

MORAL ECONOMIC TRANSITIONS IN THE MONGOLIAN BORDERLANDS

A proportional share

Hedwig Amelia Waters

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Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands

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Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands

Hedwig Amelia Waters

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Front cover: In Magtaal, Mongolia, it is easy to accidentally cross into the border zone between countries. Here, only an isolated sign with the words 'attention, border strip' alerts a wayward traveller to their proximity to China.

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This started what has become research-and-study love affair with the country lasting over 15 years so far. Just like that first encounter with Mongolia as a foreign exchange student, my opportunity to return happened not only by dint of my own effort but also by others creating avenues for me to do so, which I then took. I am incredibly grateful to Ulziijargal Bayarsaikhan for creating and continuing the SIT Study Abroad programme in Mongolia, which taught me to say ‘Sain baina uu?’ for the first time and provided me with an endless series of amusing stories to share with bewildered family members (‘You mean, you had to ride a horse to go to language class?’). It has created a generation of Mongolia-focused researchers. Moreover, I am very grateful that the Fulbright Program exists and for the many people who supported me in this endeavour – in writing recommendations and helping me combine this experience with my MA at the Free University Berlin, but also while I carried out my fieldwork with pastoral herders in the Gobi Desert. Although many of the experiences and people I encountered on my first

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Note on transliteration

Words transliterated from the Mongolian Cyrillic form of the Halh (Khalkh) Mongol dialect appear in italics throughout the book when first mentioned and defined. The transliteration scheme used here follows Empson's (2011) modifications to Lessing et al. (1960). These modifications are adumbrated below. In the case of certain terms such as *soum* or names like *To Wang*, however, I have left them in the text in these forms, because they are well known in the ethnographic literature as such. Otherwise, all terms are transliterated according to the following system:

E as Ye
Ë as Yo
И and Ё as i
O as O
Ө as Ö
У as U
Y as Ü
X as H
Ы as Y
Б and Ъ as '
Э as E
Ю as Yu/Yü
Я as Ya

Note on currency conversion

The fieldwork for this book took place between 2015 and 2017 within a border region where people were consistently aware of international trade. They therefore often referred to multiple currencies, interchangeably quoting prices in US dollars (USD), Chinese yuan (CNY) and, of course, Mongolian tögrök (MNT). To reduce confusion, I use the abbreviations throughout the book and chiefly quote prices in MNT. During the period covered by my fieldwork, the USD price vis-à-vis MNT gradually rose from below MNT 2,000 to around MNT 2,500 to the dollar. For this reason, the rate of conversion I generally used for the book was USD 1 to MNT 2,000. For the tabulation of Asian carp and *fang feng* prices over the 2016 and 2017 seasons, I use the prices in MNT and CNY directly quoted to me by Mongolian and Inner Mongolian procurers and traders. During this period, CNY 1 equalled around MNT 350. All historical currency shifts can be found on the website www.xe.com.

Note on anonymization, activities and location

In this book, I have given my fieldwork site the name ‘Magtaal’, which means something like ‘hymn of praise’ or ‘of glory’. I find this term fitting for the fieldsite for its uniqueness as a place and its dynamism but also because it is in the easternmost region of Mongolia, greeting the rising sun. Because many of the resource-extractive and cross-border activities in Magtaal are nominally illegal, I have chosen to anonymize geographic locations and human names. In practice, although many people were formally arrested during my fieldwork and had their resource bounty taken from them, I never encountered a person who had experienced long-term negative repercussions or penalization for their activities. There are many reasons for this, which are described in [Chapters 2 and 3](#), but essentially it relates to the general (and understandable) reluctance of the government to crack down on the illegal activities of Mongolia’s poorer, rural population. Although I am aware that some of my anonymizations might not be very successful due to various other details in the book, I promised the people I was interviewing that they would remain anonymous in case that there is a shift in government policy.

In addition, I was only able to live and research in Magtaal because of border permits given to me by the Mongolian military border unit. The area within 100 kilometres (depending on location) and 15 kilometres of the border is administratively known as the border region (*büis*) and border strip (*zurvas*), respectively. This made me the only Western foreigner continually living in the region during my fieldwork – not including the occasional tourist or short-term researcher – and so I was very aware that my presence with people drew attention and curiosity. For this reason, I did not participate in any illegal activities such as *fang feng* picking or cross-border smuggling. My information on these subjects has to do with living in households and carrying out in-depth interviews with the people intimately engaged in these activities, but also the occasional trip over the border between Mongolia and Inner Mongolia in China (permit permitting!), which the Mongolian military border unit gave me approval to do.

Finally, there are a few geographic, administrative terms that the reader should be aware of in order to best understand the book. Mongolia has the administrative category akin to a US state, which is known as an aimag. It also has an administrative category akin to a US county, known as a soum. A soum can be broken down into smaller administrative units known as a bag. Each aimag, like a US state, has a capital known as an aimag centre; and each soum also has an administrative capital known as the soum centre. Magtaal is one soum within a larger aimag and so I often refer to the aimag centre or the soum centre. The main interviews in this book took place while I was living with Baatar's family in Magtaal's soum centre. But Magtaal soum also has three smaller bag, the northernmost of which is located at a lake I call Dalai Lake, where I also lived with Mandaa's family.



Figure 0.1 'To repair the front seam with the back seam'. Painting, 2014.
© Nomin Bold

Introduction: moral economic dichotomizations

A woman stands with her back to a mirror. She wears a skirt and a top inspired by the Mongolian traditional dress (a *deel*) and her right hand is conspicuously raised in both a sewing gesture and a Buddhist hand mudra. She is fixing the hem of her skirt, but her gaze does not drop to it. Rather, she looks forward to catch the viewer's eyeline, as if uncomfortable with this state of affairs and trying to distract the latter's attention. The mirror betrays her: her buttocks are exposed. She does not have enough thread to fix both the front and the back of her skirt at the same time.

This painting (Fig. 0.1) by the Ulaanbaatar-based Mongolian artist Nomin Bold is a contemplation on an uncomfortable state of affairs that accompanies many lives in the contemporary Mongolian 'age of the market'. Given the name *Mirror* in English, it is a direct illustration of the idiomatic phrase that informs its Mongolian title – *hoid hormoigooroo urd hormoigoo nöhöh* or 'to repair the front seam with the back seam'. Generally, the phrase represents the creative strategies individuals invent to finagle themselves out of pressure-filled situations. Here, the protagonist negotiates her desires to maintain her public social appearance with the unwanted reality of material shortage by taking from the intimate and unseen to maintain the seen public image.

This woman's internal dialogue – the awareness that there is not enough, but the desire to not reveal this to the world – circulates in the minds of many contemporary Mongolians. Starting in 2006, over 15 years after Mongolia underwent a peaceful yet radical transformation from a socialist, centrally organized republic to a market democracy, I undertook several multi-year research trips to the country and saw first hand how this state of affairs came to emerge. In 2006, I was a young, bright-eyed (and, honestly, slightly naive) undergraduate student, who had excitedly arrived in Mongolia to carry out fieldwork among the country's pastoral inhabitants – at the time, around 14 per cent of the population maintained its livelihood through living off of and travelling with animal herds, some

of them having returned to the steppe after socialism's collapse.¹ Learning about the chaos of the country's recent post-socialist transformation, I spent these fieldwork days in sleepy Siberian towns and herder yurts, drinking yak milk and hauling water.

In 2011, however, my jaw hit the floor as I returned to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city. In the late 2000s, vast mineral reserves had been discovered in Mongolia's Gobi Desert and that, combined with a global commodities cycle, propelled this country of roughly three million citizens into the fastest-growing economy in the world in 2011. Overnight, the international market arrived at Ulaanbaatar's doorstep – I distinctly remember the large Coca-Cola banner draped over edifices on the parliamentary square, as the skyline was punctuated by the building of luxury high-rises. In the media, Mongolia was dubbed 'Mine-golia' and the country became self-reflexively fixated on the clash between the perceived old, 'traditional' pastoral lifestyle and the new, emergent, mining-driven modernity.² Here, in sharp contrast to my previous experience, the nightlife of Ulaanbaatar was characterized by luxury rooftop parties, art and theatre openings; I spent my fieldwork, on account of my interest, in plastic surgery clinics (Waters 2016).

By the time of my next visit, the country had changed again. When I landed in Ulaanbaatar in 2015, a haze of air pollution sat on the city, as if to represent the dampened spirit that had taken hold of the country. Between 2012 and 2015, the previously booming commodities cycle had slowed and Mongolia's economy fell into an economic 'crisis' (*hyamral*) (Bonilla 2016). Inequality, air pollution and chaotic urban infrastructure were hotly debated: topics that represented the country's inability to manifest previous windfalls into collective societal improvement. On both the government and everyday level, individuals regretted unwise, boom-time expenditures; in the media, parliament members described this period as the 'hangover' after the mining party.³ In Ulaanbaatar in 2015, the phrase 'to repair the front seam with the back' had come to describe the pervasive experience of not having enough funds to meet all of one's obligations, which individuals navigated through moving assets around – like the thread in Nomin's painting – to temporarily satisfy the most pressing need.

I first became aware of this phrase through my research in Magtaal – Mongolia's easternmost township.⁴ In late 2015, setting out on my doctoral fieldwork, I travelled over one thousand kilometres from Ulaanbaatar to Mongolia's eastern border with China, in order to investigate how these seemingly urban phenomena of mining booms and economic crises were affecting remote, rural populations. In Magtaal, a rural county of roughly

3,018 citizens called a *soum*,⁵ I encountered a cash-poor, highly bank-indebted population. But while urban residents often navigate their cash scarcity by pawning jewellery or impounding a car for a temporary cash-influx loan (Empson 2016), the rural residents of Magtaal did not have these historical asset pools. Rather, Magtaal is surrounded by some of the most fertile steppe landscape in Mongolia, rich in wild animals, plant and fish resources. Here, the ‘back seam’ of hidden assets that residents reluctantly draw from to maintain their way of life is not a car or a dress – it is the earth itself.

This book documents a further, previously undiscussed rural reverberation of the country’s economic boom and bust – the proliferation of the debt-fuelled wildlife trade. Whereas much national and international scholarship has paid attention to Mongolia’s post-socialist turn towards mining (Bumochir 2020; Munkherdene and Sneath 2018; High 2017; Byambajav 2015; Myadar and Jackson 2019), relatively little has been written on the simultaneous explosion in the commodification of Mongolia’s wildlife – antelope, deer (antlers), wolves, marmots, plants, fish and more.⁶ In post-socialist Magtaal, residents maintain their economic livelihoods through the illegal gathering of locally available fish and Chinese medicinal plants for sale into the Chinese market.

This introduction makes two contributions that frame the rest of the book – one political-economic and the other anthropological. First, bank loans and debt are often internationally applauded as potential avenues for upward mobility among rural, female or poor communities; but in contexts where there are few formal employment options and limited markets, like the sparsely populated regions of rural Mongolia, bank debts are rarely a stepping stone to prosperity. Rather, I learned the phrase ‘to repair the front seam with the back seam’ from Magtaal residents who found themselves unable to match the rate of bank interest and were in a constant frenzy in search of money for bank interest payments. This introduction describes how the proliferation of rural bank debt, creating chronic downward pressure to find money, has exacerbated the illegal wildlife trade as the only reliable source of money in rural Magtaal that is unburdened by interest requirements.

Second, in the 30 years since socialism, Mongolia has undergone a deluge of structural changes that have facilitated its rapid integration into national politics and international markets, including the expanded commodification of both the environment and interpersonal social relations. Both historical ideologies of feudal pastoralism and socialism variously protected or morally debarred the natural environment from individual market commodification, but, as has been obvious from the

mining boom and the wildlife trade, extracting and commodifying resources from the earth has now become commonplace in Mongolia. Throughout my fieldwork, Magtaal felt like an archetype of the American Wild West – local residents devised all sorts of networking strategies, many illegal, to extract the wildlife and make their fortunes for community, kith and kin. Illegality was an open secret in Magtaal: everyone engaged in it but no one talked explicitly about it. But this did not mean that everyone felt at moral ease with these circumstances; in fact, a persistent theme throughout my fieldwork between 2015 and 2017 was the widespread sense that everything was not fine, but that their activities were necessary and moral in their own right.

This introduction argues that at times of great social and structural rupture within a society, such as the post-socialist transformation, cultural groups become cognizant of how past values relate to or differ from present values. In Magtaal, the constant downward pressure of bank debt has exacerbated and prolonged this state of affairs, because people progressively have to extract more and more of the environment to meet the rates of interest, and justify their actions to themselves. In Magtaal, they have done so fairly successfully through the creation of *moral economic dichotomies* – frameworks as action templates for when it is or is not morally right to economically commodify a good, social domain or practice associated with a commonly held value. Through integration into translocal markets, residents both became aware of aspects of the past system that they treasured and also realized that they needed to engage in new commodification practices to maintain their lives, so the dichotomy became an avenue for people to commodify the practice, yet do so in a manner that controls monetary flow to ostensibly retain the historical value, thereby assuaging guilt. In Magtaal, cultural-economic life was saturated with moral dichotomies of when it was or was not moral to commodify social, political or environmental relations using narratives of morally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ shares, prices, networks, traders, middlemen, moneylenders, politicians, interest rates and more.

Resources for debt

Chronic cash dearth has been a constant in Mongolia since the country’s post-socialist political-economic transition. Prior to 1990, contemporary Mongolia was a centrally organized, independent socialist state known as the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) under the tutelage and economic protection of the Soviet Union (USSR). Although the transition to a

market democratic system in 1990 was quite peaceful, it plunged the country into economic turmoil – overnight, the considerable monetary support the MPR had been receiving from the USSR disappeared, leaving the recently elected democratic representatives scrambling for aid sources (Rossabi 2005, 36). In a story common within the post-socialist region, Western aid bodies were eager to facilitate the transition from ‘communism to capitalism’ (Brada 1993), and by 1991 Mongolia had secured foreign aid under the rubric of ‘structural adjustment’ (Rossabi 2005, 55) – a set of economic liberalization policy conditions attached to loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Many prominent cabinet members also supported the implementation of so-called ‘shock therapy’ and, in 1991 and 1992, administered the wide-scale privatization of the state’s assets (animal herds, cooperatives and infrastructure), the removal of price caps and the reduction of expenditure like welfare. According to the logic of these free-market-driven policies, the retrenchment of the state and the distribution of its assets to the population might, in the short term, lead to economic instability but, over the long term, would encourage new business entrepreneurialism, engendering new tax revenue and economic prosperity.

Despite the eager implementation of international best practice, Mongolia became dependent on foreign-sourced funds. In the intervening years, academics and economists have vocally criticized IMF policies for imposing austerity-like conditions on already weak economies (Crisp and Kelly 1999; Bradshaw and Jie 1991; Thomson, Kentikelenis and Stubbs 2017; Forster et al. 2019; King, Hamm and Stuckler 2009). Under such conditions, budget austerity – including public-sector layoffs, cuts in education and welfare, etc. – causes a spike in poverty and reduces tax revenue, undermining any gains from reduced budgets (Hamm, King and Stuckler 2012; Bandelj 2016). Mongolia was no exception: from 1991 to 2007, the Mongolian government’s income and expenditure roughly broke even, and subsequently has evinced repeated deficits,⁷ while the country’s poverty level jumped to and hovered around a third of the country’s population (Shagdar 2007).⁸ Rather, Keynesian economists have noted that developing countries that initially engage in protectionist policies (like the Asian Tigers) have had greater long-term economic growth due to their ability to foster their fledgling industrial sector until it is globally competitive (Chang 2002; Stiglitz 2002). In Mongolia, the privatization of state assets was followed by punishing inflation of over 300 per cent in 1992,⁹ which both reduced state income and arrested the development of new business. Plagued by grifting, high maintenance costs and unfavourable market conditions, Mongolia’s infrastructure fell into disrepair.¹⁰ Financially breaking even, the Mongolian government

continued to look to foreign assistance to fund new economic programmes and, by 2002, aid supplied more than 30 per cent of GDP, superseding Mongolia's prior financial dependence on the USSR (Rossabi 2005, 104).¹¹

The Mongolian government hoped that mineral wealth would end this quagmire. According to Bumochir (2018, 365), Ochirbat, a mining engineer and the first president of Mongolia (1990–7), was convinced that Mongolia needed to develop quickly in order to secure its independence from its expansionist southern neighbour, China. In 1992, he implemented the 'Gold Programme', which aimed to create a political, legal and socio-economic environment attractive to foreign direct investment (FDI) (Bumochir 2018, 366). In 1997, the Mongolian Minerals Law, dictating regulations concerning mining activities, was liberalized to include favourable taxation incentives and no reference to public interests and liabilities (High 2012, 254), becoming the most 'investor-friendly' mining law in Asia (World Bank 2004, 52).¹² Overnight, Mongolia became a phenomenon in international investor circles (Myadar and Jackson 2019), igniting a licensing run on the country.¹³ In this wave, in the early 2000s, Oyu Tolgoi, one of the world's largest copper and gold reserves, was discovered in the Gobi Desert, heralding a new era. On the back of speculation, an influx in FDI and a global commodity boom cycle, Mongolia's economic growth climbed to a record-shattering 17.3 per cent in 2011.

But mining was no panacea. In the early 2000s, anxiety grew concerning mining's unequal environmental and financial distribution, sparking political calls for more governmental control of the industry. Gradually, the government shifted policy to gain more discretion over foreign-owned mining proceeds – in 2006, the Minerals Law was reformulated to allow the government to acquire interests in deposits deemed nationally 'strategic' (Ivanhoe Mines 2006; State Great Hural 2006); and, in the run-up to the 2008 parliamentary election, both parties promised policies designed to redistribute mining income to citizens (Bulag 2009). After the election, in 2009, the ruling People's Party enacted this promise by legally establishing the Human Development Fund, a sovereign wealth fund which collated money from mining royalties and taxes, and, between 2010 and 2012, redistributed it to the populace as cash handouts (State Great Hural 2009; Isakova, Plekhanov and Zettelmeyer 2012; Namkhajantsan and Mihalyi 2020). Carrying out fieldwork in Mongolia in 2011–12, I was struck by the prevalence of two schools of opinion concerning mining – on the one hand, urban residents often eagerly embraced mining, encouraging foreign-investment-favourable policy as a path to a more 'developed' modernity; on the other hand, anti-foreigner

sentiment and/or protectionist pressures peaked among low-income and rural communities fearful of being left out.¹⁴ Over the subsequent decade, the government became locked in a ‘dilemma’, often flip-flopping between or rescinding approved policies, in an attempt to please one camp or the other (Bumochir 2020).¹⁵ In the post-boom period, excitement has generally cooled to an approach to mining as necessary evil.¹⁶

Ultimately, the boom unleashed cascading effects that sank the country deeper into debt.¹⁷ Since the 1970s, ‘extractive-led growth’ models have often been critiqued for their tendency to result in ‘Dutch disease’ – in other words, the phenomenon of overt dependence on one export or resource that can increase the local currency value, undermining development in other industries and making the national economy vulnerable to global price cycles (Stevens, Lahn and Kooroshy 2015, 8). By 2014, the commodity cycle had ended and international investor excitement had cooled out of fear that Mongolia was becoming ‘resource nationalistic’ (Dierkes 2016), plunging Mongolia into economic crisis. This incited a debt snowball effect – Mongolia’s sovereign debt grew throughout the crisis,¹⁸ inciting the government to issue a series of sovereign debt bonds on international markets to navigate deficits and previous debts, which then increased its external debt burden. Between 2015 and 2019, 9 to 15 per cent of the government’s total budget was spent on debt interest payments (Gereltsetseg et al. 2020, 21; Süh-Ochir 2019, 48), ‘leading to some of the highest interest rates paid by any government in the world. Service payments on public debt alone were greater than MNT 1 trillion in 2016, more than the government spent on healthcare for the whole country’ (Bauer et al. 2017, 1). Stuck between high debt¹⁹ and looming bond payments, the government has engaged in a ‘bond bonanza’ (Frangos and Natarajan 2012), issuing *at least* eight international credit market bonds between 2012 and 2020,²⁰ using them to refinance a previous bond, lessen the interest, pay for needed infrastructure or navigate an impending default – all by extending repayment deadlines into the future.

In the commonplace economic understanding of the ideal usage of debt, a debt is utilized by investing its value into a productive enterprise, which then garners proceeds that can be used to pay off the original debt. Both parties benefit and equality between the actors is re-established upon repayment (Graeber 2011). But in the post-socialist and, especially, the post-boom period, the Mongolian state has become an entity in permanent indebtedness – it has become adept at taking out more debt or moving assets around to receive temporary influxes of payment, keeping the lights on, but never able to pay off the principal. When, in both 2017

and in 2020, the government announced that it would issue a new Khuraldai Bond and Nomad Bond to pay back investors in the Chinggis and Manzaalai Bonds, respectively, the Mongolian internet heaved a sigh and exclaimed that Mongolians live in an economy of ‘taking from the front seam to fix the back seam’ (Jargal 2020; Munkhbat 2017). This economic model is possible through the country’s mineral wealth, which acts as a form of collateral: in boon times, it is converted into a temporary payment that staves off ever-looming defaults; and in bust times, it is a form of asset guarantee that income will be forthcoming. But, crucially, mining revenue does not constitute a new form of productive revenue, but is more the cash proceeds of ‘the reshuffling of a country’s portfolio of assets: exchanging resources below ground for cash above ground’ (Stevens, Lahn and Kooroshy 2015, 3). Never in possession of enough money both to provide government services and pay off its foreign debts at the same time, the Mongolian government uses its mineral resources as temporary asset streams, shifting money around to temporarily placate a population or stave off default, but unable to escape the cycle.

This pattern is not restricted to the upper echelons of government, but has ‘trickled down’ to the wider public. In 2014, I joined the ‘Emerging Subjects of the New Economy’ project in the Department of Anthropology, UCL, as a doctoral student: we were a team of social scientists researching how everyday Mongolians, in a country often internationally associated with pastoralism, have adapted to the changes wrought by the mining boom. In 2015, we moved to Mongolia for fieldwork and quickly realized that everyday indebtedness was everywhere, memorialized in our 2016 blog series on loans and debt²¹ and the sheer proliferation of social science research on the topic during this period (Sneath 2012; Højer 2012; Empson 2014a, 2014b, 2018; Murphy 2018; Pedersen 2017; Pedersen and Højer 2019; Waters 2018; Bristley 2021). Because, after the boom, the indebted government struggled to pay public-sector workers on time, many government employees used their contracts as collateral to take out bank ‘salary loans’ to tide over their families in pay lulls. But, of course, loans require interest payments and many individuals acquired additional secondary informal loans to pay off the formal loans. Although, on the national level, Mongolia’s household debt burden is moderate²² – its consumer debt to GDP ratio hovered around 30 to 35 per cent between 2015 and 2019 (Bank of Mongolia 2019, 29) – this statistic does not encompass the ubiquity of the experience of living ‘from loan to loan’. In practice, for every formal, statistically included loan, families also have a variety of informal loans from friends, family, acquaintances, pawnshops, car impounds, credit associations, middlemen, moneylenders, work

colleagues/bosses and more, to navigate cash dearth – a phenomenon known as ‘loan stacking’ (*davhar zeel*).²³

In Magtaal, as well, market liberalization encouraged a proliferation of debt. In 1989, Magtaal was the location of a collectivized agricultural state farm (*sangiin aj ahui*), employing 4,308 individuals.²⁴ With the collapse of socialism, the government’s approach to Magtaal became the passive encouragement of self-starter entrepreneurialism – it sold the collective’s assets to local workers as new private assets, reduced welfare and public spending and provided government-subsidized small-business loans – with little direct government involvement in job creation. In a rural region with a small population and limited market access (capping the return potential of any new business), this approach had meagre success – as of 2015, two-thirds of Magtaal’s population of 3,018 citizens were formally unemployed.²⁵ Anthropological studies have repeatedly documented how bank dependence and welfare retrenchment often coincide, as low-income communities turn to these institutions to replace or supplement insufficient incomes (James 2014, 2015; Guérin 2014). In Magtaal, crucially, the township universally inherited flats from the cooperative privatization reform, immediately providing all households with a form of bank collateral.²⁶ Between 2015 and 2017, all households had at least two ongoing bank loans, often used as a form of ‘debt-fare’ to maintain livelihoods between cash payments. Here, the phrase ‘taking from the back seam to fix the front seam’ took on new significance as residents became adept at using the cash from one loan to pay an interest payment on the other, holding the first loan in temporary abeyance until the next payment was due. In fact, this didn’t just occur within households – the whole township swished loaned money back and forth, ‘suppressing’ (*darah*) individual loan interest payments as they moved.

This situation of the rotation of bank debt would be untenable over a period of time (as bank interest accrues), if not for the periodic cash influx of non-interest-accruing resource money. Figure 0.2 is a chart of Magtaal’s economic flows of cash and goods seen from the township level. Two predominant trajectories of cash emerge from this diagram – first, money from Mongolian urban centres can legally enter the local economy through banks and moneylenders, but this money has interest stipulations; secondly, money from across the Chinese border also enters mediated by resource middlemen (*changers*), which is illegal or informal but also interest-free. The result is a dynamic similar to Graeber’s seminal discussion of taxation as an avenue to integrate new populations into colonial markets – by placing a taxation demand in state-issued currency on a previously unincorporated population, a sovereign indirectly forces

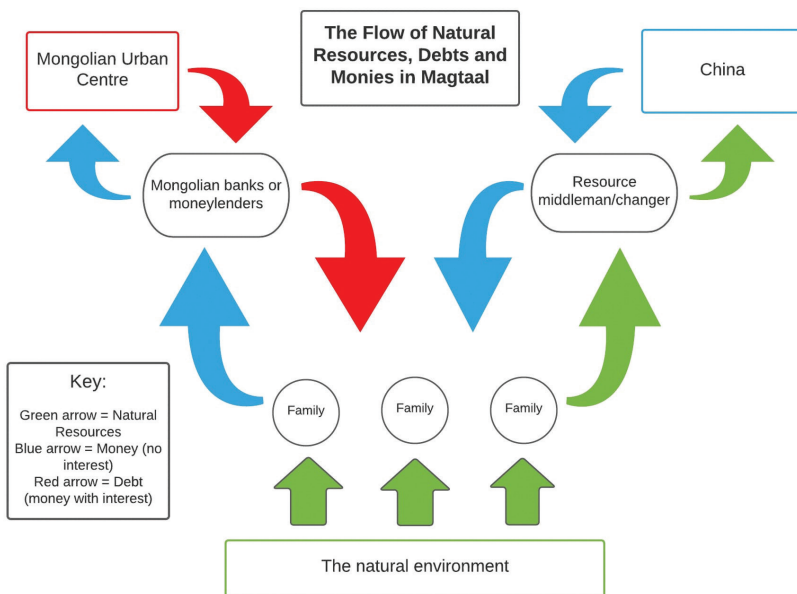


Figure 0.2 A macro-level view of the legal and illegal economic flows in Magtaal. © Author

them to learn how to devise goods and services exchangeable for coinage (Graeber 2011, 229–30). In Magtaal, residents who engage in the formal banking system often end up starved of cash, and their only available avenue to interest-free cash is through resource commodification. Debt’s accumulative nature – its growth through interest over time – further encourages this trend as local individuals must expand the breadth and depth of resource extraction to match accruing deficits. In this way, residents mimic the twofold example of their debt-juggling politicians – first they use their local resources as asset pools, converting them into cash to stave off default; but by doing so, they are not engaging in ‘productive’ enterprise but merely keep the lights on, locking them into a permanent cycle of ‘living from loan to loan’.

Econo-political networks in the wake of socialism

During the transition from socialism to a market economy, many Mongolians, left without other forms of material survival, started making use of their social connections to make economic returns – a phenomenon known in Mongolian as *suljee* or network. The concept of the ‘network’ has

proliferated within the social sciences since the advance of globalization in the 1990s to describe the breakdown, on account of the rapid global circulation of goods, things and ideas, of historically rigid forms of social organization into fleeting, agentically coalescing assemblages (Castells 2000; Knox, Savage and Harvey 2006; Latour 2008; Sneath 1993). Within this line of scholarship, the cultural economist Michel Callon has used the network concept in reference to the creation of economic value within this new market-based reality (Çalışkan and Callon 2009; Callon 1998), arguing that the global market provides hypothetically unlimited opportunities for assemblages of humans and the non-human – ‘a network of calculative agencies’ (Gregory 2014, 52) – to democratically conjoin to make economic value. But whereas network theorists assume no pre-market sociality between the multifarious actors meeting in an assemblage, *suljee* are human-centred configurations that specifically utilize more-than-market social alliances to meet market demands. Centrally, *suljee* are an organizational form that *cross-cuts and mediates between socio-political relations and market returns*: the term is widely used for all manner of activity where people band together along personal socio-political relations to make economic gains, often redistributing some portion of the economic proceeds within these networks to recursively strengthen them, then using networks to access monetary gains, etc. I privilege the ‘econo-’ in the conjunction because it is predominantly the determinants of markets that shape the orientation of political mobilization. In Magtaal, *suljee* facilitate the ‘resourcification’ – in other words, the utilization as a potential source of monetary return (Munkherdene and Sneath 2018, 822; High 2010, 153; Hultman et al. 2021) – of both social connections and the natural environment.

Prior to the emergence of *suljee* in the post-socialist economy, Magtaal was a booming mini-city constructed around an agricultural cooperative. When the MPR was founded in 1921, the land area of contemporary Magtaal – approximately 28,000 km² (roughly the size of Belgium)²⁷ – mostly served as animal grazing pasture for mobile pastoral herders (Ochir et al. 2003, 325–8). But around 1960, Soviet agricultural surveyors – having been informed that the land in Mongolia’s eastern region boasted particularly rich soil and a long rainy season – established a research centre in western Magtaal (Davaajargal et al. 2006, 230). In 1972, they founded the agricultural state farm in Magtaal’s east – a valley containing a river – and gave it unparalleled financial and infrastructural support, fully expecting this farm to grow into the capital of a new Mongolian province (*muji*). Between 1972 and the late 1980s, hundreds of families were resettled in the district in order to build up and maintain

this new cooperative and its facilities – which gradually expanded into a school, library, cultural centre, dairy, fruit farm, mechanics’ garage, hospital, research centre, military compound and multiple two-storey flat blocks replete with electricity, heat and water filtration systems. In the early years of the cooperative in the 1970s, Russian engineers assisted the Mongolian workers in implementing state-of-the-art agricultural technology, including widespread irrigation and field rotation systems, composting animal manure, mechanized dairy facilities and animal breeding technologies. The farm ballooned to become the biggest agricultural farm in eastern Mongolia – utilizing 40,000 hectares (400 km²) of land in 1986 – and won national accolades for the most productive agricultural farm – calculated according to wheat production per hectare – in 1984 and 1989.

The state farm, in line with the Marxist ideology that inspired the MPR, was organized around the collective maximization of productivity. Notably, both Marxism and market-based capitalist models are ideologies of the material world – they frame society in terms of competition over material relations, but while Marxism proposes collective utilization, market ideologies emphasize individual maximization. In the state farm of the 1970s and 1980s, the purported ideal was that members would collectively invest their labour to work the fields and, in return, receive all daily essentials, regular wages and occasional consumption perks from the farm. Pürev, who was a young man in his teens when his family was assigned by the MPR to work in Magtaal in the early 1980s, recounts that, because the state farm was widely known as a success, the workers were both highly motivated – they felt in the grip of a historical transformation, working in the name of a better society (*niigmiin tölөө*) – and also generally provided for – it had a fruit farm, a soda-making station and many entertainment activities. When Pürev later became the head of the youth brigade at the end of the 1980s, Magtaal was producing enough grain to supply Mongolia’s three eastern aimags *and* send surplus to the Soviet Union. He recounts: ‘We had so much crop [that] we had to store it in the ground.’ Money had little value – Magtaal’s workers received a 20 per cent wage boost over other state farms because of their distance from urban centres, and this wage was more than enough to buy goods from the state farm. As of 2017, a rusty state-farm-era billboard still hangs in front of Magtaal’s government building, summing up the worldview of the era: ‘The state is the master of the person, the person is the jewel of the state’ (*hümüünd төр ерhem төрд хүмүүн ердene*).

The materialism of Marxism-inspired socialism was mirrored in the strategies utilized by individuals to meet needs not satisfied by the system. Despite official mandates declaring that all citizens' needs could be met through official channels, ethnographies on the Soviet era note that official channels were often beleaguered by bureaucracy, nepotism and shortages of goods (Humphrey 1998). In practice, these sporadic scarcities and long waiting times were navigated through the development of an 'economy of favours' (Ledeneva 1998) – citizens would cultivate extensive networks of friends and acquaintances to distribute goods they had access to and organize what they needed as a series of personal favours.²⁸ Although these favours were often manifested as material goods and occasionally given with a material goal in mind, many practitioners emphasized that they were predominantly socially motivated out of a desire to be a good person, honour obligation and help each other (Ledeneva 1998, 33–8). Indeed, Humphrey (2017) argues that a favour is only successful if the receiver perceives it as neither purely materially driven nor obligative; it is a spontaneous act of grace intended to elicit social warmth (Holbraad 2017a). In Magtaal's state farm, most basic needs were easily met, but individuals used favours to access luxury goods and higher positions with consumption perks – for example, getting rides on a jet plane to Ulaanbaatar. Although favours were not as existentially important in Magtaal as they may have been elsewhere, their presence indicates that the workers of the cooperative already recognized socio-political networks and material relations as two different dimensions that could each be mobilized to augment the other.

After the MPR collapsed in 1989, social connections established during socialism took on new significance as the main avenue of economic survival in the transition. Due to the suddenness of shock therapy and privatization reforms in the post-socialist period, many public institutions were not given the time and space to develop into fully fledged, independent systems, prolonging local dependence on Soviet-era private networks to navigate the dysfunctional public system (Bandelj 2016) and as a form of social insurance (Humphrey 2002; Werner 1998). In Mongolia, in 1991, the government implemented a sweeping privatization law, which dissolved and privatized the Magtaal state farm, recasting its formerly public assets into private property that the now unemployed workers could claim (State Great Hural 1991).

Over the next two years, the now unemployed former workers of the Magtaal state farm received three asset vouchers (Ichinkhorloo 2018), variously described as 'coupons' (*tasalbar*) or 'shares' (*huv'tsaa*), that were exchangeable in two capacities: either as a 'worker buyout' by

trading in vouchers to the former state farm, receiving assets in either animals or machinery; or as currency on the newly created national stock market or secondary markets in newly privatized companies (Korsun and Murrell 1995).²⁹ Similar to Humphrey's description of how Buryat kolkhoz members attempted to combine private shares into hierarchical shareholding enterprises (Humphrey 1998, 482–505), many former workers consolidated their shares into 17 new cooperatives (*horshoo*) and three companies. Pürev, a member of the youth brigade during the state farm period, was able to collect enough shares in the transition to open a cooperative, but, as he retells it, without the external market, the cooperatives were producing more grain than local demand called for, collectively competing with each other to sell at lower and lower prices to the only flour mill in the region. Without the protective arm of the state buttressing them against market satiation, their distance from the urban centre and rapid post-socialist inflation, all except one of these endeavours went bankrupt by 1996.

Inflation increased at such a rapid pace – jumping to 325 and 183 per cent in 1992 and 1993 respectively (Rossabi 2005, 52) – that residents (and companies) could not rely on state-issued currency and became dependent on bartering. Otgon, who was a soldier in the local border platoon in 1990–1, describes with chagrin the waves of 'pillaging' (*tonoh*) of the former cooperative and its infrastructure that resulted:

[The Russians] just took their basic stuff, passport and clothing and baggage and left everything else. Then Mongolians came in immediately and took everything, even the furniture, which was from Romania. Even the tea was still hot in its cup. After that, many families had Romanian furniture in their homes. First, they would take the furniture, and then flooring, and then take the bricks of the house, and then the iron, then done.

Flour became the de facto barter measurement in the soum, because the Magtaal government starting paying out a portion of bureaucratic salaries (to teachers, etc.) as flour, while others could go to the overgrown fields of the former cooperative, gather wheat and grind it into flour in their homes, which they then exchanged with meat for herders or clothing with relatives.³⁰ In fact, Otgon notes, talking retrospectively with me in 2017 about this period, that the groupings people formed to gather metal from the infrastructure or pick and grind grain were predecessors to contemporary *suljee*:

The process of gathering resources today is the same as in 1990; both were networks [*suljee*]. When people would collect iron back

then, they would go in big social groups . . . For example, there were a lot of military staff, so they organized themselves into a gathering party to collect the stuff together. One person couldn't carry all that iron alone. Before 1990, these groupings didn't exist.

Two patterns were established during this period: first, residents learned to see the environment (the Soviet infrastructure) as harbouring assets that they could claim as private property; and second, individuals recursively used social and material relations to strengthen each other: using social connections to jointly gather resources from the infrastructure and then use the spoils to barter within socio-political networks for survival.

In 1994, the border to China opened to create a double coincidence of wants – local Magtaalians had no money and no employment, but were surrounded by lush resources; and the Chinese citizens across the border had money and a resource-hungry market. The result was a proliferation of small-scale profit-making businesses retrofitted around the needs and capacities of the Chinese market. Anu, the owner of one of the biggest grocery stores in Magtaal in 2017, originally opened a small local trading stall in 1992, and starting in 1995 she accepted payment for her goods in scrap metal and any local resources she could sell in China. At the time, she recalls, she accepted animal skins, antlers, copper, brass, aluminium and more:

People would scrounge [the metal] and sell it to me, and I would collect, bulk and weigh it and send it to Ulaanbaatar to a wholesaler [*böönii töv*]. That wholesaler would have a price for the product based on kilo or ton. I would reduce that price [for local residents] to make money off of it and pay for the transportation [of the goods]. Then I would take this cash [from the wholesaler] and use it to buy my goods from China and start the process over.

In the early 1990s, residents say, Chinese labourers crossed the border and very literally looked around to see what could be sold in China, informing the populace concerning the lucrateness of the *fang feng* plant, a root used in Traditional Chinese Medicine that was considered a mere weed among the local Mongolians. The Chinese labourers started hiring local Mongolians to gather the root. Often these hired workers did so within the same groups (such as friends, family and acquaintances) they had bartered and gathered scrap metal with, also using the lure of money to expand their econo-political networks. In this way, between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the previous 'collaborations for survival'

(Ichinkhorloo 2018) graduated into profit-making social assemblages, as residents expanded their gathering activities from the ex-Soviet infrastructure to the natural environment and continued to recursively use social and material relations to strengthen each other by using social relations to gather profit-making resources and invest the economic spoils back into the expansion of socio-political networks.

Now, economic life in Magtaal predominantly takes the shape of *suljee*. Fundamentally, *suljee* emerged in Magtaal between 1991 and the early 2000s because there was no functioning political-economic system (to provide jobs, employment and material direction) except the dictates of the market – namely, the instruction of what is and is not a ‘resource’ that can be sold. Similar to the aforementioned discussion of debt, loans and taxation, this created a passive power vacuum where Magtaalians had to adapt their behaviour to meet the expectations of the market. Descending from historical social patterns and economies of favour, *suljee* are an adaptation to an unstable economic landscape that is nearly impossible to navigate alone. Currently, the term *suljee* has three prevalent usages: 1) the mobilization of friend and family connections to navigate debt, loan or interest payments – for example, *öriin suljee*; 2) the mobilization of social relations to make economic profits in a resource commodity chain and/or web of trade relations – for example, a *fang feng suljee*; and 3) the utilization of a political position to make economic gain reinvested into political networks – for example, a political *suljee*.³¹ Reminiscent of Miyazaki’s (2013) discussion of how Japanese financial traders make economic profit through leveraging differences in time, knowledge and distance on the market, the many usages of the term *suljee* share the feature that they indicate a leveraging and coordination of differences between people’s social positionality – either, for example, someone’s employment position, access to money, credit score, geographic location, access to a border market or the closeness of relation – to make an economic gain. But whereas economies of favour were more relationally defined (by types of goods, or types and numbers of relations), *suljee* are closed assemblages of people coordinating to meet a market-defined end.

Moral economic dichotomies in the wake of value rupture

As *suljee* rapidly expanded in Magtaal, many citizens experienced doubt over the moral rightness of these circumstances, constructing frameworks to navigate their disquiet. Within the history of the social sciences, the

question of whether the expansion of formal economic markets affects local culture and morality has often been posed and fiercely debated. Both Marx and Simmel, two heavyweights influential to the founding of economic anthropology, pondered this question and came to opposing conclusions: either the expansion of markets would simplify society into two hostile classes (Marx 1872); or it would facilitate emancipation from previously burdensome social obligations (Simmel 1977 [1900]), respectively. From the historical vantage point of post-socialist Magtaal, a previously largely economically self-contained area that then became plugged into economic flows regulated beyond its borders, aspects of both assumptions hold true. First, when an area starts becoming economically dependent on trade beyond its local borders, livelihoods are no longer chiefly determined by the local community, resulting in potential local breakdowns of the previous order and newly enabled opportunities, as well as intense moral anxiety and questioning, since individuals are no longer sure what is definitively right or wrong. Moreover, the value of state-issued currency is not beholden to local people nor their moral interests. In these conditions, particularly stark during times of transition, communities can create *moral economic dichotomies* – behavioural frameworks that stipulate when it is morally ‘good’ or morally ‘bad’ to engage in a commodity relation – that are attempts to use local moral taboos to control economic flows in a manner that retains and upholds locally held social values using the medium of market money.

Self-defined total value orders

Moral economic dichotomies differ from other binaries historically debated within the field of economic anthropology, which must first be explained in order to contradistinguish them. In 1944, the political economist Karl Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation*, posing a thesis on market-instigated cultural change that would become the source of debate in the social sciences for decades. In this book, Polanyi argues that while non-market societies operated according to a ‘substantivist’ logic – how to thrive within the social and natural environment – formal market societies were constructed according to a model of *homo economicus* – humans as rational, self-interested, materially maximizing individuals – and thus the integration of the former into the latter would result in the erasure of substantivist practices such as reciprocity and distribution (Polanyi 2001 [1944], 45–58). Polanyi’s work was exceedingly influential, inspiring a generation of anthropologists known as the substantivists who were concerned with demonstrating how the formal principles of Western

economics were unsuited to understanding non-capitalist economies. In 1959, the anthropologist Paul Bohannan, a substantivist, argued that historical non-market societies, like the Nigerian Tiv, were internally governed by spheres of exchange – historical economic structures that dictated what goods and monies were interchangeable for each other – but when ‘general purpose money’ like state currency arrived, it broke down the major distinctions between the spheres, resulting in a ‘unicentric’ economy where everything became mutually exchangeable (Bohannan 1959, 492–501; Bohannan 1955). In hindsight, the substantivist school was plagued by ‘conceptual binarism’ (Guyer 2004, 20–1), because it often typecast and simplified the dynamics of both historical and contemporary societies.³²

Nevertheless, this does not mean that non-market and market societies do not have any widespread differences. Although this is both a generalization and abstraction,³³ pre-market societies often did not conceptually distinguish between economic value, as a separate material realm of existence, and social value, as cultural and moral principles. Rather, most aspects of material, social and cultural life revolved around the promotion of certain leading values – in other words, what that society conceptualized as the supreme goals or virtues of existence (Graeber 2001, 2013; Dumont 1966; Robbins 2004). For this reason, in *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1993 [1925]) refers to economic acts like gift-giving in Polynesian exchange as ‘total prestations’: as actions envisioned as simultaneously spiritual, material and political and thus a gesture symbolic of the total value ideal – for example: honour, purity or vitality – of that society (see also Parry 1986, 456–7). Moreover, the locus of control of how these total values were defined lay largely in the group itself, effectuated through morally ranking realms and aspects of social life into ‘levels of value’ based on their symbolic associations with these values (Munn 1977, 1992).³⁴ Money often took the form of human adornment, symbolising the socialization of users into this system (Graeber 1996).³⁵ In general, exchange and currency were used to increase an actor’s standing within the dominant local total value order, thereby upholding it from within.

Unmarked, two-sided modern money

The conceptualization of money most common within contemporary market societies – that of money as *commodity* or socially independent material thing with a price that can enter into quantitative ratio comparisons with other material things (Hart 1986, 638) – gradually emerged and

became more dominant across human societies as they became more integrated into religious, political and economic systems beyond local control, thereby loosening local definitional sovereignty over value forms. Put another way, the concept of money as commodity became more dominant through whatever change (or stacking changes) created ‘a departure from immediacy on one or an incremental combination of dimensions’ (Bird-David and Naveh 2014, 88), inciting people to engage in more utilitarian thinking over deferred time spans, encouraging a conceptual divergence between ‘social’ and ‘material’ registers of value.³⁶

Contemporary, state-issued modern money differs from indigenous social currencies in two key respects which invite reactions among populations newly exposed to it. First, modern money is not lumped by contemporary actors into heirlooms that they wear or display, but it is generic, multiple and socially unmarked³⁷ in form:

Money does not consist of unique objects at all. At least in principle, it is absolutely generic, any one dollar bill precisely the same as any other. As a result money presents a frictionless surface to history. There is no way to know where a given dollar bill has been. Nor is there any reason one should care, since neither the identity of its former owners nor the nature of transactions in which it has previously been involved in any way affects its value (Graeber 2001, 94).

Rather, with modern market-state systems, the major determinants of the value of money are the state and the market. For this reason, Hart (1986, 638) calls money ‘two-sided’: its value is either regulated by the state, which underwrites it and controls the supply of money, or it is determined by markets – in other words, its quantity ratio in comparison to all the other material objects on the market. Within an economy chiefly dependent on commodity money, then, its value is no longer chiefly determined in relation to local concepts of past action and accumulated histories, symbolized by heirlooms and local social status, but by the accumulated market actions of national and international peoples one has never met who have no attachment to the local worldview.

Moral anxiety with the shifting social order

In their seminal review of the moral understandings of money among Melanesian groups, Akin and Robbins (1999), following Simmel, note that both indigenous and state-issued currencies share the fundamental

instrumental quality that they cannot be consumed – literally, they cannot be eaten or used in any non-exchange capacity – and thus predominantly have value for a user when in circulation. This propulsion to stay in flow encourages currency to move ‘further afield’ (Akin and Robbins 1999, 5) at a speed and scale that can potentially open up all sorts of social relations between goods and peoples of different status to meet in exchange. It thus provides opportunities to circumvent local ranking systems, loosening the fixity of the social structures, norms and worldviews they were upholding (in line with the substantivists’ ideas), while introducing new opportunities and values (as argued by Simmel). This is a two-way cultural adaptation process: people become accustomed to expressing their group’s values through state-issued currency, but the value dominance and stability of the previous system loosens, introducing more opportunity for ‘marginal gains’ (Guyer 2004) through cross-cutting previous value regimes (such as cross-type, cross-status, cross-group or cross-border trade) and self-actualization along personally held values (Zigon 2009; Robbins 2007).

Since cultural change involves the shifting of the previous dominance and introduction of new values into the system, these periods are often accompanied by amplified moral awareness. Robbins makes a similar point in describing the mass conversion to Christianity among the Papua New Guinean Urapmin, although this was not instigated by market integration:

Cultural change in operational terms [can be conceived] as occurring only when key values change. Such change can occur either because new values are introduced or because the hierarchical relations that hold between traditional values have been transformed. When values change in either of these ways, conflicts between them are destined to arise as old values assert their importance in the face of new ones or previously dominant values attempt to hold their position in the face of growing importance of previously subordinate ones. Over time, new stable structures may arise, but during the course of change conflict is likely to be the norm. This is why people’s sense of the moral weight of their actions is strong during times of change (Robbins 2007, 301–2).

Different groups within the population are liable to encounter the destabilization of the underlying value system with conflicting feelings. Individuals experiencing value rupture feel anxiety and moral ambiguity in these moments, as expressed by common tropes such as ‘things used to be better’ or ‘people aren’t the same any more’. Akin and Robbins note that while elites or other populations (often older men) that politically

benefited from the previous value order might express distress and loss, individuals set to benefit through new, cross-status opportunities and the expansion of choice (such as youth or women) might express excitement at the coming modernity (Akin and Robbins 1999, 21–7; Ferguson 1992).

Moral economic dichotomization to navigate the ambiguity of transition

The process of suddenly going from one cultural system to another often allows the members of cultural groups to become aware of and objectify the worldviews, practices and values of the ‘past’ versus the ‘present’, or the ‘traditional’ versus ‘the modern’, as the ‘past’ becomes constructed as a ‘symbolic resource that agents can invoke and deploy for the making of the present’ (LiPuma 1999 204). Whereas some individuals negotiate this process by embracing the ‘modern’, others can react to local value destabilization by trying to restabilize values associated with the previous order, yet within or using the tools of the emergent political-economic system. These moral devices take two forms – either they attempt to limit the boundary of influence of the larger system by policing group boundaries (specifically, what comes in), or they attempt to create new internal regulatory mechanisms (in lieu of ranking systems) that take the form of moral taboos (in other words, self-regulation in the group). I call the process of making these devices ‘moral economic dichotomization’: ‘moral’ because they involve the reification of the previous value order into a social domain, practice or object, which is signified as ‘moral’; ‘economic’ because they involve the policing and social marking of two-sided, unmarked money to retain, protect or regulate the associated moral domain; ‘dichotomization’ because they manifest as binaries or scales.

An example of the former type of moral economic dichotomization is the phenomenon of economic enclaving. According to Akin (1999, 103–30), the mountain Kwaio of the Solomon Islands have historically associated money not just with markets, but with integration into the larger colonial, political order of formal governance and religion. In order to mitigate the larger system’s collective impact on the local group, the Kwaio implemented the total ban of state-issued currency from cultural institutions associated with the previous order, namely mortuary and marriage payments. This is perhaps the most successful example of enclaving – or the erection of barriers to protect the reproduction of the historical value system (Akin and Robbins 1999, 24; Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) – because it enabled

the successful maintenance of the indigenous currency system for over a hundred years after the first participation in migratory labour. Elsewhere in greater Melanesia, a political movement of self-determination around the concept of 'kastom' emerged – an indigenization of the British colonial approach of rule through native courts according to 'native custom' (Akin 2013) – which attempted to limit colonial influence through the conceptual dichotomization of economic practices into those associated with emergent enterprise versus historical custom (Akin and Robbins 1999, 25; Foster 1999, 222; Foster 1995).

An example of moral economic dichotomization of the latter type is the phenomenon of 'bitter money' – the local categorization of state-issued currency into morally and spiritually 'good' and 'bad' types based on how it was earned. This term comes from Shipton's research amongst the Luo of Kenya and is well documented for contexts where populations are newly dependent on the disturbing or extraction of a land resource for market sale – such as land, tobacco, cannabis or gold – that has historically been either the location of or associated with the spiritual (ancestral) livelihood source of the group's collective identity (Shipton 1989; High 2013; Botoeva 2021; Taussig 1980). Common across these discourses is the marking of money that emerges from these spiritual and morally ambiguous activities as 'bitter' (also: 'dirty', 'easy', 'hot', 'liquid', 'polluted'), which implies that these funds can only be unproblematically used for short-term activities, like gambling and drinking, but can bring spiritual calamity when invested into long-term activities of the social group (Znoj 1998; Peebles 2012; Botoeva 2021; Taussig 1980; High 2013, 2017; Ho 2009). Akin (2005, 21) theorizes that these discourses amongst the Kwaio primarily refer to 'wealth having been earned by an individual unfettered by the burdens of social cooperation, reciprocity, and community responsibility'.

Finally, this discussion is inspired by E.P. Thompson's description of a 'moral economy', which was another dichotomization of regulation within the group but this time concerning the prices of a commodity previously deemed a 'necessity of life' (Thompson 1971, 92). The term 'moral economy' is most often traced to the eighteenth-century bread riots instigated by the English 'poor', who, Thompson argues, were not motivated to riot because of hunger, but because of a deep-set, widespread consensus of what was deemed morally 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' in economic behaviour (Thompson 1971, 78–9). Louise A. Tilly (1971, 25) argues, in tracing a similar dichotomy leading to riot in France between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, that these narratives emerged when the French nation state was implementing increased political and

economic centralization, forcing local towns to become embedded into translocal systems. Previously, the price of bread and grain, considered a necessity for all, was regulated according to customary law, but through the transition, its price became subject to the whims of the national market, disconnected from local conditions. In this context, Tilly and Thompson argue, local communities constructed the ‘moral economy’ as a dichotomy to regulate prices at a level that made bread generally accessible, upholding it vis-à-vis those individuals who tried to profit off of bread, through riot.³⁸

These three phenomena of enclaving, bitter money and moral economies all emerge as moral economic dichotomizations in moments of adaptation to larger translocal market flows. They are all dichotomies that judge activities as morally good or bad based on whether that activity upholds a communally held value, which can be ‘group control’ itself, of the locality within these translocal systems, albeit from different angles. Moral economic dichotomies are reminiscent of Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry’s (1989, 23–8) description of ‘transactional orders’: of the cultural categorizations of moral behaviours surrounding money into realms of long-term ‘transcendent’ value and short-term personal gain with accompanying moral and immoral behavioural-moral evaluations. How these differ is in the emphasis on their creation *after* integration into (and often dependence on) translocal nation-market systems (which includes dependence on short-term, acquisitive markets) as a mechanism to preserve a shared value (conceptually similar to a long-term value marker) reified as a practice, good or resource by regulating the flow, monetary implementation and usage or prices around that sphere of activity.³⁹ As opposed to historical forms of ranking, however, moral taboos are a relatively weak form of regulation and are thus likely more apparent (to the ethnologist) in moments of structural transition within relatively isolated communities.

Post-socialist moral topologies

It could be that these dichotomies attenuate or disappear with time, especially as communities become fully integrated into translocal markets and individuals become accustomed to exploring their own personally held values of ‘freedom’ (Robbins 2007). Nevertheless, the breakdown of the socialist system, which resulted in a vast variety of local areas becoming newly integrated into translocal nation-state systems with value not pegged to local circumstances provides an opportunity to study these dynamics. Of course, socialism was not an isolated total value order: it was

ideologically undergirded by Marxism, a materialist philosophy that emphasizes the rationalization of economic processes for the common distributed good; it was transnational and the widespread emergence of the economy of favours evinces a locally recurrent worldview that easily distinguishes between material and social value(s). Nevertheless, and I can only speak for the Magtaal state farm, the era did not give the populace the sense of being embedded in processes beyond their control that did not take their needs and interests into account. Sneath (2002, 201) notes that, from the perspective of local land use, because historical forms of social organization in Mongolia had been hierarchical, yet idealized as inclusive and considerate of common welfare, the transition from feudalism to socialism contained many continuities. In contrast, the transition from socialism to market democracy, which saw the general dissolving of these hierarchical organizations through a focus on individual competition on translocal markets, was encountered as more of a shock.

Ethnographies from across the post-socialist world evince a hyper-cognizance of the 'past' versus the 'present' and the creation of indigenous binaries to mediate the 'past' in the 'present'. Often these dichotomies romanticize the past as a communal age of (possibly hierarchical) inclusion and the present as anti-communal but full of practices that are necessary, affixing this opposition to different culturally mediated symbols and spaces – in post-collectivized Vietnam, votive gold coin and US dollar replicas (Kwon 2007); in post-crisis Cuba, the peso and the US dollar (Holbraad 2017b); and among Cuban migrants in post-austerity Spain, Cuba and Spain (Simoni 2016), respectively. Ethnographies from Central Asia evince an emergence of 'bitter money' discourses (Botoeva 2021) or other forms of moral economic dichotomization (Sanghera, Ilyasov and Satybaldieva 2006). During socialism, interpersonal relations were often mediated through the economy of favours, but as interpersonal relations increasingly became commoditized in post-socialist settings, these practices expanded and adapted into moral monetary continuums. During Michele Rivkin-Fish's (2005) fieldwork in a maternity hospital in St Petersburg in 1994–5, doctors and patients navigated the moral ambiguity surrounding paying for healthcare through a topography of favours – on one end of the spectrum was 'one's own people', followed by favours (*blat*) distinguished by social and institutional closeness, followed by non-social market transactions. In Madeleine Reeves's (2017) scholarship among Kyrgyz migrants to Moscow, the moral confusion concerning renting a room from one's kinsmen results in a similar continuum – ranging from kin and obligation (*salt*) to help as favours (*jardam*) for acquaintances and transaction. Although these boundaries differ in scale and lived practice,

they often idealize communal integrity within trans-kin, translocal, non-controllable political-economic processes.

Recent ethnographies from Mongolia also evince a widespread tendency to mediate the moral ambiguities within market behaviours, practices and monies through moral dichotomies. Similar to other post-socialist contexts, the expanded usage of money within close kinship relations is often navigated through an expanded favour continuum. For example, Sneath (2006, 95; 2012) describes how, in particular, relations of monetary credit and debt among family, friends and acquaintances are morally navigated through placing obligative 'enactions' and materially driven transactions on opposite ends of a moral spectrum, encouraging close kin to give each other lenient terms and forms of help to maintain certain types of kin relations.⁴⁰ With the expansion of poverty and precarity in the post-socialist era, many households had to pawn treasured items for short-term cash, resulting, according to Højer (2012, 41), in the tabooization of pawnshops and their proceeds as spiritually condemned and marked by black energy. In some areas of Mongolia, this concept of 'bitter' or 'polluted' money can emerge around the get-rich-quick scheme of arbitrage gold mining (High 2013, 2017). In greater post-socialist Mongolia, then, moral economic dichotomies have cropped up in settings of expanded usage of unmarked, two-sided money with or within a historically treasured value, practice, object or domain.

Moral economic dichotomization in the Mongolian borderlands

Centrally, this book describes the moral economic dichotomies that emerged in Magtaal to navigate its increased emplacement within larger political-economic systems perceived to be largely outside of local control. Although these dynamics initially emerged in the immediate post-socialist period of the 1990s, they continue to be a source of discussion because of the stacking downward pressure of bank debt encouraging local people to increasingly commodify local wildlife in increasingly greater intensity and measure. The widespread emergence of *suljee* in the post-socialist period evinces the breakdown of the previous value order, as they are econo-political networks that make economic gains precisely through cross-cutting regimes of social status, expectation, time, formality, legality and state borders. In Magtaal, *suljee* most often take the form of either debt networks or wildlife networks, which work together because residents commonly take out bank debt from Mongolian banks for interim

survival, paying it off later through proceeds earned from the cross-border wildlife trade. Both these forms of income, however, enmesh local people within systems beyond their control: they cannot affect the commodity value of money, determined at the national level by banks, their state and politics; nor can they control the value of their resources or the exchange rate of their money determined through international market aggregates. In Magtaal, then, increased dependence on translocal processes has emerged in tandem with moral economic dichotomies that seek to grant local people a modicum of communal control over their local manifestation.

Throughout the book, I describe a process whereby Magtaalians became aware through their increased participation in markets of a communally held historical value that they then crystallized into a moral economic dichotomy as behavioural template within the contemporary system. [Chapter 1](#) shows that these processes are not only economic but also political. In the months prior to my fieldwork, Ulaanbaatar-based politicians tried to implement a free trade zone in Magtaal, which was met by resolute and collective protest on the part of local people. In this chapter, I discuss how, using the local exemplar of a nineteenth-century local prince, residents maintain a historically inspired ideal of inclusive hierarchy within governance, which is, in their minds, increasingly being violated by the suffusion of money into national politics. In turn, they judge contemporary politicians as ‘real’ or ‘fake’ leaders based on whether they convincingly convey the interests of local people versus those of foreign capital, respectively.

[Chapter 2](#) describes the proliferation of the *fang feng* medicinal plant trade in Magtaal that is, despite being illegal and extractive, widely socially popular. Here, I argue, Mongolians historically understood the land as a form of ‘common wealth’, as both the mediator and embodiment of relations with its people, which engendered portions of multifarious wealth they could utilize to maintain the continuity of the relational whole. Through shifts in the political-economic system, this understanding of land as common wealth has increasingly been expressed in political-economic terms as rightful shares of resource-engendered monies, national income or GDP. In Magtaal, these emergent *politics of common wealth* are accompanied by a multiply-scaled discourse that morally evaluates resource-engendered economic proceeds based on whether they regenerate the relational in-group (the soum or nation) attached to the land that created the resources. [Chapter 3](#) discusses the cross-border illegal fish trade among the fishermen of Dalai Village, a lake village within Magtaal soum.

At the village, residents catch fish to sell to middlemen, who smuggle the fish across the border, yet collectively regulate the profits middlemen can make from this trade. This case study of a group socially regulating the accumulation potential of traders is remarkably similar to E.P. Thompson's example of a 'moral economy' among the English crowd. Both within this chapter and the previous one, residents morally judge the behaviour of traders, marking them as 'virtuous' or 'selfish', based on whether their actions are deemed to help the local residents to further long-term local wellbeing or hurt it.

Chapter 4 moves into the proliferation of bank-based debt in the soum, discussing how this has contributed to an overheating economy of favours. Magtaalians morally categorize types of monetary loans based on social closeness, but because the members of the township desire to uphold obligations and enact favours to each other despite being cash poor, they take out more and more bank loans. Collectively, this has sunk the entire township, like the government itself, into near-permanent bank debt. Chapter 5 discusses the emergence of moneylenders in the soum as an occupation delivering timely money within this landscape of widespread indebtedness. Moneylenders build a bridge between the formal and informal systems and, like the middlemen, are socially marked as good or bad based on whether they are deemed to help local people navigate the indebtedness or hurt local people through high interest rates.

I have been asked why I believe these dichotomies are so stark in Magtaal, in contrast to other areas in Mongolia, as a form of social control that is actually expressed in people's everyday behaviour and practice. I can only assume it is through structural and historical factors: 1) Magtaal is relatively isolated compared to other Mongolian regions, with little migration in or out of the region; 2) Magtaalians remain highly interdependent, with socially tight networks, remaining socially close throughout their lives; 3) Magtaalians share a great sense of being neglected by the government as a border area and are thus dependent on each other; and 4) Magtaalians have a sense of being politically exemplary, living in a location that is unparalleled in its natural resources, housed the booming state farm and is a site of a legendary Second World War battle, central in the political imaginary of the contemporary Mongolian nation state. Regardless, if Magtaal integrates more fully into larger systems, has more traffic in and out of the soum or cannot independently maintain its own economic livelihoods then it is likely these factors will attenuate, becoming the subject of ramblings on how things 'used to be better'.

Notes

- 1 According to statistics from the Mongolian National Statistics Office, 366,200 individuals were herders in 2007, comprising roughly 14 per cent of the total population of 2.6 million people in the same year ([Mongolian National Statistics Office 2011](#), 10). In 2007, there were 226.1 thousand households with livestock (*malтай өрх*, which includes both herders and families with herds) out of 645.7 thousand households in Mongolia or 35 per cent. As of 2021, 20 per cent of Mongolian households are herders ([Mönkhbaatar 2021](#)).
- 2 Frank Langfitt, 'Mineral-rich Mongolia rapidly becoming "Mine-golia"', NPR, 21 May 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/05/21/152683549/mineral-rich-mongolia-rapidly-becoming-minegolia> (accessed 2 January 2023).
- 3 Described as being 'hungover' (*shartah*) after the feast: E. Enkhbold and C. Altantsetseg, 'The Mongolian State Great Hural will decide on the eight per cent interest loan matter this month [*UIH Ipotyekiin Naiman Huviin Zeeliin Asuudlyg Ene Sardaa Shiidverlene*]'. *Ödriin Sonin*, 4 January 2016. <https://dnn.mn/з-энхболд-уих-ипотекийн-найман-хувийн-эээлийн-асуудлыг-энэ-сардаа-шийдвэрлэнэ> (accessed 26 January 2023).
- 4 The official name has been changed because of the sensitive nature of some aspects of the research.
- 5 This population figure is the 2015 number presented to me in 2017 by the local aimag branch of the Mongolian National Statistics Office when I requested the data in person. The Mongolian National Statistics Office is responsible for gathering census data from the country and collates information from the Bank of Mongolia, city, aimag and soum governments into a National Statistical Collated Database (*Statistikiin Medeelliin Negdsen San*) that can be found at the websites www2.1212.mn or www.1212.mn. Many of the national statistics quoted in the book can be found on this website, but not soum-level data.
- 6 Possibly because, in the way High surmises for small-scale mining, these activities are frequently carried out by the rural, poor and herder populations of Mongolia, they are considered unsightly, contradicting romanticized visions of indigenous Mongolia ([High 2012](#)). Studies on the wildlife trade have been limited, save for the influential 'Silent Steppe' study compiled by conservationist organizations ([Wingard et al. 2018](#)). Empson's recent book discusses the antler trade in northeast Mongolia ([2020](#)).
- 7 According to public statistical information found on the Bank of Mongolia and Mongolian National Statistical Collated Database websites. The Mongolian government's balance (*ulsyn tösviin tentsel*) can be found on the Mongolian Central Bank's annually updated chart package (see [Bank of Mongolia 2020](#)).
- 8 It is impossible to know the extent of poverty during socialism, as this was not an institutional discourse and the expansive nature of the welfare state integrated every citizen. Anecdotal informant stories from the 1970s and 1980s suggest that poverty was not widespread. In 1991, the Mongolian government established the first poverty line and determined that 15 per cent of the population was poor ([Japan Bank for International Cooperation 2001](#), 1). In 1998, the Mongolian government carried out a Living Standard Measurement Survey that estimated, based on expenditure and not income, that 35.6 per cent of the population was below the poverty line ([International Monetary Fund 2001](#)). This figure has dropped slightly, yet continues to hover around 30 per cent.
- 9 Annual inflation rose to 325.5 per cent in 1992 with foodstuff inflation rising to 476.6 per cent ([Shagdar 2007](#), 3).
- 10 Rossabi ([2005](#), 93) notes that foreign direct investment remained low in the 1990s because investors were reluctant to invest due to remoteness and poor infrastructure. Indeed, Mongolia's size and low population (ergo consumer base) caps the return potential for both infrastructure and private industry, disincentivizing foreign direct investment.
- 11 The MPR received around 800 million USD per year from the USSR in grants and loans ([Heaton 1991](#), 54), comprising, at the end of the 1980s, around 30 per cent of GDP ([World Bank 2004a](#), 1). After the transition, the Mongolian government, feeling the loss of this aid, participated in a series of development aid talks between 1991 and 2003 under the initiative of the government of Japan and the World Bank known as the Tokyo Meetings ([Buyantogs 2000](#), 48) or the Tokyo Donor's Conference ([Rossabi 2005](#)). Between 1991 and 1997, foreign governments and development organizations pledged 2.9 billion USD or around 300 million USD per year ([United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2013](#), 1), which,

- according to Rossabi (2005) and Telford (2004), comprised roughly 30 per cent of the Mongolian GDP, effectively filling the financial gap left by the USSR. Foreign aid comprised 35 per cent of Gross National Income in 1993 and 12 per cent in 2002 (*National Statistical Collated Database 2023a*). Mongolia continues to participate in regular aid conferences, receiving IMF loans in 1991, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2009 and 2017.
- 12 The first law was passed in 1994 and was not as investor friendly (*Bumochir 2020*, 33).
 - 13 As of 2015, 984 entities held 1,815 licenses, holding claims to 8.9 per cent of the country's territory (*Mineral Resources Authority 2016*, 7–9).
 - 14 In a study based on 2010–12 polling data, Mongolians had the highest rate of protectionist instincts of all polled countries in East Asia at 95 per cent approval for protectionism (*Wu 2019*).
 - 15 In 2006, for example, the Mongolian government passed a windfall tax on gold and copper that taxed at 68 per cent and was the highest in the world (*Myadar and Jackson 2019*). This was repealed in 2009. Moreover, the Human Development Fund was established in 2009, but it replaced the previously implemented Mongolian Development Fund (2007) and was later replaced by the Future Heritage Fund (2016).
 - 16 It remains an industry with lopsided benefits – as of 2017, mining was responsible for 24 per cent of GDP and 80 per cent of exports, yet formally employed only 2 per cent of the country's labour force (*Mineral Resources Authority 2016*, 9; *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019*).
 - 17 I wish to emphasize that not all debt is bad per se, but the effects of debt on an economy depend on its quantity and type. Recent work in economics and related social sciences has unpacked this topic (*Kelton 2020*; *Graeber et al. 2015*; *Graeber 2011*; *Bear 2015*). For example, social scientists emphasize that money itself is created through debt monetization and, by extension, paying off all government debt would decrease the pool of money in the economy (*Graeber et al. 2015*). In turn, recent World Bank reports calculate that a sovereign debt to GDP ratio between 60 and 70 per cent is ideal for economic growth (*Grennes, Caner and Koehler-Geib 2010*). Mongolia's debt causes cascading effects because it is overwhelmingly foreign owned, subject to higher interest rates and more dependent on market fluctuations. In the fourth quarter of 2020, for example, Mongolia's debt was 89 per cent foreign (*National Statistical Collated Database 2023b*). Within Bear's (2015) influential book on the effects of austerity on a shipping port in India, she notes that the issuing of bonds on international markets makes the governments of, in particular, developing contexts increasingly beholden to market fluctuations, the opinions of international investors and their forecasts.
 - 18 During the economic boom, the government, based on 'wildly over-optimist revenue projections . . . of mineral sector revenue growth' (*Bauer et al. 2017*, 1), made the aforementioned social spending promises, acquired foreign loans for infrastructure and issued its first government bond on international markets. Between 2011 and 2016, Mongolia's sovereign debt annually grew by an average of 45 per cent (*Süh-Ochir 2019*, 16). In addition, it took out another loan from the International Monetary Fund in 2017. A requirement of the 2017 IMF loan was the implementation of a Fiscal Stability Law to rein in the government's debts.
 - 19 Mongolia's sovereign debt to GDP was 93.1 per cent in 2016, but has subsequently improved to 74 per cent in 2020 due to a coal and commodity price surge in 2017 (*Süh-Ochir 2019*, 46). However, as public debt has decreased, private bank debt has increased: in 2021, the service payments of public- and private-sector foreign debts comprised 24 per cent of Mongolia's GDP (*Myagmarbayar 2022*).
 - 20 The government has issued the Chinggis Bond (runs 2012–22, at annual interest rates of 4.125 and 5.125); the Eurobond (2012–17; 5.75 per cent); the Samurai Bond (2013–23; 1.52 per cent); the Dim Sum Bond (2015–18; 7.54 per cent); the Mazaalai Bond (2016–21; 10.875 per cent), the Khuraldai Bond (2017–24; 8.75 per cent); the Gerege Bond (2017–23; 5.625 per cent); and the Nomad Bond (20205; 5.125 per cent) (*Chintushig 2017*; *Baljmaa 2020*).
 - 21 Can be found on the UCL Emerging Subjects blog at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mongolian-economy/category/blog-series/loans-and-debt-series/>.
 - 22 Debt-to-GDP ratios in an emerging economy like Mongolia are often lower than advanced economies; in Mongolia, this is likely partly because debt instruments are historically newer and the population has shorter-term (not longer-term) debts. This ratio does not indicate the weight of debt burden at the household level – which would be demonstrated by, for example, high monthly debt-to-income ratios or rates of interest (see *Chapter 4* for time periods of Mongolian loan options and interest rates).

- 23 Sneath also encountered the term *davhar zeel* while on fieldwork to indicate the practice of taking out bank loans, often carried out by herders with poor credit, in a family member's name with better credit (Sneath 2012, 468). In Magtaal, the term was used as a general term for stacking loans in a way not foreseen by the banking industry, either when someone gets two loans at once or uses one loan to pay back another one. Within Sneath's fieldsite, *davhar zeel* also indicated the general practice of stacking loans, of which shared herder debt burdens was one example (D. Sneath, personal communication, 3 June 2022).
- 24 According to official information from the Aimag Statistical Office.
- 25 According to official information from the Soum government.
- 26 In the 1991 privatization reform, most rural Mongolians received asset vouchers to claim state assets, such as animal herds or infrastructural equipment, that had recently been privatized. Magtaal was unusual in that former workers, in addition to receiving vouchers, also immediately received the ownership deeds to their flats.
- 27 Magtaal is the largest soum in Mongolia (Mongolian National Statistics Office 2014, 15). Its current size resulted from the merging of two soums in 1994 (Davajargal et al. 2006, 230).
- 28 On the monetization of favours right after the transition, see Sneath 2006.
- 29 One objective of this latter option was to encourage a diversity of owners in various national industries, but in practice, many family and friend networks pooled share vouchers to become dominant shareowners (Korsun and Murrell 1995, 483–4).
- 30 After 1991, both the local government and local companies started using flour as a de facto currency because of the instability of Mongolia's currency. According to Pürev, who attempted to open an agricultural company in the immediate post-socialist period, many new agricultural companies paid their taxes to the government and salaries to their employees in flour. Also, according to the former governor of Magtaal, in 1992 the Magtaal government carried out a barter trade with the neighbouring local Chinese government, exchanging frozen fish from Dalai Lake, cow and horse skins and sheep wool for rice, flour, tobacco and candies. Therefore, between 1991 and 1998, the soum government frequently paid out portions of bureaucratic salaries in flour. Residents recall that it was very common for bureaucratic employees to trade flour with herders for meat and wood. Some informants recall that they would always use the cost of flour on the market as the baseline value (for example, MNT 80 per kilo of flour), whilst others remember exchanging kilo portions of meat to flour (for example, one kilo to one kilo).
- 31 Particularly in urban centres, the term *suljee* is negatively associated with nepotistic or clientelistic political networks. Generally, *suljee* are forms of social organization where a distinction between public and private (and legal/illegal, borders, timescales, etc.) does not exist except insofar as these categories can be circumvented for profit potential, and so the *suljee* navigates both to make profits for its members. Within rural areas where public/private divides are not idealized as necessary for long-term social structure, *suljee* are generally considered morally neutral (dependent on the circumstance), but within large-scale business and governance, especially in the city, *suljee* are often deemed negative because they ignore a public/private divide, which is likely to undermine the development of a meritocratic system. Generally, however, *suljee* are a pervasive social form in Mongolia and are often deemed either negative or positive based on an actor's evaluation of the *suljee* as either hurting or helping oneself and one's long-term interests: a moral economic dichotomy. The urban political *suljee*, as opposed to the debt and commodity chain *suljee* in Magtaal, tend to be more hierarchical. Humphrey (2010, 82–5) discusses how barter networks in post-socialist Buryatia could often take either more vertical or horizontal forms, whereas the former were predominantly based on hierarchical coercion or 'forced' circumstances and the latter on a form of economically instrumental 'trust'. This categorization can likely be extended to the different types of Mongolian *suljee*, as indicated by the repeated emphasis on 'trust-worthy' (*naidvartai, itgeltei*) partners in the coming chapters.
- 32 In recent decades, this binary vision has been substantially critiqued as creating a false vision of one-directional historical development; as romanticized for not taking into account changeability nor self-aggrandizement within non-market societies; and for ignoring how both the logic of modern markets and their currencies are social constructs that reflect and mediate culture.
- 33 Since many cultural groups underwent processes of peripheral colonization over centuries and engaged in forms of commodity trade with neighbouring groups.

- 34 In other words, the more an object conveyed the history and supreme values of the culture, the higher in the ranking and more coveted it was.
- 35 Anthropologists have noted that bead currencies share many technical qualities with modern money, such as that they are portable, non-perishable and non-specific, so therefore easily multiplied and divided into portions (Akin and Robbins 1999; Graeber 1996, 2001; Holbraad 2005), making them ideal, like modern currency, for mediating between types of transactions and switching between types of value. Specifically, Graeber (2001, 91–115) argues that throughout historical time, societies have contained two types of power manifested through wealth, which he labels ‘action’ and ‘reflection’: either unmarked capacity to act in the future or reflections of past action, respectively.
- 36 Graeber (2011, 46–52) surmises that money’s commodity function emerged in different societies based on whatever change effectuated a conceptual shift from the non-quantified ‘I owe you one’ of total value systems to the quantified ‘I owe you one unit of something’ of utilitarian exchange – whether through forced integration into the market by, for example, colonization, the slave trade or state taxation (like head taxes) (Graeber 2011, 2012); the development of *wergeld* or community-established, transferable compensation payment standards (Ingham 1996); the emergence of monotheistic religions (Weber 2016 [1905]); or increased participation in non-immediate, utilitarian trade (Bird-David and Naveh 2014). Because not all groups were always willing to give up autonomy or be integrated into larger systems, many scholars have argued that it was the emergence of the state – as a power monopoly uniquely situated to integrate vastly different populations into one unit of account regulated and maintained through the requirements of taxation or the threat of violence – that set the conditions for the widespread acceptance of money’s commodity function into many societies (Graeber 2011; Hart 1986; Ingham 1996; Kelton 2020; Knapp 1924 [1905]).
- 37 A common theme within economic sociology and anthropology is precisely that money is not unmarked, but ‘earmarked’ (Zelizer 2017) by culture into special purpose monies. Generally, this line of scholarship supports the argument laid out here, which argues that because money is unmarked in form and structure, cultures attempt to re-mark it through dichotomies and social sanctions.
- 38 Tilly (1971, 47) also notes that the *entrave* or the blocking of grain from leaving the local community to be put on the national market was also common during this period as another form of economic boundary maintenance between the local and the national market.
- 39 After all, ‘short-term’ acquisitive activity only needs to be morally regulated within circumstances, such as the integration into translocal markets, where local people conceptualize profit-making and acquisition as outside their sphere of control or oppositional to long-term value, ergo morally ambiguous. This is, however, not a given to all contexts as much short-term exchange or profit-motivated activity can be seen as embedded in long-term value creation (for example, see Chapter 3).
- 40 Sneath clarifies that Mongolian debt relations can be analytically described as constructing such a spectrum, requiring the need to coin a term, here ‘enactions’, to distinguish between modalities (D. Sneath, personal communication, 3 June 2022). However, in my own fieldwork, I have had informants themselves tell me that debt relations in Mongolia can be delineated as a continuum, so I have left the wording of this sentence. An example of an informant constructing such a continuum can be found in Chapter 5.

1

Defending the beautiful homeland

It was 5 a.m. on a blistering cold and hazy weekday morning in November 2015 when I hailed a taxi to Ulaanbaatar's eastern bus station. The driver, somewhat amused that a foreigner was to undertake the eight-hour public bus ride to Mongolia's eastern aimag, enquired – what could you possibly want to do there? 'I'm going to Magtaal,' I said. Oh. His curiosity was piqued; my answer seemed to light a fire in him. 'Tell them that we support them,' he responded. 'Tell them we are watching.'

My taxi driver's words of encouragement were directed at the political protests that had occurred in Magtaal less than three weeks before. In early June, a parliamentary resolution had been passed by the State Great Hural, Mongolia's parliament, in Ulaanbaatar that authorized the conversion of 5,000 km² (roughly twice the size of Luxembourg) of Magtaal's over 28,000 km² land area (roughly the size of Belgium) into a free trade zone: a cordoned economic area focused on the promotion of international industry through trade-facilitating conditions and regulations. According to the zone's proponents, Magtaal – which boasts rich soil quality, warm temperatures and a long rainy season – provided an ideal opportunity to diversify the national economy away from its post-socialist dependence on the mining industry. Magtaal's free trade zone was specifically envisioned as an agricultural industrial park with partitions to ensure meat and crop quality control to facilitate international export.

Yet the resolution was immediately dogged by accusations of non-transparency. It was passed in a largely vacant parliament sitting on the midsummer day before Naadam, Mongolia's most significant national holiday. This had the effect that both among parliament members and in the national media, the resolution was initially largely unheeded. But in August, a resident of the aimag, a nationally renowned wrestler with family in Magtaal, was watching television and heard about the resolution. What's this? He called his family in Magtaal and they had not heard about it.

Then he called the Ulaanbaatar-based head of the ‘homeland association’ (*nutgiin zövlöl*) – a social interest group that represents the interests of their aimag constituents in Ulaanbaatar – and asked about the resolution. He also had not heard of it. Within a week, they had called around, gathered a group of lawyers and promptly travelled the 1,000 kilometres from Ulaanbaatar to Magtaal. Holding meetings in Magtaal’s cultural centre, local residents became enraged that such a monumental undertaking – an international zone almost five times the size of Hong Kong – was to be built on their doorstep and they did not receive so much as an informational pamphlet.

Over the summer, the news slowly spread and enflamed. An upstart political party seized upon the case and, together with the homeland association, started staging protests in front of parliament, collecting signatures from passers-by and drawing national attention. Early one October morning, residents in the aimag centre called the homeland association director, explaining that they had witnessed a government convoy passing on their way to Magtaal. The residents of Magtaal were notified. Before 10 a.m., over half of Magtaal’s soum centre residents had climbed the mountain at the mouth of the town, constructing a blockade with their cars and brandishing signs with slogans such as ‘You are not wanted here,’ ‘Go back, minister, go back,’ ‘The people [*ard tümen*] do not want your plan,’ ‘This is land grabbing [*gazar bulaalt*]’ and ‘We are not giving up our homeland [*nutгаа*]!’ At dusk, the motorcade arrived in front of the car blockade and Mongolia’s agriculture minister, the architect of the resolution, stepped out. The parties arranged themselves into two formations of irate citizens, yelling at each other from across the divide. My plan is good for you, the minister attempted to argue, but the residents would not have it. Their blockade symbolically represented their refusal to receive the minister, her plan or the ruling party. True to their resolve, the headlines the next day read ‘Minister forced back from Magtaal’.

This is how I first became aware of Magtaal – as a rural *soum* in political protest. In the weeks following the protest, I announced my intention to travel to Magtaal to many Ulaanbaatar-based friends and acquaintances. I encountered two reactions – first, in my discussions with low-income workers, like the aforementioned taxi driver or black-market sellers, I heard impassioned laudatory commentary on the moral rightness of the Magtaal cause; but urbanite professionals (Mongolian and foreign), in contrast, were quite ambivalent and apathetic, asking me why I supposed a rural populace rejected a job-creating economic plan.

This chapter is partly envisioned as a response to these queries – it explains why the overwhelming majority of Magtaal decided so swiftly

and determinedly to outright reject and protest against the free trade zone (FTZ) resolution. In contemporary Ulaanbaatar, rural (and low-income) individuals and their interests are easily silenced – denigrated and devalued through English loanwords like ‘orcs’ (*ork*, from Lord of the Rings) or ‘populism’ (*populizm*, from elite aspersions in the West). At the same time, since the transition to market democracy, rural regions like Magtaal have experienced systemic political and economic neglect, as their local interests have taken the backseat to nationally promoted, internationally advised economic goals. Thus, although the FTZ protest can be cursorily explained as an outgrowth of a rising anti-elite, anti-liberal, anti-globalist political swell in rural (and low-income) Mongolia, reminiscent of other international ethnographic studies that describe similar phenomena as ‘populist’, this chapter is a plea to engage seriously with this rural disquiet as rooted in a neglect-induced, emotionally charged reconsideration of the societal relationship between citizens and their government.

Namely, the emergence of this protest in Magtaal is illustrative of a deeper shift. Although mutable and not always lived in practice, the historical ideals of governance in Mongolia have been characterized by a tripartite moral model of social order: the understanding that the animated landscape as wealth source, the aristocratic leaders and their governance institutions, and the commoners or everyday people are three constituent parts of society, nested within a hierarchy, yet each integral to the functioning and wellbeing of the whole. Seen from this angle, then, the FTZ protest, as the physical rejection of the political class by the people, represents a break in the ideal previously maintained for over one thousand years. In this chapter, I explain the ongoing relevance of this historical model by using the example of Prince Togtokhtör, otherwise known as To Wang (or To Van), an aristocratic ruler in nineteenth-century Magtaal, whose historical legacy was being remembered and celebrated through a week of festivities during my fieldwork in 2017. This chapter argues that entrenched experiences of political-economic neglect among the post-socialist Magtaal populace has resulted in an epistemological fracturing of the historical model into two camps: 1) the central government, its urban culture and laws; and 2) the people of the ‘homeland’ (*nutag*), a pseudo-nationalist movement that reframes the fulcrum of their allegiance away from the central government towards their rural relational identity, including ties with local land. This undercurrent of collective resentment sets the stage for the rest of the book by illustrating why Magtaal residents are widely inclined to circumvent national authority and favour each other in their political worldviews and economic dealings.

Lords of the past

Almost two years after my first trip to Magtaal in investigation of the FTZ protests, my research partner and I arrived in a stream of cars at the base of Tsagaan Uul, the White Mountain, to honour a different era of political leadership. We, along with three hundred other Mongolian participants, were supplicants in a cairn ritual to this mountain – a *tahilga*, from the Mongolian verb *tahih* meaning to deify, worship or revere – that happens triennially at this site in south-eastern Magtaal to honour the deity that provides fertility to the local land.¹ In this year, in 2017, the White Mountain cairn ritual coincided with a larger event of multi-week festivities in Magtaal in celebration of the feudal prince that first formally recognized the White Mountain as a sacred site – the mid-nineteenth-century local nobleman known as Togtokhtör (1797–1868) or, simply, To Wang (‘Wang’ being his noble title). During my fieldwork, the historical figure of To Wang loomed large as an ‘exemplar’ (Humphrey 1997), a model of the ideal Mongolian lord and political figure, that gained in significance in its contrast to the perceived failures of modern politicians. This particular ritual in this particular year had a dual symbolic meaning that lived up to the mountain’s extended name – the Vangiin Tsagaan Uul, or Wang’s White Mountain. Not only, as was customary, did the rite signify interrelation with the spiritual ‘land masters’ (*ezed*) of the local homeland, the *nutag*, but it commemorated the political models offered by the great princes (also *ezed*) of the past.

This ritual was an *ovoo* ceremony – *ovoo* meaning ‘stone cairn’ – which is frequently carried out on the top of mountains or the seat of other impressive land formations known to house the spiritual masters of the land.² Historically, Mongolian pastoralists envisioned the steppe landscape as occupied by powerful yet wily and capricious spirits that, nevertheless, could be appeased through regular offerings and encouraged to use their power for the good of local herders. Because *ovoo* ceremonies are often partitioned by gender, on this particular morning, we arose before sunrise to join the procession of well-dressed women to the women’s *ovoo* at the base of the mountain, while the men started the ascent to the top. We appellants humbly approached the *ovoo* with offerings of various grains, milk products and vodka, circumambulating the stone piles three times, dousing the stones in libations and adding stones to the pile. The theme of cyclicity figures prominently here – not only does the *ovoo* emerge through the stacking of millions of aspirant contributions in repetition of their ancestors and in precedent to their descendants, but also mortal wellbeing is interlinked with trans-human, trans-generational rotations of energy.

Tripartite hierarchical inclusion

The symbolism of the *ovoo* ritual embodies a historical worldview that posits the individual as rooted in larger (spiritual, political) hierarchical wholes. Possibly because the experience of nomadic pastoralism is centrifugal – herds and herders tend to wander from a centre and split into new herds over time – historical processes of governance in the steppe have been centripetal – bringing dispersing groups of herds and herders to order by drawing them to a centre (Pedersen 2003, 2006; Humphrey 1995; Jagchid and Hyer 1979). At the household level, pastoral life is physically arduous and requires labour from all members, resulting in intra-household relational models that are hierarchical, giving the organizational reins to the male ‘head of household’ as *geriin ezen*, but also more historically inclusive of difference, such as gender, than their more sedentary neighbours (Humphrey 1992). As steppe groups become larger, this basic pattern of organizing disparate parts within a hierarchical whole repeats to encompass itself (Sneath 2002, 2007; Atwood 2012).³ This pyramidal organization of herder units, with male heads, integrated into encompassing units under the jurisdiction of a ‘lord’ or *ezen* finds expression throughout Mongolian history during periods of relative stability (Atwood 2012).⁴

The forms of spirituality that developed during these periods mirrors this governance approach. Since at least the third century BCE, steppe peoples have engaged in a form of pantheistic shamanism that conceptualized the universe as populated by both ancestral and land-dwelling nature spirits that could ‘either bless or curse a family, depending upon the family’s attitudes and actions’ (Jagchid and Hyer 1979, 169). When Tibetan Buddhism was reintroduced to the steppe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it overlaid with shamanism to create a more hierarchically centralized cosmology (Humphrey 1995). Bawden (1958) discusses how the Mongolian aristocracy instructed lamas in the eighteenth century to create a ritual that integrated the popular practice of local deity worship into the new religion. This resulted in the *ovoo*, a stone cairn erected close to the believed seat of the ‘land master’ (*gazryn ezen*) to attract the spirit and create a stable location of veneration that local political leaders used to stage their spiritual legitimacy. In turn, everyday cosmologies among pastoral herders mirrored this political philosophy of integrating natural entropy through hierarchical ritual and order (Chabros 1992). To herders, all life, including humans, was integrated into a universal flow of energy, which could be increased or harnessed through good Buddhist behaviours such as charity and

scripture reading (see [Chapters 2 and 3](#)) and performing supplicant ceremonies to entreat blessings from the spirits ([Atwood 2000](#)).

During the Qing dynasty, these political and spiritual practices constructed a tripartite hierarchically inclusivist governance model ([Sneath 2002](#), 198). In the mid-seventeenth century, Outer Mongolia, the territory of the current-day Mongolian nation state, became a suzerainty integrated into the Manchu Qing dynasty, which partitioned the territory into administrative states called aimag that were further subdivided into fiefdoms, known as *hoshuu* or ‘banners’, under the governance of a Mongolian aristocrat who inherited his position along his paternal lineage. The idealization of governance of the period is reminiscent of Dumont’s (1966) description of ‘nested’ hierarchies within the Indian caste system: that, although castes are hierarchically sorted, they are each recognized as having inherent, irreplaceable functions deemed integral to the functioning of the social whole. Within Qing Mongolia, banners were hierarchically governed by noble lords (*jasagh*) expected to run them and allocate their lands in a manner that upheld the unit’s self-sufficiency, while the banner’s vassals (*albatu*, from *alba* or ‘duty’) had nominal rights to use those lands for their herds and were required to perform service such as military, corvée labour or taxation in animals ([Bawden 1968](#), 18; [Jagchid and Hyer 1979](#), 287–8; [Atwood 2012](#), 4). Moreover, through the staging of banner *ovoo* rites, human lords (*ezen*) drew legitimacy from and emplaced the banner and its wellbeing in a hierarchical relationship with the land masters (also, *ezen*) ([Sneath 2007](#), 195; [Humphrey 1995](#)). Princes and peoples were conceptualized as having respective duties within a hierarchical order that, when carried out faithfully, engendered both political wellbeing and spiritual favour.

The real-world consequences of this model were contested during To Wang’s rule in the nineteenth century. To Wang, who was born in 1797 as the sixth generation of a line of nobles in Tsetsen Khan aimag to become the regent of Ilden Vangiin banner in 1822, remains well known among modern scholars as a ‘rare bird amongst his fellows’ ([Bawden 1968](#), 179) because, not content with stasis, he continually strived to increase the capacities of the banner. To Wang was a visionary: he carried out a series of avant-garde political and economic reforms, including the organized implementation of agriculture, small industry (like water mills) and even forms of mining ([Natsagdorj 1968](#), 33–51) to rule the banner ‘as an integrated and diversified economic and cultural unit’ ([Bawden 1968](#), 180). But because his grip on his banner in pursuit of reform was sometimes too tight, he also received the moniker ‘To Wang, the difficult’ (*hezüü*) during his tenure. In the 1830s, he decided to build a large,

culturally impressive Buddhist monastery, mobilizing all the resources and peoples of the entire banner for four years, taxing them for the funds and materials, even having the disabled members of the community form a queue on the ground to pass bricks (Natsagdorj 1968, 23). In 1839, after years of toil, he ordered all the banner's lamas to relocate to the monastery, which provoked an armed revolt. In the words of his subjects, To Wang's taxation had become too great and he had ceased to show consideration and sympathy for their sufferings (Veit and Rasidendog 1975, 835). In the 1850s, his banner was hit by a series of droughts, so he took out moneylender loans to purchase animals to distribute among the impoverished populace. Unable to stem the hardship, To Wang wrote to the Manchu administration in a plea for help and tax leniency (Natsagdorj 1968, 36–41). Both prince and peoples, then, were motivated at different times by expectations of respective obligation.

Arguably To Wang's greatest achievement emerged from his conceptual ability to instrumentalize the tripartite governance vision. During the droughts, To Wang, motivated to prevent further calamity, wrote, in 1853, the first economics text written in Mongolian – *Hebei Wang's Teachings on the Act of Economizing* (*Hebei Vangiin Aj Töröh Üiliig Zaasan Sargaal*) – which contains a series of instructions that directly or indirectly focus on the long-term growth and maintenance of animal herd populations (Bawden 1968, 239). Many of these lessons are simply practical instructions – for example, how and when to herd what animals; what to wear to go herding in the countryside; at what time of the year which animals can be killed and eaten – but there is a constant underlying moralistic quality that frames these actions as examples of political-cum-spiritually 'right' behaviour. For example, To Wang describes the act of paying taxes to the state as a moral duty that, when carried out with loyalty, will reap spiritual rewards:

Because during difficult times [note: such as a drought] people do not have a lot of fortune [*buyan*], it is difficult to accrue wealth on one's own. But if you pay your taxes well to the lord khan [*ezen khan*], then you will get rich through his beneficence [*buyanaar*]. There are no cases of people adhering and paying duties [*alba*] with the true/faithful mentality [*unen sanaagaar*] and then becoming impoverished . . . In this way, the old saying goes 'people who pay tax are sponsored by the state [*tenger*],⁵ people who produce good acts [*buyan*] will be saved by Buddha' (Togtokhtör 1990 [1853], lesson 3).

The *Teachings* is reminiscent of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*. Writing in 1905, Weber theorized that capitalism emerged in Western Europe after the emergence of Protestantism (especially Calvinism) allowed the

conceptual divergence of ‘this life’ (the profane, material world) from the ‘afterlife’ (the sacred world), encouraging the middle class to become materially ascetic to increase their spiritual judgement in the afterlife. In the *Teachings*, the consummate Buddhist herder is presented as humble, temperate and economizing, someone who works hard and is respectful of hierarchy, which will bring success in this life and, in turn, a better spiritual rebirth. However, because To Wang himself did not follow his own maxims on the virtue of frugality, as he was often indebted to moneylenders, the socialist-era Mongolian scholar Natsagdorj expresses misgivings concerning his underlying motivations: To Wang’s actions ‘did not in the least spring from his consideration of the welfare of the people, but are to be explained as being aimed at reducing the people’s consumption as far as possible and increasing his own exploitation of them’ (Bawden 1968, 182; quoting Natsagdorj 1968). But regardless of his exact objective, the lessons and moral vision of the *Teachings* have transcended To Wang’s era, as it is rumoured that the herders in Magtaal’s state farm secretly used it as a didactic guide and it is currently taught as the historical ideal to Magtaal’s schoolchildren.

A politician for the people

For an anthropologist, more insightful than the integrity of To Wang’s intentions in the past is how this legacy is romanticized in the present. After the *ovoo* ceremony at To Wang’s White Mountain, I sat among the participants, eating *hoshuur* and watching the festivities, and asked what had made To Wang significant in the minds of local people. Rather than receive descriptions of his works, ideas or controversies, I was surprised to hear many repetitions of a series of pithy ‘fables’ (*domog*) that depicted him as the epitome of a certain theme – as an *exemplar*. Caroline Humphrey (1997) argues that morality in Mongolia has historically not been characterized by general tenets that apply across the board to all people, but by the elevation of certain people or events to epitomize a certain moral virtue, serving as the model of the respective human behaviour. Exemplars can be people, stories or proverbs that come into the world through human action, but gain moral meaning when cogitated on, learned from and mimicked by disciples or other actors. Back at the ceremony, residents eagerly recalled the story of how the White Mountain became Mongolian:

One day during his reign, a Manchu [Chinese] prince comes to To Wang and claims the White Mountain, on the boundary between

their territories, as his own. To Wang thinks about it and strikes up a deal – ‘I desire a piece of the mountain that is the size of a large cowhide. Anything more than that, you can have.’ Thinking To Wang to be a fool, the Manchu prince agrees. But then To Wang went away and had his servants take a large cowhide, soak it until it was pliable and cut it into a very fine, long cord. Two days later, he returns to the White Mountain and has it wrapped along the entire circumference of its base; there was even some cord left over. Seeing this excess cord, To Wang reveals to the prince that, a few years ago, gold had been buried in the mountain and the leftover cord meant that the mountain had become thinner; someone had stolen some of the gold. Caught off guard and scared of being exposed for theft, the Manchu prince fled and the White Mountain became part of Mongolia.

Other participants told a different story on To Wang’s character:

To Wang was born close to the Salt Lake and was keenly aware of its alkaline properties. He struck up a deal with a Manchu banner [in current-day China] to exchange a thousand carts of salt for a thousand two-year-old cows, but set a strict delivery date. But when the salt carts did not arrive on time, To Wang proclaimed that his banner would not pay and told the caravan to return. The traders, angry at the effort, proclaimed that they would rather dump the salt than trek back again and To Wang brought them to the lake to dump their wares. Since then, and until this day, the lake has produced its own salt, becoming a reliable salt lick for all of the herds of the region to freely use.

These fables share a theme and narrative sequence. To Wang is depicted as a cunning, skilful and sagacious ruler, who strikes a deal with a greedy or half-witted Manchu Chinese individual who assumes, from the outset, that they will unduly benefit from this arrangement. But, To Wang, using his foresight, is able to finagle the situation to his and the banner’s benefit. In both fables, the result is the opening of a land resource, as a site of either sacred or economic wealth, for communal usage by the local (Mongolian) polity. Thus, even if these fables are not completely ‘accurate’, they are significant for their depiction of the exemplar of To Wang – as a skilful Mongolian leader who manoeuvres the schemes of greedy foreigners in the wealth interest of his people.

Indeed, contemporary Magtaal residents refer to the memory of To Wang as the ideal Mongolian *ezen*, the exemplar of what current-day politicians, also *ezen*, should strive to imitate. The week after the cessation of the multi-week festivities dedicated to To Wang, which included several *ovoo* ceremonies, a wrestling competition, academic presentations, film showings, a theatre performance of his life and more, I sat down with Tseren, a well-respected local teacher in Magtaal's grade school. She had participated the previous week in the theatre performance by playing the role of 'vassal', bowing to the actor of To Wang as he rode past on his horse (Fig. 1.1). I asked her, as a teacher who reads the *Teachings*



Figure 1.1 An actor playing To Wang on his noble steed. © Author

to her schoolchildren, if she knew why To Wang was occasionally known as ‘difficult’:

Difficult means ‘smart’ [*uhaantai*]. He gave us economic knowledge and life knowledge. He thought about the interests of his own soum and banner and tried to raise it up. He did a lot here for us. He was hard-working, shrewd and good with words to get what he wanted and liked to cleverly trick people, so people called him ‘severe’ [*shirüün*] or ‘difficult’. He used his intelligence out of affection for his people [*ard tümendee elegtei*].

Throughout our long conversation, Tseren continually compared To Wang’s memory to the actions of contemporary politicians:

The modern government is not good for people [because] politicians now think of themselves and not of the people . . . Now they just think about how they can get rich. They all have money and offshore accounts and companies . . . When they want to get elected, they talk about caring for the people; they talk just like To Wang, but when they get elected, they do the exact opposite . . . but To Wang gave us useful things that we still follow. His intellectual power carries on over two hundred years. Now, if there was [a politician like] To Wang, they would be a real politician for the people [*jinhene ard tümnii uls törj baina*]. If there were more politicians like To Wang our country would be better.

It is difficult to imagine whether To Wang would have been a ‘genuine politician for the people’ considering that he, in his own time, sent troops to attack his own vassals when they revolted in 1839, ordering whippings and locking them in cangues (Natsagdorj 1963, 228–9). Nevertheless, the collective memory of his achievements readily evoked within the minds of contemporary Magtaalians is of his *Teachings*, which paints a moralistic vision of an integrated hierarchy, and the fables, which depict a shrewd Mongolian leader finagling resources for his banner. It is likely that this particular vision has emerged and is honoured in contemporary Magtaal because it represents the conceptual antipode to what residents perceive is currently happening in the soum – that their central government has become greedy, is negotiating away the territory’s resources to the very descendants of the Manchu princes in To Wang’s fables, leading it to politically and economically neglect its constituents. To Tseren, a ‘genuine politician for the people’ would be someone who

works according to the hierarchical inclusivist vision, who governs and manages the territory's wealth (now conceived as resources for money – see [Chapter 2](#)) to maintain the interest of all. Echoing a sentiment that recurs throughout this book, the fact that residents are currently suffering means that something is amiss in this historical governance balance.

Politics of the present

Although it has been over 150 years since To Wang's *Teachings* was written, its model of hierarchical inclusive governance remains the ideal in the soum. At its core, this moral model reasons that when all cogs in the hierarchy are in alignment and work in unison towards a common goal, both the material and sacred wellbeing of the polity are assured. Although it has been adapted to accommodate the shift to a market democratic system, what remains constant throughout the eras is its idealization of *political-economic inclusion* in governance – in other words, the perception that both princes and peoples, politicians and citizens, pursue a common goal that engenders wellbeing for all. In 2004, the political scientist Cas Mudde argued, noticing a global upswing in anti-globalist, anti-democratic and nationalist rhetoric, that the world was experiencing a 'populist zeitgeist' which he defined predominantly as a Manichean worldview that split politics into 'the elite', envisioned as evil, and their nemesis, the 'people' of the republic. However, 'populism', he argued, was a 'thin-centred ideology' because the actual term explains little about why people are driven to formulate this worldview, since individuals on both the political right and left can be populist ([Mudde 2004](#), 544). In Magtaal, although the FTZ protest and many anti-government statements could be labelled as populist because they often frame the central government in opposition to local people, they can be better explained as outcroppings of an undercurrent of grievance, even sadness and feelings of betrayal, over the perceived loss of political-economic inclusion.

A loss of inclusion

The trip from the aimag centre to Magtaal's soum centre consists of an eight-hour drive over unpaved country roads into a largely human-less expanse, but six hours in, travellers bored from seeing only sky and land for many hours suddenly draw in sharp breaths, as oil drills start to appear



Figure 1.2 Oil drills in the Chinese oil field in Magtaal in 2016. © Author

on the horizon (Fig. 1.2). When the state farm collapsed in the 1990s, its workers became instantly unemployed, whilst those individuals at the core of the government system, such as teachers, doctors and government workers, stayed formally employed yet with reduced benefits; now, over 25 years later, not much has proportionally shifted in the south: as of 2015, one-third of the population was formally employed by the government in educational, medical or governance services, while two-thirds remained formally unemployed. Through the privatization process in the early 1990s, local ex-state farm workers initially tried to create new entrepreneurial businesses using the land and resources of the ex-cooperative, but were unsuccessful (see the [Introduction](#)). As a result, Magtaal's territory became a de facto post-socialist 'frontier' – a peripheral territory that, regardless of the actual historical presence of peoples and their lifeworlds, was formally 'unutilized' and open to new individuals and companies with the political and economic resources to formally claim them to make spectacular returns (Tsing 2005). Thus, although very few new formal employment opportunities have emerged for local residents since 1990, this does not mean that economic opportunities (for others) have not appeared. By 2012, several agricultural companies with associations to wealthy Ulaanbaatar-based families had started agricultural outposts in Magtaal, and in 2014, a Chinese oil state-owned

enterprise (SOE) gradually expanded its activities into Magtaal from the neighbouring soum.

Between 1993 and 1995, in an era when Mongolia was highly encouraging of outside investment (see the [Introduction](#)), the national government signed an investment-sharing contract with a joint American–Australian oil venture to explore and exploit three oil fields, including one in the neighbouring soum (to the west of Magtaal) and two in Magtaal. When, in 2005, this licence was purchased by the Chinese SOE, the agreement was transferred and the company started building its first field in the western soum. To this day, the full terms of the agreement remain fairly opaque to the general public,⁶ but the media widely reports that it stipulates a flat payment share (including any taxes) of 21 to 24 per cent (dependent on the field) on revenue to be paid directly to the central government ([Sodnom 2003](#), 143–50). In Magtaal, starting in the 2000s, the oil company was the source of much anger in the soum because, at the time, its lorries were traversing Magtaal over unpaved roads to cross into China, throwing up dust plumes that choked animals ([Fig. 1.3](#)). At the same time, since the early 2010s, several Ulaanbaatar-based conglomerates owned by elite Mongolian families (including some parliament members) arrived, opening daughter companies focused on agriculture and herding to complement the conglomerate’s larger



Figure 1.3 Oil lorries queuing up at the border crossing. © Author

activities in other regions in Mongolia.⁷ In 2016–17, there were 10 agricultural companies in the soum; three were owned by major ‘elite’ Ulaanbaatar families and parliament members.

If you take a bus from the aimag centre to Magtaal, after crossing the border into the soum, it has a routine set of stops: first there is nothing but expanse until it reaches the oil field, letting out some passengers; then there is nothing but expanse until it reaches the agricultural company with the massive hay silo, letting out some passengers; then there is expanse again until it reaches, after another 40-minute drive, the soum centre poking out from the foothills. Evidenced by the sheer distance between them, these various sites both feel like and infrastructurally function as tiny cultural islands with very little traffic between them. For one, these various companies source the majority of their employees (and materials) from outside the soum: one agricultural company I frequented in 2016 had 94 employees, 15 of whom came from the soum, while the oil SOE officially had 262 employees, of whom around 30 were from the soum.⁸ With the exception of one person I encountered,⁹ the Magtaal employees were the lowest paid workers in the position of cleaners, cooks and, at the oil company, drill operators.¹⁰ Moreover, at the oil company, they were the lowest paid amongst the Mongolian employees, who were all paid less than their Chinese counterparts.¹¹ In my interviews with the directors of the agricultural companies, their hiring tendency was explained as a result of local people’s laziness or ‘handout mentality’ (*belenchleh setgelgee*): that they wanted a lot for little effort. It was often discussed in the soum that because all these companies signed their paperwork and received their licensing from the central Mongolian government, they were not economically liable to the local government and had little pressure to integrate with the soum through employment, good pay or community outreach.¹²

Because these companies are predominantly plugged into national and international flows, residents feel and are largely practically excluded from the post-socialist formal economic opportunities that emerged in the soum. Over a year after the FTZ protest in Magtaal, I found myself sitting in Kazi’s kitchen – a 57-year-old cook and native to the area, who, starting in the 2010s, was hired every busy harvest season to work as a short-term cook at one of the agricultural companies. Kazi had been an avid supporter of the anti-FTZ movement, even travelling to Ulaanbaatar to collect signatures in front of parliament, and, on the day of the Magtaal protest, had been present at the top of the hill, clutching a sign that read ‘My Magtaal is not the government’s to sell!’ In our interview, instead of jumping straight into why she had protested, I asked her what the

economic conditions were like in the soum. 'The situation is very weak, very bad [*mash doroi muu*],' she answered, and continued:

Those companies [that come here] are always foreign companies with foreign investment. I don't know how they can just come here and possess [*ezleed*] our land for their enterprise. Only our politicians [literally: big big bosses or *tom tom darga nar*] know [how this is possible] and smooth it over. I don't know what 'capital investment' means. They do not explain anything to us and we know very little . . . And then they also say things like all of the households in Mongolia are entitled to get a parcel of land for their family's wellbeing. But when we go and ask for it, [the government] tells us there is no land [to be had]. Or if they say there is land, then they show us the worst plot full of potholes that is unusable. A pit in the ground . . . But then if one of those companies comes, then they give them the most beautiful piece of land to use. So, does that mean [the government gets] their 'investment' from that? I don't know. We don't have any specifics at all. So, [the government] doesn't tell us anything, we aren't experts and they don't give us any explanatory information. And even if they do, they don't listen to us. They are just splitting the profits up there [at the higher echelons] and eating them up [*deegüüree huvaaj ideed duuslaa*].

She repeated many of these sentiments with reference to the oil company:

And generally we know nothing about why that oil company was built here. Why are they changing [the landscape of] my homeland this way? How has it come to be that they are in my homeland's territory but we don't know who gave them the permit to be here? Did it come completely from the top [*bür deereesee*] from the big ministers in Ulaanbaatar? Or did my soum government give them permission? We generally know nothing. They don't give us any information. But suppose they did because it is our homeland, well then we would want them to distribute a bit of the profits downward and employ people from here. Yes, that would be the right thing. Right now so many of our young people are unemployed; so many of our cooks are unemployed. And those companies constantly get their employees from the aimag centre and from here and from there and who knows where. The same at the oil company's two fields. And so, right now, my Magtaal is full of unemployed people. But [the companies] should be 100 per cent

sourcing their employees from here! But who are we supposed to tell these things to? Why do we not have the information about these things?

It is palpable from these statements that individuals like Kazi feel they are being economically displaced in their own home. In his study of 'spreading populisms' among working-class Polish citizens, Don Kalb (2009), following Jonathan Friedman, argues that these movements often emerge from experience with (and fears of further) *transnational disenfranchisement* – a growing cultural divide between urban elites and other communities within a nation that results from the former's focus on transforming themselves into cosmopolitan classes, more concerned with engaging in transnational flows than promoting the project of the nation as a community of fate. Kazi's statements and experiences vis-à-vis the large companies in Magtaal echo a similar rift. In contrast to the contemporary idealization of To Wang where individuals, like Tseren above, use hierarchical language to depict an alliance of two differently positioned yet aligned classes, Kazi's statements concerning the current national government are similarly hierarchical but present a disconnect between those 'up there' and us 'down here'. She discusses how decisions are made remotely in Ulaanbaatar by the big bosses, who discuss things among themselves 'up there', hand out decisions 'from above' and should distribute profits downward. As discussed further below, Kazi, in contrast, presents herself as lower-class and uneducated. The worldview that is recreated here is of a stratum that radiates out from Ulaanbaatar, which draws capital from international flows and directs workers, products and payments to and from the Magtaal-based company islands that flows largely over the heads, outside of the reach of and inscrutable to local people.

So, in contrast to the idealized hierarchical inclusion of To Wang, now Magtaal residents feel hierarchically excluded. Following the collapse of the socialist MPR, the new market-democratic Mongolian government ended its paternalistic policies and formally encouraged the pursuit of private entrepreneurialism and business as the new avenue for national wellbeing (stated explicitly by the prime minister: see [Chapter 4](#)). But in Magtaal, in practice, these purported entitlements to new property and entrepreneurial opportunity have often been de facto unobtainable (see [Chapter 3](#) on wildlife permits). In Kazi's case, she describes how local residents have the formal right to apply for and receive a plot of land in the local soum to grow vegetables or build a house, but many people I talked to in the soum recounted that it was practically very difficult to receive them. Both with the employment opportunities and with the plot of land, then, individuals formally have a

right or an avenue to participate in new opportunities, but for some reason that they do not know or understand, they are inaccessible to them. Individuals like Kazi are left puzzling over what the possible reason could be for this de facto debarment. Not obtaining clear information from their government, such as with the oil company, nor direct benefits, as with the agricultural companies, residents rationalize this exclusion as instigated by money, greed, international backdoors and conspiracies.

Similarly, it was not the FTZ resolution per se that massively angered residents. According to the 2015 'Law on Free Trade Zones' (FTZ Law), revised by the Mongolian parliament just a few months before the resolution, a 'free zone' (*chölööt büs*) is a section of territory within Mongolia that will be cordoned off and considered outside of the country's custom's zone, subject to special tax, infrastructure and migration regimes with the intent of attracting foreign investment and facilitating business growth (State Great Hural 2015). The anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2000, 57) argues, using case studies in Indonesia and Malaysia, that special economic zones tend to create conditions of 'graduated sovereignty' – the differential state treatment of different segments of the population based on their relation to market calculations – because they proportionally emphasize economic over other rights. With the FTZ Law, although it stipulates that zones are subject to the Mongolian Constitution, it also includes many clauses that are more permissive towards foreigners than state law – namely, land possession for foreign companies,¹³ as well as increased freedom of movement for nationals bordering the zone. In Magtaal particularly, the FTZ Law provoked ire among the population with its clauses that citizens of the country bordering on the zone could enter it visa-free for 30 days (11.1), while Mongolian citizens needed to show passports to enter (11.4): if the FTZ had been built according to this plan, it would have socio-culturally, infrastructurally and geographically cut off Magtaal's soum centre from the rest of the country.

The FTZ Law received so much pushback because of existing anger and distrust vis-à-vis the government. The Magtaal FTZ was planned to be built in the area where the oil and some agricultural companies were active, which had already, in the minds of residents, received great regulatory leniency from the Mongolian government, but because residents did not know the full contents of the company contracts, they could not take any legal action against them. With the FTZ, however, residents had the legal clauses and support to act decisively, ultimately striking down the resolution in 2016 through the legal technicality that its parliamentary passing had violated the administrative process.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the dubious manner in which the resolution had been passed sparked many suspicions and rumours in Magtaal concerning

the motivations for why parliament members had initially approved the plan – either, residents hypothesized, they wanted to install their own companies in the zone; or foreign countries were ‘land grabbing’ (*gazar bulaalt*) by paying off parliament members; or the zone, through the justification of ‘investment’ and ‘job creation’, was an attempt to circumvent the nominal need for corporate social responsibility. In the autumn of 2016, even after the resolution had been officially rescinded, mysterious number signs began popping up at night across the land area of Magtaal that declared their location as designated sites for the ‘State’s Agricultural Zone’. Never later claimed by anyone, these signs made clear to the populace that someone still had ambitions for Magtaal’s land (Fig. 1.4).



Figure 1.4 Mysterious signs proclaiming a free trade zone pop up surrounding Magtaal in the night in autumn 2016. © Author

Mattering forth of the *nutag*

Subject to political-economic exclusion, many Magtaal residents began to reposition the fulcrum of their socio-political identities away from the central government. In contrast to Kalb's emphasis on capital flows, William Mazzarella (2019) suggests that scholars reach for the term 'populism' whenever they sense the breakdown of what he calls the 'liberal settlement' – the imaginary post-Second World War division of the world into the liberal 'free world', with hegemonic forms of liberal democracy, and those countries that are not 'free', such as communist states or developing countries. In contrast to liberalism, which frames citizens as many unconnected, individuated, self-actualized selves, he argues, these movements often rely on an imagery of a 'collective flesh', a substance of the people that through sheer number and immediacy 'matters forth' and overwhelms any liberal focus on the rights of the one (Mazzarella 2019, 49). After the fall of the MPR in 1990, the ideals of market liberalism arrived in Mongolia, but in the subsequent 30 years, their promise has been more fulfilled for certain segments of the population – namely, the urban, educated middle and upper classes – than others. In turn, the rhetorics of republicanism and nationalism have fused among the lower rungs of society, among those for whom the liberal settlement has not revealed its promise, into the rallying cry of 'the people' (*ard tüimen*). Within this narrative, 'the people' are the populations that occupy and constitute the 'homeland' (*nutag*), which, in Magtaal, is spatially fixed to the soum. From this angle, then, the FTZ Law represented not only a threat of further economic disenfranchisement, but also an attack by the central government on the spiritual-political locus of the homeland.

In contrast to the ideals of liberalism which assume that government and citizens have no inherent obligation to each other, besides the creation and following of laws to maintain the conditions of general wellbeing, the ideals of hierarchical inclusion contain the expectation that government and peoples are nested in an inherent attachment of reciprocal care. At least in Magtaal, populist rhetoric often emerges from situations where people were giving voice to the anger and confusion they felt in trying to understand why, as in the aforementioned examples of transnational companies and local plots, government and elites were no longer honouring this attachment. For example, Tseren, the grade school teacher who taught To Wang's *Teachings*, explained, still comparing to the exemplar of To Wang, how she felt contemporary government was failing:

It is true that To Wang was 'strict' and could be a bit of a dictator, but he did it to maintain [the good of all]. But now, our laws are not strict and they are not implemented . . . If the law was strict, we would be disciplined. For example, if people in China or Korea are corrupt, those people go to jail, but in Mongolia, the directors and the heads are eating lots of money, but nothing happens [to them]. To Wang, in contrast, upheld the state[']s responsibilities]; when he got tax revenue, he gave maybe 60 per cent to the Manchu and used 40 per cent to help his banner. Does the state still care for us like that? Those things barely happen now . . . Democracy is too open [*zadgai*; literally: unbridled, untethered]. The government's obligation to us remains the same, but if the law is not being implemented, we don't get shown any care . . . In To Wang's *Teachings*, he wrote about how the rich and poor need to work together; that the rich couldn't treat the poor like slaves . . . now, there is a huge difference between the rich and poor and we can't do anything about it.

Here, Tseren argues that the hierarchical inclusive relationship between government and citizens contains duties and expectations similar to a parent/child bond: the parent must govern in a manner that maintains a balance between discipline and care, so that the child can become a well-adapted upholder of society. To Tseren, although the post-socialist ideals of liberalism nominally continue historical governance obligations, they are not doing so in practice: the government is not implementing its laws and is not 'strict'; the people are not receiving care and are being overlooked; and the attachments between the classes have become so untethered that their division is growing out of proportion, with the rich becoming super rich and the poor becoming poorer. In stark contrast to James Scott's (1976) idealization of gaining autonomy by fleeing the state, Magtaal's citizens feel deep-set sadness and confusion at this state of affairs, rather like a child that has been unwittingly abandoned by its parents, often using terms like a lack of being considered (*bodoh*) or looked out for (*harah*) and also having been thrown away (*hayah*) by their politicians.

The political language used by Magtaalians to describe themselves and their government reflects this sense of the tether between them being stretched, if not already snapped. Throughout the interviews, residents used terminology from the feudal, socialist and post-socialist eras to depict themselves as a neglected-yet-righteous collective political mass in opposition to those classes, the elite, who have violated the obligations of their historical alliance. In her discussion of the lack of commitment

companies evince towards local residents, for example, Kazi echoed Tseren's statements that there is a growing divide between the richer and poor segments of society:

Yes, there are no jobs here; especially not for our young people. And when there is a job, the people that work in the company call up their family member or their kind of people and get them hired through the back door [*ar övriin haalgaar*]. It's just the people like us of my ilk [*man' metiin*] that are the black and brown people [*har borchuud*], the ones who do not have connections, we will not find a job . . . we are [the black and brown people]: the ordinary, poor people like us [*maniudyg*] who just work to scrape by [*amia teeh*].

In Magtaal, people perceive a sharp divide between those people with the connections, knowledge and resources to survive within the current system and those, like themselves, who can't. As their opposite, residents refer to the former group as the Ulaanbaatar-based wealthy (*bayachuud*), the 'elites' (*elit*), the 'big bosses' (*tom darga nar*), 'the lords' (*ezenten*), the 'high rankers' (*deedchүүл*), the 'billionaires' (*terbumtan*) and more. In contrast, Kazi referred to herself and the Magtaal citizenry as 'the poor' (*yaduuchuud*) or the 'black and brown people' (figuratively: 'the working class'), utilizing two colour designations used to refer to underclasses during the pre-socialist feudal era,¹⁵ which, when I later asked Kazi to clarify, she understood as references to the colour of their skin after grunt work (*har bor qijil*) under a hard sun. As evinced by her comment, in these narratives, residents rarely refer to themselves in the singular or as a family, but constantly as representatives of a unified collective of similar sentiment. Easily the most commonly utilized term within Magtaalian political discourse, residents refer to themselves as constituents of 'the people' (*ard түмен*), the neglected yet virtuous political underclasses of Mongolia. Or they refer to the soum as a collective of shared sentiment such as 'my village people' (*tosgoniihon*), 'my people' (*manaihan*), 'my homeland people' (*manai nutgiihan*), 'people of my ilk' (*maniud; man' met*) and 'my soum people' (*sumyhan*).

Within this discourse, the tie that binds people together is their mutual attachment and belonging to the *nutag* or 'homeland'. When the MPR was formed, pre-socialist Mongolian terminology, which divided the masses into feudal classes, could not conceptually capture the Marxist-Leninist notion of the revolutionary working-class people in struggle, resulting in the creation of a neologism that fused the feudal term for secular commoners, *arad*, with the term for multitude, *tүмен*, as 'the

people' or *ard tümen* (Sneath 2010, 252–3). During this period, Stalin's assertions that 'a nation' was a group of people with shared kin lineage and traits that rested in a territory as its spiritual, spatial cradle was also translated into Mongolian concepts utilizing the terms 'motherland' (*eh oron*) and 'homeland' (*nutag*) (Sneath 2010, 253). According to Sneath (2010, 256), both during socialism and with the revival of tradition in the post-socialist era, this concept of the *nutag* has been 'elevated to the point of becoming a sacred principle'. In contemporary Mongolian politics, the usage of this term is relationally scaled – when referring to the nations of the world, *nutag* refers to Mongolia; but from within Mongolia, Magtaalians use the term *nutag* to refer to the *soum*. In fact, because political movements fashioned around the *soum* as a community of shared sentiment have become more common in the last decade, Munkherdene and Sneath (2018) coined the term *nutagism* to describe this *soum*-based downscaling of nationalist rhetoric. In Magtaal, residents constantly talk about how they are in, a part of, or one of the many of the *nutag*, which is imagined as the shared political-sacred body united through its spiritual-relational oneness with local land.

Similar to Western national populisms, *nutagism* derives its superior moral authority from being closer to and more representative of 'the people' of the nation. Recent work on rising populisms in the United Kingdom notes how their rhetoric, similar to Magtaalian hierarchical distinctions above, often 'invert . . . the elites' discourse of cosmopolitanism [by] relying on a language of rootedness' (Koch 2016, 284), with populists imagining themselves as the latest in a long and shared history of the British underclasses, deriving their moral character from the positive traits of being grounded, community-minded and locally, not globally, oriented (Balthazar 2017; Koch 2016). In the case of Magtaal, not only is the *soum* renowned throughout Mongolia as To Wang's home and the site of the award-winning state farm, but also it is world famous as the location of many decisive Second World War battles that stemmed the Japanese advance into the Soviet Union. For this reason, in her description of the motivations behind the FTZ protest, Kazi cast it as an act of service in line with the sacrifices of previous generations:

If we hadn't protested then what would have become of the blood of our ancestors [*övög deedsiin maan' tsus*] that was shed to keep our beautiful homeland [*ene saihan oron nutгаа*] . . . And through our ancestors' efforts our beautiful, nature-rich homeland has developed so wonderfully. Even if there are now Western people living here, they are still in our homeland . . . The children that come from us,

they are called the children of the [Magtaal] River . . . That's why we cannot easily lose our beautiful homeland and all of the beautiful benefits [ögööjöö] it gives us.

Here, similar to the language of everyday rootedness in British populism, Magtaal's residents conceptualize the *nutag*'s people as the latest iteration in a long lineage of the commoner classes – which include the vassals of To Wang's time; the Mongolian soldiers of the Second World War; and the workers of the socialist state farm – that have shed blood, sacrificed time and effort to maintain the integrity of the nation and develop it into something beautiful that they now reap. Within a context where market-liberal narratives are felt to buttress disenfranchisement – for example, enclosing land in order to create jobs or uphold the rights of the owner of an economic contract – the imagery of the angry collective masses, which draw their moral supremacy from the deep, transgenerational 'people' as the true authority of the republic, is a powerful countering tool because it frames any politician or liberal contract as illegitimate if they undermine the republic's original mandate of national continuity.

However, in contrast to contemporary Western nationalisms as chiefly rooted in the shared political lineage, the Mongolian concept of the *nutag* is also much more intertwined with the literal earth that constitutes the homeland (see [Chapter 2](#)). As evinced by the continuity of the *ovoo* ritual, Mongolian herders have historically and continue to imagine their wellbeing as intertwined with the favour imparted upon them by the land masters which are envisioned to create the grasses and animals that feed humans and can impart and take human life. Within this worldview, the newborn exists because of the land master's favour, resulting in many traditions that honour and make explicit the relationship between human child and sacred earth: among the Buryat Mongols, the placenta of a baby is buried in its location of birth ([Empson 2011](#), 159–60), while in Central Mongolia, a newborn is rolled in the sand ([Bumochir 2019](#), 168). From this angle, then, the political body of humans is never purely secular, but it exists corporeally because of and is intertwined with the spiritual masters of the earth, producing the person as constituted by and constituting a shared spiritual-relational corpus. Indeed, when Magtaal residents refer to the *nutag*, this often refers not only to the soum political collective, the people of the *nutag*, but also to their shared spiritual relation to and interdependence with the land master.

Thus, the rootedness that Magtaalians claim they share runs deeper than political lineages: it inheres in the substance of their bodies

that originated in the *nutag*. Drawing authority from nationalist, republican, class-based histories and pastoral cosmologies, Magtaal *nutagism* constitutes the worldview that they are the everyday ‘people’ of the soum that share their collective origin from, are nurtured in life by, have a reciprocal relationship with and return in death to the land masters and, as such, have the superior authority to remain in and benefit from its land. Here, then, *nutagism* is directly and intimately attached to the specific territory, and thus taking the land away, kicking people off it or cordoning it off in an FTZ represents the destruction of the continuity of lineage between a certain people and the land master. For this reason, the FTZ protest was a battle for the right to be the human constituency of this *nutag*. To Kazi, this was the logic behind why people were so unified in protest: ‘People generally protested in order to retain the homeland’s beautiful nature and all its aspects. In a way, they were trying to seize [*bulaah*] our lives.’ Another politically engaged local herder put it this way: ‘If they came for your home, you would get angry too’ [*Tany geriig avna gevel yalgaagüi uurlana shüü dee*]. Indeed, if the resolution had been implemented, Kazi’s grandchildren would have no longer been the ‘children of the Magtaal River’ who were able to use all the ‘beautiful benefits’ (*ögööjöö*) that the land provides to continue their lineage and reciprocal relation with the land master.

Conclusion

Given the historical idealization of the tripartite social contract and the Mongolian adulation of political hierarchy, nothing short of a moral breach of immense magnitude must have taken place to sow cracks in the order. In the years following the post-socialist collapse, rural Magtaal residents have felt entrenched political-economic neglect. Some residents maintained that they could not access either the jobs, land or resource permits they were politically promised and legally entitled to. Others felt slighted after seeing non-residents access these same resources. Still others complained and were told that their perceptions were not true, and that they needed to work harder (that they were, for example, ‘lazy’), or were openly ignored (‘they don’t tell us anything’). Thus, at least in Magtaal, what a political scientist might label the manifestations of ‘populism’, such as anti-globalist, anti-elite or anti-foreigner sentiment, are not the source of the anger, but the triggers of the larger search for explanations for why Mongolian politicians have decided to thwart or relinquish their historical duty

of inclusion. In the case of the FTZ Law, residents did express fear that Chinese people would overwhelm the *nutag* or that foreigners would grab land, but these conditions were only conceived of as threats within a context where residents no longer trusted the government – full of politicians now believed to be greedy – to harness these situations to the betterment of residents and the nation.

In Magtaal, *nutagism* is an attempt to re-create inclusion: to bring political-economic relations back to a level where they feel that it represents local welfare. It is a discourse that rescales the tripartite social contract down to the level of the *nutag*, cutting out government and human lords as the historical liaison between the common people and the sacred land and, in doing so, marks a foundational break in the history of Mongolian governance. Put in Bumochir's terms, it represents a historical de-deification of the state and the re-deification of the *nutag* (Bumochir 2020, 101). While strolling around after the *ovoo* ritual during the ceremonies at White Mountain, I asked several supplicants if they had come to honour To Wang and received the following answer: 'No, To Wang showed us where the land master was, but he was a person of the state. In the past, the state [*tör*] and our homeland [*nutгаа*] were one, but no longer.' In this rescaling of people's allegiance to the *nutag*, it draws its moral legitimacy from two lineages: first, the historical, trans-generational 'people' of the republic; and second, the sacred corpus of the *nutag* as constituted by both humans and land. Moreover, within a resource-based economy, the fertile benefits (*ögööjöö*) the land provides gain a new facet of importance as a source of monetary income on which the soum has become collectively dependent for their mutual economic survival (see Chapters 2 and 3). The enclosing of land through the FTZ Law would have been the final displacement: the dislocation of peoples from their self-fashioned system of inclusion carved out from within larger conditions of post-socialist political-economic neglect.

Notes

- 1 The word *tahilga* is associated most directly with offerings or sacrifice; the word *dallaga*, which generally means 'ritual to beckon fortune', can also be used in this context (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018; Chabros 1992; Humphrey 1995, 147).
- 2 Most anthropological studies on Mongolia mention the *ovoo* ritual in some capacity: it is a common phenomenon. Particularly crucial to my analysis were Bawden 1958; Humphrey 1995.
- 3 In the thirteenth century, as perhaps the most celebrated example, Genghis Khan (sometimes known as 'Chinggis' in English) consolidated his power by establishing a military-administrative decimal system that subdivided pastoral households into groups of ten and then emplaced

- them into larger units of one hundred, one thousand (*myangad*) and ten thousand (*tüimed*) households with commanders at each level (Jagchid and Hyer 1979, 271).
- 4 Specifically: the Mongol Empire (1206–1368); the Dayan Khanid period (1510–1634); and the Qing dynasty (1636–1912). See Atwood 2012.
 - 5 *Tenger* means Heaven, but implies here the ancestors of the nation (like Chinggis Khan) who are channelled through the state apparatus and its cult.
 - 6 Sharing percentages are redacted on officially released contracts.
 - 7 This tactic for a larger company to open up several daughter companies in unrelated industries is a common business tactic in Mongolia, so that the larger conglomerate can buttress itself against default or economic crises in one sector by moving profits between the different branches (Chuluunbat and Empson 2018).
 - 8 According to in-house statistics I received from the Mongolian government office at the oil company's offices in October 2016, there were 262 formal Mongolian employees and 94 formal Chinese employees. Discussions with long-term employees revealed, however, that the company contracts multiple Chinese firms for short-term repairs and services such as oil transport, nature rehabilitation, drilling companies, drill repair and cartography. These supporting companies comprise an additional three to four thousand (mostly Chinese) workers. Also in October 2016, a Mongolian government spokesman for the company unofficially told me that there was a worker quota agreement (*kvot*) between the Mongolian government and the company that the number of Chinese workers at any time at the camp could not exceed a 35:65 Chinese-to-Mongolian worker split. If this is true, the situation adds to the existing confusion and doubt towards the oil company: although officially the oil field is portrayed as staffed by mostly Mongolians, this information is considered contradictory to the size of the Chinese quarters of the camp (and the visible number of people), which are much bigger than the Mongolian quarters.
 - 9 There was a soum-born technician at the agricultural company that made 1,200,000 MNT per month (USD 600): a very high salary by local standards.
 - 10 Drill operators at the oil company start at 400,000 MNT per month (USD 200).
 - 11 One long-term Mongolian employee at the oil company who was an urban transplant explained that all Mongolians at the camp got less than their Chinese counterparts in the same professional bracket. He told me that while he received 800,000 MNT (USD 400) as an administrator and a Mongolian cleaner would get 350,000 (USD 175), a Chinese counterpart in his position would receive 1,500,000 MNT (USD 750) and a low-skilled worker would receive 600,000 MNT (USD 300).
 - 12 Community outreach differed among the companies: the various agriculture companies visibly engaged in and financed soum festivities; but the oil SOE was well known for its lack of engagement in the community. One oil company employee who had formerly worked for Oyu Tolgoi (which is partly Canadian-owned) noted that the oil company was not a 'Western company' and had no pressure from its own citizens for transparency and outreach. Starting in 2015, the Mongolian government made the oil company honour a stipulation in its contract to build an asphalted road. During my fieldwork, the company was financing and building many asphalted roads throughout the soum.
 - 13 According to the 2002 Mongolian Law on Land, only Mongolian citizens and companies can 'possess' (*ezemshih*) land (State Great Hural 2002, Article 27.2), whereas the FTZ law enables possession when approved by the zone's governor (State Great Hural 2015, Article 22).
 - 14 According to a lawyer representing the homeland association, the resolution was struck down because they argued that, according to Resolution 402 passed in 2014, all ministries had to be involved in and approve the creation of the resolution, but the Ministry of Agriculture had unduly facilitated and approved the process, circumventing the Ministry of Industry.
 - 15 According to Charles Bawden's Mongolian-English Dictionary, first published in the mid-1970s, *borchuud* had historically been a term for the secular inhabitants of towns in Manchu times. During Mongolian socialism, the term expanded to become a placeholder for the concept of 'the proletariat' (Bumochir Dulam, personal communication). 'Black', in contrast, was used for centuries to elucidate a distinction between the noble, aristocratic classes, who were referred to as 'white-boned', and the commoner underclasses, designated as 'black-boned' (Sneath 2007). In the immediate pre-socialist period, in addition, 'black' (*har*) was used to differentiate secular commoners from the 'yellow' (*shar*) members of the Buddhist monastic establishment (Sneath 2007, 51). The conjunction of these terms thus rhetorically reproduces historical precedents of class segmentation between upper- and lower-class people.

2

A proportional share

It is a crisp fall day in September 2017 and the central square in Magtaal feels like a ghost town. For the four months between summer and the start of fall, the local steppe landscape is fairly dry but not yet frozen, allowing the quick uprooting of *Saposhnikovia divaricata*, a plant commonly known within Traditional Chinese Medicine as *fang feng*. In formal Mongolian, the plant is known as *derevger jirgerüü*, but Magtaal residents exclusively refer to it as ‘the root’ (*ündes*), as that is the part that is profitable on the international market.

In the late 1990s, two Chinese men entered Magtaal to work as seasonal fishermen at Dalai Lake (see [Chapter 3](#)) and realized that the area was awash with wild-growing, untouched *fang feng*, deemed ‘organic’ and thereby highly lucrative in China. They put out a call to the local populace, saying that they would pay good money for any roots privately collected and brought to them. Now, almost 20 years on, even though *fang feng* procurement has been gradually illegalized by Mongolian environmental legislation, its local popularity as a subsistence strategy has only grown in lockstep with the booming consumer demand and climbing prices for *fang feng* in China. By the time of my fieldwork, *fang feng* season had become a communal event, as everyone, in the words of one picker, from ‘the age of six to grandmothers in their sixties’ was mobilized to roam the open countryside in search of plants for sale to China.

On this day at around seven in the evening, right after a wave of people returned from all-day expeditions, we had the good fortune to run into Amina. I had been trying to meet her for some time, as I had been told that she would be the ideal person to talk to if I wanted to understand the local rationale behind the *fang feng* craze: Amina, a 42-year-old woman born and raised in the soum, was renowned for her skill in ‘picking the root’ (*ündsiig tüüh*), as local people referred to the activity. I asked her

why she thought so many residents were ‘picking’ (*tüüdeg*). It is, of course, economically ‘very helpful for our lives’ (*nemer baih*), she started, but it was also a matter of principle:

There is now a big oil company here [in Magtaal] and it doesn’t give anything back to our soum or homeland or pay any taxes or fees. But, in a way, it is getting its profits from our land [*manai ene nutgaas*]. In my opinion, at the very least, this profit should be a benefit to every citizen in their proportional measure [*ard irgeded n’ zohih hemjeenii huv’ nemer baih lystoi*] . . . But we are not receiving our share [*huv’ irdeggüi*] . . . So, you could say, that every citizen picking [the root] in our soum is, in a way, receiving their allotment of mother nature’s fortune [*baigaliin hishgiig hürtej baina*].

In [Chapter 1](#), I discussed how residents evince a formal ideal of inclusive governance, but feel debarred or not considered by post-socialist formal economic shifts, encouraging them to refocus their allegiance around the ideal of the homeland or *nutag*. Amina starts with a similar rhetoric, criticising the post-socialist presence of formal companies in the soum, like the Chinese oil company introduced in the previous chapter, because they are engendering economic profits by taking resources ‘from the homeland’ (*nutgaas*) whilst not giving back a portion of these proceeds as taxes, fees or employment to the homeland’s constituents. Against this backdrop, then, Amina argues that the *fang feng* extractions of the local populace are moral, because they are merely sourcing from the local landscape their ‘shares’ (*huv*) or the allotted portions of the ‘fortune’ (*hishig*) from the environment that all Mongolians are entitled to.

Amina’s language is partly reflective of larger ongoing national debates in Mongolia concerning the redistribution of mining profits. James Ferguson (2015) argues that in contexts where economic development has been accompanied by entrenched economic disparity, populations often respond with a ‘politics of distribution’ as a new trajectory of political demand focused on the rearrangement of national wealth in the name of the general good, which often manifests as programmes such as sovereign wealth funds, cash-handout policies or basic income grants. Within this larger trajectory, he notes that demands for the redistribution of national resource wealth conceptualized as a ‘rightful share’ are particularly compelling. In deliberating why ‘it seems to be the case that share-reasoning is most readily accepted when it comes to mineral wealth’ (Ferguson 2015, 184), he hypothesizes a linkage to labour proportionality: growing and consuming agricultural crops entails

a proportional labour to reward relation, whilst the prolific returns from an oil spigot does not. This general political-economic diagnosis holds true for Mongolia. In 2011, on the back of the mining commodity boom, Mongolia had the fastest-growing economy in the world, but these developments were also accompanied by conspicuous inequality, fear of economic exclusion and populist anger (see the [Introduction](#)). Sensing the political winds, various parties and governments have since 2006 attempted a number of political solutions, including renationalizing mining deposits, establishing sovereign wealth funds, and distributing profits as cash handouts or share options with dividend payments ([Namkhajantsan and Mihalyi 2020](#)).

Although politics of distribution undoubtedly emerge from perceptions of exclusion from the national economy, Ferguson also draws a perspicacious connection between them and the anthropology of sharing. In the later twentieth century, ethnographers working among hunter-gatherer populations increasingly documented a widespread practice that meat brought back to camp after a successful hunt was not hoarded or deemed the private property of the hunter, but immediately handed out as portions to all individuals present, because it was conceptualized as a general entitlement ([Woodburn 1998](#)). Although these 'demand sharing' practices ([Petersen 1993](#)) have now been widely documented as a key feature of many hunter-gatherer societies, anthropologists continue to deliberate how much this practice can be applied to other sharing practices in, for example, the contemporary contexts of the sharing economy or basic income grants ([Widlök 2017](#)). For Ferguson, the key economic dynamic which conjoins both hunter-gatherer demand sharing and politics of distribution is the conceptualization of 'the proper and just division of a whole to which all have a claim' ([2015](#), 176).

This chapter expands upon Ferguson's theories to argue that, in the Magtaal case, rightful share politics and practices of sharing overlap in the conceptualization of the environment as the wellspring of common wealth. I argue that, even within contemporary national debates on the politics of mining wealth currently raging on the national level in Mongolia, there continues to exist a historically derived, pastoral-inspired cosmological understanding that the social unit of belonging includes not only humans but also the land they are in and thus a part of. As an interdependent entity, this social unit relationally creates the conditions of life, a commons that all members take from to extend their shared existence. This argument hinges upon two Mongolian terms that are historically associated with pastoral cosmologies but have definitionally

ramified as Mongolia underwent various nationalizing and marketizing shifts: namely, *nutag* as both ‘spiritual birthplace’ and ‘homeland’ (see [Chapter 1](#)), but also *hishig* as both ‘spiritual fortune’ and also ‘resource wealth’. When Amina argues that she is a member of the *nutag* and, as such, should receive a portion of its *hishig*, she is blending national political-economic concepts and pastoral cosmologies into a multiply scaled *politics of common wealth*: the conceptualization of the national economy as a wealth pool created through the interrelation of the land and its human inhabitants and, as such, all are entitled to an usufructuary portion, a proportional share.

The collaboratively extractive *fang feng* trade

After Mongolia transitioned from the socialist Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) to the market democratic state in the early 1990s, many unemployed and poor populations started engaging in multifarious forms of trade arbitrage to make money off the price differentials between various Mongolian and international (often, Chinese) markets ([High 2017](#); [Ichinkhorloo 2018](#); [Pedersen and Højer 2019](#); [Munkherdene and Sneath 2018](#)). Starting in 1994, Magtaal’s border crossing to China gradually opened for regular traffic and the local population started engaging in the informal (and, later, illegal) export of locally available resources like *fang feng* and Asian carp. Although it has now been almost 30 years since the shift to the market economy, both forms of the illegal wildlife trade I studied in Magtaal – namely, the Asian carp and *fang feng* networks – were uncharacteristically collaborative in comparison to similar studies of sudden local resource booms. In [Chapter 3](#), I explicate this contrast, explaining how the Magtaal case study is an example of a ‘moral economy’ using the example of the Asian carp trade. Here, I predominantly focus on how – in contrast to ethnographic situations where resource rushes result in sentiments of scarcity and competition in a zero-sum game – the illegal *fang feng* trade, even as a market-driven profit enterprise, is pervaded by sentiments of generative bounty created through collective action within the participatory group.

Cross-border profits

In the late 1990s, a Mongolian businessman from Ulaanbaatar showed up at the lake in northeast Magtaal – known as Dalai Lake discussed in

Chapter 3 – and opened a private fishing company that annually hired Chinese seasonal labour until the company went bankrupt in the early 2000s. Two of these hired fishermen discovered that Magtaal was full of wild-growing *fang feng*, highly coveted in Traditional Chinese Medicine, yet virtually unknown as anything other than a weed to local Mongolians.¹ They went back to China to source money, subsequently approaching a well-known Magtaal resident with ample social contacts and knowledge, offering him money to become a middleman liaison – known in Mongolian as *chyenj* from the English ‘(ex)change’ and thus often termed a ‘changer’ – between them and the local population. This Mongolian changer subsequently put out the call to the township’s residents that he had money and would distribute cash or consumption items that residents could pay back in gathered *fang feng* roots.

Even though, by the time of my fieldwork, *fang feng* harvesting had become illegalized, it was a continually booming trade. Starting in 1995, the national government established a series of laws creating a permit system for the usage of flora, also declaring *fang feng* a ‘rare’ plant and therefore only legally procurable for profit with a government permit ([State Great Hural 1995a](#), Articles 12, 13).² During my fieldwork, *fang feng* picking had also been restricted for a five-year period to a four-kilo limit for personal use according to a 2015 proclamation from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Individuals caught with more than that were subject to a 250,000 MNT fine (roughly 104 USD) per kilo ([Fig. 2.1](#)). Nevertheless, in 2017, at least five illegally sourcing middlemen were locally active who each had a network of around two hundred engaged local pickers (see [Chapter 3](#) for details on local negotiation of wildlife illegality). Various residents estimated that up to 80 per cent of the local township population was involved, because, as they described it, picking was an easy, highly flexible, highly profitable and, not least, fairly enjoyable activity.

The *fang feng* trade makes its profits through a supply chain sequence as an example of the econo-political networks discussed in the Introduction. Residents who have formal jobs or only a day to spare can pick independently on the side, riding their motorbikes into the open countryside, selling their haul at night at the changer’s house. Those interested in larger returns engage in the very popular, lucrative practice of ‘going on otog’ (*otogoor yavj baina*), which involves picking for days or weeks in groups often organized by a changer. After the local changer, the first in the series, accumulates enough roots, s/he resells it at an increased price in the aimag centre to a second changer. Here, either the

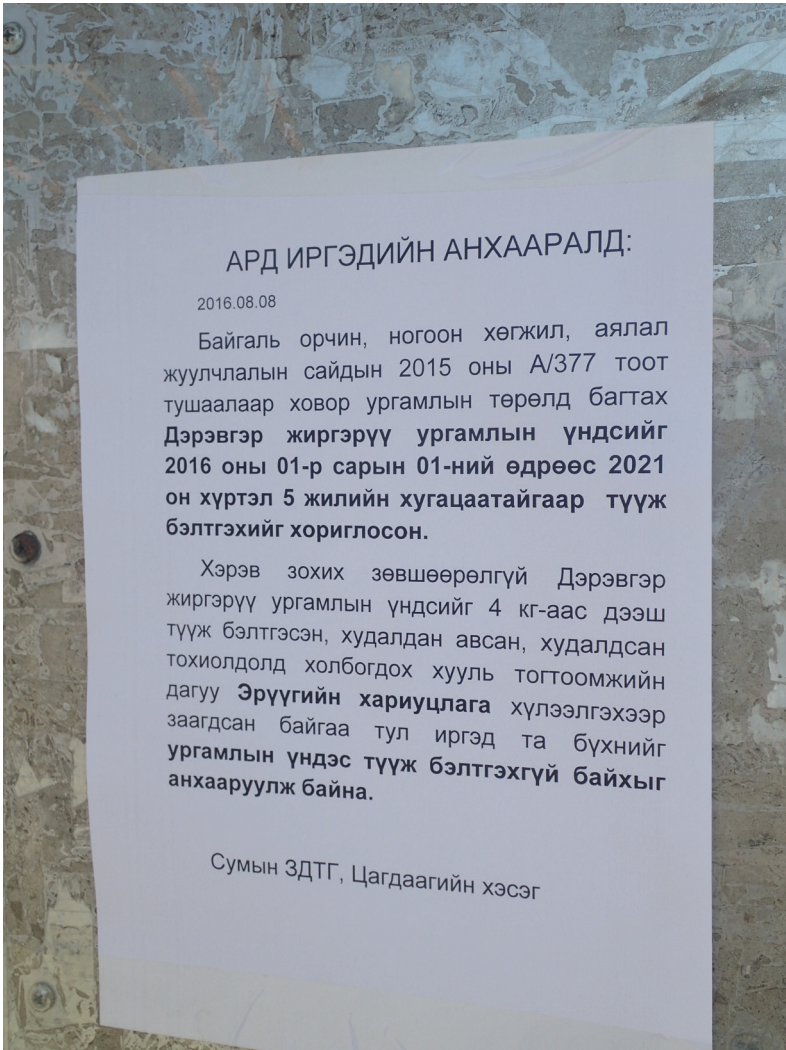


Figure 2.1 Government legal restriction of *fang feng* picking. © Author

first or second changer will dry out the roots, which decreases its quantity but increases its value because it is now less perishable.³ This second changer will then either export their haul to China directly or resell it again at an increase to a third changer in Ulaanbaatar. The *fang feng* will then be illegally exported south either within train carriages or stuffed within the coal or building materials carried by lorries. *Fang feng* is desirable within multiple Asian medical traditions (Kreiner et al. 2017) and is resold along multiple nodes, reaching urban China and

Table 2.1 The price of a kilo of *fang feng* by location in 2017 (in MNT)

	Magtaal	Choibalsan	Ulaanbaatar	Inner Mongolia, China	Beyond (e.g. urban China; South Korea) ¹
Fresh	5,500	8,000	20,000		
Dried		23,000	45,000	100,000 – 115,000 MNT	300,000

¹ According to Mongolian journalistic reports from 2017, Mongolian-sourced *fang feng* is often sold on to South Korea: see <https://news.zindaa.mn/1ydf> (accessed 26 January 2023). Magtaalians generally knew little about what happened to the plant after it left Mongolia and were at pains to pretend they did not care and did not want to know. They mostly believed it was a ‘drug’ (*tamhi*).

South Korea. In 2017, even though Magtaal residents earned only 5,000 MNT per picked kilo (around 2 USD), which pales in comparison to *fang feng*’s resale kilo price of 100,000 MNT in China (around 42 USD),⁴ they could still easily earn a local month’s salary within a week of picking.

The repurposed pastoral *otog*

During the 2017 root season, I found myself sitting outside enjoying the autumn wind with Mogi, the local kindergarten’s 58-year-old night watchman, right after he had returned from a seven-day *otog*. Mogi, who had been a pastoral herder during the MPR era, started earning money after the socialist collapse by gathering wood from the countryside on a horse-drawn cart: ‘Back then we used to gather all sorts of stuff together,’ he reminisced, ‘but it was only after the root craze started in the late 1990s that we started calling it *otog*.’ The term *otog* can be directly translated as ‘clan’, ‘band’ or ‘tribe’, but is conceptually associated with the historically recurring pre-socialist pattern in Mongolian political administration of segmenting groups of families into closed communities of pastoral herders with their own territory to use as shared pasture (Atwood 2012). Not used to refer to a pastoral subdivision during the MPR (Fernandez-Gimenez 2010, 319), the term has re-emerged in post-socialist Magtaal to characterize the practice of going in groups of between 5 and 20 individuals into the open countryside for multi-day, sometimes multi-month, roaming trips to gather resources like *fang feng*.

Many residents mention that the experience of *otog* is highly reminiscent of *otor*: the rapid long distance movement of groups of

herders and animals to find better pasture (Fernandez-Gimenez and Batbuyan 2004, 144n1). ‘When I was a herder,’ Mogi compares, ‘we used to call it “going on *otor*” [*otoroor*] when we would travel over 100 kilometres from town to overnight for days with our animals. “Going on *otog*” [*otogoor*] is similar in meaning, because you have to nomadize [*nuuj bairaa yum*] as well.’

In addition to migrations in the ‘uninhabited wilderness’ (*hiir baih*), both *otor* and *otog* require participants to band together in group formations of mutual help, as manifested in the association of these formations with words like ‘network’ (*suljee*), ‘team’ (*bag*), ‘nucleus’ (*tsöm*), ‘collective’ (*hamt olon*), ‘help’ (*tus*), ‘support’ (*tüshig*) and ‘aid’ (*tuslamj*). As Mogi explains:

If you go into the countryside alone and on your own devices, you won’t be able to get anything done. But if you join together [*bööndöö*, literally ‘in bulk; in the many’] and you act in a network [*suljee*] and organize together, then you can provide aid [*tüshig*] to one another when you are in the countryside. Usually, the countryside is hard – there are dogs and wolves and rain. But if you work as a team [*bagaar ajillaj bairaa*], then you can mutually help one another [*hariltsan tuslah*].

Pickers argued that *otog* and *otor* were ‘definitionally the same’ (*utgiin huv’d adilhan*) in their structure as units that needed to think, move and act in unison both to survive and to effectuate a shared goal. Former or current pastoral herders, like Mogi but also Amina’s family, were often the most successful pickers, due to their familiarity with the open countryside.

There are several types of *otog*. Sometimes, Mogi retells, residents literally roll out of bed and decide to go on *otog* with their friends, organising tea, gear and food, buying a sheep to cook together, roaming together and sharing stories, songs and sleeping bags (Fig. 2.2). ‘If there are people without food in the *otog*,’ Mogi says, ‘the group apportion those people into different familial sub-groups to feed them.’

Or residents can join *otog* organized by middlemen. ‘When we go on *otog* with a middleman, s/he organizes everything,’ Mogi emphasizes, ‘so that we only focus on picking [and nothing else]’. When preparing for a changer-led *otog*, all Mogi brings is a large canister of black tea, his loom (a large shovel-like instrument with a screw-like ending: Fig. 2.3), a belt



Figure 2.2 Bird cherry (*moil*) pickers on *otog* in summer 2016. © Author



Figure 2.3 The 'loom' tool to extract *fang feng*. © Author

with an attached bag (*zamuurai*) and an extra straw bag (*shuudai*). ‘So, there are two cars,’ Mogi explains:

First, a driver [organized by the changer] comes and picks you up in the soum centre and drops you off at the picking location [often over 100 kilometres from the soum centre]. Three days later, the changer will arrive at the spot and picks up all the roots that you have picked in the meantime and drives to the aimag centre [to sell on to China]. All the while, the hired driver is driving back and forth between the soum centre and the drop-off location, delivering water and food to the pickers and tallying the food expenditure. When the changer reaches the aimag centre, he meets his selling partner and exchanges the freshly picked root for cash. The changer, who is now in the aimag centre, then transfers the cumulative earnings to the hired driver’s bank account in the soum centre. The hired driver then takes out the money at the bank in the soum centre, drives with it to the pickers at the drop-off point and gives it to them, subtracting the money they have spent for food.

This coordinated system can go on for days or months, based on the enthusiasm of the pickers, drivers and changers. Often, pickers can return to the soum centre for a rest for a few days and rejoin the ongoing *otog* a few days later, creating, effectively, a flexible employment rotation to which people can opt in and out. Seasoned pickers often stay in the changer’s rotation for months at a time. Because pickers are enabled, through this organizational system, to concentrate exclusively on picking, changer-organized *otog* aggregate the largest root-ergo-cash bounty.

Changers as hierarchical sibling-like figures

In contrast to the image of the middleman as exploitative brute, changers in Magtaal were often socially popular and suave individuals who, although in a hierarchical position vis-à-vis pickers, took care to maintain goodwill (see [Chapter 3](#)). In my interview with Mogi, he mentioned that he had just started ‘giving’ his roots to a new changer, a likeable young local man with a budding family he wanted to support. The words pickers use when discussing changers reveal that they conceptualize themselves not as entrepreneurs on an equalizing market, but as hierarchically subordinate to changers: they do not talk of ‘selling’ roots, but of ‘giving’ (*ögöh*) them to changers; they refer to themselves as the ‘clients’ (*üilchliüülegch*); and they talk of the economic actions and flows of changers as coming ‘from above’ (*deereesee*). It was only after my



Figure 2.4 Jochi's dried *fang feng* in the shed. © Author

interview with Mogi that I found out that he was talking about Jochi: a local born-and-raised 24-year-old man, who was one in a family of eight siblings and had recently become a *fang feng* changer.

A few months later, I encountered Jochi perched somewhat dangerously on the top of a local cabin, as he unloaded over 100 kilos of *fang feng* root on the rooftop to dry in the sun's rays, placing wood beams around the edges so that no passer-by could see them from the street (Fig. 2.4). 'I was sick of being treated poorly,' he recounted in explanation of why he became a changer. 'I tried every secure job available, but they

were all temporary or difficult, like coal stoker.’ Jochi had recently lost several toes in a tractor accident working for one of the agricultural conglomerates located in Magtaal and had had enough of low-paid labour. As a charming, well-spoken young man in a large local family, he had many local contacts and knew that he could have success as a changer: ‘You need to have a talent for attracting people [*Hün tatah av’yaas gej baina*],’ he explained.

In Magtaal, changer success in the *fang feng* trade is interrelated with the successful implementation of pastoral models of hierarchical relationality along the *ah düü nar* or sibling idiom. This concept, which fuses the term *ah* or ‘older brother’ with *düü* or ‘younger siblings’, is evocative of relations within herder households. Herder families often have many children, who respect an internal hierarchy of birth order vis-à-vis each other (for example, the firstborn has authority over younger siblings) yet they must work together, through complementary duties and the pooling of labour, to ensure familial success. In Daniel J. Murphy’s work among pastoral herders, he describes how the sibling idiom continues to provide the moral framework for inter-household collaboration, but as economic inequalities increase between households, it also becomes the foundation for the emergence of patron–client relations (Murphy 2015, 405–6).⁵ In Magtaal, due to the fledgling nature of his business, Jochi was in the process of learning the proper social decorum of changer/picker relations, needed to evoke sentiments of loyalty from pickers:

If you communicate well, laugh and tell jokes, then people will sell to you. When people we know go to pick roots, we can call them and say ‘OK, when you have roots, we can come and pick you up with a car and make everything easier for you.’ If we know that government patrols are circling [to arrest pickers], then we offer to pick up roots directly [to put them at ease] . . . People like that kind of thing.

Pickers were highly swayed and beguiled by these displays of attentiveness, which, according to Mogi, were an integral component of changer success:

[Changers should] bring people to the *otog*, ask them what they need, if they want a break or a ride to the soum or aimag centre, provide food and drink, etc. This is a good relationship. If they don’t supply and organize everything, it will be harder for them to get the same amount of roots [literally: ‘the roots will not be found’]. There is a lot of competition.

In practice, changers offer ‘incentives’ (*uramshuulal*) in the form of higher pay and kickbacks (such as free car rides and interest-free loans) to particularly skilled and loyal individuals, so that they become loyal and ‘trusted’ (*naidvartai*) pickers over time. Although these incentives are likely partly a result of competition in Magtaal amongst changers for good pickers (Long 2001, 125), they also reflect the prevalent local experience that both parties, pickers and changers, gain by collaborating with each other, a sentiment expressed here through pastoral idioms of hierarchical collaboration.

The advantages of collaboration

I had been told by several people to interview Amina concerning *fang feng*, because she was a child in a herder household of eight siblings, who, after the MPR collapse, had pooled their knowledge to create an impressively efficient *otog* system. According to Amina, the innovation of their *otog* rests on the role of her younger brother, who acts as both organizer and mediator between the pickers and a middleman. When her family decides to go on *otog*, they form a big group, then split themselves into three groups of around seven people, who are ferried by their younger brother in a car to three different locations. Every day, he drives between the groups bringing food and water and picking up root hauls; every three days, he moves them to new locations. At the end of their 2017 *otog*, their younger brother had collected so much root that an urban changer was eager to make a deal (*tohiroltsoo*) with him. Although the going rate (*hansh*) for *fang feng* was 5 to 5,500 MNT per kilo of root, the changer, eager to acquire this impressive volume of plants, offered to pay 6,000 per kilo. Everyone benefited from this arrangement, Amina explains, because her younger brother paid each family participant their earnings at the rate of 5,500 per kilo, the higher end of the market range, and he recouped his gasoline costs through the additional 5,500 to 6,000 price jump, keeping any remaining money.

Whereas Amina’s family pooled their collective skills to make the *otog* internally more efficient and productive, Jochi utilized his extended family to facilitate the external process of exchange. One day, while hitching a ride to the aimag centre, I found myself sitting next to Jochi’s teenage sister, who was accompanying a bag of his dried roots, and as we approached the city’s gates, their older sister drove out to meet our car, picking the younger sister up to avoid the city’s ranger patrols. In both cases, situations that required quick coordination of sequential trade factors were easily navigated through sibling assistance. I asked Amina

why Magtaal residents prefer to work with relatives and close friends in the illegal trade, including if she didn't begrudge her brother his profit margins:

It is a saying that if you have to eat someone's dog, let it be your own [*hünii nohoi ideheer ööriin nohoi ideg*]; in this way, the various people involved get their profits based on their appropriate measure [*zohih hemjee*]. Our brother looks out for all of these people, seeing who needs what food and drink and providing for us; so we can provide for our brother, giving him a bit of what he needs for his life.

The saying 'if you eat a dog, eat your own' can be semantically translated to 'it is better to give an advantage to someone you know than to someone you don't'. Amina explains that it is preferable to work together with close individuals, potentially leading to increased and reciprocal benefits among the entire group, than to work with strangers, leading to short-term benefits with no promise for future returns.

Meritorious acts

Although collaboration certainly had an economic functional advantage – allowing, for example, the group to pick more and for longer, or to decrease risk factors – the extent of cooperation exceeds economic self-interest. In [Chapter 3](#), I expansively discuss the usage of the term for Buddhist 'merit-making' or 'good karma', *buyan*, to characterize certain economic acts and prices in the Asian carp trade. In the *fang feng* trade, as well, acts that could be labelled 'meritorious' or *buyantai* were usually material manifestations that allowed both actors – for example, picker and changer – to mutually benefit from the exchange or economic participation. For example, pickers would choose to sell their roots to different middlemen based on whether they offered a 'merit-making price' (*buyantai üne*), characterized as a purchase price for their roots that was superior to competitors and deemed beneficial to the picker. The words for 'help' (*tus*) and merit were often used interchangeably to describe acts such as providing utensils for the trade, interest-free loans or free car rides to picking sites. Generally, material manifestations or economic behaviours that were evaluated as enabling multiple individuals not only to participate but also to economically benefit from the wildlife trade were described as meritorious acts that could create positive reverberations in not only this but also the next life.

A benefit to everyone

Ultimately, the *fang feng* trade was highly popular because it created economic profits for all participants; and monetary profit was the first determinant of how and why residents made choices within this trade. But in the process of doing so, material profits were a platform for the expression of many different types of economic modalities and therefore moral categories. Considering that every family was involved in this trade in some capacity, it created the general sense in the soum that everyone's economic prosperity was mutually intertwined and thus it was generally a moral thing to help each other uphold and participate in this trade. For one thing, Mogi explained, diverse people often recurrently end up in *otog* rotation together, a bonding experience through which 'we grow into friends and companions' (*naiz nöhöd bolood lyavdag*), creating the sense of an extended family that works together. Moreover, when he emphasized in our interview that he recently started selling his roots to Jochi, Mogi argues that supporting the business of a well-known and locally networked 'person of the soum' would positively affect many local lives, thus percolating benefits throughout it. Here, Mogi was extending Amina's statement that it is better to help those closest to you than the soum population as a whole unit: that by helping the 'people of the soum' (*sumyhan*) it creates both direct and indirect generative benefits that raise the multifarious wellbeing of the general local polity.

Shareholding narratives in reaction to political-economic disenfranchisement

Partly the overwhelming atmosphere within the *fang feng* trade of its moral rightness was a reaction to the widespread sentiment within the soum that residents had been abandoned by the post-socialist state and thus needed to jointly assure their economic wellbeing (see [Chapters 1 and 3](#)). In his discussion of the emergence of politics of distribution, Ferguson (2015, 4–5) argues that they similarly emerge as the neoliberal promise that all citizens can benefit from the national economy through labour gives way to a reality that many are unable to do so due to poor-quality jobs or near-chronic unemployment. In the case of Mongolia, there are long-standing historical *holistic* precedents: conceptualizing society as a complex relational ecosystem comprising interdependent, moving parts that must coordinate to ensure overall prosperity. Models of pastoral governance dictate that the political unit of belonging should be

hierarchically governed in a manner that ensures a common pool of resources, allowing redistributive benefits and boosting greater wellbeing. In turn, in contemporary Mongolia generally, and Magtaal specifically, these rightful share narratives also emerge at a similar moment of political-economic disappointment, but rooted in the perceived failure of the post-socialist market state to work as a holistic political unit of belonging, paving the way for the creative reimplementation of discourses of entitlement to the common pool.

Historical holistic common pool precedents

Prior to the emergence of the MPR in 1924, the area of contemporary Mongolia was predominantly occupied by herders, who, during eras of state organization, were subdivided into ‘hierarchical inclusivist’ pastoral units (Chapter 1) that shared access to common lands. Sneath (2007) argues that pre-socialist steppe statecraft often took the form of a ‘headless state’, whereby aristocratic lineages partitioned out and governed appanages, which consisted of certain lands and their associated herders stacked into military decimal units according to the number of soldiers they could nominally mobilize.⁶ Although the specific terms to label the unit have changed with state formations, Atwood (2012, 2) argues that the ‘appanage community’ has recurrently appeared as the building block of Mongolian social organization: a closed herder cooperative, with inherited membership and access rights, assigned specific lands and resources for members to exclusively use as common, shared property. As extensively discussed in Chapter 1, historical governance ideals emphasized the need to oversee resources to uphold the self-sufficiency of the pastoral unit.

Indeed, two terms contemporarily used with Mongolian rightful share politics – namely, *huv*’ for ‘share/portion’ and *hishig* for both ‘spiritual prosperity’ and ‘resource wealth’ – have often been used to convey the mutual constitution and dependence of individuals on larger entities. Jagchid and Hyer (1979, 252) argue that, as far back as the thirteenth century, Mongolians evinced a ‘customary division of property’ whereby material wealth is redistributed to vassals as parts, portions or appanages known as *huv*’ or ‘shares’. By the nineteenth century, in Outer Mongolia, the term *huv*’ was associated with the allotments of a family’s herd that one was entitled to when, for example, a son got married and separated from the family group (Vreeland 1957), whereas in Buryatia, Siberia, the equivalent *khubi* indicated the allotments of hay and land that families received on the basis of their

membership in a clan (Humphrey 1998, 495). In contrast, the term *hishig* (*kesig*), commonly contemporarily associated with spiritual benefits received from land masters (discussed extensively below), likely had a pre-1700 meaning as the portion of meat that a supplicant received during these ceremonies, the reception of which ‘confirms membership in the community’ (Atwood 2000, 114), as well as a secondary meaning of ‘favour’ or ‘benefit’ imparted by a senior that ‘represents an individual’s share (portion) of the vital energy of his lineage’ (Chabros 1992, 155). As a result, Humphrey (1998, 495) declares ‘[t]he medieval practise . . . [that] an individual had *unconditional* rights to a share and also owed service as a matter of course, by virtue of membership in the polity . . . has surfaced again and again in inner Asian history’.

Given these historical perspectives, the emergence of the centrally organized materialist MPR was less a radical break than a rescaling of holistic political-economic concepts onto the national ‘unit’. Although there had previously been notions of shared descent or origin (Lhamsuren 2006), the planners of the MPR had to invent a plethora of new terminology, ideas and institutions to separate cosmology from materialism and project the latter project onto a centralising nation state (see Chapter 1). Reimagined as a national community of fate with bounded territorial roots, the first constitution of the MPR depicted the territory as this nation’s material inheritance, pronouncing that ‘from the past, natural resources have been the wealth of the people and public’, which was now the ‘state’s property and people’s capital’ (*ulsyn ömch ard түмний höröngö*) (Bumochir 2020, 52). During the latter half of the MPR (post-1960), citizens were collectivized into large-scale industrial facilities, like Magtaal’s state farm, which shared the moral theme of heavy material utilization of the territory in the name of the nation’s (including its people’s) collective wellbeing.

Post-socialist usufructuary land rights

Even though Mongolia transitioned to a market democracy with expansive legal recognition and protection of private property in the early 1990s, this did not so much challenge the prevailing conceptualization of territorial wealth as diversify its modes of appropriation. In 1992, parliament ratified the first constitution of the new system, which described the land, its aboveground and underground ‘riches’ (*bayalag*) as under the ‘sole control of the people’ (*ard түмний медөлд*) under the ‘protection of the state’ (*töriin хамгаалтад*) (State Great Hural 1992, Article 6.1). Whereas the MPR had cast the territory as the state’s wealth to be collectively utilized by the

nation's people (*ulsyn ömch*), the post-socialist constitution conceptualized the territory as national wealth that each individual citizen had the right to utilize for personal needs and gains (*huviin ömch*) (Article 5.2). The language of the new constitution and the subsequent legislation thus cast the territory of Mongolia and its resources as a material common-pool resource – that is, indeed under the guardianship of the state to allocate, but ultimately the prerogative of ‘the people’ (*ard түмэн*) to use and access within the new market.

At the same time, in the early 1990s, a few members of the new parliament were concerned that complete private enclosure of land would jeopardize pastoralism (Sneath 2001, 42). In 1994, the Law on Land was passed, which struck a compromise by creating three categories of land tenure, including an innovation known as ‘temporary possession’ (*ežemshil*) that allowed herders (and other citizens) to apply to exclusively use a plot for up to sixty years (Plueckhahn 2020, 102–5). Roman law concepts of possession commonly contain the rights of *usus* (to use), *fructus* (to enjoy) and *abusus* (to damage or destroy) that a full owner of an asset enjoys. In contrast, temporary possession rights are an example of usufructuary ownership (of *usus* and *fructus*, sans *abusus*) implying that during the tenure of ownership, the possessor can enjoy the fruits of a good but must maintain it so that its fruits can later be enjoyed by another. According to the language of the law, a temporary possessor of land must utilize the plot in an ‘efficient’ (*ür ashigtai*; also: in a way that creates yields, fecundity) and ‘appropriate’ (*zohistoi*; also: balanced) manner, upholding soil quality (State Great Hural 1994, Article 49).

The post-socialist mining economy and the rise of resource shares

After several years of deliberation on adequate mining legislation, parliament passed the 1997 Minerals Law, widely considered one of the most liberal mining legislations in the world, permitting the government to issue exploration licenses to foreign companies at limited cost and oversight. This law was successful in its intent to attract foreign investment, resulting in the issuing of thousands of licences comprising, as of 2015, almost 9 percent of Mongolia's land area (Bumochir 2020, 34). This was initially heralded as an avenue for general prosperity, but over the early 2000s, the Mongolian public grew increasingly aware of the environmental degradation wrought by prospecting, the displacement of herders, the drying up of water through mining and scandalous comments depicting Mongolia as a land ripe for foreign exploitation made by the

American CEO of a major mining deposit (Jackson 2014, 10). Then the country underwent the mining boom in the early 2010s and inequality increased conspicuously. Fear that Mongolia was losing its economic sovereignty abounded. Surveys carried out in 2012 evince the highest support for ‘protectionism’, or government regulation and control of industry, within East Asia (Wu 2019).

Starting in 2006, various cabinets responded to this undercurrent of discontent by dabbling in measures designed to nationalize mining industry, capture greater returns from its windfalls or redistribute its profits. In 2006, the Minerals Law was revised to include clauses granting the Mongolian state up to a 50 per cent ownership share in private mining deposits deemed strategic for the nation (Jackson 2014, 8). In the run-up to the 2008 parliamentary elections, both major political parties announced proposals to redistribute these newly sourced mining proceeds as cash handouts: while the Democratic Party’s handout was called ‘share of the riches’ (*Erdeniin huv*), the People’s Party termed theirs the ‘Motherland’s Blessings’ (*Eh orny hishig*) (Bulag 2009, 132). The latter won, subsequently passing legislation in 2010 that officially codified the cash handout programme into law as the ‘procedure for allotting *hishig* and shares’ (*hishig, huv hürteh*), which included monthly handouts of 21,000 MNT (around 15 USD) to each citizen between 2010 and 2012, as well as various additional social payments to the unemployed, students and elderly (State Great Hural 2010, Resolution 347). Although this programme was short-lived, it solidified the popular understanding that national mining resources were a form of national common wealth with rightful shares and benefits for its citizens.

Political-economic neglect and share resource politics in Magtaal

In line with Ferguson’s thesis, then, shareholder resource politics were also adopted at the local level as awareness of the entrenchment of inequality increased. Below is Amina’s comment on how local *fang feng* activities are moral because residents are not receiving their rightful shares and, as a result, must claim them for themselves, indicating her awareness of the ongoing national debates. I quote it at length here, because its themes are revisited throughout the rest of the chapter:

I often ask myself why and for what reason [the government] ha[s] restricted [*fang feng*], considering that it is a plant that grows in nature and you could say that every citizen and every picking member

of our township are receiving their apportioned favour from nature [*baigaliin hishgüig hürtej baina*]. But then [the Chinese oil company] is in our homeland [*manai sum oron nutagt*] and it gives nothing, no taxes, nothing, even though you could say that they are getting their profits from our homeland [*manai ene nutgaas*]. Personally, I think these profits should go to the citizens in their proper measure [*zohih hemjee*] . . . I think if [government police rangers] catch me [for picking] I will ask them this: when we pull up [*fang feng*], we don't take it from the root, but from the top in an appropriate measure [*zohih hemjeeger*]. But then the oil company comes here and sucks up everything. They don't do any rehabilitation; but if the people want to make a little something to maintain their lives, why is this illegal? Why don't they stop all of this sucking up of all of [the oil] from over there and under here and make them pay their taxes? I think that all people that live in the township, all the people of the homeland, should have enough money [*zohih hemjeenii möngö*] for their lives. But we don't [have enough money] because, I think, we aren't receiving our share [*huv*] . . . In 2008, [the politicians] said that the 'Motherland's Blessing' [*Eh Orny Hishig*] was 1.5 million MNT [roughly 1,300 USD] for each citizen and was to be dispensed. But when they did it, it did not come to us. Old people, people with connections, university students; they got this money. But we [in Magtaal] were left in the cracks in the middle, thrown away and left behind [*hayadaad üldej bairaa*] . . . Mongolian citizens are not receiving their shares of the fortune from anyone or anywhere.

There are two concurrent discourses running throughout this quotation: first, a clear rightful share resource narrative, often maligned as 'resource nationalism' (Myadar and Jackson 2019), that the market proceeds from resources within a national body should be preferentially used by and distributed to its citizens; second, a spiritually inflected narrative of proportional, reproductive usage of the fortune(s) of the earth. I will first discuss the former.

From one political-economic angle, Amina's statement can be interpreted as another example of *nutagism* as discussed in the previous chapter: the rescaling of sentiments of national identity and political-economic allegiance to the localized soum administrative level. Amina's quote clearly indicates that she denounces the Chinese oil company for taking from the 'homeland' (*nutag*) and rationalizes that the residents of the homeland, like herself, are poor and thus are not receiving their share.

But in Magtaal, it is not so much that economic inequality provokes a rightful share narrative for revealing the failure of meritocracy, but that it is an indicator that political leaders are no longer acting in the interest of the political unit as a whole (see also [Fig. 2.5](#)): a sentiment likely rooted, in this case, in the common pool appanage precedents of the socialist and pre-socialist eras. In [Chapter 1](#), Tseren bemoaned the lack of sometimes harsh hierarchical regulation as a sign that politicians no longer uphold their duties or ‘care’ for their citizens; Amina similarly argues that the inequality and ineffectiveness of redistributive policies reflect the fact that local people have been ‘thrown away’ and ‘left behind’. Others complain that politicians have become greedy and ‘selfish’ (*öörstdiigöö boddog*) because they started to think of their personal economic interests instead of the welfare of the nation. The concept of care implied here is analogous to a strict parent/child relationship: residents felt abandoned in the manner of a neglected child left to its own devices and had, in turn, begun to ‘de-deify’ ([Bumochir 2020](#), 101–2) the state into an object of political contestation that they could rival (see [Chapter 3](#)) or from which they could take their own shares without the consent of politicians.

The land’s common wealth

Because of the palpable feelings of bitterness towards the central government and resulting localization of political-economic identity, Magtaal residents feel justified in undermining the state’s laws, personally and collaboratively, to maintain their subsistence. However, this political-economic localization does not fully clarify why residents feel that helping each other engage within the *fang feng* trade is a spiritually meritorious deed with potential karmic benefits in this and the next life. As already touched upon in [Chapter 1](#), the term *nutag* has a simultaneous second interpretation which can be translated as ‘sacred birthplace’ but more importantly communicates a worldview where the animated land and the people dwelling in it are conceptualized as one political-spiritual corpus. I argue that the activities of *fang feng* trade are similar to the anthropology of sharing, in that the pickers concurrently conceptualize themselves as relationally creating a field of common wealth that all participants are entitled to utilize to maintain a commonly created society: a worldview subsequently scaled up to the national, GDP level.



Figure 2.5 Local reaction to government-propagated share-buyback schemes. In 2011, the government decided to privatize 20 per cent of Tavan Tolgoi – a largely Mongolian-owned coal mine – and distribute its stake as 1,072 shares to every Mongolian citizen born before 2012. In 2016, the ruling Democratic Party offered a stock repurchase scheme (called *sain huv'tsaa*) allowing individuals to sell a third of these shares for cash. In Magtaal, this was largely seen as an attempt to gain votes, so residents wrote ‘stupid’ (*teneg*) on the announcements of this scheme. © Author

The relation between pastoral *hishig* and the anthropology of sharing

The *ovoo* ceremonies carried out in Magtaal throughout my fieldwork were first popularized in the seventeenth century as a means to unite the diverse shamanist pantheons of local pastoral populations into centralized Buddhist ritual sites for worship (Bawden 1958). Regularly and annually, either as families or as larger appanage units, herders would carry out rituals at the dwelling site of land masters, hoping to appease and cajole them to impart 'favour' or 'benefits' on their family or pastoral unit often defined as *hishig*. A term later used, as noted above, to designate national resource wealth, *hishig* has historically predominantly been conceptualized as a life-giving essence, similar to the Polynesian concept of *mana*, which circulates through the universe, inhering within appropriate environments, people and objects to manifest as bounty, wealth or prosperity in its multiple spiritual or material forms (Empson 2011, 69–72; Chabros 1992). The most readily recognizable manifestations of *hishig* are fecundity and its constituent conditions: a good climate, rich grasses, prolific berries and wildlife, the birth of children and growing of herds. This concept thus implies that the spiritual and material realms are interconnected: that growth reverberates and manifests as both material and immaterial 'wealth'.

The concept of *hishig* describes not only an essence that is already existent in the environment, but one that can be influenced by inter-human and human/environmental effort. Both historically and contemporaneously, the term *hishig* often occurs in a compound together with the aforementioned term *buyan*, or Buddhist merit, karma or virtue, to form the 'causal productive idiom' of *buyan hishig* (Humphrey and Ujeed 2012, 154): it denotes that *hishig* as the essence of wealth can inhere in beings and things, but, through accomplishing meritorious acts, one's *hishig* will increase. Empson (2011, 91–4) describes how *hishig* is cultivated by herders through two techniques of portionality: either 1) a piece of an object, animal or person imbued with *hishig* can be separated off into a sacred vessel, encouraging it to flourish; or 2) families can carry out rituals to the sacred realms of land masters, ancestors or Gods, in attempts to invite them to bequeath or allot *hishig* (Empson 2011, 78–9). The generation of *hishig* metaphorically aligns with the process of pastoral growth: just like a portion of a herd can be separated off and nurtured, through pooled human effort and the grasses of nature, into a larger herd, so too can *hishig* be cultivated through good acts into fruits from which all can thrive. The noun *hishig* is also repeatedly semantically

paired with the verb correlate *hürteh/hürteeh*, meaning to receive or dispense allotments, respectively, constructing it as relationally exuded from larger substances.

The grand environmental and cosmological cycles of *buyan hishig* might not resemble the prevalent ethnography on sharing when apprehended on the level of individual transfer. Attention to sharing as a possibly distinct, culturally recurrent economic modality greatly increased with Woodburn's (1982, 1998) argument that hunter-gatherer meat sharing practices could not be analytically encompassed within known models of reciprocity. 'Demand sharing', now widely documented within hunter-gatherer groups, describes a practice, whereby individuals, who make their presence known through either corporeal or verbal 'demand', are allocated a portion of a desired good, such as meat from a game expedition or a cooking meal (Petersen 1993). As the apportionment is often instigated by the receiver who conceptualizes the portion as their entitlement, and, as such, it does not create sentiments of dependence or debt, it is distinct from either charity or reciprocity.

Expanding upon these insights, Widlok (2013, 16) defines *sharing* as an act that expands access to a good with 'intrinsic value', i.e. what the actors deem of general societal value or of value to have, and, therefore the act is carried out because it is deemed moral in itself. There is no immediate or delayed instrumental aim. Widlok (2013, 22) argues that it is the strength of 'common ground' – which can emerge either from contexts of relationality and interaction, along pathways provided by societal idioms and practices like kinship, or through shared circumstances, like the happenstance of presence – that increases the likelihood of a sharing act. Indeed, studies on hunter-gatherer groups note that sharing-based economies continue, even after groups have been sedentarized, as long as their 'relational ontology' of commonly constituted personhood persists (Petersen 2013). Belk (2010) notes that, even within advanced consumer societies, sharing occurs out of a desire to widen the 'aggregate extended self' and therefore one's circle of intimacy and shared essence.

I suggest that the cosmology of *buyan hishig* implies a worldview where the animated environment is conceptualized as an enduring bountiful source and to 'do good' implies to carry out relational acts that strengthen the quantity and the quality of the fruits it exudes, forging them into a field of common value in which the political-spiritual corpus can recursively participate. Other philosophical and ethnographic studies on sharing evince a similar conceptualization of the larger environment: while Bataille (1991 [1949], 28) describes the sun as the unwavering furnace of life energy that 'gives without ever receiving',

Bird-David (1990) describes how the South Indian Nayaka conceptualize the forest as a relational, giving parent. Through his fieldwork among the Amazonian hunter-gatherer Uraria, Walker (2020, 147) argues that the local conceptualization of ‘property’ is not of material goods individually possessed through labour, but of the larger relationally constructed material and immaterial outgrowths and constructions of society as a ‘collective productive resource’ he calls ‘the common’.

Conceptualized in this manner, *buyan hishig* resembles sharing when refracted through its aggregate effects as a generator of a common-pool relational unit. Bird-David notes that the sharing-based economy of the Nayaka – an economy based predominantly on open one-directional demand transfers – results in a form of ‘relational levelling’, where not everyone receives the exact same return or benefit. Rather, through their interconnection, sharing distributes the diverse resources (material and immaterial) of the group along a ‘law of connected vessels’ (Bird-David 2005, 212) – as if all actors were connected by a series of tubes and water poured into one percolates to all – effectively creating a field similar to Walker’s common. *Buyan hishig* aligns with these perspectives, conceptualizing the environment as an animated wellspring forged through relational active presence into a total (ergo: material, political and spiritual) common wealth and, as such, earmarked to relationally incorporate and strengthen the assemblage that produced it.

Strengthening the vitality of the *nutag*

Ovoo ceremonies happened annually at Magtaal’s diverse mountains, lakes, rivers and sacred sites. I started to notice, similar to High’s (2017) description of *ovoo* participation among artisanal gold miners, that *fang feng* pickers and middlemen were usually in high attendance. At the White Mountain ceremony, I asked Dorj, a *fang feng* picker, why he participated in these rituals:

We go to the ceremonies to worship the spirits of the mountains and waters (*uul usaa*)⁷; this has been carried down from our ancestors and we ask these spirits to protect all that we have, our jobs and lives. We are worshipping our homeland (*nutag usaa*) and pray so that our livelihoods, our progeny and our homeland stay free of drought and misfortune.

Magtaal’s residents emphasize that they are the ‘people of the homeland’ (*nutgiihan*; literally: people of, made of or belonging to the same

homeland) and so they have inherited *ovoo* practices from their ancestors and will pass them on to their children (*üye udamaaraa*) to uphold the transcendent bond with ‘our homeland spirits’ (*uul usaa; nutag usaa*). Whereas the term *nutag* is certainly being used in Magtaal to indicate multiply scaled nationalisms, it is here also evincing its overlapping definitional scope around the idea of ‘sacred birthplace’ (Bumochir 2019). Bumochir (2019, 167) describes the practice in west-central Mongolia of rolling a newborn at the location of its birthplace in the dirt ‘to report the birth of the child to . . . the local spirit masters [and] set up a relationship between the child and his *nutag*’. Moreover, as the child grows up, it worships the spirits, eating and growing from the *hishig* created by the spirits, becoming corporally marked by it. Here, the *nutag* is imagined as an interrelational human and non-human economic-political-spiritual corpus, constituted by the masters who give life, feed and protect the humans who worship them across cycles and generations.

Notably, the *nutag* is not a unit that one can belong to without effort, but is relationally created through active presence. Similar to Widlok’s discussion of common ground, *nutag* belonging can be primed through relatedness and inherited membership, but is deepened through participation in shared events and with each other (such as in *otogs*). Several supplicants at the White Mountain ceremony, for example, were the children of previous generations of Magtaal people who had moved to Ulaanbaatar, but, in the manner of the newborn reported to the land masters, were partaking to remind the land master that they still considered themselves a child of that *nutag* and wished for inclusion.

The *ovoo* ceremony was widely conceptualized as a ritual that reconstituted the bond between people and the land. Bilgüün, a pastoral herder who occasionally picks *fang feng* on his motorbike, describes the significance of the *ovoo* ceremony:

Why do people honour the *ovoo*? We should do it every year, in order to invite rain, in order to invigorate the mountain and water spirits and because the livelihoods of the peoples, all people, are intertwined with nature. First, we are wishing for rain; second, when the rain comes, people’s lives are bettered, the wheat and grasses grow. The ceremony is to strengthen nature; humans and animals are connected; it’s not for God; it’s the connection between humans and the land.

To Bilgüün, through the *ovoo* ceremony, people and land collectively strengthen each other, making *buyan*, which allows both to thrive through the creation of *hishig*, such as rain and plants. In 2016, I attended an *ovoo*



Figure 2.6 A supplicant at Dalai's *ovoo* ceremony wades into the lake to greet the fish *hishig*. © Author

ceremony at Magtaal's lake, which involved the throwing of grains and other offerings into the tide, and fish (with birds hovering over them) accumulated off the shore for several days (Fig. 2.6). After the White Mountain ceremony in 2017, the local steppe experienced several rainstorms. After both, fishermen and *fang feng* pickers expressed open glee that their rituals had strengthened the masters, as evinced by the subsequent power of nature, which would benefit all.

Here, there is a slippage in the concept of ownership reminiscent of Walker's discussion of 'the common'. *Fang feng* pickers are likely to be in high attendance at *ovoo* ceremonies because they feel that, in participating, they are both reconstituting their membership in and, in doing so, strengthening the *nutag* as a vessel of *hishig* and, as constituents involved in this production, entitled to source from it. In Chapter 3, I quote a local fisherman who argues that the resources are 'theirs' as the people of the *nutag*. But in the same breath, he goes on to explain that to 'own' implies that they have to show care through cleaning the lake. In his work among Amazonian hunter-gatherers, Fausto (2008) notes that local definitions of 'ownership' can be conceptualized through the idiom of 'master/caretaker': that to master or predate on a resource, means that they must also care for it to maintain its usage by others. There is a similar

historical Mongolian governance ideal of ‘master/custodian’, which implies, reminiscent of appanage communities, that humans can both be mastered (by their state, land masters) and master (resources) but only as long as all custodially care to maintain the unit (Empson 2014b). Thus, whereas concepts of possessive claiming of resources for the market are certainly present, there is also a local understanding that the resources are produced through local effort within the *nutag* as a common field of production that residents can custodially utilize.

A proportional share of *hishig*

Not all participants agreed that this production of *hishig* was being put to good use. While at the White Mountain ceremony, I sat down next to a bespectacled nature protector, whose job it was to find *fang feng* pickers and other abusers of the environment, and asked why he was participating:

I am here so that the ecology does not go out of balance. Now it is unbalanced. Very many people come here to the rituals and pray and appeal to nature to ‘please give us more *buyan hishig*’! But they are just exploiting it. We have to use all things appropriately [*zohistoi*].

Here, the nature protector also conceptualizes the *ovoo* ceremony as a moment that engenders *buyan hishig*, but disagrees on its proper usage. While he conceptualizes the ceremony as a moment to restore the balanced order to an imbalanced ecology (Lindskog 2016), he censures wildlife procurers, like *fang feng* pickers, for wanting to produce *hishig* for what he conceptualizes as excess profits.

This difference in expectation points to emergent variations in the definitional understanding of *hishig*. Whereas, within the pastoral economy, *hishig* is a life-giving essence to uphold the general cycle of life, now, certain forms of *hishig* become teased out and elevated over others, dictated by what produces ‘life’ and therefore money in the resource-based market economy. The nature protector is not condemning that residents wish to produce total *hishig* per se, but only wildlife resources as goods that produce money on the market and, as such, are easily over-extracted. Indeed, the *hishig* crucial to pickers is the conditions that produce *fang feng*. In her work amongst arbitrage gold miners in central Mongolia in 2006, High (2017, 69–72) documents how the term *hishig* was also used to refer to the coveted resources of gold, but as a substance that was evading miners because the spirits disapproved of the gold’s

extraction. In contrast, when pickers from Magtaal like Amina refer to *fang feng* as their *hishig*, it is characterized as a relationally created bounty that is prolifically offered by masters.

Whereas the nature protector condemns any extraction because it can undermine ecological balance, *fang feng* pickers morally judge not the act of extraction, but its proportion in terms of both the environment and, even more so, the size of its economic value. In our interview, I also asked Dorj, the aforementioned *fang feng* picker at the *ovoo* ceremony, whether supplication and *fang feng* picking were contradictory, and he answered:

These two ideas don't conflict because we are only taking from the land in the amount fitted to us [*öörstdiihöö hemjeend*]. If you take [from the environment], you must pray and supplicate well. We have no other choice than to say 'I'm sorry, God!' [*Burhan min' uuchlaarai*]. We pray to the *nutag*. You cannot take from it in an amount without care that just destroys it. We are not taking the trees, only the roots. You cannot take too much and become greedy, only in the amount that is fitted to you. That's just what I think. Now, for example, the road company is destroying our land, look at it! In 30 years, the oil company will move from here and there will be nothing left except a road.

In both this statement and Amina's extended quotation, it is excess in relational proportions that is criticized. This line of argumentation is reminiscent of Humphrey, Mongush and Telengid's (1993) description of how herders conceptualize themselves as part of an interactive system with nature which implies, similar to how animals predate on each other, that taking from it is allowed if extracted in amounts that are 'necessary for existence', but overuse, wanton destruction or neglect would draw anger and repercussions from the masters. Here there is an aesthetics reminiscent of *hishig* portionality at play that, within the resource-based economy, becomes *hishig* proportionality: Amina condemns the oil company because they are 'sucking up everything' without rehabilitation or giving back to the *nutag*; Dorj maligns the Mongolian road company (building the road to the Chinese oil field) because they are paving over the steppe (causing dust plumes) so that no other life can survive. In contrast, Dorj claims that pickers are not 'taking the trees, only the roots' and Amina says they don't take all of the root, only 'from the top'. In contrast, the portions they are taking are 'fitted to their lives' – i.e. deemed necessary for their familial existence and, continuing the metaphor, moral because they maintain the livelihoods of the people and thus the continuity of the human/non-human *nutag*.

Conclusion: usufruct shares of the common wealth

Amina's extensive quotation has two simultaneous discourses in it, because both the concepts of *nutag* and *hishig* have multiple meanings based first on pastoral cosmologies and later refracted through nationalist and market shifts. *Fang feng* pickers argue that they are part of the township political-spiritual corpus (*nutag*), an amalgam of relational effort between humans and the environment, and, through merit-making like the *ovoo* ceremony, they form a common spiritual-material wealth-prosperity (*hishig*) that all are entitled to as constituent, active members in the polity to utilize to maintain existence and its continuity. But this discourse also works on the national scale refracted through a political-economic lens: the national political-economic body (the *nutag*), constituted by its citizens and territory, interact in labour and relations to form an abstract pool of mineral wealth (*hishig*) that inheres in the GDP and, as constituents in the political-economic body that created this common wealth, they are all entitled to its monetary portions as shares to maintain their lives and thus the existence of the political-economic body.

Indeed, Amina's projection of locally derived concepts onto national scales is also evident in her framing of the national *fang feng* trade as a unit similar to local *otog*. Being provocative, I asked Amina how and why *fang feng* was deemed beneficial since it was, like the Chinese-extracted oil, another Mongolian resource that was resold in China at prices much higher than what the Mongolian picker received. She responded:

In my opinion, the root is much more beneficial to us. The reason is, with the root, we pick the root through the power of our own labour and give it to you and you pass it on through multiple hands. And even though all those [middlemen] get profit and we get our proceeds at the going market rate, this money goes directly to and benefits [*üldeh*; literally: dwells in, stays in] our lives . . . [With the *fang feng*] because it is a Mongolian who is doing it, even if the resources go abroad, it leaves a remainder [*üldeztei*] in Mongolia, the profit stays here.

Similar to Amina's earlier advocacy for working with her siblings in the *otog*, or Mogi's argument for supporting Jochi's business in the *soum*, Amina extrapolates the moral reasoning of pooling to the national

fang feng trade. Here, the *fang feng* trade is imagined as a whole system maintained by the collaboration of many Mongolians at multiple stages to create an overarching pool of wealth. Even if all participants do not have the same role or get the same portion, their shared collaboration enables a whole that all benefit from. Moreover, similar to both the sentiments of generativity that surround local *fang feng olog* and pastoral *hishig*, she twice uses the word stem *üldeh* – which can be translated as ‘to remain’ or ‘dwell’, but, also figuratively, as ‘productive’ – to frame national *fang feng* proceeds as more valuable or moral than other forms of wealth, like the oil company, because it directly returns a portion to Mongolian hands. This assertion of the moral superiority of a return that immediately ‘dwells’ in one’s life is reminiscent of Kauppinen’s (2020, 46) discussion of the ‘rightful return’ among middle-class Christians in urban Ghana: they prefer to pay tithes to churches rather than taxes to the state, because the former is perceived as a public good that yields multiple, immediately tangible (rather than politically abstract) benefits. Within this projection of *otog*-based pooling onto the national scale, the rightful usage of the land’s territorial wealth is its conversion into monetary wealth by and for Mongolians that ‘dwells’ – that is, immediately benefits the national group directly and immediately in their everyday lives.

Projected onto the national economy, *hishig* and *huv*’ as portions manifest as proportional, usufructuary shares. Recall that Ferguson argues that rightful share politics often emerge vis-à-vis land resources, such as minerals or oil, because of the disproportion between individual labour and economic return. In Mongolia, I argue, there are three components to the politics of common wealth: 1) the conceptualization of the territory as the original, inveterate source of life-giving multi-dimensional wealth; 2) through the interaction of territory and people, this source is converted into its fruits as common wealth; 3) as diverse constituents in this process, all are entitled to usufructuary portions – i.e. immediate returns of the wealth’s fruits that allow constituents to maintain lives – to maintain the continuity of the polity. The proportional share is thus the portion that allows one to maintain one’s life and also reproduce the whole. Thus, at least in this case, the affective disproportionality underlying common wealth politics is not so much rooted in labour as in the affront of co-opting the original source of wealth by the one, the few or the non-national to such a degree that it undermines the reproduction of the national whole.

Notes

- 1 According to an herbalist expert in Traditional Mongolian Medicine (TMM), *fang feng*'s flowers can be used for a few, uncommon medicinal purposes within TMM; however, its roots are widely and commonly used within other Asian medicinal traditions. For this reason, the local population was largely unaware of *fang feng* and its medicinal value until foreign traders arrived.
- 2 *Fang feng* is no. 350 on the rare plants list passed according to Resolution 153 (State Great Hural 1995c).
- 3 One kilo of wet *fang feng* root condenses when dried into 300 grams of dried root.
- 4 According to 2017 USD to MNT conversion rates founds on xe.com.
- 5 Murphy (2015, 416) also notes that patron–client relations within share-herding – when a poorer herder family contractually combines their herd with a larger patron family, providing labour and receiving economic benefits – are often discursively framed around the share (*huv*) as charity.
- 6 For example, the word *otog* first appears in Mongolian in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to describe a pastoral subdivision of around a thousand families embedded within a larger military governance unit of ten thousand households (a *tümen*) (Atwood 2012, 15).
- 7 As opposed to other ethnographic studies where land spirits are often referred to as *lus savdag* (Pedersen 2011), Magtaal residents predominantly refer to spiritually animated land as *uul usaa*, which can be directly translated as 'my mountain and water' but figuratively as 'nature and its lords' (Oberfalzerova 2012, 36).

3

The moral economy of Dalai fishermen

Sixty kilometres northwest of the soum centre lies Dalai Lake – a freshwater lake abutting the Chinese border that is affectionately nicknamed ‘the oyster’ among Magtaalians for its convex depths. For centuries, Dalai’s shores were largely unpopulated, used chiefly as a water source for roaming pastoral herders until, in 1939, the socialist Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) founded the lake’s first fishing settlement, which grew into a centrally organized fish factory. But when, in 1989, the MPR collapsed, half of the roughly 80 families stationed as workers at the lake moved away in search of better economic prospects in urban centres. Now, 30 years after socialism, only a tiny fishing hamlet remains at this spot, consisting of roughly 20 patchwork houses occupied by those of non-working age (pensioners, small children) and a few dogged fishermen. Even though Dalai Village (*tosgon*), as it is now known to local people, remains largely unconnected to the state’s infrastructure and does not exist on many maps, its presence looms large in the surrounding soum. Since the transition from socialism, the name of Dalai Village has circulated in Magtaal for its reputation as the fishing village that survives on the margins of the state through the illegal-yet-licit sale and coordinated, cross-border smuggling of its fish.

Much anthropological work on frontier economic transformation in post-socialist and/or market-liberalizing contexts has documented how the intensification of resource extraction – for example, monoculture farming (Li 2015), artisanal mining (High 2017) or wildlife procurement (Botoeva 2014; Tsing 2005, 2015; Sulek 2019) – is a common survival strategy among the poor. Another overlapping body of scholarship discusses how the employment options available to the poor are often at odds with the ideologies of emergent states, driving these practices into realms of fraud (Wiegatz 2016) and illegality (Galemba 2018; Botoeva

2021; High 2012, 2017; Roitman 2005, 2019; Scheele 2012). In practice, many people in Magtaal who are unemployed maintain their subsistence through participating in the illegal procurement, sale and cross-border export of local wildlife (Wingard et al. 2018) – in particular the Chinese medicinal root *fang feng* (see Chapter 2). But while most of the anthropological literature emphasizes the divergent economic stratifications and accumulative competition that result as the poor vie for scarce (and sometimes illegal) resources, the wildlife boom in Magtaal, as illustrated, for example, by the formation of *fang feng* mutual-aid bands, is curiously suffused by group collaboration. Here, the case study of the fish trade at Dalai merely draws attention to an aspect of local wildlife practices prevalent throughout the soum, but particularly stark in the village due to its pre-eminent infrastructural and social isolation.

At Dalai, despite (or perhaps partially because of) its illegality, the attitude predominates that the survival of the fish trade, and with it local wellbeing, is dependent on the mutual effort of villagers. While living with Mandaa and Tuya, a Dalai Village family, in 2017, I witnessed how villagers economically collaborated to enable this trade, helping each other avoid the authorities, giving each other gifts and interest-free loans, sharing car rides and food, extending affordable exchange prices, etc. But more than the individual whims of charitable actors, these acts were motivated by a pervasive anti-profiteering moral discourse in the village that categorized economic actions as legitimate ('good' or 'virtuous' as *buyantai*) versus illegitimate ('bad' or 'selfish') based on whether they upheld the economic wellbeing of the whole versus the accumulation of the one, respectively. In this way, Tuya argues that local activities are indeed illegal, but they are licit and moral because, by helping each other out through economic acts, 'we are building merit together' (*neg negendee buyan bolj bairaa baihgüi yuu*). Here, forged through an amalgamation of circumstances – for example, the memory of socialism; the post-socialist marginalization of the rural poor; their administrative and legal isolation – with the shared dependence of the local populace on the resource commons as post-socialist, market-defined common wealth (Chapter 2), the villagers of Dalai have constructed a moral economic framework designed to sustain the group, reinforced by social pressure and the threat of socioeconomic ostracism.

This chapter argues that the enacted moral framework evinced by the fishermen of Dalai is highly reminiscent of E.P. Thompson's 'moral economy' (1971). Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, feudal England underwent a political-economic transformation that saw

a shift away from protectionist legislation – that regulated the affordability of basic foodstuffs like grain and bread – towards laissez-faire market policy – with food prices determined by supply and demand. In turn, with notable frequency in the eighteenth century and when the price of grain would spike, those individuals particularly affected by these repeals would seize grain reserves – a phenomenon known as the ‘grain riots’. In 1971, the Marxist British historian E.P. Thompson published his seminal work *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* out of frustration with previous historical work that depicted these rioters as purely motivated by hunger. In contrast to this ‘crass economic reductionism’ (1971, 78), Thompson argues:

It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within a community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor (Thompson 1971, 79).

Upon publication, Thompson’s usage of the term ‘moral economy’ to describe the social and moral motivations behind the protests of the English ‘crowd’ became hugely prolific in the social sciences – inspiring both a worldwide historical search for similar crowd-based political-economic phenomena, and a proliferation of anthropological studies detailing how moral frameworks influence economic reasoning.

However, this chapter ponders the conditions that engender a ‘moral economy’ – here, a crowd-shared anti-profiteering moralizing ethos upheld by group sanction – common to both the Dalai case study and the grain riots. Notably, the historical literature on grain riots often evinces a political climate that involved a shift from (or breakdown of) a paternalistic provisioning system for a good (wheat, bread or rice) considered central to societal wellbeing. Although grain riots could differ in the strength of their ‘legitimizing notion’ (Thompson 1971, 78), their recurrent aim was to mitigate the ability of others (such as traders, the elite, dealers) to profiteer off of these shifting circumstances. At Dalai, the rural, twenty-first-century Mongolian fishermen have similarly undergone a political shift from the socialist holistic provisioning system to the post-socialist market liberalization of a commodity perceived as central

to their wellbeing – the resources of the commons. Moreover, their anti-profiteering practices are most pronounced when dealing with changers – those in a position to take advantage of the village’s shifting circumstances – and are upheld by social denigration and ostracism. Thus, differences notwithstanding, two factors bridge these historical epochs and likely gave rise to these similar ‘moral economies’ – 1) the presence of a historical narrative of collective entitlement to (products of) the commons increasingly challenged by emergent political-economic circumstances, thereby sparking political outrage and claims of entitlement among the newly disadvantaged classes; 2) the subsequent formation of morally voiced economic-levelling practices – inspired by but reformulations of historical collective ideals – aimed to defend their historic entitlement and functionally uphold the economic survival of said group.

The moral economy of the eighteenth-century grain riots

Writing in 1971, Thompson used the term ‘moral economy’ to describe a bastion of social mutuality among the poor that was increasingly under threat through the nascent ‘triumph of the new ideology of political economy’ (p. 129). Thompson argues that governance in late medieval England was modelled on a paternalistic ideal of obligation between classes, which prescribed the implementation of regulation that maintained the general interest of the commonwealth – also ‘common weal’ or common wellbeing. Economically, this ideal manifested itself through a *mélange* of statutes, local laws and customs that structured market access to and limited profiteering from basic foodstuffs, in order to safeguard their accessibility for all (Thompson 1971, 83–8). But throughout the eighteenth century, the statutes of the paternalistic, ‘old model’ were gradually repealed as it was displaced by the emergent ideal of political economy, which maintained that the common good was best upheld by the free flow of goods on liberalized markets. The result were sharp periodic increases in the frequency of food riots – in other words, actions of civil protest, commonly instigated by the poor (or, variously, ‘the working classes’, ‘the crowd’ or ‘the people’), which involved the storming of food reserves with the aim of redistributing them at a crowd-determined ‘just’ price to the participants (Thompson 1971, 112–18). More than the manifestations of pure material need or hunger, Thompson argued, it was the participants’ ‘moral economy’ – the shared notion among the participants, rooted in the

paternalistic tradition, that it was morally wrong to profiteer from the necessities of life – that was triggered and expressed in the form of a food riot as a method of rectification.

Upon publication, the reaction to Thompson's coinage was enthusiastic. Because Thompson's article describes an epochal shift – from the past 'tradition' of moral economy to the emergent 'de-moralizing' political economy (Thompson 1971, 79; Thompson 1991, 201–2, 271) – his work was often read as complementary to that of Karl Polanyi, who had argued that economic history could be divided into a pre-industrial, subsistence past and a post-industrial, amoral, formal economic future (2001 [1944]). In turn, Thompson's article initially inspired a wave of historical research seeking similar moral economies in various cultural contexts (Thompson 1991, 341–51), but reached new audiences when, in 1976, the anthropologist James Scott used the term to describe the 'subsistence ethic' amongst the peasantry of Southeast Asia – in other words, the historical practices of moral reciprocity developed by peasants to maintain mutual survival (Scott 1976, 2). As anthropology gradually drifted away from Marxist to post-structuralist approaches in the 1980s and 1990s (Hann and Hart 2011, 70–8), Thompson's formulation was increasingly derided for romanticizing the past and ignoring the many moralities present within contemporary economies (Booth 1994). In lockstep with this trend, its definition was gradually broadened to indicate 'not only how moral ideas are expressed in our economic choices, but also . . . how the organization of the economy affects social well-being' (Browne 2009, 2). Currently, the term 'moral economy' remains divisive but is undergoing an efflorescence as a general signifier for diverse moral frameworks that impact economic behaviour (Wiegratz 2016; Hann 2010; Carrier 2018; Keane 2019; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Götz 2015; Simoni 2016).

In contrast, the anti-profiteering moral ethos of Thompson's description was a product of a recurrent set of historical circumstances. Fascinatingly, food riots recurred globally between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in contexts where a historical provisioning order governing access to a central foodstuff was undergoing a dissolution – whereas Thompson describes the rapid expansion of laissez-faire economic doctrine around 1770 (1971, 89), Tilly (1971, 1983) discusses how food riots in eighteenth-century France were set against the nationalization of the grain market, shifting economic authority away from the regulatory systems of local communes, and Wong (1982) argues that the rice riots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Qing China occurred as the state became unstable and unable to distribute reserves housed in state-run

granaries. Recurrently, they were predominantly instigated by the buyers of food (and their moral allies) who were particularly sensitive to price fluctuations (Rudé 2005 [1964]; Tilly 1971, 26) – such as small peasants in France (Tilly 1971, 26), small wage earners in England (Tilly 1983, 344), and the urban and rural poor in China (Wong 1982, 771). They did not necessarily happen at times of highest poverty, but were often triggered by rapid price jumps caused by either dearth or human action (Rogers 1987; Rudé 2005 [1964], 219; Tilly 1971; Tilly 1983, 339; Wong 1982). And repeatedly they were directed at those individuals suspected of either instigating and/or profiting off high prices in the contested foodstuff – merchants or bakers in France and England; wealthy feudal households in China – and took two common forms designed to limit their profiteering – either the blockade to prevent export to areas with higher prices, or the storming and redistribution of reserves to prevent hoarding until prices rose (Rudé 2005 [1964]; Tilly 1971).

Likely, grain riots were rooted in the perspective that the wellbeing of society was best served through the distributed access to necessities common to all. As an earlier corollary, Rakopoulos and Rico (2018, 278) describe how narratives of rule in medieval England hinged on the image of the ‘commonwealth’ – of a centralized kingdom where the Crown, its (common) territory, its wealth and the wellbeing of subjects were one. But starting in the thirteenth century, common lands accessible to all began to be enclosed into private plots for sheep grazing, sparking a proliferation of riots and contestations – for example, Diggers, Levellers, enclosure riots – among those populations newly debarred from access to common lands – such as vagrants and the urban poor (Rakopoulos and Rico 2018, 278). Similarly, Tilly (1971, 45n48) makes the crucial point that although the ‘vague justification’ that the monarch had an obligation to see that food was available to all existed in sixteenth and seventeenth-century France, ‘the moral economy, as an alternative model with a very specific content as to how government should act in reference to the commerce of grains and food prices, *only appeared when governments stopped intervening in traditional ways*’ (emphasis mine).

Based on these patterns, the eighteenth-century moral economy of Thompson’s description was likely not a narrative coherently formulated in the past, but a medieval societal norm of shared access to life necessities (land and food) that became distilled as political-economic changes threatened it. Those who found their livelihoods made newly vulnerable became cognizant of this shift, self-reflexively giving voice to these historical norms and crystallizing their manifestation as prices upheld through the sanction of grain riots.

The fishermen of Dalai and historical narratives of socioeconomic inclusion

Similar to the idealization of the English commonwealth, both pre-socialist and socialist-era Mongolia were suffused by a hierarchically inclusivist governance model aimed at upholding the wellbeing of the whole. In [Chapter 1](#), I discuss this model at length, including how the perceived political-economic neglect experienced by rural Magtaalians in the immediate post-socialist period engendered a fracturing of the historical relationship between ‘the common people’ and their sovereigns, now as politicians. In [Chapter 2](#), I describe how historical governance models were interconnected with the understanding of land as a common resource, a common wealth, that embodied the relationality between land and peoples to engender spiritual and substantive life. At Dalai, specifically, the fishermen also express neglect, but the final nail in the coffin severing the allegiance between politicians and people was the illegalization of fishing, in other words, the formal economic debarment of the local populace from the commons. Faced with the impossibility of both maintaining post-socialist livelihoods and following the legal promulgations of their leaders, fishermen chose to continue their now-illegalized practices, which they legitimated according to emergent narratives of *nutag* entitlement (similar to those discussed in [Chapter 2](#)).

The arrival of socialism with the founding of the MPR in 1924 did not so much contest the model of common wealth but integrated it into the centrally organized state. With the transition to socialism, private ownership was dissolved and herds were collectivized, as land became newly conceptualized as state property granted for free and perpetual use to herding cooperatives ([Fernandez-Gimenez 2010](#), 327–32). In 1939, Magtaal became the MPR’s easternmost soum, containing a *nedgel* – a herding cooperative under the supervision of the soum leader that grazed in its territory – and the first fishing workshop at Dalai Lake. In 1954, this fishing spot was expanded into a centrally organized fish factory, as 80 families were relocated to the lake as its workers. While the agricultural state farm grew in the soum centre in the 1970s and 1980s, the factory at Dalai Lake expanded separately to become a specialized production offshoot (*tseh*) of the meat factory (*kombinat*) in the aimag centre. In historical interviews, the *tseh*’s former workers, many of whom still live at Dalai, describe its operations as centrally organized – the entire *tseh* could be mobilized to man the giant horse-drawn nets (*morin tor*) it used to catch fish, at which point the workers were divided into smaller units that alternately salted, refined and packaged. Then, the fish were sent on to

the aimag centre to be transported throughout the Soviet bloc, while the workers at Dalai received their monthly salary. Here, although in altered form, the socialist fishermen of Dalai also conceptualized the land as the wellspring of collective wellbeing until the gradual collapse of the MPR in 1989–91.

Enclosing the resource commons

During the transition process from 1991 to 1994, Magtaal underwent both the retrenchment of state provisioning, welfare and job security and the gradual opening of its northern border crossing to China. These dual forces – specifically, the presence of demand markets without any locally present industry or employment bridge to them – sparked a process of ‘resourcification’ – in other words, the reconceptualization of the natural commons as containing singular capitalizable assets that could be partitioned off for personal gain (High 2010; Munkherdene and Sneath 2018, 822). While, in the soum centre, cash-starved individuals started stripping the now-abandoned Soviet infrastructure to sell as scrap metal, an Ulaanbaatar-based Mongolian businessman arrived at Dalai, offering to buy asset vouchers from the ex-workers. According to the recollection of contemporary fishermen, he gathered about half of the vouchers, employing their titleholders as workers in his new private company. This company operated at the lake for 10 years, seasonally employing Chinese fishermen, who arrived in the soum and were shocked to find freely available *fang feng*, informing the local populace concerning its lucrateness in China and establishing the first changer network (see Chapter 2). In the early 2000s, the private fish company dissolved after a drop in the fish price in China, and a similar changer network in fish developed at the lake. During the various company forms, the residents of Dalai thus continued to treat the lake as a collective resource pool, but one from which, entrepreneurially, they could now take fish assets in order to survive (Munkherdene and Sneath 2018).

Gradually, this trade became legally circumscribed. In 1995, the Mongolian government passed its first wildlife legislation, the Law on Hunting, Resource Use Payments & Fees, which cast game wildlife (*an am'tan*) as the property of the state that citizens could utilize through a system of fees and royalties (continuing governance approaches to the land discussed in Chapter 2) (State Great Hural 1995b). This law was complemented in 2000 with the passing of the first Law on Fauna (later superseded by a 2012 version), which regulated conservation and trapping relations around large game, birds and fish, and established a

permit system for industrial, domestic and special purposes, as well as fines for violators (State Great Hural 2000). The latter version stipulates a total ban on fishing at Dalai Lake for domestic and special purposes between 15 May and 1 August of each year (State Great Hural 2012, Article 9, Clause 2.4) – likely because this is the fish spawning period. From the mid-2000s, after the collapse of the private fish company, new Ulaanbaatar-based private companies started applying for seasonal, not permanent, permits to export fish from Dalai in the winter,¹ when the sale price was especially high in China prior to Lunar New Year. Every November between the early 2000s and 2015, these companies would seasonally move to Dalai, hiring local fishermen, not as regular employees, but as contractors. Extending their state-received permits to the fishermen, the Dalai contractors were allowed to temporarily fish for sale to the company. But, since this formal, legal trade was only seasonal, local fishermen also used the permit as a smokescreen to entrepreneurially sell a portion of their catch to illegal changers, who often offered higher rates.

Formalization thus initially resulted in increased dependence on urban Mongolians with enough capital and access to apply for state permits. For example, Ganzorig, who was born in and currently works as an electrician in Dalai Village, was actually trained in aquaculture, receiving a degree in Bulgaria in 1989, but following the collapse of the *tseh* he had not been able to utilize his expertise in any formal manner. I asked him why local people, like him, hadn't combined their skills and expertise to open their own company and he responded:

Our fishermen are experts [*mergejilten*], but Dalai residents can't get permission as a formal company. Other companies come here from urban centres that don't have expertise, but they use their networks to get the credentials . . . So, then they have the documents and can pay the tax to the government [to get the permit].

In Ganzorig's opinion, not only were local fishermen hindered in market participation by their lack of capital, required to pay taxes to receive government permits, but they also did not have the social contacts and physical ability to 'go to many government departments and meet lots of people' in Ulaanbaatar. In 2015, the Chinese government made the formal fish-exporting process more hygienically demanding, which dissuaded urban Mongolian companies from applying for seasonal permits for Dalai. As a result, as of 2015, the local fishermen have been formally and legally debarred from capitalizing on the resource commons, as they do not have the funds to either apply for permits or meet the demands of the two governments.

‘Doing it for life’

Although they are aware of recent political-economic shifts, Magtaal residents still frame their ideal governance relation in terms of holism, discussed extensively in [Chapter 1](#), evident in the words contemporary Mongolians continue to use in reference to material processes. The contemporary Mongolian term for economy, *ediin zasag*, can be directly translated as ‘the governance of property’ and encapsulates the understanding that the realm of material relations (*ed*: property, thing) should be administered (*zasah*: govern) by the sovereign head for the wellbeing of all ([Sneath 2002](#), 201–2). Ideally, this relation of inclusive yet hierarchical governance would repeat itself on multiple societal levels, as indicated by an associated idiom: ‘First govern yourself, then govern your home, and then govern the state’ (*biyee zasaad geree zas, geree zasaad töröö zas*) ([Plueckhahn and Dulam 2018](#), 346–7).

Similar to the supplicants at To Wang’s mountain or the protestors against the FTZ, Dalai fishermen also refer to these inclusive ideals as exemplars of what their politicians *should* be doing but were not. In 2016, I walked into the home of Zurhee, a fisherman born in Dalai in 1964, right after a local politician had swept through the village asking for votes for an upcoming election. When I entered, Zurhee threw the politician’s pamphlets to the side and exclaimed: ‘They all say nice things before the election – that they will legalize fishing – but then do nothing.’ I asked him what kind of person he would vote for instead and he explained: ‘They would have to support the people. Someone who looks out [*harah*] for the people would be a good person . . . They should first govern their body, then make their home nice, and then they can govern the state.’ Zurhee’s statements are reflective of the continued sentiment in Dalai that an ideal sovereign (now: politician and government) would show care – in other words, look out for (*harah*) or be considerate of (*bodoh*) – everyday people, but that these historical ideals are increasingly at odds with the reality of the contemporary system (see [Chapter 1](#)).

Specifically, at Dalai, the equivocal illegalization of fishing has been interpreted as a dereliction of sovereign duty. In interviews, residents of both the soum centre and Dalai Village often used the idiom ‘Mongolian law [is applicable for] three days’ (literally: ‘Mongolian law, three days’; *Mongol huul’ gurvān honog*) to describe the perception that the contemporary implementation of central government law is both illogical and erratic. In [Chapter 1](#), I introduced Tseren, a grade-school teacher, who used the phrase to describe how the law is poorly implemented,

reflecting that it does not apply to people with wealth, which is a sign that the state is not keeping everyone in line in the name of the greater good:

Our law is not strict; if you give money to a judge, the law is not carried out. Mongolian law, three days. If the law was strict, we would be disciplined. For example, if people in China or Korea are corrupt, those people go to jail, but in Mongolia, the directors and heads [of government] are corrupt [literally: 'eating lots of money'] and nothing happens . . . That's why the government isn't caring for us [*harah, bodoh*].

Tseren's usage of the phrase actually implies, contrary to the common assumption that peripheral populations want to escape the state, that she wants the state to take command, have a strong backbone and implement its laws so that everyone is kept in check. This is an idealization of the state as paternalistic, as having strict laws but ones that are there so that society as a whole continues and functions. In contrast, the current inability or unwillingness of the state to forcefully assert itself is symbolic of a failing state with rulers who no longer have any interest in showing care or consideration to those below them. At Dalai, the inability of the state to strongly regulate the fish trade, and its tendency to make decrees that are poorly enforced or easily circumvented by themselves and Chinese others, is a sign of general neglect – that politicians really do not care about their livelihoods and whether they fish or not: they only want to maintain the *image* of caring.

These combined forces – on the one hand, the lack of direction or provisioning from the state, with, on the other, the ambiguous illegalization of local resources – places the fishermen of Dalai in a moral double bind. After formal fishing companies stopped arriving at Dalai in 2015, changers with their own questionably legal means to export fish to China kept showing up at the lake, willing to buy fish from local residents. At this point, Zurhee explains, he considered his employment choices – he could work at the oil company, but it preferentially hired urbanites and foreigners; he tried working at a local tourist camp, but they preferred younger relatives with English skills. The result was a reconsideration of morality similar to Zigon's (2007) description of a 'moral breakdown' – faced with the impassable clash between material realities and long-held inner beliefs, local fishermen became cognizant of their historical worldviews and rationally adapted them to contemporary conditions. Zurhee, for one, argues that government policy was confusing, motivating him to disregard it: 'Either you completely stop the fishing or you let us

fish. There are two avenues [*hoyor zam l baina*] . . . Now, the only wisdom that really matters is the experience of living.’ Rather, in the interest of living life, they now have to break the law:

Since [the implementation of restrictions], we just always catch illegally [*hulgaigaar*, literally, by way of theft]. Even if they say ‘don’t do it’, we will catch the fish illegally. Also if someone comes to buy it, we will sell it . . . If we follow the law, life gets hard. So we break it [*Huul’ dagahad am’dral hezüüdeh geed baina. Bid huuliig zörchij baina*] . . . We are just trying to live [*Am’drah geed l üzne dee*].

Indeed, the appeal to the imperative of life – expressed through statements such as ‘we are supplying livelihoods’, ‘doing it for life’, ‘thinking about life’ or ‘life demands it’ – commonly accompanied local rationalizations for participating in now-illegal activities. Now, Zurhee admits, he rarely follows both spiritual and legal prescriptions against fishing, arguing that, although their activities violate historical traditions, they are moral: ‘We are forgetting out traditions in order to live our lives [*Am’dralyn tölöö yos züüg martana*]. We do it to eat, drink, consume – not to get rich.’

Similar to other studies on the ramifications of market liberalization among the rural poor, fishermen like Zurhee have decided that they no longer have any choice but to engage in chronically illegal practices. Here, the rationalization of ‘life’ – a word that can represent pure subsistence, but also the ability of individuals to continue their way of life into the future (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) – becomes an overarching imperative compelling residents to adapt their worldviews in order to legitimate previously illegitimate behaviour.

Because the entire township has collectively undergone this shift and is, in some manner, dependent on illegal resources to survive, the participants in these activities enjoy high levels of coordination and sympathy in the soum. In 2017, I interviewed an official in local government, who had been elected after working as a nature protector for eight years, who admitted that the fishermen’s activities were public knowledge. But for nature protectors, he explained, cracking down on this trade was a ‘personal dilemma’ (*hünii huv’d hezüü asuudal*). For one, echoing Zurhee’s language, the participants were doing it to sustain their families within a system that did not provide them with work or aid – the law ‘did not fit the reality of life’ (*bodit am’drald taardaggiüi*). At Dalai, in particular, the trade had become very ‘refined’ (*nariin*) – individuals living in the soum centre would call their relatives at Dalai as soon as they saw a ranger car heading in the lake’s direction, sparking a warning telephone chain. Moreover, many of the nature protectors were either

directly or indirectly involved in resource trades themselves – either because they were related to a participant or even, in some cases, because they themselves participated at weekends for extra income. In general, he admitted, public officials were not that interested in penalizing everyday resource entrepreneurs, ‘because it would cause all sorts of problems in the soum’. Indeed, by one informant’s estimate in 2017, up to 80 per cent (including underpaid rangers) of the soum was involved in the wildlife trade, leading to high levels of organization among fishermen to avoid raids and demotivation among rangers to try and catch them.

Entitlement to our homeland

At Dalai, economic exigency has not fractured historical holistic societal ideals into many competitive individuals, but into new oppositional constructions. For one, similar to the political-economic shifts in Magtaal as a whole, the residents of Dalai feel increasing resentment towards their central government leaders, instigating a severance of the historically idealized allegiance between ‘the people’ and their sovereign leaders. Here, too, the fishermen of Dalai increasingly frame their identities around the concept of the *nutag* or homeland – a dialectically spiritual-and-profane discourse arguing that individuals from a shared homeland have preferential moral access to its resources on account of both their historical political connection to that land and their historical spiritual relation to its land masters. Similar to the identity terms described in the expanded discussion on *nutagism* in [Chapter 1](#), Dalai residents also chiefly identify using the designations *nutgiihan* (the people of the nutag), *tosgonyhan* (the people of the village) and *dalai nuuryhan* (the people of Dalai Lake), framing their livelihoods in opposition to far-off, central government politicians and the state who do not understand their lives and seem to demonstrate limited care for them. But at the same time, the emergent narratives of *nutag*-based identity evince a further antagonism: the people from the same *nutag* must defend their homeland vis-à-vis people from other *nutags*, which includes foreigners (such as Chinese workers) but also other Mongolians.

As discussed in [Chapters 1 and 2](#), the narratives of *nutagism* are based on historical ideals of spiritual interrelation with local land masters, but within a neglectful, resource-dependent political-economic system, *nutagism* can take the form of political-economic resource claims. For example, when I spoke to Ganzorig, the resident electrician, he introduced me to his wife, Onoo, who runs the local Dalai store. Showing me the carp she had stashed behind the store’s counter in anticipation of the arrival of



Figure 3.1 Dalai fish behind Onoo's store desk. © Author

a buyer (Fig. 3.1), she argued that the fish were the fortune (*hishig*) yielded from the spiritual connection of residents with the lake's land master, given so they could sustain their lives:

The lake's resources are the resources of the land and water spirits and the *nutag*. We carry out rituals to the land and water to appease them . . . If we didn't catch fish, there would be no reason to be here [at the lake]. Usually, the people that live here are pensioners, not young people, and they are just trying to supply their lives. We are doing this for life and are not exceeding our share. You shouldn't live beyond your means. If we use the resource, then our next generations can have a good life. We *need* to use them; the people should use their resources . . . The people of the lake have the right to catch for their daily consumption.

Similar to the *fang feng* pickers discussed in Chapter 2, Onoo used both spiritual and rights-based language to argue that the fish resource is Dalai's *hishig*, but also the prerogative of local people on part of their historical interrelation with the homeland (*ard tümenii* or *nutagiin bayalag*) allowing them to take their share. Zurhee's viewpoints overlapped with Onoo's: he argued that because he takes care of the land,

carrying out rituals and looking after it for the land master, he should have preferential access to its resources:

Outsiders [read: non-locals] don't live in this place, so they don't love our lake. The local residents think it is our lake and we love the lake. Outsiders just think it's like any other place; it's just someone's 'homeland' [*nutag*], doesn't matter to me. 'Loving' means to take trash from the lake, to not leave your net in the lake [and] clean it.

Increasingly, as non-*nutag* people enter into Magtaal, hoping to use its resources, residents use the terms of *nutagism* to express exclusive claims and rights to its resources. This is likely because residents feel neglected, not politically protected, yet they are living in a resource-based economy where richer or better-situated non-residents have easier access to the resources that local livelihoods have become dependent on. Indeed, Munkherdene and Sneath (2018) noticed a similar development within disputes among entrepreneurial gold miners who arrive in soum districts with local miners. At Dalai, the continuity of local livelihoods in the past, present and future is framed as sustained through sharing an exclusive connection to the *nutag* as both spiritual master and resource commons, motivating residents to collectively defend it against those who (they perceive) wish to appropriate it – such as the proponents of the free trade zone; the laws of central government politicians; the companies of wealthy elites; and 'outsiders' (*gadny хүмүүс*) such as urban Mongolian changers, Mongolians with other *nutag*, Chinese fishermen, etc.

The moral economy of merit

In [Chapter 2](#), I described how the products of the environment that give life have historically been described as *hishig*. In contemporary Magtaal, when resource procurers and fishermen talk about the bounty of the environment, they often describe it as *buyan hishig*. The term *buyan* can be translated as 'merit' or 'karma', and is often associated with historical Buddhist-inspired understanding that carrying out good acts – such as reading scriptures, good management of the self and family, charity, ritual participation and giving alms (Empson 2011, 73) – could increase one's fortune in this or the next life. Combined into one term as *buyan hishig*, the compound comes to represent a dialectical process, whereby

buyan can strengthen *hishig*, leading to more opportunities for *buyan*, etc.² Considering that, within the resource-based market economy, the definitions of *hishig* have expanded to encompass money-engendering resources, a similar dynamic is underway with *buyan*. Locally, resource-based economic exchanges – in other words, exchanges that deal with the land’s *hishig* – are governed by a moral economy that incentivizes ‘good acts’ as mutually beneficial exchanges – legitimated as ‘virtuous’ or *buyantai* – versus acts of uneven accumulation – denigrated as selfish – that allow local people to collectively survive and maintain their commons-based livelihoods within the contemporary economy.

Building merit together

Most residents continue to live off the land, not by directly subsisting off it, but by converting its resources into money. In Dalai Village, by 2015, all permitted fishing had ceased and the residents had become quite adept at fishing and selling their catch ‘illegally’ (*hulgaigar*) to whomever arrived at the lake. In 2016, Mandaa, a 42-year-old fisherman, born and raised in Dalai Village, copied the *fang feng* trade practices of other Magtaal residents by building a hidden compartment into his car to stash fish and successfully smuggle them across the border. Bringing them to market a few times in the nearest Inner Mongolian city in China, he eventually struck up a friendship with an Inner Mongolian man who could sell his fish. For the first year, Mandaa and his wife, Tuya, took turns going back and forth – alternately fishing and exporting – until they realized they could save time by focusing purely on exporting. In 2017, they started going around to all the fishing houses in the village and buying fish from others at the going Dalai Village rate, which they would then export in bulk. And everyone would benefit, they emphasized, because Mandaa’s family (and other smugglers and/or changers with cars) was able to effectuate another market avenue for themselves and the rest of the village, whose economic opportunities were otherwise restricted by legalities. During my fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, the villagers of Dalai earned the bulk of their subsistence through participating in these coordinated resource exports.

Mandaa was a popular figure in the soum. Months after doing fieldwork at the lake, my research partner and I were sitting in a yurt cafe on the other side of Magtaal and overheard a conversation between strangers on how great he was. Indeed, in contrast to the widespread reputation of middlemen as individuals who prioritize their economic

profit, taking advantage of power differentials to exploit procurers, Mandaa was a local resident, born and raised at the lake, who tried to buy fish from residents at prices that suited them. Previous changers and companies that had come during the winter season had often taken advantage of local residents' lack of cash and legal negotiating ability to indebt fishermen and/or receive fish at a depressed price. In contrast, Mandaa and Tuya incorporate the price fluctuations and the going rate in their price negotiations with fishermen. They would sell fishermen nets, give them loans without interest and accept payment at the going rate; and they would often give gifts to fishermen they constantly worked with and/or would give them free rides to China for various needs. When I asked Tuya about their activities, she emphasized that the local residents all knew each other: they were all trying to feed their families, so 'those individuals that can cross the border, should buy from the others – we are doing a good deed [*buyanii ajil*]'. The narrative of moral virtue often accompanies these retellings – 'we are building merit together' (*neg negendee buyan bolj bairaa baihgüi yuu*), she opined when describing the villagers' economic collaboration.

Tuya and Mandaa's usage of the term *buyan* can be generally translated as 'doing good', which is a common contemporary lay-Buddhist understanding of the term (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019, 130). For example, in this quote by Tseren (see Chapter 1), she argues that both the flow of both *buyan* and money are governed by the moral adage that you give what you get:

If you give more to the government, you can take more, if you give less, you take less. If you give your *buyan* to others, you get *buyan* from others. It's a rule of money – the more you give, the more it grows well and comes back . . . If children [come into my store] and don't have enough [money] to buy things, like 10 or 15 MNT are missing, then I'll just give it to them. Next time, it will be my income . . . Mongolians like to sponsor rites or give to others, because it will come back like *buyan* . . . It's a question of intention; greedy people are difficult [to deal with]. If you are greedy, people don't like you.

On the one hand, Tseren's multiple usages of *buyan* draw attention to the same parallelism present in the concepts of *nutag* and *hishig* – that the mundane and this-worldly, and the profane and otherworldly, ricochet dialectically. Within recent Mongolian ethnographic literature, money has often been depicted as an amplificatory conduit of the spiritual intent of its user – such as money engendered from spiritually negative acts, like

gold-mining, which is sullied (*buzartai*) and must be controlled to limit negative reverberations (High 2013), whereas urban participants in Buddhist money-calling rituals sacralize specific notes to ‘pull’ additional positive wealth (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2018). But in both Tseren’s and Tuya’s usage, *buyan* has taken on a secular distinction as participating in and upholding relations of economic reciprocity that will engender collective wellbeing.³ As opposed to economic acts that are ‘selfish’ and only benefit the wellbeing of one, both the ideal state and Dalai Village are depicted as fields constituted by many acts of economic aid that uphold the whole over time.

Merit-making prices

In addition to the narrative that changers, like Mandaa, are doing ‘good deeds’ (*buyanii ajil*) when they provide employment to unemployed fishermen, local changers often strive to give and/or buy from fishermen at the ‘meritorious opportune price’ (*buyantai bolomjiin üne*; shortened here as ‘merit-making price’) – a price that is seen as beneficial to both actors. This conjunction of a virtue with economic price setting is highly reminiscent of Thompson’s (1971, 108) discussion of the just prices demanded by the grain rioters – specifically, rioters outraged by attempts by tradesmen to profit from high grain prices would storm their stores and, fascinatingly, instead of absconding with grain, would often resell it to the participants according to a ‘just price’ (sometimes leaving the money for the tradesman). As a result, Thompson (1971, 92–3) argued, the rioters couldn’t have been motivated by pure hunger, but by a moral notion of what was considered right or ‘just’ in payment for a ‘prime necessity of life’. Although other studies analysing just prices have often

Table 3.1 The price of a kilo of Asian carp by season in 2016–17 (in MNT)

	Dalai Village (Magtaal)	Inner Mongolia (China)
Winter (2016 to 2017)	5,000 to 6,000	18,000; increases to 37,000 to 74,000 before Lunar New Year
Spring	7,000 to 10,000	18,000 to 37,000; 60,000 to 74,000 during breeding season
Summer	2,500	3,000 to 4,000
Autumn	Gradually rises from 2,500 to 5,000	4,000 to 18,000

argued that these prices are undergirded by a subsistence calculation, the Dalai merit-making price is, in contrast, a relational price – it is informed by the question: are both actors mutually benefiting from this exchange or is one actor unfairly benefiting over the other?

Specifically, the usage of the adjective ‘opportune’ (*bolomj*, also ‘possible’) in the full conjunction draws attention to proportions in exchange. In the following passage, Bilgüün, who has been both a fisherman and a root gatherer to supplement his herding income, explains how middlemen differentiate themselves through the prices they offer to procurers:

A middleman’s job is just work. Middlemen can make people’s lives better. They can gather the resource of the people [*ard tüimen*] and export them, which garners large merit, merit in this lifetime. If you are a real middleman, it is merit. For example, if you buy the roots from people and say ‘These are bad and dirty,’ you are a bad middleman. But a real middleman does not see a huge amount of profit. They aren’t greedy. If they are greedy, they will be cursed by local people.

Here, Bilgüün’s wife jumped in to the conversation to clarify the meaning of ‘merit’: ‘Merit means “to help” [*buyan gedeg n’ tuslamj*]’. Bilgüün then continued:

A real middleman collects roots at the meritorious opportune price [*buyantai bolomjiin üne*]. For example, a price could be 10,000 MNT, but one middleman complains and says he will only pay 6,000 or 7,000. But if another comes and says he can pay 9,000, then that is merit. You will attract people and get more loyal partners [*ünench tünsh*]. The bad changers only think about themselves [*öördsdiigöö boddog*].

In Magtaal, almost all people are dependent on the money engendered in exchange for local resources at market prices that they have limited control over, but they can affect their profit margins in singular exchanges. For example, in the winter of 2017, the going rate for fish in Dalai was 6,000 MNT, but it could be sold for 18,000 (or more) in the neighbouring Chinese city – this meant a profit of 6,000 for the fishermen and (at least) 12,000 for Mandaa (Fig. 3.2, Table 3.1). The ‘opportune’ aspect refers to price possibilities – the going rate is 6,000, but Mandaa theoretically could offer more without taking a large personal hit. The ‘merit-making price’ is thus a price that is offered by the middleman that cuts into his



Figure 3.2 A Han Chinese seller at the market in Inner Mongolia sells Dalai fish. © Author

profit margin in favour of the fisherman.⁴ *Buyan* is used by Bilgüün (and his wife) to describe situations where the more powerful actor engages in acts of economic reciprocity – in other words, creates employment, is relatable and pleasant, gives favourable prices, etc. – over the choice to maximize their profit ('think of themselves' or 'greedy'). In the short term, these acts allow both actors in the exchange to benefit, which, over the long term, upholds the common wellbeing of the soum.

Finally, Bilgüün's comments point to another aspect of this discourse – its social sanctioning power. Within a context where all local people are involved in some capacity in resource exchanges, *Mandaa* and other changers, especially if they are from *Magtaal*, do not want to contradict the prevailing sentiment, lest it provoke outrage and have disastrous effects on their business and ability to live in the soum. For one, because of the market outlet in China, local resources are in high demand and procurers can afford to be picky regarding changers. It is thus in the interest of changers to provide attractive prices, because it garners the accolade of merit and, with it, reputation in the community that attracts more 'reliable partners'. During my fieldwork, changers (and Chinese fishermen) who came from other areas to do business in *Magtaal* often did not offer attractive prices and were ousted through social pressure

from the community – either local residents would refuse to work with them or they would use rumour (in Bilgüün’s words, ‘curses’) to tarnish their reputations. In the same manner that residents would use phone chains to avoid patrols, they would use anonymous phone tips to tell the authorities the location of changers who were locally disliked. Through a confluence of factors – including but not limited to the shared feeling of entitlement to common resources; the isolation of Magtaal from other areas; the proximity to China; the illegalization of their livelihood practices; and the mutual dependence of all soum members on the same trade – the pressure to conform is so strong because most residents feel that their political entitlements and individual interests are best upheld by defending the wellbeing of all against the accumulation of one.

Conclusion

There is a specific confluence of factors that engendered an anti-profiteering moral discourse common to Dalai Village and the eighteenth-century English grain riots. First, in both, society had been historically ideally governed according to a holistic model that distributed access to the commons – in other words, the ‘necessit[ies] of life’ (Thompson 1971, 92) – in the interest of societal wellbeing. However, the distribution of common goods had been recently liberalized and consigned to economic markets. Certain segments of society, particularly those individuals now dependent on these exchange prices for survival, became cognizant of and morally outraged by the recent loss, creating the moral economy in an attempt to either rectify it or uphold the holistic wellbeing of the debarred group in the new exchange-based economy. Although the general political-economic trajectory is the same, there is a crucial difference between the commodities that are being regulated – whereas the livelihood of the English poor was dependent on the *purchase price* of bread, the livelihood of the rural poor of Magtaal is dependent on the *sale price* of natural resources. Here, there is no direct equivalent to riot in Magtaal, because whereas the English poor could rectify purchase prices by actively seizing grain from dealers and setting a price for it, the rural poor of Dalai can only collectively affect the sale price (in other words, how low the wage is that people will accept) by compelling each other, using social pressure as a monopolization tactic to maintain crowd-accepted prices and scare off non-adhering individuals (changers, Chinese traders, ‘selfish’ others) with the threat of group sanction and the law.

Therefore, the moral economy of the fishermen does not represent a throwback to the past, but it does signify a fracturing of the holistic social body – in other words, exactly who and what is included in the political commune of the commons. In pre-socialist Magtaal, herders were encouraged to use land and its resources moderately for subsistence, sharing access with others according to hierarchical cosmologies of human/non-human interrelationality. In socialist Magtaal, the land was ideologically conceptualized as a material realm collectively worked by everyday people, who gave their yields to the state and received provisioning in return. But the moral economy of fishermen of post-socialist Magtaal does not, contrary to pre-socialist cosmologies, condemn the extraction of non-human life to the benefit of the human, nor, contrary to the ideologies of socialism, the conversion of resources of provisioning into cash that accumulates. Rather, faced with the existential threat of being severed from the commons by markets and political leaders, local fishermen reconceptualized historical narratives into specific exchange practices that predominantly differ from the market-liberal ideals of the post-socialist Mongolian state in their emphasis on group, not individual, accumulation. Here, the enclosing of the land and its resources has sparked the gradual hemming in of the collective social body entitled to the common wealth – now chiefly the prerogative of the human occupants of the *nutag*.

Notes

- 1 A high local official described to me how this permit process is carried out. First, a company can apply to the Ministry of Nature and Tourism in Ulaanbaatar for a permit, but before it can be dispensed, the ministry sends money to the soum government to hire an outside nature contractor to determine how much of the resource in question can be sourced that year without damaging its reproductive capacities. The ministry then sets an official number, based on information on the resource store from across the country, and sends it to the aimag government for verification, which then issues an official documentation and sends that to the soum government. Then the soum makes contracts directly with the company (that applied for the permit) to source an amount within the limits of the ministry-determined quantity. Then the nature protectors and the head of the smallest administrative unit (a *bag*) are supposed to oversee the process to make sure everyone stays within their limits.
- 2 According to Empson (2011, 73), the combined pair, *buyan hishig*, augments the meanings of *hishig*. To Wang (*Togtokhtör 1990* [1853]) also uses this contraction within the *Teachings* to indicate a fortune–action cyclicity: if the reader follows his instructions on how to act ‘correctly’ vis-à-vis the social universe, this is *buyan*, or Buddhist merit, or will receive *buyan* from the human state, which will elevate one’s *hishig*, bringing both material and spiritual reverberations (see Chapter 1).
- 3 Swancutt (2008) also describes the presence of the moral categorizations of ‘virtuous’ (*buyantai*) versus ‘unvirtuous’ (*buyan bish*) behaviour among Buryat Mongol shamans in eastern Mongolia, but focuses on how ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ behaviour invites different spiritual

entities to variously interact with humans. Importantly, although Swancutt's fieldwork was not far from Magtaal, her informants are highly influenced by shamanism, whereas Magtaal is a predominantly Khalkh Buddhist area. These regional differences might have influenced divergent local definitions of *buyan*.

- 4 The changer still often makes a larger cut of profit. Procurers generally do not begrudge the changer their margin – since they are ‘facilitating the process’ (*yavuuulakhyn tuld*) – if they give back in terms of benefits and working conditions (Long 2001, 125). See the [Conclusion](#).

4

An overheated economy of favours

In May 2016, I sat with Baatar, the father of my homestay family, in the kitchen of our Soviet-era flat as he bent over the table, scribbling calculations on a napkin. Two months earlier, the ruling, soon-outgoing Democratic Party (DP) had nationally announced a newly discounted, government-arbitrated bank mortgage programme, which was the cause of Baatar's flurry of calculations.¹ Previously, this party had introduced a government-subsidized mortgage loan (*ipotyekiin zeel*) that enabled applicants to purchase flats by paying 20 per cent upfront and the rest back to the government at an 8 per cent interest rate.² In 2013, Baatar and his wife, Tsend, had their second child and, believing their children would receive a better education if they left Magtaal, used the government scheme to purchase a flat in the aimag centre. But three years later, the family remained in Magtaal's soum centre, as the purchased flat remained empty and unused, the physical manifestation of mortgaged, unrealized dreams. Thus, when in 2016, the party announced this new plan with an improved 5 per cent interest rate, Baatar jumped at the opportunity to convert his ongoing loan to this reduced-interest scheme, hoping to alleviate the financial burden – he calculated possible savings of 7 million MNT (3,500 USD) – weighing on their family.

Baatar and Tsend had not moved because they were knee-deep in *zeel* or loans. At the time of receiving the mortgage loan in 2013, Baatar and Tsend both had well-paid, government-payroll jobs in Magtaal's soum centre: Baatar worked as a computer teacher in the school and Tsend as an assistant in the local museum. Their ability to receive the loan was based on the bank's appraisal of their finances as reliable and secure, enabling Baatar to become the chief borrower – requiring him to pay 140,000 MNT (70 USD) every month for 20 years – and Tsend to be the guarantor. To gather the money for the upfront payment, Tsend also used her job as collateral to get a salary loan (*tsalingiin zeel*) from the bank – a loan that allowed her to receive a large cash payment, paid back by capping her salary for three years. In 2014, after a bout of depression and

drinking, Baatar lost his job. After I moved into their flat in 2015, Baatar engaged in a variety of odd jobs (*haltuur hiih*) – he fixed people’s computers, engaged in beekeeping and became a political campaigner for different political parties – and engaged in a plethora of *zeel*. Later, he received a government-subsidized small-business loan (*üildverleiin zeel*) and regularly frequented a moneylender in order to gather money to meet the ongoing interest payments.

There were two complications hindering Baatar’s switch to the new mortgage loan. First, the new programme required a 30 per cent upfront payment, requiring their family to gather 1.8 million MNT (900 USD); and second, Baatar’s job loss required him to find a co-signer without a loan. ‘A loan-less person?’ He cursed his luck: ‘Such a person does not exist in Mongolia any more!’ He decided it would be easier to pay off his mother’s loans, so he set to work. He called up a good friend – the owner of a local store whose computer he had fixed recently – and she transferred a few hundred thousand MNT to his account: not a loan (*zeel*), but a form of help (*tus*) for a friend, he later told me. With this money, he went to the bank and paid off his mother’s ongoing pension loan (*tetgevriin zeel*) – a loan that had similarly reduced her pension in return for a large upfront sum. Then, Tsend, whose salary loan was close to the three-year completion date, went back to the bank and extended it – she took out more money, pushing its end date back another year. With the paperwork from paying off his mother’s loan, so she could act as the co-signer, and the money from Tsend’s newly extended loan, so he could meet the 30 per cent payment requirement, Baatar hopped on a bus to the aimag centre and saved his family 7 million MNT.

It was on that day in 2016 that Baatar first taught me the phrase ‘to take from the back seam to fix the front seam’ to describe the pervasive experience in contemporary, post-socialist Mongolia of constantly shifting assets to negotiate debts (which I unpack in the Introduction). In the early 2000s, the Mongolian government was able to implement one pillar of the post-socialist reforms recommended by international advisers (Rossabi 2005, 45) – namely, the successful privatization and sale of several national banks to private foreign investors, jumpstarting a proliferation of credit availability for everyday people (Rossabi 2005, 110). By the late 2000s, anthropologists working in Mongolia started to notice a loan epidemic (Pedersen and Højer 2019). In the decade that followed, research on debt in Mongolia exploded as it became an overarching, defining feature of contemporary life (Sneath 2012; Empson 2014b, 2016, 2018, 2020; Pedersen 2017; Pedersen and Højer 2019; Plueckhahn 2020).³ Similar to other anthropological work on everyday indebtedness amongst the poor (Guérin 2014; Han 2012; James 2014, 2015), the main instigator driving this phenomenon has been general cash dearth – many

Mongolians, despite periods of income or seasonal employment, often do not have enough cash or savings to meet their various needs. Currently, it is common for individuals to take out bank loans, but find themselves unable to pay off the principal, often becoming chronically entangled as they take out second loans to navigate the first. The generality of this experience has inspired a wave of illustrative popular terminology – including ‘living from loan to loan’ (*zeelees zeeliin hoorond am’dardag*) (Murphy 2018; Waters 2019); entering ‘webs of debt’ (*öriin suljeend oroh*) (Empson 2016); having ‘double loans’ (*davhar zeel*) (Sneath 2012); and ‘fixing the back seam with the front seam’.

This chapter describes the debt epidemic as a manifestation not only of cash dearth, but also of the cultural proclivity to distribute socio-economic burdens. Contemporary loaning practices in Mongolia are shaped through the intersection of two historical understandings of debt (*ör*): first, concepts of *social debt* that posit individuals as intertwined in social wholes that are honoured and upheld through enacted obligations (Graeber 2011, 43–71; Roitman 2003; Sarthou-Lajus 2013); and second, understandings of *exchange-based debt* that posit individuals as independent actors in self-interested, contractual relations that cease upon the conclusion of exchange (Graeber 2011, 102–8). Within conditions of chronic cash scarcity in a market-based economy, the lending of money, especially in times of need, has become a common expression of social care, aid and obligation (Empson 2020, 79–95; Sneath 2006, 2012; Han 2012). In Magtaal, as opposed to resource-sourced monies that are predominantly governed by the spiritual narrative of *buyan hishig* (see Chapters 2 and 3), monetary *zeel* are commonly associated with the secular language of favour, inherited from the ‘economy of favours’ of the pre-market socialist era (Humphrey 2012; Ledeneva 1998), described as varying in degree according to social closeness: in other words, the stronger our social ties, the bigger or better the terms of a favour manifested as monetary *zeel*.

But local people, especially the unemployed, do not have sovereign control over the source of money, but are highly dependent on national banks, governed by the logics of exchange-based debt, to access the limited supply of further cash. Whereas anthropologists working in urban Mongolia report that these circumstances of the growing dependence on bank-sourced (exchange-based) debt to honour social obligations (social debt) have resulted in either the severing of kinship relations (Pedersen 2017) or their reconceptualization according to functional calculations (is this person an asset or a burden?) (Empson and Fox 2021), in Magtaal they have resulted in a local deflationary spiral, an ‘overheating’ of

the economy of favours, where more and more favours (as goods or services) are needed to satisfy bank debt burdens and interest payments. Rather than sever social relations, Magtaal residents in close social and geographic proximity have been mobilizing all social relational templates with greater degree and frequency – be it master–custodian (or state–citizen), patron–client, siblings (*ah düü*), mother–child, etc. – to motivate themselves and others to give or lend money as favours to each other when in bank-based debt stress. In Magtaal, in particular, local desires to uphold and honour intertwined social relations have been taken to such an extreme that the entire township is implicated in each other’s bank indebtedness, moving an aggregated pool of bank-loaned money and seasonal resource income back and forth within the township, paying off interest payments as it moves.

The emergence of *zeel*

When I first moved to Magtaal in early 2016, I was intrigued by the sheer ubiquity of *zeel* in the soum centre – a term used, like its English equivalent of ‘loan’, to describe a time-deferred return of an economic asset (goods, monies, services, etc.). While I became intimately familiar with Baatar and Tsend’s finances, Baatar introduced me to many of the soum’s shopkeepers – whose experiences I use extensively in this chapter – and I witnessed how they all kept themselves economically afloat through both loaning out goods and monies to others (*zeeleer ögöh*) and receiving various loaned goods and monies (*zeeleer avah*) to temporarily suppress other loans (*zeel darah*). Truly, it seemed like no one owned anything outright (Empson 2014a). In general, this condition has emerged because individuals can use collateral to access bank loans in the hopes of realizing desired goals (like Baatar’s dream of moving his family), but they rarely have enough economic stability – being burdened by, for example, economic booms and busts, irregular incomes and lack of regular employment, as well as personal crises – to reliably pay the interest or principal. Although, according to the Mongol Bank’s 2017 figures, Mongolia’s household debt to GDP ratio was only around 25 per cent (and has since increased to 35 per cent: Bank of Mongolia 2019, 29) – modest in comparison to developed contexts like the US’s roughly 70 per cent – this number is not representative of the experience on the ground.⁴ In practice, for every formal bank loan in Magtaal, there is a plethora of informal *zeel* used to navigate its interest payments, resulting in a micro-level economy chronically dependent on *zeel* in their many manifestations (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Common bank *zeel* in Magtaal in 2015–17

Type	Collateral form	Amount of loan	Length of loan	Interest amount (annually)	Additional
Mortgage loan (<i>Ipotyektiin zeel</i>)	Two guarantors; the property itself; 20 per cent upfront payment	The worth of the property minus 20 per cent; local example was 24 million MNT	Dependent on amount; often 10–20 years	8 per cent	A government plan that offered 5 per cent mortgage loans was offered during my fieldwork in 2016
Salary loan (<i>Tsalingiin zeel</i>)	A government-guaranteed regular salary	Dependent on salary; local examples around 6 to 10 million MNT	2 to 3 years (in practice)	18 to 20 per cent	In practice, this loan is often extended after a few months of paying off to receive additional funds; most common loan in Magtaal
Consumption loan (<i>Heregleenii zeel</i>)	Varies; mostly flat	Based on value of collateral; local example was 5 million MNT	2 years	30 per cent	Second most common loan in Magtaal, because flats (which have an average value around 12 to 15 million) can be used as collateral

Pension loan (<i>Tetgevrin zeel</i>)	A government-guaranteed regular pension	Varies; local example was 6 million MNT	1 year (in practice, also 2 years)	18 per cent	Can be extended
Government-led small-business loan (<i>Töstitin zeel or Jijig iüldverin zeel</i>)	Varies; local example was flat	Varies; local examples were 5 to 20 million MNT	3 years	1 per cent	A government-led programme for small businesses ¹
Bank-led small-business loan (<i>Biznyestin zeel</i>)	Varies; local example was almost always flats	Based on application; local examples range from 7 to 20 million MNT (one outlier store had 50 million loan)	2 years	Around 25 per cent	
Herder loan (<i>Malchny zeel</i>)	Animal herd	Based on herd size; local examples ranged from 2.5 to 6 million MNT	1 year (sometimes 1.5)	24–30 per cent	Can get 15 per cent at government bank with proven track record
Savings loan (<i>Hadgalamj bar'tsaalsan zeel</i>)	Welfare; savings; often, locally, the government allocated 'children's money'	Based on savings/welfare amount; local example was 1 million MNT	Based on savings/welfare type	6 per cent	Often resorted to when in a pinch or very poor; usually small amounts

¹ I also encountered another form of government-led small-business loaning programme with no interest for the first two years of payment and 9 per cent interest only in the third year: a loan of 8 million MNT over three years with 9 per cent interest (720,000) in the last year.

Zeel throughout the eras

Zeel has consistently referred to attempts to navigate a contemporary dearth (in food, clothing or money) by borrowing from the future (Peebles 2010). In pre-socialist Mongolia, the term *zeel* was originally two different loanwords from Chinese (Jagchid and Hyer 1979) – first, the Chinese term *jiē*, commonly used to describe a street lined with shops, was assumed into traditional Mongolian script as *jegeli*; and, second, the Chinese term *jiè*, meaning ‘to borrow’, was adopted as *jigeli* (U. Ujeed, pers. comm.; Sechinchogt 1988; Wheeler 2004). These terms likely became conflated⁵ because, starting in the late seventeenth century, Mongolians increasingly frequented these market streets to receive high-interest loans from Chinese moneylenders (Sanjdorj 1980) – credit, calculated in units of silver, to be paid back in herder animal products (such as meat, young animals, wools, fur) when they became seasonally available.⁶

With the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1912 and the emergence of the socialist MPR in 1924, the practice of high-interest loan distribution became infrequent and ideologically condemned as speculation. In hindsight, contemporary Magtaal residents recall that money was generally of little concern during the state farm era (from 1960 to 1989), because they, as state workers in a remote border region, received a salary bonus. Baatar’s mother, who had been the director of the school in the state farm, described food access in the 1980s as ‘nothing fancy’ because there was a dearth in luxury goods, but the workers’ major needs were met by the farm. In hindsight, individuals would distribute rare goods according to an ‘economy of favours’ (see below), but *zeel* were uncommon except in the context of borrowing/lending everyday goods without interest (clothing, sugar, etc.).

When the term *zeel* re-emerged in common usage in immediately post-socialist Magtaal, it was most often used to describe the deferred payment of everyday consumer items. When the border to China opened up in 1994 (see the Introduction), many Magtaal residents took to entrepreneurial suitcase trading. But at the time, the Mongolian currency (MNT) was undergoing rapid inflation and government pay was sporadic, so Mongolian consumers often could not pay suitcase traders immediately for desired goods. Here, the term *zeel* was used to describe the time-deferred payment negotiation between a trader and a consumer – residents would *zeel* singular items (such as a shirt or a pot) and pay back at a later date at a negotiated equivalence using goods (such as meat or flour) or a mix of goods and money. Baatar’s mother argues that *zeel* at the time referred mostly to the time-deferred barter of goods.

Zeel for modern dreams

As the 1990s progressed into the 2000s, the Mongolian economy stabilized and *zeel* reclaimed its meaning as interest-laden loans. In 1991, the fledgling Mongolian government, following international best practice for the establishment of a market system, created a two-tier public/private banking system from the assets of the socialist-era State Bank (Rossabi 2005, 45, 51). This included the creation of the public Agricultural Bank, which took over the State Bank's rural offices to become the only bank readily available in rural Mongolia, intended to offer credit to rural enterprise (Dyer, Morrow and Young 2004, 9). Throughout the 1990s, the Mongolian banking system was hampered by high inflation and nepotism and, by 1999, the Agricultural Bank was in receivership (Gutin and Young 2005, 2). Rather than lose this important credit source to rural communities, the Mongolian government turned to the World Bank and USAID for help, who agreed to hire an American management firm to turn the bank around (Gutin and Young 2005, 3). By 2003, the Agricultural Bank had made an impressive turnaround into profitability – offering, for example, small-business and herder loans to rural communities. It was privatized and sold to a Japanese businessman (Rossabi 2005, 277n77). In 1998, the first Agricultural Bank office, later to be renamed the Khan Bank, opened in Magtaal; by the late 2000s, many local residents had received their first monetary bank *zeel* as a herder loan, small-business loan, pension loan or salary loan with different rates of interest (see Table 4.1). Currently, two banks operate in Magtaal's soum centre: the Khan Bank and the Töriin Bank.

Initially, many residents took out loans in order to jumpstart entrepreneurial business in lieu of other employment. Compared to other soum centres, Magtaal had one feature that made it particularly amenable to bank loans – when the state farm collapsed, the former workers in Magtaal all automatically received the ownership rights to their flats, which became an easy source of collateral in the new market. For example, Delgermaa and her husband, both born in Magtaal, had worked in the state farm as a photographer and as a farmer, respectively, and both lost their jobs with its dissolution in 1990. Initially, she told me, they tried to continue farming, but inflation put them out of business within two years. In order to financially stabilize her family – in particular, as her husband's health began to fail – she collateralized their flat in the late 1990s to receive a government-subsidized small-business loan. She used the funds to buy a bread oven and bulk sweets from China, selling candy and bread from her flat in Magtaal and eventually paying the loan back. Chimgee,

another shopkeeper in Magtaal, has similarly successfully leveraged her flat as collateral to receive bank loans to open her shop and, later, receive more store product. Chimgee was an eager proponent of bank loans based on private property, arguing that ‘private property is the gift that democracy has given us’. Although many people were less enthusiastic than Chimgee, the sentiment was common in Magtaal that bank loans were part and parcel of the modern age.

Stacking loans

By 2008, Delgermaa fondly recalled, her business was booming and profitable through the sale of more than 40 loaves of fresh bread every other day. But in 2012, the Mongolian economy entered a national economic ‘crisis’ (*hyamral*). The effects were felt in Magtaal in 2013, through the further drying up of cash – tourists stopped coming to Magtaal and the value of MNT dropped vis-à-vis the Chinese yuan, making shop goods more expensive. Delgermaa’s income dropped significantly, so she decided to expand her business, putting up her flat as collateral to receive another small-business loan in 2015. Regrettably, a few months later, Delgermaa’s husband had a stroke and she had to pay for medicine and care. At the same time, during the prolonged economic crisis, many other struggling households started baking bread – suddenly, she was competing with 10 other local bakers and was only able to sell 10 loaves every other day. So she felt she had no other choice than to receive a second loan – in 2016, she collateralized her pension from the state farm to receive a pension loan. I asked her how she navigates the different payments – ‘I pay the first loan off with the turnover from the store and the second with our pensions; if I can’t pay the interest on the first loan, I extend the second one to pay off the first.’ It sounded exhausting, I told her, and she responded, ‘We are living from loan to loan, paycheque to paycheque.’

For many, the combination of a stagnating (or fluctuating) rural economy with personal crises has resulted in long-term bank dependence. In general, bank loans have two structural characteristics that are challenging for Magtaal residents: they require regular, monthly payments;⁷ and they require income growth that matches the rate of interest. But, as discussed (see [Introduction](#) and [Chapter 1](#)), people in Magtaal have limited job opportunities – formal industry in the soum rarely employs rural residents, so citizens can only engage in either legal forms of entrepreneurialism (such as baking or shopkeeping) or illegal resource procurement. The former has limited opportunities for returns – because, for example, the local population’s demand for bread is quickly

satisfied and Magtaal is far from urban centres – and the latter has a temporal gap between, for example, familial demands at different points of the year and the sale of local resources (commonly in the autumn). Throughout the economic crisis ongoing during my fieldwork (2015–17), very few of the many households and shopkeepers I interviewed were able to make any substantial returns (save one, discussed below) – rather, many were losing money. Without savings, any personal or familial crisis tipped them into long-term debt.

In this way, Magtaal residents can often easily take out loans, but often receive secondary loans to pay off the initial debt. The phrase *davhar zeel*, directly translated, means ‘double loans’ and, in practice, is used to describe a variety of loan-stacking behaviours. Its most general usage is to describe instances, as with Delgermaa and Baatar, where a person takes out a second loan, like Delgermaa’s pension loan or Tsend’s salary loan, in order to pay off or navigate the first loan. In fact, a Mongol Bank report from 2018 recounts that, between 2013 and 2016, the majority of consumer credit growth in Mongolia was in mortgage loans, while in 2016, salary and pension loans increased, surmising: ‘This may be due to the fact that households with loans are increasingly repaying their loans with other loans’ (Byambatsogt 2018, 86). A second local usage of the term ‘double loan’ was the practice of making money, similar to a moneylender (see Chapter 5), through the receiving of a loan at low interest (such as 5 per cent) and then re-loaning the money at higher rates of interest (such as 20 per cent). Sneath (2012, 468) details yet another usage of the term often used by herders – taking out loans in the name of relatives with better collateral access and rates. Baatar’s usage of his wife’s loan to pay off his mortgage loan as well as the loaning of money from a friend to pay off his mother’s loan would qualify as loan stacking.

Magtaal’s residents complain that modern life is incredibly stressful. Not only do they have to constantly shift assets and invent new strategies to make money, but they also have to constantly maintain the many social relations required to implement these tactics. After his flurry of asset transfers in May 2016, Baatar reduced his mortgage interest, but still did not have a job, so in September 2016, he used the flat as collateral to apply for a small-business loan with the stated intent of opening a computer business. In October, he and Tsend received the loan and used the money to satisfy a plethora of needs – they went to Ulaanbaatar and took their son to an eye specialist; they went to China and purchased many goods – including fruit, a pallet of eggs, rice and candy – as well as computer items – for example, a large printer, movies, games, paper and ink – and finally, they returned to Magtaal and gave both the fruit and

leftover money (as a thank you) to all the people that had helped them out during their mortgage predicament. Unfortunately for Baatar, similar to Delgermaa's dilemma above, the Magtaal economy continued to falter and his computer business was never much in demand. When I returned to Magtaal in 2017, Baatar and Tsend had moved in with Baatar's mother, having given up their collateral, the flat we lived in, to the bank.

Economic debts versus social debts

Baatar felt motivated to spend a substantial portion of his bank *zeel* on the maintenance of social relations because he was well aware of their importance in contemporary economic life. Like its English equivalent of 'debt', the Mongolian term *ōr* has historically been defined as 'something borrowed from others' and has often been associated with oppressive dependence, as indicated by the eighteenth-century proverb: 'If you are free of debt, you are rich; if you are free of illness, you are happy' (Sechinchogt 1988). Once again, everyday Mongolians have become entangled in exchange-based debts – a conceptualization of debt, propagated within contemporary market ideologies, as the unfulfilled moment of dependency within a two-way, monetary exchange, which will re-establish actor independence upon its completion. However, both historically and now, Mongolians have rarely conceptualized themselves as (or desired to be) independent actors, but as components in imagined holistic totalities – be it kinship, *nutag* or national identities – associated with a conceptualization of debt as social obligation between actors intertwined in relations of long-term dependence. In contemporary Mongolia, these two visions of indebtedness both clash and interact. At first glance, the contradistinction of these visions of debt imitates a gift-versus-commodity opposition, possibly created by the bank loan structure itself, which frames loaned money as a commodity with exchange-value.

During the 2016 election season – in the space between the induction of the new national parliament and the election of the new local-level representative body – the freshly appointed prime minister of Mongolia from the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) decided to take a recognisance trip through some of the most politically sensitive and economically promising areas of Mongolia. In Magtaal, it was widely known that the prior ruling government had recently attempted to implement a free trade zone (see Chapter 1) – a decree that was widely unpopular – and so locals were eager to hear what the new prime minister, appointed by the opposing party, would say on the matter (Fig. 4.1). Many bright-eyed faces filled the audience chairs in the town's culture



Figure 4.1 A procession of pre-selected schoolchildren await the prime minister. © Author

centre that day in September, as the prime minister got up on stage and launched into a speech about his party's political platform (*möriin hötölbör*). He talked about macro-level economic policy, arguing that the current economic slump was a result of market distortions created by the Democratic Party's mortgage loan programme and an over-reliance on mining revenue. We need to support business people, he said, to stabilize the economy and attract foreign investment. And we need to industrialize the land. 'We can't lose this chance,' he emphasized, reflecting his desire to influence local opinion in favour of his party colleagues in the upcoming local-level election. 'With your support we can implement all these policies.'

Yet when the floor opened for questions from citizens, these macro-level discussions seemed of little concern to residents:

The ex-agriculture minister has illegally put up signs in the area; can you end this? [See Fig. 1.4 for an example of these signs]. The frequency of Chinese oil trucks driving across the steppe is increasing and throwing up dust; please change this. This year, individuals are making too much hay for sale and not leaving enough pasture for animals; please end this. The governor is not doing his job and meeting locals; make him change. Wolf attacks are

increasing; can you lift the ban on killing them? We need a dentist in our town; can you supply one? Can you install heating in our apartments? Can you lower the cost of electricity? Our school needs a roof!

A pensioner in his sixties with a weathered face stood up and approached the microphone perched in the middle of the aisle:

Please, dear sirs [*ezenten*, literally ‘lords’],⁸ please allow me this overbearing [*davarsan*] question, there are only a few soum in Mongolia that are still as remote as we are, so could you please nullify [*tegleh*; literally, ‘set to zero’] our herder and pension loans [*zeel*]?

A murmur of agreement in the room reflected the local growing awareness of the weight of bank debt on the shoulders of herding families, ex-farmers, pensioners and schoolteachers in the community.

The prime minister, however, did not agree with this popular sentiment. ‘Your loans are a contract between a private company and an individual person . . . We can’t pay them but we can [only] lower the interest,’ he responded, emphasizing that bank debts were the contractual responsibility of individuals and not the government. He continued:

We live in the kind of society where it is our base duty [*iiüreg*] to work and labour for ourselves. In this way, if you ask what kind of support and aid the government can give you; we can free you from a tax; or if you need land, we can give it to you; or we can lower restrictions to access a government service. We can only do these kind of things. So, if your town’s citizens come up with your own initiative and say we want to carry out this kind of plan, we can give you a discounted, low-interest loan. But I want to tell you, it has to come from you.

Almost exactly a year later, in September of 2017, I found myself sitting in Erdene’s kitchen, the pensioner who had beseeched the prime minister to nullify their loans, at the very moment when this minister found himself in the middle of an internal parliamentary coup (he was later ousted). The subject of debt amnesty was still on Erdene’s mind, as the newly elected DP President, who had ridden a popular wave into victory, had made a thinly veiled promise to nullify the various loans of everyday people during his election campaign.⁹ I asked Erdene if he had been satisfied with the prime minister’s answer a year before. No, he answered, the prime minister’s answer was ‘wrong’:

Our [current] president says we have the possibility to pay off personal loans; Mongolia has money! We see on the news that [government officials] have 17 million dollars [around 50 trillion MNT] in offshore accounts; why don't they have any civil courage [to help us]? Why don't they say, ok I will just take 500 million MNT and give it to the people? . . . Why don't they care about Mongolia's 3 million people? . . . The prime minister was wrong; he should think about how to improve the lives of the people. To improve the economy, the people and government have to work together . . . He is a big representative of Mongolia, so he can make a deal with bank directors for debt amnesty. In the past, princes [*noyon*] helped the people and vice versa; that's why I asked the prime minister [for debt amnesty]. Where has their obligation [*üüreg*] gone? The prime minister and the president have the obligation to care for the people and the nation.

Seemingly, the source of this disagreement between the prime minister and Erdene was the exact definition of the term *üüreg* as societal 'duty' or 'obligation'.

Perhaps a discursive legacy of the advice given to the Mongolian government in the post-socialist transformation, the vision of society advocated by the prime minister on that day mirrors neoclassical discourses. According to the tenets of neoclassical economics, ideologically traced back to Smith's classical *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), society is populated by economically self-interested individuals, who have the inherent propensity to 'truck, barter and exchange' (2005 [1776], 18) and, by not interfering but rather by promoting these inherent tendencies, governments can ensure well-functioning markets that will ultimately safeguard the greater good of society. In *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Graeber (2011, 120–4) argues that exchange-based constructions are often buttressed by a moral logic that posits individuals as ideally equal yet separate, who can enter into contracts with other private entities to pursue their own interest and, when the exchange is complete, can separate, thereby having benefited. By extension, 'debt' in this formulation – in other words, 'exchange-based debt' – is not inherently immoral because it is only a transitory moment in an unfulfilled contract which, if it becomes permanent, does not indicate a deficit in the practice per se, but a disciplinary failure of one individual in the equitable contract to fulfil their side of the bargain. For this reason, the prime minister describes, he cannot get involved in these contracts between private entities, because the role of government is as overseer – an institution that can merely fix the parameters of the market in terms of taxes, restriction or interest rates – lest its involvement damage the functioning of markets.

In contrast, perhaps a legacy of pre-socialist, feudal and socialist governance ideologies, Erdene neither maintains the illusion, nor considers it particularly desirable, to posit individuals as equal and separate. From a different cultural perspective, Roitman (2003, 212–13), writing on northern Cameroon, describes local moral narratives that posit individuals as asymmetrically intertwined in original or cultural states of dependence – a moral logic of ‘social debt’.¹⁰ She describes how valuations of social debt have real life effects on economic relations: for example, one’s social position, including societal contributions and number of dependants, affects the prices and exact calculations of quantified debt a person might be made to pay (Roitman 2003, 221). In Magtaal, Erdene views ‘our Mongolian nation’ as comprised by hierarchical actors – bank directors and politicians, on the one hand, and ‘the people’, on the other – whose wellbeing over time is intertwined with one another and who thus must carry out relative obligations to uphold the greater good. Similar to Roitman, here, too, there is a slippage between concepts of social debt and exchange-based debt: Erdene argues that politicians should fulfil the duties of care and obligation born from social debt through a jubilee that frees them from the burden of their exchange-based debts.

Likely, this slippage is inherent to the concept of debt within materialist, market-based economic ideologies. The development of trans-local, utilitarian market economies was often accompanied by the cultural emergence of an epistemological division of the universe into the realms of the profane, material ‘this world’ and the spiritual, moral ‘next world’. Within Western society, this development is represented by the conceptual fracturing of certain economic-related concepts, such as ‘wealth’ (like with *hishig* – Chapter 2), ‘value/s’ and ‘debt’, into two parallel yet dialectically overlapping definitions where the first is materially focused (for example, ‘wealth’ as monetary quantity) and the latter is morally focused (for example, ‘wealth’ as good health and rich social relations) (Rakopoulos and Rio 2018), as well as the selfless ‘gift’ versus self-interested ‘commodity’ (Parry 1986, 167; Parry and Bloch 1989a). For this reason, Graeber argues that capitalist economies emerged in global contexts through whatever transformation effectuated a shift in the concept of ‘debt’ from either a non-quantified ‘I owe you one’ to the materially quantified ‘I owe you one unit of something’ (Graeber 2011, 46–52). Returning to Erdene, his concept of social debt is likely a product of both pre-socialist Buddhist feudalism and socialism (see the poem below), which both ideologically conceptualized individuals as having non-quantifiable, original debts that could be ‘redeemed’ through altruistic, socially motivated materialism (as indicated in To Wang’s writings, discussed in Chapter 1). In contrast, the prime minister’s

understanding of exchange-based debt reflects a worldview undergirded by political-economic market ideology that posits money, and the debts it creates, as chiefly a commodity with exchange-value.

I am indebted to the century (*Ene zuund bi örtei hün*)

A poem from the book *Öglöö (Morning)* by Sh. Dulmaa (1969). I found Baatar reading this poem one day in 2016 while he contemplated his bank indebtedness. I asked him if this was his concept of 'debt' (*ör*) and he answered, 'No, this is how we used to think about debt but no longer.' The poem depicts the idealisation of human material advancement through group action, which likely influences contemporary concepts of social debt.

I am indebted to the century,
To the cloud curtains of the cosmos,
It is exciting to be leaping forward,
To the light of dawn through human will,
It is wonderful to aspire.
Even though I was born in a brown yurt,
In this age with the speed of Vostok [the Soviet space programme],
I am grateful to be alive,
And proud of my champion age.

Born into the twentieth century,
Why did I arrive now on earth?
On the threshold of the century,
I arrived naked.
When I put on my boots and stepped onto the ground,
Even though it was as hard as steel, I adapted.
My small footprint of a child,
'A human!' it announced to the universe.

A continuum of *zeel*

These conceptual divisions colour how Magtaalians respond to debts through the internal classifications of *zeel* or favours. In my first months in Magtaal, I spent a lot of time sitting with and interviewing many of the soum's 11 shopkeepers – who sold mostly sweets, bread, snacks, alcohol

and vegetables and were almost exclusively women – as they engaged in both socially and economically motivated transactions to maintain their businesses. Because most Magtaal residents were indebted to the bank and were out of cash right after their monthly interest payments, they often took advantage of the opportunity to *zeel* store goods – in other words, purchase now and pay later – until they received money again. During my fieldwork, on average, four out of every ten shop transactions were *zeel*. At first glance, the willingness of shopkeepers to engage in *zeel*, giving out their goods without a set date of cash return, might make little financial sense, especially because they, too, have bank *zeel* that require regular repayment; but shopkeepers were also aware that denying *zeel* blocked them from participating in crucial social network-building and affective morality. For this reason, in practice, both shopkeepers and everyday residents, like Baatar, walk a line between these conflicting pressures by internally distinguishing between types of *zeel*: people who are close, socially indebted or particularly locally reputable are likely to give and receive one-directional aid, whether as money or goods, calling it ‘help’ or *buyan*; community members will give each other two-directional *zeel* with flexible terms; and non-related individuals engage in *zeel* as exchange with a profit motive.

Social credit in a low-cash economy

Magtaal’s soum centre is a small place – residents grow up together and sometimes know each other for decades – so a lack of cash does not necessarily present a barrier to trade. Across the way from Baatar’s flat in 2016 was a bakery shop owned by Degee – a 32-year-old woman born and raised in Magtaal. In her early twenties, she moved to Ulaanbaatar and was trained in cake-making, before returning to Magtaal to start a family. At first, she started selling cakes from her flat with the help of a small-business loan she received in 2011. Finding success, she collateralized her flat and used the money to purchase the store and furnish it with a new bread oven. When I first entered her store in late 2015, her business consisted largely of selling cakes and pastries, carrying out a contract with the local school to provide them with bread and also, informally, selling Oriflame cosmetics across the Chinese border (where they were banned). I quickly noticed that, despite her two loans with ongoing payments of 530,000 MNT (265 USD) a month, she was one of the more economically comfortable shopkeepers – earning over 2 million MNT (1,100 USD) a month, roughly Baatar’s yearly income. On the one hand, this success had to do with the market niche of her business – no other local resident made professional-looking cakes like she could. But on the

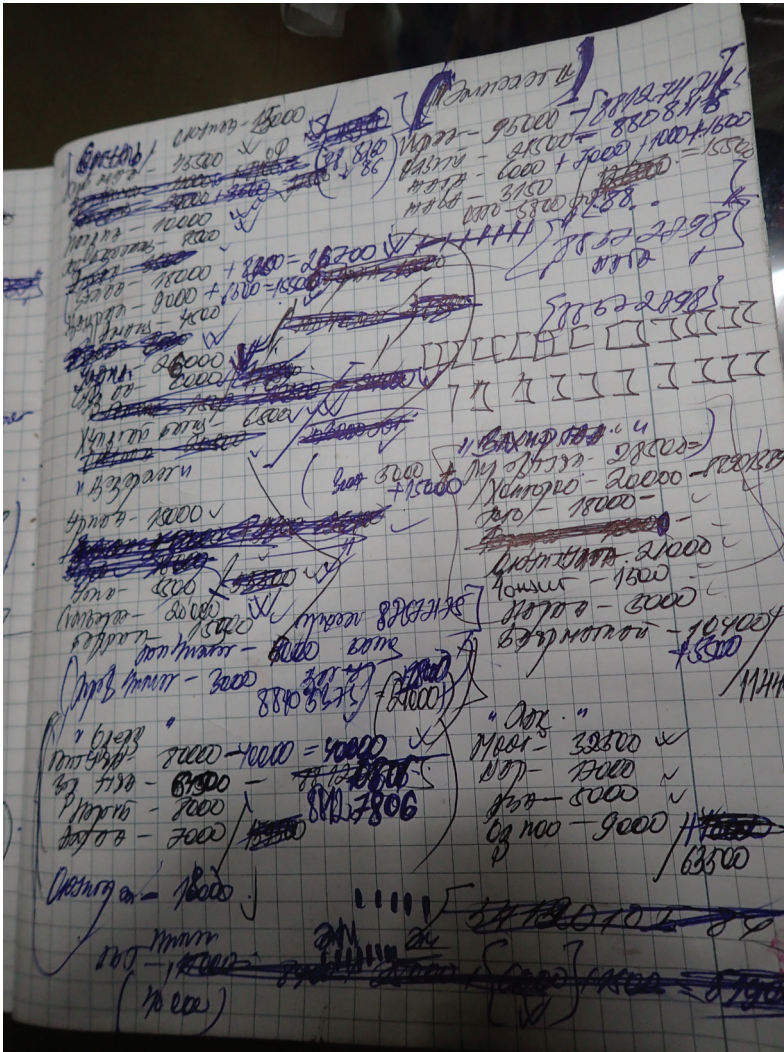


Figure 4.2 Degee’s messy debt ledger tracking her debt network (*öriin suljee*). Note that Degee classifies people according to their occupation, writing *zahirгаа* (local government) and *emneleg* (hospital) as headers on the page. © Author

other hand, Degee was particularly skilled at taking advantage of the lack of cash and using *zeel* both to remain at the centre of local transactions and to direct the local economy in her favour (Fig. 4.2).

Whenever individuals would come into her shop low on cash, she and the customer would undergo a process of negotiation – they would

‘negotiate a price’ (*üne tohiroltsood soliltsdog/taardag*). Similar to Roitman’s discussion of prices in Cameroon, Degee grew up with many of her customers, intimately aware of their social standing and relative situation, and would take this into consideration in their negotiation – for one, she was more likely to give loans to individuals with reliable, government jobs, aware of their steady incomes; but, at the same time, she would also reduce prices for people who were particularly well known or socially liked, and therefore more capable of honouring a favour. During fieldwork, I noticed that Degee’s store was particularly popular among pastoral herders, who liked to get a birthday cake for their children at special events, but many of them were particularly low in cash until calving season in the spring. One day, I was sitting in Degee’s shop when a herder came in and gave her dried curds (*aarts*) as a goodwill gesture until she could pay off her *zeel* in the spring; another time, Degee herself was short of money, so she called in a favour with a herder, who slaughtered a goat for her and then, over time, took bread and kimchi from her shop until the debt was repaid. Generally, in this small town, people eventually honoured their loans/debts, because everyone knew each other and their reputation – ergo social credit – would be damaged if they failed to pay (*ner hund aldah*).

Zeel as buyan

Although all shopkeepers in Magtaal give out *zeel* (with one exception – discussed below), they could differ in their motivation for doing so. Tseren (introduced in [Chapter 1](#)) was a sociable and gregarious person: she often ran around town in bright pink velvet jumpsuits, and was involved in everything – she had been an actor in To Wang’s play, and was very engaged in the local committee for retired elders, always putting together social events with other retirees. Tseren had moved with her husband to the socialist state farm in the 1980s and then, after its dissolution, taught at the local school for two decades. When she went into retirement, she decided to open a shop that specialized in photo printing and school items (notebooks, pencils) but also contained candy and clothing. In 2016, Tseren had double loans – she had received a small-business bank loan to purchase the product for her store; but also had a pension loan to navigate the interest of the first loan. One day, while I was interviewing her around 4 p.m. in 2016, my questions triggered her memory that her interest payments were due that day and she raced out of the store. She knew a friend had just received a pension payment, so we ran up the stairs to her house and Tseren’s friend handed over her

money, no questions asked. Then Tseren ran on to the bank, depositing it before the bank closed at 5 p.m. Without this money in her account the following morning, she would have received an overdraft penalty when her loan payment was automatically deducted.

Later, I asked Tseren if she actually made money through the *zeel*; was all the constant economic calculation worth it? It's profitable on paper (*tsasan deer ashigtai*), she said, even though it didn't feel that way, because she was always chasing money and giving it away again. But, as stated in previous chapters, she often equated the process of distributing money and/or being socially generous in economic behaviour with a type of *buyan* or Buddhist merit:

If the children [that come to my store] don't have enough money to buy things, like 10 or 15 MNT are missing, I will just give it to them. Next time it will be my income . . . Mongolians like to sponsor someone or give things to others, because it will come back to them like *buyan* . . . For example, an old man recently died who was very popular because he helped people all the time; we collected money for him and received around 300,000 MNT for his funeral expenses and for his family. But when people were greedy during their lifetime, others don't like them, and we can only collect around 30,000 or 40,000 MNT.

In fact, for Tseren, the principal function of the store was not so much to make money, but to remain centrally involved in local social life. Similar to Empson's (2014a) discussion on the temporary possession of goods, Tseren claimed that she ran the store because it gave her an avenue to be kind to children, do favours for people and participate in local activities – she was often printing event pamphlets or using her resources to plan some social function or other – and, as such, she would continue to do it 'regardless of whether it was profitable or not' (*ashigtai ashiggüi ch gesen*). To Tseren, being kind and altruistic in her everyday relations could bring favour in society or even the next life.

Zeel as profit

In contrast to Tseren, Degee was pretty adamant that her *zeel* activities were buttressed by individualist profit motives – 'I do this job for me [*öörÿn gesen ajiltai*]; and I wouldn't do *zeel* if they weren't profitable.' Without cash, when a customer enters a store seeking a *zeel*, she undergoes a mental consideration evaluating whether a connection to

this person is risky and/or is likely to elicit a potential future benefit. In practice, shopkeepers, moneylenders (see [Chapter 5](#)) and everyday people (like Baatar) will adjust *zeel* conditions based on the evaluation of the social reliability (*naidvartai*) and closeness of the receiving individual. In the context of her store, Degee will only engage in two-directional *zeel* – not, like Tseren, one-directional help as *buyan* or favours – but she will change their conditions based on the receiving individual. Customers she engages with often and knows well – in other words, ranging from school friends to acquaintances – can receive ongoing *zeel* with flexible terms to be paid back without interest over between one and five months. If she does not know the person well, she will limit the time or the amount to test their trustworthiness. As a store, she does not loan money nor demand interest, but she will refuse *zeel* to strangers or individuals of poor repute. From her perspective, *zeel* engenders economic benefits because it allows her to pick which individuals in the community she wants to be economically intertwined with – choosing those people with better assets – ensuring that, whenever income does arrive, she is likely to be on the receiving end of its benefits.

For some local shopkeepers, there is also an additional, more nefarious benefit to a low-cash economy. Recall that both Delgermaa and Degee bake bread and are thus in direct competition with one another in the soum, but Delgermaa is older and all her spare time and money is directed towards caring for her ailing husband. Because she often complained about the difficulties of chasing money, I asked her why she didn't cease *zeel*. 'Because', she answered, 'your income will suffer [*hohiroh*] and it will smear your reputation [*hel am garna*]'. For example, she recounted how in December 2015, she was so fed up with chasing after and maintaining relations with individuals that she stopped offering shop *zeel*. Immediately, her income decreased. In response, she decided to continue offering *zeel* in bread – because it was perishable and needed to be sold quickly – and also to lower its price from the standard 1,500 to 800 MNT. For a month, everything went well, she recalled, as her income picked up considerably. But then Degee arrived at her door, and she complained that her income had suffered through Delgermaa's decision, which was unfair because Delgermaa was undercutting the soum's 'going rate' for bread (*sumyn hansh*). In retelling this story, Delgermaa explained that not only were shopkeepers able to negotiate favourable prices in individual consumer–shopkeeper *zeel*, but the *zeel*-dependent economy also created a space where shopkeepers could collectively set the local price at a rate favourable to them. In February 2016, Delgermaa returned to the standard bread price.

A deflationary economy of favours

The widespread interdependence of economic acts on social reputation and motivation is reminiscent in the ethnographic literature of the socialist and post-socialist ‘economy of favours’ (Ledeneva 1998; Henig and Makovicky 2017): the practice of cultivating strong social networks through the distribution of ‘favours’, which could also be mobilized to access needed goods and services. Ledeneva (1998, 33–8) notes that during the Soviet Union, favours were often distributed not because the giver had a specific goal in mind, but out of a moral sensibility to want to ‘help’ or be seen as a ‘helpful’ person; thus, the crucial defining characteristic of a favour is that it occupies the ambiguous space between altruism and self-interest, because giving it leaves the giver with an aura of moral magnanimity, precisely because it is unclear whether it will ever be returned (Humphrey 2017, 56–8; Ledeneva 2017). In the aggregate, however, these many distributions of favours ensured that many people received goods they otherwise would have had limited access to. Thus, this model of the economy, similar to the model of social debt, also envisions the world as fractured into a material realm and a social realm (Holbraad 2017a), but idealizes socially motivated practices that collectively uphold the material wellbeing of society.

In contemporary Magtaal, money given out of a sense of moral or social obligation evinces many of these characteristics of the favour. Contemporary Magtaal citizens retell that during the state farm period, most of the goods and services they needed were provided for them and they only occasionally distributed luxury goods as favours. But during the socialist breakdown (1989–91) and immediate post-socialist period (1991–5), a barter network resembling an economy of favours developed in the soum, as local residents cultivated social networks and gave each other goods out of a sense of mutual aid. Of course, with time, the economy transformed as goods became more abundant and cash became the scarce resource. Now, when individuals, like Baatar, give or get money from their close friends or family, or other individuals, like Tseren, distribute *zeel* out of a sense of moral duty (calling it *buyan*), they also describe it as a form of ‘help’ (*tus, tuslamj*) that is given without expectation of direct, equally quantifiable return. In general, in Magtaal, whether because of the lived experience of materially surviving the post-socialist period or the general strength of local group narratives and obligations (see Chapter 3), the legacy of the economy of favours persists through the practices of providing one-directional, morally driven gifts of money.

As cash scarcity became more pervasive, this learned strategy to negotiate conditions of dearth was taken to new extremes. Initially, individuals took out bank loans to start new entrepreneurial dreams; unable to pay these back, they took out second bank loans to navigate the first. If both of these cash avenues fail, residents can turn to moneylender loans or rely on friends and family. In times of need or impending payments, Magtaal families will run from one relative to the next, mobilizing social networks to access assets to satisfy a bank payment, which are readily given as an expression of the social obligation that exists between relatives or close friends – an *enaction* of obligation rather than a *transaction* (Sneath 2006). In practice, this has resulted in a state of ‘generalized debt’ (Pedersen 2017; Roitman 2003). Rather than say no to a relative – lest it violate one’s moral sensibilities and damage a reputation – individuals will go to great lengths to be able to provide money to those closest to them. Like Baatar, who received a small-business loan and spent half of the proceeds on paying back friends for previous aid, residents will also use bank-loaned money to pay back or return bank-loaned money. Now a pool of leased money swishes back and forth in the soum along relations of social obligation and favour, paying off interest payments as it moves, but locking individuals into relations of permanent indebtedness.

As the economy of monetary favours goes into overdrive to navigate bank *zeel* and the high demand for money, non-monetary assets undergo deflation. Anthropologists working on remote communities when they are first integrated into state-issued currency or colonial economies note how local economies often undergo inflation in these circumstances because there is suddenly a large amount of new currency that can pay for the same pool of local goods and services (Law 1995; Guyer 1995; LiPuma 1992; Strathern and Stewart 1999). In Magtaal, in contrast, the high local demand for limited state-issued currency has resulted in the (social and economic) deflation of local social relations, goods and services, especially those that do not engender monetary returns. First, faced with the pressure to pay off bank loans, individuals simply cannot socially, economically and mentally afford to distribute money freely, choosing instead to restrict their social enactions to close kin to limit the burden of obligation (Botoeva 2015; Pedersen and Højer 2019, 162–3; Empson and Fox 2021).¹¹ Secondly, this downward pressure results in the local devaluation of other assets vis-à-vis cash money, including social credit, goods and services. Within an economy where all people need scarce money, and only money, to pay back bank loans, money is at a premium, as individuals go to greater and greater lengths, offering up more and more non-monetary assets, to get it. Local individuals who are

able to provide momentary respite from these pressures – like Degee, who will accept goods or rely on social credit – can stipulate or fix the rate of conversion in their favour, resulting in creeping devaluation.

Conclusion: chronic indebtedness

The conditions of generalized debt in Magtaal emerge through the slippage between social and exchange-based debt. The moral narrative that legitimates bank loans and debts posits them as only a temporary loss of independence because, ideally, the investment produced through the loaned money will provide economic returns, allowing the debt to be repaid and actor independence to be re-established. But within a context where morality is influenced by notions of holistic, hierarchical interdependence, relations of material indebtedness can quickly be conceptualized by the indebted as merely another material manifestation of their original social debt. In fact, for this reason, Graeber (2011, 66–71) condemns social debt – in his words, ‘primordial debt’ – as exploitative, because it can be used by those in power (e.g. princes) to justify material extractions (e.g. taxes) with the rationale that people ‘owe’ it to society. Unfortunately, in Magtaal, these concepts of social debt are indeed maintaining, extending and feeding stacking levels of bank debt, because individuals, instead of conceiving of the debt as their own responsibility, tend to distribute it among more and more family members, lessening its burden for a time, but sinking them collectively into ever more entangled relations. Arguably, Mongolians used the same tactics in the eighteenth century when ‘the extent of [Chinese moneylender] debt was made possible because debt was not always taken on individually, it could be acquired by the head of a banner and then distributed, and debt could also be inherited across generations’ (Dear 2017; see also Dear 2014).

But the perceived permanence of this state of bank indebtedness challenges the neoclassical legitimation of exchange-based debt. Of course, Graeber (2011) vocally argues that the aforementioned narrative of equality within debt relations is most often advocated by the actor in the position of power, in order to simultaneously elide yet benefit from unequal relations. Whether intentionally or not, in Magtaal, bank credit does seem to result in conditions of permanent dependence, because economic returns are never enough to pay off a loan completely, but only enough to stave off a default. As a result, individuals like Tsend – underpaid salaried employees like teachers and nurses – often get loans in times of need, pay

them back for a few months, and then extend the loan again, whenever the next moment of need pops up. I can only assume that this is unproblematic from the viewpoint of the bank provided that the person does not default, which they rarely do as long as they can call on the resources of more and more family members and more and more wildlife.

But, from an emic, Magtaal perspective, the origin of the debt/loan ensnarement is not so much the availability of bank credit but the failure of contemporary leaders to live up to Mongolian historical ideals of sovereign rule. To individuals like Erdene, according to concepts of social debt, leaders might have more wealth and higher hierarchical positions, but they also have the responsibility to monitor holistic social relations in the interest of the whole. But now, the accrual of wealth at the top has become so disproportionate that it is preventing the rest of society from producing and thriving (see [Chapter 2](#)). For this reason, Erdene does not direct his anger at bank directors, but pleads with leaders to fulfil their duty to society – he calls for a sovereign-declared clean slate, reminiscent of the debt jubilees of the Bible or Babylonian kings – to act in the interest of the political body as a whole by freeing everyday people from their restraints.

Notes

- 1 In June 2016, the Democratic Party's (DP) main opposition, the Mongolian People's Party, won a landslide victory in the parliamentary election. Prior, the DP's mortgage loan interest adjustment was viewed by many as an election ploy to attract additional votes.
- 2 Initially, Baatar's mortgage loan was with the Trade and Development Bank, requiring him to only pay 20 per cent of the cost upfront. When he switched programmes, he switched to the Töriin Bank, which required 30 per cent upfront. Other banks, like the Khan Bank, required 30 per cent upfront for both the 8 and 5 per cent loan programmes. Because different banks have different requirements, families will often switch from one bank to another. In January 2013, the Mongolian parliament passed a resolution to 'Support the Construction Sector and Stabilize Housing Prices', which included sub-programmes for government-subsidized mortgage loans, launched the same year. See: https://www.mongolbank.mn/documents/pricestability/day_news/barilga_subprogram.pdf (accessed 11 January 2023).
- 3 See also the Emerging Subject's Loans and Debt blog series: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mongolian-economy/category/blog-series/loans-and-debt-series/>
- 4 Figures taken from statistics made public on the Mongol Bank website. A chart tracking debt to GDP ratios can be found at: https://www.mongolbank.mn/documents/5.%20PPT_munkhburen%20Zakhan.pdf (accessed 11 January 2023).
- 5 For example, Kowalewski's 1844–9 dictionary lists *jegeli* (market street) with the definition of both 1) street and 2) debt, borrow, indicating a fusion over time.
- 6 Aleksei Pozdneev, a Russian academic who travelled through Mongolia in the 1890s, wrote of the Mai-mai-ch'ing trade settlements in Kovdo that '[t]he commercial part . . . consists of only three streets. The first main street [*yekhe dzeeli*] passes the whole length of the city . . . the second [*nariin dzeeli*] . . . is almost an unbroken row of commercial buildings' (Pozdneev 1971, 206). From his descriptions, we can discern that credit-based trade during the Manchu era was spatially located in market streets in Mai-mai-ch'ing (Chinese market towns) known as *dzeeli* (*zeel*).

- 7 An exception here is the herder loan, which is a one-year loan with flexible payback schedules, designed specifically because of the temporal gap between herder income needs (generally in winter) and the income from herder animal products (generally in spring) (Dyer, Morrow and Young 2004, 7).
- 8 Reflecting his allusion to contemporary politicians as human ‘masters’ (*ezed*) – see Chapter 1.
- 9 <http://time.mn/n/mih> (accessed 11 January 2023).
- 10 As far back as the Vedic Brahmanas in 700 BCE, various cultural and religious traditions have cast individuals as inherently indebted to each other by way of being born into systems that transcend one lifetime, existing prior to their birth in one realm that will continue to exist after their transition to the next (Gregory 2012, 866; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986; Graeber 2011, 57).
- 11 Individuals in different contexts vary in their strategies to restrict the social pressure of obligation – whereas Botoeva discusses shifting kinship spheres through the exclusion of the poor from these relations in rural Kyrgyzstan, Pedersen and Højer and Empson and Fox describe the tactic of physically absconding to obscure locations in urban Mongolia or the calculated consideration of relations along a burden or asset continuum, respectively. Although there are indications of the emergence of these calculations in Magtaal, the general social and geographic interdependence in the local township mitigates the aforementioned strategies, which emerge in conditions of greater economic independence. Because Magtaal is still characterized by sentiments of communal economic interdependence, cash dearth and stress were navigated through local economic overheating.

5

The financialization of help

Saraa and her husband are herders living in a *ger* on the other side of the river and slightly outside of the soum centre. In the winter of 2014–15, Saraa and her husband received a ‘herder loan’ – a bank loan that accepts pastoral animals as collateral – in the amount of 2.5 million MNT (USD 1,250). With the money, they bought presents for their extended family and guests for the Mongolian New Year’s celebration, a new yurt cover and a linoleum floor. A year later, in early 2016, Saraa’s eldest daughter was preparing to leave for college and their family contemplated how they would fund her tuition costs, considering they were already in debt to the bank for the herder loan. Aware that banks reward reliable clients with higher credit caps, Saraa and her close friend devised a plan to enable Saraa’s family to access more money. Saraa’s close friend Boloroo, a teacher, went to the bank and took out a loan and then gave this money to Saraa, who returned to the same bank and used it to pay off her herder loan. Through this process, Saraa officially became a reliable loan client and payee in the formal system: a person who, in the eyes of the bank, was financially disciplined and paid off her debts. Saraa then went to the neighbouring bank and, with this new improved credit standing, was able to collateralize her herd, yet again, to receive a new improved herder loan for 5 million MNT (essentially, doubling her credit cap). With the augmented amount of money from the new herder loan, Saraa returned to Boloroo, gave Boloroo the money she had borrowed from her, and gave her a little extra, ‘a few tens’ (*tav arvan tsaas*), for Boloroo’s ‘assistance’ (*tuslamj*) in freeing up her bank credit flow.

Boloroo and Saraa’s monetary manoeuvring exemplifies how social networks of obligation are implemented to carry the burdens of financial debts. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Magtaal’s residents maintain two overlapping discourses of debt as either social loans/debts

between mutually embedded actors and transactive, exchange-based debts between socially unconnected or anonymous actors. The logics of the latter, I argue, are being upheld by the mobilization of the former. In this chapter, I extend this argument to discuss how residents practically distinguish, link and convert between these disjunctive registers of debt. These moral loan continuums are moral economic dichotomies: strategies through which actors hedge locally held concepts of kinship relations after entering a market economy that requires the commodification of sociality (see the [Introduction](#)).

In the aforementioned example, Saraa and Boloroo worked together to effectuate a process known in business circles in Mongolia as ‘loan freeing’ (*zeel chölööloh*) or ‘loan redeeming’ ([Højer and Pedersen 2019](#), 146) – in other words, funds are shifted to circumnavigate credit ceilings to access better loans. Importantly, this term emerged in post-1990 Mongolia to describe a transactive business service that can be purchased for a fee from an offering moneylender. Saraa and Boloroo, however, would not use the term *zeel chölööloh* to describe their actions, even if they are practically identical to the business services of ‘loan emancipators’. This is because, according to the moral economic sensibilities of local residents, the term *zeel chölööloh* would mark the action as motivated by economic profit, which contradicts the appropriate moral behaviour between residents who are socially intertwined and mutually embedded. Moral opprobrium results when a debt/loan action is perceived as comprising an untoward mix between social closeness and profit motivation.

Consequently, the post-1990 Magtaal social landscape has witnessed the multiplication of broker-esque entrepreneurial occupations that straddle this line between local social mores and the needs for wealth creation. As bank debts continue to accumulate and lead to aggrandized downward pressure on the township, social networks alone no longer suffice to manage this financial debt. As a result, contemporary Magtaal has witnessed the proliferation of ‘translator occupations’ as entrepreneurial business actors who convert and absorb (in other words, ‘translate’) diverse forms of value in the social and natural landscape into economic returns, working within complicated networks of relations, connections and indigenous social expectations ([Tsing 2015](#)). Using the case study of ‘loan lenders’, or community-based moneylenders, I discuss how translator actors link local mores, such as social debt and neighbourly assistance, into the monetary calculations of the finance system, and, in doing so, form a bridge for the incremental movement of value into this system. As we saw in previous chapters, these nodal occupations, concretized as ‘changers’

(resource middlemen), are also critical for the building of economic-political networks that stepwise remove material objects from local worldviews and transform them into alienable market-driven commodities. In turn, translator occupations walk a moral tightrope as township community members with profit-oriented, transactive occupational activities. Their successful navigation of this line thus far – bolstered by the ongoing, unrelenting mounting pressures of bank debt – is contributing to the incremental financialization and monetization of local social mores over time.

Contemporary Magtaal lenders

Contemporarily, there are seven individuals in Magtaal's soum centre, a town of roughly 1,700 individuals, who earn their income through the selling of 'timely money' (Sneath 2002, 466). According to local oral histories, the contemporary occupational category of 'loan lender' (*zeeldüülegch*, as opposed to usurer or *hüülegch*) (re-)emerged in Magtaal in the early 2000s, but became a commonplace feature of household calculations during the 2011–12 economic crisis.¹ As we shall see, unaccredited lender activities are highly intertwined with banks and have benefited from the moralities surrounding bank loaning. For example, during my fieldwork, in March 2016, the Mongolian parliament banned the accrual of interest in loan contracts (*zeeliin geree*) between citizens and stipulated that only bank interest loans were legal.² Two months later, however, the Mongolian Constitutional Court ruled the aforementioned parliamentary decision to be unconstitutional – it violated the decree that 'the rights of property owners should be protected by law' as assured through the constitutional guarantee to 'fairly acquire, utilize, own or inherit fixed assets'.³ In Magtaal, these urban discussions were followed with mild interest, as most residents felt that these decrees would have little impact on local activities.⁴ Nevertheless, thanks to the narratives of rights and property (including money) of the contemporary market-democratic era, lenders are officially seen as entrepreneurial contemporary citizens. By extension, they enjoy legal recognition and can be frequented by customers as diverse as police and power players. Yet even though lenders are tolerated by the relative elite of the township, their largest client base is derived from individuals who utilize their services to navigate situations of intractable bank debt. In the following, I discuss how lending has emerged in the post-1990 social landscape as a complement to banking activities, in order to forge a bridge

between the local lifeworlds of residents and the formalities of the financial system.

Bridging gaps to the formal financial system

Banks, as the ultimate arbiter of cash access in the township, are often the first option for cash-starved residents, but their functions are carried out according to the disciplinary mechanisms of the formal financial system. Although the distinction between formal and informal has been critiqued as a misleading dyad that falsely presents interrelated processes as separate (Roitman 1990), I find the term ‘formal’ useful to describe the ‘regularity of order, a predictable rhythm and sense of control’ (Hart 2012) associated with the state-sanctioned (and implemented) finance and banking system. According to Guyer (2004, 156), formalization occurs when the state attempts to fix and categorize relationships, ‘usually among several different value scales: the identity of the parties (including those who will enforce the contract in case of default), the kind and quality of the goods and services at issue, the monetary value, and the timing’. Additionally, she notes, formalization is often accompanied by the ‘appearance of paper’ – contracts, residence deeds, identification documents, social welfare booklets, etc. – often in an attempt to document and regulate relations between institutions, citizens and the state (Guyer 2004, 156; see also Roitman 2005; Reeves 2014). Indeed, the formal, state-sanctioned Mongolian banking system endeavours to enter into contractual, legally regulated relations with individualized citizen-subjects (as opposed to families or groups) that are upheld through registers of financial discipline (such as collateral concepts, documentation, guarantor signatures and monthly interest payments). In my experience, residents frequently bump up against restrictions set by the bank in line with economic visions of individualized, profit-oriented, disciplined borrowers, particularly because residents conceive of themselves as actors in ongoing economic relations of obligation and distribution (enactions of social debt); and/or the rhythms of their lifeworlds do not coincide with the temporal regimentation of the bank. In this lacuna, lenders have emerged as an option for quick cash that residents often use to circumnavigate the formalizations of the financial system.

Indeed, it was within the context of chasing monies to answer a bank payment that I first met Nergüi – the woman who lives over the bank.⁵ Naran, a regular interlocutor of mine, works as a cleaner in the

local government and receives an adequate, if low monthly salary. Needing to pay for her daughter's tuition, Naran collateralized half of her monthly salary for a bank loan, while spending the rest to pay off a bank loan she had inherited from a deceased sister. As a single mother of two children, Naran feels chronically strapped for cash and visits Nergüi when finances get too tight. In fact, I visited Naran one late afternoon, as we sat together and discussed the plight of bank loans in Magtaal. Suddenly, she jumped up – my questions had jogged her memory that she had a bank interest payment due that day before the bank closed at five. We ran together to the bank (at 4.39) and up the stairs to the flat over the bank, where Nergüi conducted her activities. Nergüi allowed Naran to deposit her state welfare booklet as collateral for a monetary loan, and we ran back down the stairs to deposit the money in the bank (by 4.50). In this way, Nergüi's services truly provide 'timely cash' – she provides money (a material form the bank accepts),⁶ in an immediate fashion (whenever exigency hits), and will accept forms of collateral easily available or on hand. In this way, her services are most often called upon by local residents, like Naran, who either have tied up all their institutional or formal capital in bank loans, or are not institutionally recognized (the unemployed, the poor, individuals who work as resource gatherers) and thus do not qualify for bank loans.

Mimicking the logics of formal finance

Nergüi's activities differ from other forms of inter-communal lending behaviour, because she does not simply give money without expectations of return (as in inter-familial relations), but dispenses loans in accordance with expectations of exchange, collateral and interest. In fact, according to the historical memory of contemporary relations, the concepts of collateral (*bar'tsaa*) and interest (*hüü*) did not exist within inter-community *zeel* relations prior to the widespread permeation of formal banking activities. Nergüi's lending thus incorporates this financial logic by offering two types of loans with interest with collateral deposits – monthly 20 per cent interest loans with a maximum period of three months, and daily 1 per cent interest loans with a maximum period of 14 days. The average amount of money individuals receive, she says, is around 500,000 to 600,000 MNT (200 to 300 USD). She is flexible regarding collateral, but the most common types she accepts are the ownership deeds to flats (*ordyer*) and any form of social welfare booklet (*halamjiin devter*) (Figs 5.1, 5.2). Naran, for example, is entitled to



Figure 5.1 The welfare booklets (*halamjiin devter*) from Nergüi's clients. © Author



Figure 5.2 Flat deeds (*ordyer*) from Nergüi's clients. © Author

20,000 MNT a month from the government in ‘children’s money’ (*hüühdiin möngö*) for their upkeep, which is registered in a social welfare booklet that is often left with Nergüi as collateral. Upon my visit, I saw more than 30 flat deeds and various booklets for disability and children’s money – including a booklet for the state welfare one gets for nursing a newborn baby (Fig. 5.1). Interestingly, Nergüi’s acceptance of collateral mimics the logics of the banking system, but does so without competing with it – she accepts, for example, minor, state-sanctioned collateral forms that the bank would not accept. Once an agreement has been made over collateral and amount, Nergüi has new clients sign in a *Toy Story* school notebook next to their name, amount lent and phone number. When they pay back interest, she writes the amount above the line, and the date in Roman numerals, and circles it. Otherwise, the exchange is based on verbal agreement and social understanding. Consequently, Nergüi’s loaning incorporates concepts from the financial system, but in a locally modulated fashion.

Providing temporal relief

Importantly, Nergüi’s services offer temporal flexibility and respite compared with the regimentation of the bank. For starters, the lifeworlds of local residents are often out of sync with the monthly payment order carried out by the bank – residents often have a seasonal cash influx when resources ripen, animals give birth to offspring, irregular payments come in, wares from China arrive and so on. For many residents, like Naran, who are scraping the bottom of their cash reserves, this temporal mismatch between seasonal cash influx and monthly bank interest outflow is experienced as unrelenting pressure. Lenders like Nergüi offer services that provide immediate cash with flexible, temporally deferred promise, which provide great relief to this immediacy. However, this can result in dependence on lenders, as residents become accustomed to using Nergüi’s resources to pay off their interest payment every month. For example, one of Nergüi’s ‘regulars’ (literally: individuals ‘who constantly receive [money] and give [collateral]’ – *avaad ögөөд л байдэг*) receives a loan from Nergüi after his monthly visit to the bank under her flat. According to his social welfare booklet, he is entitled to 140,000 MNT a month from the government. However, a few months back, he found himself without money for food, after having used his welfare for other purposes that month. Without another option, this man went to Nergüi with his social welfare booklet and discussed loan

possibilities with her. They decided that she would keep his booklet as collateral and give him 100,000 MNT with the understanding that she would be paid 120,000 MNT (i.e. a rate of 20 per cent monthly interest) at the beginning of the next month. Thus, when the next month started and he was once again eligible for his social welfare payment, he returned to her for his booklet, went down to the bank, and then up again to her and paid 120,000 MNT. At this point, however, he only had 20,000 MNT left over for food that month, so he gave his booklet to her again, and took out another loan of 100,000 MNT. In this specific case, this client had used his resources elsewhere, but needed money to fulfil immediate consumption needs. In other cases, like Naran's, residents need to stave off bank interest for another month. Either way, residents, who are dangerously low on funds, often become dependent on Nergüi to provide cash to stave off immediacy (either as hunger pangs or the threat of default).

In this way, the activities of lenders often construct informal and temporal bridges between the local needs and lifeworlds of residents and the formalization of the banking system. Nergüi's spatial location in the flat over the bank was a symbolic (or strategic?) expression of the interrelatedness of her activities with the financial system – in fact, the clients discussed above all had to run up and down the stairs to carry out their monetary business in tandem with the bank below. Similarly, James (2014, S21) discusses how consumers in post-apartheid South Africa commonly have three sources of credit – banks, legal/formal lenders and illegal/informal lenders. In both this case and in Guérin's (2014) South Indian study, debtors commonly 'borrow from the latter [illegal creditors] to pay back the former [legal/bank creditors]' (James 2014, S21). In Magtaal, similarly, residents often borrow from lenders like Nergüi in order to pay directly into the financial system. Alternatively, they borrow funds to circumvent a formal restriction (as with Baatar's mortgage saga), to reproduce the bank's vision of disciplined borrowers (like with 'loan freeing'), to satisfy an impending interest payment or to have money for food (when all capital is tied up in bank loans). Without the presence of Nergüi, for example, many Magtaal residents most likely would have long since defaulted on their bank interest payments. As a result, Nergüi complements the bank and expands its exchange-based logic – she reproduces the concepts of collateral and interest, dispensing the universal currency of money, but also accepts forms of collateral the bank might not, allowing the logics of exchange and finance to permeate deeper into areas previously not governed by exchange.

Moneylenders as translators between social and financial value

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

Translators as occupational role in Mongolian capitalism

Concepts of value linkage, or ‘conversion’ (Guyer 2004), between disjunctive ‘circuits of exchange’ (Bohannan 1959) have a long historical arc in economic anthropology. In revisiting Bohannan’s study of ‘circuits of exchange’, Guyer (2004, 28–30) argues that historical West African trading partners often were trading with a variety of neighbouring groups with differential access to and desire for goods. Guyer appropriates Bohannan’s term ‘conversion’ to describe the negotiation that occurs when two groups, with vastly different registers of value and perspectives

on trade, disjunctive desires, currencies and expectations, meet in the moment of exchange, in the hopes of overcoming ‘spatio-hierarchical thresholds’ (Guyer 2004, 38). Potential for gain arises precisely because the value forms of different groups are irreducible to one another: there is always a remainder (Guyer 2004, 51). From a different angle, Tsing (2015, 64–6) uses the term ‘translation’ to discuss conversionary mechanisms that link and move between ‘sites of difference’, converting between non-capitalist, social values and economic, monetary value, thereby expanding the reach of exchange-based, monetary logic. Specifically, in her seminal study of the international trade in matsutake mushrooms, Tsing discusses how supply-chain capitalism takes advantage of non-capitalist processes – such as indigenous knowledge of the mushroom’s natural growth or human labour – to incorporate them into economic value. ‘Translation’, in this rendering, is the conversion of non-quantified social/local registers of value into an economic price to overcome a threshold in transactional pathways.

Akin to Tsing’s commodity chains, a variety of ‘translator occupations’ have arisen with the advent of the market democratic era in Mongolia. As discussed in previous chapters, the breakdown of the centrally planned socialist economic system, and the consequent loss of assured job prospects, provided the setting for the proliferation of entrepreneurial business occupations as Mongolians were forced to become economically free-floating actors to support themselves. Within this setting, the market transition resulted in the efflorescence of self-employed business subjectivities that earned money by negotiating the gaps between different geographical, social, cultural or financial registers. Specifically, the post-1990 transitional moment saw the widespread emergence of occupational brokers who could produce value through the buying, selling and moving of goods, money or both. For example, many Mongolians earned their livelihoods by becoming arbitrage-based, small-scale traders (*naimaachid*), who, for example, crossed into China, bought products at a low prices, returned to Mongolia and sold high (Lacaze 2010). Concurrently, pawnshops arose in urban centres – an occupational category that buys goods and sells money (Højer 2012). Importantly, changers (*chyenj*) became a pervasive job category to describe bulkers who accept resources from diverse sources, bulk, move and resell at higher prices (Lacaze 2010; Højer 2012; High 2017; Pedersen 2002). In short, the post-1990 transition has been economically defined by the rise of entrepreneurial occupations that make money from moving and/or transforming resources, thereby building economic bridges between disparate markets.

Although translation is a form of conversion, it emphasizes the usurpation of non-capitalist, social-based production, knowhow and value into economic registers. For example, as semantically indicated in the job description, ‘changers’ do not simply *convert* between stores of value: rather, they *exchange* one ontological category of value for another. In her discussion of *moka* exchange in Hagen, Strathern (1988) notes that pigs are ‘transformed’ from multiply constituted objects – as products of the multiple labours of a household – into a singularly authored object – as a gift being returned for a previous gift – through the act of exchange. Højer (2012, 46) asserts that contemporary pawnshop owners in Ulaanbaatar not only effect economic transactions, but also do ‘ontological business’ by transforming inalienable, personal possessions into economic commodities. To a seller, an heirloom might be perceived as a highly personal, familial-embedded, inalienable entity with various energies. Pawnshop owners have the unenviable, spiritually precarious job of putting a price on such an object. Nevertheless, as Guyer (2004) describes, profit can be made in this situational matching between registers – considering there is no universal price for a familial heirloom, pawnshop owners set the price themselves, enabling profit. Even money itself can be liable to ontological transformation. In her discussion of ‘polluted money’ earned through gold digging, High (2013) notes that store workers charge higher rates for dirt-caked, mining-derived money than for cleaner bills (presumed to be sourced elsewhere). Store owners thus effect ontological translation – turning the bills spiritually associated with unethical gold digging into quantified economic value – which provides space for economic profit in the transformation. Within these diverse examples, local, spiritually laden and socially constituted forms of value were altered in the process of exchange into socially disembodied, alienable commodities and fungible units of value. Translation occupations effectively earn their keep through effectuating this process of translation by pocketing the economic remainder created through the process of situational, ontological matching.

Collateralizing social registers

In order to be successful as a peddler of loans, one must combine knowledge of the financial and social landscape to turn a profit. During my time interviewing individuals in ‘translation occupation’ positions, I noticed a recurring trend – often, entrepreneurial brokers were individuals who were born in urban centres, but had moved to countryside locations as the spouse of a born-and-raised local.⁷ Nergüi herself is not

from Magtaal, but she moved there three years before my visit when she married Davaa. Davaa works for a local administration and was born and raised in the area, but met his wife while working in the closest urban centre for several years. Nergüi and Davaa have several children, one of whom was struck with a serious illness and became immobile. They negotiated this situation by moving from the urban centre to Davaa's countryside home, Magtaal, where life was less stressful and polluted for their child. But they only received 60,000 MNT (30 USD) a month in disability allowance from the government, which meant that Nergüi had to find a way to take care of their child and work, simultaneously.

In response to this predicament, her older siblings, who work in a giant department store in the closest urban centre, suggested that Nergüi participate locally in their family business. As individuals well placed to work with customers who wanted loans for department-store consumer items, her siblings had started a small business 'freeing up loans' (*zeel chölööloh*) in the closest urban centre. Nergüi and her siblings thus formed a loaning business that bridged locations – her siblings would earn money through 'loan freeing' and give Nergüi the surplus to distribute to individuals to accrue interest over time. When her siblings had a need for large sums of money for a particularly big loan job, they would ask Nergüi to freeze new loans, collecting the incoming money to be sent to the siblings for the loan job. In Nergüi's case, this constellation – in other words, being urban-born but married to a local – works well for her entrepreneurial activities because it allows her to combine a source of cash liquidity (from outside the township) with intimate knowledge of the local social landscape. From another standpoint, Terbish, who we will meet below, also upholds this combination – he is an urban-born, high-ranking military officer, who thus has access to funds, whose wife, a born-and-raised local resident, distributes loans based on her knowledge of local social registers.

A knowledge of the local social fabric is particularly useful, because lenders openly incorporate social registers into their lending activities. Namely, when residents are so financially extended that they no longer have any material forms of collateral (neither documentation, resources nor money), Nergüi will consider social reputation as a guarantee of creditworthiness. For example, the flat deeds and welfare booklets that Nergüi demands as collateral are not particularly legally binding – Nergüi has never gone with a deed, for example, to force an unpaid loan, and crafty residents could, hypothetically, just order a new flat deed or welfare booklet (without getting the original back through the repayment of a debt). Nevertheless, Nergüi is not particularly perturbed by this lack of

legally binding contract and formal paperwork, because she relies on evaluations of social reputation and prestige in her lending.⁸ Nergüi claims that none of her clients have failed to pay her back and chalks this down to her and her husband's abilities to discern who is a reliable, trustworthy client – *naidvartai hariltsagch*.⁹ When describing the countryside effects of the 'regime of debt', Sneath (2012, 467) mentions that when rural economies become fuelled by credit, 'creditworthiness becomes of critical importance' because shopkeepers and other local businesses will sell goods on informal credit to local residents they know, like and 'trust'. Nergüi works on a similar principle – she only gives out loans to individuals who are *naidvartai* and the more trustworthy/creditworthy, the better the deal she gives. When a new person comes to her, she will ask her husband about their family relations, social history with other local people and connections. If they deem the person well connected, socially embedded (so that they, for example, wouldn't be likely to run away without paying) and with a hypothetical source of cash, they will give them a loan.¹⁰

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

(experienced as exchange-based monetary loans) and the local social scales of value (prestige), by incorporating the latter into economic logic (creditworthiness) and financial form (monetary loans).

The financialization of help

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

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

In essence, Terbish argues that bank debt has become so pervasive that residents who desire to help each other must take out bank debt to get the cash to do so. In his case, Terbish recounts, his friend gets low-interest bank loans (between 1.5 and 1.9 per cent), which he loans to Terbish for 3 per cent interest, which Terbish loans out for 15 per cent interest. Because the entire nexus of friendship enactments is realized through the materialization of bank loans, Terbish argues that it is only socially appropriate and proper to pay each other back with the interest in mind. Not doing so would punish (in other words, hurt) the person for their social benevolence towards you. In this way, Terbish takes the narrative of social help and favours, which is often materially articulated as a non-quantified expression of gratitude or a monetary gift without return, and appropriates it into a material, quantified form – a calculated loan with interest.

Although Terbish and Nergüi have material reasons for co-opting the discourse of help (discussed below) and might not be exemplary for the wider Magtaal community, their discussions do touch on the wider phenomenon of financialization within local social mores. The noted authors of the ‘Gens Manifesto’ define the term *financialization* as ‘the scaling up and growing influence of finance, and specifically the increased linking, translation and interactions between a financial mode of apprehending the world and other social domains’ (Bear et al. 2015). In the previous chapter, I discussed how behaviours of distributing *zeel* in the soum form a spectrum from gift to commodity based on apprehensions of social distance and mutuality – in other words, residents who are close often enact social obligations and give money without an expectation of return, whereas the more socially distant the actors, the more the *zeel* is apprehended as exchange and profit-focused. Terbish, similarly, sat down with me and wrote out a spectrum of ethical *zeel* behaviour on my notebook:

If you give money to family members, it is ‘assistance’ [*tuslamj*] unless they call it a loan [*zeel*], which is paid without interest; between friends, no interest, but if over 1 million MNT, then give with low interest; between strangers, if they are ‘trustworthy/creditworthy’ [*itgej baidag*], high interest, no collateral; if you don’t ‘trust’ them [*itgehgüi*], high interest with collateral.¹¹

In this way, Terbish co-opts the local *zeel* spectrum differentiated through social distance and reformulates it to include the financial concepts of collateral (*bar’tsaa*) and interest (*hüü*). Because he is a lender whose occupation is indirectly intertwined with bank activities, Terbish’s scale is particularly finance-oriented, but he is not unique in

his consideration of interest in local calculations. In the previous chapter, I discussed Baatar's mortgage saga and how he needed to source money quickly from multiple individuals, including a friend to whom he alternately paid interest or expressed gratitude through fixing her computer. By extension, Terbish is not misplaced in his analysis that the downward pressure and permeation of bank debt has not only increasingly monetized registers of help, but increasingly also financializes expressions of social gratitude as interest.

In many ways, lenders constitute bridges between the financial functions of the bank – a social other of transaction – and local social mores based on expressions of mutuality and obligation. This brokerage role is materially manifested in Nergüi's location in the flat over the bank, and socially symbolized through their kinship role as social others who married into the community. Walking the cusp between otherness – siphoning resources from outside the locality – and sameness with intimate local knowledge, lenders are ideally placed to carry out a profit-oriented business within the local social landscape, because their own social positionality lies at the juncture between these different registers. Functionally, their actions forge direct linkages between the banks and the local social landscape by often providing funds that circumnavigate the bank criteria or are needed to pay the bank. Allegorically, however, their actions allow 'lives and products [to] move back and forth between noncapitalist and capitalist forms[, to] shape each other and interpenetrate' (Tsing 2015, 65), because they increasingly translate local social registers into a financial form – they, in other words, incorporate social concepts of prestige into registers of lending creditworthiness and they link narratives of social help to financial interest. In this way, lenders create complements to the bank, because they enable the logics of finance to become a common feature of local social interaction by accepting collateral and using local social registers that the bank otherwise would not. The activities of lenders are a double-edged sword – they do provide temporary relief (felt as gratitude) to bank-loan-burdened residents by accepting alternative, flexible forms of collateral, but in doing so, they allow more registers of value (concepts of sociality, help and mutuality) to become financialized, siphoning value from the social community in order to feed the ongoing, unrelenting bank interest.

The moral evaluation of moneylenders

The positionality of lenders, employed in a translator occupation, on the cusp between local social mores of mutuality and exchange-based profit narratives, exposes their activities to intense moral scrutiny. The business

practice of lending money at interest, despite the innocuousness of the term ‘moneylender’, is often associated in popular discourse with morally negative and exploitative behaviour. In consequence, Graeber (2011, 10) opines: ‘I’m not sure there is another profession (executioners?) with such a consistently bad image.’ Gregory (2012, 386), however, argues for a nuanced consideration by claiming ‘[t]here is no transcultural consistency in the moral valuation of creditors and debtors’ and by noting that even within historical Christian canons, the moral evaluation of moneylenders has transitioned from debt creation ergo bad, to credit creation ergo good (see note 11). In the Magtaal case, there are often different terms for translation occupations based on the speaker, the speaker’s social proximity to the translator actor, and the speaker’s evaluation of the translator actor’s business motivations. For example, in the case of resource changers, a resident could call them ‘changers’ (a term that come from the English term ‘exchange’) if they perceive the individual’s intentions to be exploitative and overly profit-oriented, or they could just call them literally ‘the person who is buying’ (as a contextualization of sociality removing the emphasis from the business capacities) if they perceive the individual to be a well-intentioned, relatable or socially close community member. In the case of lenders, residents will call individuals like Nergüi either a *hüülegch* – a term that literally means ‘the individual charging interest’ – or a *zeeldüülegch* – a term that literally means ‘the individual dispensing loans’ – based on their assessment of Nergüi’s activities as either exploitative or socially proper, respectively. Essentially, different morally tinged terms exist in Magtaal for the same general occupation based on whether or not the actor is perceived as more collectively minded or individually profit-motivated in their business.

The example of lenders thus draws attention to the role of individual profit motivation in historical moral renderings of Mongolian economic life. In his discussion of idioms of morality encompassed in various Mongolian terms associated with trade and markets, Alan Wheeler (2004, 235) argues that the contemporary compound term for market economy, *zah zeel*, incorporates both historical acceptance of collective sharing and individualized profit motivation. I argue, inspired by Wheeler, that moneylenders’ moral acceptance hinges upon their successful blending into one of these two categories – either they are viewed as social companions, whose economic behaviour is socially inflected, or they are viewed as social others, whose profit motivation is based on reciprocal (and reciprocally beneficial) exchange. I thus offer a complementary interpretation of the *zah zeel* dichotomy – *zah*, for (social) margin or

border market, as sanctioned exchanges with social others, and *zeel*, for loans or street markets (see [Chapter 1](#)), as sanctioned ongoing transfers with social companions. In this rendering, a profit motive *in itself* is not morally reprehensible if the lender engages with social others in a reciprocal, objective manner. Consequently, exchange-based trade was often reserved to border markets; and moneylenders, historically, were Chinese and not Mongolian.¹² Within contemporary society, however, the line between social other and social ally is increasingly blurred and thus spectrums of gradations are forged that are open to interpretation.

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

From the other side of the moral spectrum, Højer’s study of pawnshop owners in Ulaanbaatar and High’s discussion of artisanal gold changers evince how translation occupations that are openly instrumental and profit-oriented in motive make claims to objectivity ([High 2017](#); [Højer 2012](#)). For example, pawnshop owners are ‘translating’ from socially inflected heirlooms into cash money and thus are highly aware that ‘the more things appear as cynical exploitative business, the more spirit-like – in other words, loaded with emotions, morality and agency – they seem to become’ ([Højer 2012](#), 46). Careful to avoid moral condemnation, Højer discusses how pawnshop owners appeal to objectivity, stating their activities are ‘just business’, in order to neutralize the disorderly elements of social idioms. Indeed, the only time I heard an

open complaint about Terbish's lending activities was when a store owner (whose flat deed was in Terbish's cabinet) declared that the government's decision to view moneylenders as entrepreneurial yet average citizens was false – motioning to the goods in her retail store, she exclaimed, 'If I pay taxes for this, why shouldn't they?!' Essentially, the store owner was complaining that Terbish's business was too profit-motivated and instrumental to be considered socially inflected local loaning; she wanted his behaviour to be formally recognized for what she thought it was – a business.

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

Consummating the future

As a final point, the community-wide normalization of the need for cash money for economically dignified social lives has partially counterbalanced moral uncertainties towards lending. To Wang, for example, condemned moneylending, because the base form of value at the time was sheep, and an untoward focus on money, he argued, cut into the reproductive abilities of society (concretized as sheep wealth) over time. From a different angle, Roitman (2003, 222), quoting Sarthou-Lajus (2013), discusses how individuals in northern Cameroon distinguish between concepts of (un)sanctioned accumulation of wealth and debts based on the debt's ability to 'open . . . onto a future that represents the hope of accomplishing that for which [a subject] is responsible with respect to the other'. Put differently, wealth and debts are considered socially sanctioned, if they are perceived as building towards a better future within the contemporary social moral order. Considering the

widespread permeation of financial indebtedness, residents are increasingly feeling locked within constant cycles of bank interest payments without release. Additionally, the monetization of the economy has elevated the standing of monetary distribution within local registers of communal help and long-term social reproduction. Lenders, as people with a translator occupation, can provide temporary relief to bank pressure and ensure the continuity of local social registers by incorporating local values. They are thus largely sanctioned because their services enable many local residents to continue their diverse circuits of debt, lending diverse transactions an air of confidence of consummation and accomplishment. Lenders allow the ongoing flow of wealth – upholding the fulfilment of economic promises made in the present towards the future and undergirding the contemporary moral order. Translator occupations thus fulfil an essential function in the contemporary capitalist system – they feed the financial apparatus with additional forms of social value when financial avenues are exhausted, allowing the continuance of the contemporary economic, social and moral order.

Notes

- 1 Moneylenders existed prior to the current era, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#) and the [Conclusion](#).
- 2 It was rumoured locally that this was done because lenders were not paying taxes.
- 3 The constitutional court decision can be found on the Mongolian government's legal website at: <http://www.legalinfo.mn/law/details/11954?lawid=11954> (accessed 11 January 2023).
- 4 Even if all residents do not agree with the decision – see below, 'The moral evaluation of moneylenders'.
- 5 As she was known colloquially.
- 6 As opposed to bartered goods (like dairy products), which retail stores in Magtaal will often accept in lieu of cash.
- 7 Or someone who combined these tendencies, like Jochi from [Chapter 3](#), who was locally born and raised, but partnered with an urban-born individual in his changer business.
- 8 Roitman (2003, 219) similarly discusses in her deliberation of (un)sanctioned wealth in northern Cameroon how the patriarchs of a family, known as the *baaba saare*, often are heavily in debt, yet are offered more loans, because of the consideration of their social position and responsibilities in the community. She argues, similar to my discussion of social versus exchange-based ontologies of debt, that *baabe saare* are considered nodal positions of authority within frameworks of original debt in the community. Consequently, Roitman's study echoes the conflation of social and exchange-based debt in Magtaal that Nergüi also capitalizes on: individuals of high social prestige within narratives of social debt are offered exchange-based loans, because they are considered to have more resources and more leverage within local registers.
- 9 In writing about concepts of trust among the Barga Mongols in Inner Mongolia, China, Haas (2016, 94) discusses how both the terms *itgeltei* and *naidvartai* can be translated as 'trustworthy' and both 'designate people who are deemed to be morally upright or otherwise capable and bound to perform specific tasks'. Although Haas goes on to distinguish between the two – namely that *itgeltei* refers to morality and *naidvartai* more specifically to character traits – the moneylenders in this study did not distinguish between these two terms. Nergüi and Terbish used the two terms interchangeably to describe the 'creditworthiness' of a person, which combined both moral and behavioural assumptions.

- 10 Another local who dabbled in moneylending quit her business because she had lent out a substantial amount of money to an individual who, being unable to pay back, fled to Ulaanbaatar. Pedersen (2017, 4) makes the argument that the neoliberal urbane of the Ulaanbaatar has encouraged 'generalized debt' – individuals consistently take out debt from one another, rarely paying them back fully, and move around the city freely opening and closing various debts to one another. While widespread debt is certainly a feature in Magtaal, as everyone opens up relations to one another and moves money around, these debts are commonly honoured and paid back. In contrast to Ulaanbaatar, Magtaal is a small township where all members are intertwined in almost daily interaction with one another. The social regulator of reputation puts a check on the excessive behaviour of both moneylenders and debtors – both fear social reprisal for perceived unreliable/antisocial behaviour. It has happened, as mentioned, that people flee to avoid debt, although to do so is a drastic step: residents who flee to avoid debt permanently break off all contact to Magtaal.
- 11 Terbish is not historically unique in his interest stacking according to social registers and proximity. Gregory (2012) argues through a thorough reading of historical Christian and Hindu injunctions against interest that borrowing and loaning has often been morally refracted along evaluations of social distance and class standing. For example, Thomas Aquinas argued, inspired by Aristotle, that money was sterile; attempts to make it breed were considered heresy to a false God (Walsh and Lynch 2008, 95). Passages in Deuteronomy specifically indicate that charging interest within one's own social group (to one's brother) is reprehensible, whereas lending outside of the community is more acceptable (Nelson 1989; Maurer 2006; Gregory 2012). In another context, Indian moral codes delineated different ethical rates if one was a Brahman, Warrior, Merchant or Sudra, respectively (Gregory 2012, 388). Even Adam Smith's 'A Theory of Moral Sentiments', Gregory notes, surprisingly offers the prescription that 'the morality of the affective individual varies with kinship distance and along with it the morality of the interest rate that should be charged on a money debt' (Gregory 2012, 389). Interestingly, Gregory argues that Jeremy Bentham was a revolutionary in regard to the social acceptance of usury. For example, Bentham rebukes the sterility theory of money and says that no man of sound mind 'ought to be hindered, with a view to his advantage, from making such bargain, in the way of obtaining money. . . . nor . . . [should] anybody [be] hindered from supplying him' (Gregory 2012, 390–1). One could argue that Terbish is recreating this argument through the logic that interest is vital to not hinder or hurt 'those that supply'. In my reading, usury (as high rates of interest) is easily morally condemned when the base form of value is not money and thus overt focus on money draws attention or stifles the reproduction of base value. As money shifts to the central value form (as a monetized economy), money itself becomes necessary for social reproduction. Consequently, as Bentham and Terbish argue, money is important for one's own social/familial prosperity and thus should be allowed to 'procreate' (as usury/interest). This process likely overlaps with pushes towards trade as base morality form and an emphasis on individual over mutual relations (Nelson 1989).
- 12 Although I acknowledge that this situation was partially created by the Manchu government, which carried out an isolationist policy within Mongolian territories (Dear 2014; Pedersen 2002; Schlessinger 2017). Nevertheless, in medieval Mongolia markets were typically set up at the borders between nomadic polities, or along the liminality between nomadic and sedentary society (Lattimore 1988; Pedersen 2002; Wheeler 2004). In Magtaal's general vicinity, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, a yearly border market emerged at the end of August or beginning of September around the Barga monastery of 'Ganjuur'. This market was located on the border between the Barga and Outer Mongolian territories (on contemporary Magtaal soum's border). It ran for nearly 150 years and became formalized between governments – tax proceeds from stands were split 60/40 for the Chinese and Mongolian governments, respectively (Kormazov 1928, 95).

Conclusion: two-way capitalist adaptations

What I found surprising in carrying out my fieldwork and writing this book was how often Magtaal residents implemented and reconceptualized historical pastoral and Buddhist concepts to justify their widespread participation in the cross-border illegal wildlife trade, even though the current form and proliferation of extractions would have been anathema to social propriety within pre-socialist pastoral and socialist Mongolia. As will be discussed below, forms of both mineral and wildlife extraction occurred within pre-socialist Qing Outer Mongolia (1636–1912), but they were generally limited in form and scope and were chiefly carried out by non-Mongolians. I was therefore surprised to see how quickly – within 30 years of the market economy, if one does not count the 70 years of socialism – worldviews created and conceptualized around preserving the integrity of land for pasture which had endured for over a thousand years had been successfully reformulated to justify the very activities they were created to mitigate: the widespread extraction and commodification of environmental resources from Mongolian collective land. During my fieldwork, regular extraction of both fish and *fang feng* were visibly having effects on the environment, but residents generally seemed unconcerned, justifying their actions as moral when harnessed for the local communal good.

I wrap up this book by describing the mechanisms through which market adaptation in Magtaal has been so successful that local people now reconceptualize and remobilize historical land-protective values in the interest of resource extraction. Generally, I argue, using expanded ethnography from the resource trades in *fang feng* (Chapter 2) and fish (Chapter 3), capitalism is an adaptively extractive system: once market currency was locally adopted, becoming resocialized according to local values and worldviews, and local people became dependent on it to maintain those worldviews, it enabled a channel for the upward extraction

of economic value. In the resource trade, modern market money has easily adapted to these local circumstances through a process of *dialectical conversions* – the conversion of life effort, labour, values etc. into a market-price calculation and the resocialization of earned money from this calculation back into local worldviews. But because the determinant of this calculation is not set locally, people gradually adapt their local behaviours and worldviews to keep fulfilling the material requirements of this calculation. In this way, the book concludes, adaptation to capitalist resource markets in Magtaal has been a continual two-way lifeworld–market process that extracts economic value upwards through exhibiting material pressure downwards over time.

Pre-socialist precursors

An adaptive process to international commercial and resource markets was already underway during the pre-socialist era while Outer Mongolia was a suzerainty of the Manchu Qing Empire. As discussed in the [Introduction](#), anthropologists have often argued that pre-market societies rarely conceptualized wealth in purely material terms, but as a means to promote the ultimate total values of their society, and for this reason, Graeber (2001, 2012, 2013, 2014) argues that labour and currencies within such societies are generally focused on ‘people-making’: in other words, how to reproduce progeny and grow them into well-adapted carriers of total value. In the case of pre-socialist steppe societies, worldviews and structures developed around the relational creation of total ‘wealth’, in other words, health, happiness and fertility, which was both manifested in and promoted through a bounty in ‘meat’, for example, hunting game, pastoral animals and women (with children) (Hamayon 2012). Among the more pastoral groups, this resulted in both political and cosmological systems that promoted the growth of ‘meat’ in herd animals, which was both the source of food and also a symbolic representation of one’s favour among and protection by the land and ancestor spirits (Jagchid and Hyer 1979). But throughout recorded history, concepts of material capital and wealth for its own sake usually emerged whenever steppe societies became integrated into larger empires, but largely remained distant from the local pastoral or animal-focused economy (Dalai 1992, 84–105; Enkhbold 2019).¹

When Outer Mongolia became integrated into the Manchu Qing Empire in the seventeenth century, this centrality of animal wealth to societal continuity became structurally institutionalized as currency,

because the Qing administration regularly levied taxation in animals (Sanjdorj 1980; Bawden 1968). According to Schlesinger (2017), the Manchu elite romanticized the Mongolian pastoral way of life, implementing laws and the banner system which were designed to ‘preserve’ their natural herder culture and landscape, effectively economically isolating them. But because this resulted in a very one-dimensional economy, when Chinese traders illegally entered Outer Mongolia to trade during the era, they were often well received and encountered an eager and lucrative consumer base (Sanjdorj 1980, 3; Dear 2014). From the beginning, these trades were credit-based because of the mismatch between types of currency – traders calculated in units of silver, to which herders had limited access, so they used their animals as currency, but could only pay back in the spring when their animals had offspring (Sanjdorj 1980, 42).² Arguably, then, debt pressure calculated in silver units encouraged the populace to re-apprehend their landscape in terms of material resources, as these debts were paid back in animals, their progeny, their furs and products as well as wildlife such as mushrooms, salt and game (Bawden 1968, 94; Namjim 2004, 193; Pozdneev 1971). Indeed, it was during this period that To Wang wrote his *Teachings* to teach people how to maximize their animal wealth, and the first forms of both wildlife and mineral extraction emerged (High and Schlesinger 2010).

From an anthropological perspective, the integration of personal animal herds into commercial, material narratives, like taxation, was possibly the precursor act that gradually enabled the expansion of materialist logics and commodification. Strathern and Stewart (1999, 164–72) note a similar process in the expansion of commodification among the Mount Hageners of Papua New Guinea who, prior to the arrival of White foreigners in the 1930s, used pigs and pearlshells as currency in the local prestige economy. In the coming decades, the foreigners started trading with the Hageners in pearlshells, which was familiar to them, but used them for expanded forms of commodification, for example, as wages for workers on plantations, which sparked a process of ‘precurson’: ‘a process . . . in which an indigenous valuable is itself reappropriated into a new nexus of relationships and, thereby, paves the way for a special sequel in the reception of money . . . into previously non-monetized contexts’ (Strathern and Stewart 1999, 171). Although, during socialism, Magtaal’s residents were not very dependent on currency per se, economic relations were still intertwined with herding. When Mongolia emerged as a post-socialist market economy, at least in Magtaal where economic livelihoods took new forms of environmental

dependence, state-issued currency was able to take on or channel local moral narratives associated with historical animal wealth, for example, pasture sharing, proportionality, *hishig* and good acts.

Capitalism's two-way adaptive conversions

Whereas limited material extraction did occur during the Qing era, particularly because traders set the rate of exchange, animals are not very mobile and are a finicky and perishable resource that must be consumed quickly. Not so with money as coin, which can move at a rate and distance way beyond animal wealth, connecting the products of local communities into more expansive international markets, providing both a myriad of opportunities for the circumnavigation of local social structures and for personally defined advancement. In Tsing's (2013) seminal work on the international matsutake mushroom trade, she argues that it is precisely this conversion of 'gifts' or creations of the local people-making nexus into commodities at the moment of exchange that creates economic value for capitalist markets. A similar process happens in Magtaal with the fish and *fang feng* trade, as people engage the people-making nexus to find and produce resources that are then separated from the locality and exchanged for commodity money at the moment of trade. But this only views the economic flows from one direction: a concurrent process of re-moralizing or integrating money into the local people-making nexus happens in the opposite direction. Indeed, market integration through money happens along a 'dual' (Akin and Robbins 1999, 21) or two-way adaptation process – namely, the integration of aspects of the local people-making nexus into the commodity economy; and, then, the local re-socialization of earned commodity money into local (or personal) people-making.

Within foundational social studies on the emergence of market systems, like those by Marx and Polanyi, but also in more recent theorizations on the phenomenon of globalization, capitalism is often described only from the angle of the absorption of multiple forms of local value (be it labour, resources or substantive effort), which leads to an image of capitalism as a monolithic structural logic that will inevitably eradicate cultural difference. Finding this depiction one-dimensional and contrary to the multiple cultural examples (like Magtaal) of individuals using market and monetary relations in culturally determined capacities, the feminist geographer duo J.K. Gibson-Graham influentially argued that these theories were 'capitalocentric' because they ignored the

multifarious diversity of relations existent within it (Gibson-Graham 2008, 2014). In 2015, several pre-eminent feminist anthropologists took stock of these approaches to argue, within their 'Gens Manifesto', that market systems could be productively analysed through the lens of generation – how capitalism derives economic value from *generation* (of culture, nature and life) and *generates* new local systems (Bear et al. 2015). To them, if capitalism looks in the aggregate like a system with a central logic, this image is only created because of an unlimited number of contingent everyday conversions:

[W]e emphasize that structure itself is not pre-formed, but heterogeneously made through processes of aligning multiple projects, converting them toward diverse ends that include (but are not limited to) the accumulation and distribution of capital. Acknowledging the power and structural formations of capital does not in any way necessitate that we grant either capital or capitalism a singular, coherent, and totalizing logic. The gens approach, then, is a concerted strategy to reveal the constructedness – the messiness and hard work involved in making, translating, suturing, converting, and linking diverse capitalist projects – that enable capitalism to appear totalizing and coherent (Bear et al. 2015).

In other words, when a trader arrives in a new area or a new product is put on a market, this does not automatically mean that these activities will be successful – perhaps local people have all the commodities they need or they do not need that good. Rather, there has to be a constant negotiation or an 'aligning of projects' between markets and many peoples – people first have to be in a position to either conceptually or physically be willing to trade; then they can only trade what the 'market' – in other words, another person – wants for their own life project; and they will only buy things that align with their own needs and values. Moreover, trades can only happen through a constant set of conversions – for example, translating between my personal human needs and material objects; exchanging objects and services into monetary form; and re-exchanging monies into other human needs.

The use of the term 'conversion' is provocative because it spotlights the tension between orthodox economics and anthropological understandings of market processes. Namely, economics is a materialist epistemology that uses matrixes of materiality and techniques of material framing to understand and explain the more-than-material relational world that capitalism exists in. The base social relation that is

the fundament of economic theory is the exchange relation – of two actors with respective material desires meeting and exchanging goods – which, lumped together with many other acts of exchange, constitutes a market. However, these theories and calculations rely on a socially learned process of framing: in my rendering,³ disregarding and bracketing out non-material, social processes from consideration in economic decision-making (Callon 1998, 39–40; Callon 2006; MacKenzie and Millo 2003). Humans have cultural, psychological or emotional reasons for interacting or exchanging goods, and their presence on the market is the result of years of cultural learning (including how to use a market), subsistence nurturing and emotional care. The term ‘conversion’ is evocative of this slippage – ‘conversion’ is reminiscent of the economic act of currency exchange, by converting one state currency to another in market settings; but the ‘conversions’ discussed by the authors of the ‘Gens Manifesto’ refer to how cultures and actors learn to express and meet their many more-than-material needs (namely, how to reach and further their own understandings of what constitutes a good life) through market exchange.

In Magtaal, the *fang feng* trade is so successful because it navigates a delicate balance between local notions of the good life and economic trade imperatives. Indicative of this dance, three of the prominent middlemen in this book – namely, Jochi, the *fang feng* changer (Chapter 2), Mandaa, the fish changer (Chapter 3), and Nergüi, the moneylender (Chapter 5) – all had successful local businesses because they, in some capacity, combined an intimate sensitivity to the lifeworlds of local people with a non-local economic partner, as a source of money, who did not encounter local people. In the case of Jochi, he partnered with Baatarsukh – a driver from the aimag centre who was able to locate a buyer to give them a loan – but because he was a well-known local man, well positioned to negotiate local social relations for his business, creating *otog* to make people feel socially cared for in a manner that is familiar and replicates historical notions of mutual aid in the steppe. In addition to human people-making, Tsing (2015, 62–3) draws attention to similar processes among non-human species. The *fang feng* root, which is the good traded in exchange, does not exist by itself, but was relationally made through processes in the environment, for example, energy from the sun, nutrients in the earth, photosynthesis and weather, as well as, in the worldview of residents, their spiritual relational rites. Thus, there are an infinite number of relational acts of *life effort* that are undertaken and inhere in living beings before they can even begin to engage in the market as either a labourer, with the energy and time to sell in employment, or as a resource commodity.

Only at the act of exchange are human actors cognizant of the larger market, because, in this moment, life effort or people-making is conceptually bracketed out of the equation. In addition to organizing *otog*, Jochi would sit at his home with an open door inviting people who had picked on their own during the day to stop by to sell their bounty. They would come with large bags of picked *fang feng* root and dump it on the ground to be weighed for assessment. In these moments, no matter how much Jochi likes someone, how much they banter or show care, how much love, labour or food went into a certain *otog* group, how sacred or rich the soil was or how beautiful a specific *fang feng* plant was, all of these things did not matter in the moment of exchange except if they translate into a standardized number, such as size, weight or quantity, that is recognized by the market as a factor in economic value (Tsing 2013). Indeed, markets are formed through the establishment of certain material indexes that are deemed to work in relation to each other to establish price. In the case of *fang feng*, Jochi tries to establish the true weight of the roots brought to him by a picker, which he does by shaking the roots, trying to knock off any dirt that can affect weight, then by taking off any tassels they have. Once weight has been assessed, he pays the picker according to the price per kilo. In that moment, the picker, too, is reduced to quantity: they are chiefly assessed and valued according to how much root they bring to Jochi. Of course, then, based on the weight of the roots, the human picker receives their monetary earnings, which Jochi can also selectively use to make people feel valued – giving, for example, kickbacks or bonuses to people he appreciates – but he, too, can never veer too far from the market-given price.

Within Magtaal, capitalism takes the form of two acts of conversion that enable the fulfilment of a market-given price calculation. The first act of conversion happens at the moment that a local person sells their *fang feng* bounty to Jochi: they are translating the many processes of local life effort into a singular decontextualized *thing*, a commodity with a price. But the second act of conversion happens when the picker receives money from Jochi for the *fang feng* root: they cannot eat this money, but must trade it again into something they have use for. Often, people take that money and buy things that again are important for their life effort: in addition to food, acts of care for their family and children, often socially re-entangling the money (Slater 2002; Thomas 1991). This two-way process – of socially disentangling goods and socially re-entangling money – happens repeatedly everywhere where individuals are dependent on market-engendered money, enabling capitalism to simultaneously incorporate yet hold apart groups with very different values and

worldviews. Capitalist exchange does not require people to speak the same language or even like each other; they only have to understand the basic concept of material exchange and feel that they are getting something out of it. People do not have to change their entire worldview to engage in it, only change it *enough* so that they can materially fulfil the requirements of a market-given price calculation – here: 1 kilo of root = 5,500 MNT – and morally feel comfortable realizing their own social values through it. In Magtaal, *fang feng* exchange currently allows residents to engage in pastoral values to earn income, but also use their proceeds in a re-socialized manner to help each other, imparting upon the money locally valued designators like *hishig* and *buyan*.

Upward flow of value

Although cultural groups easily adapt to yet maintain a degree of cultural sovereignty vis-à-vis market logics, this process of chiefly sustaining livelihoods through the market is still extractive over time. Environmental, feminist and Marxist anthropologists have vociferously made this point that, although limited monetary profits do return and are re-socialized into the locality along local values, the greater part of the effort of the environment, women's care and lower-class labour remains unacknowledged and unremunerated (Bear et al. 2015; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995; Rubin 1975; Graeber 2006). In the case of the Magtaal resource trade, this happens because local residents do not have any control over the price equation (for example, weight to price for *fang feng*) given by the market (they can only decide if they want to attempt to meet that equation or not) and are actually competing with many people across Mongolia and Siberia that they have never met. For example, after pickers sell their *fang feng* to Jochi, he dries it out to make it more perishable and then moves it to the aimag centre. There, his buyer purchases Jochi's collected bounty according to how much root for what prices he can get from changers across the aimag, and how much the buyer in Ulaanbaatar will pay for the bounty. In Ulaanbaatar, the changer also determines his purchase price from the aimag-centre changer based on how much root he can get from all across the country and how much consumers in China will pay for the root. The consumer purchase price in China is further determined by how much root at what price is available from Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (China) and Siberia (Russia). Thus, the equation that determines the conditions of people's local livelihoods in Magtaal is constituted by an

international process that local people could only marginally affect through collective effort.

In practice, with both *fang feng* and fish, the price equations are largely set by changers higher up in the chain in, for example, Ulaanbaatar and China. With both *fang feng* and fish, this is partly because of market differences between Mongolia and China – it is, for example, cheaper to live in Mongolia, so workers demand less money – but also because the demand in China for organic Mongolian resources, especially the medicinal plant *fang feng*, is so high that consumers exhibit limited pressure on its consumer price. Put differently, the price differentials between how much Mongolians will pick *fang feng* for (less than 10,000 MNT per kilo) and its consumer price in rural China (more than 100,000 MNT per kilo) and beyond (over 300,000 MNT) is so great that changers along the chain have great leeway in choosing what prices they demand at each stage.⁴ While carrying out the fieldwork on the fish trade for [Chapter 3](#), I interviewed Tamir, the Inner Mongolian changer who purchased Dalai's fish from Mandaa, who explained how changers feel entitled to set their prices because they 'facilitate the process' (*yavuulahyn tuld*). Using his fingers to designate various nodes in the chain, he argued that without changers there would be no market:

[A fish chain] is like a chain process [*suljee*]. The person who catches the fish from the lake receives a small amount of money. The next person gets more profit from the first. For example, [pointing at fingers] this person [finger 1] sells their fish to this person [finger 2] for 10 CNY; and the second person [finger 2] sells their fish for 20 CNY to this person [finger 3]; and the third person makes the highest profit and sells it for the highest price to other people [finger 4]. The first person [finger 1] can't sell his fish directly to the last person [finger 4], because he doesn't know who they are. You need to go through changers to enable the process. If the chain isn't facilitated by changers, then it doesn't survive. You just wouldn't know the right people.

In essence, changers are 'the market' as its price-setters and enablers connecting, for example, pickers to the next changer in the sequence. Each changer has effectively two goalposts affecting their price calculations – 1) how much resource for how much local people are sourcing; and 2) how much resource for how much the next changer is buying – and can set a preferred equation between them, which, in the aggregate with other changers, determines the prices of the market at

each location. Resource procurers in Magtaal are aware that the number of changers both within a location and along a chain affects prices, arguing, as stated by Bilgüün, a picker introduced in [Chapter 3](#): ‘Many *suljee* in Magtaal are good for us, because the changers compete for pickers. But particularly *suljee* with less steps [are good], so that the price of the root isn’t depressed to make profit at each step.’ Magtaal residents are aware, then, that the number of changers and nodes has a direct effect on the material circumstances of their lives, and that the longer the chain (for example, more international), the lower their income.

Generally, Magtaalians are at the whim of the changers and the resource market and, if they want to make more money, only really have the choice to source more (root or fish) for less output (energy or expenditure). The ‘moral economy of merit’ discussed in [Chapter 3](#) was a novel approach to this problem, because local fishermen knew changers like Mandaa and Tamir well enough (because they live either locally or right across the border) that they can exhibit pressure on them to mitigate their own profit margins in the interest of the whole locality. But more common is the approach taken by Amina’s family in [Chapter 2](#), who mobilized the collective energy of their extended family and friend group to pick in larger and larger quantities at a faster rate with less energy expenditure on their part. Through the efficacy of Amina’s familial *otog*, her family was able to negotiate a better price equation for themselves (1 kilo = 6,000 MNT) than other pickers in Magtaal, purely because that changer would be receiving a huge quantity of root. Thus, in the much more common incidence that people are not able to morally convince changers to mitigate their prices, pickers’ only tool for increasing their income is to tweak one of the material determinants given by the market: they pick in greater number; pick heavier root; or use less material and energetic output in picking.

Moral economic dichotomies as response to downward economic pressure

At the moment, residents are dependent on financial credit and the proceeds of selling resources for their livelihoods, often taking out debts in the autumn and winter to be paid back with resource income in the spring and summer. But if something changes in these circumstances – if they have a personal emergency, the interest rate increases, the price drops for wildlife or the resource starts depleting – they will have to adjust their behaviour – taking on more debt or sourcing more wildlife – in order

to maintain this balance of flows. In the initial years after my fieldwork, *fang feng* continued to be highly sought after on the international market, having been officially declared a Traditional Chinese medicinal remedy against Sars-CoV-2 (Hsu and Xin 2020). In 2021 and 2022, however, irregular shutting of the Chinese border impeded widespread informal participation in this trade.⁵ Prior to the border closings, Magtaalians' dependence on wildlife income was possible because the market prices in Magtaal are high enough to make it worth the effort, and the wildlife resource is still prevalent enough that anyone can participate. But the first signs of wildlife depletion were already visible and evident during my fieldwork. Residents like Amina reported that when they first started picking in the early 2000s, they could walk right outside the soum centre and find the plant. But now, not only do residents have to travel over 100 kilometres away from the soum, but also particularly intrepid pickers had started crossing illegally into the militarized border zone between Mongolia and China to access previously untouched locations. Despite attempts by Amina and Jochi to rotate picking regions, the annual picking rhythm is too frequent for the plant, which requires three years to reproduce. Here, even one material factor within local economic relations becoming unstable – namely, the quantity of the plant resource – encouraged residents to alter their behaviour, engaging in new risk taking and illegalities to continue achieving the price calculation.

Becoming integrated into markets does not necessarily *directly* affect or alter local worldviews, because they just become mediated through dialectical market conversions, but it only does so if local people, now dependent on the return flows, experience heightened pressure to adapt their behaviour to continue these flows. Because these flows lie outside local control, they inevitably fluctuate, instigating cultural change over the long term when these markets experience lulls or busts. Moments of pressure, like the depleting of wildlife mentioned above, are the circumstances that breed moral economic dichotomies, which are attempts to continue to regulate the in- and-outflows of the locality in a manner that continues locally and personally held values. First, the dichotomies of this book all developed around a value perceived as central to and shared by the local group (such as hierarchical governance, interrelationality with the land's common wealth or social help), but now expressed through the usage of money. Second, the dichotomies emerge in circumstances where the community is under pressure (such as within credit/debt relations or wildlife extraction) to expand the gamut of commodification. In the case of Magtaal, expanding how much debt one takes out or how much one picks was mediated through these dichotomies,

marking the action as moral if the funds continue to return to the locality in a manner that upholds locally held values. It is no coincidence that many of the moral economic dichotomies were a form of boundary-keeping between the locality, however spatialized, and the non-locality. Within [Chapters 1 and 2](#), we saw how moral concepts developed around regulating resource flows to maintain either the nation or the soum, whereas in [Chapters 3 and 5](#), we discussed frameworks that emerged to regulate the activity of group-peripheral traders. Finally, I would surmise that the conceptual effect of this pressure is the parallelization of value: the fracturing of total value into (social) values and (political-economic) value ([Graeber 2001](#)), the way Magtaalians describe *hishig* as fecundity versus riches ([Chapter 2](#)); social debt versus exchange-based debt ([Chapter 4 and 5](#)); or *nutag* as political-economic nationalism or shared spiritual land attachment ([Chapters 1 to 3](#)). Like other divisions, such as the binary of man over nature, this dichotomy is false yet continually constructed through stacking dependence on market prices not determined by local conditions to fulfil individual needs and dreams.

The long-term effects of economic pressure

The aforementioned assertion that cultural worldviews do not necessarily directly change through integration into the market has an important caveat. Within Magtaal, when pickers or fishermen sell their bounty to a changer and receive money, even if the full scope of care and life effort on their part is not fully remunerated, they can still continue their livelihoods. But the natural environment which grew the resource is never in any capacity remunerated by capitalism. Within this constellation, as already evinced by the Magtaalian expansion of the scope and areas of picking, it is the worldview that the land's integrity must be maintained that is increasingly adapted when pressure mounts. Whereas, in the past, any form of excessive extraction was taboo, now, mediated through moral economic dichotomies, extraction is moral if it upholds the continuity of the *nutag*. As the sacred bond between politicians and peoples is fractured and the state is de-deified, it remains to be seen whether the land will be, too.

I was pretty surprised during my fieldwork with both *fang feng* pickers and Dalai fishermen how unconcerned they all were concerning wildlife depletion. Perhaps this is because they have rarely encountered complete resource scarcity in their lifetimes. But they have personally witnessed wildlife stores depleting, considering that, within the last 20 years, resource procurers have had to gradually travel further out of

Magtaal's soum centre to find *fang feng* or travel further away from shore on Dalai Lake to get bigger fish. Rather, as long as there are resources to be found and a market to purchase them, I'm told, Magtaal's people will continue sourcing it. We have to live life. Even if it is low this year, I'm told, it will be back next year, because nature will continue to give to the people of the *nutag*. If a resource is exhausted this year, we will just find the next resource to sell, because 'Mongolia will always have a tomorrow' (*Mongoliin margaash hezee ch duusashgüi*; literally: Mongolia's tomorrow is inexhaustible).

Notes

- 1 The Chingisid Yuan dynasty (1206–1368) is well known for having inventively participated in large-scale currency and taxation schemes in order to integrate new peoples into its empire (Smith 1970). Enkhbold (2019, 535) even describes the usage of silver and paper currency and large-scale capital partnerships between Mongolian lords and foreign traders. These administrative systems and capital partnerships dissipated after the empire's collapse. In times of weaker social control, people were still expected to provide tax or tributes to a lord on request, but not in an administratively systemized manner (Jagchid and Hyer 1979, 288–92).
- 2 Sanjdorj (1980, 49) argues that Chinese traders really capitalized on this seasonal discrepancy and lack of trade familiarity among the populace by setting rates of conversion that were highly in their favour.
- 3 My usage of the term 'framing' differs slightly from Callon's. According to Callon's agencement model of the creation of markets, the world is full of both material and immaterial factors and humans engage in both material and more-than-material relations. Both meet and are moulded through socio-technical discourses and devices into contexts and objects we recognize as market actors and goods. He describes this process of moulding as 'framing', further delineating several different types of frames (Callon 2022). My usage of the term emphasizes the general conceptual elision of more-than-material factors and more-than-self-interested human action within economic theories of markets, while Callon focuses more on how the market process is constructed ('framed') in a manner that both involves yet makes it seem like more-than-material factors are absent. This nuance exceeds the argument of this conclusion.
- 4 Mongolian journalistic outlets report that the *fang feng* is even further exported to South Korea, where its price jumps to over 300,000 MNT per kilo: <https://news.zindaa.mn/1ydf> (accessed 12 January 2023).
- 5 According to a decree from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism in 2021 (A/136), *fang feng* could be picked again from then, with a permit required for commercial purposes. Although this decree formally restricts the amounts that can be picked, it provides the legal smokescreen for open picking in Magtaal.

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In the early 1990s, Mongolia began its hopeful transition from socialism to a market democracy, becoming increasingly dependent on international mining revenue. Both shifts promised to herald a new age of economic plenty for all. Now, roughly 30 years on, many of Mongolia's poor and rural feel that they have been forgotten.

Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands describes these shifts from the viewpoint of the self-proclaimed 'excluded': the rural township of Magtaal on the Chinese border. In the wake of socialism, the population of this resource-rich area found itself without employment and state institutions, yet surrounded by lush nature 30 kilometres from the voracious Chinese market. A two-tiered resource-extractive political-economic system developed. Whilst large-scale, formal, legally sanctioned conglomerates arrived to extract oil and land for international profits, the local residents grew increasingly dependent on the Chinese-funded informal, illegal cross-border wildlife trade. More than a story about rampant capitalist extraction in the resource frontier, this book intimately details the complex inner worlds, moral ambiguities and emergent collective politics constructed by individuals who feel caught in political-economic shifts largely outside of their control.

Offering much needed nuance to commonplace descriptions of Mongolia's post-socialist transition, this study presents rich ethnographic detail through the eyes and voices of the state's most geographically marginalized. It is of interest not only to experts of political-economy and post-socialist transition, but also to non-academic readers intrigued by the interplay of value(s) and capitalism.

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