

# From Childhood Trains to Minecarts

Imaginarities and Realities of Railway in Mongolia

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the historical and contemporary railroad constructions in Mongolia and socio-cultural transformation due to the infrastructural changes. In order to transport the minerals to markets in and above all outside Mongolia, especially China and Russia, states and private companies invest in rail and road transport (plans). When the first long distance railway was built as ‘a gift from Stalin’ between 1947 and 1949, herders who never had seen engine techniques, imagined the railway as a ‘metal snake’ (tomor) that drilled mountains and crossed rivers. Today many people have high hope of this infrastructural modernization and expect better economic development and quality of life as result of the railway expansion. Until now most of the planned new infrastructures such as “The Steppe Road” exist on paper and in the minds. In this research, we are investigating recently realized railway projects in Selenge province in northern Mongolia. The presentation of this infrastructure focuses on the social encounters of and the cultural impact on involved workers, herder families and the natural landscape (including spirit beings). Which economic, ecological and sociocultural changes go hand in hand with the development of the railway? The investigation, based on fieldwork in the years 2017–2019, includes studies on material and visual culture using primary and secondary sources.

**Keywords:** railway construction, infrastructure projects, political narratives, social and environmental encounters

## Introduction

*“If there was a train  
Taking you to your childhood  
Everyone would get on it  
Thinking I am now and then.”*

*(Khüükhed nasand khürgej ögdög  
Galt tereg khervee baidag bol  
Kün бүкхен суunadaa геj  
Khaaya bi boddog yum)*

In Mongolia today children and adults could both easily recite this passage of a well-known children’s song from 1986.<sup>1</sup> Although it is about the charm of childhood nostalgia, the metaphor of “the train taking one back to one’s childhood” (*khüükhed nasand khürgedeg galt tereg*) describes the positive image of trains or railways derived from state socialist development projects. The imagery of the railway was shaped as a vehicle (for everyone) to travel spatial and temporal journeys due to state socialist infrastructure projects and their propaganda. Although the first railway was built to transport coal from the Nalaikh mines in the 1930s (FIG. 1), it grew further as part of Soviet-style modernity to connect Russia and China and became its own “railway kingdom” (*tömör zamyn vant uls*). Railway issues have been and are central for politicization and instrumentalization both in socialist and post-socialist Mongolia. Consequently, the contemporary discourses concerning railway construction, whether about investors, route or gauge sizes, focus rather on the transport of mineral resources than the connectivity of people and places.

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1 The music teacher S. Galmandakh and the well-known poet Z. Tүmenjargal wrote this song, which was titled “I Will Always Love My Childhood” (*Khüükhed nasaa bi khairlaj yavna*).

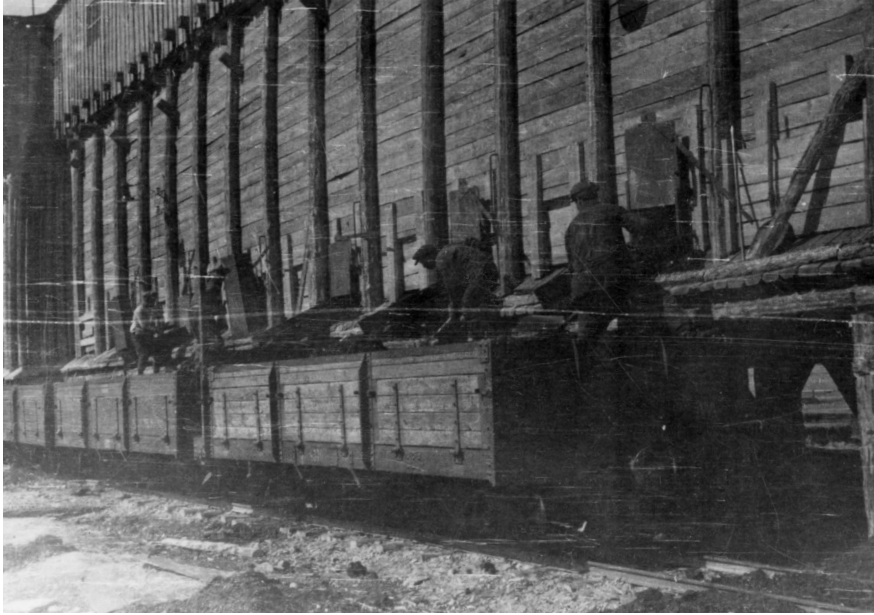


Fig. 1 Loading coals on narrow gauge wagons, 1940 © Mongolian State Archive

This article<sup>2</sup> presents historical and contemporary narrations about existing and emerging railways and roads, which transform the landscapes and the daily lives of herders and animals in Mongolia. Rapid transformations processes as a result of new railways and roads are juxtaposed to slow narrations by individuals.

Historical or imaginative roads such as the “New Silk Road” and the “Steppe Road”, relating to the historic ancient network of trade routes connecting Asia and Europe, have become major themes in global political economy especially in the last decade. In addition, the railway in Mongolia is not just an infrastructure issue, but also one with profound geopolitical implications (Bulag 2014). Alongside

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2 This article was developed within the scientific-artistic research project *Dispersed and Connected. Artistic Fragments along the Steppe and Silk Roads* (PEEK-AR 394-G24) funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), which aims to collect and explore narrations, images and imaginations, artistic fragments and expressions along old and new steppe and silk routes. These routes link dispersed and connected biographies, artistic traditions, cultural monuments and memories. <http://www.dispersedandconnected.net>

the Chinese initiation of the “Silk Economic Belt” (or “One Belt One Road”) in 2013, nowadays called “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and the Russian Eurasian Transport Network project, Mongolia proposed a “Steppe Road” in order to promote regional economic integration. The “Steppe Road” project was presented as an infrastructure to connect Russia and China through Mongolia with five main rail lines, a road, oil and gas pipelines and energy links. With the aspiration to intensify its economic development and increase investment by connecting the two giant neighbouring stakeholders, the government of Mongolia initiated the “Steppe Road National Programme” in 2017. It includes various rail and road infrastructure projects, mainly to connect mining areas to border ports. In May 2017 the Mongolian government issued another program or re-named the old programme as the “Development Road Program”, to be implemented in connection with the BRI. Conferences, meetings, workshops, agreements and discussions have continuously been held at national and international levels. Most of the above infrastructure and transport lines crossing Mongolia still exist only on paper and in the mind – few have been realized yet, some very recently decided.

The not even 30-km railway in the Khüder sub-district of Selenge province is one of the very few railway projects to be realized recently by the Mongolian government. It also has a historical implication, being linked to the main railway, the Ulaanbaatar Railway (*Ulaanbaatar tömör zam*) that runs to the Chinese border in the south and to the Trans-Siberian Railway further north. We conducted field work in Selenge, Ömnö-Gobi, and Övörkhongai Provinces from 2017 to 2019 and interviewed railway workers, herders, miners, private gold miners and administrators.

New infrastructures mostly imply development of and promise connectivity to often very remote areas. The impact of existing and new roads and routes, of course, go far beyond this. The transformations occur on many levels and layers – among others they affect individual life histories, forms of local knowledge, cultural and archaeological sites, resources and natural landscapes, transnational migrations and transfers of people, animals, spirits, ideas and artefacts. Some of the main questions leading this research are: What are the individual and local

responses, reactions and agencies to these processes of transformation? What changes are visible and which narrations are told on the sidelines of the newly emerging roads and the existing old routes? Is it possible to speak of reviving “pre-modern” transport networks?

### “An Iron Sheet” as Stalin’s Gift

This part of the paper elaborates historical highlights of the railway in Mongolia in narratives of J. Nyamdash, a retired railway journalist, whose life had been connected to the railway from its establishment to the present. His life story thus demonstrates the different phases of the railway history, the social impacts of this infrastructure, and most importantly people’s perceptions about the process of introducing a completely new type of transport. Furthermore, informal narratives reveal some implicit discontent among herders despite the intensive propaganda and oppressive communist regime, which one would not find in an official historical record.

From the beginning the history of railway construction in Mongolia has been connected to mineral extraction. The idea of establishing a railway through Mongolia (from Kyakhta to Khüree, today Ulaanbaatar) and from Khüree to Kalgan (Zhangjiakou) had been discussed by Russia, China, the US, Japan and Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The “Agreement to Build a Railway” (*Tömör zam barikh geree bichig*) was part of the tri-partite treaty between Russia, Mongolia and China, known as the “Treaty of Kyakhta” signed on May 25, 1915. Highlighting the importance of connecting Mongolia to the nearest railroad network because trade with Mongolia was flourishing, the government of Mongolia and the Imperial Russian Government defined the Siberian Railway as the nearest, and mutually agreed on building the appropriate connecting railway in Mongolia (National Legal Institute 2010, 113-14). The agreement states that the authority to build a railway in Mongolia was issued by the Imperial Russian Government and if transferring the authority to others the Mongolian government should consult with the latter to ensure it would not harm Russian interests and military concerns.

Regardless of the above agreement and negotiation, the first short, 43-km stretch railway<sup>3</sup> from the Nalaikh coal mines to Ulaanbaatar was built only in 1938. Being built after the establishment of the industrial factory (*Aj üildveriin kombinat*) and the power station (*Tsakhilgaan Stants*), the railway belonged to the Soviet Union until October 15, 1940. Then the 237-km broad-gauge railway from Bayantümen in Mongolia to Solovievsk in Russia was built for the military purposes of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol on the eastern border in the late 1930s. As Soviet military construction workers built this railway, it belonged to the Zabaikalsk Railway until 1956. The first 400-km long-distance (broad-gauge) railway connecting Naushki, the Russian border town, and the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar, was constructed between 1947 and 1949 under the agreement with the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union. The main workforce was the “no. 505 construction group,” which was mainly based at Soviet rail sites such as the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), the Lime-Urgal, the Komsomolsk-Sovetskaya Gavan and the Taishet-Bratsk.<sup>4</sup> The labour force of up to 40,000 workers, including professionally trained railway workers in communications and locomotive construction as well as Russian prisoners of war, was approved by the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs. The opening ceremony for the Naushki to Ulaanbaatar railway took place in Ulaanbaatar on November 7, 1949 (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2  
Opening the Naushki-Ulaanbaatar railway, 1949  
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- 3 This railway for coal transport had narrow-gauge of 750 millimeters.
- 4 Some specialists, such as Gvozdevski as the head of the 505 group, D.V. Uspenskii as the Lieutenant-Colonel, and Gilner N.K. general engineer, were transferred to Mongolia from the western management of BAM (Baikal-Amur Mainline).

While the former two railways were one-track and restricted to mining and military transport, the latter was part of the Soviet-style “high modernity” (Scott 1999) that led to social transformation in the spheres of mobility, materiality and belonging. Herders were mobilized, settled and turned into railway workers. Since the Mongolian-Russian joint venture Ulaanbaatar Railway (*Ulaanbaatar tömör zam*) began operation in 1951, official campaigns were launched to recruit railway workers from seven western provinces.

In 1948, after her husband died, the mother of J. Nyamdash, Punsal, left her home town of Bayantes in the sub-district of Zavkhan province for Ulaanbaatar, 1,000 kilometres away, to seek a better life. Soon after, J. Nyamdash who stayed behind, heard a rumor that his mother had been sent to prison and was held in a place of the *balai shavi* [protracted pronunciation of A. Vlasov<sup>5</sup>] (crazy disciple). When J. Nyamdash asked about the meaning of “crazy disciple,” Zaanaa, who was believed to know much, explained: “The teacher J. Stalin had many disciples. One of them went crazy and became friends with a ‘man-eater’ (*makhchin*) called Hitler. He was such a bad guy that he wanted to kill the teacher Stalin. That is how he became called ‘crazy’ (*balai*)” (Interview with J. Nyamdash, 2018). This anecdote shows the imagination of the people in a remote distance to understand the political situation and describe it in their own ways. For example, Stalin was seen as a great teacher with disciples around him – just like a Buddhist monk. Then, A. Vlasov who betrayed the ‘teacher’ J. Stalin was portrayed in a negative way as an enemy.

Later, J. Nyamdash and local people discovered that his mother Punsal was not in jail but had started working for the no. 505 railway construction camp, which consisted of Russian and Mongolian workers. According to J. Nyamdash, the no. 505 construction group included political prisoners who worked on the BAM railway in Mongolia from 1947 to 1954. “They were not criminals but were put

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5 Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov (1901–1946) was a Red Army general who later adopted pro-Nazi stance and headed a Russian liberation army. Soviet generals and officers who joined the Vlasov army personally experienced cruelties committed by the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*) during the Great Purge. Political prisoners working for the Soviet railway construction group in Mongolia were generally named as the ‘Vlasov army people’ (*Vlasovyn armiinkhan*).

into jail during Stalin's repressions. After the death of Stalin, they were released. They mainly worked for the Naushki-Ulaanbaatar Railway. In the south, in the town Choir, some of them worked until 1954," J. Nyamdash says (Interview with J. Nyamdash, 2018).

In the autumn of 1949, J. Nyamdash was sent to his father's friend at the centre of a *sum* (sub-district) who was planning to bring him to Ulaanbaatar. J. Nyamdash spent the winter there and heard the word "railway" (*tömör zam*) for the first time during a New Year's party. As it was the year of its opening, the word railway (*tömör zam=iron road*) and the names Kh. Choibalsan and J. Stalin were mentioned several times during the party. J. Nyamdash remembers that a "winter old man" (*öвлиin övgön*), or a Russian version of Santa Claus (*ded moroz*) was saying that the "Teacher Stalin" (*Sitaalin<sup>6</sup> Bagsh*) presented the railway as a gift (*tömör zam beleglekh=iron road gift*) to "Father Choibalsan" (*Etseg Choibalsan*). As a little boy, J. Nyamdash then imagined that the old man (winter old man) had a father called Choibalsan and a (Buddhist) monk teacher called Stalin who handed him a long sheet of iron (Interview with J. Nyamdash, 2019).

Political propaganda was a significant part of the process of the railway construction and the topics of the railway and "Stalin's gift" further became central in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A competition for railway songs was organized among composers and writers for the opening of the Naushki-Ulaanbaatar Railway. The song Steel Road (*Gan zam*) by Ch. Lkhamsüren and L. Mördorj, which won the second place, was especially popular and became a hymn of the Mongolian railway.<sup>7</sup> The composer L. Mördorj once described how he got the inspiration for the melody. He was lying on the ground near the Emeelt railway station and felt the sounds and rhythms of passing trains (Interview with Rash, 2018). The lyrics

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6 This is how J. Nyamdash heard of the railway for the first time. Due to the phonetic feature of the Mongolian language with vowels in-between consonants, this was the way to pronounce the name of Stalin.

7 The song was performed for the opening by the well-known singer L. Tsogzolmaa and recorded with the voice of the opera-singer G. Khaidav accompanied by a symphony orchestra. (<https://montsame.mn/mn/read/206268>)  
The Ulaanbaatar Railway Administration Office built a monument in honor of this song and pays tribute to it during celebrations and anniversaries of the railway.



were revised three times, modifying to political conditions and railway changes. In the original it said: “This is a gift of J. Stalin, A broad transportation of good.” (*Ene bol Staliny beleg, Ed tavaaryn örgön teever*). After J. Stalin died in 1953 and the Moscow–Ulaanbaatar Railway was established, it changed to “Connecting Moscow and Ulaanbaatar with Eternal Friendship” (*Moskva Ulaanbaatar khoyoryg; Mönkh nairamdlaar kholbodog*). When the railway between Ulaanbaatar and Zamyin Üüd was established in 1956, it changed to: “Connecting Moscow and Beijing with the Capital of Mongolia” (*Moskva Beejing khoyoryg; Mongolyn nüisleltei kholbood*) (Interview with J. Nyamdash, 2019) (FIGS. 3A-3B).



Fig. 3a  
Building the Ulaanbaatar-Zamyn Uud Road  
named Friendship, 1954  
© Mongolian State Archive



Fig. 3b  
Building the Ulaanbaatar-Zamyn Uud Road  
named Friendship, 1954  
© Mongolian State Archive

These changes reveal not only the external and internal political shifts but also point to the ambition, to position the socialist nation-state of Mongolia as a transit zone connecting Russia and China.

The railway program of state-socialist modernism aimed to (trans)form people’s visions, imaginations and perceptions. Ideological institutions such as the Railway Cultural Centre, the Railway Literature Unit, and the “propaganda train” (*ukhuulgyn galt tereg*) served to propagate the railway project and party ideology either to railway workers or the general public. The “propaganda train” was an additional wagon attached to general trains where cultural figures, writers, musicians and singers travelled and performed ideological events at each railway station. The well-known writer D. Törbat, who started his career at the Railway

Literature Unit, collaborated in the propaganda train for three years with various artists on the line between Selenge in the north and Zamyn-Üüd in the south. “The wagon was detached at one station. We were eating, sleeping, reciting poems, and singing on the train. Then it was attached to the next train and moved to another station.”<sup>8</sup> According to D. Törbat, the first novel about railway workers, *The Comrades (Nökhöd)* was written by D. Darjaa in 1963. The railway administration paid writers to write about railway topics. State socialist propaganda worked on shaping imaginative perceptions (Sneath 2009) to see the railway as the greatest and most prestigious community, as a “railway kingdom”.

### Animal metonymies

The railway was advocated by the socialist modernist state as an essential part of development and modernity, referring to the common notion of “development follows the roads” (*zam dagaj khögjil*) (Lang and Tsetsentsolmon 2021). Nevertheless, informal narratives describing railways in animal metonyms reveal some implicit discontent among herders despite the intensive propaganda and the oppressive regime. In the early years of railway construction in Mongolia, herdsmen who had never seen engine technology imagined the railway as a “metal snake” (*tömör mogoi*) that drilled through mountains and crossed rivers (Bulag 2014) or as a “Russian black stallion” (*orosyn khar azarga*) (Nyamdash 2009). Although horses and snakes are both positively accepted animals by Mongolians, the former as a “precious topaz” (*molor erdene*) and the latter “an animal of land spirits” (*lusyn amitan*), qualifications such as “metal” and “black” have negative connotations that might refer to suspicion and doubt. J. Nyamdash recalls a story he witnessed as a small child during the camel caravan journey to his mother in Ulaanbaatar in 1950. A man called Jambal was leading the caravan. When he saw a steam train (*parovaz*) going uphill superbly making a loud noise and frequent signals and running fast downhill, he said: “Stalin teacher says ‘meat and fat, meat and fat, GIVE ME!’ (*öökḥ makh, öökḥ makh ÖGÖÖCH!*). Then, on the way back he says “I’ve had enough

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8 <http://www.garag.mn/a/62103>. Accessed on November 25, 2020.

and I am full” (*Khanalaa, tsadlaa. khanalaa tsadlaa*). Jamba imitated the sound the steam train made going up and back down. However, his message was that the Soviets were coming to take something from Mongolia and went back after getting it.<sup>9</sup> Despite the government’s propaganda, ordinary people knew what was given to them and what was taken from them, although they could not express it for fear of political repression.

In 1956 J. Nyamdash and his mother later moved to Sainshand near the Chinese border when the railway from Ulaanbaatar to Zamyn Üüd, on the southern border with China started. Experienced and trained workers from the “old railway” (*khuuchin zam*) from Naushki to Ulaanbaatar, started work on this “new railway” (*shine zam*). There is an anecdote that after the completion of the railway line to Russia, Yü. Tsendenbal, the leader of the Mongolian People’s Republic from 1940 to 1984, when he was invited by Mao Zedong, asked him if he should come to visit China by camel caravan.<sup>10</sup> Then finally, in 1956, the new railway called the “Friendship Road” (*Nairamdalyn zam*) between Russia, Mongolia and China was inaugurated. Although many Chinese worked on the construction of the railway, this was not officially mentioned due to the tension between China and Mongolia caused by the Sino-Soviet split. A short story titled “A Train is Coming” (*Bogoon irlee*) by J. Lkhagva describes the imagination of the railway among the people in the Gobi. It narrates:

*By the 1950s, the rumour about railway building was spread in a remote Gobi place and inside herder households in interesting ways. Everyone was saying: “A train had arrived (Bogoon irlee).” Yet, nobody knew what bogoon or wagon was. Once an old man who led a camel caravan to Bayantümen*

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9 The writer Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn also records a story of a railway-builder prisoner and a Mongolian herder. He writes, “During the construction of this railroad the unguarded prisoners were ordered to tell the Mongols that they were Komsomol members and volunteers. When the Mongols heard this, they replied: ‘Take back your railroad, give us back our sheep’” (Solzhenitsyn 1973-8, 592)

10 <http://www.garag.mn/a/62103>. Accessed on November 24, 2021.

*stated: "Coming from the USSR (Seseer), it must either be exhausted or have backache. It cries loudly on the way. After it arrived, it scrabbles, moans and foams at the armpits." Hearing it, I imagined a train was a huge animal. Nowadays, seeing a steam train (parovaz) in films, it reminds me of the old man's talk and it looks like an animal to me.*

(LKHAGVA, A TRAIN IS COMING, 561)

Both, narration and literary work reveal that animal metonyms were used to describe engine technology such as railways or wagons when they were first introduced. While having descriptive connotations of doubt, fear and criticism, trains were likened to horses or camels, with which herders had been familiar (as riding and pack animals) and communicated for long time.

### Minecart 1

In 2009, six decades after the establishment of the Mongolian-Russian joint cooperative Ulaanbaatar Railway, the Mongolian government initiated the Mongolian Railway (*Mongolyn tömөр зам*), a state-owned company. Due to "a mineral turn of Mongolia's economy" (Bulag 2014) in the 2000s, the government aimed to build a national railway network connecting major coalmines to the Chinese border. The State Policy on Railways approved in 2010 presents plans and directions for infrastructure construction of 5683.5 kilometres, most of which connects mining areas to the Chinese border towns. So far, they have not been completed, due to external and internal political and economic factors such as the instability of the government, discontinuity of state policy, corruption and pressure from neighbouring countries. Two brief ethnographies in this section show that the current railway issues focus mainly on mineral transport, while the existing main railway, the former state socialist construction, remains overloaded with passenger transport and freight.

The short railway line where we conducted our investigation in the Khüder sub-district (*sum*) of Selenge province (*aimag*) is the only finished state-funded railway

in the recently planned Mongolian Railway lines (FIG. 4). The Tsagaan Khaalga crossroads or junction, where we started our investigation, is an interesting place, an intersection of three railway lines: the Ulaanbaatar Railway, the Mongolian Railway and the Bold Tömör Yöröö Gol Railway. Recently new railways and roads have been built to access a major Mongolian iron deposit, called Khüder in this area. A new 135-kilometre line has recently been built from the Yöröö depot of the existing main line to the Tömörtei depot in Khüder. The 84-kilometre line, known as the Bayangol Railway, to a place called Khandgait, or Bayangol Mining, was built with Chinese investment and belongs to a private company called Bold Tömör Yöröö Gol.<sup>11</sup> The Bayangol Railway lies along three junctions (zörlög) and two depots (called Tsagaan Khaalga, Khan Chuluut, Tal bulag and Khandgait). From 2005, iron ore was transported from the mines to the main railway line by truck. Bold Tömör Yöröö Gol started building a new railway line with the Chinese Railway Bureau no. 20, completed within three years. The rest of the new line, about 23.5 kilometres from the Khandgait depot to Tömörtei, belong to the state-owned Mongolian Railway company, a transport infrastructure for iron ore from the Darkhan Metallurgy Industry Company. The ore is washed on the spot, to separate iron from earth, and transported directly to China (FIG. 5). Depending on the traffic, it takes a week to reach the Chinese border town of Erlian and to return. From Erlian the extracts are distributed to different metallurgy factories in the north of China. The Mongolian Railway rents wagons and lines to the Ulaanbaatar Railway and the Bold Tömör Yöröö Gol Company, using its own wagons and locomotive, only pays for the track.

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11 It was the first railway line in Mongolia owned by a private company. The Mongolian Trans Logistic, a subsidiary of the Bold Tömör Yöröö Gol deals with railway transport and further built 10.8 kilometres of railway in the Altanshiree sub-district of Dornogobi province and 4.3 kilometres of oil and gas pipelines in Zamyn Üüd, the southern border town.



Fig. 4  
Rail works, Selenge Aimag, Mongolia 2017  
© Maria-Katharina Lang



Fig. 5  
Train with iron ore loads leaving for China, Khüder,  
Selenge Aimag, Mongolia 2017  
© Maria-Katharina Lang

While the newly built and planned rail lines promise economic benefit to the company or the government, herders and animals in the railway area suffer from reduced and divided pasture land (FIG. 6). Herders who sell their milk, dairy products and animal hide enjoy the increased speed through a new road parallel to the new railways. According to Ch. Davaanyam, a herder from Javkhlant sub-district of Selenge, whose family spends the summer along the newly built roads and railways, the fixed road has brought some positive changes to access the market. He says: “It is much better now. Before, it took two to three hours to reach the crossroads (Tsagaan Khaalga) which is 30 km off-road. Milk and meat might deteriorate when it is hot. Now, it takes only 20 to 30 minutes” (Interview with Davaanyam, 2017). Although the paved road was built to access the mines, it helps connect herders to the economic system. As Brian Larkin says, “Infrastructures mediate exchange over distance, bringing different people, objects, and spaces into interaction and forming the base on which to operate modern economic and social systems.”<sup>12</sup> However, herders are not interacting or are entangled with the accelerated speed and connected distances of the railway construction. Trains fully loaded with iron ore pass the pastures and farming fields day and night.

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12 Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *The Annual Review of Anthropology*. 42 (2013): 327-343, here 330. <https://doi:10.1146/aanurev-anthro-092412-155522>.



Fig. 6 Khüder sum, Selenge Aimag, Mongolia 2017 © Maria-Katharina Lang

## Minecart 2

The other location we investigated in 2018 was Tavan Tolgoi in the South Gobi, where major Mongolian coal, copper and gold mines are located. New infrastructures in this area have also not been established for the welfare of the inhabitants of the areas but to connect the mines to transport resources, mainly to China. Just shortly after we arrived in the South Gobi to document the impact of Mongolia's major coal mine, Tavan Tolgoi, and copper/gold mine, Oyu Tolgoi, after ten years of discussions and scandals an influential governmental decision concerning new transport lines was made: the decision to build a railway and new road from the Tavan Tolgoi mine to Gashuun Sukhait at the Chinese border (FIG. 7). It had been decided to sell 30% of Tavan Tolgoi on the international stock market. Another joint-stock railway company, the Tavan Tolgoi Railway, was built on August 8, 2018, by the Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi (ETT) (66%)<sup>13</sup> and the Mongolian Railway (34%), which will build the line from Tavan Tolgoi-Gashuun Sukhait. The

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13 ETT is a coal mining company established in 2012. It extracts coking coal from an open mining and directly sells it in raw to China. ETT is located 270 kilometres from the border, which means from the port of Gashuun Sukhait.



Fig. 7 Building the Tavan Tolgoi - Züün Bayan railway, Mongolia 2019 © 24 tsag.mn

task of building the line from Tavan Tolgoi to Gashuu Sukhait was transferred from the Mongolian Railway to the Tavan Tolgoi Railway. According to Sh. Bayarkhüü, a division manager of ETT, the company's goal is to build the railway to the company's area. He states: "the main problem is transport. We transport the extracted coal for 270 kilometres to the border by truck. If we transport it more cheaply by rail, it would positively affect the price of coal. Once we have the railway and get to the border, then it could be sold to customers in China, Korea and Japan" (Interview with Bayarkhuu, 2018). There are two routes from the Tavan Tolgoi area to the border by truck: one to Tsagaan Khad (on the Mongolian side) and the other to Gants Mod (on the Chinese side). The ETT sends five hundred coal trucks to Tsagaan Khad. Once the number rises to a thousand it causes a long tailback due to the low capacity of the local port of Gashuun Sukhait.

Hence the rail line from Tavan Tolgoi and Gashuun Sukhait has been a priority for the government. However, the plans have been changed recently to build a new 414.6-kilometres broad gauge (1520 mm) line from the Tavan Tolgoi mine not directly to the Chinese border but to Züünbayan sub-district of Dornogovi province. About 37 minefields are located within a 30-kilometre radius of the line from Tavan Tolgoi to Züünbayan. This railway would also join the main line, the





Fig. 8 Coal trucks on the way to China, Ömnögovi, Mongolia 2018 © Maria-Katharina Lang

Ulaanbaatar Railway, which further connects to the eastern Chinese Kaczensky ports or to the Russian port of Vostochnyi in Vladivostok. The Ministry of Road and Transport Development of Mongolia signed a contract to cooperate with the Russian Railways (*Rossiyskie zheleznye dorogi*) as an open joint-stock company on the newly planned railway (on November 5, 2019). (The plan is to finance the new line with profits from the Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi coal-mining company by buying Mongolian Railway bonds.) The labor force would be provided neither by the Ulaanbaatar Railway nor by the Mongolian Railway but the Mongolian army general staff.

While governments and parliaments have repeatedly been changing decisions, long queues of trucks with open loads of coal still travel on the mostly unpaved roads (FIG. 8). Discourses on railway construction have become (new) anecdotes so that people say “nobody would be surprised if the President said he would build a railway to the moon.”

## Conclusion

This paper presents historical and modern highlights of railway construction, which are mainly connected to mineral resources in Mongolia. It shows how the first railway project, as a part of Soviet modernization, influenced people’s

visions, perceptions, and individual lives. State socialist propaganda changed the imagination of the railway from the metaphor of a “metal snake” to being “Stalin’s gift”, “bringing development”, and as a “vehicle for journeys.” However, unofficial narrations also show that people expressed their contested views in sarcastic ways although not speaking publicly.

The New Railway Project (from Tavan Tolgoi to Züün Bayan) and the directions for future railways mentioned in state policy are heavily dependent on mining in the area and increasingly related to Chinese stakeholders. Both ethnographies, from two different places in the north and south of Mongolia, show that the focus of the new infrastructure projects is rather to transport mineral extracts than to connect people and places. Railways here rather disperse materialities, commodities and people. People mostly still have to use the unpaved dirt roads. The highly praised “connectivity” and “win-win situation” of the “New Silk Road” or China’s BRI remains more than questionable when travelling on side roads of the “Silk Roads.” Although Mongolia aspires to gain advantage as a “transit nation” (Bulag 2014) between Russia and China, and a demanding “coal supplier” with its imaginative roads, in reality, it is in “a long (and slow) queue” waiting to be connected to international transport networks and trading routes.

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