Can Kinship Come to the Rescue?

Trust and Cooperation across the Border between China and Mongolia

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Abstract
Inner Mongols find themselves in a special situation of relatedness to both China and Mongolia, and thus can play a ‘bridge’ role in the two countries’ economic transactions and other relations. Sharing a common historical, ethnic, and cultural heritage with Mongolians and being citizens of China, are they in fact in a (dis)advantageous position for making links between the two realms? This chapter, based on fieldwork conducted in a Chinese border town, discusses the case of a network that brings together Inner Mongol intermediary agents and Mongolian truckers in an unusually successful alliance. Kinship is one of the key resources called upon. The focus of the chapter is on exactly how the relevant actors create trust that can provide the basis for them to cooperate and ensure mutual benefits.

Keywords: kinship, trust, cooperation, Mongolia, China, coal, truckers

Introduction: How do you become relatives?

When the Chinese president Xi Jinping made his first official state visit to Mongolia in August 2014, his address to the Mongolian parliament compared his visit to Mongolia with visiting a relative (zou qingqi de fangwen), and stated that the relationship between China and Mongolia had arrived

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at the best period of its development in history. He also published an article in Mongolian newspapers\(^2\), which emphasized that the more frequently relatives visit one another the closer the relationship becomes (*qinqi yue zou yue jin*); the longer the friendship, the stronger the feelings that develop will be (*pengyou yue jiao yue shen*).

Why and how does China claim that Mongolia is her ‘relative’? The term ‘relative’ can evoke various imaginaries concerning the relationship of the two countries. At one level, it may refer to historical relations between the two countries – but this historical relatedness also raises many questions. Was the Mongol-dominated Yuan Dynasty a normal dynasty in the history of China, or was it a branch of the Mongol Empire? Between the 17th and early 20th centuries, was Mongolia ruled by an independent Manchu regime, or was it ruled as part of a Chinese dynasty?

At a different level, one can connect the term ‘relative’ with a specific ethnic group in China’s national configuration that shares some kinds of kinship with the Mongolians of present-day Mongolia. Indeed, we cannot avoid Inner Mongolia as a region and the Mongols living there (colloquially called Inner Mongols) as a people when we talk about the connections between China and Mongolia. Inner Mongols are related to the two countries in different ways: they are Chinese in terms of citizenship and Mongolian in terms of ethnicity. Therefore, one could say that it is the Inner Mongols that form the basis for considering the two countries to be ‘relatives’. During an Inner Mongolian media interview a couple years ago, a Mongolian diplomat said that the Inner Mongols, as a people who share a cultural and linguistic heritage with the Mongolians of Mongolia, are a positive force that could play the role of a bridge in the economic and other relationships between Mongolia and China. This is indeed what Uradyn Bulag called for as early as 1998 in his book *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*.

Recently, the two countries have decided to align their infrastructural initiatives, China’s *Belt and Road* (otherwise known as the ‘New Silk Road’) and Mongolia’s *Steppe Road*, in order to improve their cooperation in trade, investment, and other fields. However, international policy declarations about collaboration do not necessarily translate into equivalent relations on the ground. Even in the Socialist era, they could be undermined by undeclared national agendas (Mihailescu, Iliev, and Naumovic 2008) or by hierarchical relations between brotherly entities (Humphrey 2004); today,

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\(^2\) Xi Jinping published a signed article entitled ‘Galloping Toward a Better Tomorrow for China-Mongolia Relations’ in *Udriin Sonin, Unuudur, Zuunii Medee and the UB Post* and on the Mongolia Web News website on August 21, 2014.
when greater initiative by non-state private enterprises is allowed, the translation of government proposals into actual cooperation is all the more uncertain. The Inner Mongols may be represented as ‘relatives’, but what role do they actually play in the connections between the two countries? Can each state trust them to participate when they seek to activate the cooperation between the two strategic initiatives? Analysing this situation presents us with ‘the task of situating the international and the local in relation to one another without either assuming an opposition between levels or collapsing the two into one, or ignoring the political field in which they generate meaning’ (Borneman 1998, 9). As this chapter will argue, beneath the overarching political-diplomatic idiom of ‘relatives’, micro-scale networks of actual relations, based largely on kinship, can eliminate much of the misdeeds and lack of trust that are otherwise likely to occur between citizens belonging to different states and ethnicities – although, as I shall describe, the ability to form such networks in a cross-border political field is dependent on the delicate concatenation of particular linguistic and cultural circumstances.

Francis Fukuyama points out that trust, as a foundation of social virtue in capitalist environments, plays a significant role in economic cooperation (1995). He argues (1995, 27) that in any given society it is spontaneous sociability, ‘the capacity to form new associations and to cooperate within the terms of the reference they establish’, that extends trusting relations into economic activity. In Asian countries like Japan and Western countries such as the USA or Germany, this trustfulness reduces the cost of economic operations. Such spontaneous sociability can be based on various foundations; it could indeed emerge from a pre-modern cultural heritage – the Japanese spirit of Samurai, for instance – which has transformed to become a basis of trust in modern cooperation in the economic field (1995, 11).

According to Hardin’s rather different approach (1992), trusting somebody requires knowledge of the one who is trusted, based on experience. Although they share a long history, Inner Mongols and Mongolians have been separated into two polities since the early 20th century. There was very little contact between them during the decades when Inner Mongolia, as part of China, was cut off from Soviet-dominated Mongolia. However, since the early 1990s the Mongols from the two sides of the border have had opportunities to interact face to face, thanks to the Chinese policy of ‘Opening up and Reform’ and the Mongolian shift to a market economy and democratic system. When they meet each other in international trade and other occasions, do they feel like relatives or like some kind of familiar stranger? In the context of the high-level cooperation initiated by the two
governments, can ordinary actors establish trusting relations based on the ‘spontaneous sociability’ that might emerge from a common language, culture, or other heritage?

Based on my fieldwork conducted in recent years at the Ganchmod port of entry, an important border crossing through which Inner Mongolia imports coal from the Tavan Tolgoi mine in Mongolia, I would like to discuss how Inner Mongols create links across the border between China and Mongolia.

The Inner Mongolian border town of Ganchmod: The venue of our story

Trade, more precisely the trade of mineral resources, has become a major component of the relationships between China and Mongolia. Mongolia’s coal and other mineral resources are exported by truck to China, mostly through inland border-ports. To import these much-needed goods, China has accelerated the construction of these ports along its border with Mongolia and invested in the development of the mining industry in Mongolia. In recent decades, it has opened eight main ports of entry in Inner Mongolia along the border with Mongolia. Ganchmod port is located at the northernmost part of the Urad Middle Banner, Bayannuur Municipality, Inner Mongolia (N 42°24′6″, E 107°34′1″). The corresponding port on the Mongolian side is Gashuun Suhait, which is 12.8 kilometres away.

Ganchmod, previously a border guard station for regular meetings with Mongolian counterparts, was identified as a temporary entry point for imports by the Chinese government in 1990. Two years later, in accordance with an intergovernmental agreement, Ganchmod was promoted to the status of an ‘A’ class seasonal port, permitted to open for a certain number of days each season. In 2004, the two countries agreed to open Gashuun Sukhait and Ganchmod as regular corresponding ports, and Ganchmod began operations with the permission of the Chinese State Council three years later. It has expanded greatly in the last decade with the exploration and development of the Tavan Tolgoi coalmine in Mongolia’s Ömnögovi province. Reports indicate that the trade of coal through the port has been growing dramatically, from receiving only 20 trucks of coal in 2004.

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3 The other seven ports from west to east are Tseke, Mandal, Ereen, Juunhadavch, Arshaan, Ovdeg, and Arhashaat, and the respective corresponding Mongolian ports are Shivee Hureen, Hangi, Zamiin Uud, Bichigt, Sumber, Bayanhoshuu, and Havirga.
to 8,500 trucks in 2014; during 2011 and 2012, the weight of the coal annually imported through Ganchmod reached over 40,000,000 tons. According to statistics from the Inner Mongolia Exchange Center for Coal, in a single month (March 2015) over 100,000,000 tons of coal were imported through the port.4

There have, however, been problems with this massive import of coal (Figure 7). Direct transportation from Tavan Tolgoi, located 257 kilometres from Ganchmod, has been monopolized by Chinese companies. But there is also a small station inside Mongolia called Tsagaanhad, which is located 25 kilometres away from Ganchmod. This is a station where coal from Tavan Tolgoi can be stored before being transferred to Ganchmod. This means that there are two ways to transport Tavan Tolgoi coal to China: directly from the mine, or from Tsagaanhad. The long-distance conveying of coal is more cost-effective, at 110-128 RMB per tonne, while the short-distance is cheaper, at 45-50 RMB per tonne.

4 This report was published on Inner Mongolia Market of Coal website (neimenggu meitian jiaoyi shichang) on December 22, 2015.
Buyan and the need for an intermediary agency

Many Inner Mongols, especially college graduates, have sought career opportunities in the emerging and expanding border towns since the 1990s. Buyan, the main figure in our story, is one of them. Buyan was born in 1986 in Bayan-Onder Sum of the Ar-Horchin Banner, Ulaanhad (Chifeng) municipality in eastern Inner Mongolia. His father told him that their original home was Darhan Banner, and that their ancestors emigrated from there to Jaruud Banner in eastern Inner Mongolia in the 1920s, when many local herders lost their pastureland due to the banner’s land, like that of many other banners in Inner Mongolia, being taken over for cultivation. Later, the family, led by his grandfather, migrated from Jaruud to Bayan-Onder Sum in search of a better standard of living. Now Buyan identifies strongly with this Sum and the Ar-Horchin people.

Buyan has three siblings: an elder sister, a younger brother, and a younger sister. His two sisters are married and live separately from his household. His household has the use rights of 180 hectares\(^5\) of pastureland where they graze over 300 sheep, while also growing fodder and vegetables for their own consumption on 1.3 hectares of cultivated land. The household enjoyed higher than average prosperity before Buyan got involved in business at the border port. After graduating with a degree in ethnology from Inner Mongolia University in 2009, Buyan went to Ganchmod port for a job, after an older man from his Banner who worked there told him that there were opportunities for young people. Although not a high achiever in ethnology, Buyan learned a lot about how to communicate with others after getting to Ganchmod, where he also developed the ambition to have a career in business. He was first hired as a trucker in 2011, by an international trade company that organized the transport of coal from Tavan Tolgoi to Ganchmod. At the time, coal hauling from Mongolia to China was conducted almost entirely by Chinese firms. The company that hired him later provided the opportunity for him and the other drivers to purchase a truck in instalments. In 2011, the Mongolian government asked these Chinese companies to hire some Mongolian drivers. It also required that the Chinese citizen truckers transporting coal from Tavan Tolgoi acquire work visas; tourist visas were no longer acceptable for work in Mongolia. Consequently, the Chinese truckers working for transportation companies had to apply for visas, but they were very difficult to come by. Mongolian work visas are classified by various periods (one month, three months, six

\(^5\) 2700 mu in Chinese measurement.
months, etc.), and a work visa costs over 20,000 RMB, including ‘gifts’ to key personnel in Mongolia. This new situation forced Chinese transportation companies to hire truckers from Mongolia.

When China accepted these proposals, a question emerged: how could the Chinese companies and Mongolian drivers trust each other? It was reported that some Mongolian drivers had disappeared after selling tyres stolen from Chinese trucks in Mongolia, and that some Chinese companies had delayed the payment of salaries to Mongolian drivers. This tension and even crisis of trust between Chinese transportation companies and Mongolian drivers demanded a middleman who could play the role of a guarantor to ensure smooth cooperation in their transportation of coal from Mongolia to China.

**Inner Mongols as brokers between Chinese and Mongolians**

When Chinese companies started to hire Mongolians as truckers, the Inner Mongols, and Han Chinese as well, stood to lose the chance of getting jobs as drivers for these companies. But Buyan and other Inner Mongols soon realized that they could actually do a different kind of work as brokers between the Mongolian drivers and Chinese companies. Virtually none of the Mongolian drivers had any knowledge of Chinese language or business, and the same was true of the Chinese companies in terms of their knowledge of Mongolian language and Mongolia. In addition, there were some practical reasons for the two sides to work together through a broker.

At the very early stage, some incidents occurred. Some Mongolian drivers never came back to the Chinese border port after driving trucks from the Chinese side to the Mongolian coalmine. This was caused by the failure of the Chinese companies to pay salaries on time to the drivers: the latter sold tyres and other truck components as compensation. The major tasks for the brokers were therefore to guarantee the timely payment of Mongolian drivers’ salaries, and to guarantee that Mongolian truckers would not damage trucks that belonged to the Chinese companies. By 2014, there were more than 100 intermediary agencies in the port – all were managed by Inner Mongols. Today (2015), while many of these firms have problems managing their business, some are quite successful; Buyan’s agency is one of them.

Buyan founded his intermediary agency in 2012. First, he had to find a reliable Mongolian trucker. He met a guy called Mönghe who he felt was a trustworthy person. Buyan then hired Mönghe as the bagiin darga (‘leader’) of his trucking team, paying him a regular salary of 4,000 RMB per month.
Mönghe also received 20 RMB from each trucker every month. There were 29 truckers in the team in total. Buyan made an oral agreement with Mönghe that he would protect Mönghe's interests in China, while Mönghe promised to find reliable truckers for him. The primary reason for Buyan's choice of Mönghe as his partner was simply Buyan's personal impression of Mönghe. Buyan thinks that a person's character can be assessed through informal communication, by talking together or chewing the fat over dinner. Mönghe had impressed him as an honest person in this way.

Mönghe employed three people under his own guarantee. This meant that if any of the three created a problem during their trucking in Mongolian territory, such as damaging their vehicle, Mönghe would have to pay the cost. He recruited Dorji (his brother-in-law), Ot-hoo (his younger brother), and Bataa (Ot-hoo’s brother-in-law). Next, Dorji enlisted three people with his own guarantee: Dorji’s father-in-law, his wife’s brother-in-law, and his wife’s baziin hurgen ah (‘brother-in-law’s brother-in-law’). With his own guarantee, Ot-hoo introduced his fellow-townsmen Huyag, Ganbaa, Zayaa, and Baasanjav from Zavhan province. Bataa guaranteed two kinds of people: first, his relatives by blood or marriage, including his half-brother Togtoh and his younger sister’s husband; and second, his anda (‘blood-brothers’), three ethnic Kazaks, Zaki, Hadan, and Baska, who had become his blood-brothers through a ritual in which they drank the mixed blood of their thumbs when they worked in the same company in Ulaanbaatar.6

6 Anda, a term to refer to a ritualized ‘brotherhood’ between male equals, is well known from Mongolian historical documents from the 13th century onwards. Until recently, it was a valued relationship among many Mongol-speaking peoples. However, it is rarely used in this sense in modern Mongolian. One can see it applied in the original meaning in only a few encounters, like Bataaa’s relationship with the three ethnic Kazaks who became blood-brothers through the blood-mixing ritual. The word anda, however, is now more widely employed, both in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, as a term simply to denote close relations among men. In Mongolia, a man can use anda toward friends with whom he has maintained trusting relations over a long period; angiin anda (‘classmate brother’) or daichin anda (‘army brother’), for example, are common terms of address among friends who were at school together or comrades-in-arms many years ago. Nowadays in Ulaanbaatar it is also quite common for male teenagers to call one another anda. The term is applied less in everyday conversation among the Mongols in Inner Mongolia. A well-known pop group from Inner Mongolia has named their band Anda (Anda Hamtlag in Mongolian). Naras, the lead singer of the group, explained to me why they chose this name by saying that some of the band members had been together since kindergarten, and others since their teenage years studying music at the same school in Hohhot. When they founded the band in the late 1990s they were around 20 years old. They hoped from the very beginning that they would not only play music but also be setgelee medeltsesen naiz (‘feeling-linked intimate friends’) forever. Since then, the nine members of the band have been together for some 20 years. Inner Mongols use the combined term ah duu (‘older and younger siblings’) as a broader idea...
Thus, almost all of the people working in the firm are relatives in one sense or another. Buyan calls the men older him *Ah* (‘older brother’), and is called *Ah* by the younger ones. Buyan understands that kinship works well as a guarantee mechanism among the truckers. It is, however, a two-way relation; so while he expected his Mongolian team to be trustworthy (for him), he organized matters so that *they* could also trust him. Thus, he tried to provide a better logistical service for his truckers while also setting some strict rules for them to follow in their work. He arranged an inexpensive dormitory for them (at a monthly rate of 1,000 RMB per person), which had a kitchen that provided meals at a monthly cost of 1,000 RMB per person. He asked his truckers not to drink alcohol during work time. Although this rule was not easily enforced at the beginning, his truckers gradually accepted and followed it. On top of the guarantees mentioned earlier, he also required each driver to give him 2,000 RMB as a cash deposit against any damage that might occur to their truck. Further, he insisted that the Chinese companies hiring Mongolian truckers buy insurance for their drivers in order to minimize his own potential risks.

Buyan found that personal relations were very important for running his agency. The private affairs of the truckers should be their own business in principle, but Buyan has gradually become involved in some of their personal affairs. Many of the Mongolian truckers, for example, did not know how to manage their salaries, which on average came to over 10,000 RMB per person monthly; as soon as their wages were paid, they would spend all of it on drinking or other leisure activities without any longer-term plan. Buyan helped them save money by sending a portion of their salaries directly to their families’ bank accounts in Mongolia, or by putting part of their salaries into his own account so that it could be taken out for their families when they went back home. These measures were welcomed by the truckers – and especially by their wives. Some admitted that they really could not manage such savings by themselves. Some truckers’ wives invited him over phone to visit their families in Ulaanbaatar any time he wanted. Buyan also helped his truckers by providing them with instruction in basic spoken Chinese and information about Chinese society and customs. He also arranged introductions to hospitals in Hohhot for their families and relatives, to help them get better treatment. If truckers’ wives came to Ganchmod for a visit, he would organize places for them to stay. These investments in the
team’s personal affairs have brought a positive effect on the business of his agency, since the truckers came to trust him and work with him efficiently.

When I asked Buyan about the key reason for the success of his agency, he credited specific compatibilities of language and culture. He said that there are a lot of Inner Mongols from Tongliao municipality in Ganchmod speaking the Horchin Mongolian dialect, but that those people could not communicate well with the Outer Mongolian truckers due to differences between the Horchin and the Halh dialects. He emphasized the advantage of being an Ar-Horchin, because the latter can communicate with Halh Mongolians and also understand the traditional culture well, which is so necessary for interacting with Mongolians. Ar-Horchin people, as he pointed out, have kept their nomadic ways of life in some areas of their Banner, whereas the Horchin Mongols have completely settled down, meaning they have lost much of the traditional culture. Other Inner Mongols from the western parts of Inner Mongolia are not good at running businesses even though they speak a similar dialect to Halh (only one agency run by a local Urad Mongol is successful, according to Buyan). We can see from this that, while all Inner Mongols are potential mediators in the business between China and Mongolia, not all of them are equally well placed to do this effectively.

Even for Buyan, however, the situation was not easy to handle. Though his agency managed the intermediary business carefully, it still occasionally encountered incidents regarding truckers from Mongolia. One of his drivers unintentionally damaged a car belonging to the Customs Service, and Buyan and the Chinese company that owned the truck had to pay a huge sum (220,000 RMB) in damages. Part of this sum (170,000 RMB) was covered by insurance, but the remaining cost had to be shared equally by Buyan’s agency, the company, and the trucker involved in the case. In fact, Buyan could never trust the drivers one hundred percent. Buyan told me that once he had established good relations with the Mongolian truckers he found they were trustworthy and kind-hearted guys that he could work with. ‘As long as you treat Mongolians nicely, they would do the same to you,’ he said. However, he also mentioned during a conversation with me that he normally would not allow all of the people who guaranteed one another to drive back to Mongolia on the same day, just in case they disappeared with their trucks.

Still, in comparison with the other (over 100) intermediary firms in Ganchmod, which altogether employ around 1,000 Mongolian truckers,7 Buyan thought his own agency was one of the best and most successful.

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7 There are more than twice as many Mongolian drivers as Chinese, of whom only around 400 are employed in the coal transport business.
Some of the other mediator agencies treat their truckers poorly, beating them, for example, when they make mistakes; and some are not able to push the truck-owning companies to pay the drivers’ salaries on time. Because of his success, Buyan has been able to take a step up the economic ladder: he now owns six trucks himself, from which was able to make an income of 400,000 RMB in 2013 alone.

**Conclusion: Inner Mongols as a ‘relative’ for the cooperation between China and Mongolia**

China and Mongolia have been trying to find a common ground by linking their ‘Belt and Road’ and ‘Steppe Road’ projects at the governmental level, as laid out by the presidents (Mongolian: *tolgoi*, ‘heads’) of the two states in recent years. This is a basic framework for cooperation that needs to be activated through more practical connectivity between them, including infrastructural hardware like railways (see Figure 8), roads, or tunnels, as well as cultural and social interaction between the two peoples. In other words, the cooperation between the two countries not only relies on good

**Figure 8  Buyan standing reflectively by an unused railway, 2013**
agreements made by the heads of the governments, but also needs understanding, communication, and work between real people.

The story presented above shows that a group of mediator businesses run by Inner Mongols have been working effectively to build bridges between the two sides, deploying the Mongol language (indeed, a specific dialect), ethnic-cultural backgrounds, and kinship relations as social resources. This has ensured that the two sides can work together without loss or worrying about each other. The core foundation for their cooperation is still their common interest in earning benefits from the trade of coal between Mongolia and China.

And yet this cooperation, based on a network that over time constructs some kind of trust and joint surety, cannot easily be identified with the ‘spontaneous sociability’ described by Fukuyama. The network relies on previous relationships, and is itself always in the process of formation. Time and care is needed to consolidate such a network in a form that might be able to manage the large-scale economic organizations required for cooperation between two countries. Ancient Mongolian social traditions of creating relations between non-kin individuals, such as anda, a type of blood brotherhood formed between non-kin to cement a political alliance (Atwood 2004, 13), have not functioned as a major factor in the formation of the network in general, although as we have seen anda is seen in some parts of the network.

According to Giddens (1990) and Fukuyama (1995), the trust and spontaneous sociability that function as the base for economic cooperation in modern society are not developed from family or kin groups, but from the sphere of ‘civil society’ that exists beyond the family. If this is true, then clearly the cultural and social base for setting up networks of this kind between Inner Mongols and Mongolians is fragile and immature in respect to establishing sustainable support for international cooperation.

In addition, we should acknowledge that there have been some negative cases of distrust and even fraudulent conduct between Mongolians and Inner Mongols in recent decades.8 Furthermore, the elaborate creation of guarantees shown in this chapter indicates that trust in kin is limited to close relatives and requires special oversight if it is to be extended further into a network. Still, although it is too early to say whether trusting...

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8 Such negative cases have been reported from Ereen and Beijing, where Mongols came for business or hospitalization with Inner Mongols serving as go-betweens or interpreters. Since some Inner Mongols cheated Mongolians for more benefits, there is a saying among some Mongolians that it is better to ask for help from the tsever kujaa (‘real Chinese’) than from Inner Mongols.
relationships and collaboration among ordinary people will have a positive effect on the two countries’ cooperation in large economic affairs, this kind of nongovernmental network should not be neglected when considering broader cooperation between the two countries in the future, i.e., not only in the economy, but also in other areas such as cultural exchanges.

Nevertheless, considering the question more broadly and internationally, the Inner Mongols’ relatedness to both sides also has the potential possibility of bringing about a blurring of national boundaries: in other words, a potentially destabilizing infiltration from one side to the other. This is important because the two nations, Mongolia and China, are not equal in terms of political and economic power. As John Borneman notes with regard to West and East Germans, particular cultures are both constitutive of, and subversive of, international order (1998, 2). Over the course of increased integration through economic and kinship ties facilitated by the Inner Mongols who serve as go-betweens, the wellbeing of independent Mongolia, in terms of both its national sovereignty and its economy, could be at risk. In this sense, Mongolia is indeed the touchstone of the peaceful rise of China (Lin 2014).

References
