes the only thing he can do is respond with silence.

### **A Cigarette with Ganbold**

The internal tension Ganbold experiences due to being caught between regulatory regimes was first revealed to me in a subtle, intimate encounter at the *horoo*. While Ganbold had always been kind and courteous to me, for the first few months I spent installed in his office there had remained a sense of professional distance. It was not until my sister visited Mongolia and kindly brought me some rolling tobacco that we really became friendly. Ganbold smoked and was curious to try the foreign tobacco. He found it funny that I rolled my own cigarettes, generally the exclusive pastime of old Mongolian herders, and he also liked to joke that I was smoking ‘black tobacco’ (*har tamhi*, meaning drugs) but he enjoyed the light taste of the Golden Virginia. Smoking is very popular among both men and women in Mongolia, but women still tend to smoke discreetly. Sometimes other female *horoo* staff would join us on the outside stairs to the basement, or we would go into the tiny bedroom of the building’s overnight janitor. Following the visit to Batnaran and Delertsetseg, Ganbold and I went down to have a cigarette in this little room. We sat side-by-side on the tiny bed, looking at our reflections in the dark glass of the janitor’s 10-inch TV. It had been a sobering visit and there wasn’t much to say. We smoked silently until Ganbold asked me, “Do I have an *aash muutai* face?”

The question caught me off guard. *Aash* is the Mongolian word for character or temperament. *Muu* means bad or ugly. So, Ganbold was essentially asking me if I thought he had the face of someone with an unpleasant disposition or bad character. Up until that point, I hadn’t thought that Ganbold would be concerned about what sort of face I thought he had. In fact, I didn’t think of Ganbold as being preoccupied with what anyone thought of him. As we saw in the argument with Nomin in the previous chapter, he could appear utterly impervious to others’ emotions, their curses or their tears. In fact, Ganbold’s face was the subject of some discussion among local ger

district residents. He had clearly suffered from severe acne in his younger years, as his cheeks were pockmarked with a constellation of scars. Those who did not recall Ganbold's name would identify him to others as 'the one with the scarred face'.

Ganbold's question was interesting since he was apparently referring simultaneously to surface and interior traits. He asked about neither his looks nor his character exclusively, instead wanting to know whether I thought he had the face of someone with an unpleasant temperament. Unsure of how to answer Ganbold, I drew instead on my cigarette. Before I said anything he continued softly, "Some people say that about me ..."

Although Ganbold and I had of course discussed at various times how 'hard' (*hetsüü*) his job was, it was generally not in these emotive or personal terms. Despite its difficulties, Ganbold felt that his work was meritorious (*buyantai*) and, whatever else, he always appeared to try his best to follow the letter of the law. Over the course of my fieldwork, the impossible position of Ganbold and state workers like him became ever more evident. Most accounts of bureaucracies attend sympathetically to those who are subject to the domination of their gaze. Likewise the focus is often on bureaucrats as sad, thoughtless robots of one kind or another. Indeed, Herzfeld's work on the subject begins with these very questions:

Why do some people apparently become humourless automatons as soon as they are placed behind a desk? Why do kindly friends and amiable neighbours become racists and bigots when they discover, or (more accurately) decide, that others do not 'belong'? How does it come about that in societies justly famed for their hospitality and warmth we often encounter the pettiest forms of bureaucratic indifference to human needs and sufferings, or that in democratic polities designed to benefit all citizens whole groups of people suffer from callous neglect? (Herzfeld 1992: 1)

Texts that sympathise with bureaucrats are few and far between.<sup>96</sup> Instead of examining the consequences of being wedged between the iron face of the

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<sup>96</sup> A counter-example is Gupta, who emphasised that "many hard-working bureaucrats were often frustrated by their inability to work effectively to bring

state – with its distance, hardness and unblinking gaze – and a day-job at the ‘coalface’ – where bureaucratic rationality and certainty struggle with untidy realities that cannot be contained by the categories of a survey – workers like Ganbold are held in contempt for buck-passing when they do not personally solve someone’s situation, yet are just as easily deemed corrupt if they bend the rules in an effort to help (Sneath 2006a). In terms of the food stamps program, Ganbold finds himself in precisely such a bind.

In private, Ganbold made no secret of the fact that he felt the *talon* program should be stopped. This was not because he did not want people to receive help (others in the *horoo*, however – particularly older staff who still clung to certain ‘socialist’ ideals – did feel this way), but because he faced daily the disputes that it caused between and among families. Furthermore, he was subject to constant scrutiny from above. As he put it, “It is always causing problems. People think I can add people to the food stamp program. Then when I do, the bosses think I am the father of these kids and the lover of these single mothers”. Ganbold therefore experiences regulation highly ambiguously, as something that both ties his hands *and* sets him free. The iron face of the state often denies Ganbold the capacity to truly help anyone in the area, a situation that was deeply uncomfortable for him, but he could also harness these same bureaucratic tools to distance himself from responsibility for citizens’ hardships.

## **Hospitality**

From the vantage point of the *horoo*, where bureaucratic technologies regulate the space and capacity for interaction, district residents are more easily transformed into a collection of names and numbers in a computer program. In contrast, when Ganbold visits a home, his capacity to maintain a distance is greatly diminished.<sup>97</sup> Home visits are the key site where the tension between the iron face and the coalface manifests. This is because it is where the making of the state through paperwork collides most intensely with the hardships of people’s lives. Furthermore, upon his entrance into the home,

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about real changes in the lives of the poor people who were so often the target of government programs” (2012: 23).

<sup>97</sup> See Dubois (2010: 47-49) for description of French welfare inspectors’ home visits and the types of risks and disruptions they may face.

Ganbold and his interlocutor enter a new ‘frame’ that layers onto their already prescribed roles (those of bureaucrat and citizen) a new relational set of positions: guest and host.

Almost all households try to integrate Ganbold as a guest when he visits. There are classic and long-standing forms of customary hospitality in Mongolia that have shifted over the years but remain largely recognisable from the canon of historical literature that covers such matters, including travel histories, missionaries’ tales and ethnographic texts. An article by Caroline Humphrey (2012) reproduces a selection of these *yos* (rules/norms) from a list of ‘One Hundred Rules for the Host and Guest’, as narrated to her by a Mongolian teacher in the 1980s. The list covered hospitality among Mongolians living a nomadic pastoral life, and includes some references to guns and horses, for example, which are not relevant to the case of ger district home visits. Nevertheless, the general outline of hospitality remains easily recognisable to this day, and even as materials may have shifted – from a felt ger flap to a wooden *baishin* door, or from homemade dried curds to store-bought candies – the expected gestures and tone remain largely constant.

Humphrey’s article focuses on this last aspect – tone – in order to elucidate how a hospitable encounter gives rise to particular feelings and affective atmospheres among guests and hosts via their oscillations between prescribed actions and personally modulated emotions. The customs of Mongolian hospitality in action not only generate a particular affective tone between guest and host, but should also themselves be carried out with a particular emotional air of attentive detachment, at least at first. There are many bodily and material aspects to this atmosphere, such as refraining from sudden, loud movements – including of the eyes. Speech is kept to a minimum or restricted to formalised questions (with formalised answers), tea and food should be offered and accepted without verbalised ceremony or thanks; even just the act of following the expected sequence of guest-host exchanges contributes to the desired “serene formality” (2012: S68). As Humphrey writes, “Ideally, the guest is kept in a ‘holding pattern’, held at a certain distance while he circles in, through the home, and out again, while his impact is depersonalized till it becomes an abstract energy like a gust of wind” (Humphrey 2012: S65, emphasis removed).

Recent trends in anthropology have seen a revival of interest in hospitality both as an object of ethnographic enquiry and a theoretical abstraction to ‘think with’. This trend has been led especially by a special issue of the *JRAI* that poses the question “What would anthropology look like if Marcel Mauss had focused on hospitality rather than the gift?” (Candea and da Col 2012: S1). The resulting publication abounds with detailed studies of particular material and affective regimes of hospitality (Allerton 2012; Fausto 2012; Humphrey 2012); the stretching, bending and scaling up of hospitality as a concept within and without anthropology (Battaglia 2012; Candea 2012; Herzfeld 2012; Wagner 2012), and the dangers in hospitality that come from bad, parasitic or ensnaring guests and hosts of both the human and non-human variety (da Col 2012; Delaplace 2012; Ladwig 2012; Kelly 2012; Marsden 2012; Shryock 2012; Swancutt 2012). The theoretical bedrock of the anthropological concern with hospitality is traced back to Jacques Derrida (2000, 2005), although the editors of the special issue propose Julian Pitt-Rivers’ works on hospitality (1968) and grace (1992) as more disciplinarily “robust” conceptual forefathers (Candea and da Col 2012: S16).

Both Derrida and Pitt-Rivers (independently) focus on the ambivalence of hospitality. In doing so, both also draw on Benveniste’s (1969) discussion of the etymology of the term. ‘Hospitality’ comes from the Latin *hospes*, itself made up of two distinct terms *hostis* (foreigner, enemy) and *potis* from *pet* or *pot* (power, mastery). Derrida famously coined the term ‘hostipitality’ in a 1997 lecture to capture better the aporia contained within the concept (translated and published in 2000). Derrida’s argument regards, in particular, the paradox of universal hospitality, a concept he extracts from Kant (1970). On the one hand, “he who offers hospitality must be the master in his house” and “must be assured of his sovereignty over the space and goods he offers or opens to the other as stranger” (Derrida 2000: 14). However, the point of hospitality is to offer one’s home to another, hence maxims like ‘Make yourself at home’ or ‘What’s mine is yours’. And yet, the very offer asserts its opposite: there is no way to “open up or offer hospitality, however generous, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home” (*Ibid.*). Heeding the warnings of Candea, who cautions against importing ideas on hospitality “wholesale from continental

philosophy” (Candea and da Col 2012: S15), the paradox Derrida illuminates and the ambiguity that Pitt-Rivers grapples with can nevertheless be productive starting points. Returning to Mongolian hospitality, we can see some of the same underlying tensions. Guests are considered potentially dangerous strangers, but likewise, while both are bound to afford each other respect, the only word for ‘host’ in Mongolian is *ezen*, or ‘master’.<sup>98</sup> The tension between hostility and hospitality is all about the unsteady and uncertain power relations between guests and hosts.

Sneath and Humphrey have continued the exploration of hospitality in Mongolia, springboarding off Derrida’s arguments and focusing on different aspects of the interrelation between power and hospitality. In their joint seminar delivered at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU), University of Cambridge (2018), Sneath urged that we consider the “micro-hierarchies of power” that are embodied in acts of hospitality. Building on his earlier work that prioritises obligation (over reciprocity) as a core principle of social action in Mongolia, Sneath likewise depicts Mongolian hospitality as the ‘enaction of obligations’ (i.e. not reciprocal transactions). He then examines the historical record in order to uncover how these obligations came to be placed on guests and hosts, arguing that the rules have been useful to the rulers. His ultimate point is that hospitality is produced by particular political orders, and in its enaction, reproduces them. In other words, hospitality is not ‘cultural’, nor does it come about for the good of the community; it is a mechanism of power that various ruling classes in Mongolia’s history have taken the time to legislate because it has benefitted them to do so. Sneath’s perspective is useful because it highlights that hospitality is not always driven by reciprocity. In fact, in the case of Ganbold, both parties are well aware that he will never host citizens in his home as they do him. Hospitality is revealed here as clearly obligatory and imbued with ‘micro-hierarchies’, and Sneath’s work speaks to the link between hospitality and the state, to which I will return later.

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<sup>98</sup> Can be paired with ‘home’ to give ‘head of the household’ (*geriin ezen*). The verb ‘to host’ can only be translated as ‘*ezen hvnii baidlaar baih*’ ‘to be in the position of master’.

Humphrey likewise tackles questions of power and its manifestation through hospitality, but she comes from a different angle, beginning with the reminder that while European hospitality assumes an emplaced ‘host’, Mongolia is differentiated by the mobility of nomadic pastoralism. Humphrey then elucidates from the historical record three types of hospitality that each involves a different combination of power and mobility: ‘radiating hospitality’ (a static hosting site radiates power out and down), ‘entrapping hospitality’ (a host attracts a powerful guest and hopes to keep him or her there), ‘visitation’ (the visit of a mobile ruler to a lower-status person). None of these models directly map onto Ganbold’s visits. Visitation comes the closest, and yet, unlike Humphrey’s description of the state forcing monasteries to host the army for lavish banquets, Ganbold was never an extractive guest. Nevertheless, Humphrey’s attention to the variety that hospitable interactions take is useful, especially the recognition that despite the de facto status of host as master (*ezen*), guests can use the ‘respect’ they are obliged to their advantage. Taking up this point, I wish to turn now to some of the particularities of hosting a bureaucrat for a home visit.

### **Hosting a Bureaucrat**

At first it might seem that Ganbold’s visit fits neatly with the literature on ‘bad guests’; and yet, while difficult, Ganbold cannot be said to be a parasite, as many bad guests are. When Ganbold enters a home and is offered tea, dried milk curds or other candies, and a particular place to sit, he is being offered an invitation to participate in a different type of relationship. This may be an entanglement he is wary of, and yet custom does not give him any easy ‘out’ from accepting what he is offered. As we saw in the cases above, at times Ganbold would take a cup of tea (or in the case of Lhagvaa a symbolic ‘tea’ in the form of a cup of boiled water); other times he would refuse, saying he was in a rush, or that he did not want to trouble his hosts. On the other hand, offering Ganbold hospitality is also fraught for the hosts.

Against the backdrop of customary hospitality – in which formality and host-guest oscillations provide the “mutually needed reassurance that harm, insult, bad news, and so forth, are out of the frame” (Humphrey 2012: S68) – hosting Ganbold presents a number of conundrums, such as how to



ingratiate yourself to someone whose assistance you seek without appearing destitute. Hosts are also caught between the norms of hospitable chat and the Mongolian aversion to speaking about anything bad – especially in a hosting context – and using Ganbold’s visit as a chance to speak at length about their various concerns and hardships. Regarding ‘hospitable chat’, Derrida states that “hospitality consists in doing everything to address the other, to accord him, even to ask him his name, while keeping this question from becoming a ‘condition’, a police inquisition, a blacklist or a simple border control” (2005: 7). Derrida is, of course, referring to the host questioning the guest. In Mongolia this would be considered equally inhospitable behaviour. And yet, how to deal with a guest who is there specifically to ask questions? Ganbold’s household survey reverses this protocol even as it breaks it. And yet, in general, far from wanting this ‘bad guest’ to leave, most of the families that host Ganbold are concerned that he will leave too soon. Does all this make Ganbold an anti-guest?

While so much about Ganbold’s home visits does seem to distort standard hospitality, the tone of the interaction usually remains recognisable as that which is expected between guest and host. I suggest, therefore, that far from being an anti-guest, the tensions and paradoxes that Ganbold’s visits produce only reinforce the already well-recognised aporia of hospitality.

Candea has written of hospitality that it “tends to feature [in the literature] as a scale-free abstraction, tying together into causal chains entities of radically different sizes (individuals, nations, doors, villages, etc.)” (2012: S35). To make this argument he draws on Herzfeld’s recognition that hospitality can be studied “not only at the level of village ethnography, but also at that of its national and regional transformations” (1987: 75), particularly in the sense of national stereotypes. Doing so means recognising the “essential homology” that exists between various levels of collective identity (*Ibid.*: 76). The examples Herzfeld provides are of a rape being described metaphorically as the entering of the woman’s father’s house, and of the 1974 invasion of Cyprus being depicted as a home invasion. Candea also recognises this scale-free abstraction in the work of Derrida, who was writing about hospitality in a particularly polemic historical moment. Derrida’s reflections on hospitality are therefore also critiques of the French

state and its asylum policies, with ‘hospitality’ “deployed as a lens through which to examine the tense relations between states and migrants, and to rethink postcoloniality more generally (Rosello 2001: 23-48; Shryock 2008: 409-411)” (Candea 2012: S38). To critique the state as Derrida does through metaphors of hospitality relies on the same homologies as Herzfeld points to. Candea’s point, however, is not to interrogate these homologies but to trace how hospitality comes to be such an effective abstraction to think with across scales. Here, I wish to pick up on the capacity of hospitality to work as a scale-free abstraction, and on how it can be a lens to focus attention on the activities and attitudes of the nation-state, albeit at a bit of a conceptual right angle. I suggest instead an exploration of how the ethnographic overlap of the bureaucratic and the hospitable that is enacted in Ganbold’s home visits can be scaled up to offer new ways of thinking about bureaucracy that are inspired by the literature on hospitality.

My point is that so much of the writing on bureaucracy is reliant on ideas of formal structures (and structural violence) that become trapped into one of two perspectives. The first is to consider bureaucracy as a kind of extraordinary structure that gets in the way of ‘real life’ and distorts it with paperwork, classification and dead ends; the second is to focus on *how* all this comes to be, and ultimately to despair at the power of the ‘structures that be’ to defeat even the most well-meaning program or sympathetic bureaucrat. Both these perspectives can be backed up ethnographically and justified as anthropologically sound; and yet, I suggest they may be failing to take advantage of the capacity for conceptual flexibility that anthropology displays in other contexts. I find hospitality a good resource for thinking differently about bureaucracy because it responds to both of the unsatisfying perspectives I outlined above. For example, addressing the second perspective, rather than despairing over tourism in Greece, Herzfeld argues that the Greek hospitality shown to tourists is a means of “englobing” the dominant cultures of Europe. “As unilateral givers” he writes, “the Greeks are enabled to use the moral implications of reciprocity to reverse the historical and political dependence of their country upon the West” (1987: 86).

Referring to the first perspective, again I find the work of Herzfeld helpful, as he is one of the first anthropologists to see the connections between

bureaucracy and hospitality. As he writes, “Both bureaucratic interaction and personal hospitality are deeply concerned with defining lines of exclusion and belonging” (1992: 170). Herzfeld then takes the point in a different direction, scaling up to the level of the nation in order to return to his opening question: “how, in countries that pride themselves on the warmth they proffer strangers, can officials turn out to be so indifferent?” (*Ibid.*) Instead of this, I want to take up his point that bureaucracy and hospitality both concern themselves with defining lines of exclusion, and to consider it in light of the underlying principle that sets his study apart, namely that bureaucratic indifference cannot be understood in isolation from the other ways that society manifests exclusion and indifference. Hospitality therefore begins to work on two levels. Summarising the question, we might ask: How does hospitality produce lines of exclusion, and how might understanding these shed light on how hospitality (abstracted) can reframe standard arguments on bureaucratic encounters?

### **Zones of Craft**

Finally, I wish to point out the curious overlap between bureaucratic and hospitable forms of interaction. Consider the words of Caroline Humphrey:

The enaction of hospitality creates its own intervening zone of craft, evident in a depersonalized repertoire of ‘things that are done’, which detaches acts from actors and speeches from speakers, and focuses attention on these artful ‘things’ themselves (Humphrey 2012: S63).

Although she is writing about hospitality, her words could also apply to Ganbold’s enaction of bureaucracy. How might we rethink the work of bureaucrats at the coalface of the state if we were to consider them as engaged in a performance, the enaction of a particular ‘zone of craft’ like hosts and guests? Performance, I suggest, may be a useful lens because it captures the oscillation between creative and rule-bound action that is characteristic of interactions between both bureaucrats and citizens, and guests and hosts. It draws attention to the frames that shape the interaction and the materials (the objects, words and bodily gestures) that bring those frames into being. Hospitality obliges people to make certain things present and visible, such as

a cup of tea or a bowl of candies, and to enact a particular affective tone; similarly, bureaucracy makes demands of its ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’, obliging citizens to make themselves visible in particular ways and state workers to use a prescribed set of tools and language.

Lest I be misunderstood, engaging with the theoretical insights that have come out of hospitality does not mean refraining from critiques of bureaucracy. In fact, hospitality has proved itself to be key to powerful moral critiques of state action already, especially in the case of migrants and asylum seekers. These critiques rely on the capacity of the concept to scale up without losing its affective potential. My suggestion is that critiques of bureaucracy would do well to take inspiration from those who emerge from hospitality, firstly because the most compelling works on hospitality are those that address questions of exclusion and belonging in broad terms rather than siloing them with restrictive conceptions of scale or context, and secondly because hospitality is instantly recognisable as a performative zone of craft in which both hosts and guests must tackle uncertainties about how to know what is ‘real’ even as they enact the very gestures that can make hospitable interactions uncanny.

This chapter, therefore, has focused on Ganbold in a different way to his introduction in Chapter Four. It has dealt with the affective tensions he must navigate as he carries out the obligations of his work as sub-district care administrator. It is a job that Ganbold feels is meritorious (*buyantai*) because its goal is to help people, even as he knows his capacity is severely limited. Rather than focusing only on Ganbold as a bureaucrat, I have sought to theoretically springboard from the ethnographic juxtaposition of Ganbold as *both state worker and guest*, which occurs when he enters a home, in order to consider how perspectives on hospitality might expand the potential for creative theorisations of bureaucracy as a zone of craft.

## CHAPTER SIX *Anticipating In-Between*

In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduced Badrakh and Ulzii's family home in Aglag and mentioned that, looking directly south from their *hashaa* one could gaze out at a mountainside decorated year-round with the glistening lights that illuminate the ski slopes of the exclusive Sky Resort complex. By the summer of 2016, a new feature had appeared at the foothills of this mountain; namely, a neat row of 53 luxury, three-storey villas. Constructed at a cost of billions of MNT, the villas were built to host the 53 heads of state and other officials who were to attend the 11th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Ulaanbaatar on 15 and 16 July 2016.

The ASEM was very important to the Mongolian government; it was to be the biggest international conference in modern Mongolian history. The state extended the dates of the national Naadam holiday, which also took place around that time, and actively encouraged people to leave the city and spend the holiday in the countryside. As part of its 'beautification' project it also instructed the police to clear the streets of drunks, who were temporarily arrested (cf. Herzfeld 2015: 22; Klima 2002: 40).<sup>99</sup> On 15 July, the night before Badrakh and Ulzii's family and I left for the countryside, we attended a free concert in the city's central square that was put on as a joint celebration of the Naadam and the ASEM opening. We took a seat on the plastic chairs as the light faded, remarking that attendance was surprisingly low for the free event. Soon after, the announcer walked onstage and said, "Hello Ulaanbaatar and welcome to all the beautiful people here! As we know, all the ugly people have been sent to the countryside!"

A couple hours later we made our way home on the bus. As we continued eastwards along Peace Avenue, the central artery of Ulaanbaatar, leaving the city centre behind, the size and shine of the buildings diminished. Reaching almost the eastern edge of the city, the bus arrived at its last stop on the main road. Directly ahead, the road led out of the city to the countryside and to the right the 53 ASEM homes stretched out in a row, each bathed in a warm glow. To the left stood the turn to Aglag.

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<sup>99</sup> The Aglag police were very busy at this time, as was Ganbold, who was often petitioned by people – usually women – to help get their husbands or relatives out of police custody in the *horoo* basement.

For the people of Aglag, the ASEM houses stood as a blunt and highly visible manifestation of both the capacities and priorities of the Mongolian state. Most notable was the reality that it was prepared to spend billions of MNT on not only providing homes, but also on a series of independent infrastructural projects to ensure reliable water, heating, electricity and paved road access for the international visitors, who would stay only a few days. This, naturally, stood in stark contrast to the way it routinely avoided doing so for other arrivals to the city such as those in the ger districts.

There was something of an irony to the situation, however, that complicates simple narratives of the state's capacity to turn a blind eye to the less fortunate (see Herzfeld 2015). Merely three weeks before the opening of the ASEM, the ruling Democratic Party (DP) – which had seized the opportunity to host the meeting and invested years of preparation into harnessing its potential – was voted out. In a striking rejection of their four years of rule, on 26 June 2016 the Mongolian people ejected all but nine of the DP's candidates from their seats in parliament and installed Mongolian People's Party (MPP) candidates in 65 of the 76 total places. That left two seats, one of which went to a candidate from the country's third largest party, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, an offshoot of the MPP. The final parliamentary place, and the *only* seat that went to an independent candidate, was elected in none other than the constituency that included Aglag.

Although the major parties had proposed strong candidates to Aglag voters, including a popular television star and the incumbent MP, the people of Aglag voted overwhelmingly for a singer known for having little formal education and no experience in government or formal public service. What this man did offer, however, was a remarkable public image. Dressing exclusively in old-fashioned Mongolian robes (*deel*), he arrived on horseback to his rallies at Aglag kiosk wells, flanked by banner men and an oxcart. Manifesting an image of Mongolian purity, deep nostalgia and a steadfast commitment to performing his politics, he proved to be immensely popular. Of course, it is too neat to draw a straight line between the visibility of the ASEM houses from Aglag, the invisibility of Aglag in the eyes of the ruling elites and the election of the only independent candidate in that constituency.

Nevertheless, the election result stood as a defiant rejection of the state's anticipatory attitude towards the visiting dignitaries, and the extent to which it was willing to invest in hosting them for a mere matter of days, directly in the eye-line of those it refused to host, or even see.

Ten days before the ASEM began, the newly elected member of parliament for Aglag arrived on a white horse, dressed in *deel*, hat and boots, to the opening of parliament at the government palace, leading a procession of 99 banner men who were also on horseback. He dismounted, tied his horse to the railings outside and took up his seat, announcing that he was donating his first parliamentarian's salary to the purchase of school uniforms for the children of poor families in his constituency.

The excitement of his election, however, soon wore off. The people of Aglag were well aware that their candidate was a single voice in a supermajority MPP, and joked (only sometimes metaphorically) that the other members of parliament had soon turned the singer's microphone off. There was also some sense of embarrassment when they did hear their MP speak in parliament. Of course, they agreed with his anti-corruption, straight-talking attitude, but it was different to witness his vernacular (*har yaria* – black/commoner speech) style in the government palace, as opposed to next to a dusty Aglag well. Indeed, if the ger district dwellers had felt invisible before as the government performed its hosting of the ASEM visitors, and if they had enjoyed a moment of revenge in voting out the men and women who had ignored them, it soon became apparent that the new government was now fixing its eyes on them, but its gaze was harsh, and the face it would now show would be one of iron.

### **Post-Election Pawn Shops and Pine Nuts**

In early August 2016, Ganbold, Naraa and I sat together in the Aglag *horoo*. The two government employees – Ganbold, the care administrator (*halamjiin ajilchin*) for the district, and Naraa, a sector worker (*hesegiin ahlakch*) subordinate to Ganbold – gathered around a desk on which I had placed a small plastic bag filled with unshelled pine nuts. The morning had been stressful. In fact, the mornings were becoming increasingly stressful as

the effects of the election of the new government were felt.<sup>100</sup> The new administration had announced that it would be halting a number of social programs and welfare payments, including the 70,000 MNT (£21) ‘good student’ payments, the annual six-day state-sponsored holiday for pensioners and the 20,000 MNT (£6)-per-child monthly payments known as ‘children’s money’ (*hüühediin möngö*).

In the absence of paid work or salaries that meet the daily survival needs of families living in the ger district, these small amounts of state welfare are indispensable. Gandbold, Naraa and I sat eating nuts and reflecting on that morning at the *horoo*, which had been taken up by visits from upset residents asking why they had not received their ‘children’s money’ since the election. The *horoo* staff had no answers to give the residents. They had received no word from the government about the future of welfare payments and programs, and were themselves left relying on rumours and the media.

Suddenly, Ganbold drew his hand out of the plastic bag and held both hands up between us. “Look at these”, he said, “What do you see?” I hesitated before answering “Nothing”. “Exactly”, he replied, “Nothing. My rings are gone. They are all in the *lombard* (pawn shop). It’s not just the children’s money that’s been stopped. We *horoo* employees haven’t been paid for two months! We’ve had to pawn the rings off our fingers to survive. They say we might be paid again in October but that’s also probably when we’ll lose our jobs anyway. A new government always replaces all the employees, bringing in their own people. I might not have a job for the next four years until maybe after the next election. And I’m over thirty. I won’t find another job ...”

Ganbold was then interrupted by a phone call. “It’s my father. He’s outside. He’s been pawning our silver bowls and collecting his pension money”, he said and left.

Naraa let out a sigh after Ganbold had gone. “It’s even harder for us”, she muttered, “At least Ganbold has a father who he can rely on and things to pawn. He also has relatives in the countryside to send meat. For the rest of us ... *yah uu* ... How will we make it?”

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<sup>100</sup> See Radchenko and Jargalsaikhan (2017) for their analysis of the 2016 and 2017 election cycles in Mongolia.



At home with Badrakh and Ulzii the mood had been similarly depressed and desperate. The school year was due to start on 1 September, and many things needed to be purchased. Ankhaa, the youngest daughter, was entering the second grade and needed a uniform, new shoes, tights and a headband with a white synthetic puffy bow. The elder siblings likewise needed new clothes, bags and books, but with the suspension of the children's payments, a summer of work without pay for Ulzii and only a limited income brought home by Badrakh, the family's capacity to provision itself was restricted.<sup>101</sup> The summer had been a happy time, but now the cold had begun to return; frosty winds whipped through the holes in the windows, and the smoke of coal fires became a more regular morning feature. Following the breakdown between the family and their *ah*, Dashgombo Ah (see Chapter Two), Badrakh and Ulzii no longer had an animal to their name, and the question of how to feed the family for the winter was growing ever more urgent.

Such concerns were common across the district; indeed, Naraa in the *horoo* that day referred to the cost of kindergarten. Severely oversubscribed, access to state kindergartens had long been a contentious issue, as the numbers of children in the ger districts had outgrown the capacity of the city's schools. For years now, the only way to ensure your child received one of the highly coveted places was either to camp outside the gates overnight to be the first in the queue on enrolment day (as Batbold and Chuluunbold, Ankhaa's older brothers, had done), to use an inside connection, such as a relative who worked as a teacher, or pay a bribe.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ulzii had been able to take her summer salary at the beginning of the year to help with the cost of the Lunar New Year.

<sup>102</sup> The story of Batbold and Chuluunbold getting Ankhaa into kindergarten was a favourite for retelling in the family as it highlighted so well the boys' caring natures and responsible enaction of elder brotherhood. Batbold and Chuluunbold had heard from local gossip about the need to be first in line on the morning of the kindergarten enrolment and had taken it upon themselves to camp overnight there to ensure their younger sister a place. They were so intent on their goal they spent the night outside without any shelter or blankets, and Chuluunbold had even in his sleep stood up and shaken the metal gate, calling out, "Let my sister in! Let my sister in!" When Badrakh and Ulzii returned from the countryside some days later they were amazed at their sons' actions and overjoyed that Ankhaa would be able to attend a state

In 2016, according to Naraa, the bribes were up to 300,000 MNT, although eventually the Aglag kindergarten had decided to hold an open lucky dip lottery for kindergarten places.<sup>103</sup> While Ganbold and others felt the lottery system was a step in the right direction in terms of fairness, there was no doubt that bribes and favours would nevertheless swell the numbers of children actually attending the kindergarten so that by Christmas class sizes might have even doubled.

“If you want to be rich in Mongolia,” Ulzii told me one evening, “there are two businesses to go into: one is kindergartens, the other is pawnshops. It’s easy. All you have to do is sit there and the money comes to you!” Unlike the Mongolian pawnshop owners written about by Lars Højer, who expressed considerable unease and ambivalence about their profession (2012: 39), Badrakh and Ulzii felt that being a pawnbroker was not morally problematic at all. “It’s something that people need”, Badrakh responded to my probing on this matter. “When people need money, pawnshops give them money”.

Badrakh and Ulzii’s attitude was not always so positive about pawnshops and their proprietors, but likewise it was never antagonistic. They were very familiar with an Aglag pawnshop located at the old terminal bus stop and, like Ganbold and his father, at this time of need had taken what they could there to access some cash. Ulzii’s ears now sported her ‘imitation’ earrings, which were of no monetary value (unlike her precious ‘Russian gold’ (*manyet*) earrings, which were now being held in a little paper bag in the pawnshop’s safe) but nevertheless filled the holes in her earlobes, a necessary

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kindergarten for free, as they could afford neither a bribe nor a private kindergarten (a less desirable option anyway in terms of education quality).

<sup>103</sup> In a video Ganbold showed me following the event, the 150 children each technically entitled to a kindergarten place took it in turns to draw a folded piece of paper from a bowl in front of the kindergarten entrance. Aided by a parent, the child would then open the paper and reveal the number between one and 150; those who drew numbers between one and fifty would win a place, the rest would miss out. In the video, each child dutifully stuck his or her hand into the bowl and there was a moment of intense anticipation as the parents and crowd waited to see if the child was lucky (*aztai*) or not. Lucky children were duly celebrated by their parents and looked very pleased with themselves, while the unlucky (*azgüi*) ones were quick to be moved away from the bowl by a parent, who usually greeted the news with silence or a rueful “*Za za ...*”

protection for her spiritual fortune as a woman. The suspension of children's money at this crucial time, in combination with their lack of animals, was hitting the family hard. Like the many others in Mongolia who were worrying about how to afford their children's school clothes or kindergarten bribes, or how they would feed their families that winter, the harsh cuts to welfare payments were considered a cruel repayment for a population that had enthusiastically voted in the new administration. The *horoo* staff were not only overwhelmed with the influx of concerned citizens, but were themselves left struggling without salaries. With no word from the new government, it soon became clear that the transition would impose a period of profound uncertainty as government workers and citizens alike scrambled to gather information and activate all the connections at their disposal to access basic services such as education, and basic items such as clothes and food.

### **Uncertainty, Hope and Waiting**

This chapter explores the intersection of the lives of the ger district residents and the government workers introduced over the course of this thesis during a moment of particular uncertainty, when the few institutionalised structures that they relied on, such as government salaries and welfare payments, were temporarily stopped. The form that this intersection took was both subtle and somewhat uncanny. It consisted of single gesture: that morning in August, Ulzii sent me to the *horoo* with a bag of pine nuts. A small and curious act of generosity, it perhaps reversed the expected flow of goods and services from the family to the local bureaucrats. Like the disappointing Naadam, the house that cannot be called a house and the cigarette with Ganbold, it was one of a number of uncanny moments that have been featured in the thesis. These are all moments in which life between iron and coal is crystallised – the space betwixt and between, where things never go quite as expected, yet there are rarely any real surprises. August 2016 in Aglag was also such a moment in light of wider times of uncertainty and the particular temporal orientations that are produced in the in-between.

The confusion of summer 2016, during which the parliament was handed over from one political party to another, contains echoes of another, more extended period of 'transition' – namely the years that followed

Mongolia's democratic revolution in 1990 and ushered in the post-socialist era known in Mongolia as 'the age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*). The idea that Mongolia (along with the rest of the post-socialist world) had entered a transition period in the 1990s, out from which it would emerge into a new age of 'capitalism', was a narrative that dominated local elite and international advisory opinion. The question of when this 'transition' would end or how the end would be recognised has never been successfully answered, and to this day debate continues over the use of terms such as 'post-socialism', 'transition' and indeed 'capitalism', with regard to Mongolia.<sup>104</sup> Leaving semantics aside for now, whatever terms one uses to describe it, the end of state socialism caused massive social and economic upheaval; for some it opened up great opportunities, and for others it felt like a disaster. Those who have written on 1990s/early 2000s Mongolia have variously described it as "widespread social chaos" (Janes and Chuluundorj 2004: 235), a time of crisis in which a "lost generation" balanced on a "social and existential knife-edge" (Pedersen and Højer 2008: 91) and 'a storm' (*shuurga*) by Mongolians themselves. While the socialist state had been forward-oriented to the extent that it sought to more or less erase the nation's past, the future that the state projected was one of certainty as dictated by evolutionist socialist models of progress. With the collapse of state socialism, everything seemed to become doubly unmoored (cf. Yurchak 2006). Mongolians found themselves living "in a place with an unimaginable future, an unknown past, and a present full of misfortune" (Buyandelger 2007: 142). As Pedersen and Højer have suggested, if this period of uncertainty and change was supposed in theory to

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<sup>104</sup> Even, socialism, of course, cannot be considered a singular, self-evident category (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2002; Humphrey 1998; Verdery 1995; Yurchak 2006). My position on these debates is fairly pragmatic. Based on my fieldwork, which was carried out between 22 and 28 years after the end of socialism, I have observed just as vividly the continued importance of memories of socialist structures to the generations that came of age as state socialism ended (Yurchak's 'last Soviet generation' [2006] and Pedersen and Højer's 'lost generation' [2008]) as I have the insignificance or incomprehensibility of such memories to those who have only known the age of the market. Here, I am less interested in finding the 'right' (-ism) term to describe contemporary Mongolia (for me, using 'the age of the market' [*zah zeeliin üye*], as my interlocutors do, works well enough) and more concerned with unpicking how ideas of transition have produced particular concepts of *context* that frame anthropological accounts of life in Mongolia.

be ‘transitional’ or temporary, it has instead become a permanent state of affairs (2008: 73; Buyandelger 2008).

According to the authors, this situation of permanent uncertainty is characterised by chronic job insecurity, rapid fluctuations in the cost of living, a proliferation of informal economic forms and a reliance on networks. But more than this, the pervading logics of permanent transition themselves are seen to have possessed the lost generation: “they have internalized the temporality and the moralities of transition to such an extent that it [has become] their own subjectivity” (Højer and Pedersen, forthcoming: 4). This subjectivity is manifested through a particular temporal orientation, one in which people live “in the moment”, not seeking to “tame the future by planning” (*Ibid.*: 29) or other ‘practical’ means, but rather to exalt in an abundance of potential futures into which they leap in deliberately non-strategic ways as they emerge, whether in dreams or in reality.<sup>105</sup>

The purpose of Højer and Pedersen’s forthcoming work on this lost generation is to explore the formal analogies between the attitudes of their Mongolian friends and accounts of hunters and gatherers who display similar attitudes to their environments, and likewise have been described as “living for the day” (*Ibid.*: 32). Their work is distinguished by this innovative comparative lens, and indeed, the material conditions of transition that they describe are not unique to Mongolia. Comparable conditions of uncertainty and precarity have been described for many areas of the world, including, for example, on other urban peripheries. I draw attention to one such case, the work of Clara Han (2011, 2012) on life in La Pincoya, a *población* (low-income neighbourhood) in Santiago, Chile.

Both Højer and Pedersen and Han seek to go beyond accounts of life that reduce ‘the potential’ to ‘the possible’, as is the case with the theory of practice delineated by Bourdieu (1977). However, while urban hunters turn instead to the “alternative, non-practice-theoretical, practice” described as the work of hope to leap forward into emerging futures (Højer and Pedersen, forthcoming: 32; cf. Pedersen 2012), women in La Pincoya instead engage in

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<sup>105</sup> Højer and Pedersen (forthcoming: 30) differentiate the futurity of living “for the moment” from the presentism of living “in the present” that Day and colleagues have described (Day et al. 1999).

“active waiting”, a form of “laterally oriented” patience that draws on a “sense of indeterminacy, to hold out hope for relational futures with mentally ill and addicted kin” (Han 2011: 8).<sup>106</sup> I find each account persuasive and well-matched to the ethnography; however, thinking back over my fieldwork and the various times I have described thus far in the thesis, I find that neither paradigm is quite enough. Instead, I wish to take up a term that both works and find unsatisfactory, and suggest that it might, in fact, provide a way to encompass aspects of both ‘hope’ and ‘waiting’. This is the concept of ‘anticipation’.

### **Anticipation**

Although rarely an object of enquiry in its own right, anthropologists have conceptualised anticipation in a variety of ways. For some, anticipation is understood in contrast to adaptation: while adaptation is reactive, anticipation is predictive and therefore productive (Nuttall 2010: 23). For others, anticipation is seen as “the palpable effect of the speculative future on the present” (Adams et al. 2009: 247). In her writing on infrastructures as a locus of anticipation, Madeline Reeves states that she uses the term to refer “not simply to inner feeling or hopeful disposition ... but an active process of ‘taking (care of) ahead of time’” (2017: 717). She continues: “Etymologically, anticipation registers a ‘taking in’ (*capere*) of the future into the present (*ante-capere*): it is both active and open-ended” (*Ibid.*). A central thread that runs through the limited literature on anticipation is the idea that it is relational in some way or another. The most common way that this relationality is expressed is through spatialised metaphors of time. As Morten Nielsen writes, “anticipatory actions connect otherwise detached temporal moments and potentially establish a meaningful relationship between the present and the future” (2011: 398).

Without fully aligning my conception of anticipation with any of these approaches, I nevertheless take up the idea of anticipation as a relational orientation that disrupts conceptions of linear time, and emerges through

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<sup>106</sup> For Han “the possible” is neither “a series of possibilities that are given in advance” nor “the adjustment of aspirations or expectations to objective chances” but the indeterminacy of lived relations within the present (2011: 8).

practice and performance in everyday life. I suggest that, in fact, anticipation has a conceptual flexibility that suits well the ambiguity of making and maintaining relations in uncertain times. While less prescriptive than prediction, it nevertheless connotes a degree of future-oriented reflection; while less open-ended than imagination, it is nevertheless speculative. Ultimately, I argue that the flexibility of anticipation is the result of it containing a kind of conceptual bifurcation: anticipation can refer to both *expectative waiting* and *pre-emptive action*.

In this chapter, I trace these two modes of anticipation as they were manifested in post-election Aglag. I propose that in the ger district, people do not only leap or wait, but move between these two anticipatory modes in the navigation of everyday life between iron and coal, and demonstrate this by analysing the intersection of the lives of Ganbold and Ulzii. Following this, I address some specificities of anticipation in Mongolia through the concept of *amni beleg*, ‘the omens of the mouth’, tracing how *amni beleg* not only illuminates new sides of Mongolian anticipation but opens a window to its ‘dark side’. Ultimately, I suggest that the movement immanent in the concept of anticipation provides a way to conceive of both ‘attend-ive’ (in the sense of waiting-with-attention) and expansive modes of engaging with others who are never an entirely unknown quantity, nor a sure source of care.

### **Nuts and Safety Net(work)s**

In the previous chapters, Ganbold’s government position seemed to afford him a kind of security in comparison with the other Aglag dwellers introduced across this thesis. However, August 2016 stood out as a time when the markers that had distinguished Ganbold from other residents lost their shine. While he still wore his official suit jacket emblazoned with the crest of the Social Care Services (*Niigemiin Halamjiin Üilchilgeeni Yorhiin Gazar*) and sat behind a desk of papers, as described in the opening, these material items were empty signs in contrast to the missing rings on his fingers. Ganbold was no longer protected by his desk but had joined Badrakh, Ulzii, Nomin and so many others in a mutual moment of extraordinary precarity. The kind of activities that people turn to in times such as these have already been mentioned briefly in the case of Ganbold. Together with his father’s

help, his family pawned their valuables and took a loan using the father's pension as collateral. They also called on a fundamentally Mongolian resource – herder relatives in the countryside – to request that meat and dairy be sent, products that form the basis of the Mongolian diet. For those with access to them, these three techniques are the foundation of ger district residents' survival in the absence of reliable formal private and public sectors.

For families such as Badrakh and Ulzii's, a small number of welfare payments usually supplemented these sources of income, and bank loans provided lump sums of cash at particularly difficult times of year or for one-off events. However, the debts from these loans would last for years, and were a constant drain on the family income. As mentioned, pawn shops also provided emergency cash, and the women of the family were always bringing their earrings back and forth from the *lombard*, making sure when they got home to leave them in blessed bowls of water overnight to counter the spells placed on them to ensure their speedy return to the pawn shop.

However, in late August 2016 there was one more option to explore: collecting pine nuts. Collecting nuts in Mongolia is dangerous. It is illegal before the month of October and prohibited on the sacred mountain Bogd Khaan that watches over the city from the south. If caught by police on the mountain, collectors face fines and the confiscation of their hard-won pine nuts.

Nut collecting ventures require cooperation between people, usually kin, such as finding someone with a car to drive to and from the base of the mountain and establishing who will carry out the various tasks involved in collecting. That year Badrakh, Bagbandi Ah and another friend originally from Mandalhairhan, their *nutag*, decided to go together, and Badrakh's son-in-law Baterdene agreed to be the driver. In the evenings before they left, Badrakh spoke to me about how difficult the process would be. Even if one avoids detection by the authorities, he told me, the work itself consists of multiple unsheltered nights in the forest, and climbing trees between five- and eight-metres tall without ropes to shake the pinecones to the forest floor. His teenage sons also told tales from their childhoods of dodging police, nighttime brawls, and the tragedy of those who had fallen from trees and been injured or killed. But Ulzii assured me that Badrakh would be fine – he was well-suited



to such jobs. As she said, “He is strong, he has the power to fight with men if he has to, and he can run fast, just like a horse!”

In 2016, the trees were full of nuts, and Badrakh’s party returned after three nights with multiple kilos each. However, that year so many people had been left with no option but collecting nuts that the market was flooded with people looking to sell. The price of pine nuts crashed. Where a kilo had previously sold for 6,000 MNT (£1.86), Badrakh struggled to find a wholesale buyer willing to pay more than 2,500 MNT (£0.77). This collapse proved a further blow to people’s capacity to prepare for the economic pressures of late autumn and the onset of winter. Badrakh’s first attempt to sell the nuts would make no more than 100,000 MNT (£31) and the family needed much more than that. Eventually, the wholesale price of the nuts was deemed so low that the family decided not to sell all the nuts Badrakh had collected.

### **Anticipation as Pre-emptive Action**

Saving some nuts enabled Badrakh and Ulzii to work in unexpected ways. They had supported my research at the *horoo* despite their misgivings. A few years earlier, during another desperate time when they had struggled to feed their children more than flour and water, Ulzii had visited the *horoo* to ask for assistance. She had been told rather brusquely by Ganbold himself that she did not qualify for any aid, and that, as she had four children past primary school why not take them out of school and put them to work if the family needed more money? Since then, Badrakh and Ulzii had not tried again to elicit help from the state. Nevertheless, that morning in August, Ulzii put half a kilo of the nuts collected by Badrakh into a plastic bag and told me to take them to the *horoo* for the workers there. She did so without suggesting that she had any particular return in mind. Instead, I see this act as anticipatory in the sense of being a pre-emptive action. The family is not related to the *horoo* workers, and the lack of bond or obligation between them was clear. Thus, sharing the nuts could not be an enactment of an existing relationship, but had to be a pre-emptive act that sought to open the door to a relation of some kind that did not yet exist.

There was no mention of whether there might be any favourable reciprocation, or if the *horoo* workers even had the capacity to be helpful to

the family. The giving of nuts is thus not easily incorporated within a framework of reciprocity. This pre-emptive action is more akin to Caroline Humphrey's (2017) description of 'favours' in post-socialist higher education than to a form of 'corruption' or Sneath's obligatory enactments (2006a). Favours, for Humphrey, are an *initiatory* form of action that is ethical and gratuitous. They are *sui generis*, "a particular type of action that have moral value by virtue of *not being* conceptualized as exchanges" (Humphrey 2017: 56, original emphasis). If the giving of the nuts was a favour in Humphrey's terms, here I only wish to expand this characterisation by highlighting the temporality of the action in experiential terms. For Ulzii, sending the nuts to the *horoo* was an everyday kind of bet. The terms of this bet were utterly undefined but the action had the potential to make possible a kind of future that, if not warm, might perhaps be less cold than the non-existent state of 'relations' between Ulzii and Ganbold. Rather than relying on existing relations, giving the nuts was a way of anticipating a way out of their present precarity by pre-emptively performing Ganbold as a relative.

### **Anticipation as Expectative Waiting**

If pre-emptive and initiatory actions index an anticipatory orientation to making new relations, it would be unwise to take as a given that these speculative acts take place against a backdrop of existing relations. As the previous chapters have explored, there are many ways that people illuminate the kinds of obligatory ties that are supposed to bind them to others. However, too much focus on enactment may run the risk of taking at face value how kin (broadly conceived) purport to treat one another (Sneath 2006a). There is no doubt that people in Mongolia have strong and fairly uniform ideas of how people *should* treat one another, and Sneath is right to point out that such ideas do not assume equivalent treatment in any individualistic sense; rather, they are predicated on mutually constituted but fundamentally unequal (even hierarchical) relational statuses that are generally expressed through idioms of kinship. However, the focus on obligation can obscure the precarity of even the closest kinship relations as lived, especially in times of particular hardship, when instantiating relations can be difficult even if the desire is there.

As described in Chapter Two, the summer of 2016 saw a breakdown in the relationship between Ulzii and her half-brother, the custodian of the family's remaining animals. This reoriented the family towards a new and more difficult future, one without the security of a supply of meat. The relationship had begun to fracture over many months, but the final straw came in an argument over the half-brother's failure (in Badrakh and Ulzii's eyes) to provide hospitality when the family visited the countryside in July. Breakdowns of this kind are not uncommon, and the generalised insecurity of having to rely on relational networks for one's livelihood produces the anticipatory orientation I term here 'expectative waiting'. Expectative waiting refers to the gap between the anticipated instantiation of an obligation and the reality that often these obligations are not materialised, or are delayed. This experience differs from moments of inactive despondency or listless waiting because it is predicated on a sense of expectation; it anticipates that something may or should materialise at some point, and is therefore not without hope. Nevertheless, it contains a presentism that rejects pragmatic logic: the opposite of a strategic plan.

Morten Pedersen has characterised the apparently irrational optimism of men in post-socialist Ulaanbaatar as "the work of hope" (2012: 146). He describes this as a "sustained and quite sensible temporal orientation and social practice" that is not an atemporal negation of time, but involves "an *exalted* awareness of the virtual potentials in the present" (2012: 145, original emphasis). I identify many similarities between Pedersen's 'work of hope' and the idea of expectative waiting, particularly in the way that failures and breakdowns do not dissuade people in the ger districts from continuing to turn to their networks and relations for access to goods or employment, even when these connections so often collapse or do not ultimately materialise. I also see a connection between the work of hope and the speculative acts of pre-emption described above. However, I take some issue with his characterisation of contemporary Mongolia as an "overarching context of failure" (2012: 136).

Pedersen argues that there is no way to plot a path from the present to the future in post-socialist Ulaanbaatar because "there is no terrain, not even an imagined one, on which to conduct any such 'social navigation'" (2012:

147, citing Vigh 2006). And yet, there is a *social* terrain of expected obligation between relatives that people do anticipate. Badrakh and Ulzii had expected hospitality from their ‘older brother’, and had provided a home for his daughter in the city. Furthermore, Badrakh remained optimistic that later in the autumn he would be called by countryside relatives – perhaps even his wife’s half-brother – to help with slaughtering or grass-cutting work.

This point marks my departure from Pedersen’s analysis, even as I agree with his overall depiction of the work of hope. For, beyond a social terrain of expected obligatory relations that can be negotiated (if not fully *relied* upon), there remain aspects of the future that people in Mongolia do feel they can anticipate. Central among these is the cycling of the seasons, which both provides a degree of predictability for the future and shapes the opportunities open to people. Thus, the events of August 2016 were not entirely contingent. Badrakh was not completely engaged in a radical temporal ‘trampolining’ between equivalently virtual futures. *Idesh* preparation is only a potential activity each year at the appropriate time, as are summer slaughter work, mid-winter coal work, late-spring construction and so forth. And indeed, collecting the nuts had to happen when the trees held nuts!<sup>107</sup> Anticipation, I suggest, provides a way to account for both kinds of action – waiting and leaping – without assuming either an utter lack of social terrain or the pre-existence of a ‘plan’. It is instead an oscillatory movement, born of the between.

### ***Amni Belge: Mongolian anticipation***

The anticipatory orientation I have discussed here is best captured by the Mongolian concept of *amni beleg*. The literal translation of *amni beleg* is ‘the signs/omens of the mouth’, and it is defined in the Mongolian dictionary as “the blessed wishes of good and nice things that have been desired and spoken”.<sup>108</sup> The phrase speaks to the idea that one must not only look for signs of good things in the world but also manifest those signs through words. This is a performative and anticipatory conception of speech (as action) that

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<sup>107</sup> Nuts and berries in Mongolia alternate in abundance every three years (Empson 2006).

<sup>108</sup> ‘*Sain saihan züüliig хүсэж яарсан өлзий yorööl*’ (<https://mongoltoli.mn/dictionary/>).

contains a particular idea of responsibility.<sup>109</sup> People are reminded by the phrase *amni beleg* that obtaining and receiving good things is also dependent on their calling them into being. *Amni beleg* speaks to both the expectative and pre-emptive aspects of anticipation as I have described them here. Similar to how Rebecca Empson describes the Mongolian concept of *hishig* (fortune) as “something that circulates outside the subject, but can be harnessed and carefully contained in certain forms to secure the growth of people, animals and things” (2011: 70), signs and omens (*beleg*) are both something to be read and made. Da Col and Humphrey write of such terms as “technologies of anticipation” (2012: 11-12) and discuss the importance in Mongolia of not only recognising the omens that appear in the world around people (such as the unusual appearance [*züs*] of wild birds and animals) but also of *gifting* good omen-like objects; for example, to the elderly at the Lunar New Year.<sup>110</sup>

The concept of *beleg* appears in the ancient but well-used Mongolian phrase *Mongol hün belgeeree, Tüvd hün shideeree*; ‘A Mongolian person by his or her anticipation, a Tibetan person by his or her magic’.<sup>111</sup> The phrase refers to how Tibetans operate in contrast to Mongolians. Whether the whole saying is uttered or just the first half (which can also be *Mongol hün amni belgeer*), reveals that *amni beleg* is considered a fundamentally Mongolian orientation to the world. The contrast between Tibetan and Mongolian techniques of manifesting the future are revealing. For, while Tibetans are

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<sup>109</sup> Vincent Crapanzano (2004) has suggested that scholars examining performativity, particularly when approaching it through the examination of concepts/experiences referred to as ‘dreams’, ‘visions’, ‘hopes’, ‘future’, must take care to reflect upon whether these terms are too heavily tied to a specific temporal ontology that is implicitly (and generally unintentionally) imposed on the ethnographic material through the use of ‘English’ terms. For instance, he asserts that standard descriptions of “hope” rest on “a division of time that correlates with the tense structure of Indo-European language, indeed, with tense structure itself” (2004: 107). I see this as a productive area of future research.

<sup>110</sup> “All artifacts suggesting movement (e.g., bridles, whips, saddles, bicycles, cars, ropes used for packing) are good omens, while, conversely, items that face downward (e.g., overturned pots), or that maim people (e.g., knives), or are considered polluted (e.g., dirty clothing or combs), or are used to stop movement (e.g., hobbles, manacles, chains, binding straps) are all bad omens and inauspicious” (da Col and Humphrey 2012: 11-12).

<sup>111</sup> The full term for magic is *id shid*. It might also be noted that the verb associated with *shid* is *shideh*, ‘to throw’.

said to use magic – which here can be understood as a strategic approach in the sense of a spell, formula or plan – Mongolians use anticipation to perform the future. This is understood as a non-strategic and temporally non-linear orientation in which “the present has got implications *as a future* for the future” (Højer 2004: 57, emphasis added). Nevertheless, the fact that only certain words and certain things are good omens prevents this from becoming an entirely free-floating idea. There is a distinctive material and particular linguistic dimension to anticipating the future through *amni belge*.

Mongolian people not only self-define as ‘anticipatory’ but commonly use the phrases ‘*Mongol hün belgeeree*’ and ‘*amni belge*’ to both remind and even *exhort* one another to maintain a positive orientation to the future. While performing a good future through its anticipation is valorised in Mongolia, it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that *amni belge* also has a ‘dark side’.<sup>112</sup> *Amni belge* not only incorporates a logic of responsibility that holds people accountable for their future conditions, but also encourages an avoidance of misfortune, understood as a potential source of pollution. In other words, the obligation to speak good omens carries the implication that one must likewise “take great care to avoid remarks or words that carry a bad omen or connotation” (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 134; cf. Humphrey 1978). Lars Højer illustrates this point in relation to his interlocutors’ hesitation to wear a seatbelt or purchase car insurance, as to do so would be to anticipate a future accident (2004). It can also be seen in times of abandonment, when people allow obligations and ties of care to lapse precisely during the periods of greatest need among others. Turning a blind eye to struggling relatives and friends in need of assistance by ignoring a phone call or refusing hospitality are, it must be recognised, not incompatible with manifesting a better future. Badrakh and Ulzii often remarked on this fact when thinking about the times of greatest hardship in their lives (recounted in Chapter Three). It was during those periods they became least visible to their kin, both because relatives enjoying a time of greater success might avoid contact with Badrakh and Ulzii’s misfortunes, and because they themselves were unwilling to make

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<sup>112</sup> This is reminiscent of the argument regarding the ‘dark side’ of kinship in Chapter Two, and the discussion of the ‘dark side’ of bureaucratic transparency in Chapter Four.

apparent the extent of their struggles. This dark side of anticipation, in the sense of the performance of the good demanding an avoidance of misfortune, is manifested across scales in Mongolia. It is instantiated not only in homes and bureaucratic offices, but on the level of the nation-state in ways that are starkly and literally visible, such as the luxury villas and the clearing of the city of drunks and other ‘unsightly’ people.

Of course, not every moment can be understood through the concept of anticipation, or *amni belge*; nevertheless, I suggest that it offers a useful way to conceive of much of what takes place between iron and coal. Iron and coal have stood here for the forms that the structures of social life take, and for the acts of creative instantiation that may both reinforce and challenge, given hierarchies and arrangements. At times, iron has been a harsh restrictor, as when it takes the form of the iron face of the state, whether to Nomin in the refusals to reconsider her household level, or to Ganbold, when he must grapple with paperwork that does not fit the help he wants to give. At other times, it has provided avenues for more reliable and cooperative endeavours, such as kinship bonds, which are both reinforced by daily language use among household members who consider themselves related in particular ways, and expanded across society through linguistic reminders that they are enmeshed in the world of being *ah düü*. Indeed, such moments of instantiation constitute the coalface of kinship, as the entering of information into the welfare computer system takes place at the coalface of the state. The sending of a bag of hard-earned, illegal nuts to the *horoo*, however, sits at a right angle to both kinship and the state. It might be seen instead as an anticipatory attempt to open a new coalface in light of the partial collapse of the distance between state and home.

## CONCLUSION *Between Iron and Coal*

Sherry Ortner has twice demonstrated that examining how theorists approach the question of structure and agency can itself provide fascinating insights into the state of Anthropology as a practice situated within and locked in engagement with wider social and political concerns (1984, 2016).

In her 1984 essay, Ortner dissects a range of approaches to practice as an answer to structure-agency conundrums. She concludes that while contemporary practice theory is innovating social theory (referring especially to Bourdieu [1977], Giddens [1979] and Sahlins [1981]),<sup>113</sup> there are signs that the ideas of ‘practice’ proposed are losing their “romantic aura of voluntarism” and turning more to pragmatism and “maximization of advantage” (Ortner 1984: 160). Ortner draws a connection between this turn towards questions of diffuse power, pessimism and the ‘hard times of today’, and the ‘failed’ social and political movements of the sixties and seventies.

Twenty-four years later, Ortner returns to the question of the directions anthropological theory has taken since the eighties, and finds that her earlier diagnoses regarding the effects of ‘a disastrous economy’ on theoretical preoccupations had been essentially correct. Although no longer centrally concerned by the ‘structure-agency debate’, she describes a bifurcation in anthropological theory towards ‘dark anthropology’ and ‘the anthropology of the good’. Dark anthropology can be understood as studies that focus on “harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (2016: 49). These, she says, have to be viewed in light of neoliberalism as a socio-economic/political order, and the resulting increase in interest in the theories of Marx and Foucault that address issues of inequality and oppression. The anthropology of the good offers a counterpoint to dark anthropology’s focus on “the

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<sup>113</sup> As Ortner puts it, practice theory is particularly exciting because it not only unites historical and anthropological studies but also incorporates “all three sides of the Berger and Luckmann triangle: that society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction” (1984: 159).



suffering subject” (Robbins 2013: 448), and has been characterised by focuses on happiness, wellbeing, aspiration, ethics and love.<sup>114</sup>

Just as practice theory offered some hope for mediating structure and agency in 1984, in 2016 Ortner offers the anthropology of ‘resistance’ as a third way that has been developing between the anthropologies of the dark and the good.<sup>115</sup> For Ortner, this consists of a combination of ‘cultural critique’ and moves to imagine new possible futures through ‘rethinking’ such things as the economy or capitalism.

However limited an attempt, this thesis situates itself in the space between the anthropologies of the good and the dark. Over the course of its chapters it has sought to grapple with ideas of structure and agency as they appeared in the lives of ger district residents and bureaucrats without reducing the account to a despairing portrait of loss and lack, nor to an exaltation of individual projects of ethical self-development. Instead it has sought to present an account of particular people engaged in particular relations, exploring how obligation and expectation come to be both manifested and abandoned at particular moments. Rather than seeking to *explain* life in the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar from some imagined external vantage point, it has delved into its intricacies and contradictions. Badrakh, Ulzii, Ganbold and my other interlocutors likewise oscillate between moments of seeking to account for and contain uncertainties and times of disappointment, and using the spaces and gaps of possibility that they can open up to manifest hopes and enact relations. Thinking of *amni beleg*, they can be seen as engaging in ongoing and relationally embedded practices of contextualisation, or making and being made by their contexts. Drawing then on the ‘context’ of fieldwork in an in-between place – the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar – this thesis has been

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<sup>114</sup> Dark anthropology and ‘good’ anthropology do not align precisely with the preceding split between structure and agency, but one can still trace how each disciplinary paradigm directs attention to questions of one or the other. Anthropologies of domination and suffering tend to look to various ‘systems’, or forces such as global capitalism or structural violence, to account for the things such anthropologists bear witness to, while tracing acts of everyday ethical or virtuous practice tend to exalt in the transformative capacity of human action.

<sup>115</sup> Ortner’s definition of ‘resistance anthropology’ here is specific; it does not mean ‘applied anthropology’ (2016).

a meditation on life in-between. Mobilising the metaphorical capacities of iron and coal, it has explored various instantiations of constraint and creativity across different times and places, and at different scales.

Iron and coal in each chapter took a different form, being instantiated in ways that did not necessarily stand in direct opposition to one another. For, rather than identifying various types of structure and agency, the aim has been to account ethnographically for the ways that my interlocutors both looked to moments, things and times of certainty, and also looked for times, places and ways to move creatively. This double movement towards both surety and space for change is reminiscent of the ger district itself, something neither entirely new in Mongolia nor seen in quite this way before. Rather than seeing the space in-between as a chasm or void, I have sought to account ethnographically for the ways that people build a life between iron and coal, drawing out the social, material and linguistic ways through which this life is enacted or brought into being. The focus on enaction here pushes us to take nothing for granted; performances are not 'free', and relations do not exist without materialisation. People have the capacity to show different faces at different times; they can also be forced at particular moments, through interpellation, to present themselves in particular ways, and yet an enaction of a particular relation can also fail, as obligations are ignored or a performance is not considered legitimate.

The first chapter engaged with the space between idealised kinship structures and the complex webs of everyday relations. Playing with the expectation that a 'first chapter' provides contextualisation, it delved into the intricacies of a network of complex relations, celebrating the remainders and making the argument that kinship is context. In doing so, however, rather than setting a ground of pre-existing certainty, it examined how obligations come to be enacted in language, highlighting the expansive capacities of Mongolians and letting the space between grammar and utterance speak to the navigation of mutual and unequal relations. The second chapter took up the idea of kinship as context and explored how normative obligations among kin are materialised through meat. Building from the material frailties of flesh and blood, and the corresponding metaphors in formal reckonings of relatedness, it explored their echoes in times of relational breakdown. Rather than tracing

such lines within a contextual void, the material focus pushed the analysis to the specificities of the materiality of life in contemporary Mongolia, which for many is being negotiated along reconfigured axes of distance and separation between ger districts and the poles of city and *nutag*.

Blending together the attention to the material and the social dimensions of context, Chapter Three expanded on questions of relations and things to add a historical dimension to ways of approaching the movement of people and things. Arguing that the ger district comes into being as a result of these movements, it rejected ideas of infrastructural lack that are built on synchronic modes of urban comparison, and instead wove together personal histories of migration with diachronic perspectives on movement, distance and power. Dealing there with ideas of power and the state on fairly reified terms, Chapter Four then pivoted towards a routine bureaucratic space in order to explore how particular state structures are enacted alongside and in conjunction with the other contextualising forms. Taking the challenges of contextualisation seriously, it again sought to reframe assumptions of what it means to write about the state. Nevertheless, it allowed space for the aspects of commonality and contradiction that emerged in the close discussion of Nomin's protest. Like Chapter One, it was again a celebration of remainders, in the sense that it did not seek to excise the 'dead ends' of the various rhetorical and conceptual provocations mobilised by Nomin in her attempt to change her position in the eyes of the state.

Chapter Five picked up on questions of performance and the state, exploring the constellation of frames and gazes at work in the encounters between Ganbold and Aglag residents. Building from the uncanny moment of introspection when Ganbold disaggregated his flesh-and-blood face from the iron face of the state, it reflected on the intersection of domestic and bureaucratic regimes of performance that manifest when he enters a home. Hospitality, here, emerged as zone of craft, and the interplays between guesting and hosting spoke to questions of enaction and creation in new ways. Reversing ideas of structure as restrictive and agency as creative that can be too readily applied to bureaucratic contexts, it proposed a re-examination of bureaucracy through hospitality, a mode in which conformity and repetition can provide comfort.

Chapter Six attended to another moment of intersection, the sending of nuts to the *horoo* by Badrakh and Ulzii. Although focused on the idea of anticipation as a way to conceive of the temporal and performative orientation of life between iron and coal, it also sought to complicate the division of the bureaucratic and the domestic that was already being broken down in Chapter Five again through ideas of gaze and frame. To do so it presented the view from Aglag, in the literal sense that in late summer 2016, Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa* provided a direct view of a mountain side that now hosted an established, elite ski resort, a new luxury village conjured for visiting international dignitaries and a wealth of pine trees laden with nuts.

Looking out produces simultaneously the gaze from the other side. From the trees, the glow of the ger tops (*tön*) and *bashin* windows remind people like Badrakh that there are children at home waiting for them to return to and provide for. From the expensive villas, thanks to clever engineering of the angles, the triple-height windows present a view of grasslands that provide a rich space for the foreign imagination of nomadic pasts and resource-rich futures. From the ski slopes the view is one of Aglag and its surrounding ger districts, stretching and sprawling indistinguishably across hills and valleys. There is, no doubt, some beauty in the view from afar, but the chimneys that rise from every house and ger serve as a reminder that the smoke of coal is in the air.

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## Appendix I: Key Mongolian Terms

**Aaw** – Father

**Ah** – Older brother, older male relative, older man

**Aimag** – 1. An administrative area or district of Mongolia, similar to a US state or a UK county. There are 21 aimags in Mongolia that are subdivided into *sum*. 2. The word is also used in Mongolia to refer to the district centre of an aimag area.

**Bagsh** – Teacher

**Baishin** – A house or small building. In the ger districts, such buildings take many forms, from small single-room ‘shack’-style houses to two-storey, multi-room constructions. They may be built of a combination of brick, concrete and/or wood, but are usually fully detached and often constructed by their inhabitants.

**Deel** – Mongolian robe

**Düü** – Younger sibling, younger relative, younger person

**Düüreg** – 1. Ulaanbaatar is administratively divided into nine *düüreg*: boroughs or districts, seven of which are contiguous (Bagakhangai, Bayangol, Bayanzürkh, Chingeltei, Khan Uul, Songino Kairkhan, Sükhbaatar) and two of which (Nalaikh and Baganuur) are separate. 2. The government office that is responsible for administering a *düüreg* of Ulaanbaatar; each *düüreg* (borough) has a *düüreg* (office).

**Eej** – Mother

**Egch** – Older sister, older female relative, older woman

**Emee** – Grandmother, old woman

**Ger** – Long-standing Mongolian dwelling that consists of wooden lattice walls that are collapsible, with a wooden circular ‘window’ on the top. It is supported by two central wooden poles that reach the ground and many (often 108) roof poles that fan out from the ceiling window, connecting to the top of the wooden wall lattice. The frame is wrapped in felt coverings, as is the roof; the ceiling window can be covered and uncovered by a thick square flap of felt attached with ropes. The small door is wooden, and three belts are fastened over the felt coverings, keeping everything together.

**Ger horoolol** – Ger district

**Guanz** – Small café or informal restaurant that serves Mongolian food.

**Halamjiin ajilchin** – Care worker, care administrator

**Hamaatan** – General term for relative

**Hashaa** – *Hashaa* is both the term for a fence and a plot of land enclosed by a fence. Sometimes I translate *hashaa* as ‘homestead’ to capture the image of a fenced-in plot of ger district land that features, for example, one brick house, a shed, two gers and an outhouse.

**Hesegiin Ahlagch** – Sector worker assigned to a section of a district (*horoo*), works under the *halamjiin ajilchin*.

**Horoo** – 1. An administrative subdivision of Ulaanbaatar. The nine boroughs (*düüreg*) of the city are each broken down into *horoos* that are usually numbered. There are now 151 *horoos* in the city 2. The government office that is responsible for administering a *horoo* of Ulaanbaatar; each *horoo* (subdistrict) has a *horoo* (office).

**Hot** – City. May be used to refer to Ulaanbaatar ‘the city’.

**Hödöö** – Countryside. Refers to all rural areas of the country, and is also used in an adjectival form to refer to people who live in the countryside or display stereotypical countryside traits and behaviours.

**Idesh** – A supply of meat for the winter.

**Mah** – Meat or flesh

**Naadam** – Yearly summer festival and national holiday marked by three main competitive games: horse racing, wrestling and archery.

**Nutag** – A complex Mongolian term that ties together ideas of location, belonging and identity. I often translate *nutag* as ‘homeland’ or ‘countryside homeland’. Generally one’s *nutag* is determined by birth, but for those born in the city or ger districts the term can refer to the birthplace of parents or grandparents. *Törsön nutag* is birthplace.

**Ohin** – Daughter, girl

**Owoo** – Grandfather, old man

**Sum** – 1. Often written as *soum*, this is a rural administrative sub-district. There are 331 *sums* in Mongolia. They are further subdivided into ‘*bag*’. 2. The word is also used in Mongolian to refer to the district centre of a *sum* area.

**Tsagaan Sar** – ‘White Month’; i.e. the Lunar New Year and its accompanying celebrations.

**Tsus** – Blood

**Tör** – the State

**Yos** – Rule or custom

**Zah** – Market

**Zah zeeliin üye** – The ‘age of the market’, the period following the democratic revolution of 1990.

## Appendix II: CMP vs. FSP

Being in-between is not a position experienced only by those living in the ger districts, nor by low-level bureaucrats who must work at this coalface on behalf of the 'iron face'. It is an idea that has also been applied to the geopolitical reality of the Mongolian nation-state. Mongolia is known for being 'wedged' between two large neighbours, Russia and China, each of which dwarfs the country in terms of population size, economic power and military might. This position has brought both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, Mongolia must answer to its neighbours, and being landlocked between the two, must negotiate with one or the other for access to markets and opportunities further afield. Mongolia is also well aware that it would be utterly powerless to defend itself militarily against either Russia or China. On the other hand, by being in-between, it finds itself in a curiously protected position, as each larger power relies on it as a buffer zone between the other and, for the most part, Mongolians can assume that in the case of aggression from one, the other would provide defence. I refer here to Mongolia's peculiar geopolitical context in order to reflect back on the idea of the iron face of the state. While the metaphor of the iron face speaks to the state's capacity to make harsh decisions and act without compassion, it contains within it an implicit sense of the state's 'right to choose to do so'. In fact, this is not always the case. Especially regarding government welfare programs, the Mongolian state itself is also caught in-between.

Before the democratic revolution, the socialist state was entirely responsible for the population in the sense of providing education, employment, healthcare and pensions. The budget for social security was subsidised by the Soviet Union (Mongolia being a member of the socialist Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), but the state covered 90 per cent of the costs of social security, which was then administered by the trade unions. The end of the socialist period marked the end of social security as Mongolians had known it, and there followed a period in which budgets were slashed without alternatives being put in place. Between 1994 and 1995, the Mongolian parliament passed legislation establishing a social *welfare* system that differed significantly from the previous model, being modelled on the

welfare states of Western liberal democracies and tied to the market in ways that can be called neoliberal.

The welfare system in Mongolia has undergone a number of changes over the last decades.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, throughout this period the state has had to negotiate between the same key forces: the power of voters in domestic politics and the power of international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank, which have financed Mongolia since the 1990s. The general trend has shown that when Mongolia's economic situation has been stronger, political parties seeking power have won elections based on promises to redistribute Mongolia's mineral wealth, usually in the form of direct-transfer welfare programs, and when the economy has slowed, international lenders have tightened their purse strings, demanding that the government place more restrictions on its welfare policies in the name of 'fiscal responsibility'.

This thesis has dealt most directly with two of the country's key welfare programs, namely 'children's money' and 'the food stamps program'. From an ethnographic standpoint, these two payments stood out for being fundamental to the survival of households in the ger district. For recipients of food stamps and children's money in the ger district, these benefits were conceived as coming from the Mongolian state, mediated by the *horoo*; as was demonstrated, people addressed their frustrations to the *horoo* workers when the children's money failed to arrive, or to try to negotiate access to food stamps. These two programs, however, also provide a key lens on the Mongolian state being between iron and coal, in the sense outlined above.

The Child Money Program (CMP) was initiated in Mongolia in 2005 following the election of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), which had made the program a key part of its campaign. Originally meant to be means-tested and relatively limited, following the reality that the implementation was both haphazard and progressing along familiar lines of kith and kin, it was expanded to cover all children (0-18) in the country from January 2006. It is, by far, the largest welfare program in Mongolia in terms of both coverage and budget. In 2013, there were more than one million

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<sup>116</sup> See B. Gochoosuren (2013).

beneficiaries, with 94 per cent of children covered, and the program budget accounted for 1.41 percent of Mongolia's GDP (World Bank 2015: 11-12).<sup>117</sup> Given that it aims to cover all children, regardless of means, and is a direct cash transfer from the state, it is most similar to the socialist-era social security system. The CMP was also established with the putative aim of “redistributing mineral wealth to the next generation” (*Ibid.*: 11), as it is funded by the Human Development Fund from mining revenues (ADB Report 2015: 2),<sup>118</sup> making it a flashpoint in domestic politics. Public support for the program is generally tied to income level; many wealthier people feel mineral wealth should be ‘invested’ rather than paid directly to the people, while those who actually rely on the small sum in their household income find it indispensable.

In contrast to the CMP, the Food Stamps Program (FSP) could be called Mongolia's flagship neoliberal welfare program. It was established on a pilot basis in 2008 by a coalition government and financed by a loan from the Asian Development bank (ADB). The ADB has been “particularly active”, as it says, in reforming the Mongolian social welfare system (ADB Report 2015: 4). The bank introduced the system of proxy means testing (PMT) that the FSP relies on to ‘target’ its efforts at only the poorest Mongolian citizens (the lowest quintile), and developed the 2012 Social Welfare Law, which was supposed to move Mongolia away from “universal social transfer to a well-targeted safety net that protects the poor and is fiscally sustainable” (IEG Report 2015: 54). In 2015, the ADB loaned the Mongolian government 150 million USD for the FSP.<sup>119</sup> In return for the loan, the Mongolian government

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<sup>117</sup> Mongolia's social welfare budget is usually described in the literature as generous, as the country allocates approximately 2.78 per cent of GDP to cash transfers and welfare programs (World Bank 2015: 11). This is in contrast to the average of 1.6 percent of GDP that is spent by other developing and emerging countries.

<sup>118</sup> The CMP is unique in this, as all other social welfare programs are financed by the budget of the Ministry of Population Development and Social Protection (except the FSP, which is funded by the ADB; see below).

<sup>119</sup> The terms of the loan are as follows: “The government has requested a loan of \$150 million from ADB's ordinary capital resources to help finance the program. The loan will be disbursed in two tranches. The first tranche of \$100 million will be disbursed upon loan effectiveness as the first tranche policy actions have been satisfactorily completed. The second tranche will



is required to demonstrate that it is improving its budget transparency and reducing its fiscal expenditure. Interestingly, the push to discipline Mongolia's financial expenditure on social welfare by such organisations is linked directly to how these institutions view the CMP.

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crash and the subsequent drop in commodity prices, in 2010 the Mongolian government passed the Fiscal Stability Law (FSL). This law tied government spending to certain measures of growth and debt, capping the "fiscal deficit and public debt at two and forty per cent of GDP, respectively" (ADB 2016: 2).<sup>120</sup> However, with the speedy recovery of the Mongolian economy by 2010 and an upcoming election, the government found various ways to circumvent the new law and also expand social welfare programs.<sup>121</sup> <sup>122</sup> Indeed, despite the ADB's celebrations, the government also elected not to switch to the Poverty Targeted Benefit scheme that had been the centrepiece of the new Social Welfare Law, and instead continued the popular CMP.

The optimism of the 'wolf economy' period, however, was short-lived, and by 2015, the effects of falling commodity prices and sharp drops in foreign direct investment in the country (by 55 per cent in 2013 and 80 per

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disburse \$50 million upon achievement of the second tranche policy actions. The loan will have a 15-year term, including a grace period of 3 years, an annual interest rate determined in accordance with ADB's London interbank offered rate (LIBOR)-based lending facility, and a commitment charge of 0.15% per year" (ADB Report 2015: 6).

<sup>120</sup> The three main rules established by the Fiscal Security Law: "a ceiling on the structural deficit of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), effective from 2013; a ceiling on expenditure growth linked to the rate of growth of nonmineral GDP, effective from 2013; and a public debt ceiling of 40 percent of nominal GDP, in net present value terms, effective from 2014" (IEG Report 2015: 100).

<sup>121</sup> This included the establishment of the Development Bank of Mongolia (DBM), which was made exempt from the restrictions of the FSL.

<sup>122</sup> It should, however, be noted that 2010 was the year of an infamous *zud*, or winter disaster, which devastated Mongolia's livestock and the lives of many herders. The country's GDP growth figures for 2010 were likewise damaged by the *zud*, which offset some of the gains made as a result of rebounding commodity prices (IEG Report 2015: 12). As Chapter Three in this thesis and the work of Lindskog (2014) suggest, the effects of this *zud* were not just the result of a harsh winter, but can be directly linked to government welfare policies at that time that were being restricted in response to the global financial crash.

cent in 2014),<sup>123</sup> in combination with soaring national debt and budget deficits, were causing serious concern, especially among the international development banks. Reports from 2015 by the World Bank, the ADB and other monitoring bodies such as the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) all take issue with the CMP and its broad-brush approach to poverty alleviation. It is consistently branded as ‘fiscally unsustainable’ (e.g. World Bank Report 2015: 15) and contrasted against the FSP, which is praised for being an example of a “modernized” welfare program because it is targeted and sustainable (provided, of course, Mongolia adheres to its fiscal stability law) (ADB Report 2015: 4).

All such reports recognise by their own measures the positive impact of the CMP on the poorest citizens, but still insist that targeting according to proxy means testing would be a better way for Mongolia to allocate its resources. From their perspective, the money spent on CMP also takes away funds that could be invested in infrastructure, especially that needed to support the mining industry (IEG Report 2015: 12). This is despite evidence that even if the food stamps program were being “targeted to the very poor (the bottom 5 percent of the wealth distributions, the amount is *not very generous*, particularly given the large family sizes (5.8 members on average) of these beneficiary households” (World Bank Report 2015: 72, emphasis added).<sup>124</sup> But, of course, the bottom line for these institutions is fiscal security: no program is worth the cost if it is fiscally unsustainable, and loans must be repaid!

By the time of the 2016 election, it was clear that Mongolia was under significant pressure from its lenders to reform its social welfare programs and to move towards more ‘modernised’, market-friendly forms of welfare provisioning.<sup>125</sup> The new government therefore justified the cuts it made to

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<sup>123</sup> See ADB Report 2015: 1.

<sup>124</sup> On average, the estimated yearly amount received by households is only 529,141 MNT (approximately 286 USD), or 91,231 MNT (approximately 49 USD), per person (World Bank Report 2015: 72).

<sup>125</sup> The 2012 law (which had not been implemented) was designed to transform the system from a means of redistributing mineral wealth or providing social security to a fiscally sustainable ‘safety net’. The term ‘safety net’ references the principles of a neoliberal model of welfare (Giddens 1998: 7-8).

welfare payments and the salaries of government employees with reference to fiscal responsibility and the severe deficit that it had ‘inherited’ from the previous administration. Few might have sympathy for the many millionaires in the new cabinet, several of whom had done very well for themselves from the same cycles of boom and bust that had left thousands of others with only ‘children’s money’; however, it is still possible to see the position of the state as being between iron and coal. Up against the iron face of their creditors and the coalface of the next election, the state’s capacity to set its welfare strategy was clearly curtailed.

While the reports discussed above draw out the contrasts between the CMP and the FSP in terms of their funding, structure and fiscal sustainability, they do not tackle the question of why all social welfare programs in Mongolia except the FSP do not apply means testing. For, like the children’s money, all 71 social welfare programs in Mongolia are category based except the FSP, whose terms were directly set by its ADB funders. Unlike the FSP, they target broad categories of people who are determined to either need care, such as pensioners or the disabled, or merit care, such as ‘Mother Heroes’, who have given birth to four or more children, or the ‘Elderly with State Merit’, those awarded medals by the state. The most straightforward answer to why the programs funded by the Mongolian state are not proxy means tested would be that the post-socialist Mongolian state has continued somewhat along the trajectory set for it under socialism, when welfare was likewise based on societal categories. This may well be true, but I feel there is also the space to consider another possibility. I would like to suggest a similarity between welfare as a system of category-based resource redistribution and the ‘sharing’ of meat in kinship networks. This is something I would like to explore in future research.