

Mobilities and Immobilities in Mongolia: A Short Essay on Potentials and Dilemmas

Ines Stolpe

Abstract

After summarizing the activities of our research cluster with references to its joint theoretical background, this short essay provides comparative perspectives on potentials and dilemmas of im/mobilities in Mongolia using some examples from my research topics with a focus on modernity and mobilization.

Keywords: im/mobility, mobilization, history marketing, nomad-mainstreaming, inequality, education, development, *nutag* councils, COVID-19

Our research cluster *Mobility and Immobility in Mongolia*¹ was launched during a workshop following the international conference *Mongolian Studies: Perspectives of Academic Cooperation*,² conceptualized and organized by Mongolian Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany, in 2015. Participants considered it important to promote academic cooperation and exchange between diverse facets of Mongolia-related research. We agreed on the overarching concept of mobility/immobility, because its relational dynamics facilitate the mobilization of collaborative research and also an inclusion and support of young scholars. Already during the kick-off workshop, held at the Göttingen State and University Library (Germany) in 2016, it became clear that all people involved enjoyed the fruitful dialogues between different approaches in a spirit of mutual learning and cooperation under the umbrella of mobilities research. Since then, our research cluster has developed, grown, and changed. The conference *Mobility and Immobility in Mongolian Societies*, organized by the Institute for the Science of Religion and Central Asian Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland, was inspiring and promising for future collaboration that promotes synergies between different approaches within and beyond Mongolian Studies. When I was invited to hold the keynote presentation, I decided to explore potentials of the concept using examples from some of my research topics.

Mobilities studies with their ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry 2006) have generated fresh perspectives in social and cultural sciences. Resulting from a criticism-deserving underestimation of the impacts of movements, the concept has developed towards a more power-sensitive focus on conditions for mobilities as

¹ Supported by the National Council for Mongolian Studies with a grant from the Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (Mongolia): <https://www.mongolistik-mobilitaet.uni-bonn.de>.

² Financed by DAAD. <https://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/de/inst/mongtib/datei/flyer-mongolistik-tagung-2015>.

well as their constraints and, as a consequence, included dimensions of immobility. More recently scholars suggested to look at “im/mobilities as a blended concept” (Hackl et al. 2016, 23), since the paradigm has extended its scope on social relations, status, and inequality. What has not been focused sufficiently yet are dimensions of mobilization and temporal mobilities. In the case of Mongolia, I argue, it is especially an outstanding capacity to mobilize which facilitates modern forms of mobility in time and space beyond obvious regional movements such as nomadic pastoralism and migration. In this short essay, I will briefly touch upon a range of examples most of which were part of my research over the years.

While I am writing these lines, people worldwide share localized experiences with COVID-19-induced im/mobilities. Mongolia is one of the few states which so far curbed the pandemic successfully, because policymakers acted proactively and embarked on a strategy of preventive measures. At this time, when many countries still do not have a workable concept for continuing education under the conditions of the ongoing pandemic, Mongolia already looks back on six months of distance learning with advanced TV lessons and dedicated on-line coaching. Whether organizing festivities under the conditions of quarantine or dealing with pandemic-related constraints of public life, Mongolia was an early bird. Moreover, in contrast to other countries, such as Germany, where expecting immediate help from the state was a widespread common response, the attitude of Mongolia’s citizens as well as organizations and companies was much different: Most were thinking first and foremost how they themselves could contribute to overcoming the crisis (Erdene-Očir & Stolpe 2020). Insofar the country’s achievements were recognized by outsiders, they caused as much admiration as astonishment.³ Apparently, some did not think Mongolia would be capable of taking a pioneer role in dealing with challenges like this. Yet there are many aspects that predestine the country for a far-sighted management of crisis situations. Apart from obvious factors such as bordering China where this pandemic originated, Mongolians have always been outstandingly capable of dealing with unpredictability. Without culturalist overemphasis it appears reasonable to say that mobile pastoralism as the traditional way of life has contributed to a highly developed tolerance of ambiguity as well as capacities for mobilizing resources. Even though the last-mentioned might also be associated with ancient military campaigns, today’s forms of mobilization are based on modern progress aspirations.

Ever since my first visit to Mongolia in 1992 during the country’s first economic crisis in the post-socialist era when the lack of fuel and electricity invited free-roaming animals, including Altai wapiti (*maral*), to wander the streets of Ulaanbaatar, I was intrigued by the people’s flexibility and ingenuity in overcoming difficulties. Dynamic pragmatism might not be particularly Mongolian as such, yet it cannot be denied that there are ways of inventing, re-creating, converting, and remodelling that express unique characteristics arising from a socio-cultural and historical context

³ For a much-noticed example in English language see: <https://medium.com/@indica/covid-underdogs-mongolia-3b0c162427c2>.

that makes them recognisable. And even though I did not call it mental mobility (or Mongolization, for that matter) back then, it contributed significantly to my decision to embark on Mongolian Studies. A few years later, as a student, I spent my semester break working in an EU-funded project for street children in Ulaanbaatar in 1996. Through this, I got to know the city from below, and I learned a lot about how a social breakdown can trigger spatial mobility (children leaving their homes) and lead to social immobility (poverty and exclusion). Since then, relations and interdependencies of spatial, social, temporal and mental mobilities in Mongolia have been integral parts of my research, from which I will briefly give a few topic-related examples below.

Recognizing dimensions of inequality is expressed in the concept of “Bounded Mobilities” (Gutekunst et al. 2016). In the introduction to the book with the same title, it reads: “Looking at im/mobilities, with their simultaneities and interrelations, opens up a new perspective that takes different dimensions *within* one reality into account. Such a perspective also has political implications” (Hackl et al. 2016, 24). The same applies to potential roles area studies can play concerning mobilities research: “The magic word ‘mobility’”, Bachmann-Medick writes, is “powerless unless the theories and concepts we work with become ‘localized’. Area studies, with its certain mode of cultural and social ‘groundedness,’ seems particularly suited to this task of localization.” (2014, 121). – Such ‘groundedness’ is, of course, largely based on language knowledge. However, the title of our very own research cluster *Mobility and Immobility in Mongolia* confronted us with challenges, not only regarding its translation. As Mongolists, we are concerned with emic perspectives, “consciously working through the limits of European thought” (Chakrabarty 2014, 67). Thus, we embarked on using the mobilities paradigm as a heuristic device in order to explore Mongolian notions and representations. Yet attempts at translation either ended up fairly vague (*öörchlögdömtgii chanar, uyan khatan baidal*) or covered primarily spatial dimensions of mobilities (*khödölgöönt ba togtongi üil yavts, nüüdel suudal*).

Concerning our regional focus, it is not surprising, that spatial mobility appears prominent. When discussing the evolution of world systems before European hegemony, Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) described the Mongol Empire as part of an archaic globalization, due to several forms and dimensions of mobility. Nowadays, hardly any other state across the globe is as associated with nomadism as Mongolia, a country that used the slogan “Nomadic by Nature” for its self-marketing at the world’s largest *International Tourism Trade Fair* in 2015. As the slogan indicates, spatial mobility has always been an integral part of cultural identity, yet became part of the national branding at a time when the majority of Mongolia’s population had settled down.

Even though distinctive features of the socialist era are rather not considered effective for history marketing⁴ vis-à-vis a global audience, they cannot be omitted

⁴ The term originates from public relations of companies, which use certain aspects of history for generating positive emotions. Concerning Mongolia, there are some historiographic approaches which mobilize the past as marketing strategies in global struggles for recognition.

when discussing modern forms and patterns of mobility. Until the late 1950s, a majority of the population was leading a mobile way of life, and the unique modernization of the then Mongolian People's Republic was decidedly based on a mutual integration of spatial and social mobility, the latter being more and more associated with ambition and progress. Given that state policy and institutions were from the outset oriented towards integrating mobile herders into projects of modernization, the MPR was a peerless example of what I call 'nomad mainstreaming' (Stolpe 2015a). Interesting examples for mobilizing state institutions were strategies used during the literacy-, and hygiene campaigns in order to reach the moving target groups in the steppe. Elements such as mobile music and theater troupes, peripatetic teachers, and members of the youth league as 'riding newspapers', mobile shops (*nüüdliin delgüür*) as well as mobile hygiene control commissions (*ariun tseveriin shalgaltyn kommiss*) proved highly effective. They can be seen as early forms of what today would be called outreach work, and their formula for success was to a large degree based on their focus on women who were (and are) pioneers when it comes to profound transformations of social spheres (Stolpe 2008b, 2008c).

Not 'nomadism' was associated with backwardness in the MPR, but illiteracy. In order to combine spatial with social mobility, schools were built further and further out in the grassland, and the new (co-)educational system was in many respects coordinated with needs of mobile animal husbandry (Stolpe 2008a, 2016). This is why internationally acknowledged accomplishments in education could be achieved: a country with a predominantly mobile population was the first state in Asia that reached nationwide alphabetization (for which it was awarded by the UNESCO in 1970). Another noteworthy feature is the so-called reverse gender gap: since parity was reached in the 1970s, female graduates have always been the majority in higher education.

Mongolian relations to im/mobility include critical dialogues about the relationships between past, present, and future.⁵ These dialogues are informed by images of temporal mobility. Whereas the MPR's 'Bypassing Capitalism'-narrative (*kapitalismyg algasaad/algasch*) pictured the country's development as a highly dynamic journey through history and, perhaps more important, as part of worldwide progression,⁶ the degradation into the so-called Third World after the end of socialism had far-reaching implications. Now, three decades later, disenchanting feelings of being stuck in transition are widespread. More often than not, Mongolia is pictured as 'between transition and modernity' (as if that could not be said for all states). Boris Buden aptly stated from a comparative perspective: "The belatedness of the East designates a cultural difference in time" (Buden 2014, 174). Mongolia's categorization as one of the 'developing countries' (*khөгij baigaa орнууд*) in contrast to 'developed countries' (*khөгсөн орнууд*) refers to what I would consider

⁵ On competing views of Mongolia's colonialism discourses see Stolpe & Jigmeddorj (2018).

⁶ An unforgotten manifestation was when the MPR became the 10th country to send an astronaut, J. Gürragchaa, into outer space in 1981. This highest possible social and spatial (if not spacial) mobility is considered one out of ten important events in Mongolia's 20th century history.

immobilities of translation, even more so as we can only hope that all countries keep developing.

Back in the 1990s, the so-called shock therapy included harsh cuts in education and the donor-driven essentialisation of herders as ‘nomads’ discursively turned them from a potential into a challenge of development. As a result of privatization, some pastoralist families stopped sending their children, particularly boys, to school because they were short of workforce in herding. Another – also unintended – reason for school drop-outs in the 1990s was the hasty attempt to re-introduce the Mongolian script (*mongol bichig*) as part of mobilizing traditions. But it was particularly the decline of rural infrastructure, including dormitories, which resulted in constraints of social mobility options for a considerable part of the youth. Ironically during the first *Education for All* decade, the young generation had less educational opportunities than their parents, which is why herder families with ambitions for social mobility often had to embark on rural-to-urban migration for education (Stolpe 2008a). At the same time, unemployment triggered a recourse to subsistence economy, but many of the so-called ‘new nomads’ could not make a living with “pre-modern means of subsistence” (Bruun 1996, 65), and the process of an apparent ‘re-nomadization’ went into reverse at the end of the 1990s when a continuous rural-to-urban migration turned the so-called nomads into a minority.

Today, more than half of Mongolia’s population resides in cities, and many citizens live abroad. The concentration in Ulaanbaatar is due to largely centralized opportunities for social mobility. One way of addressing challenges of the rural-to-urban migration was the emergence of *nutag* councils (*nutgiin zövlöl*), which have developed unique figurations of mobility and mobilization. Initially established in the 1990s when the countryside faced a sudden disintegration, these dynamic multilocal networks have become the most widespread feature of Mongolia’s civil society landscape operating independently of foreign aid. Thus, they allow insights into genuine knowledge cultures and structures of relevance that follow (socio-)logics characteristic for modern Mongolia. *Nutag* councils do not have a preconceived agenda, and their existence is mainly visible through initiatives. They represent a broad spectrum of civil society interests, and their activities are as diverse as the ideas, potentials, and capacities of their active members. However, all have in common that they contrive ways to (re-)integrate rural areas into processes of progress and development and to increase their visibility. In order to gain the greatest possible attention for projects, a number of influential members is usually recruited for the board. Whether living in a city or a foreign country, people are considered parts of their rural district and/or province (*nutgiin khün*). Calls to action happen by means of mobile phones, the internet (primarily via Facebook) and mass media, all of which have the potential for mobilizing people swiftly.⁷ Typical activities are emergency aid (for example at times of *zud*), the organization of *nutag*-related social and cultural

⁷ Paradoxically, some pastoralists have more recently become less mobile in order to have access to the mobile phone net.

events, and, more continuously, the support of public institutions, locally associated businesses and talented young people, tourism, historiography, community-management of natural and cultural heritage sites, and – mostly in mining areas – environmental protection. While the countryside benefits from networking of their urbanites who wish to give something back (*ach khariulakh*), the latter regularly visit their *nutag* to find social and spiritual support. Active and successful *nutag* mobilize a wide spectrum of knowledge cultures, councils work participatory and transparent and use their affiliation with heterogeneous worlds to open up and utilize opportunities, in Mongolian usually described as *bolomj*, a term that implies resources in the widest sense (Stolpe 2008a, 2014, 2015b, 2019, 2020).

One controversial issue in the context of mobilizing Mongolian *nutag*-concepts is the claim of multiple territorial affiliations during election campaigns (Byambabaatar 2017), a recent phenomenon which Munkherdene and Sneath (2018, 822) subsumed under “*nutagism*”.⁸ Yet behind this is the excessive politicization of administration that has paralyzed important aspects of social and political life in Mongolia since 1996. The large-scale exchange of public servants after each election (*khalaa selgee*) causes institutional instability, a high insecurity (*batalgaagüi*) for individual biographies and poisons the public climate when competence is less important than party membership. It is considered an unsustainable (*togtvorgüi*) ‘political disease’ (*uls töriin övchin*), unsustainable (*togtvorgüi*) and can be characterized as a serious immobilization of the society (Stolpe 2016).

Urban Mongolia, particularly Ulaanbaatar, suffers from immobilizations caused by congestion. Overcrowded city schools have for long been teaching in shifts (even before COVID-19), hopeless traffic jams, a lack of leisure space and playgrounds, and a hazardous air pollution (which even influences family planning) have affected life quality for all urbanites, and many well-off elites, no matter how much national pride they display, try to escape. New Mongolian forms of “bounded mobilities” emerge, and show that “Privilege, mobility and performance are closely connected” (Hackl et al. 2016, 27).

References

- Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Bachmann-Medick, Doris. “From Hybridity to Translation. Reflections on Travelling Concepts.” In *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*, edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick, 119–136. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “Place and Displaced Categories, or How We Translate Ourselves into Global Histories of the Modern.” In *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*, edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick, 53–68. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.

⁸ Italics in original.

- Bruun, Ole. "The Herding Household: Economy and Organization." In *Mongolia in Transition*, edited by Ole Bruun and Ole Odgaard, 65–89. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Studies in Asian Topics, No. 22. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996.
- Buden, Boris. "Translation and the East. There is No Such Thing as an 'Eastern European Study of Culture'." In *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*, ed. by Doris Bachmann-Medick, 171–180. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.
- Byambabaatar, Ichinkhorloo. "Environment as Commodity and Shield: Reshaping Herder's Collective Identity in Mongolia." *Pastoralist Livelihoods in Asian Drylands: Environment, Governance and Risk*, edited by Ariell Ahearn and Troy Sternberg, 41–70. Cambridgeshire: The White Horse Press, 2017.
- Erdene-Očir, Tümen-Očiryn, and Ines Stolpe. "Die Mongolei als Vorreiter in Zeiten des Coronavirus: Zum Umgang mit den Herausforderungen in der Öffentlichkeit und im mongolischen Bildungswesen" In *Mongolische Notizen: Mitteilungen der Deutsch-Mongolischen Gesellschaft* No. 27 (2020): 6–30.
- Gutekunst, Miriam, Andreas Hackl, Sabina Leoncini, Julia Sophia Schwarz, and Irene Götz, eds. *Bounded Mobilities: Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016.
- Munkherdene, Gantulga, and David Sneath. "Enclosing the Gold-Mining Commons of Mongolia: The Vanishing Ninja and the Development Project as Resource." In *Current Anthropology* 59.6 (2018): 814–838.
- Sheller, Mimi, and John R. Urry. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A*. 38 (2) (2006): 207–226.
- Stolpe, Ines. *Schule versus Nomadismus? Interdependenzen von Bildung und Migration in der modernen Mongolei*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2008a.
- . "Display and Performance in Mongolian Cultural Campaigns." In *Conflict and Social Order in Tibet and Inner Asia*, edited by Toni Huber & Fernanda Pirie, 59–84. Leiden: Brill, 2008b.
- . "Die Ankunft ungebetener Gäste: Hygienekontrollen in der mongolischen Steppe." In *Die Ankunft des Anderen: Repräsentationen sozialer und politischer Ordnungen in Empfangszeremonien*, edited by Susann Baller, Ruth Schilling, Ines Stolpe, and Michael Pesek, 244–278. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008c.
- . "Postsozialistische 'Perestroika' in der ländlichen Mongolei." In *Mongolische Notizen: Mitteilungen der Deutsch-Mongolischen Gesellschaft* Nr. 22 (2014): 111–128.
- . "Truly Nomadic? Die Mongolei im Wandel." In *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 65. Jg., 26–27 (2015a): 25–31. <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/208255/truly-nomadic-die-mongolei-im-wandel?p=all>.

- . “Transcending Religion? Intersections between Spatial, Social and Mental Mobility in Contemporary Mongolia.” In *Mobilizing Religion: Networks and Mobility*, edited by Stephan Conermann and Elena Smolarz, 231–264. Bonner Asienstudien Bd. 12. Berlin: EB Verlag, 2015b.
- . “Nachhaltigkeit, lokales Wissen und Markenzeichen von Nutag. In *Mongolische Notizen_ Mitteilungen der Deutsch-Mongolischen Gesellschaft* Nr. 26 (2019): 46–65.
- . “Nutag und Mobilität: Zur Dynamisierung mongolischer Heimatkonzepte.” In *Heimat revisited: Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf einen umstrittenen Begriff*, edited by Dana Bönisch, Jil Runia, Hanna Zehschnetler, 209–233. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Stolpe, Ines and Enkhbayaryn Jigmeddorj. “Competing Narrations: Views on Mongolia’s Colonialism Discourses”. In *Voices from Around the World*, 2018,1: <http://voices.uni-koeln.de/2018-1/competingnarrations>.

Author

Since 2013, Ines Stolpe is a professor of Mongolian studies at the University of Bonn (Germany). She studied comparative education and Mongolian studies in Berlin and Ulaanbaatar and obtained her PhD from the Humboldt University of Berlin with a thesis on interdependencies of social and spatial mobility in contemporary Mongolia. She has conducted field research on education and migration, the history of concepts and discourses, development paradigms, facets of animal husbandry, changing meanings of symbols, elements of nature and festival calendars, hygiene campaigns, educational philosophy, memory cultures, *nutag* councils, politicization of administration, inequality and sustainability, Mongolia’s approaches towards the COVID-19 pandemic, and on some aspects of the recent history of Mongolian studies in Germany. In 2017, she was awarded the teaching prize of the University of Bonn.

istolpe@uni-bonn.de