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Points of Transition. Owoo and the Ritual Remaking of  
Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner  
Asia, followed by Varia

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### Bumochir Dulam, *The State, Popular Mobilization and Gold Mining in Mongolia. Shaping “Neoliberal” Policies*

London, UCL Press, 2020, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-78735-184-4

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## REFERENCES

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- 1 Currently in Mongolia, it seems as though history is repeating itself to some extent. Just as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mongolians are again determining their socio-economic and political trajectories in re-building the nation-state. Dissimilar to the previous century’s bloody political conflict that built a socialist nation-state based on Marxism-Leninism, current 21<sup>st</sup> century Mongolians are wrangling about the potential benefits of neoliberal reforms of building a capitalist nation state. Moreover, unlike the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these last few years have shown a small number of Mongolians striving for limited opportunities, at the international level, to reflect on the transition from an insider perspective. As such, this dramatic ideological shift of the 1990s transition is thoroughly captured in the recently published book, *The State, Popular Mobilization and Gold Mining in Mongolia. Shaping “Neoliberal” policies*, by Dulam Bumochir. This book allows an opportunity to contemplate on the swift transition process, by affording a great deal of analysis on the ways in which specific ideological discourses are constructed and employed to justify prioritization of certain development trajectories. This occurs vividly in the context of resource politics in Mongolia. As Bumochir elaborates, state and non-state national and multi-national agents in different socio-political strata, when dealing with resource politics, employ various ideologies and concepts and interpret them in their own way, which are suited for accomplishing a

political end. For that matter, the author, indeed, makes nuanced analysis a priority towards building an overarching argument in order to produce an open ended, objective debate of this era. While engaging with most of the major discourses regarding Mongolia's path towards democracy and market economy, the author creatively aims at exploring "how the identification of precarity on these issues constructs a political discourse that politician uses to justify the establishment of 'mining capitalism'" (p. 24) or the pursuit of environmentalism for that matter. Bumochir employs indigenization as a fresh analytical focus. This is enlightening in the way that the author exposes layers of complexities, which are weaved into the interactions between numerous agents involved in resource politics. As a result, Bumochir argues, the application of neoliberal reforms often come face to face with nationalists and are engulfed in indigenization processes at the local and national level, which in turn shapes neoliberalism in Mongolia. This indicates that the author challenges the oversimplified mainstream development thinking that neoliberal reforms often shape developing contexts. In other words, the author pushes the conceptual boundaries beyond the popular analytical impasse, such as powerful multinational mining corporations vs powerless state and/or local community, or resource curse and resource nationalism.

- 2 Bumochir uncovers the fact that there are broader analytical dimensions out there, potentially available for adequate examination of the following contradictory positions, which prevailed in resource politics in Mongolia. The argument of this book is consistently constructed around two major concepts – neoliberalization and indigenization – which are then centered on two inarguably equivocal themes: a) sector based ideological distinction persists between neo-liberal mining capitalism vs nationalist or traditional environmentalism/pastoralism, and b) the state acts as the sole, legitimate agent for exercising control and sorting out conflicts in resource governance. The author provides excellent structure in each chapter to build and articulate his overarching argument, whilst perpetually contemplating on these concepts and themes. Each chapter begins with its own theoretical lens identified upon a coherent and concise discussion of up to date conceptual frameworks. This sheds light on the ways in which agents subsequently determine their development discourses and build narratives to justify arguments. The author concludes each chapter with a conceptual argument as a bridge to the next chapter. The theme of an ideologically distinct neo-liberal mining sector is established in chapters 1 and 3. Bumochir investigates the ways in which a few politically and economically connected prominent public figures, representing the state and private sectors, justified their motives towards promoting neoliberal mining reforms and boosting the national economy of Mongolia. These agents found the economic situation for Mongolia vulnerable as its two primary neighbors (China, Russia) were emerging as geo-political powers, and were pursuing ideological positions unsuitable for Mongolia at the time. They emphasized that the national economy was in a precarious situation, one which could potentially affect Mongolia's political independence. Therefore, they allowed the flows of revenue coming from the liberalized mining sector, even if they had to navigate statist and nationalist policies when necessary. Here, the author left potential room for further analysis regarding the conflicting themes of neoliberal mining capitalism versus nationalist and/or traditionalist environmentalism/pastoralism. In Mongolia, neo-liberal policy reforms also swept through both the environmental and pastoral sectors indifferently. It introduced exclusive group use rights for conservation

purposes and individual possession rights to campsites, triggering a process of privatizing rights or commoditizing rights (transfer/sale of certification of lease). As a response, the pastoral sector, specifically, also experienced a fair share of contestation and then the indigenization process, only to be survived by a hybrid property form of public use of pasture and private use of campsites. Overall, this reform resulted in certain socially and environmentally detrimental outcomes. A number of campsites increased, resulting in the reduction of available pastoral resources between campsites and causing regional or micro level overgrazing and growing disputes (Undargaa 2016).

- 3 In chapters 2 and 4, along the lines of exploring the adequacy of a resource curse or resource nationalism for examining resource politics in Mongolia, Bumochir addresses issues of growing opposition to neoliberal mining reforms by both environmentalist and nationalist mining proponents and their nationalist and statist policies. In this scenario, all agents, regardless of perspective, invariably approached the state as the legitimate actor or platform to pursue control, mediate and reconcile between opposing positions. Different agents criticize the state, the author depicts, for diminishing neoliberal mining reforms by exercising too much control or overlooking environmental or nationalist mining causes by exercising too little control. This depiction could benefit from further clarity regarding the complex role the Mongolian state has played in the historically interdependent state and community co-management (different from the one promoted by the international development) over natural resources (Undargaa 2016). For instance, Ch. Khurts (Ch. Hurts), the former minister of Mining, made an excellent point about the need for balanced involvement of the state in mining reforms to reflect the historical governance of natural resources, people, and culture in Mongolia, rather than excessive state control being captured by international powers in both the socialist and post-socialist periods (pp. 46, 55). By radically following Soviet Russian introduction of resource nationalism under contemporary state property regime, the Mongolian socialist-state shifted its historical state/public ownership (Lattimore 1932) to state property under the 1940's constitution. On behalf of the public, the state performed a dominant and exclusive management role, and only allowed local deputy assemblies to represent herders to perform mostly nominal management roles. Since then, particularly after the 1990s, those representing the state, in fact, have continued exercising exclusive control in the environmental and pastoral sectors, either by imposing neoliberal reforms or conservationist policies. The state allows appropriation of rural jurisdictional territories for the purpose of special-use areas, protected areas, mining, intensive farming and crop-cultivation. This is mostly without much consideration and consultation for excluding and/or displacing herders' from their jurisdictional grazing territories. Thus, in this book, the concern of the absence of the state in environmental protection is mainly attributed to mobile pastoralism.
- 4 This distinction is particularly relevant to chapters 5 and 6, in which Bumochir extensively addresses two opposing positions regarding the role of pastoralism in reinforcing environmental protection and national identity: pastoralism is attributed to being the foundation of an original environmental society vs pastoralism perceived as unsustainable environmental practice. The author provides a thorough and proficient conceptual background to environmentally and socially embedded pastoralism, which is an inarguably strong position held by Ts. Munkhbayar (Ts. Mönhbayar), the leader of the environmental movement alliance. The author subsequently incorporated Munkhbayar's point of pastoralism being important to the natural environment, the

national identity and the independence of Mongolia in his concluding argument by referring to the cultural and spiritual significance of pastoralism (p.132). This argument could be analyzed further referring to the significance of pastoralism as political economy – the governance of pastoral people and pastoral production – which in fact provides a very real benefit for the above causes. Munkhbayar managed to transform, the author highlights, a local environmental protest movement into a national socio-political cause by successfully allying with the political interests of state and non-state agents at regional and national levels (pp.91-92). This was to draw attention to the absence of the state in addressing environmental damage, caused by mining and inflicted upon jurisdictions of pastoral people throughout Mongolia. Munkhbayar’s call for such broader political collaboration is inevitable and a necessary step for the following reason. The governance of pastoral people and production is firmly rooted in an historically interdependent state and local community (currently local administration and civil representative assembly) co-management towards pursuing a pastoral economy. This system is specifically tailored and customized for obtaining political and economic benefits from the existing dry-land ecology (Sneath 2007). Since the 1990s, failure of state policies and involvement in maintaining this historical pastoral institution has manifested in abolishing historically statutory mechanisms (tax, jurisdictional control/maintenance over the movement of labour, livestock and pasture/water) and affected local level co-management in many ways. Some local level co-management in pastoral governance and the environmental protection has survived to some degree, whilst others struggle depending upon the interests, capacity and ability of different agents to successfully collaborate (Ariell 2016; Undargaa 2016). In other words, the problem of open access prevailing at the national legislative level often leaves local co-management exposed to vulnerabilities and persevering by their own means (Undargaa & McCarthy 2016). This is unlike some revisionists’ misreading of pastoralism, in which open access prevailed in community pastoral practice and caused land degradation (pp. 123-130). Moreover, the significance of pastoralism has often been realized as a social safety-net, providing food security, in addition to other cultural and spiritual aspects of pastoralism, especially, when historically interdependent state and local co-management of governance of pastoral people and production was maintained.

- 5 In brief, Bumochir maps previously unexplored territories with intricate conceptual debates in resource politics, particularly with regard to stakeholder analysis. Whilst providing details of once publicly unavailable state level security and personal information, the author unpacks events and information of an intense nature as engaging and comprehensive reading with twisting arguments. This is thanks to his creative story-telling, an intelligible structure, nuance, and a flowing text. In this regard, this book appeals a great deal to both academic and non-academic readers.

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