

Communities, Culture and Commodification: Mongolia's New Resource Politics

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ABSTRACT

Mongolia's new resource politics, central to the country's geopolitical considerations and ambitions in the twenty-first century, must be understood in relation to their complex, multi-scalar socio-cultural, historical and environmental dimensions. This paper draws on the author's participatory research activities with key informants in Ulaanbaatar and amongst rural herding communities to illuminate key aspects, contexts and implications of the new resource politics. Specifically, the paper presents an empirically informed analysis of pertinent social and institutional forms, environmental and cultural values and aspects of resource governance, with particular reference to land issues, pastoralism, mining and resistance. Conceptually, it draws on recent work, especially in geography and political ecology, on activism, conservation and particularly on emerging discourses and framings of natural resources as 'ecosystem services'. Through attention to these concepts, it highlights contested dimensions of environmental values and valuation, of critical contemporary importance in Mongolia's new resource politics.

Keywords: Ecosystem services, values, valuation, mining, culture, natural resources, community

INTRODUCTION

In April 2011, at the invitation of members of the Mongolian Nature Protection Civil Movement Coalition (MNPCM), I joined a small convoy of minibuses *en route* to a windswept mountain-top to the south of the capital, Ulaanbaatar. Our destination, Tsogt Chandmani mountain in Erdene *soum* (county), Töv *aimag* (province), located at the end of the Khenti mountain range, was described by Movement activists as a 'world watershed', located between Arctic and Pacific Ocean drainage basins and the Inland Basin of Central Asia. The symbolic and environmental importance afforded to the site by these claims was further underscored by recent applications for uranium mining licences in the vicinity. The subsequent events of the day skilfully drew together celebration of the site's natural beauty;

the imperative for protection of natural resources, in this instance especially clean water; protection of local livelihoods and spiritual relations with land and nature, all in the wider context of mining resistance. Billed in part as a ‘Ceremony of the “White Old Man”, Lord of mountain and water’, music and ceremony were interspersed with speeches, the dedication of the site through the unveiling of a new monument and strategic deployment of striking visual representations of mining threats and resistance.

[insert Figure 1 here]

FIGURE 1a, b, c. Monument, ceremony and resistance, Tsogt Chandmani, April 2011. (Photographs: C. Upton.)

At the same time, in Sukhbaatar Square at the heart of Ulaanbaatar, a temporary encampment of diverse activist groups, including ‘Fire Nation’, led by the 2007 Goldman Prize winner, Ts. Mönkhbayar, articulated various strands of protest, including lack of rural development and investment in traditional (pastoral) livelihood strategies, rapid and poorly regulated mining expansion linked to adverse environmental and livelihood impacts for local herders, and the extent of foreign investment in and benefit from Mongolia’s mineral wealth.

Taken together, these contemporaneous events provide a useful snapshot of emerging and ongoing practices of mining-related resistance in Mongolia, widely framed by activists in reference to traditional pastoral livelihoods, and values of/benefits from nature, in some cases informed by appeals to resource nationalism¹ rather than rejection of mining *per se*. In January 2014, such grassroots struggles attained a new notoriety with the sentencing of Ts. Mönkhbayar and five colleagues to more than 21 years in prison, on the grounds of alleged (and much contested) ‘threats to the well-being of society’, following demonstrations outside parliament in September 2013 over proposed amendments to the ‘Law with a Long Name’ (Snow 2014).²

Despite their undoubted importance, these aspects of resistance, considered in more detail in the penultimate section of this paper, constitute only one strand of contemporary natural resource politics. Others are being enacted through resource governance practices and struggles amongst herding communities on a daily basis. In both instances, however, ‘traditional’ pastoralism and mining/mining resistance are closely intertwined, with critical questions and points of contestation outstanding over resource rights, trade-offs and accommodations, environmental values and decision-making.³

In this paper, I explore Mongolia's natural resource strategy and politics through attention to pastoralism, land and environment and attendant values and governance practices, within the wider context of mining-related transformations and resistance. Whilst many contributions to this special issue focus on the new mineral economy and geopolitics, here I seek to illuminate critical aspects of encounters and trade-offs between the mining economy and more established conceptualisations of natural resources, linked to mobile pastoralism, nature and conservation. In so doing, I seek to reaffirm a wider understanding of 'natural resources' and 'natural resource strategies and politics', beyond the prevalent emphasis on mining, the high profile of which threatens to obscure these other, critical strands. Furthermore, the term 'natural resource politics' is used herein to encompass not only the (inter)national, but multiple scales, especially everyday community-based politics and practices around land and grassroots mobilisations. The paper also highlights how aspects of the environment are being *created* as resources in new ways, through processes of commodification and assignment/recognition of value(s). I further contend that Mongolia's new resource politics must be understood in relation to socio-cultural, historical and environmental contexts and thus through critical attention to local, place-based specificities and practices. In themselves, these are scarcely contentious propositions, but nonetheless merit emphasis in the context of wider academic concerns with mapping and understanding emergent strands of resource nationalism/resource cosmopolitanism in contemporary Mongolian resource (geo) politics.

Conceptually, this paper draws on recent work, especially in geography and political ecology, on emerging discourses, construction and framings of natural resources as 'ecosystem services' (ES); contested values and valuation of resources; dimensions of rights and ownership; and aspects of resistance. Within this body of work, 'political ecologies of the subsoil'⁴ have begun to redress a prevailing geographical emphasis on "surface imaginaries of horizontal space" at the expense of "vertical" enquiries into power over subterranean matter' (Bebbington 2012; Emel *et al.* 2011: 72; Scott 2008: 1854). These approaches are especially apt in contemporary Mongolia, wherein resources rights (especially in respect of land and associated ES) and trade-offs between mining and pastoralism epitomise the new resource politics.

In the following sections, I examine critical aspects of communities, culture and commodification within the context of these strategies and politics. I first summarise emergent aspects of contemporary natural resource strategies in Mongolia and their practical, conceptual and political implications; these are subsequently explored further through

examination of recent evolution in pastureland rights and tenure, followed by analysis of some pertinent strands of the politics and practices of resistance. The paper draws on insights from interviews and participatory research activities with multiple key informants in Ulaanbaatar and amongst herding communities at sites throughout the country over a number of years and on analysis of NGO/policy texts and documents.⁵ Before turning specifically to the Mongolian context, however, I first highlight some pertinent aspects of theoretical debates and framings.

ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE: ‘COMMUNITY’, LAND AND RESOURCES

Aspects of contemporary work on land issues and land reform, both in post-Soviet and developing country contexts, have emphasised trends in the devolution of rights and recognition of communal/customary tenure (Agrawal & Ostrom 2001; Peters 2009; Upton 2009). Current concerns with global ‘land grabbing’, land governance and politics increasingly feature ‘community’ groups and representatives as recognised stakeholders. Recognition of communal or customary tenure by no means constitutes a panacea to land-related conflicts: issues of equity, community capacity and efficacy of such systems in the face of powerful, alternative claims (for example mining or expansion of protected areas) remain unresolved. Nonetheless, and drawing on insights from commons scholarship, recognition of the ability of groups of resource users to develop appropriate governing institutions and to cooperate over natural resource management remains a powerful redress to the assumed primacy of private (land) ownership rights (Agrawal 2001; Ostrom 1990). Later work in this vein has emphasised not only economic rationality, but social and historical contexts as key factors in shaping institutions, resource use and governance and in understanding local relations to land, especially in the context of ‘commons’ (Johnson 2004; Sick 2008).

Related insights from political ecology and cultural geography highlight concepts of ‘landscapes of meaning’, place and territory and the ways in which these imbue human-land relations. For example, according to Cheng *et al.* (2003: 87), ‘natural resource politics is as much a contest over place meanings [and values] as it is a competition among interest groups over scarce resources...’⁶ Thus, analysis of natural resource politics around land requires attention not only to institutional mechanisms (including tenure regimes), community roles and practices, but to values and meanings. The latter are particularly contested in the light of emergent ‘ecosystem services’ approaches to nature and natural resources.

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES, VALUATION AND COMMODIFICATION

Recent work (e.g. McDonald & Corson 2012; Robertson 2012) highlights the increasing prevalence and power of framings of nature as ‘natural capital’ and ‘ecosystem services’. The ES concept has arguably been accorded the status of a new paradigm, linked to the ‘profound reorientation of ES speak’, and new ways of encountering nature (Potschin & Haines-Young 2011; Robertson 2012).⁷ The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment’s (MEA’s) disaggregation of the environment into provisioning, supporting, regulating and cultural services, while by no means the first use of the term ‘ecosystem services’, may be considered a significant milestone in this regard and one that has emphasised utilitarian, anthropocentric perspectives of nature as a service provider, grounded in the separation of human and non-human nature and the commodification of the latter.

The ‘remaking’ of the world into a ‘collection of ES’ is closely linked to the valuation of these services, arguably to facilitate evidence-based policy making, and enabling the creation of markets, for example through payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes, carbon offsets and sequestration (Robertson 2012). Valuation techniques are themselves the subject of heated debate, but have to date focused primarily on the assignment of monetary value, for example through the Total Economic Value (TEV) framework, albeit increasingly subject to criticism (Arsel & Buscher 2012; Potschin & Haines-Young 2011).⁸ One outcome of processes of valuation and commodification has been further to entrench ideas of exchangeability and equivalence in nature, for example in relation to biodiversity, where spatial and/or temporal offsets apparently enable exchange of one thing for another of ‘equivalent’ value (Sullivan 2012).

Brockington’s (2008: 189) concept of the ‘green box of consumptive nature’, by which landscapes and biodiversity are produced and can be valued apparently divorced from the historical, political, cultural and social contexts that gave rise to them, is pertinent here. Other critiques go to the heart of ongoing processes of commodification, linked to the ES approach: Sullivan (2009) argued that a ‘non-animated, trademarked nature must be seen as a profound manifestation of “cultural poverty” through the seeming incapacity to think of nature in anything but capitalist terms’ (in Arsel & Buscher 2012: 62). Thus, place-based specificities, values and knowledges are readily overlooked, as are co-constructed socio-ecological systems and natures (Potschin & Haines-Young 2011). Furthermore, implicit in such approaches are the assumptions that ‘people (are) individual utility maximisers and private property (is) the norm...’, thus neglecting cultural diversity, and leaving little space for consideration of communal decision-making, collective/customary land rights (Sullivan

2013: 200). The category of ‘cultural ES’, specified in the MEA as ‘non material benefits e.g. spiritual, aesthetic experiences, recreation’, does little to ameliorate these concerns, being widely criticised for its highly reductive, simplistic understanding/representation of culture in respect of the environment and human–nature relationships and difficulty in operationalisation/application (for policy oriented assessments: Fish 2011).

With specific reference to mining-related offsets, these approaches i) epitomise notions of substitutability, whereby the ‘impacts of mining in one location will be “paid for” [for example] by investing in biodiversity conservation in a different location’; ii) arguably facilitate discounting of place-based specificities and values (Sullivan 2011: 11; 2013). Issues of changing and conflicting values of the environment and particular ES are also underscored in respect of mining by recent work on ‘political ecologies of the subsoil’, which chart how the extension of commodification through extractive industries has historically given rise to social mobilisation and conflict (Bebbington 2012). The process of identification and prioritisation of key ES in the context of emergent extractive economies and wider debates over resource governance is highlighted as a key aspect of resource politics, and one which typically entrenches unequal power relations (Bebbington 2012). In Denise Bebbington’s work (2013), the discovery of significant gas reserves in the Brazilian Chaco precipitated re-valuation and trade-offs between the ES (water, fauna and flora for consumption, ‘landscapes of meaning’ and gas reserves) valued by different stakeholders (local indigenous populations, government, international companies etc). Outcomes in favour of gas extraction showed not only how one set of ES were valued over another, but emphasised issues of decision-making in terms of valuations and trade-offs, especially where ‘cultural services’ and alternative values were easily discounted.

NATURAL RESOURCE STRATEGIES: MONGOLIAN CONTEXTS

These debates have resonance in the context of Mongolia’s contemporary natural resource strategies and politics for practical, conceptual and political reasons.

Practically

Ecosystem services thinking, valuation and commodification are becoming increasingly influential in contemporary policy initiatives, for example through integration with a number of high-profile market mechanisms and development projects, for example:

- A national taskforce is currently developing a Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) roadmap with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support, to encompass enhanced forest governance and conservation, involving community-based forest user groups (FUGs), supported by international carbon finance.
- The Business and Biodiversity Offsets programme, which facilitates spatial offsets and habitat recreation through calculation of biodiversity value and is grounded in concepts of equivalence and substitutability of ‘natural capital’. Such approaches are being deployed particularly in relation to mining in Mongolia, not least at Oyu Tolgoi (see Howard, this volume, for claims of ‘net positive impacts’ in relation to biodiversity offsets and mining).
- UNDP-led initiative for economic valuation of the protected area system, as part of the five-year SPAN (‘Strengthening the Protected Area Network in Mongolia’) project (August 2010-June 2015); with the rationale to quantify economic benefits of protected areas (PAs) and their ecosystem services (ES) as a tool for policy and decision making, including through evaluation of trade-offs with alternative land uses.

In addition, other sectoral approaches are using ecosystem-based assessment techniques to evaluate costs of alternative responses to environmental change:

- In June 2012, the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism (MNET)⁹ launched a project for ES-based adaptation for water security, funded through the international Climate Adaptation fund. To be implemented in conjunction with UNDP in Mongolia and local communities, the project will include valuation of ES, aimed at measuring economic costs and benefits of alternative adaptation strategies.

These selected examples illustrate how ES thinking and, in some instances, associated practices of valuation and commodification are permeating decision-making, as an increasingly integral part of Mongolia’s contemporary natural resource strategies and politics, not least through mining itself.¹⁰

In parallel, however, equally important debates are ongoing over pastureland rights and tenure. These are explored further below. It is worth noting at this point that these debates are the culmination of struggles since decollectivisation in the early 1990s over private, individual *versus* collective rights; institutional and historical mechanisms by which claims are made, recognised and enforced; and cultural dimensions of land relations and tenure (Sneath 2001; Upton 2009; explored further below).¹¹ Practically, these intersect with

ES approaches and mining in terms of spatial overlaps in land uses and the relative strength/recognition of differing types and sources of land rights. Valuation and trade-offs between diverse ES, including newly recognised services such as carbon sequestration are also pertinent to both herding and mining.¹² REDD+ approaches focus only on forest carbon, although members of FUGs may also include herders. However, exploratory work on carbon in rangelands is ongoing, and may in the future be linked to sustainable rangeland use and biodiversity conservation through herder groups (Upton 2012a).

Valuation of other resources such as freshwater and biodiversity under the ES paradigm may further complicate issues of claims, rights and responsibilities in resource politics. For example, as noted by Milne and Adams (2012: 136) in Cambodia, ES valuation and associated PES schemes produced a ‘simplification of social and ecological complexity’, through their emphasis on one or two key ‘services’ and on homogenised notions of ‘community’, even as intra-community inequalities were produced or entrenched. Specifically for Mongolia, Fernández-Giménez (2002) commented on the complexity of and ‘misfits’ between spatial and social boundaries in relation to pastureland rights and tenure: the recognition/creation of disaggregated and spatially overlapping ES thus looks set to complicate this picture further.

Critical questions also arise over how ES values are assigned and by whom; thus contemporary resource politics and struggles are not only over access to material resources *per se*, but to the decision-making processes by which values and trade-offs are determined.¹³

Conceptually

The ES paradigm and attendant processes of commodification arguably draw on assumptions about economically rational individuals and private, clearly delineated rights to resources (Potschin & Haines-Young 2011). They are less well placed to encompass communally held resources and values, alternative economies and place-based, cultural specificities, concepts of ‘cultural ES’ notwithstanding.¹⁴ As argued by Empson and Webb (this volume), concepts of usufruct rights to land in Mongolia shape responses to the new mineral economy, as custodial, communal relations with land may be seen as standing in opposition to market-driven private ownership rights. They also bring attitudes to pollution and degradation into sharp focus, where mining may be seen to diminish the resource base, in direct opposition to and thus unsettling established norms of custodial land relations. ‘Traditional’ Mongolian understandings of land(scape) as animate and inhabited by spiritual entities (*gazariin ezed* or ‘masters of the land’), linked to respectful, reciprocal relations with nature, also stand in

marked contrast to the utilitarian perspectives inherent in many ES-based approaches. Thus, as explored below, the recent evolution of land tenure and politics around pastureland highlights a critical dimension of natural resource strategies, values and encounters with mining.

Politically

The practical and conceptual aspects of new resource strategies, encompassing both mining and herding and their intersections, open up new spaces of contestation both in relation to rights to resources, but also around the ways in which resources are conceptualised and valued. These struggles are variously played out in everyday resource politics around pasture land, its use and governance, and in overt practices of resistance to mining-related land degradation/alienation and the valuation practices which underscore these. Some of these strands are highlighted in the opening case study, and are teased out more fully below, wherein resistance is seen to be mobilised, not just in response to weak tenure rights, but to challenges to conceptual aspects of human–nature relationships. Discourses of ‘responsible mining’ and resource nationalism emphasise strategic responses, beyond simplistic rejection of mining, and also encompassing claims to participation in the decision-making process.

Thus, the above contexts in contemporary natural resource strategies in Mongolia constitute an invitation – or even an obligation – to think in new ways about the futures of rural spaces and associated material and discursive struggles. The emergent ES paradigm, rapid expansion of mining and ongoing reforms of land tenure when taken together constitute a moment of both crisis and opportunity for ‘traditional’ pastoralism and relations with the environment: wider perspectives (through ES approaches and commodification) may be problematic in their engagement with local practices, values and cultures; in other words, may tend to obscure ‘place-based specificities’. However, they also potentially offer space for recognition of pastoral contributions to ES (water supply, biodiversity etc), in turn potentially linked to future enhanced support for community-based governance, donor/government investment and also income from carbon markets.¹⁵

In the following sections I explore and develop these lines of argument through i) analysis of pasture resource and governance issues; ii) emergence and framing of mining related resistance and iii) through discussion of these aspects of natural resource strategies in light of issues of values and valuation.

RESOURCE RIGHTS AND POLITICS IN MONGOLIA: PASTURE, TENURE, TERRITORY

Issues of pastureland tenure have been at the forefront of policy and academic debates since decollectivisation, and have become more acute in recent years in the context of growing pressures by alternative land uses (most notably mining) and changing socio-economic and environmental/climatic contexts. Critical issues have encompassed both the nature of rights and of rights holders (i.e. whether individual or communal, and how these may vary temporally and spatially). The exclusion of pastureland from the privatisation of *negdel* [collective] assets in the early 1990s was initially criticised by some western donors. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) complained that ‘currently there is no private ownership of land. As a consequence, land tenure insecurity causes disincentives to invest in land improvements’ (ADB 1994: 33, cited in Sneath 2003). Hardin’s concept of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ was widely articulated in the context of images of a pastoral sector characterised by weak, ineffective institutions and conflict and underpinned by notions of ownership and the primacy of private property, at odds with pastoralists’ custodial relations with land (Sneath 2001; Upton 2009).

Subsequent developments reflect growing emphasis on customary and communal rights in the sustainable management of extensive pastoral resources, through a number of influential international donor projects and in parallel with wider emphasis on devolution in natural resource management. Especially since 2000, projects focusing on community-based natural resource governance in rangelands, through devolution of rights to diverse ‘herders’ groups’, have become widespread.¹⁶ According to UNDP (2007), in just one year donors allocated \$77.5 million to 14 projects centred on creation and formalisation of some 2000 herder groups across the country, based to varying degrees on the revival and strengthening of ‘customary’ institutions and norms of cooperation, but also encompassing creation of new community-based organisations (Fernández-Giménez *et al.* 2012; Upton 2012b). Through these projects, herders’ groups of various forms have emerged as social and institutional innovations, instrumental in shaping new social landscapes around resource use and have also become central in (ongoing) debates around land tenure and tenure reform, amongst both international donors and domestic NGOs and policy-makers (Upton 2009; 2012b). However, legislative evolution, notably through the 1994 and 2002 Land Laws, has yet to fully reflect these innovations or to protect group rights based on customary and/or communal usage. These issues continue to be at the centre of debates over pastureland governance and its legislative contexts. The new administration (which came to power in 2012) has, like its

predecessors, struggled to find a way to reconcile simultaneous pressures for intensification of pastoral production, typically linked in policy discourses to individualisation of rights, with environmental and cultural dimensions of customary, group-based nomadic practices and the burgeoning mining sector.

At present the existing (2002) Land Law fails to withstand the allocation of pastureland for mining and other infrastructure development. It does, however, set out some conditions by which pasture can be allocated for a long-term possession. Provisions, interpretations, and vagaries of current land legislation have been well rehearsed in a range of contemporary sources and will not be reproduced again in full here. In brief, the earlier 1994 Land Law required the allocation of winter and spring campsites, but specified the common use of summer and autumn pastures (Article 51) (Fernández-Giménez & Batbuyan 2004; Upton 2009; 2012b). Some confusion around the provisions and implementation of this Law were evident, particularly with respect to the critical question of whether ‘winter and spring campsites’ referred only to shelters and the immediate area on which they were constructed and the extent to which clear allocation (leasing) of surrounding pasture resources were also a key part of legal provisions (Fernández-Giménez & Batbuyan 2004; Upton 2009). In practice, and despite regional variations in interpretation and implementation, local *soum* administrations have typically focused on allocation of possession contracts for winter and spring campsites only, not the allocation of wider pasture resources, although, as Sneath and others have noted, the latter are often inferred from the former (Fernández-Giménez & Batbuyan 2004; Sneath 2003; Upton 2009; but see also Endicott 2012).

The revised Land Law (2002) contained an important provision, namely that ‘citizens of Mongolia may jointly possess land under winter and spring settlements through their *hot ail* communities’. This clarified that campsites could be allocated under possession as distinct from use contracts, but was less clear on the issue of pasture allocation. It also included apparently contradictory emphasis on the need to maintain common access to pastureland, irrespective of the existence of any possession contracts, while at the same time requiring protection of key seasonal pastures from out-of-season grazing (Upton 2009). The 2002 Law has been interpreted amongst donors and in some areas as permitting herders’ groups to negotiate use or possession contracts with local authorities for key winter and spring pastures, and even for all four seasons’ pastures. Nonetheless, Fernández-Giménez *et al.* (2012) highlight the lack of a clear, appropriate legislative framework as potentially undermining community-based pasture co-management solutions in rural Mongolia. Thus, while the principles of community-based, collective rights and governance increasingly inform

approaches to pastureland tenure, and the capacity of communities to resolve ‘commons problems’ (albeit with support and capacity building) is being recognised, implementation falls short. The much awaited new legislation relating to pastureland may resolve these issues, but is still under debate at the time of writing. Pasture possession by herders’ groups, at least for winter and spring pastures, is a key recommendation by many policy sector/NGO commentators.¹⁷

Practically, and in the face of mining encroachment, group-based tenure solutions have offered little by way of defensible rights or redress thus far. Reports by World Bank Sustainable Livelihoods Project (SLP) and also by New Zealand Nature Institute (NZNI) in relation to GTZ¹⁸ herder groups (*nökhörlöl*) concur that ‘the current procedure and practice of issuing [mining] licences ... to outsiders without the free, prior and informed consent of local communities ... is endangering all successes ... as [communities] lose their stake in the natural resource base and thereby the incentive to invest in it and protect it’ (NZNI 2006). In multiple herder group interviews by the author (from 2008-2009), community-based tenure provisions were widely reported as having no efficacy either in the face of loss of pastures to formal mining activities, or to ‘*ninja*’ (informal) mining. World Bank (2006) reports concurred that pre-2006 requirements for compensation were weak, opaque and poorly regulated, as was public or stakeholder participation in any element of the initial licence allocation, subsequent activities or restoration of mine sites. The 2006 revised Minerals Law did little to address these concerns (Suzuki 2013). Furthermore, despite more recent legislative provisions around protection of watersheds and forested areas (e.g. the 2009 ‘Law with a Long Name’, considered further below) and requirements for reinstatement of mined areas, these are often poorly enforced (Suzuki 2013). Forthcoming new minerals legislation may address some concerns, through enhanced environmental protection provisions and requirements for community participation in decision-making, but resolution of pasture rights issues remains unclear.

Conceptually, as noted by High and Schlesinger (2010), mining practices and transformations driven by mining expansion are felt particularly in terms of land relations. To quote, ‘the mining boom has not only generated profit from the land, but also destabilised its broader position within the local cosmology ... recognising the physical environment (*baigal*) as having life, feelings and agency, elaborate taboos inform people’s engagement with the land’ (High & Schlesinger 2010: 290). These include digging or excavating the land, in addition to wider, framing concerns with respectful, reciprocal relations with the land, informed by an understanding of the land as inhabited by spiritual entities (*gazariin ezed*).

Thus, notions of custodial relations with the land and the specific forms these should take are challenged by mining practices *per se*. Given the reported nature and scale of mining impacts in Mongolia, with mining cited as a key driver of pastureland degradation, and with more than 50% of territory subject to mining licences in some *aimags*, contentious resource politics are increasingly coming to the fore (Suzuki 2013).¹⁹ Private resource rights and commodification of ES are also highlighted as problematic, when viewed in conjunction with custodial relationships with and understanding of land as ‘territory’. ‘Landscapes of meaning’ are important dimensions of territory, and signify cultural values (and cultural ES) beyond merely access to land and its more tangible outputs (e.g. provisioning ES) (Bebbington 2013).

It is not only in relation to mining that different understandings and values around the environment and its component ES in rural Mongolia are evident. Analysis of contemporary resource strategies around biodiversity conservation also indicates the creation of space for re-emergence and re-enactment of spiritual practices (such as *ovoo* ceremonies etc).²⁰ within more overtly scientific, donor-driven conservation projects (Upton 2010).

It should be noted, however, that conceptual clashes in values and beliefs relating to the environment (and by extension to appropriate trade-offs between ES) have not prevented impoverished herders across the country from diversifying into informal (‘ninja’) mining, as a source of supplementary income and often following loss of livestock in *dzud* or natural disasters. As emphasised here and by Empson and Webb (this volume), mining and herding resource strategies and practices are thus closely intertwined in multiple ways, encompassing practical, political and conceptual dimensions. Contemporary resistance practices, as explored below, illustrate some of these strategies, values and trade-offs as important components of contemporary resource politics.

DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE: MINING AND THE NEW RESOURCE POLITICS

Overt herders’ resistance to mining activities notably emerged in Mongolia with the appearance of the Ongi River Movement (ORM) in 2001. This movement, which subsequently grew to involve citizens of eight *soums* from three *aimags* of central and southern Mongolia, was initiated by local herders in direct response to environmental degradation and to the disappearance of much of the Ongi River itself, a situation subsequently attributed to widespread mining activities (Beck *et al.* 2007). The ORM thus emerged in response to the environmental impacts of mining, especially loss or pollution of water sources, and associated threat to local herding livelihoods.

From 2001, the movement grew through local and subsequently regional campaigns amongst herders and local government officials and ultimately through lobbying of central government and the formation of an ‘interest group’ amongst Members of Parliament, the latter being designed to develop links between the ORM and the state (Beck *et al.* 2007). By 2008 the Ongi River Movement was one of 11 similar organisations, which together constituted the Homeland and Water Protection Coalition of River Movements or the Mongolian Nature Protection Coalition (MNPC). The Movements were typically formally constituted as NGOs, while the MNPC represented a broadening of the remit of the individual and the founder organisations. Specifically, the MNPC, founded in 2006, moved beyond the ORM’s early concerns with restoration of the Ongi River Basin to explicit attempts to engage with government policy and policy making in the broader arenas of environmental protection, pastureland management and citizens’ rights. Much of their work continued to focus on mining and associated struggles over land, albeit with direct and indirect emphasis on the development and empowerment of ‘sustainable community-based organizations ...’. (Beck *et al.* 2007: 75; MNPC 2007). Following recent splits in the MNPC, the Mongolian Nature Protection Civil Movement Coalition (MNPCM) emerged, which comprises 14 member movements across 14 *soums*, excluding the original ORM and its founder, Ts. Mönkhbayar. Mönkhbayar and colleagues have since founded the United Movement of Mongolian Rivers and Lakes (UMMRL) (2009) and ‘Fire Nation’ (2010). Despite important differences in strategies, practices and politics, significant commonalities continue to exist between these movements and in relation to resource politics.

In 2007, Beck *et al.* argued ‘this kind of social activism ... (is) ... new for rural Mongolians in both socio-political and cultural terms’ (2007: 76). As a form of resource politics, the original ORM and MNPC’s activities and strategies reflected both *practical* concerns over land rights and livelihoods, but were also shaped by notions of ‘traditional’ values in relation to land and nature (i.e. *conceptual* dimensions of resource politics), and calls for a voice in decision-making over trade-offs between alternative land uses (and ES) (*political* dimensions).

According to local informants, one of the early publicity strategies of the ORM, a walk along the course of the Ongi River in 2004, included not only local herders, but Buddhist lamas. As part of this ‘ecology protest march’, lamas officiated at a series of religious ceremonies along the course of the river, at which prayers were offered for the ‘preservation and protection of the Ongi ecosystem’ (Beck *et al.* 2007: 7). Given the recent re-emergence of Buddhism and Shamanism in post-Soviet Mongolia, and according to local

informants, these events, akin to ‘performative and ritualised moments of commonality’, were highly symbolic and strategically deployed not only as part of a rallying cry and public information exercise, but as a call to assertion of commonly held local understandings of nature and conservation (Leach & Scoones 2007: 21).

The event outlined in the opening paragraphs of this chapter performs a similar function. By means of this event, members of the MNPCM sought to contest the proliferation of mining and exploration licences, through: assertion of local rights in relation to nature; articulation and performance of particular values around nature and environment; and through linking scientific and ‘traditional’ knowledges in respect of resource conservation. To use an ES framing, cultural services and values, including ‘landscapes of meaning’, were presented in this case as co-occurring with particular provisioning services (especially clean water), and with their combined values outweighing those of mineral resources and their exploitation. However, MNPCM activists have typically not sought to ban mining activities in all areas *per se*, but rather to transform their regulation and to ensure citizen participation in mining-related decisions and thus in shaping spatial and social trade-offs over ES value(s), with due recognition of *conceptual*, as well as *practical* and *political* considerations. The spatialities and place-based nature of these trade-offs are highlighted in this case of Tsogt Chandmani mountain. Its symbolic and practical importance in relation to a range of ES and values outweighed the potential value of mining activities, at least from the perspective of MNPCM activists. The author’s discussions with participants during and after the event did, however, confirm that value trade-offs would not always and everywhere be seen in this way, but would admit mining activities in particular locations subject to adequate restoration and environmental protection measures.

MNPCM have thus also sought to enforce reclamation and restoration of land following mining and to demand that companies are held fully accountable for their activities. Overall, as highlighted in the author’s interviews with movement activists, these strategies are informed by the central aim to ‘fulfil citizens’ rights to live in a clean and healthy environment’. Diverse knowledges have also shaped resistance practices. MNPCM activists have not relied only on claims based in local, spiritual or indigenous knowledges, but have successfully collated and deployed scientific and technical knowledge in mobilisation of diverse constituents and in attempts to hold the government and mining companies to account (Beck *et al.* 2007).

Recent dimensions of MNPCM-led resource strategies around mining have engaged directly within mainstream electoral politics with calls for accountability, legitimacy and

citizen engagement. Specifically, biannual ‘Green Star: Mongolian Nature and Environment Legislative scorecards’, prepared and published by MNPCM for distribution to the public, now report the most and least environmentally friendly decisions by current incumbents in parliament. They also include the voting records of specific, named MPs and urge readers to use the information to guide voting decisions. Recent reports have warned readers of incipient ‘Dutch disease’ or the ‘resource curse’, in relation to limited wider benefits of mining wealth for the population as a whole. Exhortations to protection of natural resources are central, including recent appeals to Mongolians to ‘place the value of water higher than the value of gold’ and repeated emphasis on the rights of citizens to a healthy environment (MNPCM 2010: 3). However, Mongolia’s citizens are also presented therein as the ‘owners of mining wealth’, entitled not just to a share of the profits, but to a role in decision-making. Citizen monitoring of income generation, spending and reporting of mining revenues is described as at once being a social call and constituting a citizen’s obligation in the face of ‘uncontrolled flow of our natural resources out of the country through domestic and foreign collusion...’ (MNPCM 2010: 3). Thus, a form of resource nationalism is evident both in government and ‘popular’ discourse, by which practices of mining and its revenues are to be managed in locally appropriate ways with due regard for environmental protection, cultural norms and values, through full engagement of citizens, but also with equitable distribution of benefits. The MNPCM-led formation of a ‘Wealth for the Owners’ movement in 2011 epitomises aspects of this approach.

For Ts. Mönkbayar and ‘Fire Nation’, contemporary resource politics have produced much more overt clashes with government, following from the Sukhbaatar Square protests in 2011 and most notably in the events of September 2013, when the group demonstrated against proposed amendments to the ‘Law with a Long Name’. As the key law for protection of water and pasture resources, its lack of enforcement, coupled with reported plans for its amendment by the current parliament, prompted the 2013 protests outside parliament, in defence of rights to and values around resources, culture and livelihoods. The subsequent arrests and very lengthy sentences for six key activists are the subject of ongoing claims and counter-claims, with very strong protests from human rights organisations, in the few instances where the case has become known outside Mongolia (Snow 2014).

CONCLUSION: RESOURCE STRATEGIES, VALUES AND POLITICS

This paper has traced out some of the dimensions of Mongolia’s new resource politics. While mining issues and concerns, not least around burgeoning resource nationalism,

understandably occupy much of the attention in contemporary debates, a more holistic, encompassing notion of ‘resources’ and ‘resource politics’ is indicated. In particular, pastoralism and the mining/herding nexus are central to recent and ongoing struggles over the future of Mongolia’s rural spaces and to the construction and realisation of particular visions of ‘development’. Multi-scalar approaches are also instrumental in shedding light on the nature and manifestation of resource politics.

While the mining economy may epitomise aspects of the commodification of the environment, the application of ES-based approaches are beginning to shape the identification and valuation of other resources. Analysis of recent developments in pasture tenure and governance illustrate how contemporary natural resource politics encompass both material rights and access, but also, critically, struggles over meaning and value. Tensions between both aspects and at the conceptual and physical interfaces between mining and herding are as yet unresolved. Legislative developments (for example around the new minerals and pastureland laws) may go some way to resolve the physical dimensions of these, for example where land claims overlap. However, resistance strategies suggest that it is in cultural norms around land relations, in the determination of value(s) and thus in trade-offs between strategies and ES, that both difficulties and opportunities for progress may lie. Given recent events, environmental justice and human rights must be central considerations in the future development and deployment of resource politics. As previously noted, current contexts in contemporary natural resource strategies in Mongolia constitute an invitation to think in new ways about the futures of rural spaces, associated material and discursive struggles and justice. The co-occurrence of the ES paradigm, rapid expansion of mining and ongoing reforms of land tenure together constitute a moment of both crisis and opportunity for natural resource politics and for the future of ‘traditional’ pastoralism, wherein the full enrolment of local communities in the governance and the valuation of resources is critical.

NOTES

1. ‘Resource nationalism’ is here used to denote both state and non-state concerns with the ownership, regulation and realisation of benefits from resource wealth and development.
2. ‘Law with a Long Name’ is the popular abbreviation for the 2009 ‘Law to Prohibit Mineral Exploration and Mining Operations in the Headwaters of Rivers, Protected Zones of Water Reservoirs and Forested Areas’. Since January 2014, subsequent appeals have succeeded in

reducing the sentences of Mönkhbayar and colleagues to (still substantial) terms of 1–10 years.

3. I use ‘resource rights’ to encompass not only individual ownership, but collective, usufruct and customary rights to resource use and access.

4. After Bebbington (2012).

5. E.g. see Upton (2009; 2010; 2012a).

6. Bebbington (2013) uses the term ‘landscapes of meaning’ to refer to ‘cultural meaning in the form of territory’ for local indigenous populations, thus moving beyond concerns with land ownership *per se*, and indicating concepts of value that elude economic valuation techniques.

7. For example, through the ES lens, tropical forests are now seen as an assemblage of trees for carbon storage and REDD+, linked to global carbon funding (Robertson, 2012).

8. It is beyond the scope of the current paper to provide a more detailed assessment of complex, ongoing debates over valuation techniques. Those used in the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) are set out at <<http://www.lwec.org.uk/activities/nea>>.

Further, ongoing work on aspects of economic and non economic valuation of ES is highlighted through the Valuing Nature Network: <<http://www.valuing-nature.net/>>.

9. Subsequently rebranded as the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Green Development.

10. This is not intended to suggest that all the examples listed above necessarily merit the general critiques levelled at ES approaches in the previous section.

11. From the late 1950s until the early 1990s, herders in Mongolia’s rural areas were members of Soviet-inspired, state-run collectives (*negdel*). Amongst their other roles in regulating herders’ livelihoods and labour, *negdel* were responsible for conferring land rights on constituent herder divisions (e.g. brigades) and for managing land use in their territories, including herders’ movement between seasonal pastures. The degree to which aspects of *negdel*-era land use and land rights reflected pre collective ‘traditional’ or ‘customary’ norms is contested and geographically variable, albeit with general reductions in herders’ mobility linked to changes in administrative boundaries in the *negdel* period (Mearns 1996; Upton 2009). Pastureland remained in state ownership during these changes and to the present day, although the post-decollectivisation era has been marked by (ongoing) debates over appropriate forms of land rights and tenure.

12. Carbon has been referred to as a ‘fictitious commodity’, with carbon sequestration thus becoming a ‘service’ only in response to wider environmental problems, in this case climate

change, and as a result of the assignment of financial value to this service through markets (Arsel & Buscher 2012; Robertson 2012).

13. Or as Robertson (2012: 387) would have it, ‘the social process of measuring and abstracting from nature to facilitate exchange ...’.

14. The category of ‘cultural ecosystem services’ typically includes spiritual, educational, recreational and aesthetic benefits, among others.

15. This is not to overlook negative environmental impacts of herding practices, or to suggest a romanticised view of herders as ‘natural conservationists’.

16. These include major initiatives such as the World Bank Sustainable Livelihoods project (SLP), the UNDP Sustainable Grassland Management project (SGMP) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation Green Gold project.

17. This is not, of course, to suggest that allocation of possession or other rights to herders’ groups will of itself resolve pasture issues and conflicts. Intra- and inter-group struggles, in addition to relations with non-group members, remain issues of contention, while questions also remain over sustainability of group-based solutions (Fernández-Giménez *et al.* 2012; Upton 2008).

18. GTZ was the German government agency *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit*, or German Agency for Technical Cooperation. In 2011 it merged with other German government agencies to become GIZ, or *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*, with a specific focus on international cooperation for sustainable development. GTZ established some of the first donor-initiated herder groups in Mongolia through projects such as the *Nature Conservation and Bufferzone Development Project* (1995-2002).

19. This is despite the fact that actual mining, as distinct from exploration licences, reportedly affects a much smaller proportion of Mongolia’s total land area (Suzuki 2013).

20. *Ovoos* are piles of stones, often located on mountain tops and used to denote sacred sites. Ceremonies may be held to propitiate spirits in pursuit of personal good fortune and/or to seek favourable environmental conditions.

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