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Parallel Excavations: Digging into Enchanted Landscapes

Maria-Katharina Lang[1*], Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon[2]

Abstract: Drawing on three ethnographic examples from different research projects and based on collaborative fieldwork, the authors develop an anthropology of digging by highlighting the effects, human and more-than-human reactions, or resistance to the displacement of artefacts, the extraction of mineral resources and archaeological excavations. How is the intrusion into Mongolian soil, which is widely considered as taboo, perceived from different perspectives, for example by mobile herders, Buddhists, Shamans, drivers, archaeologists, and social anthropologists? They argue that any form of digging the ground is seen as an intrusion that might provoke the anger of local spirits and is deeply interwoven with the sacred landscape. Nonetheless the field work examples also show that the interactions between humans and non-humans are flexible and adapt to the circumstances.

Keywords: Digging; artefacts; mineral-resource extraction; archaeological excavation; ethnography; spirits

Introduction

Digging, scratching or touching the ground in Mongolia is practised on various layers and changes the landscape. Due to the traditional belief in the Mother Earth and local spirits, digging the soil is practised reluctantly, as it is seen as piercing the entrails of the Earth (*gazriin hevlii*), and angering the spirits or owners of the land (*lus savdag*). Even removing a small stone from its (original) place is taboo, as it may disturb the spirits and cause negative effects, as "A stone suffers three years once it is moved from its place" (*Bairnaasaa hödölsön chuluu gurvan jil zovdog*)[3].

The technique of digging is a socially constructed action and involves not only handling the earth but also communicating with various involved materialities, human and non-human beings and requires various actions and/or rituals. "How is the intrusion into the ground perceived for different purposes, such as mineral resource extraction or the excavation of artefacts? Are there differences, and what reactions are evoked?" are some of the main questions in our new research project[4].

The displacement and removement of artefacts from their genealogical places and their complex trajectories to become museum objects (in Mongolia or Europe) has been a main research strand in all our projects. While the focus of our research was first on the dislocation and destruction of artefacts – mainly during state socialism and the communist purges in the late 1930s – in later projects it shifted more to the excavation of artefacts and the exploitation of mineral resources along with the manifold repercussions of these actions for the environment, plants, animals, people and non-human beings. In our new project, "Digging into Enchanted Landscapes", we are investigating the reactions to intruding into the earth in Mongolia from different perspectives. During the summers of 2023, 2024, and 2025, we conducted field research, which focused on terrestrial excavation.

Throughout our previous projects, we have consistently encountered the discontent of water and mountain spirits/ owners of the land (*lus savdag*). We will briefly outline three examples from both past and recent field research conducted in Central Mongolia.

"Nomadic Artefacts"

In the project "Nomadic Artefacts"[1], we researched mainly on religious artefacts, the desecration of objects and the history of Mongolian monasteries and museums (Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2016). We documented numerous object histories and the movements of objects between their genealogical places to museums in Mongolia and Europe (Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2020). One initial impetus for this and a previous project on "Mongolian Collections in European Museums"[2] was the responsibility we felt to give (life) stories back to displaced and disenchanted museum collections by investigating the object histories and documenting new object narrations (Lang 2016; Lang & Tsetsentsolmon 2017; 2020).

[1] *Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences*
[2] *Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, and Demography, National University of Mongolia*
[3] *A common expression in Mongolia.*
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* *Corresponding author: maria-katharina.lang@oeaw.ac.at*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4998-7374

[1] *Research project Nomadic Artefacts: A Scientific-Artistic Travelogue (WWTF). https://nomadicartefacts.net*
[2] *Research project Mongolian Ethnographica in European Museums (formuse/bmwf)*

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Figure 1. Rain stone, Övörkhangai Province, 2011. © Maria-Katharina Lang

In 2011, when researching on the agency and biographies of sacred artefacts, we visited an anthropomorphic stone (*khun chuluu*, human stone), sometimes called a "rain stone" or "stone to open the sky", lying in the steppe in Övörkhangai aimag/province (not far from Shankh Monastery). The stone is situated south-east of the Baga Ereen Mountain and on the western bank of the Saryn Gol River, approximately 30 kilometres to the east-south-east of Kharkhorin. This human-shaped stone monument was a sacred object marked with *khadags* (sacred silk scarves) (Figures 1-2).

Mainly, herders of the area would treat the stone with great respect, making offerings such as libations and coins. If there were times of serious drought and the need for rain, they would carefully lift the head of the stone figure slightly and ask for rain, which eventually would occur (Figure 3). Otgonbayar, a herder dwelling nearby the original place of the human stone explains:

Raised in this place and told by their parents not to move it, local people believe the stone is the reason (for the bad weather). Perhaps it is, or perhaps it is not. Some say it is the vein of the ground; others suggest it might be

Figure 2. Rain stone with offerings, Övörkhangai Province, 2011. © Maria-Katharina Lang

Figure 3. Rain stone with lifted head, Övörkhangai Province, 2015. © Maria-Katharina Lang

its lid. My ancestors claimed that a storm would come if you raised it slightly. Recently, there has been little rain. The locals ask me to pour yoghurt on the stone's face, believing that it will bring rain to cleanse it. In my opinion, this practice is an inheritance of thousands of years of life experiences. This stone embodies that human connection (Otgonbayar, Övörkhangai, 11 July 2015).

Like many historic stone monuments, this artefact attracted the interest of museums. Especially newly built museums, such as the Kharkhorum Museum[3] in Kharkhorin, had to be filled with objects. The rain stone was to be transformed into a museum object and was removed from its genealogical place.

After it had been removed and was displayed in the museum in an upright position, natural disasters occurred in the area, which were interpreted by many herders as a result of or in the context of the non-proper dislocation and positioning of the object, which provoked the anger of the spirits and made nature furious, causing catastrophic rainfalls and floods. Otgonbayar says:

Typically, it does not snow that much every year. In some years, there is a zud (glaze), while in others, there is not. Since the situation changes with a slight movement, we believed it was caused by the stone being moved. We worship heaven and nature, and thought this might be the reason. However, people do not hold a special ritual for this stone as they think it is difficult (Otgonbayar, Övörkhangai, 2015 July 11).

The sacred stone did not remain standing upright as a transformed (seemingly profane) museum object in the exhibition hall for long. At the end of 1980s, it was studied by the archeaologist Bayar and identified as dating to the Turkic period, 6th-9th centuries CE (Bayar, 1997). After powerful protests by local herders, it was relocated to its original place, accompanied by rituals by Buddhist monks and shamans before Naadam in 2011 (field work notes, 2012).

The belief in the efficacy of stones is related to a *zadyn chuluu* (breaking stone), which is believed to have the ability to bring rain from the sky. A specific stone characterised by its quality and appearance is personified to be able to influence the heaven and Earth. Based on the records about the magic of the "breaking stone" that could bring bad weather and rainstorm as already recorded in the *Secret History of the Mongols*[4], the belief was further constructed both in academic and public culture. The belief in the efficacy of stone was rooted in the "sky opening/ breaking stone", which was characterised as a "supernatural manifestation" (*tsalig dür*) (Dulam 1999: 268).

We first witnessed the empty place of the missing object in the Kharkhorum Museum. Later the space was filled with an upright standing plastic copy of the original stone.

Local people felt relieved to see the stone returned to its original location, lying in the flat grassland again.

Lately increasingly objects were needed for the Chinggis Khan Museum in Ulaanbaatar, which opened in 2022. If they could still remain part of the (sacred) landscape, historic artefacts were mostly fenced in, and rituals with milk and vodka offerings were officially prohibited due to conservation issues. Often, offerings such as grain, coins, and paper money are made instead of libations. Doing research in nearly all Mongolian museums, we repeatedly witnessed visitors trying to make offerings to sacred objects that were now museum objects. For them, these objects still possessed agency and efficacy (Gell 1998) and were alive or perceived as deities (cf. Tsetsentsolmon & Lang 2016). The (vitrine) glass between them and the objects was not even perceived by the believers. Museum staff had to repeatedly stop visitors from touching the glass panes with their foreheads while worshipping sacred artefacts, or barriers were put up.

"Dispersed & Connected"

In our art-based project "Dispersed & Connected: Artistic Fragments along the Steppe and Silk Roads"[5] we were again often confronted with discussions about angry spirits in connection to resource extractions, environmental destruction and aridity when investigating new infrastructure projects such as new (silk) roads, railways and hydropower plants. We became interested in the repeated narrative of an "infuriated nature" and decided to work on an "Ethnography of Digging".

The idea for the project initially arose when seeing the Mongolian landscape from above, like an impressive image of an ever-changing nervous system (Taussig, 1992) with increasing craters and lines. Beautiful abstract images from above – but on the ground, the intrusive marks of mineral extraction and its infrastructure were felt like a different reality (which we showed, i.e., in our exhibitions). Mongolia ("Mine-golia" see Bulag, 2009) seemed like a place where, from all sides, people were coming to move the earth and dig up the ground to extract valuable resources, including archaeological excavations.

One impression that remained as an image and idea in mind were these "parallel excavations" for very different purposes taking place at the same time. While

[3] *The Kharkhorum Museum in Kharkhorin (Övörkhangai aimag), dedicated to preserving and promoting cultural monuments in the Orkhon Valley, was established in 2010 with the support of Japan. Since its establishment it has enriched the collections with new archaeological finds from the area and its surroundings (Lang 2016: 114).*

[4] *Section 143, The Secret History of the Mongols*

[5] *The project Dispersed and Connected. Artistic Fragments along the Steppe and Silk Roads (PEEK–AR 394-G24) funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), aimed to collect and explore narrations, images and imaginations, artistic fragments and expressions along old and new steppe and silk routes. https://dispersedandconnected.net/en/*

caterpillar tractors were moving large piles of earth, transforming the landscape in creating dystopic crates and hills, archaeologists dug with shovels and used brushes to clean excavated artefacts of earth dust. As required by the Law on Protection of Cultural Heritage (§5.27.8)[6], infrastructure projects are accompanied by archaeological excavations which precede them (Lang 2021: 127-128).

The railroads and roads we studied directly led to places of resource extraction.

They divided pastures, and mineral-resource extraction (mainly coal, iron ore, gold and copper) led to polluted rivers, fewer water resources and a damaged environment (Figure 4). Consequently, the grass quality has drastically changed; it became less diverse, and this changed the quality of milk and meat, as we were told by several herders.

Sacred places such as *ovoos* (sacred stone cairns) or magnetic stones were affected as well. They had to be removed or became inaccessible. Sometimes companies involved would finance new *ovoo* rituals or regional Naadam festivities to avoid the anger and resistance of the local herders – and the spirits. "Nature is getting furious", we would hear as a repeated notion and narrative. Rituals to appease angered spirits related to digging increased, as did the need for religious specialists such as Buddhist monks and shamans to hold specific rituals (see also High 2017; 2018); concerning gold-mining places, some shamans told us they would refuse to participate in rituals there. E., a shaman who claims to have the "high-level" spirit referred to as *tenger* (sky), that only he communicates with, says:

It is a hard thing to heal nature. I mean heal the spirits of nature. I am afraid of the water. If I die, I will drown.

I know that. So, if I do other rituals, I live until I am an old man. I avoid water rituals. There are mountain rituals. I am not afraid of the mountain spirits. So, I do mountain rituals (E., Ulaanbaatar, 2023).

Spirits of every place, whether mountains or rivers, differ in their character. Some are calm and gentle, even if people extract gold, whereas others easily become infuriated over moving even a small stone. Gold mines were perceived as crowded with angered spirits or abandoned by desperate ones as people's deeds became uncontrollable.

E. says: *Gold mining sites differ. Some places are left without spirits. I went to the gold mine in Uyanga sum of Övörkhangai province five to six times. I saw only one spirit there. Spirits could not deal with those people. So, they left that place. They became afraid of the people* (E., Ulaanbaatar, 2023).

As this example shows, the fear is not one-sided. Not only are humans afraid of malevolent spirits, but spirits also become afraid of humans, and this mutual fear shapes the communication between humans and meta-human beings (cf. Solovyeva 2020).

Chinzorig, another shaman who hesitates to help people who dig up the earth or destroy nature and only helps those who suffer, shared his experience visiting the gold mine. He went there to help a private goldminer who had a mental issue because of the spirits there. "I could not calm the land with the gold mine because it was too impure, as it was full of infuriated spirits", Chinzorig told us (Chinzorig, Kharkhorin, July 4, 2023).

The communication between humans and non-humans goes in the same way as between people. One should start greeting the spirits properly. Most importantly, the balance of giving and taking should be maintained. If one takes something from the land, one should offer something back. The image of mineral-resource extraction and archaeological excavations, on the other hand, intrusions to the ground on various layers and for different reasons and findings accompanied us in the current project.

[6] *Law on Protection of Cultural Heritage, retrieved from https://legalinfo.mn/en/edtl/16760257047231*

Figure 4. Forest close to a mine, Selenge Province, 2017. © Maria-Katharina Lang

Figure 5. Remains of the monastery Tsagaan Süm, Arkhangai Province, 2024. © Maria-Katharina Lang

"Digging into Enchanted Landscapes"

In preparation for our project "Digging into Enchanted Landscapes", we conducted field work at Tsagaan Süm, in Khotont sub-district of Arkhangai province, in the Khangai Mountain range in 2024. Places in the landscape are marked with visible *ovoos,* stupas and *sülds*, which make it visible as a sacred and animated landscape. Travelling approximately 40 kilometres upstream along the river Jarantai will lead you to a beautiful, spacious valley. In this valley, hot springs emerge from a marshy, grassy area characterised by gentle hills, converging to form the River Tsagaan Süm.

In a yurt camp in Tsagaan Süm, which is connected to the hot spring (*rashaant*), we met, as previously agreed, a team of archaeologists. They planned to carry out brief surveys[7] in the area.

The works at each site were not supposed to take more than a day and involved probes of earth, drone flights and a survey using a metal detector (max. 50cm deep). We, "the anthropologists", planned an (participant) observation of the act of digging or excavating and interviews with herder families in the area.

Might not archaeological activity be perceived as a disturbing act of intrusion into the earth? And how can this be done in a self-reflexive and more inclusive way, if at all?

Balgas

On the first morning, the team of archaeologists started their survey at the ruins of Balgas (*balgas*) in view of the hot springs. The shape of the ruins looks similar to the ruins of the former historic Uyghur capital Khara Balgas, but at a much smaller scale. They are therefore often considered to be from the Uyghur period, 8th to 9th century (Kolbas 2005; Leder 1895). When we reached the ruins, the team of archaeologists had already dug a trial excavation to extract soil for later analysis. Now they were walking on the site to document and measure it. We saw a member of the team, a (hobby) metal detector with his personal detector and shovel, digging into the soil very rapidly.

We asked about the reaction of local herders and heard that some had come to ask for an official permit, which had been presented to them. Some herders had brought a bottle of airag (fermented mare's milk) to the team as refreshment. While the team of archaeologists was continuing their work, we walked to the ruins of an old monastery (Tsaagan Süm), that had been destroyed during the communist purges in the late 1930s. A few wooden poles, which were left from the monastery ruins, were marked with *khadags* (Figure 5). From the ruins, we went to the *ovoo* on the nearby hill. On the way, we saw an incomplete metal (iron) stirrup decorated with dragon ornaments – probably from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) – and a piece of porcelain from the Mongolian Empire (early 13th to mid-14th century). We later gave it to the Mongolian lead archaeologist, at the end of our initial research, feeling more ambivalent than before and somehow ashamed to have even taken it from the ground, removing it from its place. The efficacy and agency of objects seemed to work

Süm

Next morning, the archaeologists had chosen another site for a short first survey. Locally, this site was just called "Süm" (temple). We passed the ruins of Balgas and

[7] *Such brief surveys potentially offer a broad range of information in a relatively short space of time with a small team.*

Figure 6. Landscape on the way to Süm, Arkhangai Province, 2024. © Maria-Katharina Lang

drove along a small river in lush green steppe landscapes with few animal herds and hardly any people and stopped at an *ovoo* close to a stupa on a hill overlooking mountains, circumambulating and making some offerings (Figures 6-7). Other mountain tops which we saw from a distance were marked with ovoos as well. Apart from these monuments, the landscape seemed untouched until we entered a valley with a few yurts. As we came closer, we saw the archaeologists at work (Figure 8). The active movements of archaeologists and the presence of technological devices all seemed to intrude upon the sacred landscape. Some herders, who had their yurts nearby, arrived with cars and on motorbikes. Just recently, we heard later, there had been some excavations by looters. It is hard to describe the herders' expression at the site: inner turmoil, fear (of an infuriated spirit) or themselves angry spirits? This was a sacred and furious place at the same time and they would "never dig the ground; they would not even let their kids pee close to the site", we were told.

An experienced driver who had been with the archaeological expedition for over ten years told us that it was their tactic to scare outsiders at the beginning. "They say that the place they are excavating is a harsh place with infuriated spirits", he said. Dealing with resisting local people would go in the same vein as the way of communicating with spirits. According to the driver, one would decide the way how to communicate based on the way of greeting. He noted that one should carefully choose the right word for digging namely *maltakh* (scratch) but not *ukhakh* (dig down), when communicating with local people. People use the word "to dig" (*ukhakh*):

If we use the word "to excavate" (maltakh), it would sound a bit different. There is a tiny difference between digging and excavating. If I say: "they are just excavating a bit". It would feel different from "they are digging down". So, a word and its meaning make a difference. Also, the way you talk and communicate is important. (Nyamkhuu, Kharkhorin, 15 July 2024).

Figure 7. Ovoo, Arkhangai Province, 2024. © Maria-Katharina Lang

Figure 8. Archaeologists at Süm, Arkhangai Province, 2024. © Maria-Katharina Lang

Figure 9. Süld, Balgas, Arkhangai Province, 2024.
© Maria-Katharina Lang

Shamans and Buddhist monks deal with infuriated spirits. While shamans do not see any conflict in the matter, Buddhist monks in Ulaanbaatar rather avoid being asked about the role of shamans regarding rituals for infuriated spirits. Repeatedly, contemporary shamanism was seen as an urban development. Black-and-white and coloured standards (*süld*) at the sites of Balgas were put up by a shaman for example, who came from the city and had relatives in the area (Figure 9).

Resistance and Resilience

Local resistance against mining activities in the area was strong, and in some cases successful. Protest against archaeological digging was seen differently by some, as it might generate knowledge and not only extract resources. Among various types of digging, archaeological excavation has been a taken-for-granted action as having official permission and for producing scientific knowledge. Hence, archaeologists do not often hold rituals or offerings for their digs if it is not a site of old temples or ovoos. This may also be explained by the disruption of the Buddhist tradition during the communist era. The perception of an animated landscape and spirits was labelled negatively as superstition at best. In contrast, in countries with an unbroken Buddhist/religious tradition, such as India or Bhutan, excavations are naturally accompanied by appropriate rituals. Professional archaeologists often position their engagement with digs or "site destruction" as "heritage salvage" and knowledge production. However, artefact collectors and looters also play their part in the process to circulate artefacts between private and public institutions.

Conclusion

The action of digging the ground was perceived as an intrusion that might cause the anger of the spirits, the owners of the land, in every case we witnessed. One key as to what makes the spirits furious seems to be the sacred landscape – whether the landscape is marked or enchanted by sacred monuments such as *ovoos* and stupas or sacred mountains. They are also visible and fixed signs of the various invisible entities the cosmos is dwelt (cf. Pedersen 2003) and to which mobile pastoralists can relate to through offerings and rituals. Delaplace (2023) describes *ovoos* as a sort of terminal, offering a platform where the (invisible) spirits, the owners of the land or masters of the land, can be reached. (For outsiders such as researchers/ archaeologists, they may be a salient sign of a sacred and furious landscape and a place to connect).

The question of "taking" and displacing something returns under different circumstances in our projects and is at the same time the basis for a self-reflexive anthropology. The feeling of intruding into someone's life and "extracting" information is inherent in the research process, as is the question of what to give back in return for the knowledge and trust invested in us: the researchers and guests in many homes. Most of the time, this remains as it seems insufficient, and the exchange might be confined to practical gifts (such as snuff tobacco, cookies, sweets) and "listening" to the stories and memories told to us. Certainly, it is easier to observe and describe intrusions of another kind or done by others than by ourselves. Sometimes there is no dividing line, and the observers find themselves observed or observe themselves (von Foerster 1981), getting drawn into the research theme, being the observed all the time anyhow.

In his theory on how rituals of loss and mourning become intertwined with magical thinking, Michael Taussig suggests that these acts of magic are not just emotional acts but performative rituals that are intended to confront, defy, and resist oppressive structures (Taussig 1987). Shamans who hold ceremonies on sacred sites and ruins do not just perform them to acknowledge loss, but also to reassert control over sacred space through symbolic acts. Forms of spiritual resistance, such as in the case of herders who refer to sacred landscapes and infuriated spirits, are not only a means of reclaiming power and reasserting autonomy, but also for retaining continuity and peace in their daily life. The three examples of touching, digging and scratching the ground in different layers, from removing objects from the ground, digging deep for resources or less deep for artefacts, show that the interactions between humans and non-humans adapt to the circumstances. It is a reciprocal relationship between constant change, flexibility and memorised (cultural) knowledge. What these three examples of extractive actions also show is how important and necessary it is

to engage with pastoralists/local inhabitants from the beginning and include local knowledge (systems), whether it is companies or academics. On another level, they reflect cosmologies in which the Earth is seen as a body and, as Mbembe (2025) puts it, different entities are a fabric, a community of inhabitants of the Earth.

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