Preface

Mongolia is known to the world for its post-Soviet democratic and neoliberal transformation, successfully achieved in complete peace, without any fighting or violence. However, more than 20 years after the collapse of the socialist regime, environmental and nationalist protestors interrupted the peace in an attempt to gain attention for the protection of the environment from mining and to preserve the mobile pastoral way of life. On 16 September 2013, there was a gunshot\(^1\) during a protest carried out by several environmentalist and nationalist movements in Chinggis Square\(^2\) in front of the state house (Töriin ordon), where the president, parliament and government of Mongolia operate. Mongolia’s most famous and most successful environmental activist, Goldman Environmental Prize winner (2007) and National Geographic Emerging Explorer (2008) Munkhbayar Tsetsegee, appeared in front of the state house entrance with his colleagues, armed with rifles and grenades. State special security (Töriin tulgai khamaaltyn gazar), intelligence (Tagnuulyn yerönkhii gazar) and police terminated the actions of the protestors and arrested them. No one was hurt. Munkhbayar was arrested, along with 11 men of the river movement. The court sentenced five members of the movement to one to ten years in prison for possessing arms, attempted terrorism and extortion (see Chapter 5). The incident shocked many Mongolians because it was probably the first ever public incident, in modern times, of Mongolians bringing arms against the törl (state),\(^3\) which is considered as superior, sacred, respected and unchallengeable by many Mongolians (see also Bumochir 2004; Dulam 2009). The destructive consequences of the mining industry generated seemingly endless protests by environmentalist and nationalist movements, and some activists professed that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives...
to protect the environment. Amongst many other motivations, the above incident inspired me the most to write this book and to understand what made these activists decide to make such a move.

Since 1990, as a Mongolian I grew up learning to envision the future of Mongolia as a modern nation like Japan, where preservation of *ulamjil* (tradition) and advancement of *shinechlel* (modernisation) can happen together. Yet for many Mongolians a combination of the two sometimes appears to be a dilemma. In other words, my experience with the topic of the book is itself a dilemma. For example, taking the difficulties of the economy and the environment into consideration, many Mongolians think that our nation-state and its people are facing a dilemma (see also Zulbayar 2015; Jargalsaikhan 2018). The dilemma is between modern and traditional, local and global, nomadic and urban, pastoralism and mining, socialism and capitalism, nationalism and neoliberalism, and the environment and economy. Mongolians who experience the extreme consequences of the economic boom and bust, and witness endless political debates between neoliberal and nationalist agents, seem to be torn between the contesting ideologies that rule the country (see also Munkherdene 2018). For example, at the end of 2014, when Mongolian Prime Minister Saikhanbileg Chimed (2014–16) established his cabinet, he immediately announced that the country was encountering a severe economic crisis. He was enthusiastic to urgently start large mining projects and appeal to investors as soon as possible to aid the declining economy (Dulam 2015; Bumochir 2017, 30; Odonchimeg 2015). One of the projects was the Gatsuurt gold mine, on a historical sacred mountain named Noyon, co-owned by Canadian Centerra Gold Inc. and the Mongolian state. In January 2016, in the parliamentary session to approve the government’s decision to contract Canadian Centerra Gold to extract at the sacred mountain — with dozens of invaluable archaeological sites from the Xiongnu empire (3rd BC–1st AD) — Saikhanbileg responded to the dissent of parliament member, former journalist and activist Uyanga Gantumur with agony and frustration:

Now we have just taken Noyon Mountain under protection [historical site]. In ten kilometres’ distance, there is the Gatsuurt deposit, which was left halfway extracted and we are about to continue and finish [the extraction]. As a result, about 1,000 jobs will be available, US$240 million – which is MNT 480 billion – will be our tax. Plus, we will have 50 tonnes of gold reserve. These 50 tonnes of gold reserve will help the dollar rate you are paying for
from your pocket. Therefore, we are doing this in order to bring our economy into circulation. You demand the government to improve the economy, and when the government tries to do something, then you demand the government resign. In your action of a pair of scissors, what kind of government, what kind of state and what kind of Mongolia can move forward and develop?  

In parliament, Uyanga actively represented the voices of nationalist and environmentalist movements and fought against extractive industry destruction and mining corporations. In that sense, this was a reaction not only to Uyanga and other members in parliament who resisted but also to vast numbers of environmental and nationalist movement members, local residents and the public, who campaigned and protested for more than a year by organising hunger strikes, performing shamanic rituals on the central square, worshipping the mountain, and developing scholarly documentation of archaeological findings. The parliamentary session issued a decision approving the government proposal to register 11,000 hectares of the Noyon Mountain in the network of special state protection (töriin turgai khamgaalalt), under the category of ‘natural resource’, and 405 hectares in another network of state special protection, under the category of ‘historical site’ (also singularity). Parliament also approved the government’s deal with Canadian Centerra Gold, and agreed Mongolian state ownership to be 34 per cent. These two categories of the state protection of the same mountain divide the mountain into two parts. The smaller part, designated a ‘historical site’, is to protect the sacred mountain, as some protestors and politicians in parliament demanded. The larger part is a ‘natural resource’ to mine the gold deposit – with the investment of Canadian Centerra Gold company – in order to ease Mongolia’s economic crisis.

As we saw above, the prime minister described contradictory necessities and demands of actors as two blades of a pair of scissors. This is an interesting way to present the situation of the government in a dilemma of two conflicting goals: to secure the economic development of the country and also to protect its history and environment. With the metaphor of the scissors, if the government promotes one of the necessities or demands and drops the other, then the other necessity (depicted as the other scissor blade) cuts or causes damage. Therefore, to keep both sides happy, the government decided to accept and promote both of the contradicting demands at the same time. The prime minister’s presentation of the situation is indicative of his desperation to solve the dilemma. However, there are those who do not accept the
decision, and they argue that the scissor blade represents the economy/development and that corporations will still cause damage by scissoring historical and natural sites. As a reaction, the other scissor blade represents the nationalist movements and environmental attempts to scissor the government, corporations and the project to aid the national economy. Therefore, the prime minister had to actively demand Uyanga and the other politicians and movements – representing the opposition, the other blade of the scissors – to cease their resistance. In the prime minister’s description, the movements are depicted as being in control of one of the two blades of a pair of scissors. The movement can still inflict damage, even if the government manages to secure the action of the other scissor blade. The government does not have the power or authority to fully control the situation, as it can secure only one of the scissor blades, not two.

For those who did not accept the above decision of the government, the first dilemma of economy/development versus history/environment is false. They argue that there are other ways to solve the crisis of the economy – that is, rather than by extracting the sacred mountain. The prime minister justifies his decision by explaining that this was the best solution to save the national economy and the environment at the same time. However, it is difficult to know whether the decision was solely for the sake of the national economy or for the environment. How much consideration was given to his individual reputation and the interest of his political party? The prime minister wanted to keep and increase the number of supporters’ votes in the coming parliamentary election, which was less than six months away. People also suspect that behind the discourse of scissors and dilemmas, there exists corruption, individual deals with investors and donations to political parties. In other words, the presentation of the political and economic situation in the framework of a dilemma is a useful tool to obscure reality and justify political decisions.7

However, many also question whether the economic and environmental dilemmas are inevitable. For example, Ian Goldin and Alan Winters (1995, 14) conclude that ‘economic growth and development are perfectly consistent with environmental protection’. While others, namely Herman E. Daly (1996, 1), suggest that terms such as the economy and the environment together create an ‘oxymoron’. Moreover, Raúl R. Cordero, Pedro Roth and Luís Da Silva (Cordero et al. 2005, 1) conclude that environmental care and economic growth are not incompatible but to reconcile them is not easy.8 Paul Ekins (2002), in his account of ‘green growth’, writes about how to find the compatibility
between economic growth and environmental sustainability. While it is not easy, it is possible, and thus they consider it to be a false dilemma.

I do not aim to contribute to this debate and prove or disprove contradiction or consistency in the relationship of the economy and the environment. Instead, it is interesting to see how the resource economy and environment are believed to be a dilemma in certain cultures, or how the so-called dilemma develops into a conflict, or how a false dilemma is presented to be a real dilemma for political purposes. These questions about dilemmas are useful to understand and show the complexity of the multipartite relationship of agents in the state, mining companies, donors and movements. In other words, despite what international financial and development organisations suggest – and what scholars debate – true or false, some Mongolian rulers present certain challenges as a dilemma or struggle, and fail to find the difficult or perhaps non-achievable marriage of economic growth and environmental protection.

In his discussion about the ‘resource trap’, Paul Collier notes that ‘each rich, resource-hungry country is locked into a prisoner’s dilemma of inaction’ (Collier 2007, 47). Similarly, Stuart Kirsch also notes that deep in the heart of the resource problem there are ‘underlying dilemmas associated with the capitalist modes of production [that] can never be completely resolved; they can only be renegotiated in new forms’ (Kirsch 2014, 3). In other words, it is a mechanism of neoliberal capitalism, foreign investment and forms of financialisation that forces the state into dilemmas. For Collier, the dilemma imprisons and prevents action, while for Kirsch, the dilemma cannot be resolved entirely, but it can be renegotiated. Renegotiation is precisely what the Mongolian government had been attempting.

It is useful to take this brief account of Collier and Kirsch into consideration and explore experiences of dilemmas as they emerged in Mongolia. For example, Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey (2004, 17) discuss the postsocialist dilemma or ‘political impasse’ and show how the government of Mongolia tangled with the issue of whether (and how) to acknowledge the Mongols’ cultural practices of past eras and international advice to create private property. In reference to natural resources and mining, Mette High (2012, 249) describes how ‘some historical epochs have sought to limit the extraction of minerals in the Mongolian cultural region, others have celebrated mining for its potential promotion of economic growth and large-scale industrialisation’ (see also High and Schlesinger 2010). In their critique against the accusation of ‘resource nationalism’, Rebecca Empson and Tristan Webb (2014, 232) argue that the Mongolian state attempts to establish
‘trusting partnerships’. ‘The idea of “trusting partnerships” can refer to the relationship between the Mongolian State and foreign investors, as well as in specific ways to that relationship between the State and the Mongolian people’. In this relationship, the state struggles to ‘balance expectations from all of the partnerships’ (Empson and Webb 2014, 247).

In this book I present the different dilemmas of the national government, parliament and rulers of Mongolia caught between liberal, neoliberal, market and capitalist, and the so-called populist, nationalist and patriotic tendencies and approaches: the establishment of the liberal economy and mining industry in Chapter 1; state control in Chapter 2; and the approval of the environmental protection law in Chapter 5, which were all political ‘renegotiations’ made under the pressure of different dilemmas between environmental well-being and economic prosperity, and popular mobilisations and mining corporations and investors. Anticipating the political, economic, social, cultural, religious and environmental dilemmas of the nation-state government, rulers, local residents and nationalist movements in the neoliberal, democratic and global world is an alternative way to understand and interpret difficulties of countries such as Mongolia. Pascale Hatcher (2014, 128) argues that ‘the cases of the Philippines and Mongolia, and to a lesser extent Laos, rather show that the recent changes in policy are symptoms of the increasing dilemma forced upon the state by the very third generation of mining regimes promoted by the multilateral institutions’. In the sense of being a force produced by multilateral institutions or agents, false or not, dilemmas tell us about struggles, challenges of individual rulers, protestors, local residents, company owners and investors and all other inner workings in the resource-abundant country.

As a Mongolian who shares experiences of such dilemmas, in order to draw a comprehensive picture of Mongolian resource economy, environment, mobilisation, nationalism and state, I conducted research on multilateral institutions and agents. To do this, I met and interviewed political leaders such as Ochirbat Punsalmaa, the first president of Mongolia (1990–7), and Byambasuren Dash, the last prime minister of the Mongolian People’s Republic (1990–2), and their colleagues and other politicians and technocrats, who had prominent roles in the establishment of the liberal mining economy. In addition to such politicians and officials, I also visited Mongolian and foreign gold mining companies and interviewed their owners, operators and managers, who support the liberal economy and free market principles. They directly benefited from the liberal policy on mining economy; they were also disturbed by the results of laws, regulations and political decisions to
control natural resources as well as successful protests of nationalist environmental movements. In order to provide an account of the other side of the conflict, I met the so-called ‘resource nationalist’ politicians, economists, lawyers, technocrats and scholars, who succeeded in implementing different forms of state control over natural resources and placed restraints on mining companies. The popular mobilisations make up another influential group of people who contributed to nationalism. Local people – including herders and those who inhabit the administrative unit centre settlements – are those who were most negatively affected by the destruction of the mining operations and started fighting against gold mining companies and the state. They are also the ones who contributed most to shape nationalism, environmentalism and the state in Mongolia: they closed down dozens of mining operations and stalled some hundreds of mining licences, and defeated the government in the supreme court when it did not implement a law to protect the environment.

As an anthropologist, I sought to understand and describe the above-mentioned opposing groups and their approaches. I informed and explained to everyone I met that I would also meet and interview people who were in direct opposition and that this was important to draw a full picture of the scenario. All of the people I met understood my situation and accepted my position as an anthropologist and a Mongolian who was trying to develop a multi-faceted approach. I ended up in relationships with these people – I worked with many people with competing ideologies for years – and I know that I cannot judge them or prioritise any of them over any other. It is impossible (or futile) to prove or disprove all of the information that emerged in the interviews – for example, I cannot prove or disprove popular suspicions about nationalist movements and the extortion of mining companies; I cannot confirm or deny the corruption of politicians; and there is no final word to be found regarding private mining company owners who possess many mining licences, which make up a significant portion of Mongolian mineral wealth. In my work, I present my materials as they present themselves, and how these actors make sense of their approaches, and how they justify their actions. This book does not prove or disprove whether the liberal or nationalistic political decisions and actions were right or wrong. Instead, it lets opposing voices be heard, and allows them to propose their justifications.

My position as an anthropologist is not a dilemma for me, because I can write about all of these people, about both neoliberalism and nationalism and how they conflict and resist each other. However, my
personal position between the two ideologies and those who promote them is a dilemma for me; that is, as a Mongolian. Here, my dilemma should not be confused with my anthropological concerns with ethics, methodology and the scholarly discourses with which my work engages. However, as a Mongolian intellectual, I do worry about the country’s vulnerable condition, just as many other Mongolians do. Many Mongolians ask me whether the neoliberal or nationalistic approaches are correct for Mongolia to advance. This might be what many readers seek an answer to when they read this book. After observing both sides, I concluded that contemporary Mongolia reveals the interaction of indigenisation and neoliberalisation, and how different dilemmas force the two processes to shape one another. For example, a dilemma between the economy and the environment – real or not – forces the indigenous aspects of the nation to shape neoliberal policies and the capitalist free market. In other words, the indigenous shaping of neoliberalism is a product of different dilemmas. In the same way, I find that in consequence of a dilemma between neoliberalism and nationalism, or the economy and environment in Mongolia, matters of the indigenous nation-state shape neoliberal policies and markets. This should be expected. As Amarjargal Rinchinnym, the former prime minister of Mongolia (1999–2000), once said, ‘We are just 22 years old in terms of having a market economy – you cannot compare us to Hong Kong or Singapore’ (Sanchata 2012). Empson and Webb write that ‘This argument promotes the idea, not so much of “resource nationalism”, but more of an image of an “innocent newcomer” that is learning the practice of contemporary international political economy: the importance of private contractual agreements and the detached yet supportive role of the State in underpinning that environment; the raising of private finance and financial governance requirements; and macroeconomic planning generally’ (Empson and Webb 2014, 241). The learning experience of this ‘innocent newcomer’ from the contemporary international political economy and nationalistic responses to different consequences of the global economy has been a process of the indigenous shaping neoliberalism, not just how neoliberalism shapes the local (see also Tsing 2005) as many previous works depict.

Notes

At the subsequent trial, the court found that a state special security officer was responsible for the gunshot, not the protestors (see Chapter 5).
2 The square was originally named after the communist revolutionary leader Sükhbaatar Damdin, and the name changed to Chinggis from 2013 to 2016. The above incident occurred on the square when it was called Chinggis Square.

3 The peace was also interrupted on 1 July 2008, by protestors who resisted the results of the election. In the riot, police used tear gas and non-lethal weapons and killed five people. Unlike this riot, on 16 September 2013, it was the activists who brought arms in order to show their resistance against decisions of the central government and Parliament.

4 Uyanga is a woman in her forties who is a journalist and activist. She had been organising and leading dozens of nationalist movements and demonstrations against the state rulers, and was elected to the Parliament in 2012.

5 For the full video, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQiaMYSGdO0.

6 For other dilemmas in Mongolia, see also Badral Zulbayar (2015) and Mendee Jargalsaikhan (2018).

7 Many others also write about how other countries (Cordero et al. 2005, 1; Song and Woo 2008) experience similar economic and environment dilemmas in their own ways. International organisations, analysts and the media frequently address the economic slowdown triggered by environmental policy. Also, major surveys also suggest the same. For example, Forbes Insights survey shows that the United States regulatory environment has more impact on business than the economy (Moreno 2014).

8 Raúl R. Cordero, Pedro Roth and Luis Da Silva use a simple graphical model to show co-related growth of GDP and carbon dioxide emission. They argue that in order to meet both economic growth and environmental protection it is necessary to diminish the rate between pollutant emission and economic growth unit and the rate between resource consumption and economic growth unit (Cordero et al. 2005, 1).

9 By State they ‘mean the Constitution and all the rules and actions of public services that flow from it’ (Empson and Webb 2014, 232).