Subjective Lives and Economic Transformations in Mongolia

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On 16 July 2009 the Mongolian parliament adopted an impressive environmental law to control and limit the sites for which mining licences could be granted. ‘The law with the long name’, as it was colloquially known (officially, the Law on the Prohibition of Exploration and Mining in Headwaters of Rivers, Protected Water Basins Zones and Forested Areas), was intended to protect the water systems of Mongolia, on which so many depend. It allowed the government to revoke mining licences where areas were located within the boundaries of headwaters of rivers, protected water basins and forested areas.1 Prompted by the work of civil society environmental groups, which came to be known as the ‘River Movements’, this law marked an unanticipated policy shift in the midst of the booming ‘mineral economy’ (Byambajav 2015; Dulam 2020) and provided a much-needed pause for thought at a time when everything was moving very quickly. It was seen by some as a progressive response to the ‘wild’ roller coaster of the Wolf Economy. While for others, especially critical foreign investors, it was an instantiation of Mongolia’s ever-deepening ‘resource nationalism’.

In the years that followed, however, concern grew over implementation and the government’s reticence to enforce the law. Sometimes mining in areas theoretically protected by the law continued in secret, resulting in conflicts between miners and local residents, further pollution and mass protest. On 18 February 2015 (at the height of Saikhanbileg’s time as prime minister) the parliament of Mongolia chose, against protest and public critique, to amend the law, which was blamed for holding back national economic growth. Amidst talk of increasing economic crisis and the halting of progress, the law with the long name was seen as having hindered Mongolia’s investment environment.

This amendment allowed the government to approve the procedures for the revocation of licences granted in the headwaters of rivers,2 and for undertaking certain measures, including the restoration...
of the environment in licensed areas located in the protected zones of water basins where mining operations had already commenced. The Mongolian government believed that this amendment might rebuild trust between Mongolia and international mining companies, which were slowly leaving the country, and thereby boost the economy. They had no thought that what they were experiencing was the crashing wave of another global economic super-cycle; austerity and cuts – promoted by an IMF bailout – were to follow. Caught in the complex fallout of these legal amendments was Zedlen, a 55-year-old woman from Mongolia’s north-eastern countryside whose work means that she sits, quite literally, at the headwater of these changes.

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I first came to know Zedlen as the head of the local primary school in the small district where I conducted my PhD fieldwork. She had publicly chastised me for not giving free language classes at her school (instead I had offered them for free to the whole district on Saturday mornings). I thought at the time that she had been short-sighted and was surprised because she conducted social relations in a very different way from what I had learnt was acceptable in the small community where I was living. I brushed it off at the time, knowing she had suffered great personal misfortune, including domestic violence and the arson of her home. When we put together the advisory board for our ERC-funded project on changes in the Mongolian economy, however, I felt the need to diversify the group with female voices from the countryside. I knew Zedlen would be a perfect fit. When I approached her and she accepted, I was thrilled to get to know her better and find that we were more similar than I had realised.

Born in 1961, Zedlen has seen her life transformed many times. Most recently she had been working for the Ministry of Nature and Environment and Tourism as the head of the Onon River Water Basin Protected Area. When I met her in a café in Ulaanbaatar in April 2016 she was full of information about her changing work conditions. She had been through what seemed an overwhelming series of events, but, when I look back at that meeting now, certain themes emerge that make her experience familiar in the light of others I encountered. Many people were juggling job insecurity, lack of payments, insistence on continuity of stamps in their social insurance books, recourse to the law and to administrative procedures and bureaucracy, and an almost sacred attachment to documents in the face of contested claims.
In this chapter I focus on the particular instantiation of these themes in Zedlen’s life. Her example is illuminating, not least because through her we learn about the precarious existence of government workers, of women and of those who dedicate their lives to protecting the environment. Her position as a state worker defending the environment is also unique in that academic work on environmental movements in Mongolia has focused on non-state-sponsored NGOs and activist organisations spearheaded by men (see Byambajav 2015; Dulam 2020). Zedlen also offers a unique insight into what she believes is the gap that her generation suffers. Through this insight we can begin to turn full circle to the gap described by Oyunaa at the start of this book.

The pressure (daramt): insecure jobs and shifting licences

Prompted by international environment agencies (such as WWF and the UN), in the early 2000s the Ministry of Environment and Tourism created 10 Water Basin Authorities in Mongolia to protect areas with outstanding water resources. However, by 2016 employment in these authorities had become incredibly insecure and the number of areas was reduced to five. The Onon River Water Basin Authority, of which Zedlen had been in charge, was merged with the Ulz River Water Basin Authority, which was located 330 km away. Before this change Zedlen had suffered nine months of unexpected unemployment when the government cancelled all River Water Basin Authority job contracts. During these nine months Zedlen was one of only two people (of the 17 involved) who took part in a court hearing to contest their dismissal and demand their jobs back. Not long after she got her job back the protected areas were reduced and many were decommissioned. A week before I met her, Zedlen had been appointed the head of the newly merged Water Basin Authority located 630 km from the capital, in Mongolia’s easternmost province. Although she was pleased to have her job back, her post had no budget apart from her own state salary, so there was very little she could actually do; she didn’t even have the money to travel to the 22 districts the area covered.

Many speculated that the decommissioning of this post was linked to the reissuing of mining licences and revocation of the law with the long name. During the period when the law was amended, the budget for the environmental sector was drastically reduced. For example, on 13 August 2015, during the time when the decommissioning was taking place and Zedlen lost her job, a licence was secretly granted from the Ministry of Mining and the Ministry of the Environment for mining to
start at a major gold mine at the headwaters of the Onon – a project Zedlen had spent many years resisting. Corrupt and undercover dealings made the administrative structure that held things in place redundant; although she had secured a ‘protected zone status’ for the land extending 200 m from the riverbanks (granted by the representatives of the provincial civil office), mining could now commence. When we met, she showed me several documents and official letters that traced this process. Emboldened by her reappointment, she took a fearless stance, one that stood outside and directly challenged the networks most people worked within:

When I next go to this mine site I will say that, since we established a protected area here, you cannot get to the river. I am intending to stand holding this document in my hand. Once the map is approved, I can hold that and say you cannot touch this – you can dig and get things out of here, but you cannot touch the river and the water.

At this point I need to highlight that the situation is complex and not simply one of corrupt national versus disenfranchised local political interests. The local government also tried to persuade Zedlen to agree to granting the licence because they were fearful that, without the company there, artisanal miners would flood the area and cause unregulated pollution, crime and disorder. The mining company has assured local people that they will only extract gold and will then transport it to a local town to be washed and processed. Some local residents have been given lavish presents and, along with local officials, have been taken to the city for dinners and offered treats by the mining company, which claims to be working in their best interests. Zedlen herself has been offered money by the company, to make up for the lack of funds in the state budget to carry out assessment work.

Crucially, however, once the licence was agreed upon, the mining company did not begin mining, but, perhaps owing to the economic downturn, they deployed a security team to protect the area from small-scale artisanal miners. The situation is thus one of deadlock, of activity in lieu of other activity, and of holding things in place. This indefinite pause generates the space for speculation about motives and alliances and is characteristic of the opaque nature of politics in Mongolia (see Interlude II).

The week before our meeting Zedlen had travelled to the district of her new headquarters, where the local governor had greeted her with complete disregard: ‘I have heard that the new head of this authority is
very contentious and always making arguments. For how long do you intend to work here?’ As I came to learn, her work encountered difficulties at every turn, with people in the Ministry, with local administrators and herders and with the people she employed, who, an audit revealed, channelled some resources to themselves.

Therefore, because of all these pressures, I feel like I want to leave and quit my job … I am like a baby otter squeezed between rocks [hadand havchuulagdsan halluny zulzaga]. I have so much pressure [daramt] but I need to be patient and stick with it, at least until November when I can claim my retirement. People say I should just take the money, grant the full permission to the mine and take a share. Instead I endure all these pressures, but it is hard because I am no one to the state, like a little mouse trying her best [Töriin tölöö ogotno booj üheh, literally ‘A mouse hangs herself for the sake of the state’].

Zedlen’s work sits between the state and local forms of direct action. She also stands perpendicular to a local activist and NGO group that is trying to mobilise resistance against mining on specific terms, especially since the change to the law with the long name which means mining can now take place 200 m away from water sources and rivers, rather than 500 m. A group of local people from the subsection (the smallest Mongolian administrative unit) of the district closest to the river formed a political organisation several years ago and registered as an NGO to protect the area (Goloo Hamgaalah Hödölgöön). They are not necessarily anti-mining, but they want to make sure local people receive benefits from any company profits and that the surrounding environment is not damaged, so they can continue to live there. Dolgor, a local activist and part of this group, works with local shamans to protest against mining in the area. They are extremely active both locally and in the capital, where they have linked up with the local Homeland Association and NGOs protesting against mining elsewhere in Mongolia (see Dulam [2018b] for historical detail of such movements in Mongolia). The shamans regularly hold rituals in the local mountains, ensuring the area is known as a ‘sacred landscape’ (see Byambajav 2015).

Dolgor and Zedlen were emphatic rivals, coveting each other’s jobs. In many respects they sounded extremely similar – self-driven, outspoken and active in their wish to see the landscape they grew up in protected. It happened that some of my closest friends in the district were great supporters of Dolgor and had extremely positive things to say about her; one woman commented that she was ‘an excellent lively
woman who was extremely contentious’ (*sergelen mundag hüühen, ayuultai hel am yostoi sainai*). ‘When things happen,’ she said, ‘she will not just sit quietly – she even lay down in front of one of the miners’ trucks, refusing them access to the mine site.’ Local people commented that Dolgor was better than Zedlen, that ‘she could do more’. Along with a well-regarded and highly trained local blind shaman and his daughter, Dolgor and her allies have carried out direct action against the mine company at various times.9 When I met the head of the NGO, based in Ulaanbaatar, he was angry with Zedlen for allowing her department to sign the mining contract, even though this took place when she was redundant and she was now trying her best to restrict the licence agreement. Rumours circulated that she worked for the artisanal miners and had ‘sold’ the licence to the mine and got a share of the profit, along with the local district governor who now drives a smart four-by-four. Speculation about the different putative alliances was overwhelming and prevented any form of action.

**Activism in action**

I meet Zedlen in the countryside as she returned from the headquarters of her new office to her previous base in the countryside. It’s late and she’s tired, but she holds a meeting with her team, updating them and laying out duties for the month to come. I am struck by the sense that she is an excellent leader and they feel energised by her presence.10 The situation in the eastern province is dire, she reports; there are three working mines there, but none of them employs local people and one has been overtaken by artisanal, or ‘ninja’, miners, so called in Mongolian because of the green plastic pans they carry on their backs to mine gold. There are hardly any trees left in the surrounding woods, and forest fires are almost permanent. The district is awash with drunk men and women who cast curses (*hel am or haraal*). Zedlen’s main task is to make sure that the mining companies sign a contract to say they will pay taxes for the amount of water they use, but it is difficult to enforce.11

Leaving her office, we go to find the governor of a local sub-district to confirm a meeting about water and mining tomorrow. I am surprised by the way she gets things done. While it might not seem out of place in an urban office, it is unlike the normal way of interacting in the district, especially with officials.

The sub-district governor says, ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?’
Zedlen responds, ‘I called you several times and even tried to visit your house, but you have a scary dog. When can we meet with the people in the sub-district over the weekend?’

The governor looks shocked and replies, ‘I don’t know.’

To which she responds, ‘What does “I don’t know” mean? Does it mean you will let us know later? Like when? This afternoon? Let’s try calling her now.’

Whereupon the man has no choice but to call someone from his mobile. With a slightly trembling voice he says, ‘I’ve got these people right next to me now who asked me to call you to find out if they can come tomorrow at 12 noon.’

The next morning we set off in an old Russian van that Zedlen has travelled in from eastern Mongolia. The driver is anxious. He tells us that his vehicle cannot travel up hills; it is used to the flat steppe of eastern Mongolia and may not make it to the mine site, which is at the peak of a mountain range. We drive out of the district and northwards, over the large river (via a bridge funded by the mining company), only stopping to collect a Nature Protection ranger before turning east across the pastureland to the foothills of the Gutain Davaa mountain range.

The atmosphere in the car is one of excitement. As the landscape dashes past we glance at a sheet of paper being passed around in the car. The Ministry of Environment has listed four companies allowed to carry out mining in the protected area. Zedlen assures us that she has spoken to the current minister, who has said that they can’t all dig here, so there is contradictory information and suspected corruption; the minister who granted the licences must have received a bribe and is no longer in his post.

We stop briefly to observe the damage to the river running down from the mountain pass, where the mine has syphoned off water to create reservoirs for washing and cleaning. Soon we are back in the Russian van, crossing our fingers that it will make it up the very narrow mountain track that leads to the base at the top. At one point the car stalls, black smoke billowing from the back. The driver pulls the handbrake, places rocks underneath the back tyres and tries again. We jolt upwards, climbing beyond the treeline where a man in camouflage can be seen crouching down holding a dog on a chain and beckoning us to move forward.

**Gutain Davaa Haruulyn post**

Our car comes to a halt at a small plateau. My eyes cast around to see a ger, a wooden storehouse and four ferocious dogs without ears or tails,
chained up and barking. Just below, on a narrow terrace, lies a large pig with piglets. Some chickens scuttle around. There is a faint singing noise as the wind bends the tall trees. We are ushered towards the ger as a man covers the eyes of the dogs on the chains. We sit down in the back of the ger and are served hot black tea and homemade biscuits. There are maybe six men and their boss, all in camouflage fatigues, watching us from the beds on either side. The boss takes out a red notebook with the words ‘Gutai Raport’ (sic) on it and notes down in detail who we are, our affiliation and our time of arrival. There is the low hum of a wind generator driving a television and radio.

This is the security/protection company (*hamgalach lr hamgaalaltiin alba*) employed by the mining company to guard the area while they await permission to begin mining. Their main job is to prevent ‘ninjas’, a Mongolian term for unregulated individuals who mine for their own benefit, extracting what they perceive as ‘their’ gold. The security/protection company first came to this area in 2003, and then again in 2013 when another security company took over. The leader has only been here for one year and they have little to tell us. In fact, their work seems quiet and I later learn from local herders that they hunt wild animals most days. Zedlen hands them a copy of the new resolution that they can’t use any river water. They are keen to show us three large holes in the ground near to the camp, each 50 m in diameter, which they have filled with concrete. These are the ninjas’ old mines, where people discovered seams of gold the width of at least four fingers.

When there was a gap in the mining licences, and in the security firms paid to guard the place, people flooded the area. One local man went up the mountain by himself and was greatly rewarded, but another family travelling up in a car suffered an accident: the car turned over, causing their son’s death and their daughter to lose a leg. Gold, everyone reflected, breeds greed; no one could hold back when they learnt what existed in these mountains (see High’s [2017] description of *altny hüch* – ‘the power of gold’).

**Sub-district herder’s meeting**

Descending the mountain to the pastureland below, we stop at a small wooden hut where the local herders have gathered for the meeting. Zedlen knows them as her school students and friends. She gives a brief overview of the history of the river basin area, and the recent changes in administration, and then invites me to speak briefly about our project. The generator starts and Zedlen begins her PowerPoint presentation
about clean water: how important it is to drink fresh water and how underground toilets pollute water sources. ‘Always dig your well up-land from your toilet,’ she exhorts, and then draws on several examples relating to the lives of the people she is addressing. As the talk develops into a more technical one about mining and river pollution, the driver from eastern Mongolia is invited to talk about the environmental impact of mining in his district. The floor is then opened for questions and several people raise their hands at once. There is an intense atmosphere; people want to know what is happening with the mine.

One woman explains, ‘We were pressurised into signing the current agreement. They said, “Do you want ninja miners or us? You choose, but you have to choose now.” And then they said, “We won’t wash the gold here; we will wash it in Baganuur,” and so we all signed the letter granting permission, but now everyone is worried and other people are furious with us and we want information. What is happening?’

Zedlen looks concerned but all she can say is, ‘Yes, the letter of permission to resume mining was signed by many people in this sub-district and was countersigned by the Ministry. This all happened when I was out of a job, and now I am looking into how to revoke it. I will go to Ulaanbaatar and meet with the new minister and with other River Water Basin Authority people to discuss it.

I have a feeling that the only reason people have gathered today is that they hoped they would be greeted with better news. Frustrated, a man asks, ‘Why do you have so many misunderstandings in your Ministry? Why, if your Ministry gave permission, are you against it? Is there a state or not? We suffer a real lack of information here and don’t know who to trust.’

People go on to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of allowing the mining licence to be issued. One woman explains, ‘To be frank, we were made to choose between ninjas or the mining company, and we chose the company. Everyone says we were given gifts, etc. to vote for them. The mining company passed a list around our sub-district asking us to support them. Most of us signed it. But we now realise that this makes us responsible for the consequences, and people have even spread through Facebook that we did this, but actually we didn’t have a choice. They came early in the morning, at dawn, and they brainwashed us, saying if ninjas come it will be terrible; you need to sign this now.’

During their discussion a sense of unresolved confusion haunts the room. Zedlen has not been able to give them further information. They are still in the dark about what will happen and who will be blamed for the outcome.
On environmental injustice

Witnessing this local community trying to gather information and navigate the snippets they glean is humbling. I feel their helplessness in the face of an incredibly complex situation. It seems a terrible injustice that some outsiders – perhaps foreign investors – would refer to this hesitancy to allow mining to take place in their region as a form of resource nationalism. The point of concern is not how to keep the resources – the gold – for themselves and it is not driven by greed or envy. These people’s concern is how to carry on living in a place in the way they are used to, without it being obliterated by extraction activities. I am reminded of Dina Gilio-Whitaker (2019) saying that in situations like this mining acts as ‘an environmental form of injustice’,14 robbing people of a way of inhabiting a place which recognises the interrelationship of people and the ecological environment in which they live. A herder in the area, who I interviewed some 15 years earlier, reflected, somewhat prophetically, ‘We don’t have fences here. Our cows and herd animals don’t have computers in their heads. They may wander and feed anywhere – what is to stop them drinking from the polluted waterways and streams created by the mine?’

As has been noted by other anthropologists of the region, what constitutes the ‘environment’ (baigal’ orchin, from baih – ‘to be’) is broader, ontologically, than a simple biological definition of ecology and includes the varied ways humans and non-humans inhabit a place and how these relationships come to constitute the human (see Humphrey and Sneath 1996; 1999, Humphrey and Onon 1996). Of course, forms of extraction take place all the time (see Chapter 5). People take resources from the environment and turn them into profit: antlers, berries, nuts, stones and even gold are taken and traded. But local people know how to take their share without damaging the environment where they live (both biologically and spiritually; according to Mongolian concepts of the environment those two things are entwined) and how to give thanks for the returns.

In contrast, stories of excess, of taking too much, of losing one’s mind and being driven by greed, stand out as exceptions (although who knows what the promise of gold does).15 It seems, then, that ownership, or perhaps proper custodianship, is what is at issue. When unregulated artisanal miners pillage gold they act quickly, escaping as soon as possible to avoid the local administration, which may try to hold them accountable, and from reprimands by the human and non-human agents of the local environment. When local people help themselves to a small share (be that of antlers, berries, nuts or even, in some cases, gold), they are, it is hoped, doing so in the same way that they help themselves to
other resources in the right ‘usufructuary proportion’ – as custodians to ‘masters’ (ezen) rather than as ‘thieves / swindlers’ (luivar). The prevalence of this relationship across multiple scales has been explored in my previous work (Empson 2014), and I believe this sense of proportionality (of a share to a whole) can also be seen to underpin many present-day Mongolian economic transactions and relations (cf. also Chuluunbat and Empson 2018).

Many are, of course, supportive of granting a licence to a large, recognised mining company. This, they argue, is ‘development’ (högjil); it is the only way that people may be held to account. Others feel gold is a kind of curse that they would rather get rid of so that they can be left in peace. But when a large, unknown mining company comes and places seven guards and ferocious dogs on top of a mountain to keep you and others out, without any information about when things will change, resentment builds and contradictions escalate. As long as the local administration and the provincial and national government remain opaque about their purposes, local people are left to feel that their current way of life is hanging on a knife-edge. An anonymous sign has been hung at the gate to the mine site which states, quite simply, ‘You can’t eat money.’

**Adjusting to the era of society (tsag üyee dagah)**

It is late when we return to the district centre. We grab something to eat at the local shop and light the fire in the Nature Protection building. The men retire next door. Zedlen reflects on the life events that have brought her to this work. Born in Ulaanbaatar, she graduated from school in 1978. After this she studied for her BA in Mongolian language and literature at the National University of Mongolia. Winning straight As, she got several stipends and went straight on to a master’s, graduating with a high mark. In 1993 she came to the village where her parents lived and where she’d spent all her summers. She married a local man and had three children. He was an economist by training but never worked in this profession. She worked for 16 years as a teacher at the local school, and after 12 years became the headteacher.

Her husband was an alcoholic and didn’t have a job, he became more and more violent. In 2000, with the financial help of her parents, she joined her children who were studying in the capital. Offering private classes at night and working at different schools during the day, she tried to keep her children safe and in education for three or four years. After a few years, she recalls with pride, they were able to save a little money and...
visited a restaurant together for the first time. A few years later her parents died, and in 2010 she moved back to the countryside with the idea that she would help her sister with her parents’ animals and work at the local school; but they wouldn’t reappoint her. That autumn a local man ran for the provincial elections as a representative of the Green Party, and Zedlen offered to help him with his campaign. It was this man who later came to tell her about the job to run the local river protection area and encouraged her to apply. She sat five different tests before she was appointed, to the great disappointment of a local woman who had held the position before her. Now 55 years old, she will be able to retire in 10 months’ time. However vaguely, the state does intervene in certain ways, regulating people’s life course and determining their futures.

Although conflict, jealousy, curses and feelings of mistrust surround her, Zedlen works hard to focus on her wider sense of duty and commitment to her homeland’s water. Thinking back over the different jobs she has held, I have an impression that her current position, although demanding, gives her a certain kind of freedom to move between different groups of people which she has not experienced before. As she sees it, this is a freedom born out of her passion and conviction: a sense of responsibility that hard work can make things better; something, she says, that was fostered during the socialist period and is sorely missing from younger generations.

This freedom to flourish at the margins, rather than being driven by the need to be resilient, is something that Tsing (2015) has referred to as an outcome of capitalism. On the margins of mainstream economic and political life there are openings for individuals to flourish in a way they might not in more formal positions. Moving from one countryside headquarters to another – to provincial centres, the capital and back again – Zedlen has been able to move between several registers, translating ideas and issues across scales. This is not necessarily productive in a quantifiable sense (i.e. in terms of money, or the outcomes produced), but it does allow her to sustain a kind of life that she craves. In such a way she is able to straddle the tension between holding down a job at the Ministry, which believes she is a troublemaker, and reporting back to local people, who don’t believe she is fully representing them either.

At the same time, it is perhaps not entirely an outcome of current capitalist logic that she is able to flourish in this space of tensions. Mongolian women, traditionally subjected to forms of virilocal residence, are masters at finding their place outside fixed networks, in the transience of movement (Humphrey 1993; Empson 2011). No wonder, they were the main breadwinners of the early 1990s, trading between Mongolia, Russia and China (see Chapter 2). This movement gives them
a mobility that amounts to a different kind of power than the networks based on place (cf. Chapter 3). As I saw several times in Zedlen’s dealings with – especially male – forms of authority, unable to work within them, she refused to bow down to them. This made her unpredictable and scary to some, and an outcast to others. Perhaps there is a greater place for this kind of subject in the gap than there ever was before.

Zedlen elaborated to me her own idea of this gap:

I attended school during socialism, but when the market economy came in the 1990s I had to adjust in a huge way. For people who were born in the 60s – we were brought up not to lie, without taking sides and so on, but this does not serve us well in today’s society. Now I have no car, no accommodation – nothing, except my salary. In fact, I am rewarded with very little money. In many ways I am conflicted between the way we were educated and the unjust society we have to live in today. … People like me end up becoming the victims of today’s society, not the victors … living in an honest way, all I have is these burdens or outcomes. I have no emotion because there is so much pressure on me … since there are many difficulties for people they are just eager to make money. They don’t place value on protecting the environment and volunteering to do so, but I work for my passion, for what I believe in, not for the money, not to get rich. Most young people I meet have misunderstood what freedom and democracy means.

Reflecting on her self-description, I am confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, Zedlen describes her singularity and difference as a product of her generation, living with one set of values in a society that has radically changed its priorities. On the other hand, it is precisely this new society that gives her the space to advocate and fight for the values she believes in. The world she inhabits is changing rapidly; laws and alliances all seem to be on the move, yet she holds on to certain things she believes in and wants to remain the same. Women of this generation, like a Tuyaa, appear to live in a world where the ground is shifting beneath them, with no solid place for them to dwell.

**Singular subjects**

I am reminded of Humphrey’s work on the making of individual subjects in times of rapid change or rupture. She states, ‘Certain kinds of anthropological experience seem to require the conceptualisation of singular
analytical subjects: individual actors who are constituted as subjects in particular circumstances’ (Humphrey 2008, 357). In many ways Zedlen seems to be just such a singular person. She is beyond the known categories and moulds available to her, and yet she has become who she is in very specific times and circumstances. She has a sharpened and pervading sense of who she is.

Humphrey explores the way such singular subjects emerge through the idea of the ‘decision-event’: something that propels the individual into becoming who they are ‘such that this idea dominates other possible ways of being and orients subsequent action’ (Humphrey 2008, 374). Zedlen’s rupture or shift amounts to several cumulative decision-events that mark the contours of her lifeline, as she described them in our conversations, but it also coincides with the event of the collapse of state socialism and the experience of being propelled forwards into a world that recomposed the future. This event was a creative switch, a gap, that marked and ‘separate[d] off times, the time of Before and the time After’ (Humphrey 2008, 374). Zedlen appears to consciously live out the contradictions and the meetings of these times in her own way of inhabiting the present. Singular, yet multiple and fractured, in her continual movement and reinvention she is the gap, bridging perspectives from the past with ways of being in the present.

This movement brings to mind Deleuze’s concept of the ‘fold’. As a process of subjectification, the idea of the fold allows him to think about the production of subjectivity beyond accounts that presume a simple internality and externality. For the fold, the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside (a fractal or self-scaling reciprocity of perspectives) which replicates across scales. It is a kind of mastery of oneself to oneself (see Chapter 2) and can be seen as a question of ownership. It can also be extended outwards – opening the subject to that which is beyond, which is then folded back into the subject to produce new modalities of being (O’Sullivan 2012). Life is here made in between the infinite and the finite, allowing

access to something, the void, the ‘ground’, from which these worlds, these subjects have emerged. An unfolding then as that which always accompanies the fold, producing new folds but also opening us out to that which is yet to be folded. (O’Sullivan 2010)

The fold appears like a decision-event or the gap. It is a space that productively draws in from outside to open us out to that which is yet to be. Although it is able to accommodate the past in the present and make
it its own (a kind of vernacular historicisation of the subject), there are differences between these concepts, which don’t all signify the same phenomena. The decision-event marks a moment as rupture and event. It is the starting point, or origin, from which a new kind of subject is born. Not unlike the idea of crisis explored in the Introduction, it puts a jolt into an otherwise linear idea of time and throws into relief what counts as the ordinary. Although the gap, as a concept marshalled by Oyunaa, seems in some ways to do the same, I am not sure that it contains the same idea of rupture. Durational to some degree, but also swinging back and forth in its temporal perspective, it allows the subject to look back at a series of events and revaluate them in relation to present conditions so that, in place of failure to live up to anticipated outcomes, the subject comes to recognise a new world. Perhaps this is what Zedlen has also come to recognise. Though acknowledging the dissonance between her own morality and that which seems to underpin those around her, she has also benefited from the way in which the gap opens up a space for her to advocate and fight for the values she believes in, to exercise the freedom she seeks.

Notes

1. This law is regarded as a keystone in the struggle to prevent more than 300 mining licences being granted in Mongolia’s most delicate ecosystems. It has been credited with helping to reduce pollution in water systems, especially from gold mining, and resolving conflicts where communities faced displacement by mining projects. As an international precedent for making key ecological regions no-go areas for extractive industries, this legislation also meaningfully boosted Mongolia’s environmental credentials. The law affected more than 1330 licences (mainly alluvial gold deposits) belonging to some 830 legal entities (see: www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=924fe95-7ef5-4e1a-81f2-dcc5f8387112).

2. Crucially, it reduced the protected zone of water reservoirs to 200 m from rivers and lakes, whereas before it had been set at 500–5000 m (pers. comm., Byambabaatar Ichinkhoroloo, 2016).

3. For further details see: www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=924fe95-7ef5-4e1a-81f2-dcc5f8387112.

4. She was, she claimed, the only one who could use a computer and travelled to and from the city frequently; therefore she acted on their behalf and even appeared on TV to campaign for them.

5. I thank Bumochir Dulam for his comment that in many ways ‘her post is symbolic’, i.e. the government maintains the post in order to defend themselves against critique, but central and local government do little to support it.

6. It was explained to me that inviting artisanal miners to a mine site is a pressure tactic many mining companies have used to secure formal agreements with local governments. When I met with the head of the local NGO, based in Ulaanbaatar, he explained to me how in 2009 one of the old mine directors had been sacked for doing something illegal and in revenge had sent 500 illegal artisanal miners to the site from a south-western province. The current mining company, he claimed, had used the same threat, saying, ‘If you don’t grant us the licence, unregulated artisanal miners will arrive.’

7. It appears that her position does carry some power, specifically to grant legal authority to the mine, but the situation was far from clear. Even if she did have this authority, it was uncertain whether permission would ever be granted.
8. Dulam has warned, ‘it is important to not mistake the nationalist environmental protestors for the Western advocacy civil society NGOs. Although there is no clear boundary or difference between the two, they are certainly not the same’ (Dulam 2018b, 105).

9. In a social media post, the younger female shaman can be seen following a large mining truck, instructing the drivers to repair the road damaged by their vehicle. See: www.facebook.com/100009183161419/videos/vb.100009183161419/1600207770295313/?type=2&video_source=user_video_tab.

10. Despite having no resources they are all getting stamps in their social security books so at least their pensions can be assured when they retire.

11. It is not clear if it is the tax authority’s or Zedlen’s responsibility to make sure water taxes due from mining companies are enforced.

12. All we have are their names: Shoroo urt (UNB) Kompani, Avian Tes, Baihan Altan Hangai and Gutain Chuluu Kompani.

13. When I first came to the district in 1999, local rumours had it that the previous governor had signed a private deal with Ochirbat, then president of Mongolia, who owned the mining company at Gutain Davaa and would fly in regularly by private helicopter to oversee it. Over the last 20 years I have many times visited this site and some of the disused mine buildings nearby. When I first visited the mine site 20 years ago the outward physical marking on the landscape was practically the same as it is now.


15. My mind flits back to the story of the family who made the journey up the mountain in a Jeep and were struck by misfortune on the way down. In 2005 I recorded a similar account of misfortune at the mine site from one of the nurses at the local hospital who was caring for a small group of people who had been tasked with assessing the extent of gold in the region. They had experienced hauntings and accidents. One woman admitted herself to the hospital to escape the terrifying visions that followed her.

16. Zedlen reflects that she doesn’t sit and drink with men and do politics in the way that they do.