

## FROM 'PUBLIC' TO 'PRIVATE' MARKETS IN POSTSOCIALIST MONGOLIA

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### Introduction

This article<sup>lxii</sup> is based on a research project concerned with Mongolia in 'the age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*), which I recently completed in the capital Ulaanbaatar and the two industrial cities of Erdenet and Darhan<sup>lxiii</sup>. There is no doubt that Mongolia's urban markets serve as a prime source of identity for the people trying to make a living there, and that many of these identities are infused with the perception of relentless movement associated with the opaque workings of late capitalism in postsocialist - and postcolonial - settings (Burawoy & Verdery 1998; Comaroff & Comaroff 1998). Furthermore, as elsewhere in the postsocialist world – in particular Russia and the former Soviet republics (see e. g. Mandel & Humphrey 2002) –, making one's living on the market still carries a range of negative connotations in Ulaanbaatar, especially for those members of the former elite (military officers, academics, and the like) who did not manage to profit from the chaotic years following the onset of 'the age of the market'.

In spite of these similarities, however, the Mongolian encounter with capitalism is not directly comparable to that of other postsocialist countries. As various policy makers and development consultants have lately noted, there seems to be something quite distinctive about the manner in which Mongolians conceive of and act within market contexts. This is so, suggests Alicia Campi (1996: 92), because 'Mongolia's command economy was a nomadic socialist economy, which operated in a cultural/philosophical world at odds with some of the basic assumptions of a free-market economy'. However, far from identifying the source of this economic cosmology within a monolithic nomadic culture (as Campi to some extent does), the present article will seek to trace various shifts in the Mongolian market (*zah*) concept over time, with special emphasis on the increasing monopolization to which the country's urban markets have been subject over the last fifteen years.

Taking my lead from the growing literature on Mongolian trade, barter and exchange (e.g. Humphrey 2000; Wheeler 2004; Sneath 2006), the aim here is to explore the gradual transformation from the so-called 'public markets' (*ulsyn zah*) of the early 1990s to what is referred to as the 'private markets' (*huviin zah*) of Ulaanbaatar today. In so doing I hope not only to contribute to ongoing

debates about the market in the former socialist world, but also to problematize certain Euro-American assumptions of what the public and private might be.

### The market in Mongolian history

For some time now a strange assumption seems to have persisted among scholars and policy makers alike that markets and trade are fundamentally alien to traditional Inner Asian culture. Consider, for instance, the following assertion from a recent survey of Mongolia's 'informal sector' conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO):

[In Mongolia], the informal sector is a fairly new phenomenon unlike traditional Asian bazaars. Some observers point out that Mongolia differs from other economies in transition in that a "second economy" did not exist under the command economy. Unlike some post-communist societies there does not appear to be a legacy of non-compliant behaviour and destructive entrepreneurship (Morris 2001: xii).

Leaving aside the hairy issue as to precisely under what circumstances and according to which authority entrepreneurship may justifiably be recognised as something 'destructive', the author of the ILO rapport is completely right in implying that, for a very long period of time, the great majority of Mongolians were excluded from participating in market transactions. During the nearly seventy years of state socialism all private trade was forbidden by law<sup>lxiv</sup>, although the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (*MAHN*) did turn a blind eye to the accelerating barter and trade which took place during the 1980s at the semi-legal exchange sites located at the outskirts of every big city and provincial capital. As we shall see below, it was these semi-legal sites and institutions which in the early 1990s were turned into Mongolia's first capitalist markets.

However, the protection or - depending on one's viewpoint - exclusion of people from the capitalist market goes back significantly longer than the age of socialism (*sozialism üid*). In the 18th and 19th centuries too, the large majority of Mongolians were in no position to conduct any trade. Outer Mongolia back then was governed as a colony of the Qing (or Manchu) empire through an aristocratic,

feudal-like system of divide and rule specifically designed to keep the nomadic Mongolians separate from their sedentary neighbours in China and, on a larger scale, from the expanding European powers which at that time were closing in on Inner Asia from all sides (see e.g. Bawden 1986).

One consequence of this isolationist policy was that, for several hundred years, only Chinese – and later Russian – traders, who bought licences from the imperial administration in Beijing, were allowed to set up trading posts in Mongolia's northern princedoms. As a result, the inhabitants of these remote colonial provinces came under growing economic pressure, as both the aristocrat rulers of each princedom and the corresponding Buddhist clergy incurred enormous debts to foreign moneylenders, and as the commoners, of course, ended up paying for the formers' frivolous spending through an ever-increasing burden of tax, alms and corvée labour (c.f. Sanjdorj 1980; Bawden 1986). Needless to say, the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (MAHN) did nothing to repress this particular aspect of Mongolia's pre-revolutionary history. Not only did the image of the exploited nomad/worker fit neatly into historical materialist theory; the equally powerful image of the profiteering Chinese moneylender also went hand-in-hand with the strongly sinophobic discourse of Mongolian nationalism (see also Bulag 1998).

It is, then, quite understandable if many observers have been led to believe that there is no tradition of economic entrepreneurship in Mongolia. Understandable, yes, but nonetheless wrong. The 'traditional Asian bazaar' is by no means foreign to the Mongolian way of life. The only difference from the famous oasis cities of Central Asia is that in medieval Mongolia (and, apparently, the Middle East) markets were typically set up at the fluid borders between nomadic polities, or along the liminality between nomadic and sedentary society (Lattimore 1962). In fact, trade blossomed in the Mongolian empire. Historians regularly credit Genghis Khan's re-opening of the Silk Road as one of the most lasting outcomes of his campaigns (Morgan 1987). It was only later, following the *de facto* loss of independence to first the Qing empire and subsequently the Soviet Union, that trade became marginalised from Mongolian social life – not, however, for internal reasons pertaining to nomadic culture, but, as I have tried to show, for external reasons arising from the political economy of empire.

### The Black Market

In the early 1990s, following the legalisation of private trade and profit-making by Mongolia's first democratically elected government, a huge market

evolved at the northern outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, near the location of the old barter station from socialist times. Up until 2000 this so-called Black Market (*har zah*)<sup>bxv</sup> or Northern Market (*hoid zah*) was unrivalled in Mongolia in size and popularity. Practically any grown-up in Ulaanbaatar can tell you a personal and often highly amusing anecdote from the heyday of the *har zah*, which quickly became renowned for its claustrophobic, dusty and pickpocket-infested pathways, and, more generally, for its seemingly total lack of organisation. Indeed, the *har zah* only had a few permanent fixed points. Essentially, the market was created from scratch every morning, as vendors would scramble, argue and sometimes fight in order to pick the best spots to sell their wares. 'The place was utterly crazy!', as one former trader of vodka and distilled pure alcohol (*spirt*) explained. 'There were no stalls or anything. We just stood there holding up the labels of the *spirt*, and sold (*borluulah*) out everything we had. People would gather around us from all sides, and buy like mad'.

Still, there seems to have been some measure of organization behind the 'madness' (*galzuu*). Not everyone had to fight for a good place for his or her stand. On the one hand, there were the 'big bosses' (*tom bossod*), who through a creative combination of entrepreneurship, riches and connections (*holboo*) as well as – on a few occasions – downright physical coercion had secured themselves *de facto* ownership of the best trading spots from the early days. (To some extent, these 'bosses' or 'leaders' (*lideriüüd*) were – and still are today – comparable to other and more well-known violent entrepreneurs who, in the name of *mafia*, have attracted so much attention across the postsocialist world (Volkov 2002, Humphrey 2002)). On the other hand, certain vendors were lucky enough to be related to, lovers of, or simply on friendly terms with such 'big people' (*tomchuud*) – or more precisely big men (almost all *tomchuud* were and still are male) – next to whose containers they would smugly line up their wares. (Back then, as now, the minority of people in possession of a whole container – as opposed to a smaller stall – were treated with a great deal of respect by their fellow traders; and this is especially true if the type of goods transacted ranked high in the Mongolian markets' hierarchy of wares, see also below). It should further be noted that the Northern Market did not remain in a state of flux throughout its existence. In the course of the 1990s it gradually became more formalized in social, legal and spatial terms. An increasing number of permanent stalls were constructed and the *spirt* trade was made illegal, but the place was still unbelievably crowded since there was no room for

expansion due to the peri-urban slums in the neighbourhood.

It came as no surprise to me, therefore, that people applauded the opening of a new, more 'sophisticated' (*bolovsrongüi*) and 'specialized' (*töröljsön*) market at a central urban site in the autumn of 2000. The Naran Tuul Market, also known as the High Market (*deed zah*), quickly assumed the role of Mongolia's leading market. Unlike its predecessor, the new black market (for the Naran Tuul market is also known under this designation) is highly organised. There is ample police presence and numerous security guards, plenty of breathing space (at least outside the most crowded trading spots towards its midst), every stall is carefully numbered and registered with the administration, and imposing, panoptic watchtowers are positioned at each of the market's corners. For the same reason, and as is also the case with many of Ulaanbaatar's gated community compounds<sup>lxvi</sup>, one is left with the impression of entering another domain of sovereignty, politically, legally and economically separate from the surrounding society.

It is evident that the costumers enjoy this atmosphere of order, security and 'modern' (*modern*) professionalism. Indeed, many Ulaanbaatar residents, in particular those coming from lower class backgrounds, seem to take a certain pride in the Naran Tuul Market, emphasizing, for example, how certain 'Chinese goods' are deemed to be of too low a quality to be worthy of being sold there. Still, its relative prestige dwindles in comparison with the many *elite shops* which have recently mushroomed in Mongolian cities. Indeed, Ulaanbaatar is today home to a small but influential segment of rich people to whom the Naran Tuul and all the other black markets in Ulaanbaatar are nothing but an embarrassing reminder of the country's backwardness, where poor and unhealthy people are 'forced to get their shoes muddy to obtain the goods they need, like during Socialist times'. The *har zah*, to them, is an obscure, filthy and dangerous place which, fortunately, is located outside what is visible from the shopping avenues of the city centre or the marble balconies overlooking the rivers. However, this minority of 'new Mongolians' (*shine Mongol*) notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the Naran Tuul Market is the ultimate trading venue in the country. It is, so to speak, the epitome of the market against which all other images of the market come into being.

#### *The 'privatization' of the market*

If visitors are positive about the Naran Tuul market, the people who work there are more ambivalent. In particular, there is dissatisfaction about the high tariffs and rents which vendors say

they have to pay to the market owners. More generally, people at Naran Tuul and other markets in Ulaanbaatar feel that they are subject to 'all sorts of pressure'. Very well, was my initial response, but this is just the kind of complaint one can expect such people to make. After all, who would not like to have fewer costs? Surely, I then went on to ask, if you compare the new black market with the chaos of the old *har zah*, you would prefer this? Here is what Sara, a female flour trader in her early thirties, responded:

Back then the market belonged to the public (*ulsiinh*); it had not become private (*huviin*) yet. When I look around here in Ulaanbaatar, I can see that many peoples' lives are now getting better. But it is not like that here at the market, for it has become privatised (*huviinh*). There are many official people above us. It is not just [the owner of the Naran Tuul market]. He has many *sponsors*. There is a big conspiracy behind all this. A sort of *mafia*. The market is stripping us people who are working here. That is the big difference [from before]. We are paying enormous tariffs so we are forced to work extremely hard. Some people are only just selling enough things to buy food. In the old days, the *har zah* was not like that.

Very well, I then asked, but clearly you were under 'all sorts of pressure' back at the Northern Market too, for instance from roaming gangs of *atamans*?<sup>lxvii</sup> 'No', Sara insisted, 'there was nothing like that at the old market'. Although this particular trader does represent a somewhat special case (see below), it is still my impression that the majority of the merchants share the basic tenet of her experiences. Quite astonishingly in the regional context, it really does not seem as if any racketeering was taking place at the old *har zah* - or if it was, at least not in the highly organised form particularly familiar from many post-Soviet markets (see Nazpary 2002; Volkov 2002; Hohnen 2004). To be sure, there were arguments and fighting galore, and people were making recourse to virtually whatever means available (connections, threats etc.) to secure a good trading spot. But for Sara and other veteran traders this only added to the overarching feeling that people were in a position to 'do what they wanted themselves. No one was eating (*ideh*) us from behind'.

Quite paradoxically, it thus seems as if the old 'public' (*ulsiin*) market is remembered as having been *more private* (in the ideal liberal economic sense) than the new 'private' (*huviin*) market, for the former seems to have been characterised by a higher degree of entrepreneurial freedom, less regulation and lower fees, just like the textbook ideal of the free

market<sup>lxviii</sup>. For the old *har zah* was perceived as 'public' not so much in the sense that it defined a moral and socially inclusive realm of a given collectivity, but in the more infinite, transformative and all-encompassing meaning, in the sense that this domain did not exclude any person - or indeed any form of behaviour - in the manner a given 'private' domain does<sup>lxix</sup>.

Arguably, it is possible here to identify concepts and practices which can be traced back to Inner Asia's medieval markets. Consider the fact that the most popular Mongolian term for a market - *zah* - also means 'border', 'edge' and 'margin': following Wheeler (2004), this concept does not just refer to the relative or spatial margin of Mongolia's different city centres (*töv*), at whose outskirts the first markets of the contemporary period were located. *Zah* also denotes a sort of absolute or liminal exteriority, namely the intermediate position occupied by male or female traders seen from the perspective of the patriarchal nomadic household (see Pedersen 2006; c.f. Vreeland 1962). It certainly is a well-established truth in lore and legend that, during their famous raids into enemy land, Old Mongolia's warrior-traders were known to venture into new, dangerous territories searching for spouses, wealth and glory at the very 'social margi[n, where] a constructed world comes into being, mediated by objects along transactional pathways' (Gell 1999: 104).

My point is that this absolute margin reappeared in the early 1990s. This, in fact, may be what the so-called immorality of trading in postsocialist contexts is all about. What is presented as a dislike of traders due to their perceived self-interest may involve a more deep-rooted breakdown of 'ontological security' (Giddens 1991), set in train by the new subjectivities personified by these economic actors. As was the case along Inner Asia's medieval borders, the 'public market' until recently found in the Ulaanbaatar suburbs served as a veritable exteriority, which encompassed irreducible multiplicity (Deleuze & Guittari 1999). All kinds of goods were sold in this liminal zone; and all kinds of people were selling these wares. For the same reason, it was impossible to remain the same, for people were tunnelled into a marginal realm, whose rules of engagement were defined in opposition to the conventions of the 'private' domains outside.

### Market identities

The world outside did indeed present a real obstacle back in the very first days when Sara began selling *spirt* at the Northern Market. It was not only that her (middle-class) parents strongly opposed her newly found profession, which they viewed as a disorderly and vulgar activity. 'It is making you

careless, scruffy and mindless', they complained, while conjuring up frightening scenarios of their youngest daughter ending up 'drinking the very vodka she is supposed to sell' like those 'terrible speculator women' (*mohai damchin avgai*) who in the early 1990s could be seen drinking all day long on markets, train stations and the like. The problem was also the hostile looks and remarks which Sara received from visitors to the market, 'especially from other girls of my age'. Only the other traders at the *har zah* did not seem to mind; indeed, one *boss* in particular was impressed by the fact that a 'girl like her' was working there:

No one could tell I was a trader. I was around 18 with a very pale face, not at all looking like someone doing business. Girls from my background don't like selling at the market. They hate it. But he [the *boss*] was both worried and curious. "I have observed you many times, selling the vodka tirelessly. You are very hardworking. Are you from a very poor family?" he asked me. To which I replied "no, I just like this better than anything else", and that left him very surprised.

Under the protection of her new *boss*, Sara's business began to thrive<sup>lxx</sup>. Selling the vodka was just 'so damn profitable' (*aigüi ashigtai*) and, besides, the constant deal-making gave (and still gives) her an immense sense of 'satisfaction' and 'fun'. It is evident that this feeling derives to a large degree from an awareness of being good at something that only a few people are cut out for: 'Not everyone can do market trading. It makes the head work a lot, it is hard. Talking all day long. It is very difficult, very unnerving (*nervnii*)'. We are here reminded of Rita Astuti's study of female fish traders among the Veso of Madagascar, who also experience a 'rarefied aesthetic pleasure from the calculations, the suspense, and the power of [the] imagination' (Astuti 1999: 93). Indeed, as I did myself, Astuti heard many complaints that the market had become an 'addiction' for the young Veso women, distracting their attention from expected services within the household (1999: 92).

Today, with her parents' blessing, Sara runs a successful flour (and rice) outlet at the Naran Tuul market. As 'white staples' (*tsaagan yum*) that satisfy 'natural needs', selling these goods by no means carries the same negative connotations as her former *spirt* business did. What is more, she is now part of the so-called 'flour people' (*gurilchinguud*), who enjoy a high status in the market's informal hierarchy ('we are probably only surpassed by the electronics people')<sup>lxxi</sup>. Nonetheless, she considers herself to be an outsider, for she is one of the few flour people

who works 'alone' (*ganz*) in the flour business. The rest 'all have relatives (*hamaatan*) and family (*ah duu*) here', as this is widely accepted to be the only trouble-free way for traders to enter both the Naran Tuul and other urban markets. Indeed, like practically every other vendor group on the Ulaanbaatar market scene (the petty 'matchbox and candle people' aside), the *gurilchinguud* are renowned for using a highly effective cocktail of deception, bullying and corruption to keep newcomers away from becoming part of their 'community' (*hamt olon*).

When, for example, Sara first managed to buy herself a container with an associated slot (*bairshil*) at Naran Tuul by responding to a newspaper ad, she spent the first three months listening to constant verbal attacks, occasionally even having things thrown at her, and more generally trying to steer a course through a sea of lies and deceptions. No one at the market would tell her anything about how things were working ('how to buy goods wholesale, how to arrange for transport, how to deal with the local *bosses*'), while at the same time all the established *gurilchinguud* were collectively selling their goods below the going rate to push her into bankruptcy. But, 'as I always do', Sara somehow managed to persist, using her well-developed gift of the gab (*am'ni figürtei*) to strike unusually profitable deals with influential wholesale *liders* as well as a growing segment of customers. And ever so slowly, the hostile outbursts began to die out, as did the 'artificial lowering of prices', although it was to take a full year before the others completely accepted her by 'opening a bottle of vodka and congratulating me on how stubborn I had been'.

Sara's story is by no means unique. In fact, the Ulaanbaatar market scene seems to have been colonised to a significant extent by informal 'vendor corporations', whose mode of organisation has been imported from the domestic sphere. In parallel to the nomadic household (*ail*), a typical vendor corporation may thus be said to consist of two or three stalls (*languu*) selling the same goods, many of which have also been acquired from the same source (whether this is a local wholesale *lider* or a distant supplier in China). While each stall/household constitutes a (semi)autonomous business, all its members share a number of costs (such as transportation and bribes), just as they tend to pool their labour and other resources when this is needed (notably to enter the market in the first place). All this is reminiscent of the various contemporary kinship and quasi-kinship arrangements in the pastoral economy (Szykiewicz 1993; Humphrey & Sneath 1999).

It is important to stress that – and again just like in the rural context – such vendor corporations are deeply formal and hierarchical in nature, even if

they are at the same time highly fluid and adaptable in terms of both size and composition. Hence, although the personnel inhabiting these hierarchical positions may change rapidly, one will always find an *ah* (senior male) or an *egch* (senior female), who presides over several junior (and, typically, more recent) members. Occasionally, such a vendor corporation can grow so influential that it is able to control the price of a given commodity (like, say, flour), in which case its figurehead will be known as the *boss* of the whole 'people' associated with it. Thus, all the people selling a certain commodity tend to be conceived of as distinct collectives (such as the aforementioned 'flour people') which, in semi-conscious mimicry of former state socialist forms, perform ceremonies and celebrate holidays (like the Lunar New Year and International Women's Day) just as someone from the same 'community' would. In the same way as the Ulaanbaatar market scene as a whole has become more monopolized and 'privatized', then, there seems to be a simultaneous development to the effect that, on a smaller scale, each stall 'may be held by the same people or families for several years and [be] treated as [a] monopol[y]' (Konstantinov, Kressel & Thuen 1998: 733).

## Conclusion

As should be clear by now, Ulaanbaatar's markets have undergone significant changes over the last decade or so. In broad terms, the liminal exteriority demarcated by the 'crazy' markets of the early 1990s has gradually been colonised by the – in their own right rapidly changing – social, economic and political structures of Mongolian society as a whole. What was once perceived as being a transgressive 'public' realm operating beyond the reach of any 'private' agenda now seems to be much more closely in step with the social and economic conventions of the extended household and the (neo)liberal nation state. It is probably due not least to the emergence of informal institutions such as vendor corporations and communities that the symbolic stock of the trader's role seems to be on the rise in contemporary Mongolia, especially for those people belonging to a really 'professional' market like Naran Tuul and to a high-ranking 'private community' like the *gurilchinguud*.

Consequently, although working at the market is by no means the greatest dream (*mörööldöl*) of the urban youth, it does not carry an inescapable stigma either – as it did just a few years earlier. Having said that, one does find a plethora of social outcasts in this setting, especially around the less prestigious markets in the suburbs. All these types of persons can be observed right across the

urban space, but markets are one of the few locations where one encounters them all together. Such dispossessed persons include, among others, the 'exchangers' (*chenjüüd*), the 'dumpster people' (*hogiin garuud*), the street kids (*taranshaany hüühdүүд*), the thieves (*hulgaichuud*), the pickpockets (*karmanii hulgaichuud*) and, most lowly of all, 'the drunkards' (*övgöntiin*)<sup>lxii</sup>. By way of conclusion, let me now briefly compare the positioning of these marginal persons with the exterior position held by the people at the old *har zah*.

Contrary to the frivolous black market of the early 1990s, where practically everyone present seems to have been propelled into the same undifferentiated social and spatial multiplicity, there is a clear sense that the sociological stigmatisation of the above outcasts has today been translated into a spatial exclusion too. At the Har Horin Market (Ulaanbaatar's second biggest), for example, an open waste ground adjoining its eastern wall has developed into a sinister visualisation of 'the dark side of the market' (as one of my local friends coined it). Here, in the so-called Valley of the Drunkards (*övgöntiin höndii*), the people at the absolute bottom of Mongolian society seems to have created a distorted mirror version of the old black market which is considered to be a strictly no-go area by the other visitors to Har Horin. As opposed to the latter, whose professional management and informal organisation amongst merchants are comparable to the Naran Tuul, the Valley of the Drunkards has no permanent fixed points. A steady flow of pickpockets and beggars arrive to exchange their latest spoils into directly consumable items obtained from the warring bands of street children and waste scavengers, who compete to service the former's needs. Meanwhile, the vendors steal occasional glances over the other side of the fence, exchanging comments that are strangely reminiscent of what was once said about the black market as a whole (e.g. that it is an 'immoral' place).

As such, the Valley of the Drunkards can be said to perform a sort of purifying role with respect to the more established communities of vendors, spatially and symbolically affirming what the latter perceive as *their* closer proximity to the world outside. The Valley of the Drunkards, in a perverse sense, is thus the only genuinely liberal market in postsocialist Mongolia, encompassing, as it were, the residual 'public' domain which has not been included in any 'private' community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article has benefited from comments received at the presentation of earlier versions at the

Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen; at the workshop 'Encounters of a postsocialist kind: The movement of goods and identities within and beyond the former socialist world' held at the EASA meeting in Vienna; and at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit at the University of Cambridge. Special thanks are due to Jenia Boikov, Signe Gundersen, Lars Højer, Kåre Jansbøl, Kimiko H. I. Pedersen and Alan Wheeler as well as to the editors of this special issue, who have all contributed to the formation of the present argument.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the Danish Research Board of the Humanities for a two-year post-doctoral fellowship which made this research possible.

<sup>3</sup> Still, of course, practically everyone was engaged in barter- or trade-like transactions by virtue of participating in the informal exchange of desired goods through private networks.

<sup>4</sup> It is probably no coincidence that these markets are associated with the color of black. The same goes for a range of other phenomena which for political, economic or religious reasons have come to stand in a marginal relationship to more dominant arenas of Mongolian life. The country's ancient shamanist tradition, for example, is popularly known as the 'black religion' (*har shashin*) as opposed to the (since the 16th century dominant) school of Gelugpa (or Yellow Sect) Tibetan Buddhism, which is widely referred to as 'yellow religion' (*shar shashin*). See also Pedersen (in press).

<sup>5</sup> Like many places elsewhere in the postsocialist world, the demographic composition of Ulaanbaatar's urban landscape has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Propelled by a recent building boom (funded, a persistent rumor purports, to a great degree by a continual influx of mafia money from Siberia), a number of gated communities have been constructed in the city's southern suburbs close to the forested hills and the beautiful Tuul river. While a significant proportion of this property seems to stand empty most of the year (owned as they are by Russian and Chinese businessmen or by Western expatriates), the rest is inhabited by representatives of the most prominent members of Mongolia's new elite: business tycoons, politicians, and pop as well as sports stars).

<sup>6</sup> *Atamans* are violent entrepreneurs operating at the interstices of social and economic life. Across Mongolia, the term denotes a person, who is able and willing to transgress ordinary thresholds for violent behavior, and therein is imbued with the capacity to lead or (as people prefer to put it) 'handle' (*bar'j baina*) a band of persons, typically a mob of unemployed youths or a gang of prisoners.

<sup>7</sup> As Carrier (1997) also notes, the 'free market' is a Euro-Western cultural construct, which is not necessarily supported even by mainstream economic theory. However, the Mongolian concept of the 'public market' does seem to correspond (although it is not identical) to idea of the market entertained by the so-called 'Austrian economists' (e.g. von Hayek), for whom it is a 'free nexus of impersonal communication and exchange' (Lubasz 1992).

<sup>8</sup> As Humphrey has convincingly demonstrated about the situation in Moscow during the early 1990s, traders here 'live[d] metaphorically in a different layer.. Society was unprepared for morality, let alone legality, in this sphere' (2002: 61). My point is that the same was the case about the 'public' spheres of the Mongolian market during the same period - with the only qualification that there was nothing metaphorical about this marginalization.

<sup>9</sup> The unmistakably patriarchal form of such patron-client arrangements notwithstanding, it is a fact that women are increasingly dominating Mongolia's markets. Accurate statistics are hard to come by, but the previously mentioned ILO survey suggests that more than 70% of the people working on Ulaanbaatar's markets are women (Morris 2001: 65). These figures are supported by my own experiences, both in the capital and in rural areas (see Pedersen 2006). Apart from the fact that the vendor position is symbolically marginal, this development is likely to be related to the fact that the government's structural adjustments seems to have made many female-dominated professions, in particular, redundant. As Morris also notes (2001: 37), Mongolia's 'informal sector' is awash with highly educated people (25 % have a university degree), many of whom seem to be female graduates from obsolete Marxist disciplines. 'After all', as one middle-aged female trader sardonically put it, 'what use do I have these days for my doctorate from Moscow in planned production?'

<sup>10</sup> A clear ranking of goods can be identified at every Mongolian market. Along with electronics and various wholesale products (such as flour and rice), both of which require a lot of capital to trade in, the upper echelons of this hierarchy are occupied by other expensive and/or symbolically significant goods like silver-lined saddles and antique silver knives. At the bottom end, conversely, one finds a range of goods which are considered to be cheaper and of an everyday nature, such as matches, cigarettes, kitchenware and so forth.

<sup>11</sup> I.e. 'the people of the *övgön*'. *Övgön* means old man, but here refers to Chinese vodka, whose small plastic bottles used to have the shape of an old man, complete with long beard and wooden stick. As the cheapest drink available, *övgön* was popular among

alcoholics in the 1990s, but has now been made illegal as it supposedly causes blindness.

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