Subjective Lives and Economic Transformations in Mongolia

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Preface

It had been three years since I was last in Mongolia, and things felt unfamiliar. The skyline was crowded by new buildings. Fashion styles had diversified. Shops and restaurants proliferated. There was also a new kind of dirty, rugged and raw side to the gloss and glamour that Mongolians are so good at upholding. As on previous visits, but perhaps more intensely simply because of the great contrasts, in 2015 I felt that I was being confronted in a somewhat dystopian way with what a capitalism of the future might look like.

Brushing up against this underside – the ruthless contrast between rich and poor, the seeming absence of the state, the horrendous air pollution in the city and the ravaging of natural resources, the unequal access to medical care and the way in which people were trying to make a living on the edges of things – provided a glimpse of the reverberating effects of late capitalism being felt in numerous places. Deeply destructive, uneven and desperate, it also appeared thrilling and full of potential. Cutting across this landscape of raw inequalities were individual people forging their own ethical projects that sometimes, somewhat surprisingly, seemed to flourish and grow in the cracks. Rather than a simple before and after (boom and bust, utopian and dystopian) narrative, I hope that through our attention to the lives of individuals will bring out a more complex and nuanced understanding of this time will emerge.

In retrospect, it feels easy to write about these kinds of experiences as the outcome of neoliberal policy and forms of austerity, about the discontent and short-sightedness of extractive capitalism with its focus on growth and greed. It is hard to make variegated and local stories count. One way in which I have been able to anchor my reflections in the changes I have observed in Mongolia is to focus on the different kinds of personal interventions into what seems so pervasive and predetermined. Elevating the stories of people that seem to go against the grain of what we may assume to be prevalent and dominant also becomes a political act of writing those worlds into being. In the following chapters I amplify the diversity that
exists in spite of the shared sense that we are hurtling towards something anticipated and known. This is to deliberately side-step pervasive narratives of anthropogenic and economic crisis and focus instead on how we live in spite of such chaos.

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In subsequent visits I became privy to the way in which my close female friends were reflecting and interpreting the economic, moral and political challenges they were facing. In contrast to the political rhetoric of men and the businesspeople I had worked with, many women seemed to work hard to create a space in which life could be tended to in another way. Alongside the violently fluctuating economy of the past few years, which had left some with nothing and others with more than they would ever need, these women were steering their way along a different path, which allowed them to reconsider moral, political and ethical choices about the kind of world they wanted to inhabit and the future this would mean for Mongolia as a nation.

The five women who are core to this book are all from different socio-economic backgrounds. I explore the kinds of lives they have been forging in the wake of recent economic growth and its rapid decline and the increasing questioning of belief in democracy. What this has opened up for many is perhaps not surprise at the fact that promises have not materialised (they do not bank on the fleeting promises of politicians), but a space in which to question past dreams and reconsider new ways of imagining the future. Innovative, creative and highly reflective, their views should be amplified above the dominant voices of squabbling politicians who rotate business and political alliances, trading in accusations of corruption.

To highlight this kind of heterogeneity is to draw attention to the ways in which wider shifts and processes are being experienced and made. Global shifts – such as neoliberal strategies of managing finance and changing forms of sovereignty and governance – do not simply create homogeneity the world over. They are shaped through individual and local projects that come to critique them, creating forms of experimentation and change. It is clear that to understand these features we need a richer characterisation of capitalist markets and the businesses within them (see Jacobs and Mazzucato 2016, 18) to look at what the economy is, beyond ideas about exchange and formal neoclassical ideas of maximising individuals.

For me, this diversity has become an important point to highlight because it is all too easy to resort to simple explanations for the way things are. That one political, economic and legal system can encompass all diversity. That democracy, as promised to Mongolia by the many international
development agencies and banks, would provide a better system of governance than what was before. That developing an extractive mineral-based economy would be the way to catapult Mongolia out of debt and poverty. Such frameworks often become the descriptive explanations for activities taking place in diverse settings, both within anthropological descriptions and elsewhere. They are what Englund and Leach (2000) have referred to as an overarching ‘meta-narrative’ that comes to dominate much anthropology. Thus, poverty and marginalisation are explained as an outcome of neoliberal austerity practices; the rise in sovereign and personal debt is attributed to fluctuations in global commodity super-cycles; environmental and economic precarity owes to the structural inequalities of capitalism; ‘subjects’, it seems, can be understood to ‘suffer’ in the same way everywhere (Robbins 2013). Homogeneous explanations are brought to bear on diverse ethnographic settings.

The danger of explaining ethnographic diversity in homogeneous terms is what Gibson-Graham (2014), using Geertz’s term, has called the danger of using ‘thin description’. They argue instead that a commitment to ‘thick description’ may resist the gravitational pull towards forms of explanation that assume overarching, unidirectional theories of global change. Paying attention to ethnographic heterogeneity within wider global shifts becomes a way to challenge the idea that we know what these shifts are. Indeed, one might wish here to show how this very diversity comes to work recursively, determining the global shifts that we thought were familiar in the first place.

A case in point might be the way in which the mortgage market in Mongolia is being determined. Rebekah Plueckhahn (2020) asks whether forms of financialisation – such as private mortgages – create homogeneous outcomes, or whether in fact they open up different responses and experiences. Unlike in the UK and the US, Mongolian mortgages cannot attract investment from multinational foreign companies and are part of a closed network of financial institutions within Mongolia that buy debt back and forth between each other. One of the only ways this system is sustainable is through mobilising the interest earned on the mortgages being issued to the public. Strategies among banks, construction companies and apartment buyers also help support the system in diverse and incremental ways, giving rise to new strategies and economic imaginaries that proliferate out of these fluctuating, nascent networks.

Here we have a clear example where things may at first look similar (there is a rise in mortgage markets globally), but if we pay attention to the management of lending and mortgage debt we see that it is being sustained very differently in this particular context. To highlight this kind of
heterogeneity is to draw attention to the ways in which economic models (or forms of financialisation) don’t manifest in the same way on the ground. They are being implemented and sustained differently, owing to the local or national conditions that shape them.

Bringing ethnographic diversity to bear on wider global shifts or trends raises questions about scale and the measurement of social change more generally. Specifically, I want to draw attention here to the fact that the measurement by which one might assume global shifts are occurring might not adhere to national boundaries or use gross domestic product (GDP) figures as the unit of analysis. With massive changes in forms of sovereign power, it is clear that the boundaries of what holds things in place, or equally allows their fluidity and movement, are now increasingly determined by relationships and forms of power other than the old idea of ‘the nation’. International trade networks, debt relations, even forms of pollution, viruses and waste, all cut across physical and political sovereign boundaries to determine global flows of knowledge, ideas and information.

These flows are often highly unregulated but come to determine the world we live in. They are also extremely unequal, persistently creating winners and losers and maintaining forms of environmental and economic inequality around the world. Trying to trace such flows across territories and scales is often disorientating, leaving us with a sense that things cannot be fully known or anticipated. This lack of clarity leads to speculation as to how things are, in fact, connected or determined – a kind of political second-guessing at motives and drives. In attending to these forms of speculation as they are made by our interlocutors, we may attend to the decisions and ethical projects that are undertaken within such rhetoric and to the types of explanations and connections that these give rise to. Put simply, economic and social shifts and changes may not always consist of the things we think of. They may, in fact, resist exact specification. Through attending to the ways in which our interlocutors engage with and come to know them, we may reveal connections and possibilities that we have yet to notice.

Recognising such connections presents a challenge. How should anthropologists navigate these scales and forms of explanation? Is the role of anthropology to document and show connections across scales of analysis? When doing so, whose narrative becomes dominant and when should they be amplified? In thinking through such questions, it seems to me that how we choose to pitch our explanations and the connections we choose to make is always an inherently political act that brings certain worlds into focus over others.
Almost 20 years ago, when I carried out fieldwork with a nomadic herding family on the Mongolian–Russian border for my PhD, Mongolia had a fascination with the idea of democracy and was shedding its socialist past. Today, the idea of democracy has lost its shiny newness. Shaped by an international interest in extracting minerals to fuel China’s economic growth, International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans and World Bank restructuring, the last 10–15 years have seen dramatic changes in economic and political life, some of which I’ve tried to trace in the five-year European Research Council (ERC)-funded project, ‘Emerging Subjects of the New Economy in Mongolia (2014–19)’, of which this book is a part.

The project’s title, ‘Emerging Subjects’, has focused our research in two senses. Firstly, we used this term to explore the broader themes, or subjects, that are emerging in the current economic climate and their articulation through different kinds of activities, from forms of political protest and stalled infrastructure projects to ways of transacting and accessing goods and cash, such as through pawnshops and barter. Secondly, we used the term ‘Emerging Subjects’ to refer to actual people, or to distinct forms of subjectivity that are being articulated as an outcome of particular kinds of economic and political experiences. These include forms of political protest, such as hunger strikes and self-immolation, and ways of sustaining life while constantly being in debt.

The group comprised 10 researchers, five of whom were based at University College London (UCL) and five at the National University of Mongolia (NUM). We were also fortunate to have a very active and diverse advisory board based in Mongolia, ranging from herders to female activists, independent economists and environmental lawyers, with whom we consulted and collaborated. While each of the 10 researchers carried out fieldwork in their own distinct areas – focusing on the property market and forms of ownership; the development of certain kinds of infrastructure; environmental and civil society movements; mining and the monetary sector; and small-scale trade in free-trade zones and in local markets – we all explored ways in which the economy was being shaped by and shaped its subjects in particular ways. We even carried out fieldwork with our paired researchers on specific topics (see, for example, Plueckhahn and Dulam 2018) and all together – when we travelled to the Southern Gobi, to Mongolia’s largest copper and coal mines and to the Chinese border – along two different roads – to meet with those who transport the resources outside the country. Mongolian artists were sent our findings – in an innovative art–anthropology exchange – and responded in an exhibition in London and in our book (Spriggs 2018).
The balance between leading this project and carrying out my own research was initially alleviated by the fact that I decided to base my research on friends – the five different women central to the chapters of this book. But a more persistent problem was that the rapid change that we were all experiencing felt incredibly difficult to document. Every time we tried to do so, things shifted and we needed to revise our assumptions.

At the ERC interview in Brussels when I was applying for the grant, at the other end of the table was a woman who nodded and smiled as I spoke. Her presence emboldened me to speak up to those who posed impossible questions, and it felt like she was willing me along. A few years later I looked up her name and met Professor Hanne Petersen, Professor of Legal Cultures at the University of Copenhagen. I invited her to visit our research group, and one grey January morning Hanne sat down with us at UCL for over two hours, listening and offering suggestions and insights. We had all done some fieldwork by then and felt intensely the experience of being in a Mongolia that felt like a place we had never experienced before. What did this mean for our project? What could we contribute through our insights? Hanne embraced everything and showed us how our experiences were part of wider social and political change happening globally. When we asked her how we could write about this sense of fragmentation and change, she replied, ‘Like Montesquieu; through small vignettes and essays that mimic the experiences you describe.’ Listening to her response, I again felt emboldened and decided to experiment with her suggestion, this time in my writing style.

Methodologically, the structure of this book has tried to mimic some of these experiences. In my writing I want to draw the reader into a particular tension that comes from living in a world where one is constantly being pulled in two directions: on the one hand, being exposed to disjointed and fragmented information about the world through titbits of information shared between friends and through social media: on the other hand, the embedded and close experience of the daily unfurling of the political and economic environment in which one lives. This tension, not unlike the space between boom and bust that I come to explore in this book, requires a zooming in and out of focus and scales of analysis.

One of the ways in which I have attempted to do this is to interdigitate each conventional chapter with what I refer to as an ‘ethnographic interlude’ – a snapshot or image of a particular event as it was experienced or understood, without further explanation. Looking back, I found my field notes were full of such anecdotes and exposure to unresolved events. They are experiments in taking note of things that happen at the
margins of our perception (see Tsing [2015, 206] on unexpected concur-
rences), disrupting orderly narratives and explanations.

In contrast, the chapters themselves begin as portraits of individ-
uals based on long-term friendship. They are ethnographically dense
and replete with specifics, but while you’re reading them I want you to
imagine a world where nothing can be taken for granted. Progress is not
to be relied upon, nor is it desired. In documenting this tension and flux
I hope to show that this is not something to be feared. All kinds of crea-
tivity and innovation can be found in these spaces. From these portraits,
each chapter expands outwards to explore broader structural themes
that are approached and shaped by individuals.

Contrasting these two modes of writing is a deliberate act of try-
ing to mimic the situation I am describing, where things zoom in and
out of focus momentarily and then disappear from view. I hope that by
amplifying this in my writing I give you a sense of what it is like to live in
a world where things around you change, sometimes incredibly rapidly
and without explanation, while at other times they appear, sometimes
disappointingly and sometimes reassuringly, to always remain the same.
In this tension we may glimpse what it means to live a life in precarity, but
also how individual subjects forge a sense of community and ethical care for
each other as they facilitate their lives in change.

Notes

1. I took her comment to refer to Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws* (first published in 1748), which
argues that each human society differs from every other and must be considered from all points
of view. Despite being an empiricist, he ‘principally stressed the fruit of observation [and] his
scattered notes on a wide variety of topics, are detailed, vivid and penetrating’ (Berlin 2013,
137). Furthermore, ‘his vignettes of characters and situations are not stylised, neither carica-
tures nor idealisations’, and he believed that there is no single set of values suitable for all people
everywhere, no single solution to social or political problems in all countries (Berlin 2013, 143).

2. I am aware that there is a large body of literature on ethics (for example, Laidlaw 2002) and self-
care in anthropology, with which I have not fully engaged. In the following chapters, I draw my
main theoretical inspiration from Robbins (2013) and Zigon (2014), each of whom may be seen
as part of and critiquing that wider body of work.