

Lost in Transition: Fuzzy Property and Leaky Selves in Ulaanbaatar

Morten Axel Pedersen & Lars Højer

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT *For many people in postsocialist Mongolia, the crisis brought about by the 'transition' from state socialism to democracy and capitalism has become a permanent condition of life. Based on fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar, this article explores various religious and economic innovations through which people respond to the 'age of the market'. We show how, among low-income families of mixed Mongolian and Russian background, one age group in particular suffers from the symptoms of being 'lost in transition': alcoholism, soul loss, and a total inability to plan ahead. Inspired by Alexei Yurchak's work on the 'last Soviet generation', we argue that this group of men and women, who grew up expecting to live their lives beneath the empty shell of official state discourse, has become permanently stuck in the youth culture of late socialism.*

KEYWORDS *Mongolia, postsocialism, youth, property, self*

If we by the term 'crisis' understand a situation where everything solid has melted into air (to paraphrase Marx), then crisis has indeed become context for many people in Mongolia. Leaving aside the tiny minority of politicians, business tycoons and media stars who make up the country's new elite, and notwithstanding the fact that an urban middle class is emerging as the economy is picking up following recent investments by foreign donors and mining corporations (Rossabi 2005), it is clear that the great majority of the inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar find themselves in a situation of permanent uncertainty.

Like many other places in the postsocialist world, in particular in the countries of the former Soviet Union (Burawoy & Verdery 1999; Berdahl *et al.* 2000; Nazpary 2002), large numbers of Mongolians for a period of more than 15 years have not known whether they would still have a job the next

day (perhaps the farm, the factory, or indeed the school, was to be closed due to 'structural reforms'). Nor have they had access to reliable information about what their salary could buy them a year, a month or even a week from now (subsidized food, transport and utilities were another target of 'shock therapy'), or, indeed, whether whatever savings they might have would be available the next day (during the 1990s, many banks closed down as the owners fled the country, and more recently several savings and loans cooperatives went bankrupt). In the most difficult position have been the hundreds of thousands of migrants, who have given up their pastoralist livelihood due to natural disasters and rising poverty (see Bruun & Narangoa 2006; Sneath 2003). For the great majority of these people, everyday life in the 'age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*) involves a daily scramble to secure food, water and energy (coal and electricity) in the sprawling shantytowns of fenced yurts (*ger*), which are today encircling Ulaanbaatar's Soviet-built centre in all directions.

It is true that various 'informal' economic forms have evolved since 1990,¹ which, however precarious, temporary and inadequate, endow most people with a sense of avoiding the worst pitfalls of the 'transition'. Not so, however, for a cluster of families of mixed Mongolian and Russian background, whom we have known since the mid-1990. In fact, for some of these, there simply is no future, for time essentially stopped with the end of state socialism. As elsewhere in the postsocialist world (see Mandel & Humphrey 2002), this perception is especially prevalent in rural areas (Sneath 2003) and among the older generation, where it is common to find people who believed – and still believe – in the old system. Consider, for example, the following statements:

When democracy came, my father's life somehow stopped. Back in socialist times, he had dreams. He was working for the national railway company, he went on holiday with his friends, and went fishing with his sons. Now, all he does is to sit in front of the TV, always tuned to Russian stations.

My parents were completely lost. A lot of families suffered like this. They had plans back in socialist times and then suddenly the transition came and there was a lack of products. They were just workers – that's all. Back in socialist times, it was very bad to be a trader. It was sort of low. A trader was seen as a bad person. A good person was a socialist person, a working person. Those doing trade were cheats. They knew what democracy was, what money was. So they already had a capitalist mind [when democracy came].

The above remarks, and countless others with the same message, have been overheard over more than ten years of friendship with Kolya, a 30-year-old of mixed background from Ulaanbaatar's 15th or 'Russian' district (many of the Soviet specialists sent to Mongolia settled here). Partly due to the fact that it was their father who had a Soviet background, and partly because this nationality entailed higher status than being Mongolian (until 1990, when the hierarchy reversed), Kolya and his three brothers grew up considering themselves more Russian than Mongolian, even though their mother only spoke Mongolian to them, and even though their father is himself half Mongolian, half Ukrainian.

Because of their ethnicity, the four brothers and their friends were allowed into Russian school, which was otherwise reserved for the privileged offspring of Soviet specialists and the elite of the local Communist party. However, some of their 'pure' (*tsever*) Russian classmates looked down upon them because of their working-class and mixed background, and, as often tend to happen when people find themselves 'between two fires' (as Kolya once put it), they soon gained the reputation of lazy trouble-makers, who would rather drink, fight and play rock and roll than work for high enough grades to enter university.

It is this handful of Mongolian representatives of what Alexei Yurchak has called 'the last Soviet generation' (2006) who are our main focus in this article. Based on fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar, we show that these people do not want, nor are they able, to take 'the age of the market' seriously, for they continue to live their lives as if they were the disinterested subjects of a stagnating Communist society. Indeed, it is precisely because our friends grew up learning to ignore the reified language of official party discourse, and because they came of age by participating in the parallel worlds characteristic of the last Soviet generation that they have become particularly lost in transition.

Parallel Worlds

Let us now take a closer look at the everyday life of the last Soviet generation in Ulaanbaatar in the mid-1980s. While it was impossible not to acknowledge the omnipresence of the socialist state, it was paradoxically a life whose values and practices to a large degree existed in a parallel universe beyond the reach of the state; yet, following Yurchak (2006), this was not a universe that was in opposition to the system. Indeed, for our friends as well as for many others from the same age group – that is, those born somewhere between 1960 and 1980 – the system was not so much something to believe,

or not to believe in. Rather, it was seen as something that was just there and would always remain the same, not unlike the manner in which we expect the sun to rise every day.

To our friends, then, socialism presented itself as ontology more than the ideology, which it represented to their parents and grandparents, who were old enough to remember life before the revolution, or, at least, the process of collectivization. It was, after all, in the aftermath of the Second World War – and by embarking on a path of ‘progress’ and ‘development’, which mirrored what took place across the postcolonial world – that Mongolia became subject to the dramatic socio-economic changes resulting from the implementation of the hyper-modernist social experiment known as state socialism. Indeed, in the period up until the 1980s, the country witnessed unprecedented growth, as its increasingly urban and educated population gradually left behind their earlier life as nomadic pastoralists in order to work in factories or in semi-urban collective farms. However, not unlike in the Soviet Union, this golden era of growth and optimism was eventually followed by a phase of stagnation and resignation.² Thus, around the advent of the period that is now known as ‘late socialism’,

a profound transformation of the structure of all types of... ideological discourse (from the language of ideology to the nature of ideological rituals, practices, and organizations) [took place]. As a result of that transformation, it became less important to read ideological representations for ‘literal’ (referential) meanings than to reproduce their structural forms (Yurchak 2006:14–15).

The identity of the older generations was formed around events such as the revolution, the war, the denunciation of Stalin; the identity of the younger generations has been formed by collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike these older and younger groups, the common identity of the last Soviet generation was formed by a shared experience of the normalized, ubiquitous, and immutable authoritative discourse of the Brezhnev years (2006:32).

Although Yurchak’s argument is concerned with Soviet society, and although his ethnographic material primarily stems from its urban intelligentsia, we believe that his model can be applied to Mongolia as well. Also in Ulaanbaatar, the ‘performative dimension’ of state socialist ideology became increasingly important throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as a still wider gap emerged between official representations (e.g., production plans) and the social, economic and cultural reality to which these pretended to refer (cf. Verdery 1995; Humphrey 2004). And also in Ulaanbaatar, this state of affairs

did not lead to much opposition to, or resistance against, the Communist government. Instead, and still echoing Yurchak's argument, the response of our friends as well as many others from their generation was to 'internally emigrate' into various 'deterritorialized worlds', which, 'although uninterested in the [state socialist] system... drew heavily on that system's possibilities, financial subsidies, cultural values, collectivist ethics, forms of prestige, and so on' (Yurchak 2006:132).

Loosely demarcated by a constellation of friends, neighbours or colleagues sharing a common passion, a given such parallel world could evolve around more or less any activity, as long as the purpose of this activity was understood by the participants to be external (but, again, not necessarily in opposition) to state discourse. In fact, both in the 1980s Leningrad discussed by Yurchak and in the contemporaneous Ulaanbaatar recollected by our friends, many of these parallel worlds grew out of activities that were endorsed and sometimes even promoted by the authorities. Consider, for example, Ulaanbaatar's Lenin Club, one of the countless cultural centres which were maintained across Mongolia as well as the Soviet Union (see Marsh 2006; Grant 1995). Here, young Mongolians and Russians alike used to participate in all sorts of 'societies' devoted to such 'healthy' pastimes as fishing, classical music and traditional dance. However, much as in the case of the Leningrad archaeological society and other similar communities described by Yurchak (2006), the actual activities taking place under the umbrella of the Lenin Club were often rather different from their official purpose.

There were, of course, also parallel universes of a much more clandestine nature, which involved activities that could not even superficially be said to be in the state's interest. In Ulaanbaatar as in so many other places within the vast and heterogeneous periphery of the Soviet empire (see e.g. Humphrey 2002), this shadowy underworld often involved semi-legal or illegal activities, which directly circumvented the centralist and supply-driven logic of the planned economy. Apart from joining one of the 'gangs' (*büleg*) involved in petty crime under the leadership of a local 'strongman' (*ataman*), the most popular activity apparently was to hang out with soldiers from the Red Army.³ While there was nothing suspect about spending time with Soviet soldiers as such, what actually did take place is unlikely to have pleased the authorities. After all, as Kolya (fondly) remembers it, an elaborate system of exchanges and favours was established between two groups involving substances (especially various drinks and drugs) and activities (like firing off real rounds on a machine gun brought back from the Afghan war), which

were not exactly on offer in your average 'house of culture'. Nor were the hand grenades that Kolya and his friends once managed to steal from a Russian weapon depot.

It should be clear by now that, in Ulaanbaatar as much as in Leningrad, the 'deterritorialized worlds' of the last Soviet generation were extremely different. And yet, crucially, they also had something in common, and it is this thing that makes them so important when it comes to understanding social life in Ulaanbaatar today. Apart from the fact that any mention of 'politics' was deemed 'boring' and therefore forbidden, and the related requirement that people were participating to 'have fun' (as opposed to 'work'), all parallel worlds thus aspired towards the common goal of *obshchenie*, understood as 'an intense and intimate commonality and intersubjectivity' (Yurchak 2006:148), where 'the lives of participants became tightly intertwined through togetherness that was a central value in itself' (2006:151). This valuation of intimate togetherness and momentary fun – detached from official society, state planning and 'meaningful' work – meant that the Mongolian and Soviet parallel culture, like many other marginal cultures (Day *et al.* 1999), transformed *the present* 'into a transcendent escape from time itself' where momentary 'joy and satisfaction' was more important than past (history) and future (plans) (1999:2).

As Yurchak notes, *obshchenie* in the USSR involved 'not simply close friendship, but kinship-like intimacy' (2006:151); indeed, it may be argued that it assumed an even more kinship-like quality in the Mongolian context. It certainly is clear that our friends took very seriously the mutual demands and obligations existing between fellow participants in the parallel culture. Representing a local variation of what in the Soviet Union was known as *blat* (Ledeneva 1998), the social networks of 'dry brothers' (*huurai ah/düü*) and acquaintances (*tamil*) established and reproduced through *obshchenie* often became the primary sources of the many goods and services which could not be acquired through official channels. So, while the 'deterritorialized worlds' of late socialism clearly did not serve a purely instrumental purpose, Yurchak may still be criticized for over-emphasizing their 'idealist' aspect. As we are about to see, the exalted sense of 'commonality', 'inter-subjectivity' and 'togetherness' associated with *obshchenie* could not be detached from the economic forms, which this form of social relations gave – and still today gives – rise to.

Four Brothers

Between 1991 and 1992, as most state assets were privatized and distributed as vouchers (Rossabi 2005:49–50), Mongolia experienced a severe economic

crisis when thousands of collective farms and factories were closed down, and people started moving around within the country and across its borders, desperately (and yet oftentimes enthusiastically) trying to earn money. It was a time when social relations literally broke down. Kolya remembers it as a melancholic phase where he time and again had to part with close friends at the railway station. Many of the foreign 'specialists' were returning to the newly independent states within the former USSR, and the Red Army soldiers abruptly left.

Among people with a mixed Mongolian and Russian background who grew up as 'the children of stagnation' (Yurchak 2006:32), stories of getting lost in the turmoil of post-socialist change are abundant. One guy, for example, used to be a fashion model during socialist times, but – in the words of one of his friends – at some point in the early 1990s 'he got lost and did not know what to do'. He ended up becoming an alcoholic. Another friend had a law degree from the Mongolian State University, but spent all his time drinking beer with his friends, while yet another one turned to the bottle despite having secured a good job. Among the minority who do in fact have more or less permanent jobs, one detects a profound sense of dissatisfaction. One constantly overhears discussions about this or that person, who is getting along by cleaning furniture or repairing computers, but, it is then added, 'is living a boring life'. The only way to 'succeed', it seems, is to establish a 'business', where other people do the hard labour. People are looking for easy money, not hard work.⁴ Once, when Kolya made a friend believe that Chinese traders were buying up spiders – especially female ones – for medical purposes, the poor guy spent a whole day collecting spiders in his father's garage.

Kolya and his three brothers, who between them cover the full age span of the last generation, are a case in point. This is a family who used to live quite comfortably during late socialism, but whose entire mode of existence was severely disrupted by the advent of 'democracy'. We begin by considering the different paths through the 'transition' followed by each member of the household, and then move on to present two case studies, which both reveal certain tensions arising from the sudden 'privatization' of people's lives.

In the socialist period, Kolya's father worked as a welder at the National Railway Organization. As a primary producer of heavy *infrastruktura*, he represented the ideal worker, who was leading Mongolia into the bright and progressive future of Stalinist modernity. One could hardly imagine a more socialist man. The daughter of a herdsman from the southern steppes, the now deceased mother worked in the well-funded nursery, which, in characteristic

state socialist fashion, was run by the railway organization. The future of the household was completely on track: the parents would become older and eventually pass away within the system, and their sons would take over from them, perhaps even assuming their father's honourable profession.

Already in the mid 1980s, however, the pillars of this imagined horizon began to show their first cracks as the Mongolians were confronted with the local versions of glasnost and perestroika (Rossabi 2005:8); and, by 1990, the one-party system and the planned economy had been fully replaced by liberal democracy and market economy. At this point, as Kolya himself put it in the earlier citation, his parents' future disappeared overnight; they were, in a sense, socially dead, for they had been more or less entirely divested of agency.

The parents wanted to give advice to their children and they were horrified to see what was happening to the family; yet they felt powerless and did not understand the new system. Fortunately, their oldest son, Misha, a dedicated participant in the parallel cultures of the 1980s, seemed to be adapting well to the transition. He was the manager of a Russian company and 'was always dressed well', as Kolya remembers it. He had many friends, and was a very active (*hödölgöön*, lit. 'moving') person. He knew of no barriers, it seemed: he understood what money was all about, enjoyed the booming Ulaanbaatar nightlife, and its many new opportunities for drinking. Eventually, however, he crossed one barrier too many. He was convicted and put in prison.

Like many 'mixed' and 'pure' Russians raised in Mongolia, Kolya's second brother, Lyosha, migrated to the former USSR in the early 1990s. Probably due to the fact that he left Mongolia before capitalism took root, he expected everything to be just like before as he returned with his Ukrainian bride and daughter a decade later (to the surprise of many migrants, life in Russia, Ukraine or Byelorussia turned out to be more difficult than back home). He returned, however, to an entirely different world, where he had little or no network left.

Of the four brothers, Lyosha has lost his bearings most in the turmoil of transition. He failed to settle anywhere and was unable to adapt to the new economic constraints and possibilities. In a sense, his experiences are like those of his parents. Also for him, life has more or less 'stopped'. As Kolya said,

the transition was very bad to people who were 25–30 years old. In the early 1990s, there was no employment, nothing. They didn't know what money was, or how to make money. Maybe they had a proper job in socialist times but then the factories closed down. Maybe their parents didn't know what to do. They didn't know what the hell was happening to their children. I would hang around and drink, showing that I wasn't spending time properly.

I'm now 29 and a lot of people of my age are still only just managing to reach an OK level. Usually, it is all about background. Some families figured out what democracy was and started doing business. They knew what business was; maybe they used to be accountants in socialist times. If I had had some understanding of money issues – democracy and land – then I could have done a lot of things in the early 1990s. If my parents had also known about it... we didn't know what property was... that you can privatize land... we never thought that a particular thing could be yours, that you would be owner. I don't know why, but I just didn't have this idea.

Lyosha has no clue about how things are working, because he is still living in socialist times. He doesn't know how to be sneaky and lively – how to try to do everything to get money – because he is lost. He doesn't know what to choose. Of course, there are not a lot of ways for him to choose.

According to Yurchak, the great 'paradox' of the last Soviet generation is that, despite its belief that the state socialist order was immutable, it was so good at adapting to its collapse (2006). In Mongolia, however, the majority of this generation have been less adaptive. In Ulaanbaatar, as we are about to see, many members of the 'last generation' have today become a 'lost generation', who, far from having successfully managed the transition, have become more or less permanently lost in transition.

One way of understanding the fate of the four brothers is by saying that, with the introduction of liberal democracy and capitalism in Mongolia, the 'parallel worlds' characteristic of late socialism no longer were contained by any hegemonic discourse, and were free to run wild. The result was a transformed logic from which many profited but even more people lost. If for some members of the last generation the familiarity with the old parallel culture made it easier to adapt to the new conditions (as Yurchak argues and some of our informants would also confirm), then for others the new situation either (1) opened up for *too many* possibilities (Misha), or (2) allowed them to keep on acting as the disinterested subjects of a redistributive state that no longer exists (Lyosha).

Thus understood, both of Kolya's older brothers are equally lost in transition; one because he has been adapting ('moving') too much, and the other because he has become stuck in a non-responsive state of apathy. For if, for the one brother (Misha), the creative liveliness of the parallel culture of the 1980s subsumed his life *entirely* a decade or so later, then, for the other brother (Lyosha), the same happened with the docile official culture of socialism.

Most people seem to suffer from both excesses at the same time, however. Take the case of Kolya's younger brother, Andrei, who never has had a

proper job since he dropped out of school in the mid-1990s, and who often disappears for days, spending all his time drinking with (Russian) friends, as if involved in a never-ending *obshchenie*. In fact, Andrei *refuses* to work because, as he once explained, he ‘cannot take the salary seriously’. Usually one of the friends will pay for the drinking, though it remains a moot point how they manage to secure the funds. The only times he considers himself to be a real person, it seems, is in the *obshchenie*-like company of his friends.

Among the four brothers, Kolya is the only who has done quite well in the transition, and he is – for the same reason – increasingly taking on the position of an elder brother (*ah*). ‘If I say something, they will listen’, Kolya often says. ‘What can they say?’, he may add rhetorically, implying that his brothers’ (lost) way of life provides no authority. Misha is lost in too much movement, Lyosha in too much stability, and Andrei in a kind of apathetic state of ‘hanging out’, illustrated by the fact that he will sometimes spend entire days in Kolya’s car, while his brother does his business. Kolya, on the other hand, has built up a certain respect and manages to earn a quite respectable if irregular income. He is involved in tourist business in the summer season, and does various odd jobs and petty trade and barter during winter. This ‘success’, we shall now argue, comes from a trickster-like ability to negotiate between the new market system and the old parallel culture of socialism.

Fuzzy Property

A closer look at the family’s living arrangements serves to corroborate the above findings. Presently, the whole family – including the father’s new partner, the brothers’ partners, and some of their children⁵ – live in a small one-bedroom apartment, which was originally allocated to the parents by the Railway Organization. The apartment is about to be ‘privatized’ (*huviih*), meaning that its formal ownership will be transferred to whomever Kolya’s father chooses (his mother passed away a couple of years ago). The father intends to put Kolya and Andrei’s names on the contract (due to his Ukrainian citizenship, Kolya’s father is not allowed to own the flat himself). The reason for this is not only that he considers Kolya to be most reliable of his sons in terms of safeguarding the family property; the father also finds it inappropriate that his two eldest sons are still living in the apartment; after all, the Mongolian convention of ultimogeniture – that the youngest son inherits what is left of the parents’ property⁶ – suggests that they should have found their own place long ago, namely when they got married or had children.

The situation is tense. The father can be heard complaining about Misha

and Lyosha all the time, and Kolya and his Mongolian girlfriend find it increasingly difficult to cope with the endless discussions, fighting and drinking, and prefers to spend the night at other places when possible. In an attempt to carve out a space 'for ourselves', Kolya has tried to secure one of the rooms in the apartment, leaving only the other room and the tiny kitchen for the rest of the household. Afraid of his belongings (which include a fancy mobile phone), he always locks the door to 'his' room. Otherwise, he complains, 'my younger brother will take my clothes and perhaps never return them'. Indeed, very few personal belongings are safe unless locked up or otherwise placed where no one else can reach them. While the family rarely goes to bed hungry, such commodities come in handy if one is in sudden need for cash (there is a pawn shop just around the corner), and one of Kolya's friends, a pathological gambler, could be tempted to 'borrow' some of Kolya's things if he comes by. Only the father is completely trusted by Kolya and his girlfriend.

Kolya's worries about this state of near-chaos, as expressed in countless conversations with us and various religious specialists (of which more below), reveals that he and his brothers are struggling with new property relations in a situation where ownership is fluid, and where kinship obligations and the general sense of crisis interfere with one's plans. To establish this point, however, we need to discuss a piece of property which is possessed solely by Kolya.

Like many Mongolians, Kolya recently 'bought' a piece of land in the Ulaanbaatar suburbs.⁷ In fact, he has not exactly bought the land, but he registered as living on this land by paying the previous person registered there, and he now has the right to gain ownership over the land at some point in the future. However, the land is not fenced and this poses a considerable problem: someone might take it. This is a real danger, for it is a general conception in Ulaanbaatar that it is necessary to fence land – to literally contain it – to make sure that it stays yours.⁸ In the case of Kolya, this problem is amplified by the fact that he has still not managed to finish all the official paperwork in order to gain proper ownership. Paperwork, it seems, can easily be changed and manipulated – physical manifestations of ownership are quite another thing. But Kolya's problems with his newly acquired land do not stop there. If his land were to be fenced without anyone living there, then the other, and generally poor, inhabitants of the neighbourhood would most likely steal the fence.

In other words: Kolya needs to live on the land before a fence can be put up; and before a fence is raised, the land is not 'secured'. The problem is that he does not have the funds to build a fence let alone a house; in any case,

he never planned to actually live there (due to its distance from the city centre). His only comfort is that the neighbouring woman who sold him the land is still 'looking after it'. After all, she sold him the land and will be held responsible by Kolya if the land is 'stolen' by some stranger who manages to put up a fence and 'change some official papers'. We might say that she is the guarantee, or trust, that a deeply ambiguous (and therefore, at least from a Euro-Western perspective, 'corrupt') legal system cannot provide. At the same time, however, she is also the one who is applying the pressure on Kolya to build the fence – otherwise she cannot guarantee anything, she says – and she is clearly expecting him to acknowledge her help, i.e., to reward her in some way or another.

This is where his three brothers enter the stage. Not only would Kolya genuinely like to help them (and get them out of the flat); he also needs someone to settle on the land to secure it. However, if the brothers were to settle there, they could never be asked to leave. The land would, in effect, become theirs, as they would have nowhere else to go, thus leaving Kolya with no possibility for selling or leasing the land to someone else. He could, of course, try to convince his brothers to buy the land rather than just allowing them to settle there for free, but whether they would ever pay remains a moot question. Anyway, if it turns out that the older brothers cannot cope with living together – a plausible scenario – then one of them may return to the flat one day. If, on the other hand, Kolya settles there himself, his brothers may come to 'feel too much at home' in the flat, as he put it. The best one can therefore hope, he explained, is that the brothers will return from their new jobs in gold mining with enough money to buy their own land. Kolya could then inherit the father's flat, leaving him 'only' with the problem of how to find reliable tenants for his plot of land. However, it is more likely that the brothers will not be able to save up anything – or they may be fired without receiving a salary. This is how many Russian mining companies work, Kolya explained.

There are a number of intertwined but also conflicting agendas at stake in the above tale. First of all, Kolya would like to help his family. They all have strong sense of belonging together – although increasingly tested by what Kolya considers to be the excessive drinking and general irresponsibility of his father and his brothers. As the *de facto* older brother – the provider from whom wealth flows – he cannot ignore the needs of those who expect his help. Secondly, Kolya would like to benefit from the situation himself. He bought the land for 250 USD and it is now worth around 1300 USD, but this still

dwindles in comparison to the flat, whose value is around 9500 USD. Finally, Kolya will do everything not to lose the flat, which he considers to be the family's only future. The flat could, of course, be sold now and the profit shared among the father and the four brothers, leaving all of them with some sort of economic foundation, but this would amount to wasting the fortune, Kolya worries. The money, he is sure, would flow out of the brothers' hands within a short span of time (a problem, which is not entirely foreign to Kolya himself). If that were to happen, the family as a whole would be 'lost', as they would have missed the opportunity to make something of their one big chance.

Kolya, it seems, sees himself as being responsible for the future of the family as a whole. He can only realize this possibility by curtailing the fluid network of generalized *obshchenie*, in which property flows too much and cannot be contained. He wants to 'cut the network' (Strathern 1996), and by so doing avoid becoming absorbed (if not *dissolved*) by the always looming context of crisis. His girlfriend, who first gave her 'disorderly' (*zambaragii*) family-in-law a chance, but whose role as a *ber* (daughter-in-law) has recently assumed prominence (see also below), seems to have a similar agenda. She is increasingly opposed to the rest of the family, trying to cut Kolya's relations to both them and his countless 'doing-nothing' friends, who are lost in fluid networks of drinking companionship, where money and property are all too easily lost.

The above case shows that property in postsocialist Mongolia does not assume the liberal-judicial character imagined by Western advocates of market reforms, but rather a 'fuzzy' (Verdery 1999) nature, which is difficult to hold on to. Property, at least in the present context of crisis, is in a constant process of negotiation where moral codes, traditional values, kinship obligations, liberal notions of ownership, coincidences, and security-concerns all intervene.

On a more general level, the example demonstrates how the all-encompassing sense of crisis brought about by the collapse of the state socialist order has had profound repercussions for the lost generation in Ulaanbaatar. In a sense, the breakdown has come to have its own life, intervening in people's endeavours in often-unexpected ways. Indeed, the way property and other resources are managed emerges as reminiscent of the classical accounts of hunter-gatherers in anthropology. As if subject to an obligation of demand sharing, where one reaps without sowing (Day *et al.* 1999:4) and 'make demands on people to share more but not to produce more' (Bird-David 1990:195), people simply 'eat' whatever they find. They are unable to save, even if they try to, and prefer to cooperate instantaneously, as it is difficult if not impossible to plan in an environment which is perceived to be constantly

changing, or, more precisely, is perceived to be *permanently liable* to radical change. In being forced to anticipate the accidental (the sudden disappearance of a salary, the failure of people to keep appointments, the sudden fleeing of debtors overnight, the lack of access to insurance in general etc.), people are reluctant to tame the future by planning (cf. Højer 2004:56–57). As Kolya would say: ‘Life is life, sometimes things change’. In the Mongolian context of crisis, the accidental has acquired a momentum of its own.⁹

Calling Back the *Süld*

People like Kolya are not only struggling to contain their ‘private’ belongings, however. As our second case will demonstrate, the ‘transition’ is also associated with radical changes of the self. As we are about to argue, people’s metaphysical concepts of themselves (their ‘souls’) are thus subject to a transformation, which is strikingly similar to the changes in the concept ownership and property described above (cf. Humphrey & Verdery 2004). In order to reach this point, however, we first need to provide a sense of religious life as it unfolds in Ulaanbaatar today.

Following the collapse of state socialism in 1990, a new class of religious entrepreneurs have established themselves in the vicinity of Ulaanbaatar’s greatest Buddhist temple, the Gandan Hiid. Although one does come across a few shamans, as well as the occasional *fengshui* expert, the place is dominated by so-called ‘private lamas’ (*huviin lam*) – a slightly denigrating category, which refers to all lamas who do not belong one of Ulaanbaatar’s institutionalized monasteries, and who are therefore forced to practise on their own. Although suspicions of swindle abound, clients of all ages and backgrounds visit the wooden shacks of these ‘folk-Buddhist’ specialists to solicit solutions (*zasal*) to a range of ‘problems’ (*bersheel*) and ‘worries’ (*zonvolgoo*), many of which are explicitly associated with ‘the age of the market’.

In the autumn of 2004, Kolya began frequenting a female astrologer (*zurhaich*), who had built up quite a reputation for solving people’s problems. Kolya first heard about this lama through a neighbour. Having been widowed a year earlier, the neighbour had for some time been suffering from emotional distress and financial uncertainty. But after having visited the *zurhaich*, her thoughts had been brought into balance. Soon, Kolya became a devoted client, who was singing the diviner’s praises to practically everyone he met. A handful of his friends and acquaintances heeded the advice. A young Mongolian man had long been worried that his Russian wife was having an affair, but a single astrology session was enough to bring his suspicions to a halt. A female suit-

case trader who was about to travel to China was told to cancel the trip for the time being (too many customs officers looming on the horizon). A couple running a coffee shop in the Ulaanbaatar suburbs, conversely, were confirmed in their plans to start up a second business the next month.

The more serious the problem identified in the *zurhaich's* astrology, the more elaborate the required *zasal* is. If one has suffered a relatively small amount of 'pressure' (*daramt*) or 'harm' (*horlol*) in conjunction with carrying out one's job (jealousy is widely believed to cause witchcraft-like effects in Mongolia, see Højer 2004), then it is usually enough to have a *lama* say some magic words (*shidet üg*) or to have a sutra for purification (*san*) read in the weekly prayer ritual (*hural*) at one's local temple. In some cases, however, this is not sufficient to make clients' fortune rise (*hiimor sergeh*), so the *zurhaich* will deem it necessary to try to call back their *süld* ('life-force', see below). Here, the stakes are colossal: if the *süld* is not restored in the victim, then he or she may die.

This is what happened to Kolya following a violent assault by two Mongolian guys, which he fell victim to in a bar. By applying the astrological technique known as the Mongolian Zurhai, it was determined that his *süld* had been seriously transformed (*shiljih*) in the course of the aggression. With a sombre expression, the female lama now explained Kolya that his *süld* had been kicked violently off course (*hazaisan*) and that it was necessary to summon it back (*hurailj ögch baigaa*) by invoking the aid of the Yalanguya White Tara goddess. As is the case with most Buddhist rites in Mongolia, the calling of Kolya's *süld* amounted to a series of prayers in Tibetan, which were only interspersed by occasional exclamations in Mongolian. In this particular case, the lama shouted: 'Kolyyyyyaaaa, Kolyyyyyaaaa, my son! Poor little one, he is afraid, come back, come back!'. This, she later explained, is when the *süld* returns to the patient, who experiences 'a warm and strange feeling; some even start crying'.

While Kolya's eyes were not exactly filled with tears, he was clearly experiencing a profound sense of relief in the aftermath of the healing. Later the same day, we climbed one of the hills to the south and made offerings (*tahil*) to Ulaanbaatar's four sacred mountains, as requested by the lama. 'Now', he said on the way back home, 'the protectors of the city have acknowledged my worship, and will ensure that my "fortune" (*hiimor*) will rise'.

Accounts like this are by no means exceptional. Indeed, violence – and particularly violence involving members of the lost generation – ranks high among clients' concerns when they are visiting the 'private lamas'. As the female

zurhaich explained, 'both the victims and the perpetrators of violence come to me. A young man might tell me: "I beat up someone badly. I drank vodka and acted without mind (*sanaandgüi*). Now, they say, I am about to go to prison. Please save me from this". Or a woman may beg: "My younger brother is an alcoholic. He was born only in 1974. Please make him stop drinking".'

This, then, is what life in 'the age of the market' boils down to for many households: alcoholism and violence. While these phenomena are considered symptoms of societal crisis all over the world, we believe that there is something distinctly postsocialist – as well as something distinctly Mongolian – about the way in which they are conceptualized in Ulaanbaatar. More precisely, we seem to be faced with a concept of the self, which is as leaky and permeable as the 'fuzzy' concept of property described earlier.

Leaky Selves

Just as the circulation of possessions within and beyond Kolya's household needs to be curtailed to fit into Western notions of private property, the 'privatization of selves' (individualization) associated with transition is imposing similar constraints on the flow of spirit (*obshchenie*), which was so celebrated in the socialist parallel culture. We use the word 'spirit' advisedly here, for in positing an analogy between property and spirit, we wish to highlight the latter's meaning of 'soul', or, in more formal terms, the metaphysical aspect of the self (cf. Humphrey 1996:213). We suggest that, in contemporary Ulaanbaatar, people are imagining themselves and their belongings in similarly fuzzy terms, and that this is a characteristically postsocialist phenomenon, which arises from an amalgamation of religious ideas on the one hand, and sensibilities arising from the context of crisis on the other.

In order to substantiate this point, we may begin by noting the wide range of terms, which people in Mongolia have access to when speaking about metaphysical aspects of themselves (for details, see Willerslev & Pedersen, forthcoming). In the context of Kolya's sessions with the *zurhaich*, the two most central such terms were *süns* and *süld*. While the term *süns* can relatively meaningfully be translated as 'soul' denoting as it does 'an overarching concept [of the self] that implicate[s] a human existence both in and beyond the confines of the body' (Humphrey 1996:213), *süld* has become invested with a more specific – and more distinctly Buddhist – meaning by Ulaanbaatar's religious entrepreneurs. Having always been a polysemic concept – the term was traditionally used to refer to not just 'tutelary deities' or 'protective geniuses' but various emblems too¹⁰ – *süld* now seems to denote a characteristically post-

socialist aspect of the self, one which is simultaneously multiple and singular, alienable and inalienable – just like Ulaanbaatar’s recently privatized land.

While all Mongolian lamas and shamans seem to agree that the *süins* is fundamentally inalienable from the body (if you lose it, you die), things are more complex for the *süld*. As the female *zurhaich* reassured Kolya during their first meeting, where he expressed worries that his *süins* had left him, ‘Relax, it is not your *süins*, but your *süld* that has left you. Without the *süins* you would be dead – it is the magnificence (*javhaa*) of your fortune (*hiimor*). If you become very afraid, if there is too much disorder (*hyamral*), the *süld* gets startled (*tsochood*). After some time, your work will become unsuccessful, your heart (*setgel sanaa*) will be uncomfortable, and [there will be] disease and suffering. But if I call it back, it will return to its proper channel.’

Süld, it seems, denotes a relative property of the self rather than an absolute one (as *süins* does): instead of being something that you either have or do not have, it denotes an existential substance (‘magnificence’ or ‘courage’), which vibrates with a certain intensity within you at a given moment in time. It is precisely in this sense that we may compare it with property, at least in its more fuzzy manifestations, which are so characteristic of postsocialist contexts. Consider, as a further demonstration of this point, the following exchange of words, which took place between Kolya and the female *zurhaich* a couple of weeks after his *süld* had supposedly been called back in their first meeting:

- Things are still not good back home. Actually, nothing has become better. People who are visiting must think, ‘What kind of place is this? What a strange family is that?’ My brothers are drinking. Every day. And many people follow them home, which makes my father nervous (*nervtüüleed*). So he also drinks. I try telling them: ‘Stop! Think of your life, think of your household.’ I really want to be nice. But it doesn’t work. We just argue and argue.
- There is no *energi*?
- No *energi*.
- When your family is like that, it is a sign that something has entered from the outside. I have seen your father and your brother [in the photos]. The vodka is causing bad flows (*muu ursgalyg*) to enter. You must make them leave. Then things will become nice.
- Also, that *ber* (daughter-in-law)¹¹ is drinking all the time...
- The drinking is making her heart cold (*hüiten setgel*). The 404 diseases and the 1080 obstacles are connected with the vodka. If a household has one alcoholic woman, then they all enter.
- I come home, but immediately feel like leaving. If guests arrive with vodka, they

are met with smiles. I cannot struggle on my own. It is too hard. My father's heart isn't too good either. He kicked the *ber* out. 'You drunk, you cannot clean, you are not doing any work', he shouted. There was a big argument. This is what makes me so worried. Whenever I come, she has been drinking.

– You need to be as peaceful as you can. When you become upset, she will release a terrible charge of bad *energy*, which is then added to yours. You need to be positive (*eyereg*) in order to create the opposite charge (*esreg tseneh*). To protect your own light (*gereh*) you need to treat angry persons nicely. Then [the bad energy] will go away. If you look angrily at such a person, you will only receive more bad things. You will be punctured (*tsoorood*).

– Perhaps you should come and perform a ritual back home. I told my brothers that I want to have them looked at by you. Things are going off course at the moment. Maybe you can make them stop drinking?

– If there is just one person in the household who wants to move in the right direction, then the bad flows will go away for sure. Whatever caused that *ber* to become alcoholic can be cut away (*taslaad orhichihoj*). When I think back, you have improved since you came here first time. Your *hiimor* has risen. Your mentality is different now, it has become more centred (*tövlörsön*).

Apart from corroborating our earlier observations about Kolya's household, what does this extract tell us about concepts of the person in contemporary Ulaanbaatar? The terms used by Kolya to express his worries – as well as those used by the *zurhaich* to mitigate this nervousness (*nervtüüleed*) – both express a characteristically leaky self. Like Kolya's land, his prominence (*süld*) and energy (*energi*) are at constant risk of being 'punctured' (*tsoorood*) and 'startled' (*tsochood*) by various 'flows' (*ursgal(yg)*), which are influencing him beyond his control. And, much as Kolya is struggling to make the plot of land his alone by curtailing different networks of obligation, so also he is told to engage into a sustained attempt at 'cutting away' (*taslaad orhichihoj*) the 404 diseases and 1080 obstacles associated with the alcoholism of his sister-in-law (*ber*).

This, then, may be what the growing demand for 'private lamas' is essentially about: the need for cutting and containing the flow of spirit (in the dual sense of the word) in response to the ever mounting 'pressures' (*daramt*) of the transition. Constituting modes of being that are neither fully individual nor fully collective, people's selves (like their belongings) are perceived to exist in a precarious state of dynamic equilibrium (*tövlörsön*), on either side of which lurks the always imminent danger of being pushed too much towards the one or the other side. In this *obshchenie*-like tunnel of perpetual beco-

ming, where everything is subject to transformation but within a relatively closed orbit of circulation (the body, a group of friends), maintaining one's *süld*, or magnificence (*javhaa*), becomes a matter of relentlessly subjecting oneself to the flow (*ursgal*) of the transition, while at the same time cutting its infinite networks of relations down to size. If one is not able to perform this balancing act, one risks losing oneself entirely in the disorder (*hyamral*) of freedom and democracy (like Misha), or, alternatively, to fold completely into oneself as all *energi* is extinguished, as in the dead official discourse of late socialism (cf. Lyosha).

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to account for the social and existential knife-edge on which much of Mongolia's urban youth are forced to balance. Sometimes the balancing act works, and Kolya is able to contain the flow of property and spirit (in the dual sense) by performing trickster-like translations between the *obshchenie*-based sociality of the former socialist parallel worlds and the individualist logic of the emerging age of the market (as he has been doing in the land case). At other times, however, the 'disorder' and 'pressure', which impinges on his household from all sides catches up with him, and he is overwhelmed by a deep sense of crisis, as demonstrated in his above call for help.

However, this 'disorder' should not be conceived of as a state of natural crisis – a sort of Hobbesian chaos – arising from the sudden breakdown of a hegemonic sovereign. Although a dramatic societal disintegration certainly did take place in the early 1990s, we insist that the present context of crisis is both ordering and ordered. The old parallel culture of socialism and the socio-economic effects of the 'transition' have merged into a dynamic logic, which is able to incorporate the accidental, not by anticipating or neutralizing the flow of unexpected events, but by accepting this irreducible potential for radical change through a systematic unwillingness to plan, which in some ways may be described as hunter-gatherer-like. Thus, in contemporary Ulaanbaatar, and possibly elsewhere in the postsocialist world, the chronicity of crisis is one where order and disorder are not opposed, but have been merged into one.

Like the concept of property, we have seen, the concept of the self (*viz.* *süld*) has become imbued with irreducibly 'fuzzy' properties in the postsocialist context. In that sense, both of the cases we have considered about the four brothers point to a fundamental incongruity between, on the one hand, 'private' relations of containment and, on the other, hyper-fluid relations arising

from the perpetual crisis associated with 'transition'. Within the logic of the former sociality, which calls to mind Western theories of transactionalism (e.g. Barth 1969), persons are conceived of as 'having networks', which may be extended or cut down according one's needs ('networking'), whereas, according to the logic of the latter sociality, which to a higher degree resembles Melanesian concepts of the distributed person (cf. Strathern 1988), it rather is *the network that has the person*, as multiple exterior 'flows' are felt to mould both what people are (their selves) and what they have (their property).

Kolya, we have seen, is trying to navigate between containing his self and his possessions without losing relations, and maintaining relations without becoming lost in the hunter-gatherer-like networks and obligations of a now obsolete counter-culture, which grew strong on the increasing paradoxes of late socialism. He is facing the always present danger of being dragged into the shifting relations of transition and hence losing his *süld*, but in taking the concept of private ownership (too) seriously he is also facing the obverse risk of being left all alone. Thus, only if he ever manages to fully contain himself and his property, may he end up living the 'boring' life his girlfriend craves for. What is more likely to happen, however, is that his future will be colonized by the unpredictable demands of a socialist parallel culture, which has anachronistically extended its logic into the postsocialist context of crisis.

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Notes

1. See Sneath 1993, 2007; Szykiewicz 1993; Humphrey & Sneath 1999; Bruun 2006; Pedersen 2006, 2007.
2. Although Mongolia's economic growth continued throughout the 1980s (Namjin 2000:75), the country was experiencing growing economic problems. Also, living standards were still relatively low, and from the mid-1980s the country's leadership started to talk publicly about greater openness and liberalization of the economy (Rossabi 2005:7-10, 34-35).
3. From the onset of Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s until the late 1980s, the USSR maintained a force of 100,000 soldiers in Mongolia (Rossabi 2005:8, 33).
4. It is important to keep in mind that our analysis has a significant male bias. A focus

- on women (see Højer, forthcoming) is likely to have produced a picture of a generation significantly less 'lost' (as illustrated by the fact that the majority of petty traders and university students are women, cf. Pedersen 2006, 2007).
5. It is impossible to say exactly how many people live in the flat, as people move in and out all the time.
 6. We do not wish to imply that this is a general feature of Mongolian city life, but this is the way Kolya explained it, and it is our impression that it is still widely – if implicitly – practised.
 7. According to the Mongolian law on Allocation of Land to Mongolian Citizens for Ownership of 2003, it is now possible to own land rather than just possess (lease) it, as was the case before.
 8. Actually, the law does not say anything about one having to fence one's land. According to an official from a sub-district (*horoo*) office in Ulaanbaatar, a person registered on a piece of land will keep his right to this land even if someone else settles on it. A few minutes later, however, the same woman explained that – in practice – registration (i.e. getting your name on a numbered piece of land) is not important, for neighbours etc. will know who lives where, and that – in the end of the day – it is better to fence it (because it 'proves' that it is your property), just as it is best to obtain official papers of ownership. There have been cases, she warned, where people have filed ownership for land, which was already registered in other people's names. 'The law is clear', she concluded, 'but people make it unclear'.
 9. This feature is highlighted in the Mongolian countryside and, according to Russians and people of mixed background, especially pronounced among Mongolians. Thus, apart from being an effect of transition, it is also related to a more general way of approaching temporality in Mongolia (see Højer 2004).
 10. The term *töriin süлд*, for instance, refers to the sacred banner of Genghis Khan's polity, and is still today used in official ceremonies in Mongolia and is on permanent display inside the parliament.
 11. Kolya is here referring to the wife of one of his older brothers.

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