

# TRANS-TEMPORAL HINGES

## Reflections on a Comparative Ethnographic Study of Chinese Infrastructural Projects in Mozambique and Mongolia

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**Abstract:** Based on two case studies of Chinese infrastructural interventions in Mozambique and in Mongolia, this article introduces the notion of ‘trans-temporal hinge’ as a heuristic methodological concept that brings together phenomena and events otherwise distributed across time. The authors explore envelopes used when paying Mozambican workers at a construction site in Maputo and roads dividing Chinese oil workers and local nomads in southern and eastern Mongolia as concrete manifestations of trans-temporal hinges. In exploring the temporal properties of these phenomena, we define the trans-temporal hinge as a gathering point in which different temporalities are momentarily assembled. As an analytical scale derived from a specific ethnographic context, we argue that the trans-temporal hinge provides a novel and, quite literally, timely conceptual invention compared with other recent methods of anthropological knowledge production, such as multi-sited fieldwork.

**Keywords:** China, economy of distance, infrastructure, Mongolia, Mozambique, time, trans-temporal hinge

According to Mark Hodges (2008: 402), a severe blind spot may be identified in much so-called practical-theoretical anthropological work, namely, what he describes as “a tacit unspecified temporal ontology that is evoked through a common root vocabulary of process, flow or flux—itself implying, and facilitating in an unspecified way the notion that time involves ‘change.’” Thus, Hodges argues, many anthropologists operate with a “spatialized conception of linear time” (ibid.: 405), that is to say, a more or less implicit model or theory of human temporality, according to which two events either precede or supersede one another like beads on an endless string suspended in abstract, empty space (see also Gell 1992). But perhaps it is possible to theorize socio-cultural practice



in more *sui generis* temporal terms. Doing so would imply constructing a model of anthropological knowledge production—and therefore of ethnographic fieldwork and ethnographic method more generally—that retains the open-ended holism and empirical sensibility of classic ethnographic fieldwork, but which rests on a much more explicit and coherent temporal ontology. This is what we shall attempt to accomplish in this article by introducing the concept of the ‘trans-temporal hinge’ as an apt methodological device for studying the effects of various ongoing Chinese infrastructure projects in Mozambique and Mongolia.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, there has been growing academic interest in China’s rising political-economic clout abroad, especially in Africa but also in Central Asia and Latin America (Alden et al. 2008; Brautigam 2009; Kleveman 2003; Swanström 2005; Taylor 2006), and it is fair say that China’s influence beyond its borders is now truly global. Reminiscent of the modernization theory that inspired Western development assistance after World War II, Chinese aid projects and private investments focus on the construction of infrastructure such as roads, power plants, dams, factories, and government buildings. Designed, built, and often managed by Chinese professionals and workers with mostly limited levels of consideration for local needs and participation, these infrastructural projects have emerged as “zones of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2005: xi) in which Chinese and local worlds meet, mix, and clash in the co-construction of socio-material entities. These entities are ripe for anthropological analysis but also seem to call for new ethnographic and analytical methods.

The present article is an attempt to grapple with some of the methodological opportunities and challenges that have arisen in the process of carrying out a collaborative research program, titled “Imperial Potentialities.” In it, the two of us, along with Mikkel Bunkenborg (University of Copenhagen), seek to compare Chinese development projects and resource extraction in Inner Asia and sub-Saharan Africa by conducting three closely interlinked ethnographic fieldworks on Chinese interventions in infrastructure projects and natural resource extraction in Mongolia and Mozambique. Our objective in what follows is simultaneously ethnographic and theoretical, that is, to identify socio-economic junctures in which Chinese infrastructural activities studied by us in Mongolia and Mozambique may be simultaneously analyzed in their present and future forms. Put differently, it is our ambition to locate certain ethnographic phenomena and practices that may be ‘extracted’ by us in order to frame analytically and to compare disparate cases that are otherwise distributed across space and time. Our challenge is consequently to forge heuristic methodological concepts that, at one level, bring together local temporalities in an ‘emically’ meaningful way and, at a more ‘etic’ level, may be used to theorize our data in new ways. In order to accomplish this, we wish to introduce the notion of ‘trans-temporal hinge’, which we will subsequently use as our guiding theoretical concept in a comparative exploration of two ethnographic cases involving Chinese infrastructural interventions: a Chinese-built football (soccer) stadium in Maputo, Mozambique, and two Chinese oil fields in southeastern Mongolia.

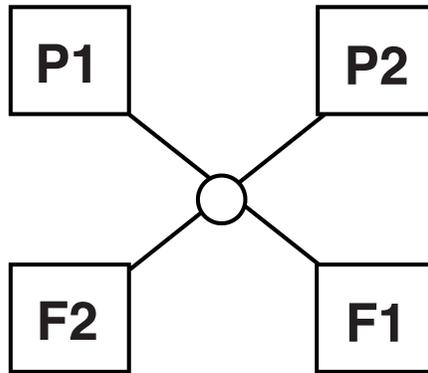
By trans-temporal hinge, we understand any configuration of socio-cultural life that is imbued with the capacity for bringing together phenomena that are

otherwise distributed across disparate moments in time. Based on a Bergsonian conceptualization of durational time (Bergson 1965; Deleuze 1988), we take time to be a co-existence of different temporalities that emerge as overlapping tendencies in the present, such as when a momentary orientation toward the future is enveloped by an only partially actualized memory of a past occurrence. Here, it makes little sense to conceive of time in terms of binary oppositions, such as ‘more or less’ or ‘before and after’ (Ansell Pearson 2002: 13; Deleuze 1988: 20). Instead, we may think of time as a heterogeneous simultaneity of disparate temporalities, whose mutual relationship is neither linear nor cyclical but rather transversal, multi-temporal, or (as we call it here) trans-temporal. Phrased in the vocabulary used by the editors of this special issue, we advocate for a particular theorization of ‘time of the field’, namely, a temporal ontology that is not so much ‘extensive’ and ‘quantitative’ in the progressively linear manner of most current anthropological paradigms (including the practical-theoretical paradigm discussed above), but ‘intensive’ and ‘qualitative’. In this view, time emerges not so much as a relationship between discrete temporal moments characterized by mutual exteriority (e.g., moment B succeeding and therefore being different from moment A), but rather as an ever-unfolding virtual (i.e., interior and intensive) whole that expands and contracts in gradually actualized forms. The key anthropological question here becomes how to operationalize such a seemingly intangible notion of time that brackets clear-cut distinctions between different temporal moments, such as before and after. What needs to be clarified is how to study the ways in which multiple temporalities in various contracted forms intersect and actualize in ethnographically significant phenomena and events. It is precisely for this purpose that we have devised the concept of a trans-temporal hinge.

The trans-temporal hinge may be described as a durational middle point that connects the multiple temporalities of our research project and its equally multiple field sites. Similar to an ordinary physical hinge between, say, a door and its frame, the trans-temporal hinge holds together otherwise disparate elements (certain past, present, and future events) in a manner that serves to maintain an optimal balance of distance and proximity between them, so that a certain technical operation (like the mechanics of opening and closing a door, or the logic of generating ethnographic knowledge) can occur in a smooth and subtle way. For is that not what a hinge basically is—a point of symmetry defined by its capacity to be always in the middle without constituting a center, instead demarcating the shared margin of two entities each of which define opposing centers? Consider figure 1, which is our attempt to depict the formal properties of the trans-temporal hinge and the new temporalization of the ethnographic field that it opens up.

As a particular kind of durational object that exists solely on a virtual plane (Deleuze 2004), the trans-temporal hinge is conducive of two simultaneous processes that, within the realm of the actual, move along opposing temporal trajectories, one from the present to the future, and the other from the future to the present. On the one hand, there is an anticipatory or protensive (in Husserl’s sense) temporal vector, which, as Bourdieu (1977, 2000) and other

FIGURE 1 Trans-temporal Hinge



Note: F = future; P = present

phenomenologically inclined anthropologists have accounted for (e.g., Vigh 2006), involves the stipulation of a possible future scenario from the perspective of the present. In figure 1, the transversal line from the top left corner (P1) to the corner in the bottom right (F1) represents this well-known temporal conjecture. The other, simultaneous but reverse temporal process—depicted by the other transversal line in the diagram that points from the corner in the left bottom (F2) to the top right corner (P2)—is more novel in terms of anthropological knowledge making of time and temporality, although we would maintain that it constitutes an intrinsic but hitherto largely unrecognized element of it (da Col 2007; Miyazaki 2004, 2006; Nielsen 2008, 2011; Pedersen 2012). This reverse temporal movement involves a seemingly speculative intuiting of the inherently unknowable contours of a certain future scenario and then ‘protospectively’ (i.e., retrospectively from a future moment that is fundamentally unknown) tracing its dynamics and ramifications to the present moment at hand. However counter-intuitive this colonization or obviation of the present by the future may seem, it is, we insist, just as intrinsic to the ethnographic knowledge process as the more commonly accepted and seemingly more intuitive temporal vector of anticipatory protension in Bourdieu’s Husserlian sense.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these two knowledge processes constitute an ‘ethnographic moment’ (Strathern 1999): an intensive version of the ‘ethnographic present’, which is both the product of an imagined, unknown future and the context for an anticipated and known one (cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2009).

In what remains of this article, we draw on recent field experiences from Mozambique and Mongolia to demonstrate that the ethnographic knowledge process rendered possible by the trans-temporal hinge allows for continuous shifts of temporal perspective so that multiple ethnographic fields are made

simultaneously visible. More precisely, as we wish to show in the following case studies, two productive trans-temporal hinges derived from our respective ethnographic fieldworks enable us to move simultaneously and symmetrically backward and forward between actual (present) and virtual (future) case studies at our respective field sites in Mozambique and Mongolia.

### **Case 1: Temporal Envelopings of Chinese Infrastructure Projects in Mozambique**

“It won’t be a happy ending, you know!” Jan de Moor, an environmental specialist working in the fertile Zambezi valley in the middle region of Mozambique, took a sip of his beer before continuing. “When the Chinese arrive in the Zambezi valley, they are going to mess everything up. How are the farmers [*camponêses*] going to survive? With 10,000 Chinese there, the situation is going to be very difficult.” Sitting in the shade outside a small liquor stall in the center of Maputo, de Moor had vividly described to Nielsen the consequences of the expected invasion of Chinese small-scale farmers that was most likely going to occur within the next few years. To be sure, the future scenario outlined by the portly NGO worker was anything but rose-colored. State officials had recently confirmed that a Chinese construction consortium had won the project of constructing 200 kilometers of tarred road in the middle of the Zambezi valley. “It’s in the middle of nowhere!” de Moor wryly noted. “Now, why would a Chinese company want to throw cement in an area without any civilization?” His answer was straightforward: it is in the same area that a \$50 million agricultural production facility—also funded by Chinese investors—is expected to be built. To make matters worse, the agricultural produce to be processed at the facility would be cultivated by a group of Chinese small-scale farmers who would be allocated plots of land in the area.<sup>3</sup> According to de Moor and several other NGO workers and municipal officials, the future realization of these projects will undoubtedly create tensions among local farmers, community leaders, and the Chinese workers coming to the area, with disputes arising over land use rights, salary policies, transactions involving construction materials, and so forth.

The interview with de Moor took place during the initial phase of Nielsen’s field trip to Mozambique in 2009 when the primary case studies to be carried out as part of this African arm of “Imperial Potentialities” had not yet been defined. Hence, at the moment when the conversation took place, the information gathered about the potential conflicts in the Zambezi valley seemed only to constitute a necessary contextual canvas upon which the central cases would subsequently figure. Indeed, only a few days after the nightly visit to the liquor stall with de Moor, Nielsen found what seemed like the appropriate case for studying the socio-economic effects of Chinese infrastructure projects in Mozambique.

Already before commencing the field trip in February 2009, Nielsen had heard about the ambitious project of building a football stadium on the northern outskirts of Maputo. In 2005, the Chinese government had agreed to donate a

national football stadium to Mozambique, and in accordance with the initially defined time schedule, the construction process commenced on 22 April 2008. Ten months later, 273 Chinese and 331 Mozambican workers were involved in the process of building what was to become the biggest sports arena in the country since independence from the Portuguese colonizers was achieved in 1975. It was this project that Nielsen assumed would constitute a central case study, and, despite being refused entry on numerous occasions, he continued to make daily trips to the construction site. After an exhausting trip around the massive walls that fenced off the construction site from the nearby sprawling market, Nielsen went into a small food stall (*baraca*). While waiting to order, he spotted a young man, eating a plate of rice and beans (*feijão nhembe*), who was wearing a light-blue boiler suit, and that easily distinguished him as a worker on the football stadium. Nielsen approached the young man, named Ramón, and after a hesitant beginning, he agreed to talk about his work on the construction site.

Ramón was part of a group of Mozambican welders hired by the Chinese building consortium to work on the massive iron framework that was to constitute the stadium's foundation. When Nielsen met him, he was having a quick lunch before returning to the construction site for the afternoon shift. Only minutes into their conversation, it was obvious that Ramón was far from enthusiastic about his Asian employers, the wage policy being the most salient point of critique. "The thing is," Ramón said, holding Nielsen's arm as if to focus his attention on his words, "they [the Chinese employers] don't tell us how they calculate our monthly pay. You just go there at payday, and they give you what they think is sufficient ... As employers, they ought to say, 'Hey, your daily pay is this, and after eight hours of work, your salary goes up to this'. But that's not how it works. None of us knows what we make from 30 days of work." To make matters worse, Ramón told Nielsen, salaries were paid out of a movable stall placed in the middle of the construction site. At payday, all the Mozambican workers would line up and receive their salaries from a Chinese accountant handing out bundles of notes through an open window. "No one likes that!" Ramón thumped his index finger on the bar counter several times. "They really ought to put the money in an envelope, you know. In this situation, that would be the proper way to do it."

To many Mozambican workers involved in the impressive construction project, quotidian interactions with the Chinese were fraught with uncertainty. As Nielsen was constantly being told, it was completely impossible to decipher the actions of the Chinese co-workers, something that served to buttress the already widespread feeling of being radically different from the latter. Elísio, a young man from a nearby neighborhood, worked as a bricklayer at the construction site. A few days after Nielsen's initial meeting with Ramón, Elísio elaborated on how the Chinese were perceived by Mozambican workers. "We don't speak to them," he said with conviction, "because their way of doing things [*a maneira deles*] doesn't even seem human. I don't know ... The Chinese ... they aren't human. They aren't persons to whom you can actually talk ... They don't respect you ... They are really racists, you know. They don't consider the Negro as a human being."

Placed in an unknown environment governed by what seemed to be radically different and potentially malevolent others, who, paradoxically, were also crucial to one's continued socio-economic existence, the key issue for Elísio and his peers was therefore how to establish stable and (relatively) predictable forms of social interaction. As Elísio and many of his Mozambican colleagues saw it, the envelope would have produced just that. This was made clear when Elísio explained to Nielsen the importance of the envelope by outlining the consequences of its absence. "Anyone can see that they are handing out money," Elísio argued. "It's like taking money off the street." Without the concealment of the envelope, Elísio and his Mozambican co-workers felt an increasing exposure as they were fundamentally prevented from acquiring a well-defined social identity. In the southern part of Mozambique, people are essentially what their relations to others make them be (Nielsen 2009; Paulo et al. 2007: 4). Without the envelope, the recipient is thrown into anonymity, which invariably minimizes the ability to act as a social persona as there is nothing to define the parameters of discrete relationships. Any transaction covers a multiplicity of potentially enhancing forces, and in order for these to benefit the interacting parties, it is crucial that only they know about the particularities of the implicit agreement. Simply put, to Elísio and his colleagues, the degree of exposure is inversely proportional to one's possibilities for social agency: the more people know about you, the more restricted is your room for maneuver, as others will probably try to appropriate what is momentarily revealed.

As a consequence of the missing envelopment, as it were, of the relationship with their foreign superiors, it was impossible for people like Elísio to make functional prospective assumptions regarding interactions with the Chinese. This was made vividly clear when Ramón responded to Nielsen's question as to why he and his co-workers refused to teach the Chinese workers some basic Mozambican words. "No, no, no!" Ramón shook his head energetically. "Why should you teach them any words at all? In the future, they'll use those same words against you; they'll use them to insult you [*começa ti insultar com ela*]." In other words, social interactions with the Chinese were ipso facto defined as being potentially dangerous and thus requiring a productive distance in order for co-existence to occur. And as Elísio, Ramón, and their peers saw it, the envelope would have established a necessary separation while simultaneously creating a restricted space for social interaction. Without completely eliminating the widespread sense of uncertainty, it would compartmentalize, so to speak, the dangers always lurking at the construction site so that they became a question of clearly defined relations rather than coincidental occurrences. This kind of stability was considered as being completely absent in the present situation.

If we take an ethnographic scale to constitute a perspective on a given phenomenon emerging through a framing activity that correlates the phenomenon in question with the dimensions of the scale (Latour 2005: 186; Strathern 1991: xiv), then we may argue that the envelope constitutes a unique temporal scale. Crucially, time is not here to be understood as linearity where moments follow

each other in a chronological and thus exterior form (i.e., where each moment is defined by its distance to all others). As a temporal scale, the envelope operates by gradually investing its (equally temporal) surroundings with its own characteristics. Rather than outlining a linear timeline composed by a series of differentiated moments, the envelope essentially distributes its own dimensions into a broader temporal assemblage that stretches both forward and backward in time. In a nutshell, had the envelope been used at the construction site as a temporal scale, it would have constituted an essential relational component that, like a seam, could have allowed for the different heterogeneous components interacting to co-function in a flexible temporal assemblage.

To take one example, to Mozambican workers at the construction site, the envelope constituted an imaginary (or speculative) future moment that structured the present in accordance with its virtual dimensions. When interacting with the Chinese, each occurrence was consequently infused with its logic by making explicit what was missing. Thus, it was by positioning himself at the imaginary moment of receiving money in an envelope that Ramón realized the potential danger of teaching his Chinese co-workers some basic Mozambican words. As such, the envelope constituted a unique temporal scale that brought together events that were otherwise distributed across different moments in time. Within the specific setting of the stadium construction site, the envelope (or more precisely its absence) structured social life by indicating how appropriate distances to radically different others might be established and acted upon. This implied a series of immediate temporal shifts between the present and an imagined future moment (i.e., when receiving money in an envelope). Crucially, it is this process of figure-ground reversals that we define as an oscillation between protensive and protospective figurations and that is made possible by the envelope functioning as a unique trans-temporal hinge. Returning again to the model presented in figure 1, the envelope may consequently be considered as the motile middle point holding together occurrences that are otherwise distributed across time. Within the relatively secluded social universe emerging at the construction site, it is conducive to two simultaneous temporal processes: firstly, a leap from the present toward the imagined future moment when payments will be delivered in sealed envelopes and, secondly, a parallel temporal displacement from the future moment toward the insecurities of the present day.

While doing ethnographic research at the half-built football stadium, Nielsen also continued exploring the alleged future invasion of Chinese farmers in the Zambezi valley mentioned by de Moor. Gradually, as it became apparent to Nielsen that social life among the Mozambican construction workers was imbued with a lack of mechanisms for apportioning relations with the unknown others, it became clear that the (etic and emic) significance of the Zambezi valley case changed accordingly. Rather than being a question of merely adding more context to his knowledge about administrative structures and their lack, the situation seemed to call for—if not require—an ‘envelope-like’ reading, as it were. Not unlike the processes of temporal displacement related by Ramón and Elísio, the present situation in the Zambezi valley, as described by people

like de Moor, was couched in a vocabulary defined by the properties of events that had not yet occurred. These events fundamentally reflected an ‘economy of distance’ privileging the need for reciprocal encounters with capricious others to be balanced, for example, by socio-temporal media such as the envelope. In order to push this line of thinking about his material further, Nielsen met up with Lourenço Duvane from ORAM, a local NGO that focuses on property rights and land conflicts in rural areas, including the Zambezi valley. For several years, Duvane had worked with farmers in the area to ensure that their land claims would be heard. In ORAM’s packed Maputo office, Duvane described the current situation: “Basically, they [the Mozambican farmers] will be kicked out. The government will probably make the regional leaders try to persuade people to move, perhaps by arguing that the local infrastructure needs to be improved ... Then, while they are away, the Chinese will take their lands.” Still, as Duvane also emphasized, people in the area did not reject the Chinese presence since the expected improval of the agricultural production facility might also strengthen the possibilities for disposing of their produce.

What is interesting, however, is that the projects might never actually be realized. As an effect of the global financial crisis, several international investors, including Chinese construction consortia, are becoming increasingly cautious about implementing large-scale development projects. According to sources in the Ministério da Planificação e Desenvolvimento (Ministry of Planning and Development), although projected infrastructure plans are not currently being withdrawn, they are frequently stalled or downsized. As Duvane told Nielsen, however, whether this pertains to the two Chinese projects in the Zambezi valley is still an open question. Notwithstanding any uncertainty, the development projections have already had a considerable effect by shedding light on, and thus adding fuel to, heated debates over the weaknesses of land management mechanisms in the area. Similar to many other rural areas of Mozambique, access to arable land in the Zambezi valley is hampered by inefficient governance structures and an increasing number of illegal appropriations by local and national elites. According to Duvane, the coming ‘invasion’ of the Chinese thus served to locate with an uncomfortable degree of precision the problems regarding insufficient capacities for operationalizing existing land laws. “To the farmers and their families, the problem is one of security,” Duvane concluded with a series of nods. Confronted by unknown strangers, such as the Chinese, no administrative technology or juridical framework was currently capable of functioning as a ‘buffer’ (*intermediária*), which would allow for the amiable co-presence of both groups. Without the necessary means of negotiating with a potentially malignant other, many Mozambican farmers currently living in the Zambezi valley were therefore convinced that eviction from their lands was both unavoidable and imminent. Similar to the situation at the construction site in Maputo, it would seem that the situation in the Zambezi valley reflects a peculiar interdependent relationship between an unstable present and an imagined future in which each may be seen as unfolding from the other. In both cases, current practices are couched in the vocabulary of future events that, as emphasized by Duvane (and documented by state officials), may never occur.

And at the same time, the imagined future moment fundamentally emerges through a temporal displacement from the insecurities of the present.

Our point is that this ongoing process of figure-ground reversals was made analytically visible to Nielsen by aligning both cases using the envelope as an ethnographic scale. The ethnographic case in the Zambezi valley was consequently opened up by the economy of social distance that the ‘envelope scale’ from Maputo instantiated. Moreover, by approaching the particular events associated with the projected Chinese infrastructure initiatives in an envelope-like way, an (intensive) ethnographic time that cuts across analysis and events was and still continues to be unearthed. Thus, analyzing the situation in the Zambezi valley through a temporal trajectory laid out by an envelope scale extracted from Maputo, the key methodological question of Nielsen’s (and Bunkenborg’s) later fieldwork in Mozambique (in late 2010) became to identify which social practices in the local terrain could be said to operate through an economy of distance. Methodologically, this implies not simply an interpretive deciphering of an indigenous concept (say, the envelope), but, more radically, using such concepts as heuristic devices for connecting temporally disparate cases.

## **Case 2: Trans-temporal Events around Two Chinese Oil Fields in Mongolia**

“We don’t know anything about those Chinese over there, and we don’t have any interest in them.” These were the words of an old Mongolian nomad at whose yurt Pedersen and Bunkenborg stopped in 2009 on one of their trips in search of Chinese companies engaged in resource extraction in rural Mongolia. Outside, they had caught a glimpse of an oil rig looming in the desert horizon to the south, perhaps 10 kilometers away. The nomad’s lack of interest came as a surprise to Pedersen and Bunkenborg. Surely, they thought to themselves as they waved goodbye from their jeep, although relations between Mongolians and Chinese have been fraught for centuries (Billé 2008; Bulag 1998), one would expect a remotely located household like this to be interested in finding out more about what is happening at a new oil field. Might there not be money to be made from the Chinese, either as hired hands or via informal trade?

The next morning, a battered pickup truck loaded with goats passed by their camp site in the desert close to the oil field. Much to Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s surprise, it turned out to be the head of the nomadic household, along with two of his sons. “Where are you going?” they quizzed. “Over there, to the oil field,” he replied. And so it transpired that his family was a regular supplier of meat to the Chinese, who purchased a few goats every fortnight, delivered and paid for in cash at the gates of the oil production compound via the mediation of the single Mongolian person present there (who was employed as a security guard and described himself as the loneliest person in the world). Naturally, Pedersen and Bunkenborg wanted to ask the old man how this new information might square with what he had told them the day before. Alas, the possibility never

arose, because in the same breath as he finished his curt answer, the nomad stepped on the gas pedal and the pickup disappeared in a cloud of Gobi dust.

Many anthropologists would undoubtedly interpret the above anecdote as a good illustration of the old Malinowskian lesson about always distinguishing between what people say and what they do. Indeed, as all culturally sensitive but at the same time critically inclined ethnographers are supposed to do in such situations, Pedersen and Bunkenborg had already anticipated the existence of this kind of discrepancy by asking themselves—in an act of prospective stipulation in which a possible future scenario was extensively imagined from the perspective of the present—whether there might not be a hidden reason behind the man’s answer during their first meeting. Probably there were economic and/or political interests that accounted for the old man’s evasive response during that initial encounter, such as the possibility that he did not wish to disclose what was evidently a good business arrangement, or that he felt ashamed and certainly did not want others to know of his ongoing liaison with the hated Chinese.

Yet something did not add up. Heading toward their next destination—a bigger Chinese oil field located in far eastern Mongolia about 1,000 kilometers away from the lone oil rig in the Gobi Desert—Pedersen and Bunkenborg had a nagging sensation that they had missed something crucial in their brief but obviously important encounter with the old nomad, and that an alternative interpretation of this ethnographic moment might be possible. It is this sensation—which may be described as ‘ethnographic intuition’, and which arguably constitutes an irreducible feature of all anthropological analysis—that we wish to explore in the present case study.<sup>4</sup> Basically, we suggest that Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s doubt might be described as a protospective effect of an unknown future acting on the present as its ‘cause’. In this capacity, it represents a reversal of the temporal movement from the present moment into the future, which is characteristic of conventional prospective acts of critical ethnographic suspicion. In that sense, as we shall see, the ‘ethnographic intuition’ to which Pedersen and Bunkenborg were subject may be explained as a ‘trans-temporal event’ through which ‘something of the future’ installed itself in their minds without them being able to pinpoint why, for ‘it’ did not yet (and might never) exist other than in a virtual realm of potential actualizations. Over the coming days, as we shall also now recount, a new train of ethnographic events unfolded by means of which a locally significant scale became transformed into an analytical scale, which in turn rendered explicit to Pedersen and Bunkenborg what they had first intuited.

“The relationship between the Chinese company and the local community is flawless.” Such was the not-to-be-questioned assessment provided by a high-ranking Mongolian government representative, whom Pedersen and Bunkenborg met on a windswept hill near the production headquarters of PetroChina Daqing Tamsag, a Mongolian subsidiary of China’s state-owned energy giant PetroChina, which, since 2005, has operated an oil field in the Dornod Province of eastern Mongolia.<sup>5</sup> In presenting in these positive terms the relations between the predominantly Chinese employees of this company and the mostly nomadic Mongolian population of the local Matad district, the senior

official was echoing the rosy narrative offered by all company representatives and many state officials in the capital of Ulaanbaatar (although local officials were more divided on the matter). In the words of Mr. Chimegtseren, a former mayor of the Matad district who was in charge of the interactions and negotiations between the Matad community and PetroChina Daqing Tamsag from 2005 to 2008, “This company plays by the book. The last thing they want is to have bad relationships with the local people. Remember, this is not a small private firm polluting the desert and underpaying their workers like many foreign mines in the Gobi. This is the Chinese state, and they are doing everything they can to leave a favorable impression on the Mongols.”

The Chinese companies in Mongolia certainly seem to be in need of improved impression management. As anthropologist Franck Billé (2008: 1) has observed in an article about Sino-Mongolian relations in contemporary Mongolia, “China is not merely portrayed negatively: a belief that the country harbours sinister intents and is plotting to destroy the Mongols’ very existence is prevalent and expresses itself in a wide range of stories and rumours.” Against this background, Pedersen and Bunkenborg were hardly surprised to learn that, among the nomads, villagers, local officials, and environmental NGOs with whom they met in the Matad district, as well as in the provincial capital of Choibalsan, the large majority of people expressed deep skepticism about, if not downright hostility toward, the presence of a Chinese oil company in what they considered to be their homeland (*nutag*). Seen in this light, the striking thing about the present case study is not the Chinese companies’ unpopularity in the rural community at hand, but the lack of visible conflict surrounding the presence of a large, foreign-owned and polluting oil field with thousands of Chinese workers in the midst of Mongolia’s sparsely populated and most cherished wildernesses (*heer*).

Consider how the relations between Chinese oil workers and Mongolian nomads have developed over the years. During the first period after PetroChina’s purchase of the oil field in 2005, a number of incidents took place in which Chinese workers approached local nomads with the intention of purchasing meat and other produce from them. Since the two sides did not speak each other’s language, the Chinese workers had to use gestures to communicate their needs. Presumably, this could have worked out, but that was not how Mr. Chimegtseren and several other Matad residents saw it, as they explained to Pedersen and Bunkenborg. “It was a total mess [*zambaraaгүй*],” Mr. Chimegtseren recalled, slowly shaking his head disapprovingly. “Groups of Chinese workers tried to express their wish to buy meat by holding their hands to their heads and grunting, as if were they cows. But the nomads could not understand what these people wanted, and now and then, when the men had gone hunting, the women and children would become so afraid that they ran from their homes. Such chaos!”

Soon rumors also began to circulate that local women were engaged in illegitimate sexual relations with Chinese men, and that ‘bastard’ (*erliiz*) children were being born in the district—a common fear all over Mongolia, which is exasperated by the fact that people find it impossible to distinguish *erliiz* from so-called genuine Mongolians. Eventually, a meeting was set up between managers from the company, the regional police chief from Choibalsan, and Mr. Chimegtseren,

in his capacity as governor. From this point onward, no Chinese worker would be allowed to leave the oil field unless authorized to do so. Chinese drivers, who would sometimes visit nomadic households on route to the border, were instructed to stick to the roads, and locals were banned from carrying out trade with anyone from the company. Instead, a central trading company was set up by the district administration through which all trade had to be conducted at a fixed price. “Soon after,” Mr. Chimegtseren proudly concluded, “all strife and conflict disappeared, and disorder was replaced by order.”

Note that for Mr. Chimegtseren, as well as several other (Mongolian as well as Chinese) officials and managers, ‘order’ here seems to mean that a complex multiplicity of relations is somehow reduced to a more homogeneous set of manageable connections. Indeed, what is characteristic of PetroChina Daqing Tamsag and the other Chinese resource extraction outfits in southeastern Mongolia investigated by Pedersen and Bunkenborg is the seemingly deliberate if not systematic manner in which the relationship between Chinese workers and managers, on the one hand, and the local communities and Mongolian workers, on the other, has deliberately been ‘hollowed out’ over time. For that was what many leaders and officials, including Mr. Chimegtseren, took pride in: the forging of an optimal distance between two worlds that are mutually dependent but must be kept separate at all costs (see also Willerslev and Pedersen 2010).

Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s visits to the Tamsag production headquarters from 2009 to 2011 confirmed this observation. Unlike the arrangements with many smaller Chinese (and other) companies in Mongolia’s natural resource sector, the Mongolian staff at this oil field received stable and relatively high salaries (around \$500 per month in 2009), plus a proper pension scheme and health insurance. The food and the accommodations at the headquarters were of equally high standard when compared to many other Mongolian and foreign-owned mining companies: the living quarters and bathroom facilities (both consisting of air-conditioned special-purpose containers of the same type that many Chinese companies use in Mozambique) were clean, spacious, and functional, just as the food was plentiful and geared toward different tastes by cooks belonging to the respective nationalities. And while minimal informal interaction took place between the Chinese and the Mongolian workers—who were eating different food in different cafeterias, and who never formed the same groups of friends smoking and chatting or playing sports outside—there was little evidence of conflict between the two groups. Instead, the limited interactions that took place between them, whether they were part of the same drilling team at one of the wells or were waiting at the showers before dinner, seemed perfectly amiable—to the point of being so polite and so mutually tolerant that the two sides could be suspected of striving to remain indifferent to each other.

What all this points to, we argue, is the workings of a distinct economy of distance by which the interactions between the two sides in a given social relationship are kept to an absolute, functional minimum. It is, we submit, the successful instantiation of this peculiar hollowed-out sociality that has ensured, ever since PetroChina Daqing Tamsag began producing oil in 2006, that the trend has been one of moving toward less and less—as opposed to (as one would tend to

expect from social relations over time) more and more—contact between Chinese nationals and Mongolians. It is this carefully forged hollowing out of Sino-Mongolian relations in eastern Mongolia that we think is of wider methodological significance for our comparative research agenda in Inner Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It is also an insight that, as we are about to learn, speaks directly to the earlier anecdote from Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s research trip to the Gobi in 2009.

Precisely how is this hollowing out done? Elsewhere, Pedersen and Bunkenborg (2012) have accounted in some detail for the network of roads and tracks built between the company headquarters and the different oil wells and exploration sites, as well as between the oil field as a whole and the local communities in the Matad district and the Dornod region, including the recently upgraded highway running eastward toward China from Tamsag. One of the things that this road ethnography shows is that the construction and use of roads between the Chinese and the Mongolians seem to indicate a desire for disconnection rather than any yearning for contact with which most roads are associated. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the aforementioned example of the trading monopoly set up between PetroChina Daqing Tamsag and the Matad community. As Mr. Chimegtseren emphasized, it was thus only after a “proper road” was made between the company headquarters and the local district center, along with various legal, economic, and political arrangements between managers from the oil company and local leaders, that the “chaotic” and “conflict-ridden” relations between the two sides were transformed into an “orderly arrangement.” As Pedersen and Bunkenborg (*ibid.*) conclude in their study, roads between Mongols and Chinese in Mongolia thus serve as a ‘technology of distanciation’ by which the two sides can be maximally separate while engaging in a mutually beneficial trade arrangement.

Returning to the earlier story of the old nomad from the Gobi Desert who was caught red-handed selling goats to the Chinese oil workers he was not supposed to know anything about, the question now is whether the road, as a particular scale of social life in eastern Mongolia, can be transposed to this particular fieldwork encounter as well and perhaps elicit an alternative and more novel interpretation of it. We suggest that it can and in a way that is imbued with peculiar methodological implications for the temporal ontology of ethnographic knowledge production more generally. The moment that roads are conceived not so much as interfaces by which entities are connected but as technologies through which latent relationships are truncated—which is precisely how Pedersen and Bunkenborg came to think of roads, but only after their visit to the Tamsag oil field—it becomes possible to scale the old man’s words in what could be considered a more satisfactory (and less skeptical) manner. If we try to ‘road’ Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s ethnographic moment in the same way as some of Nielsen’s fieldwork material from Mozambique was earlier ‘enveloped’, Pedersen and Bunkenborg’s vague intuition concerning their encounter with the old Mongolian nomad is materialized exactly in the form of the road. What had previously showed itself only as an intuitive ‘sign from the future’, a nagging sensation that something was missing (or had been overlooked) in their interpretation of this event, now became explicit when elicited by the locally important socio-material

configuration of the road. In that sense, the road came to serve as an ethnographically derived analytical scale for Pedersen and Bunkenborg by which the man's seemingly contradictory (or untruthful) remark—that he and the rest of his nomadic household did not know anything about the Chinese—may be taken more seriously (literally) as a genuine (earnest) indigenous description of the particular Sino-Mongolian relationship at hand. In this non-skeptical interpretation of the encounter, then, the nomad *did* 'mean' what he said, for the road reduced a latently multi-faceted relationship into the single and hollowed-out one that Mr. Chimegtseren called 'pure business'.

What, then, is 'the time' of Pedersen and Bunkenborg's field? In some ways, the answer is surprisingly obvious and not as metaphysical as one might expect. It is now apparent that the road, as a distinct trans-temporal hinge, was already available for them in their encounter with the old nomad in the Gobi, but that this analytical scale only became actualized through their subsequent visit to Tamsag in eastern Mongolia. Because of the virtual nature of Pedersen and Bunkenborg's nagging sensation that something was missing in their understanding of the encounter with the old nomad, things could easily have developed in such a way that their lingering doubts were forgotten, relegated, along with countless other signs from the future that constantly impinge on the ethnographic fieldworker and feeds his intuition, to the churchyard of forgotten hunches and half-baked interpretations. Not so in this case, however. Pedersen and Bunkenborg were, in a rather literal sense, exposed to their primary scale of analysis all along the way, as their route between the two field sites eventually turned out also to be their analytical concern in the form of the road. Unbeknown to them, they had been driving on what was soon to become their key concept.

## **Temporalized Scales of Ethnographic Analysis**

To sum up our argument so far, if, in our first case study from Mozambique, the locally significant configuration of Sino-African social life that turned out to work as a trans-temporal hinge was the envelope, then, in our second case study from rural Mongolia, the ethnographically salient scale that emerged as our second trans-temporal hinge was the desert road. In the first case, exchanges between Chinese and Mozambicans were guided by an economy of distance where productive transactions were predicated on a mutual effort to avoid exposing the 'content' of the relation. In the latter case, it was also a capacity for separation—as opposed to connection—that was appreciated by Mongolians and Chinese alike. Similar to the Sino-Mozambican scale of the envelope, the road as a scaling of the Sino-Mongolian relationship thus rendered possible the ongoing reproduction of an optimal distance in the awkward encounter between the two sides through its capacity as a technology of distantiation for stretching out and hollowing relations.

But this still leaves the question of the relationship between 'their scale' of social life and 'our scale' of analysis. Before closing, we would therefore like to

elaborate further on what we mean by ‘scale’ and how our use of this crucial concept compares with that of Marilyn Strathern and with other ‘post-plural’ understandings of it (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). In a study of concepts of land and value among Hageners in Papua New Guinea, Strathern (2000: 51) observes that “culture lies in the value which people give to things and the concepts through which they express it. It involves the facility for imagining one’s own conditions of life. Scales, whoever constructs them, are thus cultural artefacts. At the same time, the observer would not give any scale to the facility itself.” Here, for something to operate as a scale, it is necessary that the effects of social processes are imagined as phenomena in their own right (scalable, as it were), while the imaginary capacity for doing so remains beyond any scalar extension or dimensioning. And indeed, when analyzing indigenous conceptualizations of wealth in Papua New Guinea, it does seem very relevant to distinguish between a general facility for imagining one’s conditions of life and the specific scaling process by which, say, land is made culturally significant. By so doing, it becomes possible to examine the systemic effects of switching scales, such as when changing from measuring in terms of population density to measuring in terms of different production regimes. The result, as Strathern (1991: xv) explains, is that “relations between phenomena appear ‘complex’. Complexity is culturally indicated in the ordering or composition of elements that can also be apprehended from the perspective of other orders.” For, as long the distinction between scale and facility is assumed always to remain intact, then the ethnographer is continuously reminded that any interpretation is invariably partial since the “capacity for conceptualization ... outruns the concepts it produces” (ibid.; cf. Strathern 2006: 96–97).

Yet the question is whether our concept of trans-temporal hinges actually observes this distinction between a single, general (human?) capacity for scaling and multiple culture-specific scalings. As we have tried to make clear in both of our case studies above, one of the defining characteristics of temporalized scales, such as the Mozambican payment envelope and the Mongolian oil road, is their capacity to operate as dynamic middle points that hold together otherwise disparate occurrences and events. As ethnographic scales that serve a particular role in concrete Sino-Xeno encounters in Africa and Inner Asia, they do not indicate a set of invariable principles by which to generalize and compare particular social configurations; rather, as inherently temporalized articulating joints, they connect and disconnect at the same time and thereby expose the continual flow of relations through which various forms of social life emerge and disappear. In both of the above case studies, the trans-temporal hinges facilitated not just exterior temporal scalings of the social contexts under investigation, but also an interior differentiation that allowed our analysis to differ *from itself* in the course of making it. Thus, while the anthropological scalings discussed by Strathern require that the capacity for scaling is held stable across different scales, the trans-temporal hinges explored by us here seem to allow for a more dynamic form of analysis, whereby the facility for imagining and comparing people’s condition of life becomes an effect of the ethnographic scale identified and explored rather than the other way around.

Consider again the envelope by which the Mozambican workers sought to apportion the proper distance to their Chinese superiors. This economy of distance was made emically and etically visible through a series of immediate temporal leaps between the present and an imagined future moment when paid-out salaries would be received in the appropriate, concealed manner. By imaginatively probing the effects of holding together an untenable present with a potential but unlikely future, the envelope came to function as a viable temporal scale by which to measure certain domains of social life. Similarly, in the case of the Mongolian road, Pedersen and Bunkenborg's analytical capacity for scaling was not separate from the ethnographic scaling they ended up extracting from—or rather bumping into in—the field. Quite the contrary, their 'road-ing' of certain fieldwork events from two Chinese oil fields in rural Mongolia was to a large extent an effect of an initial inability to imagine an appropriate scale for making sense of their data.

In both of the case studies explored in this article, it therefore makes little sense to distinguish between a scale-insensitive facility for differentiation and a proportioning of social activities instantiated by the former. Trans-temporal hinges fundamentally proceed from, or we could say 'envelop', the facility for imagining how people's conditions of life might be measured and acted upon. As such, they serve as the ethnographic ground upon which to figure the proportional capacity that might subsequently activate other social environments, such as when the problematic situation in the Zambezi valley was imagined in an envelope-like way, and when the mutual propensity for hollowing out the Sino-Mongolian relationship was conceptually 'roaded' in Central and Eastern Mongolia's deserts. In both cases, the facility for differentiation was contained by ethnographic scales that initially emerged as an effect of the awkward relationship between local workers and their Chinese superiors in the two contexts. Rather than having the facility for differentiation held in proportion across different scales, the envelope and the road suggest a kind of 'transformation from within' whereby people's life conditions seem to be predicated on how different temporal moments are briefly held together. Put somewhat differently, the envelope and the road emerge as ethnographic scales-cum-heuristic anthropological concepts through the optimal distances that they afford between particular presents and futures rather than vice versa.

## **Conclusion**

We hope to have shown that trans-temporal hinges of the kind discussed in this article may allow for a better understanding of the inherent unpredictabilities of certain ongoing Mozambican-Chinese and Sino-Mongolian relationships, as well as the ethnographic knowledge process involved in studying and comparing them. Trans-temporal hinges, we have argued, are heuristic methodological tools devised for studying volatile social relations that allow ethnographers to take the future seriously as an object of analysis and methodological reflection. Because all ethnographic phenomena can, in principle, be 'scaled' in the

manner suggested by us in this article, any given practice, concept, or event from our respective project sites in Mozambique and Mongolia can be said to contain the time of our field as a whole. Still, certain ethnographic phenomena, events, or scales seem better equipped to serve as trans-temporal hinges than others. Apart from the fact that that such scales should be socially significant in the ethnographic contexts from which they derive, the key criteria behind the selection of the scales that are to act as trans-temporal hinges must be that they remain temporally equidistant from the different cases studied, for only by keeping the same distance from actual and potential events witnessed by the ethnographer will these scales be able to hold together present and future events in non-linear, trans-temporal 'hingsings' of the sort outlined above.

As noted at the outset of this article, trans-temporal hinges must always be derived from socially significant phenomena in their respective ethnographic contexts. But precisely because trans-temporal hinges in their etic role as scales of anthropological analysis are fundamentally inseparable from their emic role as important scales of indigenous social life, such scalings cannot serve as frames for generalizations on a 'higher' epistemological order than the phenomena that they compare. Whereas such quantitative scales order social domains in terms of fixed and hierarchical dimensions (e.g., if a certain phenomenon is found to be more local, then it is, in a proportionally inverse manner, also less global), trans-temporal hinges are rather a form of qualitative scales that contain within themselves the facility for differentiation and dimensioning. To this it may be objected that any analytical attempt to uproot or to extract a scale that cannot keep its proportions stable even in its local context is doomed to fail due to its obvious inability to map symmetrically onto the 'bigger' dimensions of other cases. This is, however, precisely the point that we have been trying to make here: it is *because* trans-temporal hinges, such as the payment envelope and the oil road, are so glaringly incapable of maintaining fixity and thus are so obviously unable to allow for generalizations between ideally self-identical cases that they are so apt as anthropological concepts.

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## Notes

1. Both authors have contributed equally to this article.
2. While both operations are linear in that they involve a unidirectional connection of one event with another along a spatialized temporal vector (a progressive present-future vector and a regressive future-present one), their irreducible simultaneity—the fact that they are folded into one other as each other’s grounds—ensures that they cancel each other’s unidirectionality out, delineating a non-linear temporal plane. Thus, as shown by Nielsen (2011) in his work on house building and inverse temporality in Mozambique, temporal obviation revolves around a series of inverse cause-effect relationships in which, say, occurrence A is rendered possible by occurrence B, even though the latter chronologically follows the former.
3. Rumors have it that up to 10,000 Chinese small-scale farmers will cultivate the land. This figure has, however, never been confirmed by official agencies.
4. A differently focused and lengthier account of the present case can be found in Pedersen and Bunkenborg (2012).
5. With a \$511 million investment in 2009 and an annual payment of \$19 million following the product-sharing agreement between PetroChina and the Mongolian government, the oil field is tiny by international standards. Nevertheless, PetroChina Daqing Tamsag represents the biggest foreign direct investment in Mongolia’s Dornod Province, and it involves one of the highest concentrations of foreign workers

in the country. In 2008, the number of Chinese nationals working at the oil field surpassed the local population of 3,000 inhabitants in the district of Matad. Since then, the number of Chinese workers has hovered between 3,500 and 6,000.

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