

# Introduction

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This special issue of *Acta Mongolica* features a compilation of articles presented at the first International Mongolian Studies Symposium Vienna, held at the Weltmuseum Wien from 23 to 24 January 2020. The planned series of Mongolian Studies Symposiums Vienna originated in the idea of focusing on social and cultural anthropology and interdisciplinary approaches including Mongolia-related research on archaeology, history, arts and natural sciences. The symposium aims to be a forum for international Mongolian Studies scholars and artists to present and discuss theoretical and empirical research, exchange knowledge and enhance networking and communication on current research issues and approaches. We intend to bring researchers, scholars and artists together biennially with the aim of discussing recent investigations and works, ongoing research projects and experiences.

The first symposium was generously supported by the National Council for Mongolian Studies, Institute of Mongolian Studies of the National University of Mongolia, Eurasia-Pasific Uninet, the Weltmuseum Wien and the Austrian Academy of Sciences. It was organized as part of the research project *Dispersed and Connected: Artistic Fragments along the Steppe and Silk Roads*.<sup>1</sup> The symposium entitled *Dispersed and Connected: Mobilities, Materialities and Belonging(s) in Mongolia* focused on various kinds of movements of people, animals, and objects and their socio-cultural, economic and environmental transformations in Mongolia. It further discussed the impacts of global and geopolitics, mega development projects, and infrastructure constructions on everyday life of

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individuals, materialities, art and artefacts, and belongings. Hence the mobilities entail a broad range of temporal and spatial movements mediated through a variety of agencies, (infra)structures, and platforms.

The overarching research project *Dispersed and Connected* deals with narrations, images and imaginations, fragments and artistic expressions of Mongolian belonging along old and new Steppe and silk routes, which link dispersed and connected biographies, artistic traditions, cultural monuments and memories. The project idea arose as a reaction to China's announcement of a "New Silk Road" or "One Belt and One Road" policy in 2013, labelling future global long-term infrastructure plans and the concomitant proclaimed "connectivity", "partnership of dialogue" and "win-win cooperation" (Frankopan 2018). The impacts of existing and new roads and routes, of course, go far beyond the officially promoted political discourse. The transformations occur on many levels and layers – they affect among others individual life histories, forms of local knowledge, cultural and archaeological sites, resources and natural landscapes, transnational migrations and transfers of people, ideas and artefacts.

This issue consists of articles that could be divided into three sub-topics – mobilities, materialities, and belongings – and ordered accordingly. However, there is a density of thematic entangling and interweaving among the individual articles as well as between these three topics.

Mobility entails not only movements but also "means different things, to different people, in differing social circumstances" (Adey 2006, 83). Diverse kinds of movements signify bonds between people, place, and culture across time and space (Salazar and Smart 2012). Historical and archaeological findings show that (contemporary) discourses of urbanization, cosmopolitanism, globalization, and cultural diversity could be featured in (pre)historical contexts and settings. The long-standing conceptual lens has defined societies with characteristics of (im)mobility, categorizing them as either nomadic or sedentary. The opening article co-authored by Hendrik Rohland, Christina Franken, Ulambayar Erdenebat, and Tumurochir Batbayar departs from "materialities" – in this case recent archaeological findings – and introduces cities in a nomadic environment

which further questions clear-cut distinctions of (im)mobility. Dealing with the urbanization processes of the two historical sites of Karabalgasun, the Uyghur capital from around 745 until 840, and Karakorum, known as the historic capital of the Mongol Empire, the authors argue that the “nomadic societies developed some degree of urbanization” which is “not an evolutionary transition from nomadic to sedentary societies” but “a specific type of urban place.” This further presents the incorporation or combination of sedentary societies and the nomadic world order and interactions between nomad elites and sedentary subjects.

Going back in chronological time artefacts from a burial tomb of a nomadic Turkic aristocrat built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century at Shoroon Bumbagar near Ulaan Kherem in Bulgan province excavated and documented by Erdenebold Lhagvasuren make it possible to enlighten the manifold processes of interaction and cultural transfer along existing (steppe and silk) roads of that time (Erdenebold, 2017). For this article the excavated coins with inscriptions were chosen to show the movement of artefacts.

From the pattern of construction and (infra)structure of (pre)historical cities and the mobility of artefacts, the paper by Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon and Maria-Katharina Lang takes the reader to the historical and contemporary narrations about existing and emerging railways and roads in Mongolia. Presenting the rapid transformation processes of new railways and roads juxtaposed with slow narrations by individuals, it shows parallel strains of velocity, distancing and mapping that differ between the (inter)national power-structure and everyday life of herders. While the government aims to accelerate the connections and speed as a transit zone and also at taking part in the new mega projects such as New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), herders and animals endure environmental changes but also enjoy “effective slowness” (Delaplace and Humphrey, 2020).

The following two articles further discuss the Chinese policy of the BRI and its impacts on Mongolia and other parts of the world. From a sinologist’s perspective, Manlai Nyamdorj presents the political, economic and cultural contexts of China in which the current concept of the BRI formed. Collating the BRI, as “a complete set of strategy and policy proposals in the form of infrastructure development and

financing”, with postmodernity – the global capitalist order, Nyamdorj argues that China is re-identifying the global capital system by “accelerating its expansion into previously marginalized countries while strengthening its own posture in the global capitalist system.” Contrasting with the discourses on contemporary infrastructure networking, Shagdarsuren Egshig’s article seeks historical traces of the Silk Roads from the time of the Mongolian Empire. With her accurate comparisons of historical and contemporary Silk Roads not only as routes but as complex constellations, Shagdarsuren argues that the New Silk Road project is grounded not only the concept but the structure with “soft and hard factors”.

The BRI has defined key areas as “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds.”<sup>2</sup> The aim of “facilities connectivity” is to establish an infrastructure network connecting various Asian sub-regions with other parts of Asia, Europe and Africa. Although countries including Mongolia are listed due to their affectedness and connectedness within the BRI in microeconomic indexes such as “China Connectivity Index,” published in 2016 by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Standard Bank of China,<sup>3</sup> the promised and promoted “connectivity” of roads and railroads is questionable. All these national and transnational infrastructure plans, maps of routes and transport lines remain as an “abstract distance-speed calculation” (Humphrey 2020) but have not been sufficiently materialized. Historical imaginaries of roads and routes have been re-formulated and instrumentalized to legitimize modernization projects. Meanwhile people, materialities, and commodities are being mobilized, (dis)connected, and dispersed in their own ways (Lang and Tsetsentsolmon 2020).

The next set of articles, on the topic “belongings”, concern human-animal relations, place attachment and the mobilities of animals. Developing on his theories on the notion of *nutag*, which means “birthplace, homeland and country

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2 Belt and Road Portal (*Yidai yilu*), “The Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan” <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/13392.htm>. Accessed on 3 February 2020.

3 Conner Judge and Sanchir Jargalsaikhan, “Guest Post: China’s Belt and Road Initiative—Mongolia Focus,” Strategic Analysis: Contemporary Mongolian Politics, Resources, Society, 12 March 2019, <http://blogs.ubc.ca/mongolia/2019/obor-bri-mongolia-sco-neasia/>. Accessed on 3 February 2020.

of origin”, Bumochir focuses on *nutag* in human-animal relationships and presents the ways in which it is shared by both people and animals. The histories of mutual relations between humans and animals are narrated only by humans (Ingold 2000). Bumochir describes the process which horses are “nationalized” in Mongolia and portrayed in artistic representations such as stories, films and poems in the state socialist and global capitalist realms. He calls “the naturalization of nationalism through drawing an analogy between man and horse” as animalification in which nationalist sentiments towards territoriality and place attachment are embodied in the imagery of animals.

While Bumochir’s contribution discusses *guideg mori* – horses running back home – the mobility of the *khulan* (wild ass), moving across wild steppes and desert plains is presented in the article by Petra Kaczensky, Oyunsaikhan Ganbaatar, Nandintsetseg Dejid and Bayarbaatar Buuveibaatar. The article highlights the importance of the high mobility of the *khulan*, which are identified as the flagship species for the “ecosystem functioning of the Mongolian Gobi, including large-scale seed dispersal and provision of water holes for other wildlife.” The authors provide insights into the economic, social and ecological affections to the degradation of *khulan* mobility such as infrastructure construction, resource extraction, livestock increase and herders’ perceptions. Moreover, they suggest a set of tools to “maintain *khulan* and other wide-ranging ungulates at current population levels throughout the Gobi–Steppe Ecosystem” where the *khulan* would need “the multi-use landscape between protected areas and a high degree of landscape connectivity.” There is a controversial ratio between the mobility of *khulan* and development impacts.

The series of articles collected in this special issue comprise interdisciplinary perspectives on discourses of mobilities, materialities, and belongings. Despite of the regional focus, the topics cover a vast area of spatial, temporal, and social mobilities. Taking a variety of historical and archeological records, artefacts, narrations, and artistic representations, this compilation contributes to expanding the existing knowledge, categories and views with insiders’ perceptions. It further presents discourses of ongoing transformation processes, increasing migrations,

various forms of mobility, disturbed environments, human-nature, human-animal and human-artefact interactions, and distribution of materialities.

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