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Published in:
Ethnos

DOI:
10.1080/00141844.2018.1511610

Publication date:
2019

Citation for published version (APA):
Mustering Fortune: Attraction and Multiplication in the Echoes of the Boom

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ABSTRACT
Since the end of the socialist period, Mongolia has experienced economic instabilities, growing inequalities, and increasing urbanisation. Prosperity (dallaga) rituals, once predominantly carried out by nomadic herders at specific times of the year, are now also held regularly within Ulaanbaatar’s Buddhist temples. In these ceremonies, Buddhist lamas and lay participants attempt to ‘call’ or ‘pull’ wealth to the household. In this urban context, prosperity rituals are overtly about money, combining nomadic notions of wealth, sedentary ideas of growth and multiplication, and contemporary anxieties regarding growing corruption and inequality. Following from nomadic ideas that link prosperity with movement, dallaga rituals attempt to influence the ways that money travels around the economy. As money has seed like qualities, one must be careful to ensure that the right kind of money is attracted to the household so that it does not multiply the misfortunes that are thought to characterise money made through ill-gotten means.

KEYWORDS Buddhism; money; urban; dallaga; Mongolia

Over the last two and a half decades, money in Mongolia has proven itself to be capricious. After the end of the socialist period in 1990 poverty rates rose sharply and by 1994, 24% of the population were living in poverty (Sneath 2002: 193). My interlocutors, who were old enough, remember the turmoil of the economy in the 1990s when food was rationed in urban areas. Although Mongolia’s entry into the global capitalist market was characterised by initial hardships, the country’s postsocialist economic story has also been one of sudden windfalls. In 2011, the Mongolian economy boasted an expansion of 17.5% fuelled by sales of mineral resources (Chuluundorj & Danzanbaljir 2014: 276). This fortune, however, was short-lived. China’s demand for minerals waned and the economy slowed. By late 2014 the Mongolian government declared that it was in an economic crisis (Bonilla 2016). In 2014 it was estimated that one in five Mongols were living below the poverty line (UNDP 2016).
Countless Mongols have experienced rapid upward and downward mobility since the end of the socialist period. Some families lost their livelihoods following the shift to capitalism and others have become incredibly affluent in ways that could not have been imagined in the early 1990s. Poverty is worst in rural areas. In the period between 2007 and 2008, the UNDP estimated that 46.6% of the rural population was living in poverty, in contrast to the overall rate of 35.2% (UNDP 2009). For three consecutive years from 1999 to 2002 and again in 2010 the countryside was hit by a series of environmental disasters in the form of harsh winters (zuds) that killed off vast numbers of livestock (Janes & Chuluundorj 2015). During these periods there was an increase in urban migration as herders, having lost their livelihoods or attracted to the possibilities of life in the city, moved to Ulaanbaatar’s ger neighbourhoods on the periphery of the city. Here most hoped to find work or education, supported by urban kinship networks. Since 1989 Ulaanbaatar’s population has more than doubled from below 600,000 people to over 1.3 million.

In the context of growing urbanisation and the present faltering Mongolian economy, most urban Mongols discuss money, as Guyer has written of modern economies, as though they believe ‘stability to be its nature and wide fluctuation to be a treatable pathology’ (1995: 7). Although the Mongolian currency (tögrög) has oscillated considerably since the end of socialism, many educated middle-class urban Mongols told me that Mongolia’s economic problems would be resolved in the near future. A number of friends, especially in 2015 and 2016, after the mining boom was faltering and the economy was once again in decline, explained that equilibriums would inevitably follow after the present instabilities had settled. Yet, in spite of this optimism regarding market stability, a variety of Buddhist and non-Buddhist rituals to increase the wealth of households have proliferated since the end of the socialist period.

In addition to a range of urban rituals, prosperity (dallaga) ceremonies that were carried out during the socialist period are now carried out regularly by lamas at Buddhist temples in Ulaanbaatar. Dallaga rituals are common throughout the Mongolian cultural region. In the rural context, rather than being carried out on a daily basis at specific temples, they have tended to mark yearly cycles or specific rites of passage when they are conducted in the countryside (Chabros 1992; Empson 2011). The extensive dallaga rituals that Chabros recorded in the socialist period were predominantly performed by nomadic herders in order to ‘beckon’ prosperity, and were often carried out without the help of ritual specialists (1992). One of the core components of dallaga rituals is to circulate an object, such as an arrow or ceremonial scarf (hadag), held in upwards facing palms three times in a clockwise direction whilst iterating ‘hurai, hurai, hurai’, meaning ‘let us gather’. The movement in the dallaga ceremony reflects the life-generating movement of seasons, the nomads themselves, and herding animals. According to Chabros, prosperity amongst Mongolian nomads is associated with harnessing and generation in the form of healthy animals, movement to new pastures, reproduction, and living wealth (Chabros 1992: 192).

As the end of the socialist period has ushered in a period of fluctuating fortunes and increasing urbanisation, the ways that Mongols living in the capital think about and attempt to harness prosperity have changed. Carried out in the postsocialist context,
urban *dallaga* ceremonies have become more overtly about money. *Dallaga* rituals in revitalised urban Buddhist temples both instantiate existing ideas about the nature of money and encourage certain ways of thinking about money’s movement, its attraction, its capacities, and its potential animation. Though money itself is not included in the ritual, these urban ceremonies utilise objects such as grains that exhibit cornucopia-like properties and reflect a multiplication oriented disposition towards the way that prosperity can be assured (Chabros 1992: 192). They also incorporate the nomadic focus on movement, contained within the metaphors of calling, gathering and ritual circulation. Just as nomadic prosperity relies upon the movement of families and living animals, urbanites must harness the movement of money to be prosperous in an urban environment. As money itself demonstrates different qualities according to how it is attracted to a household, these ceremonies must be careful to call the right kinds of wealth into the home. The processes of purification within the ritual ensure that the right kinds of money are called, and that unintended energies are not attendant with its attraction.

**Calling Wealth**

In 2016, on a cold spring morning I arrived at the south-eastern temple complex of Gandantegchenliin Hiid in Ulaanbaatar. Before entering through the impressive red and green southern temple gate into the temple compound, I walked northwards on a tree-lined street that is bordered by smaller temples and religious shops selling ritual items needed for Buddhist, shamanic and other ceremonies. Gandantegchenliin Hiid, or Gandan as it is colloquially known, is Mongolia’s largest temple complex and is associated with around 800 lamas. Located to the west of the city centre, inside the complex’s temple walls are approximately eight separate temples and a Buddhist university. In the early twentieth century, the tallest temple in the complex housed a monumental standing statue of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of compassion, and was a dominant feature of the urban landscape. For many Mongols, the giant statue of Chenrezig, that was destroyed during the socialist period in the 1930s and rebuilt in the mid-1990s, is a sacred symbol epitomizing the revitalisation of Buddhism following the Democratic Revolution (Vanchikova 2014). In recent years the rapidly growing urban skyline of high and medium rise buildings has come to jostle the temple on all sides, eroding the visual predominance of the building that houses one of the most important religious symbols in Mongolia.

The day before, I had visited Gandan to interview a lama about temple finances and on my way out I had stopped by with a friend to visit Gerelmaa, a former school teacher who owns a shop selling religious paraphernalia to the south-east of the southern temple gate. Gerelmaa’s shop smelled strongly of unburnt incense and was full of colourful religious items that she sells for Buddhist, shamanic and other ceremonies. Noting my interest in the ritual items that people bought for economic prosperity, she suggested that I visit the following day’s prosperity ceremony (*dallaga avah*). Upon her instruction I went to the temple ‘prayer shop’, as most of my interlocutors call it, to order the Sūtras of Golden Light (*Altangerel nom*) for the following morning’s
liturgy (hural). After selecting the sūtra from the prayer list, I paid the set price of 1000 tögrögs (worth around 50 US cents) and received a receipt printed out from a register by a lama working behind the counter. The receipt listed the prayer’s name, the date, the price and my name. The lama behind the counter who collected the money instructed me to return at 9 am the following morning. I left the complex and returned to Gerelmaa’s store to purchase the items necessary for the following day’s ceremony.

Gerelmaa then explained to me, as she did with many other customers who visited the shop, the items that I should buy and what their purpose was. During the ceremony, she told me, I would need to present a special bag containing certain objects. This bag should then be kept on the shrine in my home, partially opened at the top to invite prosperity in the form of material wealth and health to my family. The bag itself had the eight auspicious symbols printed upon it and was striped with the five colours of prayer scarves (hadag) that are commonly found at religious sites. The sky blue (tsenher) ritual scarf is the most commonly used for rituals in Mongolia. It represents the blue sky (tenger), the clarity of which is referenced in Mongolian Buddhist religious teachings to illustrate the ideal qualities of the mind, and the expansiveness of which is respected and worshipped in the Mongolian cultural region.

Under Gerelmaa’s close instruction I first placed some dark seeds of grain inside the bag. The grain, she said, is the most common thing she sells at her shop throughout the year. It is used in Buddhist and shamanic ceremonies, as well as in the offerings that people make to the spirits embodied in the mountains and rivers (lus) at their birthplaces (nutagt) and other sacred sites. According to Gerelmaa, the grain represents the purification of darkness and the multiplication of good fortune, as the quality of seeds is to grow. After the grain, we placed a small plastic bag containing five colours of rice representing food, another bag with six seeds that are used in traditional medicine, and one that contained nine precious jewels (ècön erdene) to represent wealth. Like, she said, attracts (tatah, meaning to pull) like. These items are believed to attract sustenance, health and wealth into one’s home. Gerelmaa told me that most people attend the dallaga ceremony at least once a year after the Lunar New Year celebration (Tsagaan Sar) or if they are having financial problems during the year.

The following morning I arrived just as the lamas began to enter the temple. Those of us attending the dallaga ceremony went in through the southern door of the temple, bustling through the primary hall in which morning prayers were beginning to be recited, and through wooden doors and a small hallway entered a second prayer hall to the west. Entering a Mongolian temple is often a little like entering a grotto. The temples tend to be characterised by low ceilings, the smell of incense and the striking images of tantric deities. Some of these deities are peaceful, sitting serenely with their many arms stretched out offering aid. Others are ferocious, drinking blood from skull cups, wielding strange cutting tools, adorned by necklaces of severed heads and dancing upon human corpses. Unusually, the main door of this second temple that opened onto a courtyard to the south was shut, enabling the free circulation of energy within the temple without the chance of it escaping through an open door. On the north-west side of the temple, four lamas sat cross-legged in their traditional
burgundy and yellow deels on raised seating. In front of them on orange tables were the sūtras, accompanied each by a ritual bell and vajra (ochir).

Entering the second temple, I handed my receipt to one of the lamas along with my ceremonial bag. The lama opened it up a little and placed it in front of him. He gestured to me to place offerings of ‘white foods’ (tsagaan idee) on a red table sitting in front of the northern shrine. As each layperson came in they placed their sweets, biscuits, vodka and dried curd (aarual) on the table and then sat on the wooden benches facing north towards the cabinets filled with statues of some number of Vajrayana Buddhism’s extensive pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Dharmapālas.

For almost two hours the lamas read prayers in Tibetan, a language very few Mongols can understand, breaking for a brief exposition in Mongolian about half way through the service.

During the ceremony some people came and went, but most of the thirty or so people who had arrived with me stayed in the temple for the duration of the service. A little over halfway through the ceremony the lay audience was offered an incense burner to circle around their bodies. The smoke from this incense is believed to act as a vehicle for purification. As the incense was passed from person to person, most people watched one another for instruction on what to do, sometimes imitating closely, other times following more personal promptings. Each person roughly followed the others by placing the burner respectfully to their heads and then circling it around their bodies in a clockwise direction three times. One middle-aged woman in front of me placed the burner inside her handbag to purify the objects inside. The large family to my right enthusiastically placed their phone charger and phone on top of the incense burner, likely attempting to purify the hindrances to their proper functioning.

Towards the end of the ceremony, we were each given a handful of dark grain in our right hands supported by our left hands. Then we were instructed by the lamas to circle our hands in a clockwise direction, and as we did so we exclaimed ‘hurai, hurai, hurai’. The grain that we had placed in our hands was then added to the other objects inside our ritual bags. Having been part of the ceremony, the grain’s qualities of purification and generation were multiplied, empowering the capacity of the ritual objects inside our bags to attract like to like. We each left with our newly empowered grains, eating part of our offerings from the table to the north of the temple as we went.

Money and Mongolian Buddhism

In the capital’s fluctuating urban economy, Mongolian Buddhist institutions are often called upon to carry out rituals or offer advice to the laity to help with fiscal problems. During my fieldwork in Buddhist temples and Dharma Centers in Ulaanbaatar between 2009 and 2016, many of my urban interlocutors told me that they seek out a number of religious specialists when they are confronted with financial problems. Whilst there are anxieties in Mongolia concerning the distorting effects of money and fiscal motivations on the work of religious specialists, no one I spoke to negatively commented about the dallaga ceremony’s presence in Buddhist temples.
The Vinaya, the Buddhist monastic moral code, expressly directs monastics not to handle money (specifically coins) themselves. However Buddhist scriptures have not historically discouraged the acquisition of wealth itself. Rather, it is excessively concerning oneself with wealth that is considered to be problematic within Buddhist doctrine (Findly 2003). Across many Buddhist societies making monetary donations to the monastic population is one of the key ways that lay Buddhists make merit. The selfless donation of money and gifts (giving dāna) to Buddhist monastics is believed to generate positive karma for this and future lifetimes (Spiro 1982). Eventually over time and with the ripening of good karma, one can hope to be reborn as someone who can devote their life to pursuing Buddhist soteriological goals.

In some Buddhist societies, the ability to donate large sums of money not only indicates the maturing of previous good karma, but also enables the generation of merit for future lifetimes. In some contexts, the more that one donates, the more merit one can generate in this lifetime for the next (Bowie 1998; Spiro 1982; Tosa 2012). However, donations do not always ensure that the donor receives merit. As one must also have selfless intentions to create merit (see Laidlaw 2000), the intention behind the donation can be emphasised more than the size of the donation (Samuels 2007). As Lama Zorigt, a Mongolian lama employed by an internationally funded Dharma Center to the west of the city told me in 2009, a poor person who donates a small amount from what little they have out of pure generosity to the Buddhist monastic community (Pali saṅgha, Mong. huvrag) will generate more merit than a wealthy person who gives away a small fraction of their riches. Due to the Vinaya’s prohibitions against touching coins, some monastic communities avoid touching money and credit cards altogether (Cook 2010). Others, see this as a guideline for ancient times, and allow for modern interpretations using credit cards to navigate contemporary economies or accepting paper money to avoid contravening the rules.15

Money is often included in Buddhist ceremonies as an object of value, either in large or small denominations. Throughout Southeast Asia money trees (wooden or cardboard representations of trees with money attached to them) are demonstratively given to the monastic community to show the lay support of the Buddhist saṅgha. Incorporated into celebrations and rituals in Myanmar the money tree symbolises wealth, peace and prosperity (Rozenberg 2004). Money trees also imply growth and the fruition of action. Growth and fruition, whether negatively or positively conceived, are common metaphors for karma throughout the Buddhist world. Just as a person collects the fruit from a tree that one has planted, one collects the results of one’s deeds. These farming metaphors of growth and fruition are incorporated in the urban Buddhist dallaga ceremonies.

Mongolian Buddhist institutions actively utilise money as a sign of value in religious rituals. Whilst donations to lamas are not central to Mongolian Buddhist practice as they are in many parts of the Buddhist world (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015; Bowie 1998; Cook 2009; Gombrich 1971; Gravers 2012; Gutschow 2004; Samuels 2007; and see Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986 for similar practices amongst Hindus and Jains in South Asia), small amounts of money are displayed as offerings to the pantheon of deities inside temples and are handed out as extra payments for lamas that are sitting
reading prayers (*nom unshih*). This practice is present in other Vajrayana Buddhist temples in India and China where one often sees money left by laypeople as offerings to representations of Buddhist deities or high lamas.

Most Mongols that I spoke to were unaware of the Vinaya’s proscription against the *saṅgha* handling money. At Gandan Hiid robed lamas collect payments for prayers in one of the most popular sections of the temple complex. In the temples that employ lay people to carry out this task, such as at Dashchoiliin Hiid, the intention seems to be to distance the lamas from broader concerns about corrupting fiscal imperatives, rather than being due to prohibitions about the lamas touching money *per se*. At these temples, it is not unusual to see lamas receive and touch money during the morning prayer readings and in larger public ritual ceremonies. Rather than seeing donations as a means to make merit, most of my interlocutors said that supporting Buddhist temples financially was important as money is a form of remuneration for the services of Mongolian lamas and signals the valuing of Mongolian Buddhism more generally (Abrahms–Kavunenko 2015).

Following the end of the socialist period in 1990, and the removal of the restrictions on public religious practice, Buddhist institutions have appeared or been revitalised in Ulaanbaatar. Although the city in the presocialist period was dominated by two main monastic residences with traders and other networks forming around their fringes, the present day revitalisation has occurred in an urban environment wherein Buddhist temples are increasingly obscured by the city’s high-rising skyline. During the socialist period, many of the residences of the two major temples were destroyed and other buildings were constructed in place of the once extensive temple complexes. When the Mongolian socialist government came into power in 1921, it initially sought to reform Buddhist institutions and their feudal-like relationship with the population. By the late 1930s, after attempting to erode monastic power through a series of taxes and (mostly) non-violent means such as education programmes, the Mongolian government violently purged Buddhist temples and monastics around the country (Kaplonski 2014). There were around 767 monastic institutions in Mongolia in 1936, by 1940 only one remained, around a fifth of the monastic population had been murdered (Kaplonski 2014; Lattimore 1962).

Many of my interlocutors, both lay and monastic, told me that Mongolian lamas no longer live within monastic residences due to a lack of resources and space in the current era. However, not all of my interlocutors referenced this as the main reason that lamas lived outside of temples. Married lamas are common throughout the Mongolian cultural region and the practice was common before the socialist era (Kaplonski 2014). Some lamas and lay people see the practice of marriage as a continuation of Mongolian tradition (Jadamba & Schittich 2010). One lama, Lama Enee from Gandan, told me that being a married lama is a Mongolian practice as it occurred before the socialist period. However, he went on, the contemporary material pressures created by capitalism and consumerism placed too many pressures on him and his family and, as a result, interfered with his Buddhist vocation. He decided to separate from his wife and child and now lives in an apartment with his father. Like Lama Enee, most lamas live outside temple complexes and cohabit with their wives, teachers
and/or families. They keep working hours similar to other urbanites (excepting intensive preparation for ritual events), arriving at temples in the morning and leaving after completing their duties during the day. They feed and clothe themselves, catch public transport or drive cars and pay for housing, communication and household bills. They, like other urbanites, handle money in order to go about their daily routines.

Buddhist sūtras tend to advise the laity to be prosperous and to spend their money wisely. Whilst clinging to wealth is advised against in Buddhist scriptures (Findly 2003), the ideal Buddhist state is one ruled by a divine King or Cakravartin who, through protecting the state from poverty and war, enables Buddhism to flourish. Doctrinally, poverty for the laity is not seen as being virtuous, rather it is considered to be a hindrance to the prosperity of the state and of the saṅgha who rely upon the laity for support. When I asked Mongolian lamas about poverty and wealth, most volunteered that excessive wealth and poverty can both be seen as a potential distraction from the pursuit of Buddhist morality and soteriological goals. As one lama in his mid-forties told me in 2016, excessive wealth is like having 100,000 tögrögs (around US $50) in your pocket, you will be continually checking your pockets to see if your money is still there. Lay people and lamas told me that financial hardships (especially urban poverty) could lead to moral degradation. Another lama explained that it is difficult to think about Buddhism when one is thinking about where their next meal will come from. With this in mind some of the internationally funded Dharma Centers, like Jampa Ling to the west of the city, offer charity to those in the surrounding community in the forms of food, work, emergency relief, medical care and education.

Whilst my interlocutors frequently spoke positively about dallaga rituals as a part of the yearly ritual cycle, a similar attitude towards the harnessing of wealth was not the case for all ceremonies that attempt to pull prosperity and wealth to the household. Many people told me that they were concerned about religious specialists (Buddhist and non-Buddhist) who were motivated by fiscal imperatives rather than the desire to help others (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015; forthcoming). Others described dubious rituals in which wealthy and powerful families were able to pull money to themselves through ritual means both Buddhist and shamanic. A number of my interlocutors critiqued the controversial ‘bumba’ (sacred vase or vessel) ceremony carried out at Amarbayasgalant Hiid, a Buddhist temple a few hours north of the capital. The bumba, like the dallaga bag, once empowered, calls prosperity to the household in which it is kept. However, there are a number of ways in which the bumba ritual is distinct from the dallaga ceremony. The bumba ritual is relatively new, appearing about 10 years ago, locating it firmly within the new fiscally oriented capitalist period. Unlike the dallaga ceremony, which can be carried out anywhere with or without religious specialists, the bumba ceremony is only carried out at Amarbayasgalant Hiid twice a year and participants must drop off their household bumba three years in a row for the ritual to have efficacy. Having one’s household bumba present at the ritual costs 10 times the amount of attending the dallaga ceremony, and this, along with the journey to Amarbayasgalant Hiid and purchasing a potent bumba, makes the ritual too expensive for most Mongolian families. The one off purchase of the dallaga bag and its contents costs around 10,000 tögrögs or less. Household bumbas
from Nepal or India, which are believed to the most efficacious, can cost up to 500,000 tögrögs, almost the entirety of an average monthly wage. Whilst I never heard negative comments about the dallaga ceremony, the bumba ceremony attracted stories of foolish extravagance or were commented on as a spiritually dubious activity for the wealthy to gain more money and power. As a consequence of its newness, expense and secretiveness the bumba ritual, unlike the dallaga, was a source of gossip.

**Hidden Capacities**

Dallaga ceremonies reflect urban Mongolian perspectives about the fickleness of money, and offer counsel as to how these problems can be rectified. They also indicate how one’s wealth should, or should not be, demonstrated to others, and provide insurance against the more negative aspects of wealth acquisition. As in Graeber’s discussion of religious rituals for prosperity in Madagascar (1996), the hidden objects within the prosperity bag (dallagani uut), enable communication with greater, unnamed forces to assist with a family’s health and wellbeing. The dallaga bag’s contents remain hidden and are not displayed. Like money they transmit the desire for future capacities to actively affect the world, rather than, as Graeber writes of heirlooms, ‘the power to move others to action by displaying evidence of how one’s self has been treated in the past’ (1996: 19). The contents, and therefore the wealth generating capacity, of the family’s prosperity bag remains out of sight. It exists to draw money into the home, and to make sure that the money it calls is of a certain quality. In this way the ceremony itself is not demonstrative. It links the household to invisible forces who enable the acquisition of wealth, rather than indicating to others how they wish to be treated.

This inconspicuous character of the prosperity ceremony is an interesting feature of the ritual and reflects ideas about how Mongols ought and ought not demonstrate wealth. Whilst wealth is often thought to be the consequence of one’s positive karma and a sign of one’s vitality and spiritual power (Buyandelger 2013), wealth can also betray one’s association with problematic ways of making money (Højer 2012), corruption, and dubious religious rituals. At a dinner party in 2016, a middle-aged well-dressed friend told the table that she had recently heard about the director of a coalmine contracting a continual stream of very strange and rare diseases. These she said, with general accord from the table, were a consequence of the disturbance of local spirits to dig for coal. As his work profited from the disruption of the earth, his health was suffering.

In Mongolia, as High (2013) has written of regarding her fieldsite in Uyanga, money made from gold mining comes to occupy a different ‘regime of value’ (Appadurai 1988). In her descriptions of artisanal gold miners she describes how money made from mining comes to instantiate pollution (High 2013) as it breaks established taboos about sulllying the ‘purity’ of the Mongolian landscape (High & Schlesinger 2010) and against disturbing and digging the ground (Delaplace 2010; High 2013). If the money made from gold mining is used to buy investments, such as herding animals, it is thought that the pollution will be transmitted into the asset and will multiply its
ill effects (High 2013). Like gold miners in Mt. Kare, Papua New Guinea, where money made from gold mining must be spent on consumables (Clark 1993), Mongolian artisanal miners tend to spend their ‘dirty’ money on consumable items such as alcohol and prostitution (High 2013).

In certain circumstances, money in Mongolia can be thought to attract other money to itself (see also Taussig 1977). Money, as seen in the above example of Uyanga, can carry with it the energies of the circumstances under which it was earned. This is also the case for pawnshop (Lombard) employees in Ulaanbaatar who make money from a person’s sudden need for a high interest loan (Højer 2012). Højer writes that the objects themselves within the pawnshop have been removed from their owner’s complete willingness and this causes the objects to potentially carry bad energy (muu energi) into the shop. As such, Lombards are believed to be places of spiritual danger for the shop’s employees (Højer 2012).

Money’s capacities can relate metonymically to living forces of expansion, collection and growth, especially after it has undergone particular ritual processes. However, the harnessing or multiplying aspects of money do not always work in the favour of its bearer. As money can be stained by the processes of its generation one must be careful when attracting money to oneself. These concerns about the qualities of money reflect broader anxieties about corruption in the capital. Empson has written those that extravagantly display their wealth can become the subject of gossip (Empson 2012). Malicious gossip (har hel am) and praise (tsagaan hel am) are both believed to take on curse like qualities in Mongolia (Swancutt 2012). As Sneath has argued, as the distribution of wealth has become increasingly unequal, concerns about corruption have increased in the capital (2006). Corruption often features in conversations about public servants, business people, politicians and religious specialists. Many of my interlocutors told me that if a person got rich through ill-gotten means that this would cause suffering, either in their immediate future, or in future lifetimes, or in the lives of their descendants. When I asked him if he believed in karma, Süh a friend in his mid-twenties told me on a cold winter night in 2009:

Not just in Mongolia but everywhere, you know, there’s corruption. You get rich with bad money, you know, dirty money and things like that. So for yourself, doing bad things, you could get rich and lead a good life. But still after that the consequences and the karma I think goes to your children, and if it doesn’t go to your children then maybe it goes to your grandchildren and then I heard once that if you do a bad thing it goes to seven generations.

Other urban interlocutors told me about the supramundane effects of karma and described how making money by causing offence to local spirits could yield similarly bad results.

Religious specialists are not immune from these anxieties and some ways of the ways that money is included in the religious sphere are widely disapproved of. Many people told me that they disliked religious specialists asking for specific amounts of money for rituals. These comments frequently reflected concerns about new capitalist imperatives, dirty money, and corruption. As religious specialists carry out rituals to alleviate problems in people’s lives, they ultimately rely on the suffering of others to earn a living.
This can place religious specialists in a quandary when asking for ritual payments. On the one hand they need to appear to be successful to attract lay people to their services, because if they do not appear to be wealthy it can be read as a sign that they lack spiritual power (Buyandelger 2013). On the other, it can be difficult to directly ask for specific amounts of money. When I asked a middle aged bespectacled engineer in the winter of 2009 if he thought that there were enough lamas he replied ‘I think there are enough’. He continued by recounting a story about a lama who pushed to the front of a ration line in 1992, saying:

Many people are afraid of them because anything someone will do it will happen back to them. In 1992 there were good lamas because at this time there were few lamas in Mongolia. I thought at this time most of them were good … But now [there are] a lot of temples, a lot of lamas who wish just for money … Most of them I think can’t read … the sūtras, or they can read but they can’t understand what these words mean.

The set price lists for prayers found at Gandan Hiiid were the most mentioned critique of Mongolian Buddhism by lay Buddhists. Whilst lamas from Gandan told me that these lists function to account for the money coming into the temple, many laypeople said that they preferred to donate money rather than being told how much to give for specific religious rituals.

Critiques about the ways that money was earned within Buddhist temples were also expressed by Buddhist lamas themselves. In one formal conversation with a lama who himself was openly married regarding donations, he explained to me:

When you share the benefits meant for the … fully ordained lamas, you end up creating bad karma. It is actually wrong to be respected and receive offerings like they do. You might have been observing that Mongolian lamas look like they are suffering from the effect of undue privilege, aren’t they? They are really fat, suffering from sickness inside. They are psychologically affected as well. That means that karma is at work: they are suffering from the results of unearned benefits (2016).

In his opinion, the practice of accepting donations directly when not fully ordained (even though this is a common local practice) caused the recipient harm. In this way, money earned through deceit, as he saw it, carried bad results to the bearer.

In spite of these common critiques around the generation of money, most Mongols distinguish between those that have made their money through good and bad means. Whilst rich politicians are frequently maligned, sometimes being referred to as herding animals (mal) by my interlocutors, some wealthy business people who have made their money without harming others, such as my previous landlord, are viewed positively. My ex-landlord, who has been successful in his business ventures, has 5000 friends on Facebook and when he posts life advice, as he frequently does, his friends enthusiastically comment on his posts. The combination of his success, his masculine appearance, and his moral stature accords well with a positive way of becoming rich.

As the population of Ulaanbaatar more than doubled between 1998 and 2008 (UNDP 2010: 12) visible inequalities grew, and have continued to grow. New capitalist imperatives arose for urban developers, whilst many of those that moved from rural
areas to the city hoping for a better life erected compounds surrounded by a rectangle fence (*hashaa*) on the outskirts of the built city. These areas, known as the *ger* districts (*ger horoolol*), now surround the capital to the north, east and west of the city and were estimated to account for at least 50% of the city’s population in 2010 (UNDP 2010). It is now common to see the country’s urban elite driving expensive vehicles past poorer residents rifling through the trash to find bottles to sell for recycling in China. As Ulaanbaatar’s infrastructure struggles to keep up with the demands of its ever growing population, those that can retreat inside to ever more luxurious private spaces to distance themselves from the city’s chronic smog and traffic noise.

The ways that the *dallaga* ceremony is carried out, reflects broader concerns about the unequal flows of money and the presence of corruption in the capital. The ceremony itself is a relatively secretive affair happening in a closed off temple, reached only through a corridor that does not receive much traffic from casual visitors. It is not demonstrative, at least not for other human actors, and encourages a somewhat subdued demeanour towards wealth and its acquisition. Money itself is not included in the ceremony. Instead, small precious stones are used to symbolise and to attract, or pull, wealth and prosperity. These are accompanied by representations of health, thus ensuring that calling wealth into the home does not call in the aspects of money that brings illness. One does not, for instance, want to make money in ways that will cause diseases to afflict themselves or their family members. The inclusion of grain in the ceremony represents both growth, the multiplication of the qualities in the *dallaga* bag, and, importantly, purification. As an extra precaution against impurities, incense is passed around during the ceremony, and this is thought to purify negative elements. As not all money is made the same ways, these aspects of the ritual protect against the more harmful elements of wealth and its acquisition.

**Movement and Growth**

Ulaanbaatar’s *dallaga* rituals indicate how prosperity, and its urban expression as money, are approached in the capital city. The emphasis on movement and circulation in the ceremony echo nomadic ideas of prosperity. These are stressed in the verbs that people use to talk about the ritual’s capacities to harness wealth, such as ‘pulling’ (*tatah*) and ‘calling’ (*duudah*), and within the circular gestures that are a key part of the ritual’s choreography. Metaphors of growth and storage in the ceremony, on the other hand, accord with a sedentary approach to prosperity, reflecting settled monastic practices, stemming from Tibetan sources (Chabros 1992).

This inclusion of both nomadic and sedentary elements in Buddhist rituals reflects both the importation of Buddhist ritual aspects from Tibet and the history of urbanisation in Mongolia. Ulaanbaatar’s origins as a city date back to the establishment of a Buddhist temple on the Tuul river in 1778, when the moving monastic residence of the Javzandamba, Mongolia’s most important reincarnation lineage, became sedentary (Campi 2006). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the country’s largest city, then known as Ih Hüree Hot, was dominated by two large temple complexes, Gandan Hiid and Züün Hüree Dashchoilin Hiid. These extensive monastic residences, like others
scattered around the countryside, settled in important sites for trade and rituals, and were important nodes in the networks of power and wealth spread across the country during the late Qing era (Moses 1977). Into the early 1920s the feudal arrangements of fealty that tied nomadic pastoral lifestyles to centres of aristocratic and monastic power having largely survived a series of revolutions that swept through Mongolia in the early twentieth century, still dominated Mongolian political and religious life. The Eighth Javzandambaa, the Bogd Han, had around 90,000 feudal disciples (shavi) working on his estates out of a total recorded population of just under 650,000 people (Even 2011). Ulaanbaatar’s existence as a modern city is the direct result of the dynamic relationship between these nomadic and monastic/sedentary trajectories. Processes of urbanisation, whilst still fuelled by largely pastoral economies, increased during the socialist period, with the socialist government encouraging urban migration as a necessary stage in the development of the nation. The postsocialist period has seen a rapid growth of rural to urban migration. Coinciding with this increase in urban migration has been the resurgence of Buddhism in the country, particularly in Ulaanbaatar, which houses the largest monastic institutions in the country.

Chabros (1992) argues that there are clear distinctions between dallaga rituals that are influenced by Buddhism and those that are not. As she writes of dallaga rituals that involve containers placed within the home:

The energy is stored up on the spot in embryonic form. This distinction reflects the contrast between the Mongol nomadic herding and hunting economy, with its dynamic energy-flow embodied in the animals, and the Tibetan sedentary agricultural economy, in which the energy-flow from seed to harvest to granary is an internal one. (Chabros 1992: 193)

Whilst Chabros’s study does not contain any discussion of Buddhist dallaga ceremonies in their present urban forms, she points to the dynamic tensions involved in the ways that wealth is conceived of within and outside of Buddhist rituals. On the one hand the ritual contains nomadic conceptions of movement, circulation and reproduction. On the other, the more reified qualities of stored wealth with its potential for growth.

Contemporary Buddhist dallaga ceremonies contain both sedentary and nomadic elements, perhaps best illustrated by the circulation of the dark grain. As the grains are circled clockwise the participants exclaim ‘hurai, hurai, hurai’. By this pronouncement the congregation indicates their desire ‘to gather’. This moment in the ceremony includes physical gestures, through which the participants attempt to harness wealth’s circulation, and the symbolic presence of the seeds that are associated with both purification and growth. The grains are a key aspect of the ceremony as these are the only elements of the ritual that are taken back to the home and placed within the family’s dallaga bag.

The dark grains themselves, utilised in many Buddhist and non-Buddhist ceremonies, reflect ideas about karma and growth. In Mongolia the word for karma, üiliin үр, literally means action’s seed or action’s result. Metaphors about the seeds and fruits of one’s actions are common in the Buddhist classes and rituals I attended in Ulaanbaatar. A person’s actions, once carried out, behave as though they are a seed. Whatever has been planted, will come back to the person, family and/or region.
As one of my interlocutors told me: you cannot expect to get cabbage if you have planted potatoes. Just as karma can be thought to multiply if it is left unchecked, the positive qualities of the seeds in the dallaga ceremony or the negative qualities of money made through suffering can multiply (High 2013). In this way the qualities of money can have their own agenda and these can exponentially expand.

When I visited Eej Khad or Mother Rock in the central province, Töv Aimag, the first stop on the pilgrimage route from Ulaanbaatar was ‘Money Rock’ or Yembüü Khad. Yembüü Khad is a squat rock covered in blue khadags or ceremonial scarves. It is believed that if you circumambulate Yembüü Had clockwise three times pressing your money against the rock that the money in your wallet will multiply. The circulation of sacred objects and places is an important part of ritual life in Mongolia. Ovoos (sacred rock cairns) and temples are always circled around in a clockwise direction. Clockwise in Mongolian is narzov literally meaning the correct way of the sun. After completing the circumambulation, I was told to keep the specific notes that had touched the rock in my wallet. These notes are thought to attract money to one’s wallet and to multiply and increase the bearer’s fortune. This same attribution of the pulling qualities of money was also evidenced when my parents made the first purchase at a Buddhist NGO’s new felt shop in 2009. After they paid for their felt slippers, we were told that this money would be kept and not used. As the first sale for the shop, this money was special and, if kept, it was thought that it would attract more money to the business.

Movement is positively appraised in Mongolia and is seen in opposition to sluggishness and inactivity (Benwell 2013). As Chabros writes, ‘in a nomadic herding environment, onward movement represents life in a very real sense. To remain behind when the group moves on in the yearly cycle … is equivalent to life ceasing’ (1992: 151). Buddhist lamas are often called upon to remove blockages that restrict the free flow of energy and movement, which are believed to disrupt a person’s good fortune (Abrahms-Kavunenko forthcoming). When I asked people how they felt after visiting Buddhist temples, many replied that they felt as if some kind of obstacle had been removed and that this had improved their energy.

The symbolism incorporated into the dallaga ceremony reflects key ideas about multiplication and movement. In her ethnography on notions of fortune amongst ethnic Buryats in the Hentii region of Mongolia, Empson discusses two kinds of fortune in daily life. The first is hiimori, which concerns one’s inner energies. The second is hishig, which circulates around a person, the energy of which can be harnessed to enable growth (Empson 2011: 70). Hishig is not simply luck, but can be partially controlled with the help of diviners or more mundane practices such as keeping a ‘sacred portion’ of dairy for the family. Though it circulates externally, one can internally harness hishig, to assist with the generation and multiplication of good fortune (Empson 2011).

Whilst hishig is an external energy that must be harnessed inwardly, the internal energies of a person, as seen through the concept of hiimori, are influenced from outside and can be adversely affected by external contamination (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012). Hiimori is connected to ideas regarding movement of energy and of the air.
The *hiimori san*, a prayer to help with one’s internal energies, is a popular prayer to order at Buddhist temples. Blockages in one’s *hiimori* caused by external contamination can be associated with a drop in their fortunes (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012). However, as one lama joked with me whilst we were sitting and chatting in a café concerning how fat the rich can be: ‘rich people’, he said, ‘evidently don’t always have good *hiimori*’.

Whilst Gerelmaa told me that the *dallaga* ceremony has been popular since before my first visit in 2009, a number of notable new religious practitioners who have become prominent in recent years incorporate elements of this ritual into their practices. The most famous of these is Sarandavaa, who sells out packed stadiums to preach her methods for expanding wealth. A former aura reader she tells people how to attract wealth to their wallets. Like during the *dallaga* ceremony she encourages audience members to hold out their wallets and circle them in a clockwise direction three times, proclaiming ‘*hurai, hurai, hurai*’, ‘let us gather!’ This ceremony is called the ‘*tavan hishig dallaga*’ or five *hishig* prosperity rites, overtly relating her activities to the harnessing of the external energies of *hishig* for good fortune. Whilst those that told me about the popularity of Sarandavaa were frequently sceptical about her capacities, her widespread popularity, alongside the continuing popularity of the *hiimori* prayers, bears testimony to the widespread desire to strengthen the presence of nomadic energies within the city, in the face of increasingly abstracted and unpredictable fluctuations in wealth and fortune.

**Conclusion**

Since the end of the socialist period, the Mongolian economy has been fickle, causing a few to become tremendously rich and many others to become devastatingly poor. Although most Mongols talk about the economy as though instability is a temporary state, the varied fortune related ritual activities that have arisen since the end of socialism indicate another predisposition towards money in the capital. Urban Buddhist *dallaga* ceremonies attempt to mobilise nomadic energies to assist with prosperity, resisting stagnation and complementing sedentary ideals of growth and storage.

Wealth itself is not seen as being inherently problematic. Being rich can be linked to a person’s spiritual power or the good deeds that they are thought to have carried out in a previous life. However, the ways that a person acquires money and demonstrates their wealth are treated with caution. Money carries with it certain qualities, which, good or bad, can multiply. As such, one must be careful to make sure that the kinds of wealth that one calls to the family do not contain contaminants and bring ill health and misfortune. As wealth in Ulaanbaatar increasingly refers to how much money one has, ideas about the movement and reproduction of money, and dangers attendant to this activity, are visible within urban *dallaga* ceremonies.

As the meanings of prosperity have changed in the postsocialist period, these ceremonies are offered regularly, rather than intermittently to mark the changing seasons or important rites of passage. The prosperity of the family is now more overtly linked to money, as the health and vitality of herding animals becomes an increasingly abstract concept for urban residents. Yet, the nomadic associations of
prosperity with movement continue to play a vital role in urban Buddhist dallaga rituals, as people attempt to muster fortune as it circulates unevenly around the urban economy.

Notes

1. See Comaro and Comaro (1999) for economic parallels that arose with the growth of occult economies in South Africa.

2. Ger neighbourhoods are areas of land that are made up of fenced enclosures that contain within them one or a number of gers (nomadic felt tents) and sometimes one or more concrete house structures. They frequently lack basic infrastructure such as running water.

3. This paper will use the word ‘lama’ to refer to robed monastics as it follows from the local term lam. The term does not imply advancement in Buddhist hierarchies as it does in some Tibetan Buddhist usages.

4. A region that extends from south of the Mongolian border within China, to north of the Mongolian border within Russia and includes the Kalmyk area of Western Russia.

5. It was estimated to me by lamas in Gandan’s administration that 300 lamas working at Gandan received a salary and a further 500 were connected to Gandan in some other informal or formal way, carrying out rituals or otherwise participating in temple activities.

6. The eight auspicious signs are: the white conch shell symbolising the call to awakening through the sound of the Buddhist teachings; the parasol symbolising protection; the victory banner symbolising victory against the impurities of body, speech and mind; the two golden fish symbolising fearlessness; the Dharma wheel symbolising the turning of the wheel of Dharma and the spreading of the Buddhist teachings; the endless knot symbolising interdependence; the lotus flower symbolising the possibility of enlightenment growing from impurity and suffering; the vase symbolising the treasures of health, longevity and prosperity.

7. The Mongolian sky, due to its distance from the ocean, is often unobstructed by clouds. There are around 250 sunny days a year in Mongolia.

8. Talk of pulling wealth is also present amongst the Urapmin (Robbins 1999: 95).

9. A del is a traditional Mongolian costume. It is a long silk tunic tied together with a sash. It is worn by lay people for trips to the countryside or on festive occasions, and as a winter uniform for lamas. Many Mongolian lamas wear dels that are burgundy or yellow with sky blue (isenher) up-turned cuffs at the bottom of the sleeves.

10. A Vajra (ochir) is a ritual object that represents rapid awakening. It is said to assist awakening that is as fast as a thunderbolt and as cutting as a diamond.

11. I was told to hand the lamas the bag as this was my first ceremony. I was the only person to do so as all the other participants likely had their bags already at home on the shrine.

12. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have delayed their own enlightenment to help others. Dharmapālas are Buddhist protectors.

13. Handbags are treated with a great deal of respect in Mongolia and are never placed on the floor. To place a handbag on the floor is thought to disrespect their contents.

14. Buddhist institutions whose central aim is to educate the lay population about Buddhist philosophy and transformative practices. There are a number of these in Ulaanbaatar. The bulk of my fieldwork was carried out at two transnational Dharma Centers, Jampa Ling located to the west of the city centre which is an organisation headed by Panchen Ötül Rinpoche a Tibetan born lama that now lives in Ireland, and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition’s Shredrup Ling which is located in the city centre. I spent around 22 months carrying out fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar from 2009-2010 and again in 2013, 2015 and 2016. The people with whom I communicated were from a range of backgrounds. Those I met in my daily life in the centre of the city where I lived, tended to be from middle-class backgrounds. The lamas I spoke to and the friends and acquaintances I made at the Dharma Centers I spent time at, were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, some having experienced severe poverty.
15. These strategies were common of the Buddhist monks I spoke to in the Buddhist pilgrimage town in Bodh Gaya, India.

16. See also Robbins (1999).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


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