Book Reviews

Mette M. High

Fear and Fortune: Spirit Worlds and Emerging Economies in the Mongolian Gold Rush. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. 2017. 162 pp. \$89.95 ISBN 978-1-5017-0754-4 (hardback), \$22.95 ISBN 978-1-5017-0755-1 (paperback)

While the ‘freak geology’ of Mongolia’s immense mineral wealth has been seen as a boon for international investors, local understandings of mineral extraction are much more ambivalent. In *Fear and Fortune: Spirit Worlds and Emerging Economies in the Mongolian Gold Rush*, anthropologist Mette M. High focuses on a particularly volatile aspect of the extraction economy: the illegal artisanal (‘ninja’) gold mines. Drawing from two-and-a-half years of fieldwork in the Uyanga district of Övörhangai province between January 2005 and August 2011, High’s book explores the global gold economy via the transformations of local lifeworlds. This ethnography details how the people involved in ninja mining experience the radical change and strangeness of life in the gold rush. Drawing on regional literature on the production of wealth as related to the ability to attract the fortune of domestic and environmental spirit beings, High shows how gold money is linked to human action, landscape and ‘supernatural’ worlds.

With complex ethnographic detail, this book illustrates the ways in which humans and non-humans are forging a coexistence in the interface between cosmology and economic life in the midst of Mongolia’s mining boom. High uses the concept of cosmo-economy to call into question the contradiction between economic and spiritual practices espoused by modernist paradigms. High’s book contributes to discussions of the agentic capacity of non-living non-humans and their cosmo-economic relations with humans, which are often contradictory and not always harmonious.

In chapter 1, ‘The Burden of Patriarchy’, High describes life in a particular *hödöönü ail* [rural household] headed by the patriarch Yagaanövgön. In describing the often oppressive character of domestic life in the *ail*, particularly for the household daughters-in-law, High pushes back against the dominant narrative within the literature on nomadism in Mongolia, which assumes a

direct relationship between herding pastoralism, mobility and freedom. On the contrary, High argues that the vertically hierarchical structure of the patriarchal herding household in fact limits mobility for many household members, and that it is artisanal mining that can provide individuals with the freedom and mobility they may desire.

The second chapter, 'The Power of Gold', examines how both herding and mining constitute a set of interactions with the landscape that are engendered by local cosmo-economies. She describes the phenomenon of *altny chadvar*, a dust-like material generated by gold mining that influences and incites the desires of the human beings who come into contact with it, acting as a 'centripetal force' (p. 53) that 'pulls' them to the mines, often making it difficult to leave. She concludes that in recognising this fact, we can see how economic life itself emerges as a 'potent manifestation of human and nonhuman interaction' (p. 60).

The third chapter, 'Angered Spirits', concerns itself with the non-human stakeholders involved in gold mining: the spirits, ghosts, monsters and energies that inhabit the landscape and which find themselves also entangled in the mining economy. Via stories of ghosts, ghostly influences, fears and taboos, High argues that economic life is not only a relational, but also transhuman (and transliving) moral practice. Most importantly, she points out that this is not a relationship based on harmony, but rather on desire, power and the demands of a potentially dangerous spirit world.

Chapter 4, 'Polluted Money', is concerned with the circulation of gold rush money, especially in contrast to pastoral wealth. She begins with the observation that gold itself (as well as the value associated with it) is materially unique in that it 'retains strong ties to the landscape and its many spirit beings' (p. 2). Because of its strong links to landscape, gold is both valuable and spiritually dangerous; its very materiality is entangled with the many and multivalent fears that surround mining itself. High draws on ethnographic material among *altny chanj*, or gold changers at the mining sites, showing how gold money is subject to re-evaluation by powerful local forces based on interactions between humans and spirit beings.

The fifth chapter, 'Wealth and Devotion', discusses how ninja miners deal with this spiritual fear and uncertainty by drawing on the assistance and ritual services of local Buddhist lamas, who have a different view of gold and gold money, and are central to the mitigation of local misfortune and the circulation of gold money. High argues that, because local miners rely so heavily on the expertise of local village lamas, it is the religious specialists who are becoming noticeably wealthy, even more than the ninjas themselves.

The final chapter, 'Trading Gold', shows that in addition to the lamas, local gold traders (*altny chanj*) and political players (*tom darga*) are also central

players in the circulation of money. It shows how, in converting and circulating gold money, gold changers and traders distribute risk and harness fortune and power in relation to their communities and even the Mongolian nation.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is in its rich ethnographic detail about the tensions and particularities of Uyanga's mining economy. The book's serious engagement with 'supernatural' actors engages with the large-scale issue of the global Anthropocene while remaining true to local knowledge practices. By tying the supernatural to the material without relying on static cosmological models, High also avoids the common heuristic trap that divides world religion from its others by separating Buddhist from shamanist practice, a division that does not hold water in the contemporary Mongolian context. Finally, in her refusal to draw on the notion of 'moral economy' (pp. 127–8), High stays with the trouble of *ninja* mining, arguing that this analytic assumes a degree of collective morality that belies the multiple and challenging 'actions, interactions, and transactions' (p. 3) between humans and non-humans in the context of material extraction.

While her argument about the potential for artisanal mining to provide freedom and mobility rings true, the analysis of this ethnographic material could be expanded in its engagement with gender. Other ethnographic works in Mongolia have shown that there is a great deal of complexity to the way gender works in Mongolia, and the ethnographic data suggest there is great potential for more work in this area. While High acknowledges that her observations in Yagaanövgön's household differ from the more egalitarian households described by other ethnographic works, we as readers are not presented with enough data outside the household to see whether this situation is unique to Uyanga (as High argues) or whether it is a condition of a particular *ail*. Further, while there is analysis of the vertical hierarchy of the *malchin ail*, the power of the *tom darga* is presented as somehow less gendered. If the pastoral *ail* is a patriarchal form of the socialist era, as High argues, from what history of power does the *tom darga* emerge?

Otherwise, this is a fascinating and well-researched book, with strong and evocative ethnographic data that support High's argument. The viewpoints of Uyanga's residents can help anthropologists think about secularisation and commodification of the environment and spirit worlds beyond a globalist unidirectional narrative. This book has the potential to be of interest not only to Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, but to the discipline as a whole.

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