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‘Doing It for Life’ — On the Moral Evaluation of Chinese Trade in Eastern Mongolia

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Abstract. The study focuses on the informal resource trade between Mongolians living in the far eastern region of Mongolia on the border with China and Chinese citizens (Inner Mongolians and Han Chinese). The cross-border relations between these nations are understandably maintained because of the economic opportunities they provide to citizens on both sides of the border. The article is based on the results of fieldwork held in 2015–2017 in eastern Mongolia. Although all the Mongolians living on the border are involved in informal resource trade with Chinese citizens, they feel apprehension about the morality of these relationships. The moral evaluation and justification that the local Mongolians use to explain these economic interactions is built upon the important distinction between trade ‘for subsistence’ and trade ‘for profit’ where trade ‘for subsistence’ is considered largely moral, whereas trade ‘for profit’ is denigrated as ‘selfish’ behavior.

Keywords: cross-border commodity, informal resource trade, moral evaluation, ‘doing it for life’

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«Делая для жизни»: о моральной оценке китайской торговли в Восточной Монголии

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Аннотация. Цель статьи — рассмотреть неофициальную торговлю природными ресурсами между монголами, живущими в восточном регионе Монголии на границе с Китаем, и гражданами Китая (жителями Внутренней Монголии и китайцами-хань). Вполне обосновано, что трансграничные взаимоотношения между этими народностями поддерживаются из-за экономических возможностей, которые они дают гражданам по обеим сторонам границы. Статья основывается на материалах полевых исследований, проведенных в 2015–2017 гг. в восточной Монголии. **Результаты.** Несмотря на то, что все монголы, живущие на границе с Китаем, вовлечены в неофициальную торговлю ресурсами с китайскими гражданами, они чувствуют беспокойство по поводу этичности данных взаимоотношений. Нравственная оценка и оправдание, которые используют монголы для объяснения этих экономических взаимоотношений, строятся на важном разграничении между понятиями торговли «для пропитания» и торговли «для прибыли», среди которых торговля «для пропитания» считается нравственно допустимой, тогда как торговля «для прибыли» осуждается как эгоистичное поведение.

Ключевые слова: трансграничные товары, неофициальная торговля ресурсами, нравственная оценка, «делая для жизни»

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Introduction

China and Mongolia are not homogenous social spaces. As noted by social scientists working on borderland areas, ‘borders’ are not only marked by the ending of a nation’s legal boundary and the physical presence of infrastructure, but by an affective sense of being within a political, economic and social frontier [Wilson, Donnan 1998]. Socially, borderlands are often characterised by a ‘double-bind’ because the nation’s, and the local regions’, prosperity is dependent on openness, yet being too open leads to a sense of being threatened [Reeves 2014]. When I moved to eastern Mongolia to carry out fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, I noticed similar conflicted sentiments amongst the populace—all economic activity in eastern Mongolia emerged through and prospered because of China, yet the people

were fiercely nationalist to maintain a cultural distinction between themselves and the Inner Mongolian, Chinese citizens on the other side. Affectively, my fieldsite was characterised by ‘agonistic intimacy’ created through the relation of neighbouring [Zhang, Saxer 2017] — a neighbour is someone kind of like you, who lives near you, but you never really know where their true loyalties lie. They could turn on you at any point. This paper is thus about how Mongolians in a far eastern region, bordered on three sides by China, socially navigate the tension of the political-economic frontier.

Despite distrust, these relations are understandably maintained because of the economic opportunities they provide to citizens on both sides of the border. Both in the past and now, Mongolians in eastern Mongolia and Inner Mongolian, Chinese citizens realise they both

have something that the other lacks. In eastern Mongolia, the collapse of socialism and the implementation of free market economic policies led to a cash and market dearth — residents could no longer appeal to the state for help, yet any large economic enterprise that emerged was too far from urban centres to make it profitable. But, they had land full of diverse mineral and wildlife resources and the need to work. In China, Inner Mongolians had access to markets and monies, but were less able to enter into Mongolia to establish businesses. Once the border regularly opened in 1994, this coincidence of wants led to an efflorescence of trade. First, Mongolians engaged in the widely-known post-socialist phenomenon of the suitcase trade—travelling to China to buy cheap goods in bulk and sell them dear in Mongolia [Lacaze 2010]. At the same time, the price for scrap metal peaked in China and many jobless Mongolians stripped the metal from the socialist infrastructure, selling it to Inner Mongolia and Chinese middlemen [Ichinkhorloo 2018]. Informants retell that many long-term entrepreneurial partnerships between Outer and Inner Mongolians were forged during this period.

Doing it for life

My fieldwork in eastern Mongolia consisted of two main fieldsites—one, an urban area full of individuals involved in the cross-border commodity trade; the other, a rural fieldsite with Mongolians who were chiefly occupied with selling locally-available natural resources to China. In both fieldsites, individuals morally justified their economic interaction through a narrative that it was necessary ‘for life’ (*am’dralyn tölöö*). By ‘life’, individuals most often emphasised the need for subsistence by interchangeably using terms like ‘doing it for life’ with ‘supplying subsistence’ (*am’jir-gaagaa zalguulah*) or ‘money for food’ (*hool-nii möngö*). This justification narrative went beyond the realm of the individual; generally, informants in my eastern Mongolian fieldsites evaluated themselves and each other based on a perceptual division between carrying out trade for ‘subsistence’, which was considered largely moral, versus for ‘profit’ (*ashigtai; möngönii tölöö*), which was denigrated as ‘selfish’ behaviour (*öörstdiigöö boddog*). In analysing this distinction, I am reminded of Bloch and Parry’s seminal description of long-term versus short-term moral universes in exchange [Bloch, Par-

ry 1989]. Accordingly, global cultures often evince a moral division between long-term economic exchanges — i. e. what individuals need to thrive and pass on their sociocultural values to subsequent generations—and short-term exchanges — i. e. fleeting consumption desires and profits. Similarly, ‘doing it for life’ was a moral narrative that emphasised subsistence needs that were required to guarantee the long-term stability of local families and were subsequently accompanied by insistent emphases that trade actions were ‘for one’s family’ and ‘not for profit’. Generally, whether one was a poor fisherman, a middleman trader or a large local dealer in wildlife, all actors navigated their anxieties concerning the ethicality of their trade by underscoring that their trade was *only* for life; *only* for subsistence; *not* for profit — however, not all actors were successful in their convincing of others.

Nevertheless, this ubiquitous emphasis on the ethicality of cross-border trade for life was intertwined with the local government’s passive encouragement of cross-border trade. After I lived in the nearest city for a few months, I moved out into a rural county (*soum*) and quickly noticed over my subsequent 10 months of fieldwork that the entire area was involved in the semi-legal and/or informal resource trade — specifically, different residents either fished Asian Carp; gathered a Chinese medicinal plant known as Fang Feng; shot and pelted antelope and/or wolves; and/or made hay for sale to China. All of these resource trades thrived because those wildlife resources could be sold up to 20 times more expensively on the Chinese side of the border, depending on season. Yet, local residents rarely had formal permit permissions — either from the central or the local government; or the Chinese state — to export these resources. Here, the overarching regional narrative of ‘doing it for life’ also aided the local residents. As described by one high-ranking government official in the locality: ‘We don’t really want to catch residents [at the border] because it would cause all sorts of problems in the soum’. Both government officials and border guards were generally uninterested in cracking down on local resource trading, knowing that doing so would end a mainstay of local employment. Local residents often knew, for example, which border guards would waive through goods that were for consumption or personal use, exclaiming that those guards knew that locals were just trying to ‘live life’.

Normal people like us

Most cross-border resource trade in my fieldsite was enabled through the long-term economic partnership (*tünshleh*) of one Inner Mongolian with a locally-born Mongolian tradesman. In this way, both sides were able to utilise their marginal advantages — i. e. access to workers and resources in Mongolia versus money and markets in China — in combination with one another to make their enterprise successful. During my fieldwork, most unemployed local residents were involved either in the medicinal plant and/or fish trade, which involved gathering the resource and selling it to a Mongolian middleman, who had him/herself received the money to buy the resource from an Inner Mongolian trading partner on the other side of the border. When the Mongolian/Chinese border opened in the early 90s, many eager young Inner Mongolians, themselves often poor and looking for opportunities, entered Mongolia and were astounded at the resource wealth. Seeking out local Mongolians, they offered them cash to gather local resources. Many of these initial associations stuck and, over twenty years later, have blossomed into large network enterprises employing between 20 and 200 local Mongolians, who receive money for their resources every year via a local middleman allied with an Inner Mongolian.

Although these business associations are formally illegal because they are exporting an environmentally protected resource, all the participants justify them as moral. Generally, Mongolians involved in these forms of trade similarly describe them as helping them further and improve their 'life' in conditions of widespread unemployment. Moreover, many of these trade associations between rural Mongolians and an Inner Mongolian middleman are multi-year associations—e.g. they started as scrap-metal networks in the 90s, but shifted their efforts to the wildlife and hay trade each year based on the profitability potential in the Chinese market. The continuity of these relationships encourages both sides to cooperate with one another. As discussed by Nasan Bayar in his depiction of cross-border Inner/Outer Mongolian coal truckers, both sides are encouraged to create near-kin relations with one another, calling each other 'big and little brother', attending *ovoo* ceremonies on both sides of the border and giving each other economic 'incentives' (*uramshuulal*) like gifts, discount prices

and no-interest loans to strengthen the association over time.

In 2017, I carried out intensive fieldwork with a Mongolian fishing family that had an 11 year partnership with an Inner Mongolian trader. I asked the fisherman's wife whether she considered it ethical to illegally sell Mongolian fish to China and she emphasised the multi-year relationship their family had with the Inner Mongolian trader's: 'They are just normal people like us', she opined, poor and making ends meet. Nevertheless, a few days later after an evening of intense drinking, the Mongolian fisherman pulled me aside suddenly, emotionally and anxiously whispering, 'I swear it's for my family; not for profit!' Despite their many years involved in an illegal wildlife trade partnership with an Inner Mongolian, this family remained internally torn.

If Mongolia had money, we shouldn't be working with Chinese people.

In addition to the ubiquitous trade partnerships that punctuated rural eastern Mongolia, many residents were also wage labourers for Inner Mongolian/Chinese companies. For one, south eastern Mongolia is well-known within the Mongolian media as the location of multiple oil fields belonging to the state-owned Chinese oil company, PetroChina. Within remote eastern Mongolia, this company is infamous and largely disliked because it rarely employs local residents, and when it does, only in the poorest paid positions. By extension, in 2016 and 2017, Inner Mongolia suffered a drought, which motivated the Chinese government to temporarily create policy that encouraged Inner Mongolians to attempt to import hay from Outer Mongolia. In fall 2017, for example, one ton of hay in Outer Mongolia cost 112,000 MNT, but cost 450,000 MNT in China, inciting thirty Mongolian-Inner Mongolian partnerships to apply to the soum government for hay-making permits in that year. In contrast to the aforementioned fish trade, however, most of these 'partnerships' were short-term business associations that minimally employed at least one Mongolian to work as a wage labourer and apply for the local government permit. That Mongolian, in turn, interacted with an Inner Mongolian middleman, who, in turn, worked for a Han Chinese boss that sent mostly Han Chinese labourers to Mongolia. In fall 2017, I hired a car and drove around the countryside of my fieldsite, encountering multiple make-

shift container accommodations that housed several poor, non-Mongolian-speaking Han Chinese temp labourers.

On one of our countryside trips, we noticed a hay plot that was not punctuated by the accustomed Chinese container houses, but by four yurts. Stopping, we discovered a 3,000 hectare hay plot run by a local Mongolian herder, who further employed 15 local Mongolians. Because this set-up was unusual, as all of the surrounding plots were employing either Inner Mongolian or Chinese labour, we asked the foreman how his hay enterprise had developed. 'I have been making hay since the socialist era for local families,' Nyambaatar explained, 'but last year they opened the border to China for the first time. I had some hay left over and an acquaintance [*tanil tal*] suggested I sell it to an Inner Mongolian businessman'. This year, he continued, the Inner Mongolian, working for a Chinese company, hired Nyambaatar full time and signed a contract that paid Nyambaatar 1 Million MNT a month to organise the hay permit with the local government and run the hay field.

Understandably, this trade evoked ambiguous emotions amongst its Mongolian participants. For starters, 1 Million MNT was a sizable monthly salary for rural Mongolia, but, as a foreman, Nyambaatar still earned sizably less than the Chinese labourers on the surrounding fields who earned 2.5 Million MNT per month. Consequently, Nyambaatar was grateful for the economic opportunity, yet cognizant that he and his fellow Mongolians were being underpaid: 'I do it for food; this is my only job all year. This is a great opportunity for profit for Mongolia, but right now it's only possible with foreign investment. If Mongolia had money, we shouldn't be working with Chinese people'.

As he segued into discussing Chinese dependence, we asked him about the preponderance of Chinese labourers on the surrounding fields—'It doesn't concern me; I don't know anything' (*nadad hamaaraltgiii*), he snapped. His reaction, a sudden change of affect, was highly reminiscent of Pedersen and Bunkenborg's description of a Mongolian family neighbouring the aforementioned oil company — PetroChina [Pedersen, Bunkenborg 2012]. In their work, the authors were surprised that this herding family claimed that they didn't know anything about the oil company,

nor did they care, even though they lived right next to it. The authors explained this surprising response as a result of the road between the Mongolian herder and Chinese company that symbolically and emotionally separated the two parties. Although, in my fieldsite in eastern Mongolia, there was no road between the Mongolian foreman and the Chinese hay labourers surrounding his camp, I agree with Pedersen and Bunkenborg that these statements represent attempts to emotionally distance oneself from an uncomfortable situation—to, in their words, convert the situation into a 'determinate and singular "economic relationship"' [Pedersen, Bunkenborg 2012: 565]. In sharp contrast to the aforementioned Mongolian/Inner Mongolian partnerships that explicitly relied on kinship metaphors for their success, here, Nyambaatar attempted to emotionally distance himself from the Chinese presence, treating his interaction with his bosses and the Chinese labourers around him as *just* business, a transaction. Nevertheless, Nyambaatar did care — Right before we left, he admitted his concern that Mongolians were no longer able to access hay, motivating him to stipulate in his contract that he was to sell a few tons of hay to local herders at highly-reduced prices.

Conclusion

In sum, during my fieldwork in eastern Mongolia, most citizens made their living from either the cross-border commodity or resource trade, taking advantage of the manifold price differentials between the two markets. However, despite the long history and widespread occurrence of economic interaction with Inner Mongolian and Chinese traders, local Mongolians still viewed this relation with apprehension, making moral appellations that it was, nevertheless, necessary for local Mongolian survival. This general framework that individuals utilised to evaluate if economic interaction with China was morally palatable was a distinction between 'for life' and 'for profit'. Mongolians evaluated their partnerships based on the same rubric — i. e. the more an interaction with an Inner Mongolian was long-term and/or perceived as necessary for the personal survival of the other — not out of pure profit motif — the more Mongolians neutralised its moral ambiguity by casting the relationship in near-kinship terms. In sharp contrast, situations where Mongolians deemed the Inner Mon-

golian/Chinese partner or business as chiefly profit-oriented garnered attempts to emotionally distance themselves from the trade, casting it as finite and business-driven. Nevertheless, these different strategies still seemed only to

calm moral apprehension, not eliminate it — as both Mongolian tradesmen discussed in this piece continued to express ongoing apprehension over the morality of their Inner Mongolian/Chinese trade interactions.

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