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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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**“IN ANY CRYSTALLINE LAND”: THE POETICS OF
HUMAN/MINERAL WORLDS IN EASTERN MONGOLIA**

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Jessica Madison Pískatá

June 2021

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Abstract

“In Any Crystalline Land”: The Poetics of Human/Mineral Worlds in Eastern Mongolia

By Jessica Madison Piskatá

This dissertation concerns the intersections of human/mineral worlds as they are mediated through poetic genres and practices. This dissertation focuses primarily on the Dariganga area of Sükhbaatar Province, a grassy volcanic field in the southern steppe just north of the Gobi desert and near the border with China. In the steppe and Gobi regions of Mongolia, and Dariganga in particular, geological forms are deeply involved in social life, and human interactions with worshiped mountains, stone cairns, mineral deposits, slag heaps, and mines are such that these forms take on their own kind of life. Making relations across such vast difference necessitates a way of communicating realities that may be confounding to secular modern academic language and ways of knowing, especially in translation. Dariganga poets, performers, scholars, and enthusiasts thus employ the capacities of poetry to create different paradigms of rationality and representation.

The description and analysis of this dissertation is based on two years spent working as an English teacher in Sükhbaatar Province from 2011-2013, and 18 total months of participant observation, interviews, and collaborative translation undertaken in Ulaanbaatar, Sükhbaatar Province, Dariganga *sum* district, Dornogovi Province, and Erdenet City from 2015-2018. I primarily worked with poets, heritage scholars, performers, and religious pilgrims who identified themselves as having strong affective relations with particular geological forms. As worshiped mountains

and stone cairns are ubiquitous across the Mongolian landscape and accelerating mineral extraction projects drive the country economically, politically, and environmentally, this was a very common sentiment. While intimate human relations with mineral forms is not unique to Mongolia, the longstanding intensity of human/geological relations here has afforded people the capacity to understand and articulate these relations in a uniquely clear and representative manner.

Each chapter of this dissertation revolves around a concept built from a specific Mongolian term, drawing together various practices, modes of transmission, and sedimentations of shared human/mineral sociality. I foreground Mongolian concepts to highlight the ways in which my interlocutors' understanding of geological liveliness confounds and outpaces representations of the animate non-living by the North Atlantic academy. From theories of classical animism to certain works from the ontological turn, the animating force within non-living things, whether "taken seriously" or not, has largely been defined as an ethereal quality distinct from materiality. This allows for non-secular entities such as ghosts, spirits, and deities, but not living rock. In Mongolia, while there are indeed distinct "air-like" or "invisible" spirits, ghosts, and deities that inhabit geological forms, restricting our analysis of geological sociality to the realm of religion of animism suggests an overreliance on a Christian ontology that disaggregates an immortal, ethereal soul from a mortal body. For my interlocutors in Mongolia, mineral landscapes and geological forms are very much animated, though not exclusively by spirits, nor by the mistaken application of biological life. Instead, the liveliness perceived in these geological relations is very

much part of their materiality and the materiality of people's interactions with them: treading, piling, touching, pulling, digging, engraving, and mapping. The liveliness of a worshiped mountain, for example, is an attribute of the mountain itself: its ability to compel humans to action, to invoke obligation, to create fortune, to heal and to reproduce itself through human creativity and language. To express the ineffable complexities of this liveliness, many of my interlocutors turn to poetry, citing its capacity to create new paradigms through juxtaposition, contradiction, pattern, sound, and surprise. Poetry, like the lively geology it describes, is immaterial language in material form.

This liveliness is also taking place in the context of multiple modernizing projects that sought and seek to domesticate the non-human and separate Nature from human Culture. Since the 17th century, Buddhist domestication projects interpellated landscape forms and entities by linking them to religious taxonomies and architectural projects that placed them under the purview of the Mongolian Sangha and, in the early 20th century, a theocratic Buddhist state. Socialist modernization projects throughout the 20th century attempted to physically separate Nature from Culture with stone walls by building "Culture Houses" in rural centers, moving cultural practices like poetry, art, music, and dance indoors. In contrast, the banning of explicitly religious activities allowed for new small-scale practices to form, creating new intimacies between individuals and geological relations. The acceleration of industrial mining during this era mirrored pre-existing practices of piling stone to generate fortune and blew it up to the national and international scale.

After the Democratic transition, the chaos and uncertainty caused by neoliberal shock treatment and the lifting of religious restrictions caused a mass awakening of landscape spirits, an explosion of shamanic practice, a rush of temple construction and the mandating of mountain worship ceremonies by law. Just as much as these livelinesses are appropriated by capitalism, they also gleefully participate in it while always also remaining beyond its reach. This series of modernities have sedimented over the years into a mineral palimpsest of human/geological relations which can only be conveyed and understood through similarly complex and kaleidoscopic poetic genres, practices, and performances.

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“Pravda a láska musí zvítězit nad lží a nenávistí.”



Děda and I enjoying our scholarly pursuits (California, 1986)

*Because there is no custom of planting bad seeds
In any crystalline land through which a body might wander
Let us beckon the eternal guardian from the mountains of our homeland
In search of the endless knot which ties our ancestry to our descent.*

*-G. Mend-Ooyo "Poem of Offering to Altan Ovoo"
trans. Jessica Madison Pískatá*

Introduction

*O, my stones
Can I not hear your breath?
A stone letter than came to me from the depths of a distant age
is it not decipherable somehow?*

-O. Dashbalbar, "Ode to Stones" trans. Jessica Madison Piskatá

July 2015 was unusually wet and blustery in Dariganga, an administrative region located in the grasslands of eastern Mongolia near the border with China. I was dressed inadequately for the weather, and that morning I had gone to an odds and ends shop in the town center to buy a semi-translucent men's windbreaker which was immediately soaked through. My friend and former coworker Davaasüren (Davaa), despite being pregnant with her son, had insisted on coming along with me on the 5-hour dirt road drive to Dariganga town center from her home in the province capital of Baruun-Urt.

We were staying at the Children's Camp on the outskirts of town, about an hour's muddy walk from what I had come to see—the extinct volcano Altan Ovoo. Davaa and I had been visiting Altan Ovoo since we first became friends in 2011, when she snuck me out of work early on a Friday for a trip to see the autumn swan migration. Over the following decade we'd walked around the mountain together many times, always taking the clockwise circumambulatory route designated for women, while the men climbed to the mountain's summit.

We paused in front of the first *ovoo*¹ cairn where a long blue cord made of woven prayer flags stretched from the top of the rock pile all the way up the mountainside, then disappearing over the lip of the crater's edge. Davaa pulled out her phone. "I'm going to call my mom." She said. "So this way she can talk." She quickly dialed and held the phone up to her ear: "It's me. I'm here with Jessica at Altan Ovoo. You want to say something?" I heard a muffled affirmation from the phone. "Okay go ahead." She held the phone up above her head to face the mountain and I could hear the scratchy intonations of Solongo's warm voice radiating out from the tinny Samsung speaker. Otherwise, everything was silent—hugging myself against the drizzle, I looked back at the sleepy town and the green summertime steppe behind it. To my right, a motley group of horses stood in a tight ring, bobbing their heads energetically, trying to ward off insects. A little tawny-gold one with a cream-colored mane stood slightly apart from the group. It reminded me of a line from a poem by a Dariganga poet: "My horse – Oh, indeed it is topaz. Oh, indeed it is a Mongol's jewel."

Davaa hung up the phone. "My mom says hi."

We started walking again. "Was she talking to the mountain just now?" I asked. I'd only been aware of prayers done in the mountain's immediate presence. Usually, visiting Altan Ovoo involved a good deal of physicality: pressing one's forehead to the walls of the stupa at the south side of the mountain, genuflecting on

¹ A pile, usually made of rocks, that marks a place on the landscape where spirits and energies gather, and where people can leave offerings.

special wooden boards or on the grass, scattering offerings of food or money on the air.

“Oh, yeah. She was saying a prayer and asking some wishes from Altan Ovoo. She can hardly come here anymore because of her back, so she wanted to just say something.”

Years later, during my year of fieldwork for this dissertation, I sat in Solongo’s kitchen back in Baruun-Urt and asked her about the time she called the mountain on the phone. Was it at all comparable to being there in person? “Of course, it’s different.” She replied. “It’s like talking to a relative or school friend on the phone. Of course, it doesn’t feel as good as meeting them, as giving them a hug, but it’s better than not talking at all. You can still feel the *energi* in your mind and heart.” She paused to think. “How about this technology though...cellphones.? the internet...Facebook and what have you. You can talk to anybody and make a connection. Through the signal, the radio waves, the satellites in outer space and such, there is a connection. What a world this is. That’s really something, don’t you think?”

I thought back to the phone call and imagined the cellphone signal as a little dotted line traveling up into the blackness of outer space, pinging off a cartoon satellite, coming back to Davaa’s phone, and then radiating up that long blue cord and into the mountain. Five hours to the north, the slag heap of Tömörtiin Ovoo zinc mine echoes the mountain’s silhouette in shape and form, erupting with the minerals that

will travel around the world to form the very conductor Davaa used to connect her mother to the mountain, a material triangulation of traveling immaterial language.

*

This dissertation explores the points of connection between human and mineral social worlds, the mutual (un)intelligibilities they highlight, the powerful affects produced in moments of contact and the poetics they mirror, express, and produce. Writing on the contradictions of geological materiality and its surprising liveliness, Hugh Raffles coins the term “unconformities”:

Even the most solid, ancient, and elemental materials are as lively, capricious, willful, and indifferent as time itself; and that life itself is filled with unconformities—revealing holes in time that are also fissures in feeling, knowledge and understanding; holes that relentlessly draw in human investigation and imagination yet refuse to conform, heal or submit to explanation in ways we might desire or think we need.” (Raffles 2020, 6)

I begin with an open question: in what ways are stones like people, and in what ways are people like stones? What can be found in the overlap? How are these connections made, conveyed, and maintained? The overlap that constitutes the shared space between human and mineral worlds in Mongolia is nothing if not lively. International reporting over the last decade has largely been focused on the sensational geological aspects of human life in Mongolia, especially since the start of the mining boom in 2010. Western media coverage of Mongolia depicts the country as a what Tsing would call a “resource frontier” (2011) or what Voyles (2015) and Klinger (2015) a “sacrifice zone” where violent modernity is being thrust upon a

rural, non-industrialized, and traditional population. Domestic news is often consumed by mining too,² particularly the corruption scandals coming out of Oyu Tolgoi (Turquoise Hill) copper mine in the Gobi desert, formerly run by Canada's Ivanhoe mines until it was taken over by Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto in 2009. The decade since the start of the extraction boom has brought mineral sociality to the surface of Mongolia's economic, social, and even religious (High 2011) life.



Fig. 0.1: Tömörtiin Ovoo zinc mine, Sükhbaatar Province (image from Google Earth, June 7th, 2021)

Despite this intensification, life in Mongolia has always involved an awareness of geology to some extent. The mining boom is merely the latest event in the history of a place rich in minerality—a 2011 *Financial Times* article referred to Mongolia as

² Though less so since the COVID-19 pandemic.

a “freak of geology,” painting a colorful image of “herders roaming the steppe and Genghis Khan leading his armies to conquer Asia” atop an estimated trillion dollars’ worth of potential mineral deposits (Hook 2011). While perhaps unnecessarily flamboyant, this description is not entirely untrue inasmuch as it depicts the sheer volume of mineral wealth contained in Mongolian ground, and the way people live their lives right on top and increasingly in the midst of it.

In many of the places where I conducted fieldwork research, the mineral wealth that once lay under people’s feet is now all around them. Along the recently-paved steppe road between my primary field site in Sükhbaatar Province and my secondary site in Ulaanbaatar, the increasing occurrence of mining slag heaps has transformed the horizon that, when I first made the journey in 2011, was so flat it was almost oceanic. To stay alive in Mongolia in 2021 often requires an intimate knowledge of the geological world, as the country’s two biggest industries are mining and herding (specifically goats for the cashmere industry). Why this knowledge is important for miners is obvious, but even herding requires a geological awareness: a warm winter pasture requires knowledge of how the wind flows around mountains and ridges and finding the best grazing lands requires that one know the location of rich volcanic soil.

Of course, humans far and wide have relationships with and different understandings of stone; in this way Mongolia is not singular. However, the sheer intensity of these interactions, generated in part by the mining boom, have afforded my interlocutors the capacity to conceptualize geological phenomena in creative

ways. The contemporary Mongolian context is thus an excellent analytical springboard from which to launch an investigation into geosociality.



Fig. 0.2: Monument to author D. Natsagdorj in front of a coal slag heap outside Baganuur (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, August 2nd, 2017)

Geosociality

This dissertation is concerned with geological entities as social beings, rather than a static, passive, or unanimated backdrop. Here the geological and mineral world is central, a lively networked terrain of forms, sediments, shifts, and energies. To describe this milieu, I draw on the new literature on geosociality (Palsson and Swanson 2016), coming out of conversations from the AURA³ project at Aarhus

³ Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene

University, where I spent some time before starting fieldwork in 2017. Citing new materialist thinkers, Palsson and Swanson attempt to recapture the liveliness of material things, which had been lost in the Enlightenment separation between “Nature” and “social life” that divided geology from socio-cultural theory. This draws on scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and environmental humanities that has over the past few decades, been turning its attention to other species’ relations with humans (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010)—what could be called “biosocialities.”

This is part of the greater NatureCulture turn (Haraway 2007) arising from Anthropocene scholars’ assertion that humans have now become a geologic force on the face of the earth, influencing the climate on a planetary scale. However, the beginnings of the NatureCulture turn still took a life-centric view of Nature, examining relations between humans and other living species (Strathern 1980; Haraway 2003, 2007; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Descola 2013).

Geosociality thinks on both the planetary and on the ground scales, “a down-to-earth form of geopolitics that exceeds classic notions of the term, attending to different geologic scales; to living bodies, human and nonhuman; to solid rock; and to the planet” (Palsson and Swanson 2016). Geosociality therefore describes a sensibility that considers the geologic to be commingled with the social, recognizing the alignment between geology and socio-cultural theory, with an appreciation for the mineral. Furthermore, geosociality, and recent works that consider the social place of the geological (De la Cadena 2015, Povinelli 2015, Raffles 2020) are extending the NatureCulture turn in considering the place of non-living ecologies. Povinelli marks

the excision of nonlife (*geos*) from being (*ontology*) as “geontopower,” a “...set of tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife” (2015, 4). Reintegrating Non-Life with Life in existence is an extension of the NatureCulture turn (Haraway 2007) that began with an unsettling of the category of the human in response to the conditions of a global Anthropocene where the Human has emerged as an abstract category in contrast to all other things on the planet—the Non-Human world.

This dissertation uses the frame of geosociality on the NatureCulture turn as a post-colonial and post-Soviet exploration into the Soviet House of Culture, a project of the socialist era which intended to domesticate Culture into the realm of Civilization, Art, Music, Literature, and other state-sanctioned practices (Grant 1995). In Mongolia, this intervention was literal, culminating in the construction of “palaces” of culture in Ulaanbaatar and Culture Centers in the province and district capitals. The separation of Nature from Culture was made material by creating a building inside which Culture was contained. These Culture Centers still remain in the settlement centers of many rural districts and serve as gathering places for community events such as graduation ceremonies, holiday parties, dances, basketball games, and the like.



Fig. 0.3: Display from inside the Miner's Palace of Culture in Erdenet City (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, September 19th, 2017)

However, the project of using these buildings to materially separate the realm of Culture from the realm of Nature never completely took hold in Mongolia. KG Hutchins argues that though these Houses of Culture were designed to separate Nature from Culture, humans and animals nevertheless continued to cooperate on projects of making musical heritage (2020). Likewise, my project looks at creative practices, to show how elements intended to be confined to Nature, such as mountains, mineral deposits, and caves, are in fact very much involved in the creation of “cultural objects” such as poems, music, dance, architecture, and rituals of state, to name only a few.

The various moments of geosociality explored in this dissertation are also places where human beings find themselves compelled by geological bodies, often into relations of care, violence, love, and obligation. In this way, my research finds geosociality in Mongolia to be a form of kinship, and here I build on the work of scholars who have studied other forms of human/non-human kinship. This argument draws on literature that explores the potential for more-than-human kin relations with domestic animals. Donna Haraway has coined the term “companion species” to describe the multi-species kin relations that form between humans and companion animals (2003). These kin relationships are built through accreting acts of care, obligation, violence, sacrifice, and creativity (Salazar 2018). They affect and are affected by broader political movements (Haraway 2003, Dugatkin and Trut 2017), move through cycles of obligation and commitment (Swanson et al 2018), engage in emotionally ambivalent acts of sacrifice, care, and violence, (Govindrajan 2018); and collaborate to create a shared domestic sphere (Fijn 2011). These kin-like relations are one of the incongruities that reveal the ways in which certain geological forms are lively but not alive. I use kinship as an analytic to push against the occasional tendency in Mongolian Studies to slot relations between humans and the environment as either purely secular, and therefore unsentimental, or entirely religious and reverent. Most of my interlocutors saw themselves as existing somewhere in between, having close and longstanding relationships with the elements of the world around them about which they have sometimes contradictory feelings, as is common in studies of kin relations. In Sükhbaatar, I worked with people who engage with the

deep ecology (Naess 1995) of their surroundings primarily through intimate exchanges with beings that exist in a radically different mode from that of the human: they are not alive.

Lively but not Alive

In his novella *Altan Ovoo*, Dariganga writer Gombojavyn Mend-Ooyo refers to the titular mountain as a multi-faceted “wish fulfilling jewel” a reference to the *chandmani* stone that brought the dharma to Tibet after falling from the sky. Officially named Altan Dari Ovoo by the Mongolian state, Altan Ovoo is a 4,440-foot-high extinct volcano and one of 10 worshipped mountains as mandated by the Mongolian state. It is also the residence of various landscape spirits, Buddhist deities, ancestors, and other post-human ghosts, though for my interlocutors, these are not the primary actors with whom they interact in their social relationships with the mountain. Rather, they express that their relationships are with the mountain itself.

Altan Ovoo is an extinct volcano comprised of a cone of volcanic ash and a shallow crater. It stands about 4,400 feet high and is covered nearly to the summit with the grasses and low shrubbery that can also be found all across the surrounding steppe. The silhouette of the mountain is one of the most iconic in Mongolian landscape painting: a gradual rise and fall with a smooth dip in the center and a slight hitch on the west side.

Altan Ovoo is the magnetic core of a Dariganga assemblage: a collection of volcanic rocks, hardened magma, and a cinder cone. It is covered in various grasses,

sage, wild onion, and medicinal plants; hosts silver-backed voles, marmots, vipers and a wild ass; is littered with the remains of prayer flags, rice, milk, and money; serves as a landing place for Buddhist protector deities, landscape spirits, and post-human ancestors; and is constantly ran over with deep grooves worn from the tracks of centuries of people coming to visit, walk, and pray. This is only to list a few.



*Fig. 0.4: Altan Ovoo seen from the south side of Kholboo lake
(photo by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 14th, 2015)*

However, this dissertation hesitates to call it an assemblage as such, because of a tendency in the scholarship on Mongolian mountains to subscribe all sociality and livelihood to only certain participants in the happening. This is especially true when discussing the “supernatural” elements of mountain sociality, which are often

ascribed completely to spirits. This is not to say that spirits aren't important here—there are many intangible entities that inhabit, protect, and haunt the mountain. These include mountain *savdag* (“genius loci”), Dariganga deities called *tenger* (Tamirjavyn 2017); various ancestors; Buddhist protector deities such as White Manjushri, Tara (*Dari Ekh*), or the “God with the white horse”⁴; *khiimori* energies; and the mountain’s *ezen* (master)⁵: a central Asian pit viper that can sometimes be seen slithering among the rocks of the *ovoo* at its summit. These discussions draw on classical animist frameworks that disaggregate the mountain from its spirits, specifically the *tenger* that attend the *ovoo* at the mountain summit (Tamirjavyn 2017, 265).

My research suggests, however, that the primary being with which my interlocutors engage when they greet Altan Owoo is the material form of the mountain itself. This dissertation accepts this framing as a possibility and does not deny the existence of such spirits on and around the mountains and *ovoo* that are described in the following pages. However, in seeing the way most people interact with the lively geological forms on the landscape, there seems to also be something else at work, in which material and immaterial attributes that make up lively geological forms cannot be disaggregated. The lively qualities of a mountain, for example, are not the attributes of a distinct spirit which when removed can leave a mountain an inert pile

⁴ Possibly *Chingkarwa*, a protector deity and mountain god; or *Tsangpa Karpo* who looks very similar. Regardless most people colloquially refer to him as “god with a white horse.”

⁵ See Rane Willerslev (2007) and Theodore Levin (2010) for explanation of masters of the land in Siberia.

of rock. These lively qualities are as much a part of the mountain as the layers of sediment that have collected over the years to give it its form.

When I first began preliminary research for this project in 2015, I did not expect this mountain to feature so centrally in what would eventually become my dissertation. I spent that summer in Ulaanbaatar and thus was running into a lot of foreigners in the development sector. The talk that summer concerned the new airport that was being built outside the city, or rather, the road leading to it. The rumor was that a lot of red tape had gone up around the proposed route, as it cut through what the Anglophone expats were calling “sacred mountains.” However, the road wouldn’t cut into the mountains directly and environmental impact studies had shown minimal risk. This caused great consternation among the development workers, who couldn’t understand the issue. A Canadian NGO worker in a hotel bar once put it to me this way “It’s like they think it [the mountain] is literally alive or something.”

I’ve since learned just how common this misunderstanding is, and that the culprit is the English word “alive.” Speaking in English, as most urban Mongolians do when talking with foreigners, people will sometimes use the word “alive” for both things that are biologically living (such as animals, plants, etc.), and things that are lively, like stones that don’t want to be moved, mountains that prefer certain styles of praise poems and prayers, or precious metals that infect human bodies like viruses. In Mongolian, however, the word for “alive,” *amid*, is very much biological. People and sheep and houseplants and microbes are *amid*, stones are not. Instead, people describe the life-like qualities of geological forms via felt actions: terms like *setgel tatax* “to

attract or compel,” literally to “pull affect”; *shakhaj sürdüülekh*, “to coerce,” “put pressure on,” or “ply with intimidation or awe;” or via adjectives like *soronzon/soronzlol*, “magnetic.”⁶

Even the staunchest atheist holdovers from the socialist era seem to allow for the possibility of liveliness in non-living things. Tsermaa, my cheerful but non-nonsense linguistics professor, offered this explanation when I asked about the common idea of stones that cause misfortune if you move them: “They don’t like to be moved or flipped over, because they’re alive... Well of course they’re not *literally* alive,” she explained. “Only a dummy would think that. But you know, they have preferences.”

Natural science advances in the areas of non-human agency, from plant cognition to animal sociality, keeps moving the needle towards non-humans being more human-like than previously suspected. Ecologist Meredith Root-Bernstein challenges whether the biological sciences’ central question, “what is life?” is even worth asking (2019). She suggests that life might simply be to experience being alive. This experience in turn creates a capacity to recognize varieties and degrees of liveliness in other things (Ingold 2011; Povinelli 2016). Root-Bernstein gives the example of minerals. She explains that they are “curiously similar to living systems” in that they are “ordered chemical structures with characteristic compositions, forms, and properties. They grow by forming stable, predictable, and ‘self-replicating

⁶ I’ve also had interlocutors translate this as “charismatic” when talking about something other than actual electromagnetism.

associations' via covalent bonds and a knack for finding uniform and stable conditions for growth.”

Root-Bernstein goes further, suggesting that minerals employ “the most successful life-history strategy on Earth: they are self-assembling, they don't require evolution. Like living cells, they are able to maintain the integrity of their structures over time. By the logic of perspectivism, people are simply failed minerals.” This somewhat echoes the perspectivist assertion that everything is “human” to itself (de Castro 2009). In Siberia, Rane Willerslev uses a perspectivist frame to narrate the hunt as an act of mutual incomplete mimesis and seduction between hunter and prey. The hunter must be enough like the animal they hunt to draw the prey in, but of course cannot become their prey completely. Here is where subject and object are confounded, and the confounding of an object is essential in a consideration of humans and stones, the platonic ideal of ultimate inert object (2007).

Using this pared-down use of perspectivism as a tool for empathy across the organic/mineral (or covalent/ionic) barrier, we might be able to consider the perspective of minerals well enough to relate to them. But this leaves the question of what characterizes these relations. It is here I posit an alternative to “alive” might be “lively.” Geological forms, if not simply alive in their own way, at least have the capacity for certain aspects of life, enough to catch the notice of living things. They are lively, but not alive. But how do we express a contradiction like non-living life within the secular modernist boundaries of contemporary social science language or the English language in general? One shift in terminology is certainly insufficient.

My dissertation argues that in Mongolia, and volcanic Dariganga in particular, something is known about the capacity of poetry to convey such incommensurabilities. Each poem has its own rationality, carrying meaning not only symbolically but also through its self-contained materiality: form, structure, and the distinct objects that are created with each new adaptation or performance.

Ways of Being Lively

This dissertation posits that liveliness in the non-biological sense can be determined through relationality with other things, in other words, whether or not something is felt to be lively. It also argues that this liveliness can be perceived outside of a measurable secular-materialist framework. In discussing the liveliness of non-living things in a context outside of the North Atlantic, there has been a historical tendency in anthropology to create a utopic image of an Other (Trouillot 2003) that either imagines the whole world as animated with something akin to a human soul (Tylor 1871) or mistakenly recognizes biological life in non-life (Durkheim 1912). While there is much that is useful to draw from the concept of animism, and anthropology's long history with it, my work cautions against certain aspects of this framing, particularly a troubling reliance on the concept of the immaterial soul.

The ontological turn's emphasis on empiricism⁷ and multiple natures has been taken up by scholars of New Animism, a term which first appeared in literary studies

⁷ While perspectivism offers an ontologically nimble framework for considering variant interpretations of the material world, there are still consistencies across objects. Both blood and manioc beer, for example, are things that are drunk (Castro 2011).

in the 1980's but which has recently found its way to anthropology. Drawing on the ontological turn as well as new materialism, and "classical" animism, New Animist scholars have responded to the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene by encouraging a turn towards a relational view of human ecology. As an antidote to human objectification of and alienation from the environment, a 2020 symposium on New Animism held at the University of Leeds called for "...a recuperation of animism as a creative practice for re-enchanting the world." Likewise, in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Graham Harvey (2004) suggests that New Animism can intervene in debates around extractive capitalism, climate crisis, Indigenous land rights, and mass extinction by undoing the dualisms that enable hierarchical thinking that separates humans from others.

My project draws inspiration from a provocation of New Animism that arose in tandem with the Anthropocene debates of the last decade: that addressing environmental crisis in a politically sound way requires close attention to ways of knowing and doing that have been shunted aside by Enlightenment thinking (Ingold and Bracken 2020). In many ways, the work of the New Animists mirrors the work of Tylor, who took a universalist approach to animist thinking. Graham Harvey, for example, argues that "...a list of the people who might be labeled 'animist' in one way or another includes all of us. All humans, indeed, all animals, have the propensity to respond to events as if they were intentional and personal." (Harvey 2014, 7)

While some New Animist scholars have taken a “what you make of it” approach to the study of animism (Harvey 2014), the concept maintains many of its troublesome classical roots. In *The New Animism: Creativity and Critique*, the driving force behind the Anthropocene is cited as “...a dualistic hierarchal relation between ensouled—and therefore entitled—humans and other non-souled beings and objects,” and the cure is attention to “relational networks of variously animated, ensouled, and agential persons.” Aside from being troublingly ahistorical, this provocation invokes certain “Old Animist” themes that I argue reify problematic boundaries between the material body and the immaterial spirit or soul, remaking Christian Protestant framings outside of their original North Atlantic contexts.

The notion of being “ensouled” is a worrisome retreading of the work of E.B. Tylor, who first developed the concept of animism in 1871’s *Primitive Culture*. Drawing inspiration from spiritualist seances he observed in parlors of the United States and Great Britain, Tylor defined animism as the universal belief that inside visible, tangible bodies, there resides a (usually) invisible, intangible being. This soul is distinct from the material body, and able to separate from it. Tylor argued that this notion⁸ was a central characteristic of religion writ large and could not be attributed to a particular group of people or practices. However, one cannot disentangle the concept of a discrete and intangible “soul” from its Christian context. No matter how much it is multiculturalized, this framework is bound up in Christian ontology, which

⁸ which he almost called “spiritualism” before demurring to animism in order to avoid being confused with the seances happening in fancy parlors.

is itself bound up in colonial histories of power that enable it to reproduce all alternatives in its own image (Povinelli 2002; Masuzawa 2005).

My work's emphasis on relationality does draw from certain New Animist critiques that emphasize relationality over ensoulment. Nurit Bird-David argues that animism needs to be rethought completely, understood as a relational epistemology rather than a failed one (Bird-David 1999). "This epistemology is about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer" (69). She gives the example of "talking with" a tree "rather than cutting it down" (77) as an illustration of the epitome of animist epistemology. Part of this, she says is the ability to "perceive what [the tree] does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility" (77). Rather than a materialist framing of the environment as made of discrete things, Bird-David identifies a second kind of knowledge that grows from, and is available through, relatedness with others. My work also draws on Eduardo Kohn's use of systems of relation as models for liveliness, though a "soft anthropomorphism" that defines liveliness as a cognitive ability. In *How Forests Think*, he argues that non-human entities have agency in that they have the capacity to think (2013, 43). "Thinking" for Kohn is a semiotic way of engaging with self and others, creating meaning (72) and relations through representation (83-84).

Discussions of non-human agency likewise conceive of liveliness via actions and reactions across relational networks. But how does one represent and perceive this non-human capacity to materially engage with their surroundings in transformative ways, especially something as stoic as a mountain? “Thinking,” as Kohn describes it, is distinct from things like knowing, reacting, and dwelling. In *Identity and Ecology in Arctic Siberia*, David Anderson (2000) describes what he calls a “sentient ecology” where humans act and move on the landscape “...in such a way that they are conscious that...the tundra itself [is] reacting to them (116).” This is not unlike Bird-David’s description of talking to a tree being a reaction and an expectation that the other will react. Also in Siberia, Tim Ingold describes the way in which human and non-human members of an ecological network participate together to create a “dwelt-in world” (2000). Arne Naess’ “Deep Ecology” encourages a shift away from anthropocentric understandings of the environment towards an ecological one in which humans and non-humans participate equally and holistically in ecological community (1973). All three angles acknowledge humans and non-humans engaging in ecosystem sociality and through shared knowledge, understanding, and co-dwelling, create new shared social worlds.

Anna Tsing writes that all living organisms are involved in world-making (2015, 22), giving the example of how human land management creates conditions for pine growth and therefore matsutake mushrooms, pickers, and traders. This is an “assemblage,” a cooperative gathering of distinct but interacting species in unintentional patterns of coordination (22-23). Assemblages are most commonly

described in terms of living beings, but Tsing gives another example: “I need to see life-ways—and non-living ways of being as well—coming together” (23). She gives the example of picking up a stick while walking in the woods, after which a “woman/stick assemblage” is created. This is a “happening” a gathering and event that is greater than the sum of its parts in that it enables movement and relies on a moment of affinity—a woman and a stick don’t just come together; the woman has chosen *this* stick.

This brings us back to Altan Ovoo as an assemblage, with Altan Ovoo the mountain as its magnetic core: for my interlocutors in Dariganga, the reason the assemblage has happened is largely because of Altan Ovoo’s capacity to draw things in (*setgel tatax*). This is the central agent powering the Dariganga assemblage: Altan Ovoo is the woman, and everything else is the stick. This ability to pull, to take up, to make the assemblage, is central to the liveliness that people identify in their relations with the material (and magnetic) mountain.

To further illuminate the way my interlocutors’ engagement with the materiality of landscape forms creates more-than-material worlds, I also engage with Mayanthi Fernando’s concept of the Uncanny Ecology, “What might it look like to re-imagine multispecies worlds – their destruction and their survival – in ways that exceed the secular humanist limitations of the academy?” (2021, 3). Fernando writes against the secularist framework that is so often found in multispecies and Anthropocene works, arguing that to fully undo the distinction between Nature and Culture, we must also attend to the domain of the Supernatural. This is particularly

important in discussions of climate change, since so many of the communities most affected do not live within secular worlds, nor do they abide by secular categories. I build on Fernando's non-secular approach to multispecies frameworks by looping in the geological and the material, entities which also straddle and confound the divide between the secular and nonsecular by blurring the line between material and immaterial.

Moments of material engagement, of touching and picking up and walking, are perhaps where this dissertation both draws together and departs from notions of liveliness that draw on ensoulment (as in the work of animists and New Animists) and the agency of relational networks. The geological forms described in this dissertation are involved in relational networks, many of them are assemblages that include spirits. While these immaterial spirits certainly appear on the Mongolian landscape and are closely bound up with geological liveliness, for my interlocutors in Mongolia's east, they are not the primary thing that gives these non-living forms their liveliness. Rather, it is the materiality of the practices between humans and geological forms that give these beings their animacy. While the Mongolian context has some commonalities with Marisol de la Cadena's (2015) *Andean Earth Beings*, in this case the mountains are as material as they are immaterial, and one cannot be separated from another. This is where my work builds on and departs from animated landscapes and agentic networks, in that perceiving this liveliness is neither a question of material nor immateriality, but an inextricable mixture of both.

Poetry as Object and Method

The problem of how to write about the geosocial is a central concern among geological anthropologists. Povinelli puts forward geontology as highlighting “the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power [the enclosure of existence into only the realm of entities that are bestowed with life] long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.” (2015, 5). Hugh Raffles uses the geological unconformity to represent moments in which things don’t make sense: the hanging temporality immediately following an earthquake, for example, or the loss of a memory (2020, 245). Marisol de la Cadena calls the relationship between the practice communities of Earth Beings and lettered archives “incommensurable” (2015, 122). My work came upon a similar problem—how does one represent what might be unrepresentable, at least on the pages of a dissertation? I argue that poetry is an epistemological tool for settling ontological incongruities. Poetry’s power resides in its ability to subvert the expectations of language as having a one-to-one representational relationship with a singular reality. Knowledge barred from the space of secular modernity can be let in the side door by a poem.

Experimental literary ethnography has been central to cultural anthropology since Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). Despite Hurston’s genre experimentation having deep roots in the discipline, prose and "creative non-fiction" has dominated, with ethnographic biographies, memoirs, novels, and other pastiche-like forms (e.g., Alexievitch, 2006; Ghosh 2008; 2011; 2018; 2019; Jackson 2015; Narayan 1999;

2012; 2018). Poetry remains mostly in the field, and only recently has it begun to be taken up more seriously in the practice of writing ethnography itself (Rosaldo 2003; Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; Culhane and Elliot 2016; Rosaldo et al. 2018). Very recently, ethnographic poetry has entered mainstream anthropology, particularly in “sci-comm” publications that are intended to reach a broader audience (Weeber 2020). These works disrupt familiarities (Hagman and Sacco 2017), engage with the world in a synesthetic and slowed-down way (Golomski 2019), deeply articulate the links between personal and the political (Lichenstein 2018), and expand poetry itself through the process of fieldwork (Zani et al 2019).

There is also a significant percentage of this dissertation that undertakes close-reading analysis of poetic works on the page. These techniques draw partially on the pre-Writing Culture lens on literature in ethnography that is primarily concerned with literary and ethnographic understandings of poetics as they existed in the context of the fieldwork site (Pandolfo 1997; Abu-Lughod 2008; Caton 2010). This “ethnopoetic” (cf. Hymes 2003; Rothenberg and Rothenberg 2016; Tedlock 2006) approach looks at poetics as more than just the verbal elements of the text, but the sociocultural and historical context in which it was made. By focusing on paralinguistic features and broad patterns of communication, action, and practice such as the communicative event, the role of audience and context, multiple voices and heteroglossia, dialogic meaning, politics and political histories, and affect, one can challenge the concept of “text” as bounded by a unit of analysis. Instead, this approach assumes that each text, even if it is print-based, is socially, historically, and

politically situated. Furthermore, performance features should also be assumed to be part of the poetic analysis of a text (Sherzer 1990) and include the consideration of sonic and visual elements of poetic performance (music, dance, gesture, etc.)

Poetic analysis covers both the general principles of poetic formulation, and the specific stylistic and structural analysis of particular poetic works and genres. These methods of inquiry have been useful for anthropologists who encounter examples of oral and literary art in their fieldwork. They are also important for scholars with a general interest in issues of aesthetics, form, and verbal art. This dissertation hopes to apply modalities of literary analysis with the same rigor as they would be applied in humanities disciplines like literary criticism and poetic analysis, thereby going beyond the “ethnopoetic” frame that tends to borrow from these modalities and treat these poetic texts as pieces of salvageable “culture” rather than living “art” (Moore 2009; 2011) only lightly.

In *Writing Culture*, Jim Clifford and George Marcus (1986) argue that we should look at ethnographies as “persuasive fictions,” employing narratological analysis of the voices in ethnographic texts (of the ethnographer and interlocutors) in order to critically assess the implicit claims of ethnographic authority, as well as the political and historical context in which they were formulated. In an essay from the same volume, Clifford Geertz agrees that ethnographic writing has always been writerly, pointing to the distinct authorial signatures that can be found in the prose style of many works of classic anthropology. This, he argued, is evidence that despite the aspiration that early ethnographies should present an objective or detached view

of the world, they "do not come from nowhere" but in fact are highly situated documents. Geertz also suggests that attempting to claim truth in the first place constitutes a particular narrative technique: a rhetoric which aimed to occlude links between the knowledge they produced, the representations they put forth, the interests they served, and the relations of power they embodied. This dissertation is in partial alignment with the *Writing Culture* project, and toward the broader project of improving the quality of anthropological writing as a whole by examining the "writing of social reality" as its own creative process (Hymes 1973; Rappaport 1994). In addition, this dissertation assumes that a one-to-one relationship between "reality" and the representational text of ethnography would be not only problematic but also dull. Assuming perfect representation doesn't consider the epistemic gap caused by the representational inadequacy of language, particularly in the historical context of colonialism and globalization and the asymmetrical power relations contained within (Asad 1986; Chakrabarty 2009).

This dissertation takes up multiple inadequate solutions to this problem: first, I follow Chakrabarty's provocation to allow the uncanny to filter into this work (2001) through moments that disrupt the secular rationalist frame in which the social science dissertation is necessarily placed. This dissertation contains moments where the Rational Western body of reality is punctured by ghosts, energies, living rocks, angry mountains, and so on. This mode is also used to trouble the secularist frame that is often found around works in more-than-human literature (Fernando forthcoming). Another incomplete solution is the utilization of pastiche and disjunctive

representation in this dissertation through the insertion of short poetic epigraphs at the start of each chapter. These moments reference the theoretical core of each chapter in an indirect and non-representative way. While the academic dissertation as a genre puts certain firm limits on experimentation, I have used these small moments to gesture at scholarly excess. This follows the suggestions of Kamela Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), which argued that ethnography should be both self-critical and attempt to convey perspectival plurality rather than unilateral authority of the researcher. In these moments, the language of analysis temporarily shifts away from traditional anthropological terms and towards more "disjunctive" post-modern genres like pastiche or *mélange*.

There is also the question of how to measure truth in ethnography. Some have argued that this debate is the result of "disingenuous literary techniques and positivist prose" (Clifford and Marcus 1986), while others acknowledge that other methods are specifically intended to unsettle ideas of authenticity and ethnographic authority to make a larger point (Hurstun 1935; Price 1983; Devi 2010). One strategy is to tell impossible stories, especially in the wake of epistemic violence or annihilation, using what Donna Haraway calls "speculative fabulation" (2011), Sadiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation" (2008), or Lisa Lowe calls "what could have been" (2015). These fictions still maintain what Mieke Bal calls the "fabula"—a series of related events caused or experienced by an agent (Bal and Boheemen 2003, 7). This critical blending of fact and fiction in representations of history and sociality, it should also be noted, has been critical to Mongolian literature and historiography since the *Secret*

History of the Mongols. The technique of using poetic interludes to open the mind to other perspectives has roots in *Secret History* that continue into the present, particularly the prose works of Dariganga writer G. Mend-Ooyo (2015). His work uses poetic interludes to serve as destabilizing moments in the prose when a perspective that has been rooted in one particular historical “reality” is dislodged or “enchanted” (Wickham-Smith 2008, 175) and then reoriented and restabilized in the following section of prose. The epigraphs in the dissertation employ a similar method.

Finally, I draw on Tim Ingold’s argument that creativity “lies not in people’s heads, but in their attending upon a world in formation...this kind of creativity [is] undergone rather than done... (2014).” Like with Bird-David’s interlocutors, animated liveliness is created through interaction with others in the world, through mutual responsiveness, a knowledge made from and through relation and relatedness. I draw on Ingold and Bird-David by arguing that aesthetics and poiesis can go beyond representationalism. Through a recursive engagement with the work of Dariganga poets, I show how they both create and draw on the liveliness of the geological environment around them.

Writing Across Difference

In the poem “*Chuluud*,” (“Stones”) Dariganga poet Dashbalbar revisits a hill where he played as a child, and looks at the pebbles he once used as playthings:

When I get off the horse, I stroke the blue, blue stones and sigh. Some stones are light blue, some are white like birds, of course they remind me of swans.

Like I stroke my son's head, I keep stroking these stones. In my youth I tanned leather on these stones, and I really made these poor stones suffer. If stones hurt, I pity them. Even if I passed the whole day whipping them with my wet leather strap, the stones never cries out.

What is human pity for a silent stone if not an attempt to relate across radical difference? Scholars of the ontological turn have approached the question of lively non-life from the side of Nature. They argue against the prior anthropological assumption of a single Nature distinct from a diversity of cultures. This, they argue, reifies the nature/culture binary and all the attendant binaries that come along with it. Instead, they suggest that we think of Nature as multiple as well. Viveiros de Castro's "multi-naturalism" suggests that while all subjects share a point of view, they do not necessarily share a body (2014). In the Amazonian context, he states, bodies can be swapped as easily, as Spanish minds can be changed, or souls can be converted. He calls this "natural relativism" (2011).

Marilyn Strathern goes into text itself by highlighting that ethnography relies on comparison and relativism, and therefore has the potential to be rendered obsolete in the field (1980). She points out that for her interlocutors, the Hagens of Papua New Guinea, the notion of matter as a constant and culture as an elaboration on that constant does not exist. Furthermore, making that assertion in the first place relies on a concept of culture that can be relative to other cultures and distinct from nature. The argument undoes itself by the virtue of anthropological analysis (1980). Addressing potential pitfalls like this, Bruno Latour argued that social scientists should not start at a point of assumed knowledge about what constitutes big frameworks like "society"

and “nature” (1993; 2005). Rather, these frameworks should be seen as outcomes derived from specific interactions between people and objects. This then avoids the “purification” of epistemology from ontology resulting from the distillations of natural objects out of social ones.

One might argue then that the ontological turn is simply a methodological imperative that we attend to empirical data first and build our conceptual schemes outwards. This is also the goal of the “recursive turn” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), which encourages ethnographers to adjust or create conceptual frames to accommodate confounding phenomena. Descola’s approach to ontology somewhat adheres to this principle, as his work involves the reconfiguration and the building of new schema in his field site (2013).

Martin Holbraad’s work in Cuba (2009) with diviners who insist they are incapable of error requires the use of recursivity. Since the very nature of representation contains the possibility of falsehood, Holbraad had to adjust his framework to accommodate the diviners’ claims—in what framework could they be made true? Instead of representation, he suggests that truth here is about transformation (“infinition” rather than “definition”), meaning the statement “you are bewitched” brings “you” and “bewitched” together so that the meaning of both words is altered. Truth in this case produces truth, on the scale of the book itself as well as the analysis. Holbraad is altering the meaning of truth for the reader, making the manner of explanation the same as the thing he is explaining.

I also consider critiques of the ontological turn that worry such an emphasis on difference draws boundaries around “western” understandings in opposition to “others”—reifying a “west vs. the rest” orientation. Works (such as this dissertation) that attempt to push back on the hegemony of enlightenment epistemologies would do well to remember that centuries of colonialism and globalization have most likely already familiarized most people with its notions. The ideas of the west are news to nobody. Furthermore, European philosophical thought has its own tradition of integrating matter with ideas that goes back to Spinoza. Most importantly, disagreement exists, as does doubt. As David Graeber pointed out in *Cuba*, there are also many people who think oracles are capable of error, and some of them are oracles themselves (2015).

Thus, I have tried to approach empirical data through channels of connection that I have access to, and which doesn’t demand rigid definitions. I have also tried to adhere as closely to the experiences of individuals as possible, paying attention to doubt, disagreement, ambivalence, and other complex emotional registers expressed by my interlocutors. Regarding discussions of ambivalence in human/non-human relations: there is a tendency, especially in multispecies literature, to look at relations of care as necessarily non-violent—especially in non-Western contexts. While it is important to distinguish the relationally-based systems of care that take place in these contexts from the global and historical violences of colonization and climate change, there is sometimes an affective flattening at work that suggests relations of care are always positive or devoid of harm. This belies the fact of the complexity of

human/non-human (and human/human) relations in these contexts that are often shot through with ambivalence, struggle, conflict and harm. Works in multispecies ethnography (Govindarajan 2018) and on spirit worlds (Gustafsson 2010) have been discussion the integration of violence and care, violence as care, and the intimacy of violence in non-western contexts.

In Mongolia, I follow the work of Manduhai Buyandelger in looking at how violence, harm, and refusal take place in relations between humans and non-living kin. Drawing on the context of Buyandelger's discussions of the violences in the overlap between the spirit and human worlds (2013; 2019), I bring this discussion into the realm of human/environment relations, specifically human relations with lively geological forms. I also follow Natasha Fijn's work on herders and their herds (2011) in considering the Mongolian domestic sphere to be filled with more-than-human creatures and entities, and that acts of care in the domestic sphere can often include acts of violence.

While localized or Indigenous modes of care may reject the violences of colonialism or capital, they are still emotionally and affectively complex, and often ambivalent. When describing their relations with mountains, stones, cliffs, and even mined metals, my interlocutors use emotionally complicated and seemingly

contradictory terms like “coercing,”⁹ compelling¹⁰ “magnetic,¹¹” and “charismatic¹²”. The intimate kin relations that people have with landscape are not always positive, as the domestic sphere is often a space of violence as well as love. This is important to attend to, especially when discussing the role of humans in global climate change.

Research Context

Mongolia is a nation of about 3.2 million people spread over a swath of land equivalent in area to the southwestern United States from California to Texas. The country is divided up into 21 *aimag* (provinces), and the eastern region covers the provinces of Dornogovi, Sükhbaatar, Dornod, and sometimes Khentii. The eastern region is made up of Gobi desert to the south, grassland steppe to the north. To the east is the border with China, specifically the Inner Mongolian Autonomous region. Though this dissertation was multi-sited, the bulk of my fieldwork took place in Sükhbaatar, specifically in the province capital of Baruun-Urt, and in the *sum* town center of Dariganga county in the Dariganga cultural region. The Dariganga region is

⁹ To describe the *Bichgiin Shakhaa*, a basalt stone eruption that forms an escarpment on the Dariganga steppe against which hunters used to drive herds of gazelles in order to trap them in order to kill them with greater ease. It is also the site where, according to legend, a group of kidnapped brides leapt to their death, turning to human-shaped stones that still dot the valley. This place name is also sometimes translated into English as the “Forcing Cliffs.”

¹⁰ *Shakhaj sürdüülekh*, “to coerce” or “to put pressure on.” This term was used in terms of compelling geological forms as well as human relations. My interlocutors often used it to describe overbearing parents who pushed high academic performance on their children, or to refer to peer pressure.

¹¹ *Soronzon* or *soronzon khüich*. My English-speaking interlocutors also used the English word “magnetic”

¹² Some of my English-speaking interlocutors translated *soronzon* (magnetic) as “charismatic” when explaining that they were talking about something beyond electromagnetic force. When describing a force in the landscape whether physical or affective, they usually used *soronzon khüich*

Gobi Desert, its climate is markedly different, and the high acidity of its volcanic soil nurtures an unusually fertile grassland that feeds the herds of horses that make up one of Mongolia's fastest racing populations. One of the more striking attributes of the Dariganga sensorium is what contemporary Dariganga poet Ochirbatyn Dashbalbar calls “[the] sharp green juices...the stinging scent of the steppe...” (Dashbalbar 2020). This scent is the mingled herbaceous output of the grassland itself—made up of a host of different botanical characters:¹⁴ grasses, alliums, wormwood, mug wort, and so on.

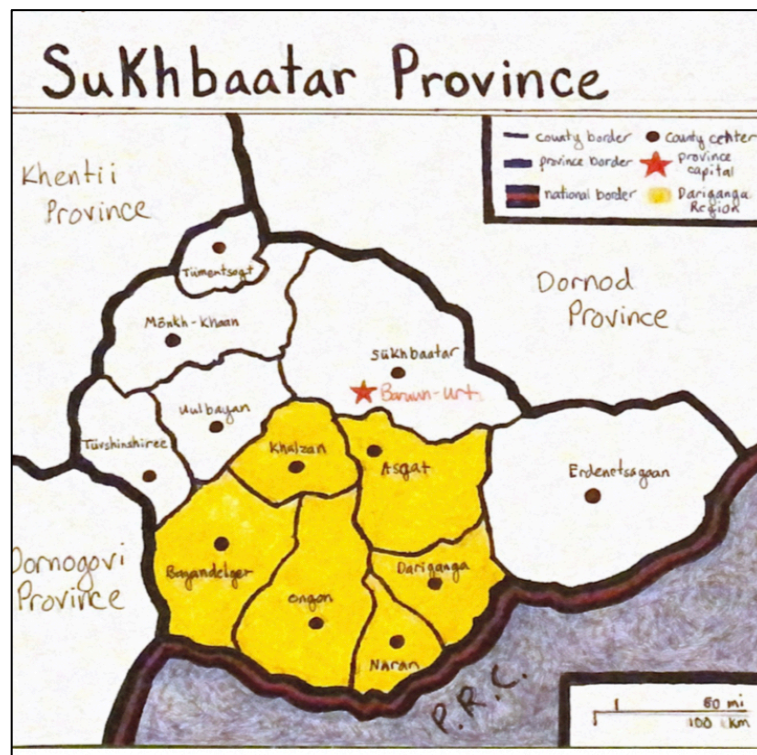


Fig. 0.6: Map of Sukhbaatar Province
(Illustration by Jessica Madison Piskatá)

¹⁴ *Allium mongolicum*, *allium polyrhizum*, *cleistogenese songoricum*, *stipa mongolorum*, *artemisia maritima*, *artemisia argyi*, and *artemisia marcocephala*, are the most commonly seen forage vegetation around the Dariganga area. There are of course many other plants.

The Dariganga area is more than just a geological region however—it has been formed over centuries of subtle political machinations that are likewise tied to its lush and volcanic character. Dariganga was established as the grazing land of the Manchu Qing imperial stud in 1697 by Emperor Kangxi. Until the early 20th century, Dariganga operated under the Inner Mongolian Chakhar banner, and petitioned to join the newly sovereign Mongolian State in 1912, shortly after the 1911 restoration of Mongolian independence from China. Thus, began a period of instability as the new Qing emperor repeatedly sent emissaries to recover the territory to no success until a task force of Soviet troops and Mongolian partisans drove the Qing out of Dariganga and a new revolutionary regime was established in 1924 under an elected banner¹⁵ (Atwood 2004). Dariganga became part of Sükhbaatar province in 1941, the jurisdiction it remains in today. Dariganga is also the ancestral homeland of the Dariganga *yastan* (sub-ethnic group), who were recognized as distinct from the Khalkh ethnic majority in the 1956 census, thus sparing them brunt of the violent purges of Mongolia’s ethnic minorities that occurred in the late 1930’s.

¹⁵ The system of autonomous banners is a basic sociopolitical unit that was in operation under the Qing dynasty (1636-1912). Each banner was then divided into sums, or units of about 150 households. Each banner represented a community which oriented itself around collective festivals such as *ovoo* worship and *naadam* games. In 1931 the banner system was transformed into a system of *aimag* (provinces) and *sum* (districts), the borders of which are more or less in operation today (Atwood 2004, 30-32).



*Fig. 0.7: Horse outside Dariganga Democratic Party headquarters
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 6th, 2015)*

The Dariganga volcanic field is comprised of around 200 pyroclastic lava and cinder cones ranging from 25-300 meters in height that have erupted from parallel fissures that trend Northeast. Formed in the Pleistocene and Holocene ages, they range in level of erosion with some of them completely preserved. The southern part of the field, which is contiguous with the Doloon Nuur (Seven Lakes) volcanic field across the border in China, is rich with ultramafic xenoliths (Devyatkin and Smelov 1979; Whitford-Stark 1987). The volcanic rocks in Dariganga, which consist of basaltic, tachybasaltic, and foiditic rocks, tend to be soda-rich, while the stones in northern and central Mongolia are rich in potassium. There has been little geologic

study of the specific region, and the last eruption is unknown. Locals, when asked, put the volcanoes eruptions in the “ancient” category, and refer to them in Mongolian as “slumbering.” Most of the mountains are entirely covered in grass, though the taller ones such as Altan Ovoo, Shiliin Bogd, and Tsagaan Ovoo have rocky summits.

The acidity of the volcanic soil lends a lush environment to various grasses and low-lying plant life—which itself supports the life of domestic animals and others such as mute swans, pit vipers, *argali* mountain sheep, black-tail antelope, Mongolian toads, marmots¹⁶, steppe wolves, falcon, silver mountain voles, seagulls and a single Mongolian wild ass who for many years was encouraged to spend time with domestic racehorses in order to keep them somewhat wild.

Because of its iconic geological landmarks and status as the home territory of the sub-ethnic minority, Dariganga is considered a cultural heritage region. In 2015, the government of Sükhbaatar put out a coffee table book entitled “Colors of the Dariganga Area” in order to celebrate the region and bring in domestic tourists. Governor Batsuuri writes: “Dariganga is the cradle of ancient people” (Batsuuri 2015, 3) and there is indeed archaeological evidence that people have been living in the Dariganga area since the Stone Age, most famously the “royal family” and “stone

¹⁶ 9-12 marmots were living around Altan Ovoo at the time of writing. Though marmots are endangered, and hunting them is technically illegal, some hunters still kill them for food and medicine. The Dariganga group is protected by virtue of living on the grounds of the worshiped mountain. “Those fat lucky bastards are so pleased with themselves” my neighbor once told me in regard to these animals and their extra protected status.

men” statues on the outskirts of town that are dated by local archaeologists to be from the 8th and 9th centuries.



*Fig. 0.8: Young boy rides a horse during a summer rainstorm.
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 17th, 2012)*

In the forward, the book’s photographer writes:

There is a beautiful area named Dariganga in the very southeastern part of Mongolia. It is the part that welcomes the sun first in the country and is abundant in historical facts...In the past, the people who lived in the vicinity of Dari Ovoo and Ganga Lake belonged to the Dariganga Khoshuu (a former administrative unit) that is a large area that consists of territory of nowadays Dariganga, Naran, Ongon, Bayandelger, Khalzan, and Asgat counties of Sūkhbaatar Aimag. Come to Dariganga if you want to feel the wonders of welcoming the sunrise on top of state-worshiped Golden Dari Ovoo or legendary Shiliin Bogd mountain; gallop or drive at full speed in the wide steppe where white gazelles run; take pleasure from seeing the whooper swan,

pride of the local people; and visit Ganga, Duut, and Erdene mountain lakes where these swans gather; converse with stone man statues about history; visit the steppe cave and admire the masterworks of Dariganga blacksmiths; and experience the Dariganga area, cradle of fast horses. (Amaraa 2015, 5)

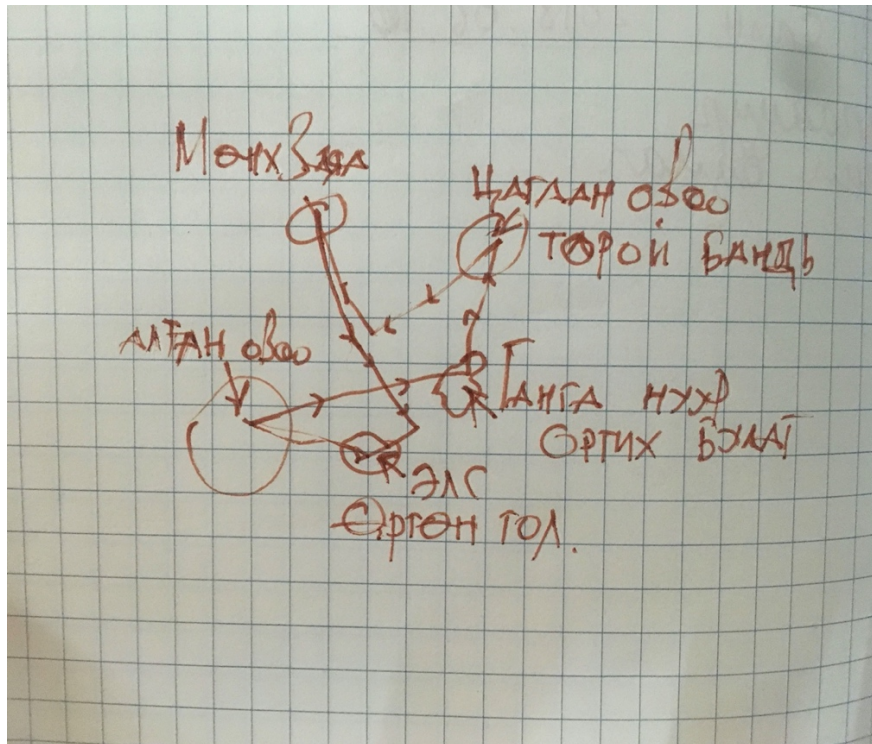


Fig. 0.9: Map of Dariganga with vectors illustrating preferred routes (Illustration by D. Gantulga)¹⁷

Methods

¹⁷ Vectors illustrate preferred routes, while circles and shapes illustrate significant landmarks.

Clockwise from lower left: Altan Ovoo, Mönkhzaya (Mönkhzaya’s ger), Tsagaan Ovoo/Toroï Bandi (Statue of hero Toroï Bandi atop Tsagaan Ovoo hill), Ganga Nuur/Orgikh Bulag (Ganga Lake/Orgil Spring), Els/Örgön Gol (Sand dunes, Örgön River).

A note on traditional Mongolian maps: they are oriented so that the South is at the top of the paper and north is at the bottom, as if one was standing in a ger and looking up out the front door. Similarly, when giving directions in the city, the “right hand side” (*baruun gar*) is translated as “west hand” and the “left hand side” (*zuun gar*) is translated as “east hand.” This does not extend to modern topographical maps that are found in classrooms or on television, in which north is the top of the paper and south is the bottom.

This dissertation draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in eastern Mongolia and Ulaanbaatar. My research focused on the social relationships between humans and geological landscapes, with a particular emphasis on the affective dimensions of said relationships. This research also puts particular focus on how these relationships are enacted, understood, and communicated, and takes poetry and creative practice to be a specifically rich field of inquiry.

I draw on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, collaborative translation, and auto-ethnographic methods in the eastern provinces of Sükhbaatar, Dornogovi, and Dornod; the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, and “second city” of Erdenet. Much of my research was done with rural educators of literature and poetry and in bookstores, art galleries, schools, and libraries. However, as mentioned earlier in the introduction poetry is not exclusively contained in institutions, so I also worked extensively with herders, mining engineers, pilgrims, drivers, and other lay poets and poetry enthusiasts.

Following the ethical agreement under which I conducted this research, I will refer to my interlocutors using pseudonyms unless I was specifically requested to use their real names. As I drew greatly on the scholarship and intellectual labor of professional poets, educators, and intellectuals, I credit them by name for their intellectual contributions. Though little of my research posed any significant risk to my interlocutors, some of the communities I work in are extremely small, social reputations are highly delicate, and even with pseudonyms, people can be easily recognized through context. For this reason, with the exception of people who

explicitly asked to be named, I have occasionally given pseudonyms, changed significant identifying details, and/or created composite characters to protect my interlocutors' privacy.

In keeping with my research's focus on poetry, I used ethnopoetic methods and methods of literary interpretation as well. Drawing on literature that addresses the research potential of poetry and translation, I worked with my former coworkers and teachers of literature on collaborative translations of local poetry. Approaching through poetry opened a door in ways that I didn't expect. In my experience, telling people in the countryside that my primary interest was poetry tended to elicit a better reaction and led to more relevant data than telling them I was an anthropologist, which carried with it the expectation that my interests were aligned with that of 20th century Russian ethnologists, which usually led to a tour of the province ethnographic museum to look at traditional costumes. Additionally, I've found that in Mongolia (and elsewhere) poetry and creative collaboration opens a door for intellectual play and creative thinking that people may not feel comfortable engaging with in standard interview contexts.

Works in English on the subject of Mongolian literature are rare; and ethnographic explorations of Mongolian literary culture are even rarer. One such work is Simon Wickham-Smith's dissertation on G. Mend-Ooyo's novel *Altan Owoo*¹⁸. In his introduction, he attributes a lack of secondary sources on Mongolian

¹⁸ I owe a great deal of my interest in Mongolian, specifically Dariganga, poetry to Wickham Smith's translations, which first appeared in Best American Poetry blog in 2009. Wickham-Smith's translations

literature to there being “...precious little interest among the Mongol reading public for literary theory, literary history and genuine literary comparative studies” (2008, 2). Instead, he says, the writers themselves will gather in bars, at readings, or in government offices, “passing around copious amounts of boiled meat and alcohol and reciting and discussing both their own poetry and that of their colleagues” (2). These symposia, he suggests, mirror the “traditional way of poetry [and is] clearly how nomadic poets would have learnt, honed, and developed their craft” (2). This, he suggests, is in sharp contrast to the post-enlightenment poet “starving alone in his garret” (2).

During my fieldwork, I was never included in these elite masculine symposia, though the general tenor of such a gathering rings true to my experience in other spaces. Additionally, the poetry and literature section of the bookstores in Ulaanbaatar and elsewhere are indeed much more robust than the criticism section. Perhaps this is a result of literary criticism only being professionalized as a genre separate from creative writing in the mid-20th century (Bawden 2003). However, in my years studying Mongolian poetry, both separate from and part of my fieldwork research, I found that a public lack of interest in formal literary criticism as a genre did not also mean a lack of interest in criticizing literature. Furthermore, I found it quite easy to find interlocutors with verve for poetry, whether as a poet, performer, or enthusiast.

are one of the first examples of Mongolian poetry translated into English directed at an audience outside Mongolian area studies. While the poems presented in the text are my own translations, largely for the reason of translation being one of my primary ethnographic methods, I still use his translations as an invaluable resource, particularly of the novel-length pieces that would take much longer than the time it takes to write a dissertation to translate.

While my fieldwork was largely centered in Dariganga; a result of the strong social networks I had built in Sükhbaatar Province during my time working with the Peace Corps, I also spent time in Sükhbaatar's neighbor provinces to the north and south: Dornod (Eastern) province and Dornogovi (East Gobi) province, respectively. As necessary, I also spent a good deal of time in Ulaanbaatar, especially when participating in the literary cultures that has mostly moved from Sükhbaatar to the capital. Though the *Gal* group is often seen as having origination in Dariganga, it was formed in the universities and apartments of Ulaanbaatar, and so a great deal of my study also took place in the capital city. This is to say, other than a focus on Dariganga and the necessity of UB, I did not design my fieldwork research to be rooted in place in a pre-determined site of group of sites because of the mobility necessitated by life in the countryside.

As will become clear in Chapter 2, a great deal of ethnography happened on the road. Though geological formations are very much emplaced, their living relations, both human and non-human, are highly mobile. My fieldwork was both multi-sited and "strategically single-sited" (Marcus 1995) in that, while I found myself physically moving to different places across eastern Mongolia, I still remained entangled in the social relations I had formed during my two years in Sükhbaatar. My first significant relationship with a geological form in Mongolia was with Altan Owoo, and my two dearest friendships in Sükhbaatar were likewise forged on a visit to this mountain. Thus, I accepted any invitation I got to travel to different geological sites whenever I was invited. Visits to places of lively geological significance during

my fieldwork strengthened my relationships not only with the geological landscape but with my fellow travelers.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation begins and ends with the mountain Altan Ovoo, echoing the path of the circumambulations I took while visiting a worshiped mountain or other significant geological form with which humans negotiate their relations with landscape. It will begin by exploring the ways in which people have intimate relations with geological forms that transcend the boundaries of religion and secularism, life and lively non-life. Perhaps more importantly, illustrate a relationship with the materiality of stone in which immaterial qualities are inseparable from the form itself. Next, it draws on this intimacy to show how material interactions between humans and stone imbue the non-living landscape with liveliness. This liveliness demonstrates that accreted human relations with the mineral landscape can transform the spacetime of physical place and human life. Then, I explore how resonances between human and mineral bodies characterize one particular manifestation of liveliness present in the geological landscape: in the transfer of vitality. Finally, it concludes with an exploration about how humans contribute and create to this liveliness in more-than-material ways by exploring the poetic genres that both communicate this state of being and create it.

Chapter 1: *Takhilga* begins at the National Ceremony of Sacrifice to the Worshiped Mountain Altan Ovoo held in Dariganga *sum* center in August of 2018.

This chapter takes this event as a centerpiece for unpacking the cyclical and kin-like relations between human beings and the mountain. The first part of the chapter looks at the *Takhilga* as an attempt by the Mongolian state to appropriate intimate relations between people and the mountain, and the ways in which such an attempt necessarily fails. It argues that while formal *takhilga* ceremonies engage primarily with Buddhist deities (on the national scale) or landscape *savdag/tenger* (on the local scale), in Dariganga these relations are primarily taking place between people and a material mountain. The second part of the chapter explores an emergent affect of anxiety that erupted in 2018 concurrent with discourses of climate change and political corruption. This chapter illustrates how stone is lively in its kin-like interactions with humans, which echo domestic relations in that they are predicated on both love and violence.

Chapter 2: *Ovoolokh* looks at how place and landscape are created via material interactions between humans and specific geological forms. This chapter starts off with several cases of human interactions with *ovoo*, piles of stone that house spirits of the land. Because of the accruing nature of the *ovoo*, these encounters transform both the landscape and the lives of the people involved. I then shift the focus to Erdenet, a mining city, to explore the connection between those sacred heaps and mine tailings. This chapter illustrates how the liveliness of stone is not only a matter of occupation by spirits, but rather something intrinsic to the material interactions between humans and minerals.

Chapter 3: *Energi* is about the indefinable flows between human and geological bodies. I examine the concept of *energi*, a distinctly post-Socialist, nonsecular, and more-than-religious energy epistemology by following a pilgrimage to the Shambala Energi Center in the eastern Gobi. This chapter looks at how stone can act as healer, revitalizing bodies that have been exhausted by labor in neoliberal Ulaanbaatar. It argues that this liveliness pre-exists capitalism in the form of a myriad of Indigenous landscape energies and entities, and so even as it has been appropriated in the service of capital, it always remains in excess. This chapter also introduces the idea of poetic performance as a way of linking the human body to the mineral body, enlivening the geological landscape over time and drawing vitality from past accretion of that liveliness.

Chapter 4: *Süld* begins with a broad survey on Mongolian literary genres and history up to the present. First, an interview with a Dariganga poet and a “poetry reader” introduces the idea that Dariganga poetry is the result of collaboration between geological and human “genius,” and that poems are the vehicle through which geological genius is translated into human language. Just like *Gal*, the Dariganga *nutag* itself is a poetry collective in which authorship is shared, and poems are written by a more-than-human collective in which the *genius loci* (*süld*) of geological entities is channeled through the literary talent of a human poet. Then, a close read of praise poem *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* will demonstrate how poems can act as enchanting events in which poets and performers translate the poetic intention of geological forms, thereby strengthening its compelling relational vectors with human

performers and audiences. These forms create a map of the uncanny topologies of Dariganga spacetime, in which unmoving geological forms transcend the physical boundaries of the landscape.

Chapter 5: *Duu* draws on the Mongolian poetic form of the Long-Song in order to show how poetry creates and is created by the geosocial landscape. First, it will examine the Dariganga Long-Song *Jaakhan Sharga* to explore the genre of Long-Song as a map of the Dariganga social homeland and a carrier of knowledge about the geological terrain. The kaleidoscopic nature of the form, which contains the song itself, the legend of the song, and the story of its transformation in popular culture, shows that just as multiple forms can exist simultaneously within one song, so can multiple landscapes exist within a single physical space. Then, it draws on interviews with artists and archivists in Dariganga to explore the Long-Song *Toroi Bandi*, arguing that the Long-Song is a genre of poetry that mimics the geological terrain, materially shapes it, and writes itself into the deep ecology of the Dariganga *nutag* via the imaginations of its human inhabitants.

Each of these chapters illustrates an instance in which human and mineral worlds overlap to create liveliness in geological non-life. Furthermore, it shows how these lively relations require alternate forms of representation that exceed the capacities of academic social science discourse and secular modern discourse in general. Though the examination of poetry, poetic genres, poetic performance, and textual exegesis, I hope to show not only how my interlocutors conceive of their

relations with geological forms, but how poetic language itself can allow these relations to be and become lively.



*Fig. 0.10: Selections from two poems by G. Mend-Ooyo and O. Dashbalbar carved into stone
Baruun-Urt, Sükhbaatar Province
(photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, October 22nd, 2017)*

Chapter 1: *Takhilga*

*For thousands of years Altan Ovoo has been shown to us,
a golden wheel of fearless power.*

*To make these offerings fits this composition of mine.
Moving my Altan Ovoo at the heart of the world!*

*On the peaceful earth, your body is eternal!
May the lives of the ever pious nobles be eternal!*

*How can I look upon my thousands of contemporaries?
How can I meanwhile oppress their suffering?
I scatter the milk of blessing on the faithful,
and offering of genius, my towering Altan Ovoo!*

-G. Mend-Ooyo, "A Song of Offering to Altan Ovoo"

In late July of 2018, on the grassland steppe of Mongolia near the southeastern border with China, the country of Dariganga played host to the *Töriin Takhilga*¹⁹ (State Ceremony of Offering/Sacrifice²⁰) to the *Töriin Takhilgatai Uul*²¹ (State-worshiped Mountain) Altan Dari Ovoo.²² Since 2004, the State Takhilga had been held in the Dariganga *sum* center every four years, but this year was an exception. For reasons that still remain unclear, the ceremony scheduled for 2017 was pushed back one year, and by the time the usual preparations had finally commenced, speculation and suspicion had spread all throughout the province. As in years

¹⁹ In this chapter, I use the term *takhilga* to refer both to the National Ceremony and as a general term for other ceremonies like it.

²⁰ The word *Takhilga* means offering, sacrifice, and worship, or really a combination of the three, because to offer a sacrifice is to worship.

²¹ In some promotional materials, this event is referred to as a *tailga takhilga*, or *tailga*, a word which also means "offering or sacrifice."

²² As stated in the Introduction, here "ovoo" refers to both the mountain itself and the *ovoo* structure at its summit. The *ovoo* is accompanied by a *mandal* structure, topped with a golden *ganjir* (spire), from which the mountain is rumored to have received its name.

previous, the tiny town of 2,000 at the foot of the extinct volcano was undergoing a massive overhaul. As soon as winter began to ease, bulldozers and steam rollers roared into town, smoothing out the unpaved roads for the first time in five years. The two big projects in 2018 were i) to pave the short stretch of road that led from the entrance to town to the permanent stage at the foot of the mountain,²³ and ii) to place anti-littering signs at all major intersections. These, like other cosmetic developments build in past *takhilga* years, were organized by a “non-governmental committee” in the province capital of Baruun-Urt, and funded largely by Tsairt LLC, the owners of Tömörtiin Ovoo zinc mine 180 km up the road.

Otherwise, the town was not terribly different from when I first arrived in 2011: two parallel main streets running east to west, with a primary school, the Culture Center, a Khan Bank, a few dry goods shops, a restaurant for dumplings, a restaurant for noodles, a karaoke bar, a temple, and a herder’s supply store. A few brick houses had gone up in the intervening years as people moved in from the countryside, but *ger* still outnumbered them.

While the Dariganga region, which encompasses about half the area of Sükhbaatar Province, has roots in the Qing era, the town that currently serves as the center of the *sum* district was constructed in the socialist era, when it was called Altan Ovoo Negdel. Collectivization campaigns in the 1950’s parceled the nation’s livestock into collective jurisdictions called *negdel* (collective, union) and the *negdel*

²³ This eyesore, along with a sprawling area of multicolored paving stones, was constructed shortly after I left Mongolia in 2013.

center was constructed right up against south side of Altan Ovoo,²⁴ echoing the spatial arrangement of a Mongolian *ger* in which the family altar, often containing a stone taken with permission from the nearby mountain, is placed at the north side of the domicile, across from the south-facing entrance.

During the three collective years I spent in Dariganga and Sükhbaatar Province, the significance of this placement became increasingly apparent to me as part of the strategy of the collectivization project. The *negdel* founders were echoing trends in Soviet architecture that attempted to create collectivity by moving private domestic spaces (such as the apartment kitchen) into shared communal ones (Humphrey 2005). By scaling up the *ger* and replacing the altar stone from Altan Ovoo with Altan Ovoo itself, they transformed the *negdel*, and later the *sum* district center, into a collective domestic space shared with the mountain. If Altan Ovoo is a microcosm of the universe, as it is described by G. Mend-Ooyo (1993), then it can also be a macrocosm of the domestic space of the *ger*. I approach the rest of this chapter from the orientation that domestic relations can scale up and down beyond the confines of the actual domicile, even on the scale of the nation and the planet.

Oftentimes this scaling is not seamless, and even sometimes fails. These domestic

²⁴ I use the term “worshiped mountain” rather than the commonly used “sacred mountain” here for a number of reasons: first, I feel it to be a better translation of the Mongolian word *takhilgatai*. Second, I use it to distinguish Altan Ovoo from other “sacred mountains” (for example Khalzan Ovoo) in the region as being connected to the state in a particular way. Third, I wish to avoid terms that may allow for false equivocations with other human/mountain relations in other parts of the world. Marisol de la Cadena (2015) cautions against these kinds of equivocations, specifically around the subject of mountains. Just as the imperfect term “Earth Beings” is particular to her discussion of Andean *ayllu* and cannot be applied to different mountain contexts, so the Mongolian “state-worshiped mountain” is an imperfect translation particular to present-day Mongolia.

relations encompass issues of affect, issues of intimacy, and issues of the macro/microcosmic scalability of Mongolian domestic space²⁵ and domesticity.

Nearly everyone alive in Dariganga today has grown up within this scaled-up spatial frame, which is to say, they have lived their entire lives sharing domestic space with the mountain. Thus, I begin this chapter with the orientation towards Dariganga as a space where domestic affects are exchanged between humans and Altan Ovoo, enacting kin-like intimate relations.

When we discuss relations between human and mountain, we can draw comparisons to other kin-like relations that take place within the rural post-socialist Mongolian domestic sphere, such as those between parents and children, ancestors and descendants (Pedersen 2011; Buyandelger 2013), or herder and flock (Fijn 2011; Marchina 2020). In this chapter, I will explore these relations on three levels: first, that human-geological relations take place in the intimate affective register of kinship; second, that these relations are non-abstractable and thus cannot be appropriated by the State; and third, that despite their intimacy, the large scale of the domestic space in which these relations are formed means they are nevertheless susceptible to influence and harm on larger scales. That is to say, the human-geological relation described in this chapter is homologous—it scales upward, downward, and outward across other relational pairs.

²⁵ See also Natasha Fijn's (2011) discussion of domesticity in herder/herd relations for a similar approach to domestic space.

To work through the ontological tension brought up by conceiving of a relation with inscrutable stone as intimate, I draw on the concept of geosociality, which describes how non-living mineral forms (volcanoes, isotopes, mudslides, and so on) are included in social life. While a great amount of research in environmental anthropology has focused on multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010) and biosociality, work in geosociality takes this sensibility further by highlighting the “comingling of the geologic and the social” (Palsson & Swanson 2016). This might include the cosmopolitics of revered mountains (de la Cadena 2015), regimes of power in extracted landscapes (Povinelli 2016), volcanic eruption as an agent of change (Dove 2008), or the temporal unconformities that arise in the cross-sections of human and geological life (Raffles 2020). In this chapter, this geosociality takes place in a macrocosmic domestic sphere, and thus discusses human-geological relations as kin-like, specifically between the worshiped mountain Altan Ovoo and its human “children.”

Lately, the increasing frequency of drought and poor grazing conditions, coupled with the appearance of shadowy foreign mining interests and the recent availability of internet²⁶ access in the town center has brought together local worries about desertification and discourses on global climate change, circulating with increasing intensity as the nearby Gobi encroaches. In August of 2018, these discourses centered on Altan Ovoo. Works in environmental anthropology and

²⁶ The local primary school has provided free wifi to residents during the school year since 2013, and another semi-reliable wifi hotspot was recently installed in the town Culture Center.

humanities have usually discussed climate change as either degrading ecological relations between humans and the non-human environment (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Bird-Rose 2015) or altering them in a potentially generative but still catastrophic manner (Tsing 2015). The Anthropocene discussion of the last decade has particularly focused on humanity as a whole as a purely destructive force and the geological (in the global sense) scale of human influence on the planet as pushing humans and non-humans further away from intimate relations with one another.



Fig. 1.1: Two white camels relax outside the Takhilga Naadam's Dariganga Cultural Heritage Exhibit (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 28th, 2018)

In “Indigenizing the Anthropocene” Zoe Todd cautions against seeing human beings and their relations with the natural world as a monolith (Todd, 2015). It is not the whole of humanity, she argues, that has brought into being the crisis of climate change, as some Anthropocene literature seems to suggest. There are local forms of engagement in which human ecologies are much more integrated and premised on relations of mutual care. Discussions of climate change and environmental issues must bear in mind Todd and other scholars’ cautions about generalizing the historical violences of colonial and capitalist powers to all of humanity.

This chapter critically considers the trend, especially in multispecies literature that emphasizes non-North Atlantic and Indigenous²⁷ relations as premised exclusively on care rather than violence. In Dariganga, it is true that humans share their domestic environment with non-humans, and that these are kin relations predicated on acts of care. However, the domestic space, and care in general, does not exclude violence. In fact, care and violence can be intimately entwined. I argue that while eastern Mongolia and Dariganga may serve as a good example of a human/non-human relation that is not entirely predicated on extraction or alienation, it is precisely this intimacy that produces particular acts of harm. I argue that while the relation between humans in Dariganga and the geological world (including worshiped mountains like Altan Ovoo) are intimate, long-standing, and even non-extractive,

²⁷ Whether rural Mongolians fit this category is presently a subject of debate.

they are also predicated on cycles of violence and harm, often coming from both sides.

“Worshipped by the State”

Altan Ovoo’s Takhilga began at dawn the morning of August 27th, 2018. The previous night had seen the population of the Dariganga sum (district) center explode tenfold, and a volunteer policeman I spoke to while he was directing traffic commented that it “was basically the same as UB²⁸ right now”. The air was full of dust and tents lined the grassy shores of Kholboo and Ganga lakes. Concerns about what these masses of city folk might do preceded the actual event by over a year. Even so, the concerns were never leveled at the character of Ulaanbaatarites themselves, as so many Dariganga residents had relatives there, or even lived in the city part time. Worries revolved more around Ulaanbaatar as a point of human amassment: the problem was not that one person might litter or wash their car in the lake, but that thousands would.

The 2018 Takhilga was also the 105th anniversary of the mountain’s Buddhist domestication and interpellation into the state, when the eighth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (Bogd Khan) erected stupas at its summit and base, enshrining a *Tsagaan Khiimortoi Burkhan*²⁹ (god with a white wind-horse)³⁰ as part of a Buddhist project

²⁸ Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia and home to nearly half the country’s population

²⁹ As mentioned in the Introduction, there are a few possibilities for who exactly this obscure protector deity might be. However, none of my interlocutors knew his official name, and furthermore, none of them found it important. This brought back memories of my Catholic childhood in California, and how nobody knew the name of more than a few saints. That sort of thing was best left to the professionals.

³⁰ See Chapter 2 for discussion of *khiimori* as energy.

domesticating the newly-sovereign nation's *zerleg* (wild) sacred spaces. This could also be interpreted the 105th anniversary of Altan Ovoo's relationship with a sovereign Mongolian nation-state.



*Fig. 1.2: A police officer performs crowd control
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 27th, 2018)*

Altan Ovoo is one of ten mountain sites in Mongolia where *takhilga* are carried out under the auspices of the Mongolian State. As it always took place in summer, Altan Ovoo's *takhilga* was to be followed by a three-day Naadam festival, horse racing, *shagai*³¹, archery, wrestling, a Dariganga cultural heritage fair, and a “night concert” and carnival at the foot of Altan Ovoo. While it is usually customary for the Mongolian President to attend the State Takhilga, in 2018, President Battulga was not in attendance. This was very disappointing to Ganaa, one of my hosts in

³¹ A game played with the ankle bones of sheep.

Dariganga, who had been talking for months about the last *takhilga* in 2013, when then-President Elbegdorj landed his helicopter right on the side of the mountain. “Some people were really angry.” He told me, “I thought it was kind of cool.” State Takhilga are “ostensibly a revival of Buddhist rites carried out until the suppression of the religious establishment by the revolutionary regime” (Sneath 2018), and like many religious rituals banned under socialism, have exploded in popularity since the 1990’s.

The State Takhilga is a large-scale version of the local *takhilga* ceremonies that happen at smaller mountains and *ovoo* across the country. In the area studies literature, Mongolian *takhilga* rituals are described as primarily a relational mediation between humans and the landscape spirits (in local *ovoo takhilga* ceremonies) or Buddhist deities (in mountain *takhilga ceremonies*) (Sneath 2014; Bernstein 2013; Empson 2011; Humphrey 2019; Bristley and Tümen-Ochir 2021). They are scheduled during auspicious days when the Buddhist deities descend from the heavens and take their seats on the mountain. This sacrifice includes food offerings such as dairy products, baked goods, grains, and candy. It also includes the chanting of *sudar* (sutra) by Buddhist lamas, mostly but not exclusively in Tibetan. For State Takhilga to Buddhist deities, this “reading of books” is the most vital element of the sacrifice. These readings include *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* (“Praise Poem to Altan Ovoo”), which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4, *Ovoon Shavag* (“Offering of Wormwood Incense to the Ovoo”), *Altan Ovoony San* (“Prayer to Altan Ovoo”), and *Altan Ovoony Serjim* (“Offering of Alcoholic Spirits to Altan Ovoo”).

This formalized State Takhilga is happening on top of a longstanding and intimate relation with local residents. While the state may be sacrificing to the deities, when local people interact, its primarily with the mountain itself.

Preparations for the 2018 Takhilga at Altan Ovoo also represented a tipping point in they were the first to directly engage with discussions of conservation and global climate change and their connection to environmental happenings close to home. Conservation-focused billboards encouraged attendees to protect the purity of their homeland, and announcements were made reminding everyone to pick up their trash, to be mindful of car-wash runoff, and to not to leave offerings such as dairy and *khadag* prayer flags³² outside of designated collection areas. For months prior to the State Takhilga, locals in Dariganga and in Sūkhbaatar province at large had been openly worrying about the impact the large crowds would have on the local environment. As it turned out, the worry about the thousands of visitors leaving their litter behind did not entirely come to fruition. Perhaps because of the pervasive signage of the anti-littering campaign, or perhaps because of a concentrated effort by the locals to pick up trash left behind by the pilgrims, the visible and immediate environmental impact of the State Takhilga was moderate. However, the lack of rain in the wake of the ceremony, which would have signaled that the offering was successful, suggested something larger was afoot. This served as somewhat of a

³² Many scholars of Mongolian religious practice translate *khadag* as “ceremonial scarf” (Humphrey and Ujeed 2013). However, since in this case they were being used in the context of a state ceremony and were being affixed to an object in order to flap in the wind, I’ve chosen to use the term “flags”.

confirmation of environmental anxieties that scaled far above litter, looping into broader discourses about climate change in the *longue durée*.



*Fig. 1.3: Arriving at dawn to the takhilga celebration
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 27th, 2018)*

On the morning of the 27th, I woke up around 4am in a small hotel where I was staying in an attempt to remain incognito and avoid burdening my usual hosts in Dariganga, who had their hands full feeding and housing relatives visiting from the city.³³ I donned a grandmotherly white hat I had hastily purchased from the “black

³³ This was a failure of course, and I was subsequently scolded for even attempting such a trick.

market³⁴” the week before and joined the crowd slowly gathering at the foot of the mountain. As the sun rose above the horizon, the people on their way to the ritual grounds raised their hands above their heads to catch the warmth of the sun and greet the first rays of dawn. As I approached, I could hear the distant thrum of lamas reading the *sudar*, a sound described by Dariganga poet Dashbalbar as being like the sound of rain falling on the roof of a felt *ger* (2020). People and nervous horses gathered at the foot of a huge Thangka painting of the protector deity on his white horse, from which a long red carpet flanked by two rows of lamas led to a roped-off runway that went all the way down to the gated entrance to the fairgrounds.

As we gathered, the first stage of the State Takhilga commenced, dedicated to the sun and the reading of holy texts.³⁵ The crowd at the foot of Altan Ovoo was initially sparse, but gained strength after the sun rose and the second stage of readings commenced, dedicated to Altan Dari Ovoo’s Divine Kingdom of Heaven.³⁶ During this stage, a group of community volunteers from each *sum* in Sükhbaatar set up a plastic table at the foot of the Thangka and stacked it with offerings of food and drink: milk, *aarul* dried curd, yogurt, distilled milk wine, rice, millet, cookies, hard candies, blocks of green tea and aluminum boxes with slots in the top for cash donations. The invocation of *tenger*³⁷ is intended to invoke the supreme deity who

³⁴ A term that is mostly a holdover from the socialist era, when the state prohibited private entrepreneurship, these markets are now mostly legal but still maintain the moniker “black market” colloquially. In some, such as Ulaanbaatar’s *Narantuul*, it is also possible to buy banned goods such as assault rifles and abortifacients.

³⁵ *Lam khuvaraguud nary takhilga üidej, altan dari, ovoony san, takhilgyn nom khurna.*

³⁶ *Altan dari ovoony tengeriig taikh töriin takhilgyn yoslolyn üil ajilga ekhlene.*

³⁷ “sky or heavens” (Bawden 1997)

bestowed authority upon the Chinggisid emperors, known as the “mandate of heaven,” a complicated rhetorical move, as in Dariganga the landscape spirits that dwell on mountains, what would be called *savdag* in most other parts of the country, are also referred to as *tenger* (Tamirjavyn 2017). In the mouth of the state, however, it is intended to serve as a callback to the Great Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan, a historical imaginary the democratic government has often called upon to legitimize itself in contrast to the pre-1990 socialist state, which explicitly forbid the “worship” of Chinggis Khan.³⁸ Similar political push-and-pulls with Chinggis Khan had been going on for years, with the central square in Ulaanbaatar switching names from Sükhbaatar Square (after the hero of the People’s Revolution) to Chinggis Square and back again depending on which political party was in power.

We listened to the lamas read for half an hour or so before groups of men and women began to peel off to the right and left. The men started their climb up Toroi Bandi’s path that cut up the steep side of Altan Ovoo to the summit. Meanwhile, the women and young children likewise began our clockwise circumambulations around the mountain.³⁹ An older woman in a pollution air mask paused to watch the

³⁸ The assessment of Chinggis Khan’s role in Mongolian history became an issue of contention between Mongolia and the Soviet Union in the mid 20th century. While his image as a powerful military leader was used to garner Mongolian support by both the Soviet Union and Maoist China, the cult of Chinggis Khan as ancestor to the Mongolian people had the potential to undermine the authority of foreign governments. In the Mongolian People’s Republic, Chinggis Khan was secularized by new translations of *The Secret History of the Mongols* by Damdinsüren, which placed greater emphasis on historical narrative and less on omen and poetic interlude. (Atwood 2004, 101). See Chapter 5 for further discussion of *Secret History*’s form and non-secular imaginaries of Mongolian history.

³⁹ The space of Altan Ovoo is gendered in the way of many Mongolian revered mountains, in which men are allowed to ascend to the *ovoo* on the summit and women are either restricted to the foot of the mountain (as with Altan Ovoo) or to another *ovoo* midway up the mountainside (as with Han Bayanzürh in Sainshand, Dornogovi Province). There are some mountains that are open to all genders

silhouettes of the men ascend in a line up the side of the mountain. “Isn’t that nice to see?” she commented. Over the course of the approximately 90 minutes it takes to circle the mountain, we passed each other a handful of times and made small talk. She paused occasionally on the path to pick up little pieces of trash. “So many tourists and their litter!” she muttered. “We didn’t use to have to do this. They’re going to ruin the lake with all this trash”. She sighed. “Ulaanbaatar people”. She untangled a silvery Lotte Choco Pie wrapper from a patch of grass and followed the gesture by flinging a handful of millet as an offering to Altan Ovoo to soothe the insult.

By the time we completed our circumambulation, the sun had fully risen, the reading part of the sacrifice was finished, and the state pageantry had. Soldiers who had been bussed in from Ulaanbaatar in full regalia stood at the foot of the stage, where local politicians, the provincial governor, and Sükhbaatar-born Prime Minister Khürelsükh⁴⁰ introduced each other with a crescendo of accolades, congratulating themselves that the *takhilga’s ajil* (work) had been successful. I sat for a while in the grass behind the stage trying to hear exactly what was being said over the booming

(such as Shiliin Bogd in Dariganga or Bogd Han outside Ulaanbaatar). There are also a few mountain summits that are open to women and forbidden to men, mostly in northwestern Daur areas (Atwood 2004, 136). There is no single theory explaining the origin of this practice, but laypeople usually cite one of two concerns: 1) that the immaterial beings populating the summit pose a danger to female reproductive capacity (especially if pregnant), or 2) that the character of the mountain is not amenable to rule-breaking or pollution and will punish the interloper and surrounding community for the indiscretion. This theory hues closely to warnings against cluttering the mountain with litter or engaging in unclean or corrupt political behavior in the mountain’s name (see the reaction of Khalzan mountain later in this paper). This restriction was abolished as part of the modernization efforts during the socialist era (see also Lisa Rofel [1999] on the connection between women’s rights and modernity in China).

⁴⁰ Now President

and crackling loudspeakers until I concluded that it was the usual political posturing, and I left to find some Naadam *khuushur*⁴¹

That night, I went with my hosts, who had immediately caught me lurking around the food stalls that afternoon, to see the Naadam “night concert”. Walking along towards the stage that had been set up at the base of Altan Ovoo, I heard the sound system before I saw it – piping out arcs of careening operatic voices that bounced off the mountain and blasted out into the darkening steppe. The concert for the first night of Naadam was to further celebrate the success of the Takhilga *ajil* (work) that had been done that morning. There were more self-congratulatory speeches by the provincial governor and Khürelsükh, and the night culminated in a performance by a dance troupe from Jaakhan Sharga Theater in Baruun-Urt. The performance reached its zenith when a group of male dancers pulled together in the center of the stage, clasping their hands, bowing their heads, and twisting their bodies together until they formed the recognizable curve of Altan Ovoo – a human tableau against the grassy backdrop of the mountain cloaked in darkness. The night closed with a public dance party to ABBA’s greatest hits, held on the newly constructed concrete square at the foot of the mountain. I hung out on the edge of the revelry with Ganaa, his wife Khulan, their teenage daughter, and her new baby. “Do you think Altan Ovoo likes ABBA?” I half-jokingly asked Khulan as she distributed *shorlog* (grilled kebab) among the small crowd. “Of course!” she replied. “Altan Ovoo loves music, and people!”

⁴¹ Deep-fried dough pockets filled with meat and wild onions usually served during the summer. The best ones are sold at small food stands that pop up on fairgrounds during Naadam.



*Fig. 1.4: Altan Ovoo with lights from the night concert
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 27th, 2018)*

Mountainous Intimacies

If Altan Ovoo does indeed love people, it has been developing that sentiment since the Dariganga Volcanic Field was first settled in the Neolithic Age—at least 800,000 years. On that timescale the *takhilga* in its present form is barely a blip.⁴² Writing on the 2009 Takhilga at Altan Khökhii, David Sneath argues that State Takhilga are one instance of a number of rituals of state that have been put into place since the 1990’s devised “as part of the project to build a distinctive national brand of

⁴² Though Dariganga as such wasn’t settled until the Qing dynasty, Slab Grave cultural monuments in the area have been connected to Proto-Mongols living in the area during the Stone Age (Sneath and Kaplonski, 2010).

public culture.” (Sneath 2018, 179) He argues that the present day Takhilga, like much of Democratic era nation building, draws on a model of tradition that is imagined as drawing connections back to Chinggis Khan, who presided over a pre-socialist, pre-Buddhist, “pure” Mongolian age. Imaginaries of the nation are also read back onto the Chinggisid era in much of the legislative environmental-protection language, even calling a hunting reserve Chinggis Khan established near the capital “the world’s first national park.”

In 2018, the year I found myself celebrating in Dariganga, Altan Ovoo was one of ten mountains worshiped by the Mongolian State⁴³ and given Special Territory status by Presidential decree. Crucial to this decree was the announcement that a ritual ceremony, presided over by the State, would occur at each mountain every four years. The tethering of takhilga to already-politicized Naadam games is one sign of the way the State Takhilga attempts to interpellate Altan Ovoo (as well as the other mountains worshiped by state law) into the re-inscription of a democratic and post-imperial national imaginary and thereby the authority of the democratic state. However, because of the high pageantry of this state ceremony, it often becomes the focal point where anxiety about social crisis points are revealed.⁴⁴

⁴³ Other than Altan Ovoo, these include: Bogd Khaikhan Mountain (Богд Хайрхан уул), Burkhan Khaldun Mountain (Бурхан Халдун уул), Otgontenger Mountain (ОТГОНТЭНГЭР), Altan Khökhii (Алтан Хөхий уул), Khan Khökhii (Хан Хөхий), Sutaï Khaikhan (Сутай Хайрхан уул), Suvrag Khaikhan Mountain (Суврага Хайрхан уул), Altai Tavan Bogd (Алтай Таван Богд) and Gobi Gurvan Saikhan (Говь Гурван Сайхан). The first decree was issued in 1995 by then President Ochirbat, declaring support for “initiatives reviving the tradition of worshipping Bogd Khaikhan, Khan Khentii and Otgontenger mountains.” Altan Ovoo joined the ranks in 2004.

⁴⁴ In a previous Takhilga year, a similar moment went on display on the national stage when it was discovered that none of the journalists assigned to cover the *takhilga* were able to report on it. Altan

This again brings us to Khürelsükh, a son of Sükhbaatar province. The evening of the night concert, following performances by the Jaakhan Sharga dancers, the classic rock band Anduud took the stage. After a few ballads, they welcomed the prime minister to the stage. Wearing a white polo shirt, he began to play rhythm guitar along with the band in a Clintonesque display of coolness. Sitting in the plastic chair next to me, an elderly man in a fedora elbowed me in the ribs “Look at this idiot.” He said to me in Russian. “I think his guitar isn’t even plugged in.” After the show the PM left the stage to take pictures with the crowd. He wrapped his arm around the other man’s shoulders paternally, but when that man went to put his arm around Khürelsükh in turn a bodyguard appeared and quickly slapped it away.

At the 2018 Takhilga, the failure of the state to gain the intimacy and trust of people at a time of great turmoil: desertification from climate change had been

Ovoo, like many worshiped mountains in Mongolia, is a “men only” pilgrimage site, where only men are allowed to climb to the mountain’s summit and conduct the ritual of burning juniper incense and pouring a libation offering of milk wine or vodka onto the summit earth. Some of the other “man mountains” allow women to ascend to a point, but with Altan Ovoo women must stay on the path around the base of the mountain and climb no further. There are also “gender neutral” mountains such as Shiliin Bogd, another famous Dariganga mountain to the south, right on the Chinese border, and a few mountains that are specifically for women, though these are very rare and none of them have been designated for state worship.

So, when it turned out that every journalist sent to cover the *takhilga* was a woman, there arose a problem. On televisions across the nation, viewers watched the frustration of their television anchors build as it became more and more apparent that nobody could do their job. Then, the anchors started reporting on the situation itself, and the discussion of the gendered implications of the moment became much franker: “You make us women do all the work, and then here we show up and you’ve already arranged it so that we can’t work.” Suddenly, the link between gender inequality, the state, religion, and land was thrown into sharp relief. Like many issues of gender politics -- domestic violence, inequality of access to capital, men in positions of authority -- this gendering of land by religious authority and the democratic state had become naturalized and normalized over time, and don’t reach the notice of national discourse until they reach a perceived crisis point (as with the anti-domestic violence marches held on Women’s Day in 2018). In this case, however, it wasn’t a crisis point that drew notice to the issue, but the mountain itself.

worsening in the area as the Gobi desert slowly encroached on Dariganga, political corruption scandals were exploding, and the mining sector was shown to not be the boon to the Mongolian people that it was sold to me, and in fact was quite destructive. Khürelsükh in particular was at the center of many of these scandals.⁴⁵ He was nearly ousted shortly after the State Takhilga in 2018, after he was implicated in a state-fund embezzlement scandal. Still, he survived that vote of no confidence that accused him and a number of other officials of embezzling SME funds (small and medium business enterprises) intended for the public to their friends and family. This failed attempt at generating intimacy on the part of the state is perhaps at the root of the strain of the State Takhilga, and of the “Ten Sacred Mountains” project in general.⁴⁶ Can the state scale up the intimate relations of its citizens? Citizenship and intimacy are not coextensive. As much as the Mongolian nation likes to imagine itself as a family⁴⁷ by translating the relationships citizens have with each other, intimacy is not abstractable.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ After narrowly avoiding being removed from his position in the wake of corruption protests in 2019, Khürelsükh resigned in January 2021 after the mistreatment of a mother with COVID-19 by an Ulaanbaatar hospital broke in the national news. For some, this was an attempt at avoiding any bad PR that could interfere with a presidential run in 2021. As of this dissertation’s filing, Khürelsükh had just been elected in a landslide as Mongolia’s new president.

⁴⁶ However, sometimes utility overrides these things. A friend of mine, who works in environmental policy, suggested that we work together on legislation to change the name of Altan Ovoo to “Khairkhan” which is the honorific euphemism given to mountains known to contain potentially violent power. If Altan Ovoo was known as *khairkhan*, she reasoned, perhaps people would be more hesitant to endanger it.

⁴⁷ Often by calling upon nationality.

⁴⁸ This is not the first attempt that the democratic Mongolian state has made to gain a sense of intimacy from a highly skeptical public, nor the first time it has failed to do so. In contrast to the socialist state, which was very much a top-down patriarchal power, and styled itself as such (*Tör Tömör Nüürtei*, “The State has an Iron Face”), the democratic state has made a point to attempt to gain trust through a performance of asking for consent. One of the main themes of the 2008 parliamentary election in Mongolia was an attempt to regain the public’s trust in order to gain the approval needed to continue



*Fig. 1.5: Women and children circumambulate Altan Ovoo
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Pískatá, July 27th, 2018)*

Despite the attempts to abstract Altan Ovoo’s power into a scalable authority that can be harnessed by the state, the way most local people engage with the mountain is on a much more intimate and un-abstractable level. What is missing from the “National” framing of the Takhilga is the excess of relationality: that the attendees are more than just citizens or wards of a patriarchal nation-state, and that Altan Ovoo is more than just one of ten state-worshiped mountains. This excess is the untranslatable affect of intimacy, obligation, violence, and repair that forms the center

negotiations with foreign mining interests. Famously, the 2008 elections ended in allegations of fraud by the losing (Democratic) party and culminated in riots in central Sükhbaatar Square at which 5 people died (Manduhai Buyandelger, Personal Communication, June 3rd, 2021).

of the day-to-day relations most people, local and not, have with the mountain. Prior to summer 2013, my second year in Mongolia, mere weeks before the 100 year “anniversary of the stupa” (aka Buddhist domestication of the Ovoo), I had no idea that such a thing even existed. My experience of Altan Ovoo, and what I experienced from others, were the relations that occurred outside the national frame, when the state was off worshipping other mountains.

Though the State Takhilga in the neoliberal era is intended to invoke a vaguely “pre-revolutionary” form of *takhilga*, the ceremony itself was not necessarily absent during the socialist era. While a large-scale public ceremony of worship like this certainly would not have been allowed, small and private *takhilga* rituals still continued, only transformed into an intimate or individual rite done outside the notice of the atheist socialist state. The state deemed such nature-bound practices to be not so obviously religious enough to survive the lama purges and monastery burnings of the early revolutionary period. These small, “folkloric” rituals (*zan uil*) such as local *ovoo takhilga* were seen, because of their small and intimate scale, as almost secular, or at least distinct from larger scale Buddhist activities and most shamanic rituals.⁴⁹ Since the 1990’s, however, *takhilga* have exploded in scale from small interactions with local cairns to sacrifices to state-worshipped mountains on the national stage. Ultimately, the “pre-revolutionary” tradition the state is attempting to revive is one in

⁴⁹ Manduhai Buyandelger, Personal Communication, June 3rd, 2021

which human/mountain relations are the purview of the patriarchal authority of a post-imperial (Pedersen 2011) state.

Davaasüren (Davaa), an old friend and former coworker who lives in the Sükhbaatar Aimag capital of Baruun-Urt, traces her family's relationship with Altan Ovoo back to before socialism, at least four generations. Her mother's ancestors, she explained to me, were once very poor, but nevertheless, they sacrificed much of what little they had to the *ovoo*. Over the years, they became wealthy. Now she feels her destiny is likewise bound up in her relationship with Altan Ovoo, just as it is bound up with other networks of relation with persons who shape her life.

The night before I set out for Dariganga to see the *takhilga*, I asked Davaa if she could remember the first time she visited the mountain. She could – it was 2008 and she had just graduated university. She went to ask for her first job. Out of this memory spilled many more, and she lamented not being able to visit the last few years:

[Altan Ovoo is] a very wishful mountain. It's so very magnetic⁵⁰. For example, I haven't visited Altan Ovoo for three years since that time we visited when I was pregnant. So now these latest days I have missed Altan Ovoo so much. I dreamed about Altan Ovoo – not every day but maybe a single time once a week or once a month. I mentioned to you about my dream – that's very religious in Mongolia. If you dream about Altan Ovoo, the Altan Ovoo misses you and they call you. They call their children or they – you know. That's what we think. And then I went to the monastery in autumn. Last autumn. I talked about these dreams to the Lama – he's a good lama – and he said "You should visit

⁵⁰ In this interview, Davaasüren used the English word "magnetic." When I asked her later to elaborate, she explained that she meant "like a magnet, it pulls you in, you want to be there" and offered up the alternate term "charismatic."

Altan Ovoo, or you should pray to Altan Ovoo, and you should give away some nice things – you know like *deej*⁵¹ and *chikher*⁵². At least you should do this because Altan Ovoo misses you and that’s the thing. That’s the thing. At least you should do this.

Introduction in this case is done through greeting and sacrifice, gifting the *deej* (the top of the cream) or the first piece of candy or rice from a bag, the best piece, again, a gift of the heart. This is *takhilga*, meaning both “sacrifice” and “worship”. Altan Ovoo and mountains like it are not just “holy” by virtue of being related to the divine or by being consecrated⁵³ it is *Takhilgatai* --literally “worshipful”. What makes Altan Ovoo *takhilgatai*, in much the way other kin are worthy, maybe not of worship but of sacrifice, is that it calls you to it, and you come.

Davaa describes the pull of Altan Ovoo as a kind of charismatic magnetism, pulling in its “children” both human and non-human. This is the parentage that is distinct from the state, and distinct from the way parentage is seen in the eyes of the democratic Mongolian state and the North Atlantic academy. Horses are said to gain energy from the mountain and are brought up to the summit before big races. Likewise, the black volcanic rocks that scatter the land around the base of the mountain, if removed, only desire to return home and can bring bad luck to the person who removed them. Davaa tells the story of a relative of her mother who suffered misfortune after taking home a small black volcanic rock from the base of the

⁵¹ (top cream layer of fresh milk)

⁵² candy

⁵³ Though as we’ll see in later chapters, there are other pilgrimage sites like this.

mountain. “Children want to be with their mother,” she said. The stone was returned, and peace once again settled on the household. The operative power of Altan Ovoo is that it is not “holy” or “sacred” in a Christian sense but that it is “compelling”. What makes the mountain holy is that it calls you.

Writing on resonant geological intimacies in Australia, Elizabeth Povinelli describes the processes by which relations are made between humans and “non-living existents.” “The more you encountered [these existents] the deeper your sense of both the range of behavior they were capable of expressing and their tendencies to do one thing rather than another in any giving context... We were to consider them dynamic personalities like any person or nonperson has a personality—they have a tendency to behave in certain ways but can also surprise a person.” (Povinelli 2015, 129) For Povinelli, facts, such as the dreaming Two Women Sitting Down, are the sedimentation of things that keep happening. Thingness, or personality, or gravity, or magnetism, is the result of an endless series of repetitions, what Brian Massumi calls “habits of mass” (1999). While Altan Ovoo is more than just a sedimentation of habit, its liveliness is felt via a magnetism and power to compel, the accretion of a chain of habitual and normalized acts of obligation towards it. This is how I take Davaasüren’s meaning when she calls Altan Ovoo “magnetic”.

In an essay entitled “Minii neesen ekh oron” (“Discovering my motherland”), Dashbalbar describes Altan Ovoo as having been created by an accretion of desire—that generations upon generations of people focusing their needs, desires, and

expectations on the mountain eventually condensed into a point of power. The “worship” became the norm, and the “worshiped mountain” was formed:

Altan Ovoo truly is a living mountain. People have loved and worshiped this mountain for centuries, and over many years the thoughts of hundreds of thousands of people have become a single point – concentrated on this mountain. Saturated with everyone’s faith and desire, it was thus transformed from a simple mountain into the love of the motherland. Well, my ancestors didn’t worship this mountain in vain! This symbol of eternal love must come to us: it is Dariganga’s Altan Ovoo!” (Dashbalbar 1983, 234)

These eons of repetition, of wishes, of desires, of hopes, of the affect of intimacy, eventually formed a point so dense that it had its own magnetic/gravitational pull. This is the “pull of affect” (*setgel tatax*) described by my interlocutors—it is the ability of a body to compel another body into response via perception and interpretation. Stories abound among my young friends about the power of Altan Ovoo to generate action and movement in their lives in response to sincere offerings of love and need. Last winter, my friend Nyambayar and I were reminiscing about the day we became friends. One of my coworkers had called me up one day in the middle of class one day to tell me that an old school friend of hers had talked someone into lending us his Land Cruiser. Did I want to go see Altan Ovoo? Many of my friendships in Sūkhbaatar began during visits to Altan Ovoo, and I tell Nyamaa so. “Yes. Me too. Actually, did I show you the snake I saw there?” He showed me a picture on his phone: it was an enormous brown and white-banded snake, coiled around a pile of black stones. He tells me that it was taken at the peak of

Altan Ovoo. He starts to tell me about the first time he sincerely wished for something from the *ovoo*:

I was there to have a different...perspective of myself...to just go there and...hey. It's just like I'm coming home to my father. And I was wishing my very best, you know. 'Hey, my life belongs to you and either it will go in a good way or whatever way'. I just wished my last time there—and it affected me somehow. Massive difference. Imagine--I was in London. I've been overseas a lot. I've seen a lot. And I always think about Altan Ovoo. Last summer when we were there, I saw a big snake, over there. (He points to his phone screen) I've seen [a snake] before but I never felt how strong or how powerful it was. You know it's kind of something this ovoo tells me: 'Hey, I'm the owner of this mountain.' It's mind blowing actually. You can't really express yourself; you can't really tell what it is. As you can see. I've never seen a big snake like that in Mongolia. I've seen a very tiny little snake there before. And then I saw this big one the last time I was there. It really affected me somehow and I believe in it. Because now I'm in America. Because I'm not only a person just being in Mongolia, I'm like a world person. I want to see what is out in the world there. That was my first wish [to Altan Ovoo] and it's affected my life. So."

It later turned out that the snake in the photo Nyamaa sent me was a Central Asian Pit Viper⁵⁴ and one of the “masters” that can be found on the steppe landscape. In the encounter between Nyamaa and the Viper, Altan Ovoo is acting as an assemblage, a concept which Jane Bennet explains is “dependent on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces (Bennet 2010, 20-22) His encounter with the snake on the mountain is an encounter with the mountain itself—as “mastery” here implies caretaking, management, and stewardship more than plain subjugation. The viper is the master inasmuch as its

⁵⁴ *Gloydius intermedius*

status as a non-living, non-human, ensouled being allows it to act as a mediator between mountain and human. Of course, it is possible to receive the mountain's blessing without encountering a snake, but the snake sends the message clearly.



Fig. 1.6: Central Asian Pit Viper (Gloydius intermedius) at the ovoo cairn on Altan Ovoo's summit (Photograph by Nyambayar Bat-Ülzii, June 2016, reproduced with permission)

To encounter a snake in Mongolia⁵⁵ is to butt up against the same complex affect that appears in relations with powerful mountains. To find a snake in your

⁵⁵ Cautious people will often avoid saying the word “snake” directly altogether. In the Gobi, I’ve also heard of people calling snakes “worms” to avoid saying the word “snake”. To me, this potentially sheds some light on the possible origin of the cryptid “Gobi Death Worm” as possibly a misinterpretation of someone describing a viper. (KG Hutchins, personal communication)

home is generally considered good luck, but people who would gladly invite one in are few and far between. In the second week after I first came to Mongolia in 2011, I was on the back steps of my hosts' home when suddenly Bold, a young father, ran out the back door and snatched up a pitchfork that was perched up against the tool shed. Without any language, I was unaware of the emergency until he popped his hand out, waving me away from the door. What then emerged was not Bold, but a long and twisting green snake draped and coiling around the tines of the pitchfork. Gingerly, Bold walked it out onto the back lawn, followed by his wife Saraa with a plastic bottle full of milk and a metal spoon. Both nervously holding their tools out as far from their bodies as possible, Saraa called me in English: "Jessica, come here!"

As I got closer, she whispered, "Look here." and with the spoon, gently dribbled a stream of milk⁵⁶ onto the crown of the snake's head. With that, Bold shook the pitchfork and it dropped into the grass and flicked away.

I nervously glanced at Saraa, and she reassured me, "It's okay, it's okay. A snake is good luck for the house if we're careful about it."

The blessing of a snake, pit viper or not, is magnified by the animal's capacity for violence. More than just visiting you it has chosen to do you no harm. In the excesses of the blessing, in its strength and subsequent restraint, lingers that ever-present potential. There is another link between vipers and ferocious mountains in the term *khairkhan*. This term is a euphemism used to avoid calling a dangerous or

⁵⁶ Milk, especially the desired "top" of the cream, is a good offering for all beings.

powerful thing directly by its name—cautious people will sometimes refer to snakes without saying the word “snake,” and will instead call the creature “*khairkhan*.” Likewise, certain particularly ferocious mountains, such as Khan Bayanzürkh in Dornogovi Province,⁵⁷ will sometimes also be called “*khairkhan*,” in this case, Bayanzürkh Khairkhan.

At a roadside tea spot in the Gobi one spring, I had a chance run-in with Badma, a college senior at Ulaanbaatar technical college who was one of my star pupils back in Sükhbaatar. She was leading a group of Australian tourists on a desert excursion to see Khan Bayanzürkh. We sat together at a separate table with the expedition’s driver, who was fretting over an incident that had happened on the road. They had hit a snake with their Jeep as it darted across the road—the driver thought they might have squashed its tail. Throughout the conversation, both he and Badma referred to the snake as *khairkhan*, and he was concerned that the incident would put them in danger on the road as the snake sought retribution for its injury. I asked him and Badma about this, because I had heard her use the word “snake” (*mogoi*) before.

“Yeah, we use *khairkhan* when we want to say, you know, ‘Please, I respect and love you, I know you are more powerful than me.’ So, then they know that they have respect. This is why they call Bayanzürkh Khairkhan too, because sometimes it can get angry with people.”

“And if you call them *khairkhan* they won’t hurt you?” I asked.

⁵⁷ Another state-worshiped mountain

The driver chimed in, “*Maybe* they won’t hurt you. But it can calm the situation. Do you know what *khair* means? Love. So, saying *khairkhan* is respect and also asking from the heart a little bit.”

Khairkhan is thus not an expression of fear or taboo, but an appeal to an affective relation, a pre-emptive expression of gratitude and acknowledgement that there is a potential for danger that will not be realized. In Dariganga, I have never heard Altan Ovoo directly called *khairkhan*, though I have heard it referred to in other terms of relation and affection—usually as “my” “ours” or “my dear.” Still, it is a respected mountain, especially for its ability to create change in people’s lives and circumstances. So how then, is that relationship mediated, if not by a term like *khairkhan*?

Cycles of Sacrifice

Altan Ovoo is not commonly described in terms of a potential for violence, and when describing its character in relation to other, more dangerous mountains or landscape entities, people usually use the term *zöölön* (“soft” or gentle). This is not necessarily the case for other mountains in the region. One example is Khalzan Ovoo, a smaller hill that is subordinate to Altan Ovoo, that sits in the northernmost section of the Dariganga area, not far from Baruun-Urt. Khalzan Ovoo is perhaps best known for having murdered two successive mayors and for burning down the Khalzan district’s government building in 2012 (Tamirjavyn 2017, 265). Its reasoning is still debated, but the most common theories are 1) that litter was collecting on the

mountainside and was not being adequately cleaned up, and 2) that there was some political corruption afoot in the government office having to do with embezzling funds, perhaps from selling mineral exploration licenses, or perhaps from the back taxes collected from the zinc mine Tömörtiin Ovoo around that time. It is impossible to say for sure what caused this violence. What is certain: Khalzan Ovoo is *dogshin* (ferocious), and easily made to *khilegnekh* (become wrathful). In general, this mountain is more likely to punish the transgressions of its human relations with violence, and people will sometimes appeal to the gentler and more forgiving Altan Ovoo to quiet or calm the subordinate mountain (Tamirjavyn 2017).

The gentle nature of Altan Ovoo and its status as a calming force on the landscape makes it difficult to imagine that the mountain would ever become wrathful with its children. This is why the unexpected lack of rain after the 2018 Takhilga was so broadly alarming. The intimate pull between the *ovoo* and its humans is highly particularized, embodied, and affective. Like Davaa, many Sūkhbaatar residents imagine their unfolding destinies as entangled with their personal history with Altan Ovoo, and the histories of their ancestors stretching back to pre-capitalist, pre-revolutionary, pre-Buddhist, times.

In the summer of 2012, I found myself on a weekend retreat with a busload of my coworkers, all of us employees of Secondary Complex School #2 in Baruun-Urt. After an especially rowdy night sleeping in the dormitories of the Dariganga primary school, we woke up at dawn to greet and *takhil* the mountain. Bolortuya, a fellow English teacher, chatted with me as we all trudged hungover through the wet grass. I

asked her how long this ritual had been going on. “Well, now we’re Buddhist, so we do it like this, but in ancient times⁵⁸ it was different. In that time the mountain was wild, it was called “Khar Uul” (black mountain)⁵⁹. The ancient peoples worshiped it by giving meat and blood, killing a sheep or goat, and they walked around the mountain by crawling on their hands and knees and bare feet.”



Fig. 1.7: A crowd watches political speeches following the takhilga ceremony (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 27th, 2018)

⁵⁸ The English phrase “ancient times” is used to refer to both the pre-Buddhist conversion, pre-Bogd Khan, and pre-socialist eras. Once a friend even referred to a film from 1975 as “from ancient times”.

⁵⁹ Many mountains currently designated as “worshiped” were named Khar Uul prior to Buddhist domestication, perhaps because of a saturation with shamanic “black religion” (Pedersen 2011) spirits.

Though Bolortuya differentiated what we were doing that morning from the pre-Buddhist practices of ancient people, there still remained a chain of connection that was unbroken. This connection was maintained by a series of accreted exchanges and actions, beginning with sacrifice. In *Animal Intimacies* Radhika Govindrajan asks “What is the nature of sacrificial connection between the one who sacrifices, the one who is sacrificed, and the one who accepts the sacrifice? Does sacrifice leave an imprint on everyday relationships that extends beyond the moment of ritual killing?” (Govindrajan 2018, 31) In the context of relations with Altan Ovoo, the answer to this question is yes—not only does the sacrifice leave an imprint on the relationship, in many ways it *is* the relationship. In Govindarajan’s ethnography, sacrifice is bound up with the compelling affects of obligation and debt: for the woman who prepares a goat for sacrifice by caring for it and making it kin, the sacrifice is intended to pay a debt to the deity in exchange for good luck or fortune—the goat is the payment. However, there is a second debt and a second sacrifice: the debt owed to the goat for marking it for sacrifice from birth—a debt that is paid with care and the sacrifice of losing a beloved child when the time comes for the goat to be killed. In relations marked by sacrifice, relations are built via these cycles of love, violence, debt, sacrifice, and forgiveness.

In Mongolia, goats are also used as mediating sacrifices between human and non-human kin. In her work with a Buryat community in Dornod Province, north of Sükhbaatar, Manduhai Buyandelger describes how sacrifice, consumption and refusal can permanently sever relations between a person, her human community, and her

non-human ancestors (2019). In the aftermath of socialism, many forgotten shamanic ancestor spirits have been reawakening and re-emerging in people's lives. The lifting of restrictions on shamanic practice and the general chaos of the neoliberal age (Pedersen 2011; Buyandelger 2013) has seen an analogous chaos in the spirit world, especially in communities with close ties to shamanic lineages and practices⁶⁰, such as the one in which Buyandelger works. In this article, she frames previously suppressed shamanic genealogies as a kind of memory and pushes against the dominant argument in studies of social memory that sees reinvigorated memory as always producing cohesive sociality. Works in Mongolian studies that show shamanism as a general drive among Mongolians to reconstruct their past in the post-socialist era (Empson 2011; Kaplonski 2004; 2014) Buyandelger shows how attention to disagreement and avoidance of memory and remembering can reveal the resurgence of the spirits to also be a source of harm and community disintegration (2019, 67). Buyandelger talks to Altaa, who has come upon great misfortune not only in the years since the transition, but back into the socialist era as well. Many locals argued that Altaa's misfortune resulted from her neglecting the spirits that had called her to be a potential shamanic initiate. Altaa, however, saw a moment of refusal to sacrifice as the defining moment which left a permanent imprint on her relations with her kin in the spirit world. Buyandelger quotes Altaa:

Everyone here knows that my father was a shaman. They also see my poverty and my misfortunes. Apparently, I owe a sacrifice of a blue goat to my origin

⁶⁰ While Sūkhbaatar tends to have less shamans than Dornod, the baseline of spiritual chaos in the neoliberal age remains true, as does the way shamanism is hybridized with Mongolian Buddhism.

spirits. There is nothing mysterious about it. My mother and I ate the sacred goat that was designated for Dorlik [the deity of the smithy and blacksmithing] when we were displaced after my father was arrested and killed during the purges [of the 1930s].

The “blue goat” is in reference to a practice of sacrifice in which a blue *khadag* prayer scarf is tied around the neck of an animal as a way of putting it aside or “sacrificing” it for the spirits. It cannot be eaten, and if it is a horse, it cannot be ridden either. In the hardship of the purges, Altaa and her mother revoked this sacrifice by eating the goat themselves. Altaa argues that this act should have been forgiven, since they would have starved to death otherwise and then the spirits would be “orphaned without any descendants (72).” The fact that she and other Buryats continue to experience misfortune despite the spirits promises of help, for Altaa, was proof enough for her to shun shamanic practices. In this case, a sacrifice was revoked, but it was also made—Altaa’s mother made the choice of putting her past shamanic relations in danger (and her relationships with the larger community) in order to keep her family alive and therefore prevent the shamanic spirits from being without descendants. Even in contexts like Sūkhbaatar, where there is less talk of shamanic ancestors, geological forms like Altan Ovoo have the long temporality to act as gathering points between living humans, their ancestors, and their future kin. Here sacrifice also has the potential for transforming relations up and down temporal lines, for better or worse.

On the geological level, such a refusal would constitute what Hugh Raffles calls an “unconformity.” (2020) This is a break in the sedimentation pattern and

therefore a mark of a temporal anomaly in which the cycles of layered relations that up to a point have strengthened the magnetic draw of the mountain are disrupted. These cycles of successful sacrifice are part of what makes the intimate relations laid out in the previous section stronger and stronger. This accretion via sedimentation is part of both relation building between humans and mountains and part of how an ovoo itself is created.⁶¹ Being a Buddhist mountain, Altan Ovoo no longer accepts sacrifices of blood or meat. It does, however, accept perfectly-read *sudar* books, and in private *takhil* the affect of sacrifice is still present through what my interlocutors describe as “sincerity” or a “true heart”: *ünen zürkh* or *ünen setgel*.

On one visit to Altan Ovoo, I asked Davaa if it was okay to ask Altan Ovoo for something frivolous. “Of course.” She replied. “You can ask Altan Ovoo for anything. You can ask for new shoes if you want, it doesn’t matter. If you come with a sincere wish in your heart, Altan Ovoo will want to give you whatever you want. But you absolutely must give a sincere wish.” Buyandelger (2019) describes how refusal can create a break that leaves a permanent imprint in the sedimented layers of relation—but what about failure? What if the sacrifice is given with an insincere heart? With an entity as gentle as Altan Ovoo, how great must a transgression be in order to actually break the relation?

⁶¹ This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3

“We Have Not Forgiven”

By the end of the Takhilga Naadam, an uncanny element had transformed the atmosphere, both meteorological and discursive. A hot dingy brown vapor rolled into town, neither fog nor rain. This was completely out of character for Dariganga in the summertime when the weather usually vacillated between bright sun and soaking bouts of rain. Nobody knew what exactly to make of it, but it was certainly not the legible rain that signals the end of a successful *takhilga*, nor the cap cloud that occasionally alights on Altan Ovoo’s summit invoking the connection between lively earth and the divine heavens.

Walking through the center of Dariganga, one could catch snippets of conversation between passersby as they walked down the street:

“This weather must be smog from all those Ulaanbaatar people’s cars.”

“I hear them say it would rain tomorrow.”

“Maybe some corrupt lama made a mistake reading those books.”

“It still hasn’t rained.”

“Aren’t you hot? I’m so hot!”



*Fig. 1.8: Leaving Dariganga on a cloudy but rainless afternoon
(Screencap from video by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 30th, 2018)*

Tired of sweating, I decided to skip the last day of Naadam horse races and instead head back to Baruun-Urt a day early in order to spend some time visiting with Sarnai, the owner of a nightclub in the province center. Pulling into town around midnight, I first noticed the clear absence of humidity, and second the familiar smell of Baruun-Urt at night: the edge of a rusty knife, the smell of processing ore that occasionally drifted over from the zinc mine upwind.

Sarnai picked me up at the bus station in her little blue Prius, and we went to her club for a drink. Across the square, a sixteen-story tall concrete skeleton of a building that had begun construction in 2013 stood empty in the darkness⁶². She asked me why I had come back a day early, and I told her about the strange weather.

⁶² It has since been completed and is now host to a number of businesses and a bar on the top floor.

“So, it didn’t rain?” she asked me. “At all?”

“Not really.” I replied. “It was just kind of weird and hot and hazy.”

Sarnai shook her head and put down her beer. “That’s not good.” She sighed. “You know me, I’m pretty religious. It is always supposed to rain after a *takhilga* if it was successful. I wonder what happened.”

“Maybe it was Khürelsükh’s fault.” I said, half-joking. I told her the story about his bodyguard pushing away the old man.

“Maybe!” she answered sincerely. “Who knows what these politicians have up their sleeves with these mines and all that money. They’d sell the whole country to foreigners if they could, and we’d just be living in a hole in the ground.”

For a long time, the mining economy of Sükhbaatar had mostly centered on Tömörtiin Ovoo zinc mine, an enterprise owned by the Chinese company Tsairt LLC. Tsairt LLC was one of the province’s primary employers since 2004, and by 2013 the zinc mine had provided Sükhbaatar, once one of the country’s poorest provinces, with a stretch of prosperity and a burst of local development. During the two years I had spent living in Baruun-Urt (2011-2013), the mine drew no more controversy than any other foreign-owned mine in Mongolia. In fact, Tsairt LLC was one of the premier sponsors of the 2018 State Takhilga, along with other mining ventures and business that sold the equipment and materials they needed to keep running.

Another new addition since 2018 is the luxury Dariganga hotel, which I will hopefully have a chance to see once the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

In recent years, there has been a rumor that the State Takhilga was pushed back because the French uranium mining company Areva (now ORANO) had been illegally exploring a uranium vein near Altan Ovoo in the summer of 2017. This rumor suggests that perhaps money or influence was exchanged to keep the celebration from happening so as not to attract attention (uranium prospecting and mining was outlawed in Mongolia in 2015). The idea that mineral extraction is not only capable of immeasurable acceleration and that it is being done outside of the rule of law has led to an analogous intensification of political and environmental contestation that no longer sees foreign extractive interests as having appetites that can be managed, but rather as destructive and ecologically apocalyptic forces.⁶³ Still, even with the intensity of these rumors, anti-mining sentiment in Sūkhbaatar remained sporadic or marginal at best.

Back in 2011, I had found this situation to be paradoxical. To identify one's social and ancestral place in the world as tethered to an unbroken geological landscape while not full-throatedly condemning mining activity seemed to be primarily an issue of ambivalence. Prior to the events that followed the 2018 State Takhilga, I had understood this ambivalence as having to do with managing economic risk or perhaps holding a non-binary view of Nature and Culture--challenging the assumptions of western European landscape philosophy that paints the natural environment as sacred and human intervention as profane. However, after observing the anxieties that

⁶³ See the environmental post-apocalyptic music video by Ulaanbaatar rapper Big Gee ft. Jonon: "Homeland", where bands of wanderers in rags sift through the dust of an apocalyptic and deserted landscape to find photographs of the landscape as it once was.

emerged in the aftermath of the Takhilga, it became apparent that rather than (or in addition to) mere pragmatic ambivalence, the attitudes of Dariganga and Sūkhbaatar residents towards the landscape had much more to do with a unique sort of relationality. This relationality between humans and their geological landscape is based on a frank and honest understanding of intimacy as necessarily containing a capacity for both harm and reconciliation. These affective cycles are inherent to the existence of relationality itself.

Contained within every relationship is the possibility that it may fall apart. Earlier in this chapter, I described an example of how relations between Altan Ovoo and what Davaa calls its human “children” are built on cycles of harm, repair, and forgiveness that sometimes play out for centuries—ebbing and flowing along ancestral lines. There are also newer relationships, some less than a decade old, that nevertheless become part of the relational sedimentation between human beings and the mountain. A few years ago, on a phone call between Mongolia and the United States, Davaa asked me if I’d been missing and remembering Altan Ovoo. I answered that I had, but that I was so far away I doubt it made a difference. “It makes a difference!” she replied, “You were introduced to Altan Ovoo, and even if you are gone for so many years, Altan Ovoo will always remember your face.”

This memory is not static, however. The primary affective quality of the relationships between Altan Ovoo and what Davaa and others call its “children” is that of an intimate push and pull. Over time, which for some can be over many generations and for others, such as myself, might only stretch over decade or so, there are inevitably

slights and harms committed. These harms can range from taking a stone from the mountain without permission to failing to provide for its proper care. Regardless, the harm must be made right, especially since the expectation of forgiveness is contained in this act of repair, especially with a mountain as gentle as Altan Ovoo.

These acts of repair are best described with the Mongolian term *argadakh*, meaning to sooth, coax, or “make it up to.” This term is used not only useful in the geosocial sphere, used to describe the practice of reading sutras to the land after it has been broken, but also in relations within the domestic sphere. *Argadakh* is done between humans: a young man bringing a dozen roses to his lover after a fight, or a mother hugging her child after she has punished them; between humans and animals: convincing a mother camel to nurse a rejected baby with fiddle music; and between humans and minerals: employing lamas to read sutras to the earth after mining. In fact, part of the holy infrastructure of Altan Ovoo itself was gained through *argadakh*: the evergreen fruiting sorogshin (Siberian pine) tree that grows at its summit was taken from the Mountain Otgontenger in the far west of the country. In order to uproot the tree, tea and food offerings were given to the *lus* and *savdag* spirits of Otgontenger mountain in order to soothe them into allowing the tree to be uprooted. It is said to be more than 300 years since the sorogshin tree was brought to the summit of Altan Ovoo, and 300 years since it has touched the ground.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This accounts for the special connection between Altan Ovoo and Otgontenger that is described in Dariganga literature, which will be further explored in chapter 3.

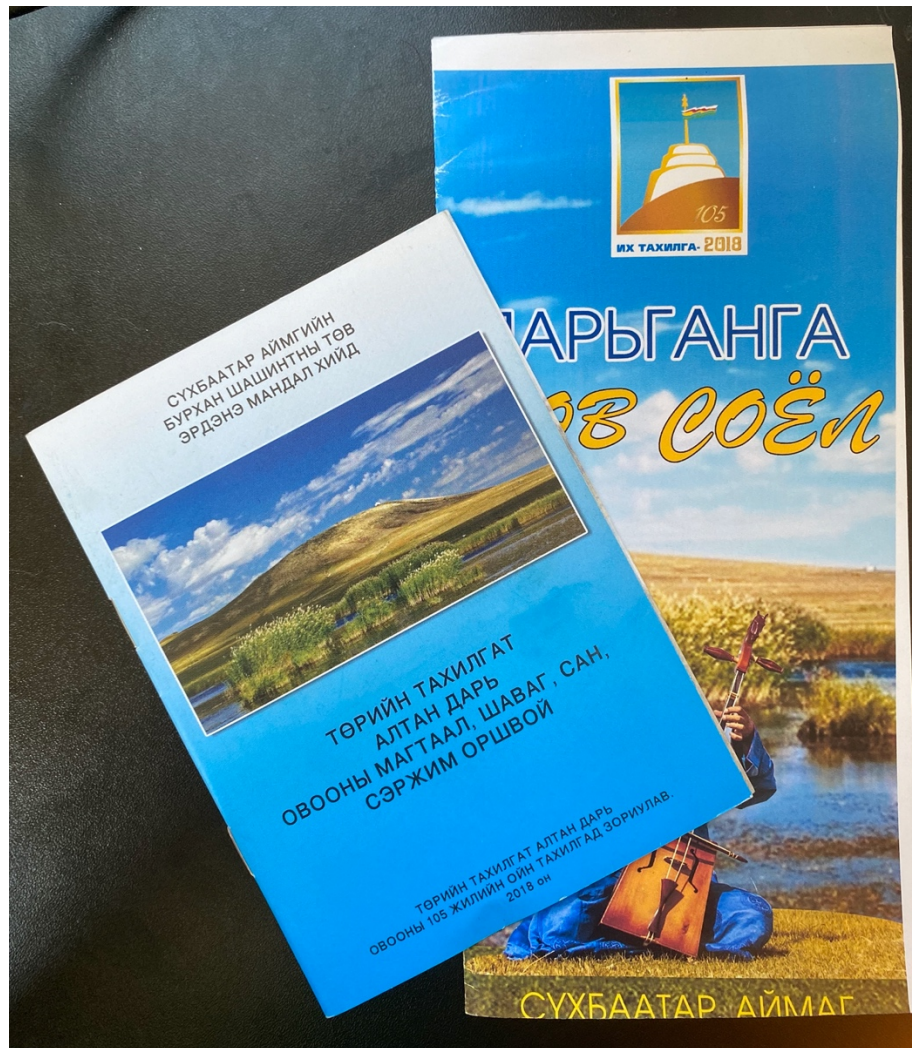


Fig. 1.9: Informational pamphlets from the Dariganga Cultural Heritage Center and Sükhbaatar Province Buddhist Center

I suggest that the State Takhilga is likewise an act of *argadakh*. While similar *takhilga* are done on smaller local scales throughout the year, the ceremony to the state-worshiped mountain is an attempt to marshal the affective power of these intimate *takhilga* on the national stage. The state engages in a public and performative act of worship in order to ostensibly receive confirmation from the mountain that despite any

wrongs that have been committed, the relationship is maintained. The State Takhilga is also an attempt to marshal the mountain's close parental relationship with its people into the unidirectional patriarchal authority of the state.

“Sacrifice” here is not so much a giving up as a giving in—a willingness to have stakes in a relationship with a non-human geological being, not necessarily alive but enlivened through historical cycles of intimate relationality. Davaa, as well as others in Dariganga and Sükhbaatar, narrate their personal and family histories with Altan Ovoo as being full of harm and forgiveness, desire, faithfulness, reward, conflict and soothing—just as with any relationship between enlivened entities, humans or non-humans. In discussing Altan Ovoo's capacity for intimate relationality with humans, I do not presume to suggest any of us humans are able to reliably read the intention or character of an inscrutable stone form that is thousands of years old. Rather I suggest that this is an understanding of the nature of the relationship between Altan Ovoo and its children, including its capacity to withstand and be strengthened through these cycles of harm, sacrifice, forgiveness, repair and recovery. Though the State Takhilga attempts to mimic this relationship by transforming the domestic parental authority of Altan Ovoo into a post-imperial patriarchy of the state in the model of the Chinggisid emperors. These are two distinct but overlapping approaches, and there could be potential for success, if the neoliberal Mongolian state had the kind of relationship with its citizens that it is trying to perform.

In 2015, I went with my landlord Binderya to go see the opening ceremony of the National Naadam games in Ulaanbaatar. After a multi-act pageant of Mongolia's

history that begun with dancers mimicking a pack of wolves and ended with an inflatable SOYUZ spacecraft disappearing into the air, the wrestling tournament was about to begin. At the time, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj was still Mongolia's president. Elbegdorj is, in the minds of most people, very much attached to the making of neoliberal Mongolia. He was one of the key leaders of the Democratic revolution in 1990 and came from Mongolia's Democratic party, the "free market" party of Mongolia's two main political parties. As he presided over the boom and bust of the mining economy in the early 2010's, many people associate him closely with a particular neoliberal era of the democratic Mongolian state and closely with foreign mineral extraction. To great fanfare, Elbegdorj took the field with the wrestlers in suit, tie, and a traditional pointed cap. Raising his arms, he began to awkwardly perform the dance that accompanies matches in which a wrestler will raise and undulate his arms in a mimicry of an eagle or falcon taking flight.⁶⁵ As the music over the loudspeakers swelled triumphantly, an entire stadium of nearly 13,000 people dissolved into raucous and scornful laughter. The neoliberal Mongolian State may want to be Chinggis Khan, but in the eyes of the populace, it is only Elbegdorj and Khürelsükh.

Even as the state attempts to invoke the authority of the mountain or of past emperors in order to legitimize its own authority, this suspicion remains. This has become especially poignant with repeated scandals having to do with corruption and misappropriation of funds gained from foreign mining interests such as Oyu Tolgoi

⁶⁵ This dance is indispensable to the wrestling ceremony. Better wrestlers tend to be better dancers.

copper mine in the Gobi desert. This came to a head in 2019, when former Prime Minister Bayartsogt Sangajav was arrested in connection with dealings he had with Ivanhoe Canadian mining corporation, who owned the Oyu Tolgoi project before selling it to Canadian/Australian outfit Rio Tinto in 2010. This is only one example of the many that has plagued the Mongolian government in recent years, and distrust in the authority and competence of the state is only growing.

When the state attempts to abstract and appropriate pre-existing cycles of relation between humans and the environment, especially in service of legitimizing its authority, problems occur. The forgiveness (or legitimization) that is bound up with repeated acts of violence hinges on the un-abstractable affects of intimacy and love. There is plenty of room for violence within love, but without love, violence tends to beget violence. Worshipped mountains have always had the potential for retributive anger, even gentle ones like Altan Ovoo. Not every mountain is Khalzan Ovoo, murdering its human relations for acts of political corruption; however, even the most gentle and permissive relationships have a breaking point, especially when the relation is not one of kinship but of governmentality. In my years of discussing the attitudes of community members towards their own relationships with the environment, I have found that the idea that things could really and truly break down forever is fairly recent and marks a new and pervasive anxiety that is more intense from the known uncertainties that are contained within the framework of religious cosmology or rules of relation with non-human persons. As the discourse of global climate change entered Dariganga's community consciousness, so did the fear of breakdown.

Industrial mineral extraction had roots in Mongolia going back to the Bogd Khan⁶⁶, and the copper mine at Erdenet in central Mongolia provided the vast majority of Mongolia's GDP after it was opened in the 1970's. It is not mining itself that has caused the fear that relations with the mountain may break down. So, what is different? Why did the failure of the 2018 State Takhilga to Altan Ovoo bring up a fear of breakdown not unlike the refusal to sacrifice a goat to shamanic ancestors (Buyandelger 2019)? Later that summer there were reports of herdsmen firing their guns into the sky in order to force the rain that had still not fallen. "This is the kind of sin that can't be forgiven." Sarnai said over Facebook chat when I asked her about it from back home. "Of course, everyone commits some little harms to stay alive, Altan Ovoo understands this. But shooting at the sky, I don't know. People have gone crazy."

Speaking on the economic hardships brought on by the drought and other environmental disasters on Facebook chat, Nyamaa wrote:

The government still gives out some small tugrugs⁶⁷ to us like that will help, but then they keep taking money from foreigners for mining and they don't clean the air. Really stupid decisions they make. It's just stupid. Economy is not good businesses are in bad shape, and so many animals died. People have no money. Now they increased insurance rate and tax! We have to pay these morons what they spent running this government while our environment gets worse and worse.

⁶⁶ The 8th Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, who ruled theocratic Mongolia from 1911-1924 following independence from the Qing Dynasty

⁶⁷ Mongolian currency



Fig. 1.10: Banner on the front of the Province Government House thanking the Takhilga Naadam's sponsors and donors.⁶⁸

The lack of rain at the 2018 State Takhilga signaled oncoming disaster, and anxieties were up in the air as to what that might be: climate change or further government corruption--in retrospect in 2021, some have been tying it back to COVID-

⁶⁸ Text in the header reads “‘105th ritual offering of sacrifice to Altan Dari Ovoo’s Tenger,’ Festival sponsors and donors, may Altan Dari Ovoo bless you all.” The footer reads “Naadam Festival Organizing Committee “Sacrifice to Altan Dari Ovoo Tenger” Non-Governmental Organization. To the left of the footer is a logo for the Naadam anti-littering campaign that reads “Let’s have a clean/pure Naadam!”

19. What is certain, however, is that the break in legible response from the mountain meant that something had been disrupted. Part of the terror of climate change, for people in Dariganga and elsewhere, is that the world has no longer become legible. These small moments of illegibility signal a much larger breakdown, both in relations between humans and their local environment, and with the planet as a whole. Whether the fault of the state, of foreigners, or of the desperate choices of people themselves, the fear of breakdown of the sedimented layers of relation was tangible, and there might not be enough books to be read that could make it right.

Chapter 2: *Ovoolokh*

*A mountain wants to be a mountain.
It's a hill in a mountainous landscape
It's a cairn on a country's border."*

-U. Khürelbaatar, "Three-Line Poems"

On a blazingly bright Gobi desert spring day, I went with Bayarsaikhan to see the fertility *ovoo* near Khamar monastery in the eastern Gobi desert province of Dornogovi. Bayarsaikhan had been one of my students at an IELTS prep course I taught in Ulaanbaatar. She was the head of a women's shelter in Nalaikh, a coal mining suburb of the capital city, and one of the organizers of the Ulaanbaatar Women's March in 2018. I had run into her at the exit of the temple grounds, taking pictures of her young daughter sitting on a camel that was positioned there as a tourist photo op. She suggested that we go together to the *süld ovoo*, since we had spoken before about my interest in *ovoo* and other "things connected to rocks" as I had put it to her when we first met. I hopped in her silver blue Prius, and holding her daughter on my lap, we drove to a religious shop to get some milk to offer the *ovoo*.

When we got to the *süld ovoo*, there was one other woman there, who also looked to be in her early thirties. A man around the same age, who I took to be her partner, stood off to the side. She finished just as we arrived, and they walked off together. The *ovoo* was actually two rock piles, stacked carefully with rectangular stones that were fitted together precisely to form two stony mounds meant to resemble human breasts, complete with two rounded spires at the top representing

nipples. In between the two there was a long metal bar festooned with blue *khadag* scarves. “Go ahead.” Bayarsaikhan handed me the milk carton. “Fill up your bowl and *tsats*⁶⁹.”

“Aren’t you coming?” I asked as I started my clockwise walk.

“No, I don’t need any more children.” She laughed. “It’s enough.”

“I’m not sure I do either!” I replied nervously.

“Well, still. You might change your mind. Just in case!”

The *ovoo* smelled strongly of old milk. At the top, the layers of milk offerings had curdled into a thick film that added a least an inch to the height of the *ovoo*. In recent years there had been a push by local governments to curb “offering litter” in high-traffic worshiped areas. In northern Selenge province, for example, offerings to *Eej Mod* (mother tree) had been confined to a plastic picnic table that was cleaned up by grounds staff at the end of each day. A “snake *ovoo*” outside Khövsgöl lake, consisting of a twisted Baltic Pine tree⁷⁰ with thousands of matches and small bills tucked into its bark, was accompanied by a mock shaman’s drum on which was painted the words “*Khog büü khai*” (Don’t litter). At Altan *Ovoo* few years prior, signs had gone up encouraging visitors not to leave items such as synthetic *khadag* scarves or wrapped candies behind, and a metal box had been set up to collect monetary donations.

⁶⁹ To offer milk in a flinging gesture—usually with a ladle but sometimes with a bowl or other vessel.

⁷⁰ *Pinus Sylvestris*



Fig. 2.1: The author and cows at süld oboo. The light layer on top is solidified milk offerings, as are the white pools on the ground. (Photograph by KG Hutchins, April 28th, 2018) Reproduced with permission.

There was no such restriction at this particular oboo, where the only offering seemed to be poured and sprinkled milk. On my third and final round around the two oboo, I had to skirt around two brown cows that had wandered up to lap at the pools of milk that had collected from past offerings at the base of the oboo.

I pointed them out to Bayarsaikhan as I walked back. “Look at these two, stealing the offerings.”

She laughed. “Get your energy up, mommies!” she shouted at them. As we walked back to the car, she jokingly asked me if I felt fertile. I replied that I wasn’t sure what fertile felt like. “Well, you’ll see what happens. At least your future is open

to it now, after you leave here. And imagine you have a baby; you'll always think back to the booby *ovoo*." The encounter with this specific human-made form on this specific point in space and time, characterized by an exchange of material substance, had opened the future to further possibilities.

Ovoolokh, a verb which means "to pile as a concept also allows us to understand a landscape poetics/poetics of place that works via processes of defining and locating. Human-made sites of material accretion and extraction define places of significance on a void made only of space: the flat and endless steppe. These human-made structures create spatial moments of purposeful exception in sedimented geological space that gain significance over time as they accrete, and meaningful landscapes form around them. This chapter explores how specific genres of human interaction with earth substance create a landscape poetics⁷¹ that make the Mongolian geological landscape on the eastern steppe and desert.

In geology, discontinuities or shifts in sediment deposition are called "unconformities," and this term is taken up by Hugh Raffles to describe moment of elemental willfulness that create not just breaks in sediment continuity but also "...holes in time that are also fissures in feeling, knowledge, and understanding; holes that relentlessly draw in human investigation and imagination yet refuse to conform, heal or submit to explanation..." (Raffles, 2020, pg. 6). I follow this thinking in considering things like *ovoo* and mines, which, like Raffles' unconformities, are

⁷¹ I use poetics here in both senses of the word, though this chapter will focus on poesis.

breaks in geological sedimentation, but depart from traditional unconformities in that they are purposeful⁷² disruptions done by non-geological collective entities, mostly human. Drawing on Raffle's line of thinking and extrapolating it into a different context, I refer to these objects as "non-conformities"—active disruptions of geological continuity that, rather than marking lost time, make meaningful place within it. These are events of significance making place in space and time.

The goal of this chapter is to orient the reader in the world of Mongolian geosociality by providing a background understanding of the history of my fieldsite's landscape and the broad strokes of how it is constructed. I do this by investigating the two most recognizable forms found on the Mongolian landscape: *ovoo*⁷³ and pit mines. Humanmade geological non-conformities like mines and *ovoo* organize and create geological landscapes through a disturbance or reorganization of sediment. Though there are other human-made geological forms that act in this way ("man stones", meditation caves) here I focus on *ovoo* and mines as they are the most recognizable and ubiquitous across the Mongolian landscape. This chapter will explore the social and historical significance of these two humanmade forms in relation to a landscape as it is created over time. These landscapes and the geosocial

⁷² By purpose here, I do in a way mean agency, though this is not the primary concept I explore here. Discussions of geological agency notwithstanding, the collective and historical agencies that produces both *ovoo* and mines are not unlike Latourian agencies of mediation in which an entity or assemblage of entities transforms the conditions under which the other entity reproduces itself. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this transformation is that of geological sedimentation becoming geological accretion (Latour, 2005)

⁷³ Literally "cairn," a pile of rocks or other substance.

worlds they contain will then serve as backdrop and orientation for the rest of the dissertation.

This chapter uses ethnographic encounters with particular *ovoo* and the human-made mountains that spring up around pit mines as an entry point for understanding the development of geological landscape over time. *Ovoo* and mines are significant spatiotemporal “events” or punctures in homogenous historical and geological continuity—locating moments and spaces of significance that create a meaningful geological landscape. This chapter will first go further into an inquiry of the *ovoo* as a form, its significance in history, its ecological and otherworldly significance, its potential for harnessing fortune and danger, and its status as a form in process—a process of making value, locality, and landscape itself through its status as an always-accreting mineral point generating opportunities to engage in risky relations across human/nonhuman difference. Then, I will present a quick overview of the advent, acceleration, and explosion of industrial mining in Mongolia through the socialist era, the economic boom of 2012, and the current affect of ambivalence around extraction in Mongolia. Then, we travel to Mongolia’s first iconic industrial mine to explore the contradictions and complexities of engaging in pit mining as *gazar* process in order to show how both spoil heaps and *ovoo* generate particular kinds of value that can only be generated through these mineral constructions, forms and performances.

Rock Pile Landscapes

One particularly muddy summer in 2016, I found myself in a familiar predicament for many residents of Dariganga: stuck in town without a ride and with a fast-approaching appointment in Ulaanbaatar. It had been three days that a small group of hopefuls had been gathering every morning at the bus station on the east side of town, with no luck. On the fourth day, a woman in her mid-thirties and her two children joined us. She was from Ulaanbaatar and had been visiting her husband's family in Dariganga for the summer. They had had a fight the night before that had gotten violent, and so she was leaving and taking her kids back to the city. She also had the phone number of someone with a van who might be willing to drive us, but his vehicle was not in great shape. Still, she had a ride, and anyone who needed badly to get back to UB in a hurry could come with her. I was traveling with Bud, the sister of one of my former students, who was moving into her dormitory that week. "I don't know, do you want to go with her?" she whispered to me. "Her *energi* makes me uncomfortable. Like that fight with her husband...that's bad vibes." We became even more nervous when a rickety blue Istana van came screeching around the corner. Behind the wheel, the driver looked to be at most 22. The rest of the crowd went back home, shaking their heads, but I was impatient, and Bud was on the university's schedule, so we got in with the family and the young driver and took off.

About 20 minutes outside of town, we stopped at a rise in the step, next to a large pile of black volcanic rocks a little taller than me. Studded in between the rocks were bits of candy, curd, small bottles of vodka, and small bills. All of us piled out:

the driver, Bud, the woman, her pre-teen daughter, and me. Her young son, about eight years old, stayed in the car, despite admonishments from his mother. He was playing a game on his phone. “Get out here, you!” she hissed. He grumbled and slid further down in the seat. “Shame on you!” he turned his back, and she gave up.

Approaching the pile, we all scanned the ground for small rocks, and each picked up three. One by one, we circled the mound clockwise, tossing a single stone on the pile after each turn. I had been taught how to do this within a week of arriving in Mongolia. “When you reach an *ovoo*, you can ask for a wish.” My host sister had explained. “So, then you have to give something to the *ovoo* in return. You can bring some kind of *takhil* offering, or just some stones is fine. This way, the *ovoo* gets bigger instead of weaker and it won’t disappear.”

Our driver, instead of adding stones, cracked open a small bottle of vodka, poured some in the cap, and flicked it onto the *ovoo* before taking a swig and saying “Okay, let’s go.” I caught Bud’s eye. She was looking concerned, and I felt the same way.

“Please wait!” I called out. “We have to ‘water the flowers.’” As we walked behind some shrubs she whispered to me, “I don’t like this at all. That little boy didn’t even offer something to the *ovoo*. And that woman, there’s something weird. She had a fight with her husband, she’s bringing bad energi.”

“Oh.” I was surprised. “I was worried about the driver drinking vodka, I didn’t even think of the *ovoo*.” Now worried, we finished our business and got back to the car.

Ovoo are, to wildly oversimplify, rock piles⁷⁴. Though the term *ovoo* can mean either mountain, heap, or cairn, what Rebecca Empson calls "heaps and accumulations" (2011), its ritual meaning refers to any constructed physical structure that serves to accumulate collective celestial fortune. The *ovoo* is multifunctional: it can act as a site of sacrifices to local deities and spirits, as a border marker, and as a physical manifestation of the link between humans and land. The *ovoo* situated atop a mountain, hilltop, or in the case of the steppe, a rise with an "auspicious configuration" (Atwood 2004) is a ubiquitous sight across the Mongolian landscape. *Ovoo* accumulate materials and pile up through the offerings of passerby, who must contribute to the pile in order to fulfil wishes and avoid misfortune. Offerings can simply be more stones, or specific items like candy, tea, rice, alcohol, crutches, car parts, the skulls of beloved horses who have passed, Barbie dolls, anything according to need or desire.

Ovoo in more heavily Buddhist areas, like Sūkhbaatar, are sometimes built with three levels and twelve small heaps in the cardinal directions, imitating the continents around Sūmber, the world-mountain in Mongolian Buddhist cosmology. Regardless of the cosmological context, *ovoo* rituals are quite similar. They can house

⁷⁴ Though they can be made of other materials such as wood, animal skulls, or even glass bottles. Still, stone over are overwhelmingly the most common, especially in the east.

various tenger (pre-Buddhist sky spirits), *lus* if the *ovoo* is near water, *gazariin ezen* that can take the form of animals, *savdag* if the *ovoo* is on a mountain, shamanic ancestor spirits, and Buddhist protector deities and bodhisattva such as Tara, Vajrapani, or Manjushri, to name only a few.

Grand scale *ovoo* rituals as described in Chapter 1 are not terribly different from the local ones performed at smaller mountains in that they require a certain degree of specialization and are often conducted either by trained Buddhist clergy, shamans, or local political leaders. However, common *ovoo* rituals that any passerby of an *ovoo* on a roadside or hilltop could conduct are quite simple: they might involve three circumambulations with three stones, or just a respectful honk of the horn while driving past.

The consequences for shirking this ritual are most common in encounters with “drivers *ovoo*” that usually appear on the roadside at the exit or entrance to settlements, on significant rises, or at crossroads. Even after many of the country’s major roads were paved in 2012-2013, road accidents are still quite common, and driving is dangerous. *Ovoo* discourse often erupted around these dangers: did we get a flat because the driver didn’t acknowledge the *ovoo* a few miles back⁷⁵ or because, as one of my traveling companions once put it, “we just have a shitty car.”

⁷⁵ Even a short honk will suffice in many instances, though it depends on the driver, the passengers, the *ovoo*, and the quality of the car.

One such disaster struck our party about 30 minutes after leaving Dariganga. Our wheel hit a craggy volcanic rock hiding in a patch of grass, there was a horrible crack, and the van slowly coasted to a stop. The little boy, who had been sleeping in the back seat, started to grumble loudly. The driver turned the engine off, then back on, and tried to go again. The van lurched and immediately rattled to a stop again. Something had gone very wrong. "I knew it." whispered Bud.

The driver got out and we slid the van door open. This was not terribly unusual, and most of the time an experienced driver could get the car fixed up and running within two hours. We were about to settle in for a long wait when we heard a long keening howl coming from somewhere on the steppe. "Are you kidding me?" I said to Bud. I had to laugh.

The boy immediately began to wail. "The wolf! There's a wolf! Oh no!"

His mother was in the front seat with the brim of her sun visor pulled over her eyes. She ignored him, slumping down in her seat in an identical manner to her son back at the *ovoo*.

"It's okay, honey." I said. "Wolves only like to eat sheep. They don't eat people. People taste so bad to them."

Suddenly alert, Bud spun around in her seat to look at the boy. "Actually, last year a wolf ate a little herder's boy just north of that *ovoo*. Just around here." I shot her a look as the boy wailed harder. "It's true!" she said. "You really shouldn't lie to children!"

After trying to fix the car for nearly an hour (the axle was broken), our driver flagged down a truck going back to Dariganga and went to go get car parts. After four hours of waiting and listening to wolf howls, we collectively realized he probably wasn't coming back and that we should try to hitch a ride ourselves to Baruun-Urt. Cars were sparse, and nobody was going in the right direction. I tried to convince one SUV full of middle-aged men to turn around and take us because "we have children and there are wolves around." The driver accused me of lying, claiming that Mongolian wolves only came out at night. Just then, another sharp howl split the air. "See? Did you hear that?" I insisted.

"Um.... no." he stammered, and they sped away.

Later in the afternoon Bud and I climbed up onto the roof of the van and tried to catch a glimpse of the animals. Far off in the distance, we saw three tawny arcs bounding over a rise in the steppe: one big and two small. A mother and cubs. Amongst ourselves, we debated what it meant. On the one hand, seeing a mother and babies had to be good, and I was so excited. On the other hand, wolves were dangerous, and the boy was still panicking.⁷⁶ He kept shrieking, thinking a large gray boulder off the side of the road was a wolf.

Then, there was the matter of the *ovoo*.

⁷⁶ The wolf as a symbol is open to contradictory and ambivalent interpretations. On the one hand, the blue wolf is revered as an ancestor of the Mongols. On the other, wolves present a threat to livestock and were exterminated en masse during the socialist period and into the present. During the socialist period, the ravenous wolf was used as a symbol in political cartoons and texts for decadent nobles. (Linden, forthcoming)

“Well, Mongolians say that spirits live in *ovoo*.” Bud said. “Maybe *ezen*, I don’t know.”

“Could the *ovoo* send something after us?” I asked.

“Well, no--yes. I don’t really know. This is all very philosophical. Mongolians say *ezen* can be many things, but that’s shamanism stuff: wolves, snakes, and what to you call it—a stag. They can mess up your life or make you sick or hurt yourself. So, when you go along here on the road things can happen in the future. This is what Mongolians say. What *some* Mongolians say. Do you understand?”

“Kind of.”

“It’s like you have to do something with the *ovoo*, if its good or bad, then it’s up to you.”

“So, do you think the *ovoo* did this? And sent the wolves?”

Bud was staring out the window. “I don’t know. Maybe, probably not. Something like that.”

Despite their ubiquity, there is something about *ovoo* that creates trouble in the attempt to translate them into social scientific or historical text. The problem, argues Brian Baumann, is not a lack of facts:

We know a great deal of facts about Mongolian *ovoo*. We know the types of *ovoo* that exist; where they are found; who venerates them; how they are venerated; when they are venerated; and why. Yet something about this very mundane subject troubles us... troubling us to no end is the question, why on

God's green earth would anyone in their right mind bother to worship an inert and lifeless pile of rocks? (Baumann 2018)

The problem that Baumann lays out plainly here is the covert problem of social science scholarship and the secular imagination when presented with something like *ovoo*: “it is not the rock pile itself that Mongols worship but the spirits that they stand for...A pile of rocks at least is tangible and real, but spirits assuredly are not.” *Ovoo* trouble the secularist framing that seeks to divide the Natural rock pile from the Supernatural spirits—but *ovoo* are fully integrated.

In his work on how *ovoo* relate to human-animal relations in Mongolia, KG Hutchins quotes tour guide Bayar, who describes how “*ovoo* worship is central to his spiritual practice” (2020, 136). ““Religion requires too much imagination,” Hutchins quotes Bayar ““Your white people are too imaginative. When you look up, you look beyond the sky, and imagine a god out there in a whole other world. When I look at the sky, I just see the sky.” This differs slightly from my interlocutors’, who mostly identify as Buddhist and not shamanist, characterization of landscape spirits as “invisible.” However, there is something resonant here. Many of my interlocutors express serious doubt when it comes to these spirits. However, they still maintain their practices of *ovoo* offering and worship and consider *ovoo* to be important entities on the landscape.



*Fig. 2.2: Ovoo at Saikhany Khötöl, Northern Selenge Province
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, September 16th, 2017)*

Uka, the teenage son of one of my former coworkers in Sükhbaatar, once put it this way, “Lots of superstitious Mongolian people think that there is some invisible spirit inside the *ovoo* that can give you something with magic. So many of my classmates are like this. They don’t study at all, but then they go to the *ovoo* or to a lama and pray and wish that they do well on the test. And of course, they fail the test, because they didn’t do anything. It’s lazy. You need to at least study.” I asked him why then, if he doesn’t believe in spirits, I’ve seen him give *takhil* to *ovoo*. “An *ovoo* is like this.” He held up his iPhone. “I don’t know how it works, but it works if you do something with it. I press a button on here, I can talk to my mom at home or my

girlfriend in Korea. It's technological." I asked if he had any guesses as to how *ovoo* work.

I don't know, I'm not a scientist. It could have something to do with bacteria, like how when people leave milk or food behind it grows lots of bacteria. We don't really know how bacteria works. I read somewhere that most of our bodies are made of bacteria. Or maybe its magnets or *energi* in the rocks, and the more rocks go on the *ovoo*, the stronger the magnet is. I don't know. That's a question for science.

This touches on the conundrum of the "real" and the material in the secularist imagination, and in social science writing as a whole. In the secular/Protestant/anthropological framework, which Bayar astutely identified as "white," the only real in an *ovoo* is the rocks and offerings, the physical pile. This is the kind of fetishism and "thing worship" that Durkheim calls a misunderstanding of animism (1912). Within a secular understanding of religion, while the worship of spirits is irrational, it fits within a Christian framework of a supernatural and immaterial divine and is therefore legible. In this framework, the rock pile is symbolic: it stands for spirits. Within the framework of the *ovoo* however, this distinction doesn't necessarily hold water. The spirits are not necessarily separate from the *ovoo* itself, but are rather a characteristic of the *ovoo*, of its liveliness.

In studies of *ovoo*, Baumann writes,

There is one line that studies of the *ovoo* never cross and that is that the *ovoo* cult and the spirits it propitiates might have something to do with science. Western scholarship stands firm on the position that spirits do not, in scientific terms, exist. This position, however, is at loggerheads with the reality in Mongolia. There the spirits of *ovoo* worship not only do exist but exist under the purview of science...in Buddhist mathematics, for instance. one finds these

spirits present and accounted for. Here the spirits are stars (usually from the Chinese sky) whose auspices have been determined according to artificial, numerical patterns. This conflict between opposing realities thus reveals the thorn in our side over *ovoo*. It would appear that goading us to study endlessly a simple pile of rocks is a question over the fundamental meaning of science. (2008)

The sun had begun to set, and Bud and I climbed back down to confer with the other passengers. We decided it was very unlikely the driver was coming back. Then there was the issue of the wolves. We had almost resigned ourselves to locking ourselves into the van for the night, when we saw a pair of headlights coming up the road in the right direction. It was a Range Rover driven by a young couple, their toddler, and their grandma, with enough extra room to hold all of us, if not comfortably. With great relief, we all piled in and took off. They were going to Khalzan, which was close enough to the province center that it shouldn't be too hard to catch a ride. We would get the bus to UB in the morning. Watching the sun set over the steppe, we told our rescuers all about the day we had had: the broken axle, the missing driver, the wolves. Bud left out the part about the *ovoo* and so I followed her lead.

We had been driving for about an hour when there was a loud bang, and the car skidded to a halt. A tire had gone flat. "Uh oh, you all are trouble!" joked the father. "We shouldn't have picked you up!" Luckily, he had a full-size spare tire, and we were soon again on our way.

We had only gone 10 minutes when the tire blew out again. We pulled over, and Bud and I walked off to relieve ourselves. "Oh god." I whispered to her.

“I know. They must think we have bad *energi* now.” She whispered back.

“This is just a coincidence.” I said with little confidence.

“Something is blocking our road.” She said. “If we keep going forward we’re going to keep having trouble.”

“Well, we can’t go back to Dariganga now.”

“Right.”

We decided that if we made it to Khalzan we would give something to the mountain *ovoo* there. I found an unopened pack of gum in my bag that would do in a pinch. When we got back to the car things were already looking up. Another vehicle had come along the road and had given us their spare tire. We piled back in and drove all the way to Khalzan in nervous silence.

Ovoo are ubiquitous in Mongolian area studies, which has mostly sought to precisely define their uses and origins. Historians of the Qing era identify them as political boundary markers, particularly at political borders or trading posts (Pratt forthcoming). They have been used to designate the spatial boundaries of patriarchal social groups since the 18th century (banners, sums, and colleges of lamas) and to mark the group’s connection to the land (Atwood 2004). Soviet ethnologists Galdanova and Mantatov propose that *ovoo* also indicate the formation of specific clans or banners (1983). Buyandelger suggests that by acting as residences for the spirits, *ovoo* were a way of settling a land with origin spirits (2013). For Buryat and

other ethnic groups that have survived state violence, *ovoo* can also serve as a way of remembering ancestral homelands, as these ancestral spirits live in the *ovoo* (2013).



*Fig. 2.3: Ovoo and motorcycle belonging to a roadside sculptor in Ömnögovi Province
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, May 31st, 2018)*

They are also said to mark borders of dangerous territory, especially those places on the summits and slopes of worshiped or otherwise haunted mountains—an *ovoo* halfway up the side of Khan Bayanzürkh mountain, for example, marks the highest women can climb without upsetting the mountain and risking physical harm.⁷⁷

A professor of engineering at the Science and Technology University once told me

⁷⁷ What harm is not necessarily made explicit, but it usually either has to do with potential damage to reproductive organs or else some other kind of bad luck having to do with children or family.

his theory of *ovoo* power. He thought it probably had something to do with the bacteria and other microbial cultures that grew from the milk and food offerings that accumulated there. An encounter with concentrated bacteria could cause some kind of influence on the human body and ultimately on its fate.⁷⁸

We finally got into the province capital of Baruun-Urt at around two in the morning, sixteen hours after we left Dariganga. I spent the night at my friend Davaa's house, and over milk tea I told her the whole story, now too wired to sleep. Davaa thought that the wolves were a sign, that we would ultimately succeed despite our trouble on the road. I told her about giving the gum to Khalzan Ovoo.

“Oh yes, that was a good idea. Khalzan has authority over the small road *ovoo*, and Altan Ovoo has authority over Khalzan. And you love Altan Ovoo and Altan Ovoo loves foreigners and travelers, so then it was okay.”

I also asked her if she thought a little boy neglecting to add stones to the *ovoo* could have really caused all that chaos.

“I don't know, could be. You said that lady had a fight? Maybe she was carrying bad luck. You never know.”

Years later, in 2017 before heading to my dissertation fieldwork in Dariganga, I met Bud for lunch at a Korean restaurant in Ulaanbaatar. We reminisced about our

⁷⁸ This is especially interesting in connection with a recent government anti-littering campaign meant to keep people from leaving food offerings and prayer flags at significant holy sites, and instead to deposit money into a box installed nearby.

adventure. Both of us had told the story so many times that it had taken on its own life.⁷⁹

“Now whenever I try to leave Dariganga I get so nervous.” She laughed. “I can’t go down that road without thinking of that time.” She said. “I’m so superstitious now, I’m like this.” she pantomimed giving a milk offering and praying and then did the sign of the cross.

I laughed. “Me too! I’ll never forget to put down a stone again.”

Ovoo interactions, whether positive or negative, transform the circumstance of all who materially interact with them, or don’t. As they pile up, those who did the piling go peeling off in all directions, transformed by the moving of stone.

Making Heaps in “Mine-golia⁸⁰”

Mining, like building *ovoo*, is a mode of geosocial relation that has become ubiquitous not only in the social life of individuals but in the character of the Mongolian landscape. Also, like *ovoo*, it is a risky mode of relating across difference with the goal (or perhaps the unintentional result) of gathering fortune (in the form of luck, blessings, or wealth) and the risk of being struck with misfortune. What seems like an immaterial relation, having to do with intangible entities like energies, spirits, or fortune, is taking place in these two instances in an intensely material mode: by

⁷⁹ When I tell it, I usually leave out details that make it seem too outlandish, such as when the driver handed me a wrench and asked me to come chase the wolves away with him, or the fact that the famous pop singer Bold was in one of the cars that passed us by as we were looking for a ride.

⁸⁰ (Bulag, 2009)

physically moving stone, metal, and earth from one place and heaping it up in another. This ties into one of the broader theoretical interventions of this dissertation, which is to think the immaterial and the material together so as to blur the boundaries between them.

Mining is a form of piling and heaping that is not unlike an *ovoo* encounter. Digging down through sediments settled in place over millions of years, mines become events in which place is made via the excavation of time over time—a socialist era copper pit mine, even one still in operation, is very different from a pit mine that is only a decade old. The longer a mining project goes on, and the deeper the pit sinks, the more distant pasts are pulled into the present and the higher they pile. As it excavates the past materially, the mine also makes its own history as successive presents unfold. Materials of the buried past that emerged into a socialist present will have very different roles and relations within the social contexts of their human counterparts than those that are unearthed in the early 21st century. To understand this, it is important to get a sense of the historical eras of mining and the ways one method of material relation has transformed over time.

The history of mining in Mongolia is long, although the country didn't gain its international reputation as "The Asian Eldorado" until the early 2010's. Mongolia's "world class" deposits of copper and coal in the southern Gobi, and uranium and gold deposits elsewhere, were opened to foreign investment, and by 2012 exploration and international investment had picked up rapidly, driven by Mongolia's need for hard currency, to create the "greatest mineral rush on the planet" (Janes and Chuluundorj

2015). Though Mongolia did have a history of mining prior to the mineral extraction boom, the explosion in 2012 created enormous social transformation and made mining one of the primary features not only on the Mongolian landscape but in Mongolian life.



*Fig. 2.4: Panorama of the Erdenet Mine's pit
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, September 18th, 2017)*

This history can reliably be traced back to the turn of the 20th century⁸¹ when the Mongolor company, against significant opposition, began mining for gold in Mongolia. In 1920, Russian investors opened Nalaikh coal mine just outside Ulaanbaatar, which is still in operation today. In 1921 both of these projects were nationalized, and Soviet geological expeditions began 10 years later. After World War II, extraction projects began in earnest and two Soviet-Mongolian joint stock companies (Sovmongolmetall and Mongolneft) were established in 1949 to exploit Mongolia's mineral wealth. The former mined fluorspar, tin, and uranium in the

⁸¹ Though Marco Polo did mention the mining of asbestos in Tuva in his writings.

north-eastern province of Choibalsan (now Dornod) as well as in Sükhbaatar province. Mongolneft was concerned mostly with oil extraction and operated primarily in the eastern Gobi Desert. Neither of these companies were very productive, so in 1957 the Soviet Union donated them to Mongolia. Until the 1970's, most of the minerals extracted in Mongolia, coal, crude oil, fluorspar, and lime, were intended for the domestic market.

However, in 1978, Erdenet copper mine was founded, and Mongolia's economy began to run on mineral exports rather than livestock wealth. This was in line with other pushes for industrialization, hybridization, and increased production during the socialist era (Linden, forthcoming). In this way, mining grew in tandem with exports like dairy, wool, and leather production. The onset of industrialization was significant and transformed the landscape and the way Mongolians imagined their relationships to it. The Erdenet mine became a symbol for the mineral wealth, the *erdene*,⁸² that fed the nation.

As was briefly discussed in the previous chapter, there is a high degree of ambivalence around mining, especially in places like Sükhbaatar where industrial large-scale mining is relatively new. Mining in Mongolia could be understood to be taboo, as according to herding customs on the steppe, it is best to avoid any breaking of the earth so as to prevent angering the various spirits, energies, and other powerful entities that reside there. However, one has to stake one's horse somewhere, so there

⁸² Treasure or jewel

are strategies for pacifying these entities⁸³ when the benefits of breaking ground outweighed the risks. Mining carried the same amount of risk as any necessary interaction with the landscape: hunting, fishing, chopping wood, even just moving across a landscape inhabited by often undetectable entities. The moral challenge⁸⁴ presented by Erdenet to the Mongolian nation was thus outweighed by its benefit of building a Mongolian socialist state. Erdenet is still in operation today, and this attitude of cost-benefit analysis remains both in the city itself and largely in the perception of Erdenet in the imagination of the nation as a whole.

The moral character of mining began to take on a stronger presence in national discourse a few decades after the democratic transition in 1992, when prospectors and mineral investors put into motion the development of several massive projects, especially in the south-eastern Gobi. The most controversial of these projects was the discovery of a massive deposit of copper-gold ore just north of the Chinese border at Oyu Tolgoi, operated by Turquoise Hill Resources, a Canadian mineral exploration and development company and subsidiary of Australian/Canadian multinational mining corporation Rio Tinto. Nearby is Tavan Tolgoi, one of the world's largest coking and thermal coal deposits that remains untapped due to a series of political and financial corruption scandals, as are the Boroo and Gatsuurt gold

⁸³ Such as the “soothing” rituals described in chapter 1

⁸⁴ Legend goes that during the Qing period, a group of Chinese miners tried to extract the deposit and were struck by lightning as punishment—animating what was then called “Erdenetiyn Ovoo” with power.

deposits in northern Mongolia near the Russian border, which were sold in 2018 by Canadian-owned Centerra Gold in the wake of permitting delays by the Mongolian government under pressure from local activists. Less high profile but still ubiquitous are the hundreds of smaller mines such as Sükhbaatar’s Tömörtiin Ovoo and Dornod’s Shinshin, usually Mongolian-Chinese or Mongolian-Russian joint ventures that have popped up all across the country. The particular characteristics of projects on this scale of mining are highly variable, with different scales of investment, different workforces, different levels of cooperation with environmental impact assessment standards, and different levels and tenors of engagement with local communities. It is difficult to speak in general about mining on this scale, as sentiment varies so widely from site-to-site. For example, in Sükhbaatar, the Tömörtiin Ovoo project is quite highly regarded due to its overall positive economic impact in the province center. However, secretive uranium exploration projects not far away in Dariganga have been met with great suspicion and anger.

Perhaps most prevalent in the anthropological literature on mining in Mongolia has been Artisanal mining, colloquially known in Mongolia as “ninja mining,” because the green panning bowls that miners strap to their backs give them a resemblance with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Ninja mining has decreased rapidly in recent years, but in the years after the transition, high levels of urban unemployment and recurring livestock die-offs due to climate change and disease drove many into poverty. Artisanal miners were comprised of three groups: the first were “unemployed workers in the mining sector...enduring severe poverty due to the

collapse of state-driven mineral exploration and mining activity” (Grayson et. al. 2004); the second were urban poor from Ulaanbaatar and farm workers from north-central Mongolia who were likewise disenfranchised by the transition to the market economy; and the third were herders whose herds had died off due to climate change. In the last decade, artisanal mining has decreased considerably due to the development of new industrial mining projects and a crackdown on the practice by government officials as a result of a series of takedowns in the press that blamed “irresponsible and careless” artisanal miners for the environmental degradation caused by mineral extraction (High 2011). Additionally, their direct material and economic relations with gold imbued them with a (highly classed) image of greed and moral pollution (High 2011). Though the artisanal mining that High describes in her ethnography had largely slowed down by the time I started fieldwork in 2017, this era of material practice marked an especially granular and “down-to-earth” way of creating material collaborations with geological landscapes. This material and hands-on engagement with earth: sifting, digging, tunneling, smuggling is a similar process to that of an *ovoo* or piling up a slag heap, but in a much more intimate and embodied register.

Since 2012, GDP growth has slowed considerably due to dropping prices for gold and copper. In addition, breakneck inflation, driven by “Dutch disease,” the term for the negative effects of over-dependence on extractive industries, has caused incredible economic strain for most Mongolians. Most resource wealth is funneled towards elites, and the mining and herding industries are no longer part of an

integrated modernization project, as they were during socialism. Mineral extraction has accelerated to a rate where its environmental effects are interfering with the maintenance of grazing lands (Jackson 2015), as well as the climate as a whole with phenomena like *zud*⁸⁵ and desertification that have led to widespread livestock death. This “resource curse,” characterized in Mongolia’s case by economic turmoil and suppression of non-mineral sectors of the economy (Humphrey et al. 2007), has created mining anew, as a way of making and producing landscape that is run primarily by capital.

Despite the total dominance of the mineral extraction sector in Mongolia, most people in eastern Mongolia have seen very little return. Even in Sükhbaatar, where sentiment towards mining as a whole is still relatively positive in comparison to other places in the east, the public is highly skeptical of the mining sector’s relationship with the Mongolian State. The fantasy that there would be a new mining project to feed the Mongolian nation in the 21st century in the same way Erdenet had provided in the 20th is long gone. Even worse are public anxieties about the state’s intense interest in attracting more and more foreign investors to the mining sector, as many see these collaborations as simply increasing the number of ways through which wealth can leave the country (Bonilla 2014).

Azjargal, a former student of mine who now works in administration at Oyu Tolgoi, has been closely following the flurry of news around the various OT

⁸⁵ Unusually long and harsh winter, a freeze following a drought

corruption scandals since the mine shipped its first batch of copper in 2013. While she had initially begun this surveillance to make sure she wasn't about to lose her job, she has become increasingly cynical about the amount of governmental oversight into the project. We were chatting online after I had returned home from fieldwork and discussing the various conspiracy theories that had emerged since I left. I told her about the alleged uranium prospectors in Dariganga, and another rumor I had heard about a certain French uranium mining outfit purchasing the prime-time hour on Mongolia's major news network. "Of course they did." She wrote. "And who will stop them? These politicians, Jess, they would sell us to anyone for a little money."

Treasure City

Ovoo are not the only rock piles that have come to characterize the eastern Mongolian landscape, nor are they the only heaps in which material exchange between geological forms and human action opens up future possibilities of fortune and danger.

I traveled to Erdenet in the fall of 2017, by invitation from a local English professor, who I'll call Suvdaa. She had contacted me over Facebook, asking if I'd be willing to give a guest lecture and workshop on writing pedagogy at the Orkhon Province branch of Mongolian National University. A few days before I was supposed to leave, I was having lunch with my friend Nyamaa in Ulaanbaatar. I asked if he'd ever been to Erdenet, and he nodded and held up his cigarette to punctuate his point. "Erdenet is really nice, the streets are paved, everything is painted. People walk

very calmly, you know, they wait for the light before they cross. It's very neat and clean. It almost doesn't seem like I'm in Mongolia, while I'm there. It's kind of creepy, actually. You'll see."

"Erdenet" refers to two distinct but nested entities: the first is Erdenet City, home to 97,000 people as of 2017 and Mongolia's third largest city behind Ulaanbaatar and Darkhan. The second is the Erdenet mine, one of the world's largest copper and molybdenum mines. When it was founded in 1977, it was the largest open pit mine in Asia, and it is currently the fourth largest copper-producing mine in the world. The mine was founded on the site of Erdenetiin Ovoo, a formerly worshiped mountain which was known to possess a large deposit of mineral wealth since the early 19th century (Atwood 2004). The mine was founded as a joint Soviet and Mongolian project and developed by Soviet "specialists"⁸⁶ and as of 1980, nearly half of the population was ethnic Russian. In 2018, that number had dwindled to 10%, but Russian and Soviet influence is still very much present, and Erdenet is still the "scene of considerable continuities with the socialist period that are not present elsewhere in Mongolia" (Smith, 2015, 30). Prior to Erdenet's founding, Mongolia's economic role in the Eastern bloc had primarily been as a producer of meat, leather, and wool, but in the subsequent years it also began to export fluorspar, uranium, zinc, gold, and silver. Erdenet is somewhat set apart from the flurry of Chinese, Canadian, Australian, and French transnational mining enterprises that have rushed into

⁸⁶ As Marissa Smith explains (2016) this term was intended to integrate the previously separated social classes of intellectuals and workers, and in Erdenet "was coded in terms of nationality" (Smith, 2015 pg. 25)

Mongolia since 2010 and is little known outside the former Eastern Bloc due to its socialist history and the positive social relations that are produced between Russian and Mongolian coworkers at G.O.K., the company that runs the mining enterprise (Smith 2015, 10).

The strong presence of women as mine employees, in contrast to the mostly male workforce at mining sites such as Tömörtiin Ovoo in Sүkhbaatar, is also a holdover from socialist-era mining projects, where the addition of women into the industrial workforce was a central goal of Soviet modernization. Likewise, the prevalence of Mongolian Russian speakers⁸⁷ at Erdenet also reveals a historical break, as the largely Mandarin-speaking workforce at Tömörtiin Ovoo is restricted to barracks on the mining site, and rarely if ever interact with Mongolian coworkers at the mine. This isolation came to a head in 2012, when the teenage daughter of one of the Chinese mining executives died by suicide in her home on the mining site. While some people in Baruun-Urt read this event through the lens of ethnic stereotype (specifically that Chinese parents are too hard on their children), many people read the event as a result of a kind of toxic sociality that was taking place at the mine. Deegii, the head of the Sүkhbaatar Children and Families Center, remembers it this way, “That young woman was isolated from her peers, and the loneliness became too much to bear.” I asked why she didn’t go to school with the other children in town and was instead taught by private tutors who also lived on the mine site. “Honestly, I

⁸⁷ Though rarely Russian Mongolian speakers

hate to say it, but I think it's too dangerous here for Chinese people. You know some people are angry that Chinese are taking our Mongolian wealth. But it's not that young girl's wrong, poor thing." In these conversations, comparisons to socialist-era mines and positive relations between local Mongolian populations and foreign mine workers came to the forefront, specifically Erdenet and its social coworking groups comprised of Mongolians and Russians.

I arrived in Erdenet in the late afternoon, pulling into town after hitching a ride from Darkhan with two affable guys in their late twenties, one of whom was a gym teacher at a secondary school in town and the other who worked for Erdenet Khivs, a carpet manufacturer and the second-best known business in town. Coming into town on the newly paved road, I noticed a fog-like cloud of dust or vapor rising before us. It engulfed us just as we passed under a rusting metal archway that read: *Enkh Taivan/Mir* ("Peace" in Mongolian and Russian). On the left was the railroad I would be taking back to UB at the end of my stay, with boxcars parked all along it. I could see the outline of strange machinery in the distance. We passed a few houses—in other cities I'd visited in Mongolia the outskirts were mostly occupied by *ger*, here it was mostly Siberian-style wooden houses with painted shutters. We passed the Erdenet carpet outlet which my fellow passenger excitedly pointed out.



*Fig. 2.5: Slag heap and Ferris Wheel in Erdenet City
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, September 17th, 2017)*

Then, on the left, I saw what I had come to see: an enormous heap of what looked like loose sandy soil—as tall, if not taller, than Dariganga’s Altan Ovoo. It very closely resembled the hill-like heaps that surrounded Tömörtiin Ovoo in Sükhbaatar, or the Baganuur coal mines outside Ulaanbaatar. When I first arrived in Mongolia, I thought these piles were naturally-occurring terrain. One thing I hadn’t realized is that from the ground, pit mines look like mountains.

I was dropped off at the bus station in front of a mosaic of Lenin,⁸⁸ where Suvdaa quickly located me before taking me to the dorm where I’d be staying. As we

⁸⁸ Most depictions of foreign socialist heroes had disappeared from public space by my fieldwork in 2017 (statues of Stalin and Lenin in Ulaanbaatar were pulled down and auctioned off in 1990 and

pulled onto the university grounds, I remarked to her how much the spoil heaps of the mine looked like a mountain, specifically like the extinct volcanoes out in Dariganga. “Well, they’re kind of similar, aren’t they?” she said. “Volcanoes are made of explosions from the earth, and so is our Erdenet mine!”

She was referring to the dynamite explosions by which the copper ore was excavated. These explosions could be heard throughout the entire city every Friday, the event of mine’s excavation transforming the temporality of the town. Both spoil heaps and extinct volcanoes were cast-off excess from a point of eruption—remarkable piles of substance expelled from a void. “Actually, though,” Suvdaa continued, “we don’t call these piles ‘mountain’ (*uul*). There used to actually be a mountain just there, called Erdenetiyn Ovoo. That *ovoo* is where they found the treasure deposit, where there is now a mine. These are the piles that is discarded from the mine. We call them *khiimel uul*.⁸⁹ After putting my things away in the dormitory, I took a walk down the road to look at the spoil heap in the sunset. As darkness fell on the grassy plains leading up to its foot, the heap was lit up in rusty streaks. Just as dusk engulfed it too, a Ferris wheel just down the road from where I stood lit up, bright pink, green, and yellow against the darkness of the form behind it.

2012, respectively. As of 2011, Stalin resided on the dance floor of Isimuss night club in UB). Or else, in places like Sükhbaatar, which were heavily developed after the democratic transition, they had never appeared. Not so in Erdenet.

Though the stated reasons for pulling such statues down were that they valorized “murderers,” according to Bat-Uul Erdene, the mayor of Ulaanbaatar at the time Lenin was defenestrated, depictions of Marshall Choibalsang, the architect of the 1930’s purges, are still ubiquitous. In many people’s eyes, their removal has more to do with making a show of resistance to foreign political interference; or with maintaining Mongolia’s performance as a model democracy in the region.

⁸⁹ Artificial or man-made mountain

A few days later we were standing on the lip of the pit, being shown by the mine's safety engineer where the dynamite was placed for the weekly detonation that, along with the sirens signaling the start and end of the day at the mine, have become a sonic temporal frame unique to Erdenet. Behind us, past more massive dirt piles and lesser man-made spoil banks, was a strange milky-blue lake with lacy white edges, which our guide called a *khiimel nuur*, a man-made lake used for cleaning and cooling the discarded minerals after smelting the metallic copper from the ore. Before smelting, the *gangue* or barren rock must be ground up and separated from the sulfide minerals. This process begins in the "grinding room" at the mine—a series of extremely loud chambers through which excavated rock is passed, and ground into finer and finer particles. The ore is separated from the gangue, or "barren rock," via a process called "froth flotation," in which the gangue sinks to the bottom of a water chamber and is then discarded. Finally, the ore is taken to a smelting room, where the metallic copper is separated from the excess ore.

The safety engineer described the *khiimel nuur* as one of two filtration systems responsible for cleaning and renewing the mining site's water, and as the source of the water they used for the process of froth flotation. "So, the white minerals around the edges are made of the discarded rock?" I asked, referring to the evaporated film of white around the rim of the lake. He confirmed that yes, they were. I asked if it made water safe to drink. "Oh yes, perfectly safe. All that is left is minerals, like in mineral water." He replied. "This way is quite sustainable." I noticed

a familiar smell. It was the smell of Baruun-Urt on certain nights when the wind blew down from the north, the edge of a rusty knife. The smell of smelting ore.



*Fig. 2.6: Grinding room at Erdenet Mine
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, November 18th, 2017)*

I asked the engineer about the spoil heaps—the *khiimel uul*. At what stage of discard were they? “This is the first stage of what we get rid of.” He said. “We remove the surface layers with dynamite and then we remove the non-ore rocks and low-grade molybdenum and copper ore into these *ovoo*. Maybe if you’re lucky you could find malachite in there.”

I paused for clarification. “You call these *ovoo*?”

“Well, not officially. But yes we sometimes call them *ovoo*, because they are kind of like the *ovoo* you see elsewhere, aren’t they?”

Suvdaa interjected. “Piles of rocks that can make you rich!”

“Yes, yes. Exactly this.” He replied.

Speaking on the irony of *ovoo* spoil heaps made on the site of a past mountain *ovoo*, Erdenet scholar Marissa Smith writes, “The *ovoo* heaps of ore that had once been *ovoo* mountain, like the *ovoo* heap of offerings on an *ovoo* mountain-top, comprise and transmit parts of an individual or group’s shared substance placed to mingle with that of others who have also made offerings, whether of vodka or scientific expertise, to comprise the *ovoo* (2015, 47).” Here Smith is referring to the processes of building *ovoo*, mining, and making spoil heaps. She identifies a particular way of producing value that she calls “accretion”, relating this to the value produced by building and maintaining positive social relations, particularly across difference (between Mongolian and Soviet coworkers, for example) and via processes of sharing and transferring *erdene* within and across social groups.

Erdene are “treasure” or “valuables” that can be obtained through relational interactions across lines of difference: between locals and foreigners, the living and the dead, and with non-human and immaterial entities such as spirits of place, ancestors, deities, and *energi* drawn from wild animals, mountains, stones, healing springs, plants, and the very forces that shape the landscape itself. This treasure can be immaterial things like “fortune” and “knowledge as well as valuable objects such

as herd animals, precious gemstones and metals, and human persons” (Smith 2015). In transforming Erdenetiin Ovoo into Erdenet mine, mining accretes not only material treasures like copper, molybdenum, and malachite, but also invokes the treasure of *chandmani erdene*. This is the Mongolian term for the Chintamani Stone, the wish-fulfilling jewel which can manifest wishes according to one’s desires, and also a metaphor for the teachings and virtues of the Buddha.



Fig. 2.7: Mural at Erdenet Mining Company headquarters
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, September 20th, 2017)

This is also an appellation for worshiped mountains like Altan Ovoo, particularly in Dariganga literature (Mend-Ooyo, 2015). At the entrance to the corporate headquarters of the Erdenet mine, there is a tile mosaic depicting a miner with pickaxe and helmet holding up a glittering green jewel emanating golden rays. Behind him, a rider in traditional dress and his horse gallop beneath the blue sky, and the rider extends his hands heavenward towards the blue and red droplets signifying the *chandmani erdene*.

Both spoil heaps and *ovoo* are points of connection that create the landscape via a locating power and also render it more than a landscape via the process of material and value accretion. They are spatiotemporal events at which the future is transformed along with the transformation of the material form at points of landscape—*gazar*. In Mongolia and elsewhere, mines exist as something *formed*, an opening made in the earth for the purpose of extracting material value from within it. What the Erdenet mining engineer described in calling the slag heap *khiimel uul* an *ovoo* was an ironic mimicry of the *takhilga* described in Chapter 1, and of *ovoo* sacrifices and offerings in general. This mountain spoil heap, the *süld ovoo*, and the neglected driver's *ovoo* on the way from Dariganga, all demand a certain sacrifice in exchange for fortune.

Months before I ran into Bayarsaikhan at the *süld ovoo*, I traveled with her to an assignment in Baganuur, a suburb district of Ulaanbaatar and coal mining hub. On the road coming into town, *khiimel uul/ovoo* not unlike those at Tömörtiin Ovoo and

Erdenet rose into view. Gripping the steering wheel, Bayarsaikhan said, “These have changed so much for me since I was a child.”

“Yeah, they’re probably gotten a lot bigger.” I remembered in Erdenet, when Suvdaa remarked on how she felt mixed about the *khiimel uul*. They were part of the mine, she acknowledged, and therefore part of the wealth of her city, but the fact of their heaping encroachment was beginning to become disturbing.

“Every year they get closer to town.” She had remarked. “And every year the mine has less and less.” Due to processes of erosion the portions of ore nearest the earth’s surface are usually the richest in heavy and valuable minerals, and as the pit grows deeper over time, Erdenet’s yield becomes more and more sparse. As of 1995, most of Erdenet’s concentrates are sold to companies which redistribute them to Chinese smelters. Currently corporations are being established in partnership with international partners to increase production of “value-added products,” such as refined copper cathode. The mining engineer we met at the edge of the pit worried that Erdenet may not have enough copper left to last the next two decades.

“Yes, that.” Bayarsaikhan replied, speaking of the heaps outside Baganuur. “But actually, the way I think about them has changed too.” She explained how, when she was a child in the late 1980’s, her mother had been a machinist for the mine, how that had been such a great source of pride. “We used to open our windows to smell the scent of coal.” She told me. “It was like *ahhh* progress.” Her work as of late, however, especially since the mining boom had crashed, had changed her viewpoint

of the landscape. “There’s just so much violence now. Men out of work and people desperate for money, it can get violent. Now when I see this place, this is what I think about.”

These *ovoo* are piled up series of interaction, accretion, and eruption, and serve as locating and meaning-making material events which not only influence the future, but also serve as guideposts when referencing the past (Basso 1996). The connection between the *ovoo* and the spoil heap is not necessarily in the kind of fortune or future they generate, but in the way they are both heaped and piled: leaving milk to collect on a *sild ovoo* opens embodied future possibilities; trouble with a roadside *ovoo* transforms a mundane landscape into being “full of things,” as Bud described it; and the spoil heaps of a socialist mining project come to represent the ambivalence that characterizes so much of the mining boom and people’s relationship with geological landscapes as they move into uncertain futures. Both *ovoo* and slag heaps are points that represent a kind of lively collaborative materiality in which each layer of sedimentation, accretion, and erosion creates new landscapes, new possibilities, and new ways of being.

Chapter 3: *Energi*

*With my palm of my hand I
press down on the earth.
The earth is warm,
and my hand is warm.
The generous and beneficent sun
has certainly given its warmth.
My mother, her mind bountiful,
has certainly given her milk.
The earth is warm,
and my hand is warm.*

-J. Oyuntsetseg, "The Earth is Warm"

The previous chapters have described the character of possible relations between humans and lively geological forms, as well as how the products of these interactions help create the landscape in which they take place. However, we might also ask—what is the material nature of these interactions, or what is occurring when a human body and a geological form meet?

In late spring of 2018, I was traveling out of Dariganga to visit a friend in the province capital when the car I was riding in got a flat right on the edge of town. While the other passengers decided to accompany the driver on his errand driving back into town on a spare, the woman sitting next to me suggested that she and I have an impromptu roadside picnic while we waited for them to return. The weather was lovely and the grass beside the road was soft and green, so I agreed, and we disembarked at the foot of the mountain beside the archway that marked the entrance to the town center.

The woman, who introduced herself as Sara, explained to me that she had been waiting her whole life to see the mountain, nearly 55 years, despite having grown up in Tüvshinshiree, a rural district directly to the west, about a 4-hour drive from Dariganga. She tore up some white bread she had in her purse and gave me a few handfuls to sprinkle before we sat down. She pressed her hand down on the grass and sighed, “Isn’t this nice? Feel that good *energi*. I’ve been taking on this *energi* all week. I’ll remember this forever.” Smiling cheekily, she added, “I’m just like a young woman again, my heart is so full of light. Try it!”

I pressed my palm into the grass and sure enough, I swore I could sense something—a radiance from the earth.

Energi is a loan word from Russian that first came into usage in Mongolian in the mid-20th century, brought back with Soviet-educated scholars who returned home after World War 2. It was first used primarily in the sciences around the 1960’s and 1970’s⁹⁰, and came into its popular colloquial usage in the late 1990s⁹¹. *Energi* as a term is nimble enough to encompass intensely local understandings while also pointing to the ways in which global historical flows and colonial abstractions both influence these understandings and are exceeded by them. This chapter defines *energi* broadly as a local energy epistemology that both encompasses and surpasses understandings of “energy” as it is defined by modernity (socialist and post-socialist),

⁹⁰ Manduhai Buyandelger, personal communication, June 1st, 2021

⁹¹ Tömörbaatar Tsermaa, personal communication, February 10th, 2018

while also drawing on long pre-existing relations with invisible landscape entities and qualities.

Energi is further complicated in that it has been constructed in a context where capitalism did not introduce modernity nor capital. Instead, the “other modernity” (Rofel 1999, Yoshimi 2006) of socialism ushered in the industrial era and an understanding of energy as primarily linked to capital. Thinking of energy first and foremost as fuel for production and industry was also part of the socialist Mongolian state’s goals. “Lenin’s Light,” a colloquial term for electric light during the socialist era (Sneath 2009) and a metaphor for a progress narrative that promised to bring the people out of the darkness of superstition and belief in spirits (Pedersen 2011) and into a perfectly rational, and productive socialist society via the introduction of modern ways of knowing and doing. This modernization project was intended to create a “bounded imaginative space [to be] filled with particular ideologies,” however; this attempt to corral energy into the exclusive space of modernity and capital was only partially successful. While new imaginative spaces were indeed produced by the advent of both socialist and capitalist modernization projects, in many post-socialist places (Richardson 2008; Sneath 2009; Thomas 2010) this imaginative space was made in a kaleidoscopic or palimpsestic formation. In Mongolia, this integrated pre-revolutionary Indigenous (Sneath 2009), Qing (Yoshimi 2005), socialist, and post-socialist ways of knowing into and understanding of the world that includes multiple modernist rationalities while also exceeding them. In the case of Mongolia and *energi*, pre-revolutionary ways of understanding the power,

agency, and influence present in the landscape are integrated with understandings of energy produced by socialist and capitalist understandings of capital.

Energi is a post-modern Mongolian energy epistemology that functions both within the boundaries and in excess of the notion of energy at the center of capital: an extractive and combustible mode of value adjudication that understands energy as primarily defined by fuel (as a materially extracted resource) or work (as productive labor extracted from the body). *Energi* as a concept formation is possible because of the kaleidoscopic assemblage of all the energetic forms that came before it: pre-revolutionary, socialist, and capitalist. *Energi* includes the rationalizations of energy and makes them more-than-rational. This chapter asks: how does *energi* exemplify a mode of value production beyond the aforementioned modernist definitions of energy, how is it appropriated by the ever-expanding margins of capital, and how is it able to nevertheless escape the boundaries of these rationalizations?

There has recently been a call in the emergent field of energy humanities to engage with epistemologies of energy beyond the industrial capitalist frame. In *The Birth of Energy* (2019) Cara New Dagget argues against a popular ecomodernist form of energy ethics that sees a transition to “renewable” or “clean” energy as a central solution to global climate catastrophe. The cause of climate crisis, she says, is not determined by what kind of fuel sources being used to produce energy, but by the very way we define “energy” itself. She reveals that the concept of “energy” as it is currently understood within the framework of global capital, is not a truth of physics, but a historicizable cultural concept that emerged in service of the industrial

revolution and therefore in service of modern capital. The problem of climate crisis, she argues, cannot be addressed by swapping one fuel source for another. Instead, Dagget argues, the notion of energy itself must be decoupled from its attachment to industry, fuel, work, and the “veneration of waged labor”. Energy must be provincialized, both through historicization, as in Dagget’s work, and through the examination and elevation of alternate energy epistemologies that either precede or have emerged outside the North Atlantic industrial frame.

What can the various understandings of energy at work in the eastern Mongolian context offer the project of energy humanities? Here is a context in which the dominant epistemologies of the extraction economy and a significant industrialized workforce overlap with multi-layered cosmologies and a significant pastoral economy that relies on intimate embodied and sensorial knowledge of the geological terrain. This is a context where the excesses of energy make themselves known clearly in everyday life in imaginative and lively realms, particularly when it comes to moments of connection between human bodies and mineral forms. In “Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia”, Caroline Humphrey defines the phenomenon of “energies in nature” as another way of understanding the social agencies of various entities on the landscape—and argues that these agencies work to build spatial awareness for those reading said landscape (1995, 35).

In this chapter, I build on this understanding by unpacking *energi* as an attempt by industrial capital to appropriate these agencies in service of healing the exhausted laboring body in the interest of maintaining productive capacity. Though

energi may initially appear to be a conceptual flattening of a multitude of local landscape entities into something that is legible to both global and post-socialist forms of capital, the historically-ingrained presence of these entities, whether explicitly identified or not, enables a relation between stone and human bodies where value is adjudicated beyond the capacity to labor. This adjudication is enabled by the capacity of certain human bodies to sense liveliness in stones, a capacity that is developed beyond the frame of the five senses. In addition to being an appropriation of embodied landscape relations in service of labor and production, *energi* is also a mode of sensing liveliness in the non-living landscape that relies on this extra-sensorial capacity that is unquantifiable and resistant of what Povinelli calls the “geontological frame” (2015) that separates non-living from the living.

Energi is cross-contextual, appearing in discourses of mineral extraction, New Age spiritual practices, post-millennial hustle culture, houseplant care, etc. However, this chapter focuses primarily on moments when it appears in embodied human/mineral relations at sites of healing reinvigoration: in physical contact between human and geological bodies, forms, and objects. This chapter consists of three *energi* stories, where *energi* is a signpost for the ineffable liveliness and vitality that can be transmitted from stone to human bodies via a body’s capacity to sense liveliness in stone. Unpacking these stories will illuminate the ways in which *energi* takes up, exceeds, and subverts the congealed understandings of energy produced by modernity, industrialization, and global capital. Writing on the problem of scalability in the representation of “contaminated diversity,” Anna Tsing writes,

To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter. To learn anything, we must revitalize arts of noticing and include ethnography and natural history...A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories. This is the rush of stories' power..." (2015, 37)

Here also, I will attempt to engage with the unscalable, indefinable, and diffuse aspects of *energi* by telling three stories that primarily draw on feeling and tactile sensation as a way in which human bodies can engage with the liveliness of stones. These are stories about the art of noticing, not with the senses, but with a relationally-developed capacity for seeing vital qualities in minerals.

First, I will explore *energi* as a mode of understanding liveliness—particularly as it relates to healing exchanges between human and mineral bodies. This story takes place at Shambala Energi center⁹² in the Gobi Desert, where groups of pilgrims, most of them young white-collar women workers from Ulaanbaatar, go to renew the vitality of bodies exhausted by the demands of a post-shock-treatment neoliberal labor force. Following the pilgrimage circuit at the Shambala Energy Center in the Gobi desert, I trace particular sites of healing and vitality to be places where the liveliness of stone can be sensed by the human body. This capacity, I argue, is enabled by pre-existing relations with landscape entities that the logic of industrial

⁹² For the rest of the chapter, I will refer to this place as the *Energi* Center in order to maintain clarity and ease for the reader. *Energi* is very difficult to translate into English, but “*töv*” is used in much the same way as “center” in most contexts, and I’m confident that any meaning gap that might emerge here is not significant.

capital attempts to corral into combustible energy that can be translated into labor power.

Second, I look at how *energi*'s linguistic and conceptual hybridity allows it to be routinely appropriated by evaluating systems of capital while at the same time always remaining too slippery to be measured or defined. This story draws on an interview with the proprietor of a crystal shops in Sainshand, and his theories on how *energi* is transferred from his crystal jewelry into the human body. Here I further develop energy and *energi* as analogous to Dipesh Chakrabarty's conceptualization of two histories—one purely analytical and posited by capital (“History 1”) and the other unfolding as a “more effective narrative of human belonging” (“History 2”) (2000, 71). Here *energi* is an evaluating force that at first glance is fully integrated into capital (in that the evaluated stones are sold according to market price). However, upon closer inspection, both the initial process of evaluation and the purpose for which the stones are being sold function in such a way that they can never be fully rationalized by capital, while also touching on an indefinable value of stone in human life that has been cast aside in the process of turning minerals into resources. By provincializing “energy” into *energi*, we can define the two concepts more clearly: 1) energy, evaluated in terms of work and fuel, the ability to produce value through labor or combustion and 2) *energi*, produced not by labor abstraction or extraction but by productive relations between human and mineral bodies that creates new capacities in humans, and perhaps in minerals as well. The manner in which

energi both adjudicates value and creates extra-sensory capacity via an expanded view of material landscapes subverts and provincializes rationalization.

Finally, I explore one way in which a geologically-sensitive human sensorium might be produced via an exegesis of the poem *Ülemjiin Chanar* (“Your Perfect Qualities”). I unpack the ways in which repeated group recitations of the poem create an energetic geological space in the desert that is connected to an exalted female body. Enlivening the earth of the energy center with poetry creates a memory in which the performer’s body is associated with the body of the landscape. This association allows for a transfer of *energi* that can later be drawn upon as a capacitation that links the sensing body to a body of landscape in service of healing. This is not dissimilar to the way the accretions around *ovoo* sacrifices in the previous chapter can be drawn upon for fortune and an improvement of one’s destiny: the *takhil* opens up a relational space which can then be drawn from. An *Energi* Center enlivened with poetry of the body can then be drawn upon to heal the bodies of others, especially the young woman pilgrims who come to this place to ease the exhaustion caused by their multiple roles in the neoliberal labor force. This also draws on a pre-capitalist concept of Mongolian poetry as a creator of lively geological landscapes and an animating link between the liveliness of stone and human capacity, which will be further explored in later chapters.

The Road to Shambala

Sainshand is the capital of Dornogovi (east Gobi) province, about 130 km west of Dariganga. Viewed by satellite, it appears as a swath of red in the middle of the camel-colored expanse of desert. This red stone marks the location of Shambala Energiin Töv (energy center). This place is one stop on a larger pilgrimage circuit that includes Khamaryn Khiid, a Nyingma (“Red Hat”) Buddhist monastery that, like many countryside monasteries in Mongolia, has undergone a historical cycle of founding, destruction, and rebuilding alongside the historical ruptures of the last few centuries. The Shambala Energy Center and Khamar Monastery Temple Complex has only existed in its current form since 2006. It, along with most of the monasteries in Mongolia, was destroyed during the post-revolutionary purges under Marshal Choibalsan. By the time the Great Purge ended in 1939, Gandantegchinlen Monastery was the only operating monastery in the country. Mongolia’s initial GDP explosion at the start of the mineral extraction boom in the early 21st century financed many construction projects and the reconstruction of temples that had been in ruins since the purges. Other stops on the pilgrimage route also includes Khan Bayanzürkh,⁹³ one of Mongolia’s “Ten State-Worshiped Mountains,” the “Mother Cave” cave complex where Gobi Saint Danzanravjaa once meditated and which first drew him to the area, the site of Mongolia’s first open-air theatre, a pair of women’s *ovoo* built to resemble

⁹³ Also known as “Khüslin Khar Uul” — the Black Mountain of Wishes. This colloquial term denotes the personal, non-state relations with the mountain, which is primarily used for making wishes. Women pilgrims will line up to whisper wishes in the ear of a stone woman at the highest point we are able to climb. Men at the summit will shout their wishes into the air.

breasts, a wishing bell, a petrified forest, and a partially unearthed dinosaur spine embedded in the red-streaked dirt just off the circuit road.



Fig. 3.1: Khamaryn Khiid (Khamar Temple) and Shambala Energi Center (Image from Google Earth)

In the spring of 2018, I boarded a night train from Ulaanbaatar to Sainshand with a group of other pilgrims on their way to the Energi Center. We would all spend the night in the metal bunks stacked up in the shared “wagon” car and wake up early the next morning upon arriving in the Gobi. I struck up a conversation with Badma, the woman sitting across from me, an office worker in her early thirties who was traveling with her elderly mother and two children. She was going to the Energi Center to rid herself of her exhaustion—she was a single mother and worked at her office all week. Her mother helped with the children, but she was getting older and Badma could tell it was getting more difficult for her. Springtime, the most

exhausting of seasons in Mongolia, only exacerbated this feeling. She had been having pains in her lower back and had gone to a doctor for her kidneys. It hadn't really helped. "Exhaustion is an epidemic for Mongolian women," she said.

This sentiment was echoed by many of my friends in Sükhbaatar and Ulaanbaatar, women who are mostly in their late twenties and thirties, all of them working full times and many of them single mothers. Since all the way back in 2011, it was common for women to check themselves in to the local hospitals for a few days of bed rest and an IV drip. These "exhaustion" patients would often take IV drips to rehydrate, and sometimes would get B12 shots, but mostly the draw was to have a few days where they could rest and be taken care of for a change. Once, in the teacher's lounge at the school where I worked from 2011-2013, I was discussing this practice with a coworker. I was telling her that she should try to get at least 7 hours of sleep a night if she could, when one of our older male colleagues piped up to correct me: "Actually women don't need to sleep much at all. Your bodies are like vessels, so you hold your *energi* in your bodies. Men, for us, we have *khiimori*, and it's like a running horse, it moves right through us, so we get tired easily and have to sleep and rest a lot." Of course, this was met by meaningful eye contact and quiet exasperation by the women in the room, but the idea of energy flows in the body being sexed was something I heard elsewhere as well. It should be noted that "*yadargaatai*" or "with exhaustion" is also used as a common exclamation when describing something annoying. In Mongolian, exhaustion, rather than being a lack of something, a lack of fuel, is a weight upon the body, something that needs to be removed.



Fig. 3.2: Waiting in line for the women's ovoos at Khan Bayanzürkh. The silhouettes of men ascend to the summit on the right. (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá April 28th, 2018)

Back on the train, Badma and I spent a few more hours chatting and sharing train snacks before strapping ourselves onto our bunks and falling asleep. I woke up once that night, probably around 2 or 3am, and when I looked out the window I saw the “true” Gobi desert for the first time. In the moonlight it looked like a minimalist painting in blue: a faint thin line bisecting the glass frame of the train window, the sky above it dark blue, the ground below barely lighter, like being out at sea.



*Fig. 3.3: Enjoying the Energi Center
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, April 30th, 2018)*

There are many theories about what exactly the Energi Center is, and none of them are in particular tension with the others. Here, the various energies present in the Gobi desert terrain have been harnessed, collected and concentrated in a tight and enclosed compound hemmed in by white walls adorned by a series of stupa. The patches of red rocky dirt that compels pilgrims from across the country (and world) to press their bodies to it is a deposit of iron and manganese in the desert soil. Weathered over time by the strong winds that sweep across the desert, especially during springtime, these minerals are oxidized and exposed to the atmosphere, and thereby are given their red color. Upon completing the circuit of *ovoo* offerings and prayers inside the walls of the Shambhala complex, pilgrims retire to sit in the sun on

the patches of red stone. Some come up to the edge and bend down to press their palms to the earth before straightening up and reaching towards the sun. Others set up picnics, laying out snacks and playing music from their phones. One family brought a boombox. There was more than one grandpa napping on his back with a baseball cap over his eyes and his hands crossed on his belly. The rest, including myself, simply sat in the dirt, warming our butts and absentmindedly pushing around tiny red pebbles.

While purchasing offerings (spring water, wheat berries, vodka, juniper incense, and a small copper bowl came in an all-in-one package) at the entrance gift shop, I asked the woman behind the counter where the Energi Center's *energi* came from. I was curious because the week before arriving in Sainshand, I had had a conversation with one of my coworkers who had visited the Energi Center the previous year and had encouraged me to make the trip after I told her about the persistent jaw and neck pain I had been experiencing since finishing my qualifying exams.⁹⁴ Salkhi, the supervisor of the foreign language department at the school where I taught language and literature, was showing me what plants I should buy for my windowsill at home in order to best filter the winter air pollution. I was admiring a small copper wire sculpture of a tree with tiny amethyst "leaves" that she had displayed among the organic plants and asked her where she got it.

⁹⁴ For the curious reader: it is still present at the time of writing.

“Oh, that’s like an *energi* thing—they say the tree shape is for good luck and the amethyst is for a clear mind.” She had purchased it, she told me, at the gift shop at Shambala Energi Center, and though she didn’t usually go for “superstitious stuff” like this, the “magnetic *energi*” she felt while at the geological site had her at least partially convinced. “I don’t know if it really works,” she told me, “but it feels nice to have it.”



*Fig. 3.4: Reciting poetry at the Golden Skull Ovoo
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, April 28th, 2018)*

Describing geological sites with compelling or alluring affect as “magnetic” was something I had heard in Dariganga. This intrigued me, as it offered an entry point into a description of affect that was not solely cosmological or intangible but

rooted in materiality as well. This brought me to the gift shop, where a shelf of the delicate stone and metal trees that Salkhi had behind her desk was displayed alongside other decorative stone accoutrements. I asked the proprietor where the magnetic *energi* of the Energi Center came from—what did it consist of? Was it related to the soil, stone, and ground in the area--the banded mosaic of dark yellow, orange, and ochre? Was it a magnetic field? She replied that she couldn't say for sure, but that to her understanding it had something to do with the configuration of the geological landmarks that made up the region, particularly those on the pilgrimage circuit. "*Energi* comes from the *ongon gazar* (sacred landmarks) here, and the red color comes from the earth in the same way." On the way from the Energi Center to Khan Bayanzürkh, I asked the cab driver the same question. She surmised that:

Sometimes it's more effective if you absorb minerals through your skin. I have a bath soak I take for magnesium; your body absorbs it better that way than it would through a pill. If you don't have enough iron, and you feel weak, if you have anemia, you can eat some horse meat or you can take a vitamin. This is the same, but you absorb it through the skin and the body. The sun also supplies you with vitamin D, which also gives the body more energy. It's just like taking a vitamin only its better because it's pure and natural. And of course, being out with nature is always good for you.

I came to Sainshand, not only hoping to release the tension in my jaw but hoping to solve a puzzle that kept coming up during my fieldwork—to figure out what *energi* "really meant" by going to the source. Instead *energi* revealed itself to be, if not beyond definition, then so infinitely definable it escapes any singular frame. Unraveling the various workings of the Energi Center depends on an integrated and holistic understanding of a particularly Mongolian constellation of knowledges about

geological landscapes—drawing on religious, historical, scientific, gendered and literary epistemologies that allow for multiple coexisting ontologies of landscape, saturated with proliferating beings, energies, histories, and palimpsestic texts. There is also a generative capacity to this narrow focus. Approaching the Energi Center on its own terms allows us to make space for particularities that may not fit within pre-existing understandings of other *energitei* (energetic) things. This opening up then makes space for particularities in other places to rush in, unraveling the entanglement between cross-global knowledge of place and the universalizing assumptions of power that seek to make everything instantly recognizable and therefore flat. However, even a specific and localized approach still finds itself attached to global flows. After all, I got to this place existing in the excesses of capitalist fuel-based energy on a coal-burning train.

Near the Energi Center, I was told to visit the “Mother Cave” where Danzanravjaa decided that he would build his temple on this site. The cave complex, which from a distance resembles an enormous stone beehive set down in a small canyon, got its name for the narrow passages which pilgrims could crawl so as to be reborn, crawling on their bellies through a stone birth canal in order to remove their “sins” and other negative attachments. In the case that a person may not fit through the narrow passages, there are also other small grottos, many set with small altars in the back, which one can pass through, usually lighting incense on the way.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ The feeling of these caves reminded me of Toroi Bandi’s ice cave in Sükhbaatar, just near Shiliin Bogd mountain.

The path that leads through the complex of Mother Cave ends with a rusty-colored flat rock up against the side of the cave complex. As each person filed by, they pressed a part of their body against the stone. I asked a woman in front of me what I was supposed to do, and she instructed me that if I had pain, I was to press the part of my body where the pain originated to the rock, and that it would help with the healing. “I have arthritis in my back,” she told me “This is really good for bad backs and kidneys.” I told her I had pain in my neck, and she showed me how to press my upper back against the warm rock as I shuffled sideways along the path behind her. I thought about Badma from the train, and if she’d already passed this stone or if she was somewhere behind me.

In this case, *energi* represents the vitalizing and healing effect stones can have on the human body in healing it from the exhaustion of capitalism. It attempts to appropriate pre-capitalist ways of engaging with invisible landscape entities via their transfer or removal of liveliness from human bodies. However, this appropriation is incomplete, as these entities and qualities exceed the frame of energy as purely fuel for labor. As *energi*, as a globalist (and sometimes New Age) concept attempts to appropriate these myriad beings, they transform it into something unquantifiable.

The difference here between energy and *energi* is how they are adjudicated by the human body and whether or not they can be translated into a measurable productive capacity. Certainly, exhausted laborers traveling to Sainshand to “recharge one’s batteries” are putting the liveliness of these stones into the service of capital by increasing their labor potential. They are translating the invisible agencies of the

geological landscape into energy—fuel to do work. This is why I have chosen the word *energi* to describe the liveliness the Energi Center pilgrims gain from these earthly phenomena: both because this is the word they use to describe the vitality they are seeking, and because to an extent they are being successfully appropriated by the global regime of labor capital. This is similar to the History 1 Chakrabarty describes in “Translating Lifeworlds”: this is an energy that can be measured via capitals logic through translation into labor, in this case labor power.

However, this vitality has its excesses, first and foremost as a result of the geontological separation that renders it without life and therefore unable to contribute to biologically adjudicated biopower that relies largely on the productive vitality of the human body. Though the bodily vitality of the pilgrims to the Energi Center is renewed, it is being renewed by a non-biological source, and therefore a non-living and non-laboring source according to the logic of biopower. It is ironically the very liveliness that allows invisible geological forces to be translated into energy that creates the excesses of *energi*.



Fig. 3.5: Pilgrims at the Mother Cave (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, April 30th, 2018)

The Crystal Man

During my time at Shambhala, after I had finished the energy center circuit, I ran into Ariunbold, who I had met at a Peace Corps retreat back in 2012. He was the counterpart of one of the business development volunteers who was stationed in Sainshand. We didn't spend much time together, but he was one of two men among

nearly 200 Mongolian counterparts, so it was fair to say he stuck out. He had set up a side business for himself selling *energitei* crystals at a small table with the other religious items vendors that waited at the exit. Ariuka's stand was especially bustling because, unlike the other vendors that sold highly polished stone jewelry that looked like it had been made in a factory and imported, his pieces retained the aesthetics of the surrounding landscape. As I looked through his items, mostly tumbled stones with natural inclusions that Ariuka had drilled holes in and tied to leather cords, he told me that the success of his business surprised even him.

One stone caught my eye: teardrop-shaped stone, mostly translucent, with a feathery bluish-green inclusion in the center, tied to a thin leather cord through a small hole drilled at the top. I handed it to Ariuka and pulled out my wallet. "Yeah this is a good one. Quartz and ocean jasper." He explained his theory of how to make good jewelry: he allowed the stones to remain as they were at the moment they came out of the ground, with no shaping beyond tumbling and drilling a hole for the cord. This method, he thought, was the main reason for his popularity: a "natural" aesthetic was appealing, of course, but maintaining the original shape of the stone also allowed the wearer to retain their memory of the place it came from.

And, you know, I called my business 'Energetic Stones' so I think I should make sure the stone keeps its good *energi* from the Energi Center. If I mostly let it maintain its shape it can remember how it was in this place and remember this place better. So then it won't lose its energy. If you carve it too much, it just looks like a fake stone from China. You would notice a difference after a while.

I put my necklace on in the car and noticed that the bag it came in also contained a little information card. On one side was Ariuka's business logo and contact info: "Energetic Stones: Made in Sainshand City with Dornogovi Minerals" on a celestial background of stars and planets. On the other side was some text in English: "Over 80 million years ago Mongolian silicate minerals were formed therefore it has absorbed a lot of energy that helps healing our everyday life in modern society with overwhelming positive ions and electromagnetic fields."

Ariuka fancies himself a bit of an amateur geologist and doesn't believe in immaterial landscape spirits other than *energi*, which he says comes from the geological attributes of the desert: the red iron-rich dirt, the petrified wood and dinosaur bones, and the "magnetic energy" that he's heard is present here. He shows me a quartz cluster behind his counter that he had procured from a crystal cave outside Ulaanbaatar and has carried with him ever since.

"See here? This came from a cave where so many other crystals were growing. See these straight angles? How the crystal grew in an organized way? These lines are connections along which *energi* can travel. So, the *energi* in the cave, coming from the earth traveled up all these lines. That's why you have to remove it properly, so it doesn't break too much. If you interfere with the crystal body, the *energi* will run out.

For Ariuka, the *energi* transfer is a simple matter of one body absorbing the chemical properties of another. I asked if he'd heard other explanations. "Of course." Ariuka answers. "You know this is a Buddhist place, so there are lots of religious ideas about it too." He's concerned about explaining it to me accurately and suggests we pick up a pamphlet in English at the gift shop before we go. Still, he takes a stab

at it. “You know Danzanravjaa was a Red Buddhist (Nyingma). He always had red robes, you see this in all the paintings of him, you’ll see at the museum later. Also, his Tsam characters are always red, or at least half red. So, energy put there by Danzanravjaa is probably red too.”



Fig. 3.6: Gobi terrain with red soil and radio tower (Photograph by Jessica Madison Pískatá April 29th, 2018)

This ambiguity between the contradictory yet concurrent and simultaneous explanations about the source of the *energi* here brings us back to the question of the two Energies. *Energi* is History 2 precisely because it cannot be pinned down: it’s kaleidoscopic and multimodal. This also tells us something about this context in that it subverts certain binaries—not only between capital/non-capital but also between

materiality/immateriality and secular/nonsecular ways of knowing. Pilgrims at the Energi Center, even as they disagree, all have the capacity for articulating understandings that muddy epistemic boundaries—particularly those that divide “pure” from “impure” (scientific/superstitious, secular/non-secular, modern/religious, etc.) *Energi* is excess energy in that it exists outside of the dominant paradigm while still being a part of it. While it creates value for resellers like Ariuka and the rest of the mercantile complex of the *energi* center, it also serves as a corrective and cure for *yadargaa*, the weight of capitalism on the human body. In this way, *energi* is a reclamation of the energy of production, or Capital in the Marxian sense, into the affective conception of *energi*.

***Ülemjiin Chanar*/“Your Perfect Qualities”**

Out of the many explanations offered to me as to how the Energi Center became energized, the one that was most interesting to me has to do with poetry. In Ulaanbaatar before my trip to Sainshand, I asked Buyanzaya, a history teacher at the secondary school where I worked that winter, about what I should expect when visiting Sainshand. “When you reach the *ovoo* at the very top of the Energi Center, you will recite “*Ülemjiin Chanar*” with everyone else who is gathered there. It’s very powerful, like many sutras put into one song. I think this is why this area is so energetic—that Danzanravjaa put this poem into the earth at this place to bless it and give it *energi*.”

Both Shambala Energi Center and the Khamar Monastery Temple Complex were founded by Dulduityn Danzanravjaa, the Fifth Noyon Khutagt and Lama of the Gobi, who is also known as one of the primary figures in Mongolia's literary history. A Nyingma Buddhist, he was known as something of a religious outlaw, often at odds with the authorities of the Gelugpa ("Yellow Hat") Sangha in Ikh Khüree (presently Ulaanbaatar). Legends of his intellectual prowess often have him pitted against Gelug religious authorities in battles of wit, winning each exchange with the use of (sometimes) off-color⁹⁶ tricksterism. These instructive "dialogues" often tie him to other Buddhist thinkers of his era (Kapišovská 2013), but he is also well-known for his explorations of medical properties of Gobi ecology, and for his reputation as a poet, hard drinker, and Casanova. Just outside his museum in the Sainshand city center, there is a statue depicting Danzanravjaa in mid-levitation, his scorpion familiar perched on his shoulder.

Gegeenten, G. Mend-Ooyo's literary biography of the "Wild Saint of the Gobi," tells the story of Danzanravjaa's "discovery" of the site that would later become Shambhala Energi Center. Just north of where Khamar Monastery now stands is the aforementioned honeycombed cave complex. Deep inside its pits and caverns, the Gobi Lama retreated to meditate for stretches of 108 days at a time. In the preface to the biography, Mend-Ooyo argues that these meditations led to a deepened understanding of the potency of the energies and ecological attributes of the Gobi

⁹⁶ A teenage student of mine once told me this story: Danzanravjaa has such control over his body that he could stand on the edge of the roof, piss off the side of the building, and then draw the stream of urine back into his body before it hit the ground.

landscape. In addition to building his theater and monastery, Danzanravjaa suspected he might be able to harness these energetic qualities, binding them to one concentrated place so that they might be more easily accessible to those who wished to benefit from them.

This is the theory of *Ülemjiin Chanar* (“Your Perfect Qualities”) that Buyanzaya explained to me before my departure. This poem, an ode to the artist Dadishura, Danzanravjaa’s close student, muse, and lover, is able to firmly emplace the energetic qualities and entities present in the landscape. Setting this poem to music, the Gobi Saint declared its power equivalent to 10,000 Green Tara Sutras. It is said that the recitation of this poem, by Danzanravjaa and all the pilgrims who followed to the Gobi landscape drew in its energies from far afield and rooted them in place, creating the Energi Center that religious pilgrims still visit.

Currently, *Ülemjiin Chanar* plays an essential role in the way pilgrims experience the energi center itself. At the northern sacred side of the complex, pilgrims climb a tall platform up to the Golden Skull Owoo and recite the poem in unison. In case anyone has forgotten the words, they are carved helpfully on a granite plaque next to the *owoo*⁹⁷, but most people have no need for them, as singing the song in a group allows for a collaborative effort in that at least someone remembers some of the words so that they can be collaboratively stitched together as they are sung out over the desert landscape. Just as the repeated visits to Altan Owoo strengthen the

⁹⁷ Because it serves the function of a sutra, the poem must always be recited in its entirety—incompletion invites danger and misfortune.

relations between the mountain and its human children, so the repeated recitations of *Ülemjiin Chanar* strengthen the energetic power of the energi center.

The poem, translated into English on the back of my entrance ticket to Shambala, reads as follows:

Your perfect qualities
Are like colors reflected in a mirror
I see your shining face, my dear,
And truly you have captured
My entire mindbody

Like the cuckoo's song
You relieve the stress in my mind
Your kind words are gentle, my dear
With such kindness you sit
And offer comfort

Your elegant body
Borne upon the breeze
Is beyond words, my dear
Like the scent of red sandalwood
You more and more entrance my thoughts

Like the taste of honey
Flowing from the heart of the lotus
Seeing you, my dear
Makes me ever happier
Happier beyond belief

In this human age
To do what you wish
Is to wish for the things to heaven
Afloat upon the ocean of deep enjoyment
Let us be joyful together.



Fig. 3.7: Ülemjiin Chanar printed in English on the back of the Energi Center entrance ticket

A scan of the poem suggests that it is a song about the healing ability of the body: the exalted female body of the poem is able to heal the anxieties of the speakers mind by the nature of its perfected being. We see a similar technique, drawn from heroic epic singing, being used in the subsequent chapter in a description of the

mountain Altan Ovoo, where the language of exaltation is used to create the image of a perfected subject and therefore conjure it and its wish granting ability into being. In this case, it is wish fulfilling power that is being invoked, as well as the power of healing the *setgel* (translated as mindbody) of the speaker. The poem itself on the page is a text of love and desire, but in its repeated recitations it becomes somewhat transformed. As a tool for rooting energetic qualities into the earth, it also links the earth with the human body. At the pilgrims recite the poem, each of them for a moment becomes the speaker, saturating the desert ground itself with the healing, exalted, and heroic qualities of Dadishura's body.

Blood from a Stone

Any countryside picnic would be incomplete without a meal of *khorkhog*. You begin by cutting meat (usually mutton but many prefer goat in the summer) carrots, onions, and sometimes potatoes into medium-sized chunks. Then, after making a small fire, you find a good number of smooth black stones, ideally a bit smaller than a fist, and place them carefully in the flames. Once the stones are good and hot, you place them inside a large metal milk container, ideally with a lid that seals, alternating them in layers with the vegetables and meat until the container is full nearly to the top. Pour in a bit of water and seal the top. When the meat is done, as determined by smell and sounds of sizzling and escaping steam, carefully open the container. Distribute the meat and vegetables to all gathered around and eat. Finally, close off the meal by handing out the safely cooled but still hot stones to your guests. They will have turned a dark glossy color from the melted fat and steam. Everyone will toss the

stone from hand to hand, holding it in their palm for as long as possible until they are completely cooled.

The first time I had a hot *khorkhog* stone handed to me I assumed it was a game or a test of strength. This is not entirely wrong, as any men in the party will tend to see how long they can hold a hot stone before tossing it to the other hand. However, it was quickly explained to me by Tumee, the barbeque master that there was more to it. “It’s good for your body to do this.” He told me. “The fat is good for conditioning your skin, and the heat from the rocks gives you *energi*.” Over the countless *khorkhog* meals I’ve had over the years, this explanation has been consistent. To hold the stones in this way is feeding the body with energy, as much a part of the meal as the meat and vegetables.

This was also my first encounter in Mongolia with the idea that the human body could benefit from physical contact with stones. I’d heard similar things in crystal shop contexts back in California, but the addition of heat and the mundane character of the stones themselves added a materiality to the exchange that was both distinct and down-to-earth, easier to latch onto. Here *energi* is both energy (in the form of the heat that transferred from fire to stone to skin) and vitality that is taken in by the whole body via the sensation of holding a hot stone in the palm.

Though it is relatively new to common speech, *energi* as an attribute of the environment has a long history in Mongolian environmental thought⁹⁸. There are a myriad of highly specific terms for the various intangible forces that emanate from the natural environment. These can include entities that occupy specific domains of landscape, such as the *ezed* and *savdag* discussed in the previous chapter (Humphrey and Onon 1996; High 2011), beings with souls of human origin (Humphrey 1995; Pedersen 2011; Buyandelger 2013), and malevolent hungry and wandering ghosts (Humphrey and Onon 1996; Pedersen, Empson and Humphrey 2007; Swancutt 2012; Buyandelger 2013). They can also be formless qualities that can be transferred from landscape forms like plants (Pedersen 2011) to humans. These energies can likewise influence the weather (Smith 2015) and the fortune of the people they interact with (Empson 2011; High 2011). Most important for the purposes of this chapter, however, are those which link landscape and the human body. In the Darkhad Depression, there are chaotic energies called *uran* which when ingested by animals or humans, can create psychological changes (Pedersen 2011). There are also energies which are transferred into a human body after perceived harm to the landscape, creating corresponding injury. Polluting a river will cause harm to the perpetrator's kidneys, breaking tree branches will cause bone fractures, killing a forest or mountain

⁹⁸ Another aspect of *energi* that this chapter did not discuss due to the fact that it took place primarily at a site of healing, was negative or "bad" *energi*. All throughout the years I lived in Mongolia, I was routinely warned, usually by older women, to stay away from people on the street who could transfer such bad *energi* to me. Usually these were people who were alone and inebriated in public, or who were otherwise behaving in an inappropriate or disturbing way. The same went with irritating or annoying houseguests, people who were complaining too much or otherwise being "exhausting." The remedy for this, I was told, was to throw salt after them once they left your home.

animal out of turn can cause insomnia and depression. Though most of the people I spoke to in southeastern Mongolia are less conversant in these intricate taxonomies than those in more shamanic-influences areas in the north and west, they still draw on an understanding that there is an influential connection present in the environment that can be formed, nurtured and felt between non-human forms and human bodies.



Fig. 3.8: Bracelet made from Blue Tiger Eye (Tsenkher Baryn Nüd) purchased from Energi Center vendor. This stone is said to help channel mental clarity and speed up sluggish endocrine production. (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, August 28th, 2017)

Energi is the result of the neoliberal appropriation of pre-existing land energies and entities into capital. However, this appropriation creates something that in fact exceeds capital, specifically through the lively materiality of stone. In order to survive within a neoliberal economy, pilgrims to the Energi Center draw on capabilities and agencies that are unmeasurable in terms of fuel or labor power. The very nature of stone exceeds this framing precisely by the fact of stone being alive, or lively, in a strictly non-biological way.



Fig. 3.9: Mala prayer beads made from the skulls of 108 scholars (Danzanravjaa Museum, April 30th, 2018)

Pilgrims translate this liveliness via poetry, specifically the poem “Ülemjiin Chanar,” which creates ties between emplaced stone and an exalted human body which can then be drawn upon for the purpose of revitalization. Poetry’s ability to create commensurabilities out of seeming incommensurabilities allows it to subvert the geontological frame that separates geological non-life from biological life.

The Energi Center in the Gobi desert illustrates a way of being lively that is predicated on being recognized or felt as lively by the living. This is a liveliness that also relies on the sensorial capacity of a biologically living body to sense liveliness in stone. This may be through touch, as in the heat from the *khorkhog* rocks, or something else less easily identifiable. One of the primary operating characteristics of *energi* and its various manifestations is that it is invisible. Spirits, ghosts, and energies are all considered “air-like” or “invisible” things (High 2011). To feel the *energi* of stone is not unlike feeling a shift in barometric pressure, as I was told by a woman who had visited the Mother Cave in years past to remedy chronic back pain. “Everyone feels it in their body, but some people have the knowledge to say ‘hey, this is what it is.’ Like a meteorologist or a *bariach*⁹⁹. These people know how to notice the invisible aspects of nature.” I thought back to the roadside picnic beside Altan Ovoo, when I could have sworn I felt some kind of radiance coming up from the earth. Does this stone liveliness require a human body, and therefore a human sensorium, to witness it? Or is this the power and influence of the same longstanding

⁹⁹ Bonesetter, some of whom also employ *energi* in their healing practices.

invisible landscape entities partially translated into something recognizable? In the next chapter, I further expand on these question via an exploration of how this liveliness make themselves known in human language, and how human language also serves to more deeply enliven the bodies that might be otherwise seen as non-living.

Chapter 4: Süld

Oh, I invite my ancestors and the elders from the great body of my Altan Ovoo. How might I substitute with words the gentle clarity of the stones which are forever the objects of worship on the hearth?

Let's go, I say to my horse, it whinnies to its master and I feel the sad songs of the mountain separated from us for a while, of the letters separated from paper for a while, whispering in my heart. But my Altan Ovoo, which teaches the deep genius which demands coming together rather than separating, again sings out upon the firm path of our journey. And when I turn back to meet the mountain's master, is it not certain that letters will once again meet with paper?

-G. Mend-Ooyo "Altan Ovoo"

Dariganga's status as an epicenter for 20th century Mongolian poetry was first brought to my attention in 2011, when my neighbor and coworker D. Aruinbold and I were organizing the library of his homeroom class.¹⁰⁰ I found a dog-eared yellow paperback book entitled "Poetic Verse of Dariganga" and asked if I could borrow it. I had just recently spent a very memorable weekend in Dariganga with my friends and my background in poetry had my interest piqued. Thus, I discovered not only works by *Gal* poets, but forms such as *magtaal*¹⁰¹, *urtyn duu*,¹⁰² Buddhist didactic poems,

¹⁰⁰ In the Mongolian public education system, each classroom is occupied by a "class" and stays the same as they move up through the grade levels. For example, a group of students will enter secondary school (in 2011 this began at 7th grade amid significant grade reform that was undertaken since 2008) and be divided into А Б В Г (A, B, C, D) levels according to aptitude testing. Once, for example, class 7Б entered secondary school, they would be assigned a classroom and homeroom teacher in which they would remain until graduation in the 11th grade (now 12th). Students and their homeroom teacher are responsible for keeping the classroom clean, decorating it, maintaining a few indoor plants by the windowsills, and cultivating a small classroom library. Teachers will circulate throughout the school day as they teach subjects to various grades. For example, I would teach English as a Foreign language to 7b and 11a on Monday, 8b and 10a on Tuesday, 9a, 9b, and 10a on Wednesday, etc.

¹⁰¹ Poetic praise sections of ritual blessing songs called *Yerööl*, which will be explored later in this chapter.

¹⁰² "Long-Song," a musical performance genre with poetic lyrics.

and patriotic realist poems from the early socialist era. That winter, I had to spend a few weeks in Ulaanbaatar on medical leave, and I passed the freezing days and nights attempting to read this book and working on amateurish translations of its texts. One afternoon, I flagged down a “taxi” for a trip to the international market and struck up a conversation with the driver who saw me pull the book out of my bag. He was in his fifties and had studied literature as a university student in Leningrad during the 1980’s. He told me about Dariganga’s place in Mongolian literature, and in my journal from that time I made a note of what he told me:

“You know about how the Irish soul is written in Dublin by Yeats and Beckett and them? You know America there was the new culture in the 1960’s that was written in New York, by Beatniks? Well, this is the way Dariganga was before and after democracy. one of those places for Mongolians. A place for literature.”

This was the seed that was planted in my mind that grew as I began my research in Mongolia and slowly bloomed into a question as time went on. What was it about a place and time that creates iconic poets and poetry? Specifically, what is it about Dariganga?

Though Dariganga’s poetic heritage began before *Gal*, many *Gal* members are still alive, and some have been hugely influential in Mongolian politics, literary culture, and environmental ethics through the democratic transition and into the 21st century. O. Dashbalbar became a controversial and charismatic populist Parliament member before his untimely death in 1999. G. Mend-Ooyo is the director of the

Mongolian Academy of Culture and Poetry and is particularly active in promoting Mongolian literature and literary culture internationally.

In his collected oral history of *Gal*, Mend-Ooyo brings together his own remembrances, essays by living Gal members, archival material, and some poems (2015). *Gal* “flame”¹⁰³ U. Khürelbaatar, the group’s archivist, tells the story of *Gal*’s beginnings and its links to Dariganga. While *Gal* began among a group of students within a greater literary circle at Ulaanbaatar College, it truly reached its potential upon the induction of young countryside poet O. Dashbalbar and his teacher D. Nyamsüren¹⁰⁴. Along with G. Mend-Ooyo, who was born to a herder’s family in Dariganga, the three made up what Khürelbaatar named “Dariganga’s Poetic Triad.”

In an essay on the topic, Khürelbaatar explores the forces that drew these three poets together: “1) Generation, or the Poets of the 1980’s 2) The Literary Life, or What Was, or Was Not, to be Repaired, and 3) Homeland or The Laws of Attraction.”¹⁰⁵ “

An excerpt from *Homeland* reads:

The special connection, the golden tether,¹⁰⁶ between Mend-Ooyo,

¹⁰³ Early in the group’s formation, the decision was made to refer to each poet not as a member but as a “flame” to invoke a sense of collectivity and passion and to draw on “nomadic” literary heritage by calling forth the image of a group of caravanners tied together by a “single sincere purpose” of sitting around and maintaining their campfire. (Khürelbaatar 2008)

¹⁰⁴ Nyamsüren was residing in Dornod province at the time, and thus was called “The Easterner” by the rest of the group. Still, he is seen in Dariganga as a native son and one of the “Dariganga Poetic Triad” of *Gal*.

¹⁰⁵ In the essay itself, “Homeland” is listed first, but I took a poetic liberty and put it last here.

¹⁰⁶ A reference to the “Altan Tövch” a 17th-century chronicle written by Guush Luvsandanzan. Its full title is Herein contained the Golden Summary of the Principles of Statecraft as established by the Ancient Khans. It is known to provide a summary of state ideology in reference to the connection

Dashbalbar, and Nyamsüren was that they were from the same homeland. In fact, the image, the special link they shared, was that they all breathed the air of Sükhbaatar Aimag. And in the breathing of this air was a wellspring, the creative flow which brought forth the life of Dariganga's Poetic Triad...Not only we, but Mongolian literature also, know better than even they the sandy hills of the standing springs in Ongon¹⁰⁷, and Sun spring in Naranbulag, Dari Hill¹⁰⁸, and Ganga Lake, and this special place of genius has been described as 'the nation's creative storehouse.' We grew up with them, from a very young age we had played around them, and it is most definitely the homeland,¹⁰⁹ or the law of attraction, in which is found the similarity between the area's shamanic nature and the intellectual artistic nature of these three poets. (Khürelbaatar 2015, 50-51)

Here Khürelbaatar clearly identifies Dariganga as source of creative power generated in no small part by the "shamanic nature" of specific non-living geological entities (springs, mountains, lakes) that make up the social and spatial formation of the Dariganga *nutag*. Also important is his invocation of the triad, a Mongolian poetic form called *yertöntsiin gurav* (Cosmic Triad) which Bawden's *Anthology of Mongolian Literature* defines as an "...artistic grouping of three phenomena, which are unconnected except for their stated possession of the one quality which it is intended to illustrate (2003, xxix)."

Unlike other poetry collectives of the 1970's and 80's, the writers of Gal were not unified around a particular style of form, but rather drew solidarity and inspiration

between religious (Buddhist) and secular statecraft.

¹⁰⁷ Another county in the Dariganga area.

¹⁰⁸ Another name for Altan Ovoo, which also is called Dari Ovoo or Altan Dari Ovoo. The translator of this piece has chosen to translate *Ovoo* as "hill".

¹⁰⁹ Here *nutag* is translated as "homeland," but the added descriptor of "law of attraction" suggests the author means it in the sense of something created through social and physical processes. See (Smith 2015) and (Pedersen 2009)

from their shared homeland. Reflecting on his days as a young poet, Gal member Gombojavyn Mend-Ooyo writes, “[Gal was] a force, grounded in the traditional life of Mongolia’s nomadic community and searching for meaning in part through the discovery of foreign literary culture.” Dashbalbar likewise drew significant stylistic inspiration from elsewhere: blending formal idiosyncrasies of Japanese haiku, American free verse, and Soviet realism with Buddhist didactic poetry and Mongolian epics and praise songs to produce his beloved homeland in poetic form.



Fig. 4.1: A Celebration of National Literacy Day at Ulaanbaatar’s Central Library (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, May 4th, 2018)

Buddhist literature likewise has had a great deal of influence on how authorship is thought in Dariganga poetry, and Mongolian literature as a whole. Khürelbaatar's emphasis on the collective genius of *Gal* having originated from the "nation's creative storehouse" in Dariganga stems from a broader idea of literary texts as being collectively authored, or at least influenced by successive authors or performers. Though oftentimes there is a single author's name attached to these texts, often by academic institutions after the fact, these pieces are in fact quite fluid in both form and authorship and have in fact undergone a number of transformations with each successive author modifying them.¹¹⁰ While this is not uncommon for orally-transmitted literature, it is an aesthetic and theory of authorship that the *Gal* authors took up in their text-based writing practices and their extensive group bylaws (Mend-Ooyo 2015). What makes the Dariganga practice of shared authorship unique is that it is specifically rooted in a place-based social collective comprised of humans and non-humans, living and non-living, entirely material and somewhat less so.

The following chapter explores the alchemical links between Dariganga as a source of poetry and Dariganga as a *nutag*, or social homeland created by repeating accreted exchanges between lively geological forms and their human relations. This chapter includes interviews with local poetry readers and working poets, as well as a close reading of classical and contemporary Dariganga literature. Following Anna Tsing's suggestion that to engage with non-humans we need to pay attention to both

¹¹⁰ One such example from outside Dariganga is the Kalmyk-Oirat "Bewitched Corpse" cycle (Krueger 1978; Birtalan 2002)

form and assemblage (2013), these chapters consider poetry to be a landscape formed by strings of words. Poetry, which carries meaning heavily via form and, one might also argue, assemblage, allows epistemological access to a landscape ontology created by channeling, collaboration, and translation between lively geological forms and human language. The semiotic strangeness communicated by poetry, and its lack of reliance on representational realism, allows us to make juxtapositions and explore multiplicities that seem incongruent when put in standard language. This is about a kind of poetic rationality that is not based on one-to-one or realist mode of representation (Asad 1986, p 151). A mountain can be a white horse, a book can be a stupa, and the routes of epic heroes can be physically traced in contemporary dirt.

Overview of Mongolian Poetry

The ways in which the poems and poets discussed in this chapter give the world coherence demonstrates that poetry can place together seemingly incongruous concepts, creating a topological map of the world rather than a topographical one. This chapter argues that Mongolian, specifically Dariganga, poets and poetry enthusiasts know something about the capacity of poetry that is specifically enabled by Mongolian literary forms and histories.

Giving context to the representative capacities of Mongolian poetry requires some familiarization with the various histories and genres of Mongolian poetry. The reason for the following extensive yet abridged recounting of Mongolia's literary history is twofold. First, I intend to demonstrate how poetic genres in Mongolia are

created by more than just the author, but also translators, performers, and audiences. Second, I intend to show how closely intertwined Mongolia's literary and poetic worlds are with its political history. In the pre-revolutionary period, political and religious shifts, especially involving Tibet and the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism, had a huge influence on Mongolian literary forms, and introduced translation as a valid intellectual practice equal with writing and composition. This will become relevant later, when this chapter unpacks poetic genres in which performer and audience are as much a part of the making of a poem as writing is. This also legitimizes the expertise of my interlocutors who may not be poets themselves, but who are still very much a part of poetic literary worlds.

Contemporary scholars of Mongolian literature tend to broadly divide poetry either by historical era: “pre-revolutionary”¹¹¹ and “contemporary”¹¹², with additional minor subdivisions in between; or by cosmological orientation, that is to say: Buddhist, shamanic, or folk.¹¹³ “Pre-revolutionary” Mongolian poetry is known for drawing on historical legends and folk tales, which were traditionally transmitted orally by bards; and shamanic incantations and praise songs, which were the

¹¹¹ Before the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921

¹¹² From the start of the socialist era in 1921, though the democratic transition in 1991 and into the liberal era, up to the present.

¹¹³ This division along “religious” lines is certainly a creation of western scholars, but it isn't entirely without merit. During both Buddhist conversions, and the consolidation of power with Tibet, Mongolian governance was divided up into “black” (feudal) and “yellow” (Buddhists) realms. In fact, the title Dalai Lama is a Mongolian title from that era, meaning “Ocean Monk.” Additionally, during the Second Buddhist Conversion, there were widespread anti-shaman purges (Pedersen 2011) which further strengthened divides between the two practices. However, these boundaries, while existent, are very fuzzy—with Tibetan Buddhism being highly influenced by Tibetan böö in the first place, and then further hybridized in Mongolia over the centuries. The “yellow/black” division was also mostly administrative and political and didn't really extend into the metaphysical realms.

repertoire of shamans. Shamans and bards operated in different realms, with shamans managing contacts with ancestor spirits and bards occupied with histories of “family, clan, or tribe, the feats of past heroes and the lives of famed ancestors” (Kara 2005). After the conversion of the Mongols to Buddhism, Mongolian poetry was heavily influenced by poetry from Tibet, while prose forms tended to draw more from Chinese sources (Atwood 2004, 335). Even to this day, Mongolian poetry, perhaps because of the lack of sources in English, is primarily spoken about in terms of its influences or else painted as entirely isolated from the rest of the world and its literary traditions. A such, post-revolutionary contemporary poetry tends to be broadly characterized by Russian influence, though a closer look at poets such as those in *Gal* collective show that Mongolian poets were also reading British, American, Japanese, Czech, and French literature, among others, and were choosing their influences quite deliberately for both stylistic and political purposes.¹¹⁴

Bawden writes that “Mongolian literature begins, abruptly, with a masterpiece (2003, xvi).” One must begin any recounting of Mongolian poetry and literature with the *Secret History of the Mongols*, written around 1252, shortly after the development of Uighur-Mongolian script (Atwood 2004, 335). Though other Mongol historical epics were also written around this time, none has the literary quality and thus the staying power of *Secret History*. The work concerns the rise of Chinggis Khan and

¹¹⁴ Russian Futurist Mayakovsky for example, was a favorite of Dashbalbar’s so much so that his portrait hung above his desk right next to a painting of Saraswathi, goddess of knowledge, language, and art. Mayakovski’s devotion to the Bolsheviks and Lenin coupled with his later conflicts with the Soviet state leading to his suicide closely mirror that of Sükhbaatar, the hero of the Mongolian People’s Revolution.

the beginning of the Mongol Empire and includes “vivid imagery of steppe life” (Atwood 2004, 335). Written primarily in prose with a pithy narrative voice, *Secret History* is also interspersed with poetic passages that communicate magical happenings, omens, and proverbs (Bawden 2002).¹¹⁵ Unlike other historical chronicles of the time, the events of the *Secret History* remain mostly in the realm of realism and linear time. A few exceptions are conveyed in the poetic passages that occasionally disrupt the narrative, for example in the story of an omen sent to young Temujin¹¹⁶ directing him to Burkhan Khaldun to escape from political enemies and into the mountain now located in present-day Khentii Province, just west of Sūkhbaatar. Like other Mongolian poetic genres, the sections of the *Secret History* in poetic verse utilize alliteration and refrain, an attribute that Bawden suggests is a remnant of earlier forms of oral literature. The use of poetic interludes to convey moments of broken temporality or reality is a practice that continues into the present.

In addition to its importance as a historical document, the *Secret History* not only provides insight into life on the Inner Asian Steppe at the turn of the 13th century, but also serves as a record of what Mongols thought of themselves at the time and continues to influence the political and national imaginary of Mongolia by Mongolians (and others) up to the present day (Atwood 2004). Rather than tracing the “royal house of the Mongols” (Bawden 2003, xvi) through Tibet, it preserves a pre-Buddhist telling of the origins of Mongolia’s rulers. “A blue wolf, with a destiny from

¹¹⁵ This mixed prose/poetry style arises again in the early 21st century with Mend-Ooyo’s *Altan Owoo*, *Shiliin Bogd*, and *Gegeenten*.

¹¹⁶ The birth name of Chinggis Khan

heaven, and his wife, a fallow doe, came passing over the so-called Tenggis¹¹⁷ water, and they were the ancestors of Chinggis Khan” (Bawden, xvii). As it names generations of their descendants, it also recounts stories that have become embedded in a collective Mongolian self-imaginary, and which frequently reappear in later works of literature.

Three centuries after the *Secret History*, a new phase of Buddhist historical writing emerged. Interestingly, with these works, the fantastical enters the narrative with much greater regularity than *Secret History*, demonstrating a fuzzy boundary between History and Legend, an orientation that remains, especially in Mongolian literature. The notion of truth in fiction has been a part of Mongolian literature and literary theory for centuries. Many works that fall under the imposed umbrella of “history/legend” were collected in the form of epics as part of the repertoire of bards (Kara 2005). The most well-known of Mongolia’s heroic epics is *Geser*, a prose work influenced by Tibetan epic poetry but nonetheless a distinctly Mongolian work of literature (Bawden 2003), and the *Jangar Epic*. There are also an uncountable number of lesser-known verse epics, with narratives of heroes and monsters, talking horses, resurrected wandering corpses, and kidnapped lovers, with very little attention given to political or military history. “Everything which happens, and the framework in time and space of the action, is exaggerated to an unbelievable degree” (Bawden, xxiii). Epics are still performed by bards, often with a mesmerizing self-

¹¹⁷ Ocean

accompaniment with a plucked or bowed stringed instrument, and sometimes even with a one-man self-propelled puppet show.

Pre-Revolutionary Buddhist literature reached its height after the Second Conversion of the Mongols in the 16th-17th century, a missionary movement headed by Altan Khan during which Buddhism became the only authorized religion among the Mongols (Atwood 2004, 490). This brought a new era of Tibetan influence and translation into Mongolian literature, producing a renaissance of sorts. Up until the mid-18th century, teams of Mongolian translators were put to the task of translating Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and literature into Mongolian, which became a significant part of the Mongolian canon.¹¹⁸ When Tibetan-influenced Buddhist didactic poetry came into vogue, it followed a Tibetan-style prosody based on isosyllabic¹¹⁹ meter rather than the isochronic¹²⁰ meter of Mongolian verse. This poetry followed the aesthetic principals of the Sanskrit literary critic Dandin (Krueger 1961), though Mongolian poets tended to play much more fast-and-loose with form and performance than their Tibetan counterparts (Atwood 2004). Most popular during this time were works such as *Sutra of the Wise and Foolish* and historical works such as Second Conversion architect Altan Khan's *Jewel Translucent Sutra*. (Atwood 2004, 336).

Mongolian poetry in the 16th and 17th centuries was also heavily influenced by

¹¹⁸ Translation, memorization, and performance were long considered literary practices on the same prestige level as authorship.

¹¹⁹ Meter based on syllable stress

¹²⁰ Meter based on syllable length

cultural and political exchanges with Tibet. The Buddhist didactic style came into fashion beginning with translations from Tibetan and Sanskrit, particularly by the Third Mergen Gegeen Lubsang-Dambi-Jalsan, who wrote many hymns and liturgies for specifically Mongolian deities. This influence continued into the 19th century, as seen in the popularity of didactic poetry and devotional hymns. The genre of *Üge* (sermon) uses the voices of animals and inanimate objects to teach lessons based on Buddhist morals. The most well-known author in this genre is poet Khuulichhi Sangdag, whose works emphasized the plight of the lonely and outcast. What one might call the height of pre-Revolutionary Buddhist poetry came in the first half of the nineteenth century with the work of Danzanravjaa, the Fifth Noyon Khutagt and Lama of the Gobi. Poems such as *Ülemjiin Chanar*, which is commonly recited to this day, particularly at the Danzanravjaa's rebuilt *Khamar* monastery, continue to have influence not only in the realms of literature but Buddhist practice as well. Poetry in the late 19th century was dominated by satire and critique leveled at decadent Buddhist clergy and the excesses of nobility—a theme that would continue into the post-revolution era with pieces such as the Long-Songs *Jaakhan Sharga* and *Toroi Bandi*, which evolved and were re-adapted according to political concerns of the time.

Folk poetry, a pre-revolutionary genre that continues to have influence in the present day, revolved around iconic figures such as the archetypal trickster Balansengge/Dalan Khudalch (the “multi-fibber”), a wandering lama/mendicant, and Shagdar Solliyatu (“loony Shagdar”) a lama who abandons his monastery to wander the countryside satirizing the evils of the present day (Bawden 2003). The language

of the latter is “racy colloquial” with puns and local allusions that create a form of popular satire that are highly illegible to outsiders.

After the People’s Revolution in 1921, the poetry world continued to be highly influenced by historical and political changes, with massive shifts in literary styles and production in response to new state restrictions. The era shortly following the Revolution was not a particularly fertile time for poets, and very little literature from that time has survived into the present. With the establishment of the Philology Institute (later the Mongolian Academy of Sciences) things livened up a bit, especially as the Institute began to sponsor the translation of foreign literature, in a similar push to that which followed the Second Conversion of the Mongols in the 16th century. This brief era of creative development was quickly squashed during the Great Purges of 1937 under Marshal Choibalsan, leading to the early death of the poet Buyanmekh and novelist D. Natsagdorj (Atwood 2004). These restrictions loosened somewhat in the intervening years, and in the 1980’s in tandem with Soviet Perestroika, they loosened even more, particularly when it came to the depiction of religious imagery. These changes are reflected in the increased influence of Buddhism and shamanic imagery in the poetry of the era, which can be seen especially in the lyric poetry of Dariganga in the latter half of the 20th century (Wickham-Smith 2012; 2015; Wallace 2020).

Mongolian literature was professionalized in 1948 during the First Congress of Mongolian Writers, and literary criticism was institutionalized as a discipline distinct from creative writing, translation, and performance. Poetry remained the most

publicly visible form of literature (Atwood 2004), and many poets went on to become public intellectuals and controversial political figures in the beginning of the “post-transition” era such as Rentsenii Choinom, D. Uriankhai, L. Dashnyam, and O. Dashbalbar. Mongolia’s political world, and therefore history, is very much influenced by the thinking of poets. Poet Simon Wickham-Smith, in his interviews with writer G. Mend-Ooyo, traces the contemporary emphasis on environmental themes in Mongolian religious life to roots in Dariganga poetry, specifically that of the poet Nyamsüren, who utilized ecological imagery to express religious ideas in subtext during the socialist era.

In the years following the 1990 “transition,” the most widely-consumed poetic genres were performance, rather than text, based. However, even musical genres such as *Urtyn Duu* or Long-Song are still considered poetic genres because of the tradition in Mongolian poetry of using isochronic meter. Isochronic prosody is ultimately determined by how long the performer chooses to hold a syllable, and Long-Song’s defining feature is its extended and ornamented syllables. This dissertation will explore Long-Song poetry to a greater extent in the following chapter, specifically the genre’s mimicry of a geological terrain that is mapped both in its lyrical content and in the sonic contours of its melody. The prosodic contours of the geological landscape influence how the songs are written and performed. Perhaps more significantly, the legends that are recounted in certain Long-Songs also come to materially shape and transform the landscape itself. Later in this dissertation, this phenomenon will be illustrated in an exploration of the Long-Song “Toroi Bandi,” where the path a hero

takes down the side of Altan Ovoo is now followed by all the men who climb it, permanently shaping the form of the mountain to echo the linguistic and sonic map of the Long-Song.

Ceremonial Verse and Shamanic Incantations are two pre-revolutionary genres that have similarly been re-invigorated and re-made in the present day, particularly in the countryside where I did the bulk of my fieldwork. Ceremonial verses and praise songs such as *yerööl*, *magtaal*, and *giingoo*, which will be discussed later in the chapter, are performed as blessings for domestic rites and formal rituals such as children's first haircutting ceremonies, weddings, *naadam* horse races, *takhilga*, or the founding of a new home.

While contemporary Mongolian poetry (both during the late socialist period and after the democratic transition) draws freely from longstanding Mongolian forms as well as the work of poets from other literary traditions, lyric poetry¹²¹ is the most common form employed by contemporary “page” poets writing today. Though lyric poetry is a broad and global genre, Mongolian lyric poetry has its own specific attributes. Often, these poems have seven to eight syllables per line, with a cesura¹²² after the fourth syllable and at the end of the line. Alliteration of the first letter of each line is common, as is refrain, an echo of the exaggeration and repetition of ceremonial verse. While on the page the meter may seem irregular, when read aloud the

¹²¹ Short poems with song-like qualities, usually on the topic of personal emotions, thoughts, or feelings.

¹²² Stop or pause marked by punctuation or break in the line.

performer may clip or extend vowels so that the verse becomes isochronically metered. This is at the discretion of the individual performer, which makes each performance of a poem a poem unto itself, with multiple collaborative authors. Mongolian prosody does not rely on the vowel length of Mongolian spoken language, but rather is dependent on the metrical units being spoken or sung, which bears no relation to the vowel length of the written or commonly spoken word.

The most commonly utilized meter is groups of two or three syllable feet, with the first syllable being the longest. The equivalent in English poetry would be the trochee (stressed/unstressed) and the dactyl (stressed/unstressed/unstressed) with the stressed syllable in English being the equivalent of the elongated syllable in Mongolian--the emphasized syllable. Three syllable feet are most often found concluding each line (Kara 1997). In contemporary poetry, this alliteration is often slant, or approximate, and in poetry written in Uighur Mongolian script it may also be visual, playing on the ambiguities of shape in the script (Atwood 2004, 441; Kara 2005). Also common in contemporary lyric poetry is *tsagaan shüleg* (white verse; its analog in English poetry would be blank verse) which is metered lines of verse that is un-alliterated (unrhymed). Free verse, meaning lines with no set meter or alliteration, are also common, as are experimental or hybrid genres like prose poetry and “language” poetry.

Ultimately, Mongolia’s poetry world is too diverse and constantly proliferating, and any recounting within the confines of a dissertation is going to feel cursory. Thus, for this chapter, I narrow my focus specifically to poems that originate

in Dariganga, and from there narrow it further to “classic” poems with enough influence to be immediately recognizable by the average person, even if they have little to no knowledge or interest in poetry on their own.

The Poet and the Poetry Reader

One afternoon in Dariganga, Ganaa told me we were going to go visit Mönkhzaya, a well-known *shüleg unshigch*, or “poetry reader,” who, along with his wife, the poet Amgalanzaya, would be instrumental in teaching me the core of Dariganga poetic theory. In Dariganga, a “poetry reader” is more than a consumer of poetry, but rather an official position given to someone with a wide repertoire of memorized poems and a talent for oration. The Reader is called upon to recite poems for civic events such as New Year’s celebrations¹²³ and Bell Day¹²⁴ or ceremonial and ritual events such as the yearly summer *naadam* games. This position is not unlike that of the bards described by György Kara (2005), though in Dariganga poetry readers’ repertoire tends to focus more on contemporary verse and lyric poetry than epics and folk legends.

The entire family and I piled into Ganaa’s silver Land Cruiser and set off driving east into the grassland. Ganaa knew the general area where he thought Mönkhzaya might have set up his *malchin ail*,¹²⁵ but we had to circle around a little bit before we found exactly where it was. On the way, we stopped at Orgilyn Bulag

¹²³ Meaning *Shine Jil*, which is celebrated around the change of the Gregorian calendar year and is celebrated by fancy-dress holiday parties sponsored by workplaces or the town cultural center.

¹²⁴ The first day off school on September 1st.

¹²⁵ Herder’s homestead.

(Orgil Spring), a freshwater spring off Ganga Lake, to take some good energy and photos for Facebook. The mouth of the spring was flat and shallow, a few feet wide and ankle deep with a gray sandy bottom and perfectly clear water. Every few seconds, a few stray bubbles emerged from the sand and fluttered to the surface. Khulan beckoned me over to show me something: “Shout into the spring!” she instructed.

“Shout what?”

“It doesn’t matter, anything. Just make a sound, like ‘AAAHHHH.’ Directly into the spring.”

I obliged, yelling down into the water. Suddenly a great flurry of bubbles erupted from the sandy bottom, as if something was breathing underneath the sand.¹²⁶ “See? Isn’t that cool? Now tell it your wish, quietly.”

After our stop at the spring, we spent the next hour or two driving in circles around the steppe, occasionally chasing sheep that Ganaa identified as belonging to one person or another. As we traveled further east, we began to encounter big heaps of dry cut grass. “Again, with this crap.” Ganaa grumbled. “This is what those Erdenetsagaan¹²⁷ people do, Jessica. They’re always trying to make some kind of farm hither and yon. What an eyesore. What a mess.”

¹²⁶ This reminded me of periwinkle snails who come out of their shells if you sing “Happy Birthday” to them in a breathy voice.

¹²⁷ The *sum* district directly to the east of the Dariganga area, home to a sub-ethnic group more closely related to Inner Mongolians than Khalkh.

Finally, we came over a gentle rise in the steppe and saw a ger with its door open and a thin blue ribbon of smoke coming from the chimney pipe. Someone was home. “There’s Mönkhzaya.” Ganaa said.

Ts. Mönkhzaya is a slender and soft-spoken man with black shoulder length hair with a few strands of gray that he tucks behind his ears. His wife, a tall woman with a serious presence, began to make us milk tea while a toddler plays around on the bed at the back of the ger. Upon hearing that I was there to hear him recite poetry, he put on a white silk *Mongol tsamts*¹²⁸ and instructed me to start recording whenever I was ready. I had not been planning on taking video, but I complied.

Watching the video back again, now more than two years later, I see this slightly withdrawn man become more animated with each verse he recites—a lightness overtaking his gestures as he punctuates each verse with a flourish of his hand¹²⁹. A baby occasionally pops into the frame behind him, pushing a toy truck or somersaulting off the side of the bed. The clanking of an aluminum ladle against the side of the boiling tea cauldron of tea and the sound of wind and horses snuffling outside opens in his pauses. The sonic space following the conclusion of each poem is electric—I can hear my own breath behind the camera after each poem is concluded.

¹²⁸ A traditional shirt made of silk with a high collar and side hook-and-eye buttons made of knotted cord.

¹²⁹ Listening to these videos again at my desk in Cleveland Ohio is a synesthetic experience. I can smell the herbaceous grass...but it’s more than that. It’s also like the feeling of drinking spring water—I think back on a line of Dashbalbar’s describing the steppe as “fresh green juices.”

The first poem he recited is a classic: O. Dashbalbar's *Love each other while living (my people)*. He concludes it with "za" (Okay) and a distinct tone of finality. I got the sense that I had given him the impression that Ganaa had taken me to see him as part of some kind of tourist itinerary.

"That was so nice!" I stammered. "Actually, would you be kind enough to tell me a poem about a mountain? I'm interested in these kind of poems."

Ganaa piped up helpfully from a reclined position on the floor. "This one is studying Mongolian poetry! She's a poetry scholar!"

"Yes, I wanted to ask you about poetry."

At this, Mönkhzaya seemed to engage. "Okay, what do you want to know?"

For the next hour or so, we chatted about poetry, and Mönkhzaya occasionally paused to recite a poem illustrating one of his points. His favorite poets, he told me, were Dashbalbar and his teacher, Nyamsüren from Dornod province.

Actually, it is good for you to know them because they really convey a philosophical understanding of the world and our homeland in their poems. Not only pretty words. For example, Dashbalbar. Though the speaker in his poems is always "Me, Dashbalbar", it is more than himself, you understand? When he says, 'I am Dashbalbar' he means not just himself and his own body but also everything else that is our Dariganga.

He gestured out the front door, where a couple of fat sheep wandered past.

"He is an authentic Dariganga poet, because our poets are what is here."

I asked why so many famous poets come from Sükhbaatar Province. “No, not Sükhbaatar.” He firmly corrected me.

It’s specifically Dariganga, not Sükhbaatar in general. In my opinion it’s because of the mountains in particular, the other *ongon*¹³⁰ landscape features. For example, you know Altan Ovoo, Shiliin Bogd, Ganga Nuur. Many people here write poems about these things because this is where poetic genius comes from—the genius of, for example, Ganga Lake or Altan Ovoo. It goes into the heart and mind of the poet with *energi*, and the talent of the poet can make the poem. This talent is also given to poets from their birthplace and also from the line of their ancestors.

When speaking of the ethereal non-humans on the Dariganga landscape, Mönkhzaya used the term *savdag* for the undomesticated spirit entities attached to mountains, and *burkhan* for the Buddhist protector deities that attended Altan Ovoo and Shiliin Bogd. However, he also used the word *süld*, which I hadn’t yet heard at that point, but would later hear again in reference to the horse-hair standards of Chinggis Khan¹³¹ and the *süld ovoo* in Sainshand¹³². Here, however, Mönkhzaya was using it to refer to a certain quality of creativity or tutelary ability,¹³³ a general and diffuse creative intellect or ability that was aggregated at certain *ongon* points on the landscape.

¹³⁰ A word literally meaning “virgin” but usually used to refer to an exalted, sacred, or enchanted place.

¹³¹ These, if you’ll recall, were part of the *takhilga* ceremony explored in Chapter 1.

¹³² The breast-shaped women’s fertility *ovoo* that were covered in milk

¹³³ He once referred to Shiliin Bogd as having a *süld tenger*, which I learned was a term for a pre-Buddhist tutelary deity



*Fig. 4.2: Poetry Reader and Folklorist Ts. Mönkhzaya reciting poetry.
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, June 6, 2018)*

Genius was present in Dariganga in more than one form. *Savdag* make their place in geological formations on the landscape, especially on *khairkhan*

mountains¹³⁴ (Buyandelger 2013, Humphrey and Onon 1996, 76) and are generally thought to have a high potential for danger and unpredictability. One of the first lessons I learned in rural Mongolia was to never fall asleep on a mountain, as a *savdag* who will attack a dreamer in their vulnerable state. *Savdag* is commonly translated into English as “local genius” or “genius loci” (Bawden 1997, 289) in that it protects and presides over a particular location and is part of what creates the qualities of the place.

When Mönkhzaya speaks of *süld*, however, he suggests there is something like a collective ability or intellect that exists in certain concentrations on the landscape. This quality is situated around specific landscape forms that are particularly *süld*, especially in relation to others. I ask him if Altan Ovoo is *süld*.

“Of course!” He replied, and immediately got up, beckoning me over to the north side of their ger. He pointed to a collage of old photographs affixed to the front of a small wooden cabinet next to the family *avdar* (painted wooden trunk). He gestured to one of the photos, which depicted him as a younger man, along with the poet Dashbalbar, and a woman I didn’t recognize. It looked to be taken in the mid to late 1980’s. He asked, “Do you know who they are?”

“I know Dashbalbar. And I recognize you. I don’t know her.” I replied.

¹³⁴ See Chapter 1 for a deeper discussion of *khairkhan*

“She’s Oyuntsetseg. This is what I mean. Her father was a poet. Maybe her daughter is too, I’m not sure.¹³⁵ If she is she lives in Ulaanbaatar and hasn’t come back as far as I know. Poetic talent comes from natural genius, but it also is genetic. It comes through the ancestral line in the blood, you understand? The ancestors in Dariganga.”

I asked Mönkhzaya how he came to memorize so many poems. “Well, I started in fourth grade. I had a very good teacher who made sure we all learned and memorized poems. Luckily, they still do this, but not everyone has great enthusiasm for poetry. You’re familiar with this problem, in America too, I’m sure.”

I shrugged, “At least most Mongolians can name one poet.”

“That’s true I suppose. What a shame. When you memorize a poem, it becomes part of your brain, in the energy that fires between your neurons. It becomes part of your body, the workings of your body and the workings of your intelligence¹³⁶.” He changed the subject. “You know, there are still poets working and writing in Dariganga now, but most of them live in UB. Still, they come here occasionally. Like Mend-Ooyo, he’s always in UB. His family owns some apartments there. He comes occasionally.”

Seemingly out of nowhere, Ganaa suddenly interjected. “Your wife is a poet!”

¹³⁵ I had never heard of Jamsrandorjyn Oyuntsetseg, and though she is counted among the *gal* poets, she is often shunted off the side, left at the end of collections or as a footnote.

¹³⁶ The Mongolian word for “memorize,” *tseejlekh*, literally means “to take into one’s chest.” Memorization is to make something part of the body.

Prior to this, Mönkhzaya's serious wife, who I later learned is named Amgalanzaya, had been bustling around quietly in the corner making tea and then moving household items from place to place. She wears her hair in a neat low bun and has strong dark eyebrows. She turned her head slightly at Ganaa's mention of her name but still said nothing.

I cleared my throat, "Egchee,¹³⁷ is it true you're a poet?" She looked at me, and it immediately became apparent that her silence wasn't shyness. She was strong and stoic like a stone.

"I am."

I asked if I could hear some of her poetry, and she agreed. "Sure. On the condition that you don't record it or write it down."

"She says you shouldn't record it!" Ganaa told me just in case I hadn't heard.

It is here that I wish I had a talent for memorization, or even a faint capability, so that I would have the poem in my bodily possession. Even so, Amgalanzaya's insistence that I do not record her work made me think that she would not like to have it fully reproduced in any case. What I can remember is that it followed the meter of other Dariganga lyric poetry, with each line ending with a repeating refrain followed by a caesura: the word *chuluu* (stone): *khaluun chuluu*, *tsagaan chuluu*, *burkhan chuluu* (hot stone, white stone, God stone).

¹³⁷ A term of endearment and respect used in formal situations that means broadly "big sister"

I was struck by the balanced strength of personality and talent between these two poetry professionals, Ts. Mönkhzaya and D. Amgalanzaya, the poetry reader and the poet. After talking a bit longer, they put on a DVD of their collected performances that they recorded for the occasion of the 90th anniversary Altan Ovoo Takhilga in 2013. Each track consisted of alternating performances by Mönkhzaya, Amgalanzaya, or both reciting a famous poem and Amgalanzaya reciting her own work in front of a well-known natural feature in Dariganga. They recite mostly poems from *Gal* poets, and a few *magtaal* for Altan Ovoo, Shiliin Bogd, and the Dariganga homeland.

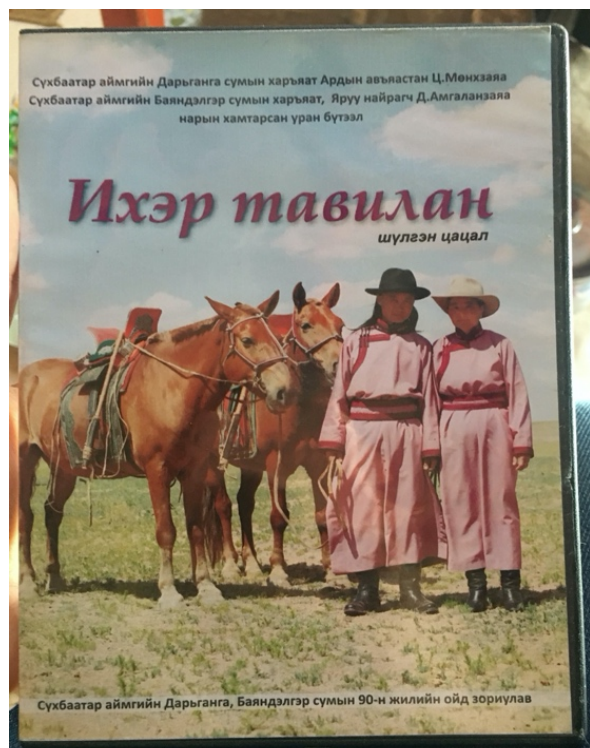


Fig. 4.3: Cover of the DVD “Twins of Fate: A Poetic Offering”¹³⁸
(Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, June 6th, 2018)

¹³⁸ ...” a collaboration of Sükhbaatar Province, Dariganga District resident Folklore Expert Ts. Mönkhzaya and Sükhbaatar Province, Bayandelger District resident, the poet D. Amgalanzaya. Sükhbaatar province, Dariganga and Bayandelger district’s 90-year anniversary.”

In the car on the way back to the Dariganga town center, Ganaa started waxing poetic about genius. Though Ganaa owned stakes in a few sheep and goat herds around town, his primary profession was as a racehorse trainer. The altar in his home was covered with racing trophies and his walls with photos of his winning horses.

You know, it was interesting what Mönkhzaya said about *ongon gazar* and poetry, don't you think? This is a very interesting topic that you should write about. Write this down, Jessica. This is how I prepare my horses. You know that before a big race, the jockeys will ride their horses up to Altan Ovoo, and from there they can take the *energi* and power from the mountain. This makes the horses great, fast runners, and winners. Talent is talent, right?



Fig. 4.4: Living room at Ganaa's house with racing trophies, ribbons, and portrait of one of his winning racehorses (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, March 2018)

It is true that Mönkhzaya made it quite clear that just as poets draw their talent from the genius of the *ongon gazar* around them, so does the poetry reader draw his talent for stewardship of this poetic heritage from his role as a countryside herdsman. What I took from Ganaa's connection is that likewise, the horse also takes a kind of genius from interaction with other landscape entities, because for a horse, speed is a kind of genius (talent). Likewise, the horse trainer takes his talent for training (itself a kind of stewardship) from his understanding of the connections and *energi* flows that take place between horse and mountain. My understanding then, is that talent, be it genius or speed, is at least partially generated through interactions between beings on the landscape, specifically across difference.

In his work on the horse fiddle, KG Hutchins describes how instructors at the Music and Dance College in Ulaanbaatar have grown frustrated with their students who attempt to play the instrument without embodied or intimate knowledge of horses (2021). Some professors have even set up field schools of sorts to send urban students to the countryside to experience domestic life alongside the animals. They argue that in order to play an instrument that draws so much creative power from the being of a horse, one must be able to channel that being, and thus be intimately acquainted with horses (Hutchins 2020, 61). However, this work across difference also takes place across the gap between alive and lively beings as well. A poet or performer channels the "genius" of a lively mountain by creating a perfected image of it in a poem. The genius of ancient and unmoving stone is then brought into the

temporality of humankind and then can then be used in intimate interactions with the mountain, strengthening the relations between human and stone and further enlivening the mountain itself. However, receiving the genius of the mountain requires an intimacy with its materiality, an “introduction,” as Davaa called it in Chapter One. Just as playing the horse fiddle requires a player to have ridden the horse, performing a *magtaal* requires the reader to have been called by the mountain.

Likewise, Mönkhzaya’s ability to channel the collective poetic genius of the Dariganga landscape requires that he be intimately acquainted with its various beings. His education and knowledge of poetry, literature, and folk culture could easily earn him a job as an educator in the town or province center (the pay for teachers is not much better than for herdsman, though it is much less precarious and less subject to the whims of climate and fortune). Herders, in order to keep their animals alive, must be intimately familiar with the way they interact with the non-living landscape: what rock faces provide shelter from winter wind, what volcanic soils provide the lushest grass, and so on. A herder’s intimate knowledge of the way the homeland community is made via cooperation with various entities on the landscape means that he is also part of keeping that cooperation going (by herding sheep, by training horses, by memorizing poems). Mönkhzaya’s adherence to a life in which domestic space includes non-humans means that he has committed himself to a life of stewardship not only of poetry but of Dariganga itself.

The following section will explore a poem closely tied to the Dariganga poetic sphere: *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* (Praise Poem to Altan Ovoo). This piece serves as an

example of how poems and the performance of poems, especially in a ritualized and formalized space, act as gateways through which the magnetic liveliness of geological forms such as *Altan Ovoo* are channeled. The channeling of geological genius through human talent strengthens relational vectors, deepening the mountain's power and ability to compel its relations via a conjuring of a perfect version of its form in human language.

Altan Ovoony Magtaal/ "Praise Poem to Altan Ovoo"

My holy Dari¹³⁹ Ovoo
With news from the holy master
With more than one-hundred *suntag*¹⁴⁰
With more than six tithed nobles
With command from holy *banchin*
Like a lotus
Most beautiful homeland.

My Holy Mother Dari Ovoo
With four standing dignitaries
To the southwest side
With the rich warm mountain range
To the northwest side
Where the wretched witch was subdued
There are mountains empowered by scripture
To the northeast side
Four narrow ledges
With stripes like that of a tiger
With sunny lush mountains
To the southeast side
Which has defeated various dangers
With white Sümber mountain¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ One of the official Buddhist names of Altan Ovoo is "Dari Ovoo" a reference to Dari Ekh—the Mongolian version of Tara, the Tibetan Buddhist deity/bodhisattva. Her white emanation is most commonly associated with Altan Ovoo.

¹⁴⁰ Tara's official chord: A thick rope spun from 5 colored strings: blue, red, green, yellow, white. (Süld-Erdene 2015, 443) Or A rod used for bestowing a blessing on people (Buddhist) (Bawden, 1997)

¹⁴¹ This could be a reference to exalted Mount Sümber in Govisümber province or to the mythological mount Sümber said to be full of gold.

Dear Dari and Choijin¹⁴² Ovoo
With a bubbling spring
Which is really ferocious
With Ganga and Kholboo lake
With their many voices of different calling birds
Beautiful and marvelous country.

My Altan Dari Ovoo
Saving religion flourishes
With thirteen temples
Incense and *serjim*¹⁴³ were offered
With many adherents
Who read your future in chant?
With many disciples
With a stupa to circumambulate and genuflect
er egzen dagav's homeland.

Dear Altan Ovoo
With five High Ministers of place
With five herds of livestock
Opulent dazzling country

The Dari Choijin Ovoo
In the cradle of legendary Dariganga
May all blessings come to be.¹⁴⁴

A full unpacking of *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* (Praise Poem to Altan Ovoo) could be its own dissertation. Therefore, for the purpose of this chapter I will isolate two attributes of the piece: its place in the genre of *magtaal* and its use of a poetic device drawn from the Mongolian heroic epic. As a *magtaal*, this poem serves as a

¹⁴² Protector of the Law (Bawden 1997, 527); Choijin Lama means “Oracle Lama” (chos-skyong in Tibetan)

¹⁴³ Sacrificial beverage offered to ensure the success of an undertaking

¹⁴⁴ Stanza breaks have been inserted for greater ease of reading. This is a preliminary translation and may appear in different form in later publications.

ritual event and channeling device between the mountain being praised, the poet, the orator, and the gathered audience.

Along with *giingoo* and *yerööl*, *magtaal* are contained within the genre of “folk” poetry identified by Bawden as “ceremonial verse” (2002). *Magtaal* are primarily performed as invocations at the opening of *takhilga* and other religious and state rituals, as well as warm up openings for orators who are about to recite heroic epics (Schubert 2020). *Magtaal* are often inserted as a spoken section in the middle of *yerööl* blessing songs, performed at more intimate public ritual functions and domestic occasions such as weddings, births, the purchase of an animal, sacrifices to *ovoo* or the household fire, milk offerings and aspersions (*tsatsal*) to heaven (*tenger*), a child’s first haircutting ceremony; and the dedication of new tools/household implements such as *ger*, saddles, guns, and so on. *Magtaal* on their own are descriptive poems praising mountains or other geological forms and landscapes worthy of worship such as rivers, lakes, mountain ranges or the *nutag* homeland at large.

Yerööl magtaal often begin with an invocation such as *om sain amgalan boltugai* “Om (the sacred Tantric seed-syllable)! May there be a good peace!” (Atwood 2004, 602-603; Oyungerel 2015) or other exclamations to open the performance. The speaker will then announce the occasion and, when appropriate, praise the features of the object being blessed or the offerings being made one by one. The orator then attempts to paint a picture with words, projecting and invoking the successful future use and concluding with the main blessing. This genre, and

Mongolian ritual language, shares a singularly distinctive attribute with the Heroic Epic: the repeated restatement of clear facts along with wild hyperbole. For example, "...a [ger]'s latticework is jade, and its door is garnet, an arrow is fledged with the 'flight feathers of the King Garuda (the mythological Indian bird) who flies gracefully on high..." and so on. (Atwood 2004, 602) This rhetorical device is drawn from Tantric visualizations with the purpose of transforming a present reality into the projected form of a perfect world (Wickham-Smith 2012)



*Fig. 4.5: "Altan Ovoo" by O. Dashbalbar, 1992, oil on canvas
(Courtesy of the Dashbalbar Collection at Sükhbaatar Province Museum)*

People with a talent for oration, often but not exclusively men, are given the position of *yeröölchin*. In Dariganga this position can be held by the local *shüleg unshigch*, or by anyone else with the talent, capacity, and training to perform the oration. This is an oral form, and performers are expected to have their repertoire memorized, adding their own creative spin to a piece in each performance. However, one can find *magtaal* in print, either in circulating paperback booklets that orators use to further develop their repertoire or in edited volumes collected as pieces of literary heritage (Atwood 2004; Oyungerel 2015).

A similar form of ritual song/poetry is *giingoo*, songs that are sung by child jockeys¹⁴⁵ during horse races to connect the rider with the animal. When *giingoo* is sung, it “transforms a singer into a medium able to connect with a higher entity……it connects horse, the child jockey, and the landscape through which they gallop” (Yoon 2018, 100). The jockey is transformed into a “sonic body, a medium that connects horse, landscape, spirits, earth and sky, and even the other participants in the race. The jockey connects them all, and the song sung at the beginning of the race becomes the sonic ritual through which they are spiritually integrated” (Yoon 2018, 103). That the mountain is of the exalted binary realm of *tenger/gazar* (sky/earth), the *magtaal* is much more highly ritualized and formalized than *gingoo*, though the importance of performance is also central, and it likewise turns the singer into a medium that

¹⁴⁵ Usually, young boys and sometimes girls.

connects the singer, the other beings gathered in the ritual performance space, and the exalted mountain itself.

In the Mongolian Buddhist context, that is to say, a hybridized practice inflected with shamanic and tengerist attributes, words are known to have power to affect physical space and fortune. The most obvious example is shamanic curses, and the incantatory power of shamanic language in general, though in the Sūkhbaatar and Dariganga context, shamans and dedicated shamanic practice is rare. There is, however, a general understanding that words, whether written or spoken, possess transformative power. In addition to the Gelug Buddhist emphasis on the memorization of sacred texts, this power can catalyze individual enlightenment: for example, the mantra *Om mani padme hum* both invokes Buddha compassion in the “heart-mind” of the speaker and transforms the practitioner’s body to be available to the presence of enlightenment (Wickham-Smith 2012). As it is primarily words which catalyze enlightenment, text, especially in Gelug Buddhism, is sacred in itself. In *How Words Light a Lamp*, G. Mend-Ooyo compares the physical undertaking of writing a book as akin to building a stupa—“Words are intentions made material (Mend-Ooyo 2015).” As the poet gathers words like stones, the power channeled by the builder/writer’s intention (to either build a perfect monument to deceased ancestors or write a perfect depiction of a holy mountain¹⁴⁶) travels into and is refracted through writer and performer like a prism, transforming them and the

¹⁴⁶ Or write a decent dissertation.

intention into towers of stone or poetic language. This in turn transforms the reading or listening audience.

Even in the register of the everyday, words are also known to have power in Mongolia. The concept of *khel am*,¹⁴⁷ or “malicious gossip,”¹⁴⁸ and *belge demberliin üg*, or “encouraging words of good fortune,” are commonly known to have the potential to influence one’s future lot in life. In her work with a family living near an artisanal mine in Uyanga district, Mette High describes an interlocutor who feels very strongly that the death of her child was caused by neighbor’s maliciously gossiping—a result of jealousy and moral disapproval over the family’s perceived good fortune collected from artisanal gold mining (2015). In a less dire scenario, a former coworker of mine, Bayarsaikhan, who taught home economics and was very interested in the potential of language aesthetics, once told me that ideally one would never attach a negative to anything one said (i.e., avoid the -gui suffix that denotes the absence of something) so as to not beckon negativity with one’s words. She eventually concluded that “Obviously, this isn’t realistic.” adding “...but beauty and perfection is painful, and difficult to attain!” The notion of words and intention affecting future fortune took on additional strength in the early 2010’s, when the new age self-help book *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) was published and translated into Mongolian. It became wildly popular, in part because of the economic chaos brought

¹⁴⁷ literally “tongue mouth”

¹⁴⁸ There is also “tsagaan khel am” lit. “white tongue mouth” or “white gossip” that I’ve heard explained both as “good wishes” or backhanded/catty good wishes that still result ultimately in misfortune.

about by neoliberal shock treatment and the mining boom (Pedersen 2011; Buyandelger 2008; 2013). Additionally, the principals about visualization, the rule of attraction, and the power of spoken or written affirmations aligned with longstanding ideas in Mongolia about the power of language to create and change material consequences and conditions.

Poetic forms like *yerööl magtaal* are even more complex. In the preface to *Yerööl Magtaal* (2015), P. Oyungerel offers a chart to illustrate the difference between the ritualized *yerööl* and the workaday *belge demberliin üg* (words wishing good fortune):

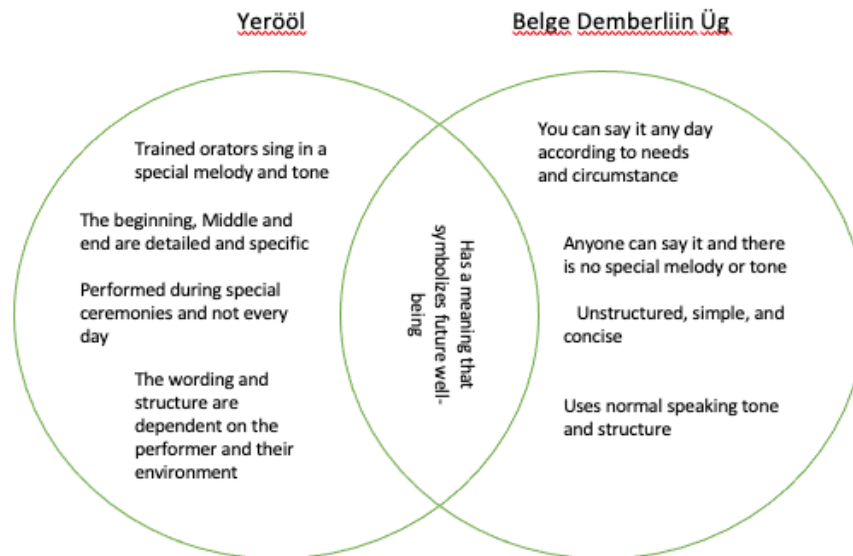


Fig. 4.6: Venn Diagram comparing “Yerööl” and “Belge Demberliin Üg” (Oyungerel 2015, chart translated by Jessica Madison Pískatá)

This chart helpfully isolates the main differences between *Yerööl Magtaal* and everyday words of blessing: prosody, diction, and the talent and training of the

performer. In the case of *Altan Ovoony Magtaal*, which this chapter engages with primarily on the page due to the limits of text-based scholarship, the elevating factor I consider is diction.

Structurally, the poetic form of *magtaal* is marked by couplets, tercets, or quatrains with alliteration on the first syllable. There is also often grammatical parallelism and refrain between sections of the poem or between lines—as we see in the poem with which I began this section, many lines begin with the word “with,” which in the original Mongolian means each line ends with the suffix *tai/-tei/-toi*¹⁴⁹ according to vowel harmony. It also includes a long cataloging list—in this case a list of all the things drawn in by Altan Ovoo’s magnetism into its relational orbit: mountain ranges, lakes, exalted lamas, triumphant events, and calling birds.

Bogd l Dari ovoo mini
 Bogd eznees medeetei
 Zuugaas buusan suntagtai
 Zurgaanaas buusan tsalintai
 Banchin Bogdoos lündentei
 Badamlyankhua tsetseg shig
 Bakhtai saikhan nutag daa.

My holy Dari Ovoo
With news from the holy master
With more than one-hundred *suntag*
With more than six tithed nobles
With command from holy banchin
 Like a lotus
 Most beautiful homeland.

The repetition of this “with,” drawn from the heroic epic tradition, conjures an idealized, perfected, and heroic image of Altan Ovoo that is being channeled into existence just as a future useful saddle is conjured by describing the present saddle with repetitive and exalted language in *yerööl*. That the refrain doing the conjuring in this case is the attachment of “with” to various objects in Altan Ovoo’s orbit suggests

¹⁴⁹ As previously mentioned, a suffix meaning “with”. For example: *Süü* is milk, *tsai* is tea, *süütei tsai* is “tea with milk.”

that the primary heroic quality of Altan Ovoo invoked in the *magtaal* is its ability to draw things in—to become “with” them. By channeling this perfectly compelling Altan Ovoo in a performance space, the orator also conjures it in the experience of the audience, who then become compelled themselves. This is not unlike the cycles of being drawn in that occur during *takhilga* ceremonies such as the one described in Chapter 1—events where *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* is certainly performed.

At first glance a reader of the English translation of *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* may be tempted to call it a topographical poem. Topographical poetry¹⁵⁰ is a genre, most well known in English literature, that maps an often-exalted landscape¹⁵¹ through the use of description and directionality. Of course, there is some mapping going on in this piece, particularly in the second stanza, where all four corners of the mountain are associated with a direction and a landscape form, place, or event placed there. However, this brief moment, while it paints the mountain’s surrounding landscape in the mind’s eye of the familiar listener, is not as central to the form and meaning of the poem as the previously mentioned refrain of “with.”

I would argue that this piece, or at least the second stanza, goes beyond the frame of the topographical poem, and instead functions as a topological poem. The spacetime of the poem is not constructed around cartographic space or directionality but is arranged in relation to the mountain at its center. In his work on the

¹⁵⁰ Loco-descriptive poetry

¹⁵¹ This genre was identified in 1642 with the poem “Cooper’s Hill”. It peaked in popularity in the 18th century.

Russia/China border, Franck Billé suggests a “mathematical” turn in anthropology which would allow us to understand things like borders in terms of the relations they produce rather than ocular centric cartographic spatiality (2018). Poems, with their emphasis on carrying meaning via self-contained form and reference rather than narrative linearity, can act as topological maps, with emphasis on relation rather than mapping via representation. A poem could easily describe a border topology as the tactile surface of skin, thereby allowing for non-Euclidean or geographically-bound notions of landscape—just as *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* describes a relational topology where everything is oriented around the mountain at the center—a magnetic core.

For Blum and Secor (2011), topological space is “...not defined by the distances between points that characterize it when it is in a fixed state but rather by the characteristics that it maintains in the process of distortion and transformation (bending, stretching, squeezing, but not breaking)” (1034). The relations described in *Altan Ovoony Magtaal* are also topological in that they are vectors—Altan Ovoo’s relations are always drawn only into its center and never the other way around. “Form matters, but not so much the forms of things as the forms between things” (Allen 1997, p 24). This is not to say that the materiality and ecology of the Dariganga Volcanic field isn’t central to these relations—Billé cautions against the move in anthropology and geography for topology to be construed as “disembodied vectorial space (74).”

Topologies are not meant to be abstract or “frictionless space and flows.” As explained in the introduction, you cannot disaggregate the geological Altan Ovoo

from the cosmological Altan Ovoo. While it does have attendant deities and spirits, they are not its animating force. Neither is it purely an extinct volcano whose sole source of power is its former capacity to erupt. Rather, its geological form is the compelling power that leads to its worship. However, considering it through the topological map of a poem clarifies some of the strangeness of how I have been told Dariganga spacetime works.

One strangeness of Altan Ovoo is the way it shows up in the dreams of those to whom it has been introduced, and who have been brought into the relational orbit of its topology. This was told to me by numerous people—in Chapter 1 my friend Davaa is quoted as explaining that Altan Ovoo appears in dreams as a way of beckoning the dreamer to visit, pray, or pay tribute. It often appears as a mountain, though sometimes in distorted or exaggerated form, but can also appear as a white horse, a snake, or a protector deity.¹⁵²

Physical proximity is not necessary for belonging in the topological landscape with Dariganga and engaging with Altan Ovoo—which is useful considering many of the humans and non-human members of the community are highly mobile. It is possible to communicate with Altan Ovoo and other geological forms in Dariganga even at a great distance. It is common to call by cell phone, as in the introduction, or through a painting or photographic reproduction of the mountain, which many people

¹⁵² (most likely White Tara or the “Altan Ovoo Burkhan” a bodhisattva/deity on a horse holding a spear and a bowl—possibly Dorje Legpa).

keep in their homes and on their altars for expressly this purpose. Prayers and offerings can be left at these images, which serve as portals for the relational vectors which draw Altan Ovoo's children in ("with") and hold the topology of the Dariganga *nutag* together.

Despite the extreme bendability of space and time, where thousands of years of a lineage can meet at a single point (Dashbalbar 1983) and paintings serve as portals to worshiped mountains, topologies are not totally abstract networks; place does matter, as do the senses. As explained back in Chapter 1, once someone comes into relation with Altan Ovoo, they are "remembered". In this way memory acts as a channel for a perfectly compelling heroic geological entity in much the same way as a *magtaal* does—by invoking a repeating series of past and future instances of being compelled or being made "with."

At the start of his novella *Altan Ovoo* (1998), G. Mend-Ooyo remembers a stone on the altar at the back of his father's ger. The back side of the ger, always facing north, is where sacred objects are placed, and is the fulcrum of the domestic space of the ger. This stone is Altan Ovoo, he writes, and Altan Ovoo is the world in miniature. The position of Altan Ovoo at the very north side of Dariganga makes it the anchor of Dariganga as a domestic space. In her book *Living with Herds*, Natasha Fijn describes the domesticity of humans and herds in Mongolia as that of mutual caretaking and coworking rather than domination (2011). If all the various human and non-human entities are involved in the creation of Dariganga poetry, then this

domestic space is a poetry collective, and Mönkhzaya's position as a caretaker of sheep is mirrored by his position as a caretaker of poetry.

Over email while writing this dissertation, I asked one of my former coworkers, a literature teacher who had obtained his degree in Russian literature at the Gorky Institute during the socialist era, about *süld*—specifically whether this was an aspect of Mongolian literary theory or if it was specific to Mönkhzaya. “This is interesting.” He wrote, “I think this is specific to Dariganga poetry. The way the *Gal* writers, even though their styles were so different, all felt that they took their talent from being in Dariganga. This is different from the European concept of the poetic genius who only writes alone. Dariganga poets say that their genius comes from Dariganga, which means from everything that is there, such as Altan Ovoo, Ganga Nuur, the horses, the grass, and so on.” At the start of this chapter, Khürelbaatar was quoted saying that the creative flow of Dariganga poetry was produced not only by the poets or by human collaboration, but that the “creative storehouse” of the nation was located precisely by the “shamanic nature” of the area—that is to say, the liveliness of a world that includes humans, living non-humans, geological forms, and spirits.

In Mongolian poetry, both writing and performing are considered equally valuable contributions to poetic practice. This is also true in the Dariganga context, as we see in the way performers have more influence on the meter of a poem than the original authors. In the following chapter, we will also see how certain poems are written repeatedly by multiple people, with different versions proliferating but still

part of the whole. A common comparison drawn by scholars of music and literature (Wickham-Smith 2012; Yoon 2018) is between American transcendentalist¹⁵³ poets such as Thoreau or Whitman, and Dariganga poets writing on Dariganga ecology. There is a crucial difference, however. The American transcendentalist is working in a social context of imagined separation between himself and Nature. Struggling against this, he must go out alone into Nature to free himself from social ties and gain authentic experience. The Dariganga poet (or poetry reader), however, is working in a context of a shared social environment between humans and non-humans, which is called *baigali* (“nature” or literally “what is”). Social homelands like the Dariganga *nutag* are comprised of shifting networks of human, nonhuman, and immaterial entities. Just like poetry, the landscapes themselves are collaborations, and poetry and landscape are coextensive and co-constitutive, mirroring, making, and re-organizing one another’s contours through terrain and prosody. This will become even more apparent in the following chapter, where we see how Long-Song singers’ versions of their poems/songs influence and are influenced by the contours of the landscape. Poetry and landscape mirror one another in that they collect together the same group of collaborators that make up the Dariganga homeland through their relational cooperation.

Poetry is both mimetic of this collection and created by these same entities as their genius is channeled through the linguistic ability of the human poet. These

¹⁵³ These are the most drawn upon genres by scholars of Mongolian literature when comparing a Mongolian poetic form to a western one (Yoon 2018; Wickham-Smith 2012)

entities, with human poets, engage in mutual cooperation, contributing different abilities to produce various kinds of value. Poetry-writing is one such collaboration. In an essay on Gal, fellow Dariganga poet and essayist Mend-Ooyo argues that though poetry bears the name of the author, it is always produced through collective labor (2015). From this perspective, the more-than-human landscape of Dariganga is a poetry collective anchored by the geological *ongon gazar* that, according to Mönkhzaya, are responsible for the region's poetic oeuvre. Whether their role is that of a creator (in which case social relations with landscape forms are mediated by exchange of genius and talent) or that of steward (in which case the social relations take place in the domestic sphere), a Dariganga poet must be engaged in a collaborative or cooperative relation with landscape and place.

Chapter 5: *Duu*

“So then, Toroi! You certainly kept our Dariganga horses under lock and key! My superiors say this herd of mine has an illustrious heritage, it drinks water, its eats grass, it moves upon the land. What is more important to a man than his horse? Ride my favorite charger from this herd, he has within him the genius of Altan Ovoo.”

-G. Mend-Ooyo, “The Story of the Little Sharga” trans. Simon Wickham-Smith

Poetry is at the heart of a conversation between Dariganga’s geological geniuses and their human kin. Unfortunately, very little of this literature has been circulated outside of Mongolia, though there has been a concentrated push over the last few years by current director of the Mongolian Academy of Culture and Poetry G. Mend-Ooyo to publish more international translations of Mongolian poetry. In August of 2017, he held a “World Poetry Days” festival to coincide with the 37th World Congress of Poets that was hosted in Ulaanbaatar that year under the theme of “The Wisdom of Nature and the Nature of the Human Soul.” In his invitation to the congress, he wrote:

Poets transmit the message of endless time, they are ambassadors of human language, they express the intuition and feeling which honors and worships the natural world, and in today’s world therefore the words of your own poetry are most important. We must not break the string¹⁵⁴ which is the rhythm of the human world and the world of nature. Today we need all the more clearly to express the voice of nature in the human mind through the

¹⁵⁴ This is likely a reference to the “golden string” mentioned in the *Secret History of the Mongols* that connects ancestral line on Chinggis Khan or a reference to the *Altan Tövch*, which dictated that the realms of religious and secular governance in the 17th century would be separated but still very much entangled. These days a “thread” is often used to either invoke a longstanding line or relationship or to invoke an unbroken entanglement or relation between supposedly separate worlds.

melody of our language and through listening to the wisdom of the natural world. (2017)

Though at first glance this might seem like any boilerplate romantic invocation that could be the opening of any poetry festival anywhere, with a background in Mend-Ooyo's work and the themes of Mongolian literature writ large, we can isolate some important ideas that will carry through the rest of the chapter. The first is his mention of "endless time," or eternity, which suggests a geological or even cosmic timescale that extends beyond human life and history. Mend-Ooyo suggests here that poetry and poets allow us to engage with this timescale on behalf of human language.

Second is the idea that worship of the natural world takes place in the realm of "feelings and intuition," that is to say, affect. While a fully-realized theoretical unpacking of the concept of affect in the Mongolian context is beyond the purview of this dissertation, this does tie back to a specific affect that has come up throughout the dissertation. The feeling my interlocutors in Dariganga describe as being attracted or compelled by magnetic geological forms: *setgel tatax*, is one distinct example of how acts of worship take place in the register of feeling and intuition.

Third is the idea that there is a connection, or string, between humans and nature that must not be severed. Here Mend-Ooyo acknowledges the modern framing of Nature vs. Culture that many poets, Mongolian or otherwise, are living in, but also suggests that the duty of the poet is to prevent this chord from being severed. Throughout his work, Mend-Ooyo uses the image of a golden chain or endless knot to

write against alienation, binarism and duality, encouraging other poets towards what Donna Haraway would call a NatureCulture (2007) project.

Finally, he suggests that the wisdom of the natural world is channeled through the human mind via poetry, specifically through “melody” or prosody, meaning sonic form. This chapter will take all four of these assumptions as a baseline as I approach the rest of the chapter—a world in which poetry and the natural world on a geological/cosmic scale are connected via the poet’s ability to translate affect and the genius of landscape through poetic forms and verse. By channeling this connection, which already exists, the poet both makes and strengthens it, lending power to the compelling strength of geological forms and poetry. Because of Mend-Ooyo’s origin in Dariganga, this chapter will primarily focus on poetry from or about Dariganga and the Dariganga landscape.

This chapter is entitled *Duu*¹⁵⁵ because it focuses on a sonorous form of poetic performance: the *urtyn duu*, or “Long-Song.” This chapter focuses on the way melodic performances of poems can act as topological maps, not only with words and rhythm, but with melody. Similar to performance-based poems such as *Altan Ovoony Magtaal*, a great deal of meaning is contained in the prosody (or in the case, the melody) of Long-Song—how long syllables are held when they are sung is an echo of the isochronic prosody of spoken performed poetry. Another similarity to other

¹⁵⁵ Very simply translated as “sound,” “voice,” or “song.” My amateur understanding of this term is that it focuses on the elements of making sound that have to do with melody, voice, and expression. This is in contrast to *chimee* (n) which is a much more general term for “sound.”

performance-based poems is that performances of *urtyn duu* are largely about “crafting a collective feeling” (Legrain 2016). I attempt to muddy the boundaries between poem and song here because of the collective drive in *urtyn duu* performances, their melody, and their rhythms that are also relevant to performed poems that may not necessarily fall under the category of song.

***Jaakhan Sharga* / “Little Palomino”**

Tomoo grew fond
of the little Palomino’s trotting,
And his temperament was
Slightly saddened
I’ve set off with two horses
And passed Khongor’s *shiree*¹⁵⁶
With tears in both eyes
Thinking of her again
I’ll wait for you at Naranbulag
Where the sun still rises
If your heart is still the same
Please come to me.
One can fix the flapping felt roof by staking a rope
But how could one fix a heavy heart?
One can stop a bellowing camel by staking a halter
But how can one stop such agitation?

Jaakhan Sharga in its most condensed form, the poetry produced above, is the lyrics of an *urtyn duu*, or a Long-Song. Long-Song is a genre of folk song in which a relatively short poem (at least in relation to an epic, for example) is sung or performed so that each syllable is elongated, each syllable decorated with melismatic ornamentation that is often improvised by the singer. Carol Pegg argues that Long-Song is a genre that is mimetic of the landscape, as the melodic contours of the

¹⁵⁶ Literally “table” here it means small mesa or plateau.

performance can be matched up to the hills, valleys, and dips of the landscape it describes (Pegg 2001, 106). Long-Song is both sung informally by contemporary nomadic herders and by professional singers trained by heritage institutions (Pegg 2001; Yoon 2018; Hutchins 2019). Though many professional Long-Song singers live in urban areas, it is commonly agreed that the best singers must have come from a pastoral or rural background (Chimedtseye 2013; Yoon 2018). Writing on *urtyn duu* singers throughout Mongolia, Sunmin Yoon argues that Long-Song singing is a sonically ritualized process that makes possible an “emotional, spiritual, and practical interconnection with Mongolians’ pastoral and environmental activities” (2018, 94). She considers this process part of how humans and animals participate in a system akin to Arne Naess’s “deep ecology” in which various actors in the environment work together holistically in order to contribute to an ecosystem’s biodiversity (1989; 1995). KG Hutchins argues that in rural Dundgovi Province in central Mongolia, herders use Long-Song as a form of potentially more-than-human performance (2019).

In January 2020, Mongolian National Broadcasting’s “Heritage” program aired an episode on the origins of *Jaakhan Sharga*, a nationally-famous Long-Song and legend from the Dariganga area. Dariganga heritage archivist G. Adiya and famous folk and Long-Song singer and musical heritage scholar Sh. Chimedtseye discuss the legendary origin of the Long-Song, recount the story of how it entered popular culture, and make suggestions for scholars and singers interested in the piece going forward.

Adiya is the great grandson of Injeenorov, the “author” and first singer of the Long-Song *Jaakhan Sharga* and the protagonist of the legend of *Jaakhan Sharga*. He is also the son of the singer who first performed it for audiences outside of Dariganga and made the first standardized version of it by making a recording for Mongolian State radio. Adiya is a broad-shouldered man in his mid-sixties, with white hair and square features. He is wearing a crisp white shirt and reading glasses and speaks in the resolute and direct manner of his generation of scholars. Behind him we see a version of the iconic painting of Altan Ovoo—a green contour against a blue sky, foregrounded by a pond full of reeds on which float two white swans painted from a single brushstroke. This depiction of Altan Ovoo, seen simultaneously from the southeast, looking out from the north end of town (to get an angle on Toroi Bandi’s path) and the southwest, looking out from the children’s camp (to situate Kholboo lake and its swans in the foreground), is ubiquitous in Sükhbaatar, and other provinces as well. One can find a version of this painting on the walls of people’s homes, restaurants, schools, government offices, and so on.

Adiya and Chimedtseyee’s interviews are cut together at intervals, and the program consists entirely of switching back and forth between the two speakers so as to strategically juxtapose contradictions and resonances. This editing strategy invokes the patchwork quality of *Jaakhan Sharga* and demonstrates the way Dariganga poetry and poetic discourse create a landscape that is multidimensional, harmonious, and often incongruous. Sitting on a blue and red lit soundstage in the MNB studio,

Chimedtseye is wearing her full performance costume, done in the style of a 19th century Dariganga noblewoman.

Below are selected and translated excerpts from both interviews:

G. Adiya: Injeenorov was a lama who lived in Dariganga's Ovoo sum.¹⁵⁷ His lover, Chimedlkham, was the daughter of a wealthy lord named Urgamalzundaa who disapproved of their relationship and secretly arranged his daughter's marriage to the son of an Inner Mongolian lord. When Chimedlkham's family went to Inner Mongolia for the wedding ceremony, Injeenorov decided to pursue them wearing his normal clothes, thus abandoning his religion.

Chimedtseye: In 1991, I wrote down the tale of this song from "Talky" Dulam, a Dariganga local, when she was 93 years old. She told me: "The mother-in-law of the girl who is marrying against her will was very strict, and a tough woman who kept the key to the chest herself. But the bride managed to take an *uuji* (garment) from the chest and hid it under a pile of dried dung."

Adiya: At that time, a wedding ceremony would last for two or three days. When Injeenorov arrived at the wedding ceremony, they didn't recognize him, thinking he was just someone who's traveling. So, he decided to sing a song: Jaakhan Sharga."

Adiya: So Injeenorov was waiting for his lover at Naranbulag, which today is Naran county's center.

Chimedtseye: After hearing this song with the hidden message, Chimedlkham escaped wearing an *uuji* which was hidden under the pile of dried cow dung.

Adiya: After their escape they spend a week hiding in Dariganga's sagebrush forest and came back home where they lived happily ever after. The girl's proposed in-laws didn't chase them because of this beautiful song. So, they've lived a simple and humble life, herding their livestock. Injeenorov wasn't just an ordinary lama. He was a high ranking and respected lama. During the Altan Ovoo *takhilga* he would sit at the top of the mountain where most of the lords used to sit. It takes a lot of time and effort to reach that level, so I assume he

¹⁵⁷ Located at the base of Altan Ovoo, where the town center of Dariganga county is now located. During the socialist era this settlement was known as Altan Ovoo Negdel (Altan Ovoo collective).

wasn't just a 20-year-old young lama. Also, he was known for his *unzad* (chanting ability). I read about it in Gombojov Dorj's book a while ago... Renchin,¹⁵⁸ the old man from Sükhbaatar's Ongon District, said that most of the verses were added after Injeenorov's death by random people which is very common in Mongolia's folklore culture and tradition.

Adiya: My father was conscripted into the army in 1944 and performed *Jaakhan Sharga* for the first time during the Army Arts competition. Since then, people slowly began to acknowledge the new Long-Song from Dariganga. In 1955 he performed this song at the nationwide youth festival and our father's version was broadcasted for many years on Mongolian radio. After other versions appeared they stopped broadcasting my father's version... Lkhamjav¹⁵⁹ is from Zavkhan province and his brother was the leader of a military detachment in Naran District, Sükhbaatar. He heard the song for the first time from a laundrywoman who was part of his detachment when he was seventeen while visiting his brother. Later he told me that he changed the song a little bit to better suit his voice.

Chimedtseye: Most people know Mr. Lkhamjav's version of *Jaakhan Sharga* instead of the original Dariganga version. It was a beautiful melody. Mr. Lkhamjav had a very smooth voice, so he added his elements to the song, I think. It is said that he learned it from Tsermaa, a woman who worked at his brother's military detachment as a cook. But it's not a classical Dariganga melody. Even I don't sing it using a Dariganga melody. My version is a mixture of Mr. Lkhamjav's version and the classical Dariganga version. Also, I've added my personal elements to it which is what Long-Song singers tend to do.

Adiya: I think the real melody of the song can only be heard here: the six counties of the Dariganga region. My father used to tell me that the versions by Lkhamjav and Chimedtseye are far from the original versions of the song. In 2000, there was a singing competition to find the best "Jaakhan Sharga" version with eighteen participants who came from various provinces of Mongolia such as Govisumber, Dornogovi, Khentii, and Dornod... The judges included [professors of literature and music] and one delegate from Inner Mongolia. Khüreltogoo, a herder from Dariganga, won first place. He was a neighbor of my father's family, and they knew each other well. Also, one of my siblings participated in the competition and finished in fourth place. I think the real version of *Jaakhan Sharga* can only be found in Dariganga's six counties. The versions of Borjigin, Dornogovi, and Dornod all have very

¹⁵⁸ Adiya is not referring to Byambyn Rinchen, Mongolia's most famous 20th century novelist.

¹⁵⁹ One of the renowned performers of the Long-Song

different melodies. I prefer the original version of the song and hope people will acknowledge it more. I've organized a *Jaakhan Sharga* singing competition among the children of our province. They learned it from their parents, relatives, and friends.

Chimedtseye: Today there aren't many people who know Dariganga's original version. So, I want Long-Song singers in Mongolia to learn from the elders in Dariganga who know the original, authentic version. If you want to distinguish yourself from others then that's the best way. Also, more research and study needs to be done on the subject. The interesting thing about *Jaakhan Sharga* is that it makes its singers famous all the time. Mr. Lkhamjav was the first to become famous singing this song. I started my career as a singer with the song at the county arts competition. My friend Nergui from Dundgovi also sang it adding her unique elements and taste and she's a well-known singer now. Norov,¹⁶⁰ my teacher, also sang it very well and became a hero of the workers and a state-honored singer. So, this song has made many of its singers famous.

There are three major points I want to highlight. First, *Jaakhan Sharga* refers not only to the Long-Song itself, but to the legend of how it came to be (that is, the love story of Injeenorov and Chimedlkham) and the history of how it became part of Mongolian literary and musical heritage. Second, authenticity is important to both Adiya and Chimedtseye when discussing versions of *Jaakhan Sharga*, though to varying degrees, and that said authenticity is closely bound up with being “of” Dariganga. Third, the proliferation of different versions of song, legend, and history, which is added to every time *Jaakhan Sharga* is sung, retold, or historicized, puts no strain on the notion that it is a singular work.

¹⁶⁰ N. Norovbanzad, Hero of Labor and the People's singer and perhaps the most famous of all the Long-Song singers. Her version of the Long-Song “the sun over the placid world” was shot into space on the *Mazaalai* satellite to show any intelligence that found it what the earth was capable of (Hutchins 2020).

One interpretation of Adiya and Chimedtseyee’s references to Dariganga is that they believe there is some air of “authenticity” to the Dariganga version of *Jaakhan Sharga*, though Chimedtseyee gives greater credence to the idea that each individual Long-Song singer channels the original song and its lyrics in their own fashion. But why for both of them is it so important that the Dariganga version be preserved, or sung by someone from Dariganga?

There is a kind of gentle tug-of-war here about what a Dariganga authenticity might actually mean. There is a back and forth here about whether the authentic, “real melody” of the song must be reproduced or performed by someone *from* Dariganga, or whether the melody can only be heard *in* Dariganga. This tension was unresolved by my interviews with interlocutors who claimed some connection to Dariganga, whether ethnically, ancestrally, or by birth. My feeling is that the reason for this ties back to the topological mapping laid out in the previous chapter, during the unpacking of *Altan Ovoony Magtaal*. This connection isn’t necessarily historical, but temporally non-linear, a sense of having been or being tethered to Dariganga by the magnetic pull of Altan Ovoo and the other *ongon gazar* in the area.

Singing or reciting talent in and of itself is often said to be dependent on region—with some provinces and counties being well known for their performers and poets, and others for their lack of talent. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I went on a trip to Khustain Nuruu National Park in Töv Province, about 60 miles west of Ulaanbaatar. I took this trip with a group of Long-Song singers who were planning to sing a few songs to the re-wilded *takhi* horses who made their home in the protected

area inside the park borders. Baatar, a retired chemical engineer and musical enthusiast had invited my partner and I to join him as he brought this group of singers to the park to “sing a song for the horses.” In the car on the way out of the city, we chatted about our interests and where we had lived in Mongolia. I told Baatar that I had lived for a few years in Sükhbaatar, and that my current work was in Dariganga.

“Ah yes.” He answered. “People from the east can really sing, especially Sükhbaatar, Dornod, and Dornogovi people. But western people, especially Zavkhan and Arkhangai province people, they can hardly sing at all. It’s those long flat spaces, in the east. You have to be able to project for people to hear you.”¹⁶¹

Sunmin Yoon identifies another one of these places as Ikh Gazaryn Chuluu in Dundgovi province. This place has a preponderance of talented singers of the Borjigin style, which “has many small ornamentations and nasal sounds reflecting the ornate granite landscape” (2018, 103). Ikh Gazaryn Chuluu is known for its enormous granite rocks, its mineral wealth, its rich ecosystem and grassy steppe. The ornamentation of the Long-Song singing style is said to be a direct result of the complexity of the geological landscape.

My interlocutors make an argument similar to that of Yoon’s. The sonic form of the Long-Song, that is to say, the melody, follows the long and flat contours of the steppe landscape. It is for this reason that singers from Sükhbaatar are known for

¹⁶¹ This is of course, a matter of debate and difference of opinion, as one of the most famous male Long-Song singers, Lkhamjav, was from Zavkhan.

having a wide vocal range and a softer singing tenor with less nasal tones and ornamentation, while people from the rockier parts of the Gobi use more intricate ornamentations. This follows the argument Adiya and Chimedtseye made in their interviews on *Jaakhan Sharga*. To be “of” or “from” Dariganga, above all else means that a singer has an intimate familiarity with the specific contours of the landscape, and the landscape characteristics in general. This familiarity, or memorization, to draw on Mönkhzaya’s theory of memorized poems becoming part of the body¹⁶², leads to a more “Dariganga” performance, no matter where the performer might be in the present. For a song like *Jaakhan Sharga*, which is above all a song about Dariganga, this intellectual embodiment, or ability to channel Dariganga itself in mimetic melody, is essential to the performance.

This softer and smoother style is said to be mimetic of the flat and smooth steppe. So, the Long-Song *Jaakhan Sharga* should be mimetic of the Dariganga landscape in its performance, and also act as a map for Chimedlkham to find Injeenorov at sunrise, both in lyrics and in performance. “I’ll wait for you at Naranbulag, where the sun still rises” he sings, as the melody mimics the bubbling of a spring and the glowing crest of the sun rising over the flat steppe horizon.

In his work on heritage institutions and the horsehead fiddle, KG Hutchins writes about how music teachers in Ulaanbaatar lament that their students, either from the city or from Inner Mongolia, have not spent enough time with animals in the

¹⁶² *Tseejlekh*, meaning “to memorize” or “to learn by heart” literally means “to take into one’s chest”.

countryside to be able to reproduce the mimetic songs faithfully, particularly those that mimic the gait of the animal (Hutchins 2020, 75-76). Similarly, the *urtyn duu* technique known as *shuurankhai* (falsetto held on the highest note) is mimetic of the peak of a mountain of the sky and is only employed in the most exalted subgenre of Long-Song, *aizam duu* (extended Long-Song) (Yoon 2018).

The connection between singers and landscape is not only a matter of performance but also in the words used in the lyrics of the song. Laurent Legrain gives the example of how some Mongolian toponyms are sonically related to songs, and Sunmin Yoon writes on how Uliastai, the capital of Zavkhan Province, got its name: “The name Uliastai, in Zavkhan province to the northwest, where I frequently saw poplar trees in my travels, comes from *ulias*, which means ‘poplar tree.’; When the wind blows across a poplar tree’s branches, it makes a sound, which is rendered in Mongolian by the verb *ulikh* (to howl), an onomatopoeia which informs the geographical name” (2014: 234).

Dariganga-born Long-Song singers such as Chimedtseye, who are intimately familiar with these geological contours, tend to favor Long-Songs such as this. The legend of this Long-Song also invokes specific landscape attributes. In an interview with Sunmin Yoon, Chimedtseye explains how the *energi* of the wind that blows from the north down through Sūkhbaatar and into Altan Ovoo:

The fresh wind of the Khentii and Khangai ridges follows the mountains down onto the steppe, and swirls in the direction of Dar’ganga, where it meets with the warm and gentle winds from the Himalayas, generating great strength. The concentration of this great power across the area of Dar’ganga around Shiliin

Bogd and Altan Ovoo is the influence which produces songs of such extraordinary energy and power. (2013: 94)

Singers in Sükhbaatar not only communicate the geological contours and attributes of the steppe, but embody it in their performances, their improvisations, and some argue, the character of their minds (Pedersen 2011). In addition to landscape topology being channeled through many different performances, there are also multiple versions of the legend itself, and some of these differences are significant. L. Erdenechimeg argues that Long-Songs often have mythic cycles attached to them that are entirely unrelated to their lyrics, or perhaps only related obliquely or through metaphor (2016).

After realizing that there were multiple, sometimes wildly different, versions of *Jaakhan Sharga*, not only different in lyrics or performance but in the origin stories attached to each of them, I began to keep a dedicated notebook in which I would record each new version I heard. If I had heard a particular version before, I would find it in my notebook and put a tick in the margin. I quickly found that the most fertile grounds for collecting wholesome historical folk tales like *Jaakhan Sharga* were places with high concentrations of secondary school teachers. On a visit to Baruun-Urt, I visited the newly-built school #4 to visit some of my former coworkers. During tea break, Buyanzaya, a history teacher, and Oyuntsetseg, a Mongolian script teacher, relayed to me the versions they knew off the top of their heads, which I quickly recorded in my notebook:

Buyanzaya: A young woman was supposed to be given over in marriage to one of the banner nobles, but she had fallen in love with a poor young man. This was during the time of the Qing, so the Dariganga banner was concerned with breeding horses for the emperor. The nobles would be very wealthy and command lots of horses. So, they hid some clothes under a pile of *argal*¹⁶³ in the yard. When the girl went out at dusk to get the argl for the night fire, she found the clothes. The clothes were a disguise, of course. This is like that other story I told you, where Toroi Bandi's wife hid the key to his prison in a block of cheese and set him free. Anyway, she got her clothes and then met the young man outside the yard, and they eloped together. They rode their little Sharga out of there and hid for a long while in the sage brush. Well, the king had his guard go out searching for her, but they couldn't find her because they were so well hidden. So, all autumn long they hid there, until finally they heard that they could go back home. They were worried that the king's guard would come looking for them, but he had lost interest in the woman, and they lived happily ever after. In this version, the Sharga is a symbol of forbidden love, and the freedom from suffering for women kidnapped into marriage.

Oyuntsetseg: There's another one that has to do with a lama who fell in love with a woman, but obviously he couldn't marry her because he was a lama. So, she moved far away to western Mongolia. However, he kept remembering her daily. He could not get her out of his mind. So finally, he decided to go and travel to see her. However, when he came upon the place where her ger was, he noticed that she had gone and had moved on to another place. And so, on he traveled with his *sharga* until eventually he found her, which is when he decided to give up being a lama.

While I can't include every version of *Jaakhan Sharga* I heard, I can identify a few key resonances I found across the collection: lovers in peril, a lecherous villain with political power, a brave little Palomino, and emphasis on the value of intimately knowing the Dariganga terrain. In fact, it is not enough for the heroes to know the terrain in *Jaakhan Sharga*, the horse must also know it, and the lovers must trust him to bring them through safely. Finally, there is a metatext to all these stories, which is

¹⁶³ Dried cow dung used as fuel.

that as both the legend and the Long-Song describe a song that acts as a covert map of the Dariganga *nutag*, they in turn also become a map, reinscribing the live-saving knowledge with each performance or telling.

The final version of *Jaakhan Sharga* is in Mend-Ooyo's surrealist prose. In this version, the narrative voice of the speaker moves from a performance of the long song in Dariganga, to an imaginary space in which the worlds of *Jaakhan Sharga* and *Toroi Bandi*, which will be discussed in the subsequent section, join. This creates a Dariganga that exists primarily through a kaleidoscopic series of Long-Songs and legends. Meaning proliferates, and the Sharga is inscribed in text, his tailhairs turned to script that saturates the Dariganga landscape, both real and imagined, with the melodic hoofbeats.

The fiddle plays 'Little Sharga,' its prayer stringing out memories. We had come together on the seventeenth day of the middle month of autumn, for a party given at home. A blind artist from Dariganga, named Saraal, sang 'Little Sharga,' and my relatives joined in...Someone from the crowd spoke, it was as though he saw the lovely horse in my eyes.

"My, what a fine horse! It's not on the earth, thought it seems like its living in my eyes. How it gallops!"

...The horse who supported the stones of the Buddha had died standing and was still standing in the hollow of the five mountains on this steppe. The music of hooves was pounding out in Toroi Bandi's proud heart, and there was the evocation of heaven, this speedy steed, in the place called Little Sharga.

Oh, can not one single word of my speech undo the knot of ten thousand meanings? In the middle of this drunken celebration, where speech flows freely, these words about the little Sharga rise up like the full moon and awaken this moment, sleeping for more than a hundred years, and it brings to fulfilment the story of this lean and powerful horse.

The wild steppe absorbed the thundering of this charger known as the little Sharga, who was born standing and who died standing, it fluttered like an offering scarf. And above the precious writing of the horse's tailhairs, the herd floated, and in the blue mirage their golden song was an ornament of the ears.

And over every heart, over the strings of the fiddle, the Little Sharga moves, tireless, through centuries. (2015)

Toroi Bandi/ “Toroi the Kid”

The first time I heard of Toroi Bandi was on my first visit to Dariganga in 2011, when my friends and I drove to the top of Tsagaan Ovoo to visit and pay tribute to his statue. The legend contained in the Long-Song that bears his name is one of the foundational Dariganga legends, equal in importance to *Jaakhan Sharga*.¹⁶⁴ After taking photographs with the monument and placing some candy offerings in his bowl, I asked our friend Muugii, who had driven us all up the mountain, who Toroi Bandi was exactly.

Well, actually Toroi Bandi was kind of the Mongolian Robin Hood. For a long time Mongolians needed many Robin Hoods because of the Manchu who were very cruel, and Mongolia was so poor. Actually we call him “Shiliin Sain Er,” because he goes to Shiliin Bogd mountain in the very early hours and swears to protect Mongolia’s poor people.

The story of *Toroi Bandi*¹⁶⁵ comes in many forms: Long-Song, folk tale/legend, and even a folk-rock song, all of which tell the story of one of legendary Dariganga bandit Toroi Bandi’s daring escapes. Once he hid in an ice cave underneath the steppe for many weeks, completely invisible to his captors. His wife was always breaking him out of prison and then vanishing from the thrust of the

¹⁶⁴ There are also a number of pop songs that reference his legend, most notably the song “Toroi Bandi” by folk rock band Khusugtun.

¹⁶⁵ Many English versions of this Long-Song and legend translate the titular character’s name as “Toroi the Bandit,” perhaps drawing on story content or the homophonic connection between *Bandi* and “bandit.” However, *Bandi* means something closer to “young fellow,” or “lad,” drawn from its original context as a title of a young Buddhist acolyte. I’ve split the difference here and chosen “Toroi the Kid,” to maintain both the meaning of *bandi* and the allusion to outlaw ballads.

story. Most famous is the story from the Long-Song, which tells the story of how Toroi Bandi escaped from authorities by coaxing his horse down the steepest grade of Altan Ovoo (Namdag 2005, 40)¹⁶⁶. The legend and lyrics of the Long-Song detail the paths around Altan Ovoo, specifically “Toroi Bandi’s Path,” which, because of the legend and Long-Song, is now the primary route that men take when climbing to the summit of the mountain.



Fig. 5.1: Statue of Toroi Bandi and ovoo (Photograph taken by Jessica Madison Piskatá, June 20th, 2018)

¹⁶⁶ In some versions, such as Mend-Ooyo’s, the horse dies as a result, angering Altan Ovoo.

Enkhmaa is the artist in residence at the Dariganga County Cultural Center. She has the kind of demeanor that is said to be rare in Sükhbaatar and the East in general, where people pride themselves on being calm, stoic, and somewhat difficult-to-crack.¹⁶⁷ Those who are exceptions tend to be very much so—a swing in the opposite direction. Enkhmaa is one of these, instantly warm and dynamic, ready to sweep you up immediately and whisk you into the flurry of their day. She is warmly plump and light on her feet with smiling eyes, close-cropped hair, and a melodious way of speaking that makes her easy to understand. Enkhmaa is the type of person who wants you to understand.

I first met Enkhmaa when I was poking around the cultural center on a venture to find someone that could turn on the town’s free WIFI router. Things tended to slow down in the summer, when teachers and most government workers transitioned to a more relaxed work schedule and spent a lot of time relaxing in the countryside. I was wandering around the semi-darkened carpeted hallways when she came around the corner wearing black stretch pants, running shoes, and a blue button-down shirt printed with tiny daisies. I introduced myself to her, she asked about my work, and instantly my project became hers. She was taking advantage of the summer quiet to work in her studio, and had the keys to the Dariganga county museum, which I wasn’t aware existed until that afternoon. “Let’s find something interesting to you!” she said,

¹⁶⁷ Morten Pedersen’s interlocutors in the West describe eastern steppe and Gobi people as having “unlayered” minds.

linking arms with me and leading me up a flight of stairs, the internet router forgotten.

The Dariganga cultural center had been extensively renovated since I was last there in 2013, revamped for the Takhilga Naadam celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Altan Ovoo stupa. The building is constructed around a large gymnasium/theater, off of which are a series of hallways and doors, one of which led to Enkhmaa's art studio. Upstairs were the offices of public employees and county officials, as well as the Dariganga Ethnographic Museum, which had recently been moved from a dilapidated building at the edge of town. Upon hearing I was an anthropologist, Enkhmaa took me straight there, phoning up one of the museum's docents to come give me a tour. The museum is contained within one room and is composed mostly of what the docent calls "cultural heritage items," most of which had been donated by Dariganga residents over the years.

"Honestly," Enkhmaa says, gesturing to some dynamic wood carvings of gamboling camels,¹⁶⁸ "a lot of this is just stuff I had around the house from my father and grandparents. I have too many things and I didn't want them cluttering up my house." In a low glass case to the right of the door were volcanic stones that resembled various human forms, alongside a collection of miscellaneous stones that had been collected from around Dariganga. Enkhmaa dated these back to 1974. We

¹⁶⁸ These, Enkhmaa told me a few months later when we ran into each other at one of her exhibitions, are made by the artist first finding the animal in the wood, and then "cleaning up" to reveal it. The grains in the wood thus follow the movement of the animal, making it appear as if it is in motion.

moved around the room in a clockwise fashion, admiring saddle work, sculptures of *burkhan*¹⁶⁹ and the handiwork of Dariganga’s famous blacksmiths: silver cups and intricate jewelry studded with turquoise and orange coral.



Fig. 5.2: Paintings by B. Enkhmaa displayed at Dariganga Cultural Heritage Exhibition (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá July 27th, 2018)

Nearing the end of our circumambulation, Enkhmaa pointed out a series of paintings hanging to the right of the door. Some of these were hers, she said, commissioned for the museums’ re-opening. Displayed prominently in her studio was a painting of Altan Ovoo’s silhouette against the steppe, with a billowing blue cloud emerging from the top of Altan Ovoo. The cloud stretched to take over the top two

¹⁶⁹ “God,” also used to refer to the Buddha and various bodhisattva.

thirds of the canvas, and inside were thin black paint strokes sketching out figures of various folk tales, some of which I recognized and some of which I didn't. On one end I saw what Enkhmaa was gesturing to—Toroi Bandi in chains and a woman in traditional Dariganga noble dress with a small bundle in her hands. There was a muted painting of greens and browns that depicted a Qing-era man leading a tawny horse with a black mane, and one in blue tones depicting a wide arc of clouds in the midst of which played a number of celestial scenes, which I recognized as containing various visual narratives of Sükhbaatar Long-Songs, particularly *Jaakhan Sharga* and *Toroi Bandi*. I pointed it out to Enkhmaa. “Yes, this is all legends in one.” She said.

During another one of my visits with Enkhmaa, she asked if I wanted to see her studio in the back of the cultural center. Behind a metal door to the side of the gymnasium stage was a small room piled with paintings both finished and in progress, all done in richly saturated oils. Many of Enkhmaa's paintings contained both Altan Ovoo and Shiliin Bogd as if they were right next to one another. One painting showed a queen in traditional Khalkh headdress offering a khadakh to the viewer while flanked by the two mountains. “This queen is saying ‘Welcome to Dariganga’” Enkhmaa noted when she saw me looking at it. “She's saying ‘Hello welcome to our Dariganga.’ So, this one is entitled *Manaid Ireerei*”¹⁷⁰ Many of her paintings contained idealized depictions of women, many of them in queenly garb with the Dariganga landscape in the background. There was also a painting done in

¹⁷⁰ “Come over to our place.”

the Thangka style depicting White Tara (Dari Ekh) as a mother with child. “This one is a bit of an experiment.” She said. “When men paint these pictures, they are so rigid. Everything must be exact. But women we are more flexible, clever, and adaptable, so our art can do the same.”

“Actually,” she added. “This reminds me of a story. You know Toroi Bandi? You’ve been to his statue?”

I had.

“Do you know why he’s there?” She asks.

“Because he was a hero!” I answer childishly.

Very good! Good girl, that’s correct. You saw how he sits in the bowl of the hill, how he’s looking towards the east? He’s looking towards China, saying ‘don’t come back here!’¹⁷¹ Now foreign companies are coming to Mongolia. We should be a rich country, but they take it all and only give some to corrupt politicians. There’s none left for the rest of us. So many people joke that we wish Toroi Bandi was still around to steal it back.

I’d learned over the years, especially in Dariganga, where many people have relatives on the other side of the border, that when average people mention the Chinese as political perpetrators and oppressors, they are very rarely referring to Chinese nationals. The position of most Chinese residents in Sükhbaatar is as labor for the mine at Tömörtiin Ovoo, and in reference to this population most people spoke in xenophobic terms. However, when “China” is invoked as a political entity,

¹⁷¹ I’d heard this narrative before in reference to the enormous chrome Chinggis Khaan statue outside Ulaanbaatar.

especially in the context of contemporary readings of Qing-era legends, it seems to mean something more—foreignness certainly, but also the force of globalization, capital, and empire. Even in complaining about the corruption or environmental degradation caused by Canadian or Australian mining projects (such as Oyu Tolgoi), the word “China” is often lumped in. This term takes two forms in the present that have come to mean the same thing in many people’s imagination: *Khyatad* (China) and *Manj* (Manchu). Despite the polity of the PRC and the Qing empire being entirely different, they are often lumped together as outside threats from the east, as *kolonichlol* (colonial) powers coming from elsewhere.¹⁷²

Enkhmaa tells me another story of the painting:

“Well, one time he was caught by the *Manj*¹⁷³ and they put him in jail. So, he was in jail, in a ger, and he was locked up with chains. He had two guards standing outside the door, guarding him. Then one night, a woman came. It was his wife. She’s very famous for being flexible and clever, no matter what Toroi Bandi did or where he went she waited and when he needed her she was always there. So, one night she came to the guards, and she had a block of cheese. She asked, ‘Can I please give this cheese to my husband?’ and she looked very gentle and soft, so they let her in. She gave the cheese to Toroi Bandi, her husband. But inside the cheese was a small metal pick that he could use as a key. She didn’t need to say anything to him, but she looked at him and he knew she had a solution. So, he ate the cheese over the next few days until he found the key, and then one night very late when the guards were sleeping, he took the key, unlocked his chains and ran away. The horse he was riding was a little Palomino. Then as he was riding away he saw a young couple that were also running away, but they only had one horse. They were running away from a nobleman who wanted to marry her, but she didn’t love him. So, then

¹⁷² The irony of *kolonichlol* being a loan word from Russian is not lost on anyone.

¹⁷³ “Manchu” often a shorthand for Qing-era Chinese authorities but really a catch-all term for what is colloquially considered to be a 19th century colonial power from the east.

Toroi Bandi gave them his horse, and his horse knew the way home to Dariganga. That's why I did this painting here."

That night I wrote in my fieldnotes: "Toroi Bandi and his stories are an act of resistance, as are all the stories of horses gone away, the like one lost in the *khangai* who dreams of coming back to Dariganga as her baby grows."

I also wrote further below: "Where does TB's wife go?"

The Long-Song *Toroi Bandi*, the original performance of which is sometimes attributed to a singer in Dornod Province, is related to the Dariganga version of Toroi the Kid because Altan Ovoo figures centrally in the narrative. In this story, Toroi Bandi is escaping from authorities who are chasing him, a common theme in legends about him. He rides his horse to the top of Altan Ovoo, and initially it seems he is trapped. If he were to go down the gentle slope of the mountain, he would get cut off by his pursuers. However, his bond of trust with his horse was such that he coaxed the horse to go down the steep and rocky side of the mountain, nearly breaking its ankles. The legend goes on to detail the various paths one could take around Altan Ovoo (Namdag 2005, 40). In addition to being an exciting outlaw legend, there is something else in this story about human-animal landscape networks that are forged through interactions and negotiations with a lively geological form. Ganaa the horse trainer was quoted in Chapter 4, saying that there is a particular *energi* or genius that racehorses gain through their embodied interactions with Altan Ovoo. Perhaps the act of horse and rider negotiating the mountain together, and accepting its protection, not only strengthens the compelling bond between Altan Ovoo and its human children

who channel its power through poetry, but the horses who channel its power through speed.



Fig. 5.3: Men ascend Toroi Bandi's path up the right-hand side of Altan Ovoo (Photograph by Jessica Madison Piskatá, July 27th, 2018)

Just like *Jaakhan Sharga*, the legend and long song *Toroi Bandi* is multivalent and constantly shifting—a coherent single story that is nevertheless made entirely of variations. I also suspect that without these divergences, it would be revealed that there is not singular central story. By including as many variations of each legend as possible, this chapter points to the way the Long-Song legend as a form necessitates a mode of authorship that is diffuse, egalitarian, and varied. Each storyteller produces

their own distinct version, and yet all versions are recognizable as parts of a coherent whole, a multivalent narrative constantly growing out of all directions.

I have reproduced these stories here in their entirety by following Lila Abu-Lughod's (1986) methodology reproducing multiple moments of storytelling within the larger ethnographic and theoretical context of the chapter. Abu-Lughod employs this strategy in order to write against the Culture concept and its tendency to reproduce generalizations that attempt to create bounded cultural objects out of dynamic social assemblages, especially in ethnographic contexts outside the North Atlantic. This is especially important in Dariganga, where people have already been subjected to decades of Soviet ethnology for the crime of having been designated a *yastan* sub-ethnic group by the socialist state.

This is also important because of this project's emphasis on poetry and art, which, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, for many years fell under the jurisdiction of the House of Culture and therefore the Soviet colonizing project. I have presented multiple versions of each long song in order to show that poetry and poetic practice in Dariganga is not at all a static cultural object but rather a process that is lively, dynamic, full of contradictions and constantly in motion. Abu-Lughod's methodology not only emphasizes the importance of storytelling but also the importance of showing multiple voices and conflicting versions of single narratives as a way of emphasizing the "fluidity of group boundaries (Abu-Lughod 2008, 10)." This also pushes against colonial and orientalist tendencies inherent in anthropology that want to freeze people in time and space (Trouillot 2003, Wolf 2010). Though

these long songs take place in the past, they are very much in the process of remade, retold, and re-evaluated in the present.

I also have reproduced each of these stories in multiple to demonstrate that in addition to telling stories as a way of dealing with political anxiety or as an act of resistance, these storytellers are each contributing to a broader theoretical framework. My friend Nyamaa once told me the Toroi Bandi story while staying at my mother's house in California. We were in her kitchen, and he had just managed to teach her ancient chihuahua how to sit in less than five minutes, despite our being unsuccessful for years. Responding to my amazement, he joked, "Well I'm a Mongolian Sūkhbaatar man. I know how to connect with the animals, to make them trust and understand. So, they will do what I ask." He then made the comparison to how Toroi Bandi got his horse to go down the steep side of Altan Ovoo because he knew how to connect to an animal's mind. Of course he was joking around, but he did get Roxy to sit.

Toroi Bandi is a heroic figure standing for resistance to authority, who triumphs via his and his horse's ability to intimately understand the landscape, specifically the contours of Altan Ovoo. Dariganga racehorses and Long-Song singers have a canny knowledge of the contours of the steppe and its mountains, and this is their particular genius. In Buyanzaya's version of *Jaakhan Sharga*, Toroi Bandi gives his horse to the runaway lovers because it knows the landscape well enough to take them home. Nyamaa's joke in comparing his talent in chihuahua training to the *Shiliin Sain Er* of Dariganga, actually presents an interesting theory as to how humans

and non-human can share the sense of being compelled and protected by a lively geological form. The shared knowledge that comes along with such intimacy thus forges a connection between horse and rider that is further communicated and strengthened via repeated performances of the Long-Song that invokes it.

This then, brings us back to Mend-Ooyo's address to the World Congress of Poets in 2017. It's true that the poet translates the genius of geological landscapes via poems and verse, allowing an outsider anthropologist like me access to some kind of understanding of Dariganga poetry's integral relation to the landscape. So to do all the storytellers whose legends have been reproduced in this chapter, producing an ethnographic pastiche that presents data about a coherent forms of creative practice while putting up a resistance to generalizations. There is something else at play here as well. Both poets and storytellers who write on Dariganga are able to engage with a non-human animal with such ease because of their familiarity with a body of literature and legend that demonstrates that a shared understanding between humans and non-humans towards a goal is possible (Hutchins 2019). The Long-Song/poem creates a possibility that humans and nonhumans share an intimacy with the lively geological landscape, and each performance of the poem makes this possibility more real. This phenomenon calls back to representational conventions in Mongolian literature going back to the "magical realist" (Bawden 2003) sections of the *Secret History*: it is not that poems represent the world, but that they make it. In this way, the poet forges the connection between poetry and the natural world because poetry *is* the

natural world. In this way, poetry becomes both the vitalizing force that creates the lively geological landscape and the very way we know it is lively.

Conclusion: Writing a Stupa

Joining letters together to make words, speaking words to express meaning, I have erected by own stupa upon my Altan Ovoo. I haven't taken stones from the land and moved them from one mountain to another, rather I have collected my endless thoughts from across the steppes, like stones lying here and there abandoned, and I have piled them high. I have not dug in the earth and extracted clay and limestone, rather I have balanced individual stanzas and rhythms, as though correcting blemishes, and I have organized these innumerable thoughts of mine into some kind of pattern...The stupa-eye at the center of our thoughts cannot be seen on Altan Ovoo, but it is in our hearts and our minds. On Altan Ovoo, when a person looks beyond thoughts, beyond the distant time, it is their own stupa which rises aloft. This stupa is a small mountain on the steppe reflected in the mirror of the eyes, its timeless meaning and import towers into the sky of the mind reflected in the mirror of the heart.

- "Building a Stupa" (Mend-Ooyo 2015, 232)

At the conclusion to *Altan Ovoo*, G. Mend-Ooyo describes the project of writing the novella as "building a book stupa." Just as a stupa contains the remains of a departed ancestor in their honor, he writes, his intention behind writing the book was to construct a monument to his father by including parts of their relationship in the text, a relationship that now exists as a series of memories of Dariganga, all of them revolving around the titular mountain. In the same way that the form of the stone stupa crystallizes at the summit of Altan Ovoo, his book likewise is built through the organization of accreting parts into a meaningful whole. Perhaps, he writes the project of writing the book, a perfected image of the Dariganga mountain as a monument to his father, might likewise create a perfected image of his own

mind—memories turned to words turned to stanzas and rhythms: one’s own heart and mind reflected back to oneself as a small mountain on the steppe.

This dissertation makes a similar attempt in the hope of invoking, if only in moments, the perfected form of the mountain, the “wish fulfilling jewel,” in the use of notions and structures that grow out of each other in circumambulatory patterns—dreams, memories, poetic refrains, but most important, representations of the true material liveliness of stone. Altan Owoo takes its crystalline form by being conjured as something that might be called more-than-a-mountain, if not for the fact that its “immaterial” qualities are inextricably bound up in its materiality: its ability to pull its human kin into a domestic orbit, to echo *ovoo* formations in the way it creates new spacetimes out of relational accretions, to transmit its liveliness into exhausted human bodies, to channel its genius into human language, and to co-produce the legends that physically shape it and the very landscape it sits on.

Like the lively crystalline forms described by Meredith Root-Bernstein (2019) in the introduction, Altan Owoo and its various representations are grown through self-repeating organizational structures—taking shape in such a way that appears to be self-driven, a recognizable representation of life. In Mongolia, where words have material consequence and therefore can act as a bridge between what we in the North Atlantic can only see as either immaterial or material, poetry forms in a similarly lively crystalline pattern. The liveliness and magnetism that we feel when reading, reciting, or hearing a poem about a mountain are just as present in the mountain itself. In writing this dissertation with a focus on poetry, I hope to

participate in the collective project of making a perfected image of Altan Ovoo, creating a stronger image of the small mountain on the steppe in my own mind, and in the reader's.

This dissertation has presented five cases in which geological forms are shown to be lively in their interactions with humans, and in which their liveliness is drawn from, created, and maintained through material interaction.

In Chapter 1: *Takhilga*, I investigated the happenings and aftermath of the 2018 State Takhilga sacrifice ceremony to the state-worshiped mountain Altan Ovoo. This chapter showed how the mountain's liveliness exists as a kin relation with humans who engage with it in repetitive and accreting cycles of obligation and care. The soft and forgiving character of Altan Ovoo is contrasted to other mountains in the region, arguing that while mountains may have different personalities and orientations in their interactions with humans, they are very much capable of anger and violence. In the midst of political upheaval and the Mongolian State's attempt to appropriate the intimate kin relations that some Dariganga residents have formed with Altan Ovoo over the course of generations, Dariganga people begin to ask the question of whether enough harm can be done to their lively relation that its gentleness will finally turn to anger.

Chapter 2 *Ovoolokh*, followed the theme of accreted material relations by first looking at localized *ovoo* rituals, delving into the materiality of place and future making via human/mineral encounters on the steppe. Then, it turned to and

examination of the uncanny *doppelgänger* of the *ovoo*: slag heap to see how analogous processes are carried out in the practice of industrial mining. Looking at how material relations and interactions between humans and stone create lively geological forms that can influence human futures and fortunes and create meaningful geological spacetimes, I underlined my argument that in the eastern Mongolian context, geological liveliness is not only the purview of spirits, but materiality itself.

The question of materiality and liveliness is further explored in Chapter 3: *Energi*, where I followed the path of pilgrims to the Shambala Energi Center in Dornogovi Province in the Gobi desert. By showing the ways in which preexisting human relations with geological landscape entities are appropriated in the service of capital in order to heal the exhausted laboring body, I showed how geological forms are lively in the way that they participate in contemporary economies while also transcending their logics. I also introduced the concept of poetry as a form of making human/geological relations and creating liveliness through a brief exegesis of the poem *Ülemjiin Chanar*.

The question of poetry's relation with a lively geological landscape was taken up fully in Chapter 4: *Süld*. I drew on interviews with Dariganga poetry readers and poets, as well as a close-reading of the praise poem *Altan Ovoony Magtaal*, in order to show how poetry is both a channeling method for the mountain's liveliness and also a method of creating a mountain that is lively. Arguing that in Mongolia, words have material influence on the world, I suggested that poems are a way of engaging with geological landscapes in a way that is not directly representational, and which

subverts the logics that might attempt to divorce the mountain from its liveliness. I also explored the concept of “genius” as a diffuse quality that emerges from geological landscapes, and which perhaps is another way in which geological liveliness manifests, particularly in the Dariganga context.

Chapter 5: *Duu*, looked at Long-Song, a genre of poetry that is specifically tied to Dariganga poetic and performance traditions. By looking at the text of Long-Songs and interviews with folklore experts and performers, I showed the ways in which poetry is written by, and writes, the lively geological landscape. Contrasting multiple versions of two iconic Dariganga Long-Songs: *Jaakhan Sharga* and *Toroi Bandi*, I showed how the creation and performance of Long-Songs is directly connected to their origin in certain landscapes, and how repeat performances go on to create these landscapes in the image of the Long-Song.

Throughout this dissertation, my intention was to show the ways in which human and mineral worlds are made and where they overlap. I argued that though there are spirits present in these geological forms, the liveliness with which they relate with humans is present primarily and fully in their material forms. Poetry is also important here, not only as a function of translating the seeming contradictions of these lively world into human language, but as a method for strengthening relations and for creating the liveliness of geological forms itself.

Though there is a long history in anthropology of reading animated landscapes outside the North Atlantic as being either “ensouled,” inhabited by spirits, or

misapplication of biological life onto non-life, this study of the sociality of geological forms in eastern Mongolia shows that things are more complicated. This is not to say that there aren't immaterial or ethereal spirits on the Mongolian landscape: there are a number of scholars who have done excellent work on these spirit worlds and my interlocutors also acknowledge, if not the possibility, then at least the presence of discourse about their existence. However, this dissertation argues that in addition to these, there is a way of interacting with mineral forms that is entirely material and much more common among my interlocutors as they relate to the surrounding geological landscape. Turning back to Davaa's phone call to the mountain that opened this dissertation, we see the use of minerals, perhaps dug from Sūkhbaatar mine less than a day's drive away, being used to build technologies that channel and maintain human/mineral relations through Dariganga spacetime.

Throughout the dissertation I have presented moments in which the very materiality of geological forms is what enables them to be lively. These geological forms—the worshiped mountains, *ovoo*, slag heaps, energetic crystals, geological geniuses, and worn pathways are made animate precisely by the capabilities of their materiality to form compelling relations with the living. This capability is what makes materiality lively by virtue of how it builds itself by coming together through chemical bonds and relational accretion, and by virtue of how it is recognized as lively by the living. These relational and lively forms come together in the same way as mineral structures and geological layers—through heaping, piling, and sedimentation. These are the processes that make them lively, because in addition to

the covalent bonds that cause minerals to grow material forms, the relational bonds formed with humans multiply their quality of liveliness. This geological liveliness blurs the boundary between the material and the immaterial—there is no immaterial soul to removed, no material form that can be made inert. A mountain here is not more-than-a-mountain because the “more” is what makes a mountain.

While this dissertation primarily considers human relations with lively geological forms, this is not to say that humans are alone among their living relations. Take for example, the Siberian Pine on Altan Ovoo’s summit, that acts as an antennae to connect the worshiped mountain with another mountain relation on the other side of the country, Otgontenger. Also take the little palomino racehorse, the “Topaz Jewel” who draws inspiration for its speed from the genius of the mountain, or the viper who slithers through the crevices in volcanic rocks, making threats and giving blessings. Further threads of inquiry might include the ways in which other living non-humans recognize, draw from, and accrete kin relations from the liveliness of the geological forms that anchor the Dariganga Area. This might also require an investigation into the roles of animals and plant in making poetry, as there has been past research on their role in musical heritage, in particular Long-Song, which serves as a bridge between the realms of music and poetic language.

Mongolian poets and poetry enthusiasts know that poetry is itself both material and immaterial, not just through their understanding that words have material influence in the world, but that a poem is literally language that relies on form. Like mineral formations, poems rely on their own logics as they come together, both

drawing on the conventions of directly representative language and subverting them. Poems are able to reveal and represent seeming incommensurabilities in the world and create a structure of sense from them, and the imaginative and alterative worlds conjured in each poem create imaginative capacity in the writer, reader, performer, or listener. Poems create new worlds, they create possibility and liveliness, precisely because of their materiality and form both on the page and to the ear.

In addition to the threads that run throughout this dissertation, there are a few loose ends that I hope to explore as I adapt it into a manuscript. First, I plan to use exclusively my own translations, and to add translations of the *Toroi Bandi* Long-Song and some of the texts read as sacrifices during *takhilga*. This also includes close readings of these religious texts, particularly those used in soothing ceremonies in the wake of geological trauma such as mineral extraction. This will require greater investigatory inroads into Buddhist Studies and collaborations with experts in sutra and Tibetan language in general. In particular, I am interested in the intricacies of the sutra that are read during *takhilga* of all scales, national and local.

On the subject of *takhilga*, I plan to travel back to Dariganga in 2022 for the next State Takhilga to Altan Ovoo, this time attending more closely to the texts that are being read. How will local discourses have changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic dust storms that hit southeastern Mongolia in spring of 2021? How will Dariganga locals see the place of Altan Ovoo in these events, and how will they see themselves? In a time where distrust of the government is even higher than it was at the time of writing this dissertation, how will Altan Ovoo react?

I plan on translating more work by *Gal* poets, particularly those that engage with the subject of the geological landscape. I am particularly interested in the work of Jamsrandorjyn Oyuntsetseg, the lone woman Gal poet to be included in anthologies of the group's work. Though the gendering of landscape is occasionally touched upon in this dissertation, the way in which it shapes experiences of the lively landscape is not fully explored. I hope that a greater engagement with Oyuntsetseg's poetry will shed some light on this question.

Finally, I hope to spend more quality time with Dariganga's other revered mountain, Shiliin Bogd. While I have visited this mountain a handful of times, its long distance from the Dariganga town center made it difficult to form a significant relationship. Shiliin Bogd is also an important part of Dariganga political life, appearing on the local campaign poster for Dangaasürengiin Enkhbat, the National Labor Party candidate for president in Mongolia's 2021 election.



Fig. 6.1: Election banner for Dangaasürengiin Enkhbat including a picture of Shiliin Bogd Mountain. The text reads “Siikhbaatar Can”

Shiliin Bogd shows up in poetry, song, and visual art with a similar frequency to Altan Ovoo, and is the place in Mongolia where the rising sun first touches. Unlike Altan Ovoo, it is a “gender egalitarian” mountain which allows all genders to ascend its summit. Recently, a Twitter debate erupted over whether or not women have “always” been allowed to summit Shiliin Bogd, with a user posting a scanned photo from the 1980’s that clearly showed an older woman standing among the crowd of men in front of the recognizable *ovoo* at the summit. A further exploration of the liveliness of the other mountain that anchors the Dariganga homeland will perhaps shed further light on the way mountains relate to one another, and if liveliness requires interaction with the living, or whether two non-living things can form their own relation.

Epilogue: Earth Gone Airborne

In the spring of 2021, as I was finishing the final chapter of this dissertation, a series of dust storms hit Sükhbaatar Province. Originating on both sides of the national border that bisects the Gobi desert, the sandstorms stretched from northern China to southern Mongolia, across the eastern Gobi provinces, all over Sükhbaatar, and into Dornod. The sandstorm easily breached China's Great Green Wall; a reforestation effort intended to mitigate Gobi sandstorms. Beijing residents had to shut their windows to prevent themselves from inhaling the hazardous particles. In rural Mongolia, they were much more deadly, burying nearly 1.6 million livestock alive, killing nine herders, and blinding many survivors. In some areas, the storm lasted nearly 20 hours (Bayartsogt and Feng 2021). The cause of such a catastrophic series of sandstorms was partially the extreme drought caused by a lack of snow last winter and rain the previous summer. Desertification caused by global climate change, pollution from gold and copper mining, and overgrazing by goats bound for the global cashmere market. The geological acceleration caused by relations with humans and others explored in this dissertation has largely been positive for the biologically living, but it would be naive to say it is always this way.

As much as the rocky expanse of the Gobi is lively, it also kills. The desert is expanding by an average of 75 miles per year according to the Mongolian Ministry of Meteorology and Environmental Monitoring, and senior researcher Dulamsüren Dashküü suspects that in 30-50 years the entire country will be Gobi (Bayartsogt and Feng 2021). In Dariganga, the friendly sand dunes to the west of Altan Ovoo, that

Davaa and I used to spend summer mornings jogging barefoot through for exercise, are creeping closer and closer to the edge of the mountain.

On cool days when misty winds blow over the summit of Altan Ovoo, a small cap cloud will form, temporarily shrouding the summit. On days like this it seems like everyone in Dariganga with a data plan will take to social media to post their own snaps of the cloud with poetic captions expressing wishes, praise, and poetic quotations. This dissertation has largely engaged with the compelling power of mountains and other lively geological features as they are on the ground. But with the events of the last few years: increasing air pollution, sandstorms, and COVID-19, greater and greater attention is being paid to the air. Will the mountain and its ability to draw rain and other fortunes be an intermediary in mitigating the troubles caused by human-created accretion of the Gobi desert, or will lively geology find itself in opposition to life? On the scale of global climate catastrophe, can turning our attention towards the temporalities and livelinesses of stone create hope for living beyond life? While poetry may not be able to predict, it can at least lend itself to imagining things beyond the boundaries of life: a liveliness that lives, even as life dies.

Appendix A: Note on Transliteration

Throughout this dissertation I will use a modified version of the Tibetan and Himalayan Library transliteration scheme for transcribing Mongolian Cyrillic into Latin script. The only exception to this system is that I use V for B. For letters with more than one phonetic correspondence according to vowel harmony, I have disambiguated the sounds in the text. A complete table of the transcription system I will use is as follows:

А а: A a	П п: P p
Б б: B b	Р р: R r
В в: V v	С с: S s
Г г: G g	Т т: T t
Д д: D d	У у: U u
Е е: Ye ye/Yö yö (according to vowel harmony)	Ү ү: Ü ü
Ё ё: Yo yo	Ф ф: F f
Ж ж: J j	Х х: Kh kh
З з: Z z	Ц ц: Ts ts
И и: I i	Ч ч: Ch ch
Й й: I i	Ш ш: Sh sh
К к: K k	Ъ ъ: i
Л л: L l	Ы ы: i
М м: M m	Ь ь: i
Н н: N n	Э э: E e
О о: O o	Ю ю: Yu yu/Yü yü (according to vowel harmony)
Ө ө: Ö ö	Я я: Ya ya

Appendix B: Note on Names and Terminology

Spelling of names follow the most commonly used format or the preference of the person carrying the name. I have used pseudonyms except in places where my interlocutors have explicitly asked to be referred to by their real name. As a great deal of intellectual and imaginative work went into these conversations, I want to make sure my interlocutors receive credit for their original ideas. When referring to someone with whom I am familiar, I will introduce them with their full or “long” name (e.g.: Gantulga, Davaasüren) and then segue into their short name (Ganaa, Davaa).

Though the term “shaman” has specific roots in Siberian practices and is not a term used in Mongolian, I translate the Mongolian word *böö* (for male) and *udgan* (for female) into the English word “shaman”. This is for ease of the English language reader.

Appendix C: Glossary of Mongolian Terms

Ajil: work

Amid: Alive, live, living

Amitan: Living creature or animal

Alt/Altan: gold/golden

Argadakh: too soothe or coax

Avdar: chest, box, or trunk, usually a painted wooden trunk kept at the north side of the ger

Bandi: i) Buddhist novice or acolyte ii) Young fellow, chap, lad

Belge demberliin üg: words wishing for good fortune

Burkhan: i) Buddha (also “Burkhan Bagsh”)

ii) Buddha state or image

iii) God/deity

iv) benevolent, enlightened non-human person

Chandmani Erdene: *cintamani* in Sanskrit, wish-fulfilling jewel

Dari/Dari Ekh: The Buddhist deity Tara, she appears as a female bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and is particularly revered among Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhists. Her white emanation is also known as the “Wish Fulfilling Wheel,” or *Cintashakra*. In Dariganga lore, she is sometimes connected to Saraswati because of her swan mount.

Deej: the choicest or best part of something, especially something offered to a deity as sacrifice

Dogshin: fierce, savage, ruthless, violent

Duu: i) sound ii) song

Urtyn~: “Long-Song,” a highly ornamented singing style where syllables are stretched out, melody is idiosyncratic to the performer but is often intended to mimic the landscape being described by the words of the song

Ekh oron: motherland

Energi: energy (see chapter 3) sometimes also pronounced *enerji*

Erdene: Jewel, gem, precious thing, treasure (see chapter 2)

Ezen: i) owner, master, holder, responsible party

ii) host to parasites

Gazaryn~: “master of the land/of place” landscape spirit that often appears as an animal, oversees potentially extractive interactions between humans and natural resources

Gazar: i) ground, earth

ii) place

iii) *li*, “Chinese mile”

iv) office (*hist.*)

v) “indeed,” “for sure,”

Ger: Mongolian felt tent, similar to a *yurt*

Giingoo: songs that sung by child jockeys during horse races to connect the rider with the animal

Istana: colloquial term for SsangYong Istana, a four-door minibus produced by Korean auto manufacturer Daewoo; catch-all term for multi-passenger van that can be hired for travel between towns

Khadag: ceremonial scarf made of silk or synthetic fibers, usually blue but can be other colors in different contexts, woven with Tibetan verse as well as the eight auspicious symbols, transmitter of energi or substance

Khairkhan: Merciful, propitiatory term used to refer to certain mountains or other landscape beings

Khel am: malicious gossip

Khiimori: literally “windhorse,” a person’s vital energies that circulate within the body, but which are affected by outside influences. Highly masculinized, associated with masculinity and masculine energi. Some say women don’t have khiimori, though many Mongolian feminists disagree.

Khilegnek: to become wrathful; a *dogshin* personality is prone to *khilegnek*

Kholboo: i) connection, contact ii) alliance, union iii) communication, signals iv) verse of poetry v) internet service provider (colloquial)

Lus: spirit of locality associated with water

Magtaal: Praise poem for landscape form, homeland, or other worshiped entity. Primarily performed as invocations at the opening of religious and state rituals, or as warmups openings for orators who are about to recite heroic epics

Mandal: Mandala, in religious architecture, it is a hybrid form between a stupa and an *ovoo*

Naadam: summer festival during which the community gathers together, consists of horse racing, wrestling, and archery in addition to food, games, concerts, and other performances

Nairag: Poetry

Yaruu ~: metered poetry

Aman yaruu ~: oral poetry

Nutag: homeland, community, social network of humans and non-humans often centered around or related to *ovoo*

Ongon: pure, virginal, holy (esp. in reference to landscape)

Ovoo: cairn of stone or other material

Savdag: spirit of locality associated with mountains

Setgel: heart-mind, intention, feeling, mind-body, affect

Shakhakh: **i)** to press, compress, or squeeze **ii)** to press down with force **iii)** to ply with drink **iv)** to fatten (livestock)

~**j sürdüülekh:** to coerce, to put pressure on, lit. “to ply or press with awe or intimidation”

Shüleg: Poem in verse

Tsagaan ~: blank, unrhymed or un-alliterated verse

~**ch:** Verse poet

~ **unshighch:** a performer who recites poetry for an audience

Soronzdokh: to attract

Soronzon/Soronzlol: Magnet, magnetism

~**Khüch:** magnetism, magnetic energy, charisma (colloq.)

Süld: quality of genius, often attached to a noun to confer mastery or tutelary ability

~ **Tenger:** tutelary genius, tutelary deity

Khar/Tsagaan ~: Horsehair standards of Chinggis Khan

Süns: ghost or soul, usually post-human

Takhilga: sacrifice or offering, especially to an *ovoo* and/or its residing spirits

Töriin ~: official ceremony of sacrifice to a mountain or deity

~**tai**: worshipful, worth or worship (see chapter 1)

Tenger: **i**) sky **ii**) god or heavenly deity **iii**) weather

Tolgoi: head, also used to in the context of landscape to describe a rise or knoll

Tsatsal: a ritual sprinkling of milk

Tseejlekh: to memorize, to learn by heart, lit. “To take into one’s chest”

Tuuli: epic, epic poem

Yastan: people, or ethnic group within a nationality

Yerööl: Blessing poems performed by specialized performers, usually performed for domestic events such as moving into a new ger, buying a new saddle, getting married, etc.

Yosen Erdene: The Nine Jewels (used in making books)—gold, silver, coral, pearl, turquoise, lapis lazuli, mother of pearl, copper, steel

Zöölön: gentle, calm

Zud: a harsh winter characterized by heavy snowfall, ice, or other conditions that make it difficult for livestock herds to graze. Zud usually follow a summer drought and are said to be increasing in frequency

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