An open air treasure in Mongolia

A short history of the uranium mining town of Mardai

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In October 1989, following the policy of “transparency” (il tod) initiated by Jambyn Batmönh after the Russian Glasnost’, the Mongolian government revealed the existence of a secret town, located in the middle of the far-eastern province of Dornod, next to the borders with Russia and with China (Sanders 1989: 64). The town was called Mardai; it had been established in 1981 next to an uranium mine exploited by the Russians, in the framework of a secret agreement with the Mongolian government. Until its gradual opening after the end of the communist regime, the town had been closed to the Mongolian population, and was exclusively inhabited by Soviet nationals, coming from all over the USSR². According to memories of people who knew the city at that time, “Russian” (Oros) workers worked in the mines and tended the shops, “Russian” teachers taught their children in a school and a kindergarten, and “Russian” policemen patrolled the town. It is estimated that about 50,000 people lived in this secret enclave of the Soviet Union, working in Mongolia, and yet living in a strictly “Russian” environment, completely cut from the local population (ibid.).

The uranium extracted in Mardai was shipped directly to a processing plant in Krasnokamensk, some 500 km away on the other side of the border (Nuclear Energy Agency

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² A former inhabitant of Mardai who created a web page dedicated to his childhood memories of this place (http://maxpey.narod.ru/mongol.html), remembers that: “People came there from all over the Soviet Union, from Belarus, Ukraine, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and so on. In general, the settlement was quite cosmopolitan.” (Translated from Russian by S. Batchimeg). It should be added that there were, according to the memories of local inhabitants nowadays, many Buryat Mongols originating from the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.
1997: 246), using a railway line that did not appear on maps. Mardai was therefore, as stressed by Uradyn Bulag, who visited the city in the beginning of the 1990s, a “symbol of Russian colonial exploitation of Mongolia” (1998: 23). It was the concrete proof that Mongolia, although an independent state, was not completely sovereign within its own borders; that parts of its territory could be closed to its own population, and exploited by Russians, for Russia’s exclusive profit.

However, the revelation of the existence of this secret town, equipped with state-of-the-art Russian infrastructure, and supplied with Russian goods, seems to have elicited less resentment than excitement within the local population. This, in spite of the fact that the city and shops remained closed to most of them, only Party officials being occasionally allowed in. Lots of Mongols, however, came to settle around the city, to live of small trade with the Russian population or to try and take hold of re-sellable pieces of the high quality infrastructure. Mongol people who visited Mardai at that time recall its shops selling clothes of the latest Moscow fashion and other items that were not even available in Ulaanbaatar; its orchard providing fruits in the middle of the desert; its swimming pool; and its fully equipped sports hall – all of which were at the same time displayed, and forbidden to them.

In 1995, the Russian government finally decided to close the mine down, and three years later the decision was made to repatriate all the workers (Nuclear Energy Agency 1997: 246). The image is still vivid in people’s mind today, of a city emptied of its whole population almost overnight, and of Mongol settlers suddenly left alone around deserted buildings. Very soon after the city was vacated, started a process of methodical removal of all the metallic components of the city. The 1990’s were a moment of economic hardship in Mongolia, and Chinese traders, at the border, were buying iron at a good price. Lamp posts, and all sorts of railings were stripped, but also the framework of the buildings: before long, the city was turned into mere standing ruins.
I had the opportunity to visit the city during the summer of 2009, and to see for myself the ruins of what is still remembered as a beautiful town. More importantly, I could meet a man who had known it as it was before, and who had been there through the whole process of bringing it down. Following this, I met a few other people who had visited the town at some point, or who expressed their feelings about its present state. Here, I propose to draw on these memories of Mardai to reconsider the uncommon history of this town, and most of all its destruction by the Mongol population.

Mardai, indeed, confronts the ethnographer to some kind of a puzzle. As a ruin, it conjures the image of what Ann Stoler (2008) has called “imperial debris”: this ruin of an uranium mining town evokes the ruination still at play in Mongolian soil, resulting from the extraction and shipment of raw ore to the other side of the border. This conjunction of ruin as a state of dilapidation and ruination as an on-going process is precisely what makes an imperial debris for Ann Stoler. Yet ruins, for Stoler are not only derelict or destroyed building, they are the “aftershock of Empire”, the “material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities and things” (2008: 194): “The question is pointed: How do imperial formations persist in their material debris, in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people’s lives.” (ibid.).

However, while Mardai looks like an imperial debris, an index of post-colonial ruination, it is clearly not perceived as such by the Mongolians I could talk to. Rather than resenting the secret extraction of the uranium and the power structure that enabled to carry out this operation behind their backs, people tended to focus on the benefits of having inherited this city to plunder. Of course, this does not mean that Mongolian people are collectively blind to the exploitative process they have been subjected to, all too happy to trade their subsoil for a few tons of scrap iron.
The question of post-colonial ruins and ruination is indeed a very sensitive one in Mongolia, and so is the topic of uranium mining. People I met never failed to mention the livestock malformations that had been noticed since the installation of Mardai. On a national scale, moreover, there were heated debates a few years ago around the possibility for Japan to bury nuclear waste in Mongolian subsoil, after what the French Uranium mining company Areva started making the news, as their prospection activities meet with strong opposition from environmental activists (and one association in particular: Gal Ündesten).

Clearly, meanwhile, there are imperial debris in Mongolia, but to see them one needs to consider another kind of foreign presence: that of Chinese merchants during the late Qing period. As argued elsewhere (Delaplace 2010, 2012), there has been some concern among Mongolian inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar lately, around stories of Chinese ghosts haunting the cellars in which they are believed to have stingily buried all kinds of riches accumulated during their life as merchants in the beginning of the 20th century. These cellars, and the ghosts supposedly attached to them, perfectly fit Stoler’s description of imperial debris: they are indeed vestiges through which the toxic influence of colonial powers perdures in a subjected country.

So how come Mardai does not elicit more resent and indignation on the part of the local population? Could it be that Mardai, contrary to Chinese cellars, does not actually constitute a ruin to Mongolians? I will argue that a crucial role is played here by the materiality of foreign presence in Mongolia: while “Chinese people” (Hyatad, derogatory Hujaa) are despised for burying everything under the ground, “Russians” (Oros) are praised for leaving visible, even conspicuous traces of their presence. So by questioning the very idea that Mardai is a ruin, I hope to be able to sketch out what kind of vestige it actually is: in a nutshell, I want to argue that Mardai is less as a ruin to Mongolians, than an open air treasure.
A brief history of Mardai

Uranium exploration started after the Second World War in Mongolia: between 1945 and 1960, several Uranium deposits were found. From 1970 to 1990, a bilateral agreement was signed, allowing the Ministry of Geology of the USSR to lead a Geological Reconnaissance expedition in Mongolia to inventory its mineral resources. 70% of Mongolian territory was surveyed, and four metallogenetic provinces were defined, among which the Mongol Priargun in the eastern part of the country (Nuclear Energy Agency 1997: 240). In 1977, an uranium ore deposit was found around Mardai river. Following this, a secret agreement was signed to allow the Soviet government to proceed to its exploitation on Mongolian territory (Mays 1998).

In 1981, a mine was established in Mardai, together with the supporting infrastructure: the mine was called “Erdes”; it was created as a “sub-combine” (subkombinat) of Priargunsky Mining and Chemical Works, which was itself a division of the Soviet Ministry of Atomic energy. The main combine (kombinat), of which Erdes was a sub-section, was located in Krasnokamensk (ibid.). The uranium extracted in Mardai was shipped directly to Krasnokamensk, where it was processed. To this end, a railway line was built, that linked the two mining towns across the border. None of these, however, neither the railway nor the town, appeared on maps at that time and until quite recently.

Production of uranium started in 1988, ironically less than one year before the existence of Mardai was revealed to the public. However, the extraction continued until 1995, providing around 100,000 T of ore a year, which amounts to approximately 100 T of uranium after refining (Nuclear Energy Agency 1997: 240).

By this time, the settlement had gradually developed into a fully fledged Russian town, populated with workers coming from all over the Soviet Union, including from the nearby Buryat Autonomous Republic. Interestingly, the secrecy of Mardai and its very restrictive
access policy drew a stark differentiation within the “Buryat” ethnic category: “Buryats” from the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, who usually spoke Russian only, were entitled to live in the town from the outset, fully benefiting its goods, while “Buryats” living in Dornod province around Mardai, who often spoke both Mongolian and Russian, were not.

The town was obviously much better equipped than any Mongolian city at the same time. Of course, the streets were bordered with trees, and there was also a social club right in the city centre, like in any other Soviet town, but former residents coming from the Soviet Union also remember the impressive array of goods sold in shops, some of which were not even available back in their hometown (http://www.maxpey.narod.ru/mongol.html). There was also a kindergarten, a school with all installations, a football and even a hockey ground, on which championships were organised respectively in summer and in winter (ibid.). It is reported that at some point a cantilevered wheel was set up to watch the city and its surroundings from above (Shimamura, personal communication).

From the beginning of the 1990s onwards, the Mongol population – often Buryat families who used to live in nearby towns such as Dashbalbar in the north – started to settle around the city. According to former residents, there were about 200 households gathered in a separate district by 1995, when the uranium production stopped. After three years of uncertainty about the future of the mine, and attempts to restart production, Russian workers were given leave in 1998, and went back to their country.

Once free of its inhabitants, the city became available for a completely different usage: as the iron was removed by Mongols settlers, and sold at the border to Chinese wholesale dealers, it became a stock of saleable parts. The mining town, ironically, was turned into a mine itself. Everything was taken: all metallic items of course, but also the iron components in buildings, leaving them standing without a structure, as well as the metallic framework of
the roads. The pipes were extracted from the ground for the lead they contained, and wires were pulled out for their copper.

After the Russian population left, only a few households specialised in iron removal remained in Mardai, occupying more central places in the town, while the rest of the households moved out. Today, a dozen households are still settled here at least on a seasonal basis, and continue gathering iron to sell it through the Chinese border. According to people interviewed on the site, they trade the iron they extract to brokers who resell it to Chinese buyers, making quite a big profit out of it. Rumour has it that some very wealthy people today have made their fortune this way at the end of the 1990s. The Mongolian state itself took on some scraping of its own, notably removing rails around Mardai to use them for its own railway network.

Mardai has recently made the news again, after plans for its re-exploitation by a new company have been revealed to the public (Urantogos 2010). The company is called Central Asian Uranium Company and it is jointly owned by the former Russian owner (Priargunsky Mining and Chemical Works), the Mongolian government (through a small company called Mongol Erdene), and a Canadian company called WM mining –which later sold its rights to World Wide Minerals Ltd, also known as Khan (Mays 1998, Wu 1999: 154). Newspapers voice concerns about the status of these mining licenses originated in opaque agreements between Mongolian and Soviet governments. Some journalists have called their leaders not to make the same mistakes by letting foreign agents exploit Mongolian resources unilaterally. People assume that in the case of a re-exploitation of uranium, Mardai would be rebuilt. And the fact that Russians themselves might take part in this rebuilding seemed quite ironic to people I could talk to –I will come back on this point.
Memories of Mardai – a forbidden island of modernity

Mongolian people who have known Mardai before its destruction remember it with great excitement, almost with enthusiasm. This excitement, in part, comes from the fact that the city had been inaccessible for so long, and was brought down to ruins as soon as it became open to the public. This allowed Mardai to remain some kind of a legend, mostly known by hearsay and clad with the prestige of lost Soviet grandeur; people’s memories, intertwined with fantasies, single out Mardai as an archetype of Socialist modernity.

“How do people go about remembering something they have never seen?” asked Morten Pedersen (2010: 245) upon considering narratives of Buddhist temples in the Northern Mongolian Darhad region. After Lars Højer (2009), Pedersen emphasised “the peculiar enhancement of occult agency that sometimes grows out of having incurred a religious loss” (p.246). He described how the leveling of almost every monastery in the Darhad region spurred people’s imagination about the extent and power of Darhad Buddhism. Focusing on the fate of one single artefact, a golden Tara statue extracted from a monastery before it was destroyed during the purges of the 1930s, Pedersen described the legends that flourished in relation to it. The statue, “a condensation of Darhad Buddhism” (p.254) is now the material anchor point of a “virtual temple” (p.254) that people carry in their mind.

As we will see, the ruins of Mardai could be said to achieve the same kind of effect: a condensation of Socialist ideology and Soviet way of life, they form the material basis of a virtual temple to modernity. What follows confirms what comes out from Pedersen’s material, and what has been proposed by anthropologists working on mnemonic techniques (e.g. Severi 2007): it is not so much absence that stimulates recollection as the salience of the last remaining item. The last remnant spurs imagination and memory, irresistibly filling the void.

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3 Carlo Severi (2007) highlighted two recurrent principles to mnemonic techniques cross-culturally: a principle of salience (a selection of significant components is singled out, the other being left out or pushed to the background), and a principle of order (the selected components are sorted). It remains to be shown whether, and how, this second principle of order could apply to the way Mardai is remembered among the local population.
and conjuring up an invisible framework within which the isolated vestige starts making sense again.

When I went to visit Mardai on a day trip in the summer 2009, I was lucky enough to meet Tögsöö. Now in his thirties, he was a teenager when the town partially opened in the beginning of the 1990s. He often went to see his brother, who had settled there with his family, and he worked over the summer with him in small jobs related with the Russian population of the town (selling milk to them, for example). After 1998, when the Russians left, he took an active part in the iron trade.

Tögsöö remembers Mardai with great emotion, notwithstanding the fact that he himself took part in the destruction of its buildings. After a small chat on what used to be the central square, and serves now as an iron trading market, he took us on a tour around the city. His memories brought the city back to life. He showed us the high-rises where workers were accommodated, he recalled the daily bus service taking them to work and back⁴. Behind these high-rises, Tögsöö pointed out the kindergarten, which was several floors high; parts of the flowered wallpaper was still visible on the walls in the ruined buildings. A bit further, blue tiles still covering a half-destroyed wall testified for the presence of a swimming pool only a few years ago –something hard to believe in the middle of the Mongolian arid steppe (plate 12). Tögsöö thus transfigured the ruins by showing details to us that revealed what was before, picturing the lives of people who had lived there, and helping us to figure out how impressive these infrastructures could appear in the middle of the plain. Going out of town, Tögsöö pointed out a space that seemed empty today, and told us that it had been the location of an airport, where planes could land that even the capital city Ulaanbaatar could not welcome today. Now it was only dust, barely distinguished from the rest of the plain. What was striking in Tögsöö’s memories was their precision, and the obvious fact that he cultivated

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⁴ According to a former inhabitant, no private car was allowed in the town, and most people would circulate by bike, when they were not using public transportation (http://maxpey.narod.ru/mongol.html).
them. These ruins were associated with very vivid recollections of the past, which he let flow for us eagerly, almost proudly, during several hours. Throughout our visit of the town, he celebrated it as an island of modernity, unsurpassed in the richness of its infrastructures, even by present-day Ulaanbaatar.

It is not rare to find among the Mongolian population today expressions of nostalgia for the communist period in general⁵, and for Russian presence in particular. However, Mardai was not really remembered with nostalgia by people I could interview. Nostalgia is a feeling for something lost, and Mardai was never really Mongolian: until the end, and indeed until its destruction, Mardai was a Russian town, whose wonders were strictly reserved to Russian usage—with the exception, as already mentioned, of Party leaders. Moreover, Mardai was not only associated with modernity, but also with the danger of Uranium: rumours still circulate today about livestock born with malformation because of contaminated grass. Present to people’s mind was also the more immediate danger of being shot if one ventured too close to the city: as Uradyn Bulag reported (1998: 23), “no bird could fly over Mardai”. Therefore, the feeling associated to Mardai today is less nostalgia, as other traces of Russian occupation often inspire, than fear, excitement mingled with fear –awe, in other words.

Memories of Mardai – “it has become like Chechnya”

A strong nostalgia, however, is still felt today by Russian people⁶ who used to live there, some of them for over fifteen years, and who had to leave almost overnight. It is reported that Russian inhabitants were very reluctant to leave the city: Tögsöö had it that they were easy prey to the “Russian Mafia” back in their hometowns. Coming back after fifteen years of comfortable salary abroad, they were not only deemed rich, they were also quite vulnerable.

⁵ Even, crucially, coming from the younger generation who has not known this period from first-hand experience (Legrain 2007): once again, “how do people go about remembering something they have never seen?” (Pedersen 2010: 245).

⁶ “Russian”, here, includes Buryats from the Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic: as already mentioned, these were clearly separated from the local Buryat population, as they enjoyed different status in Mardai and often spoke only Russian. When Mongolians –whether Buryat or Halh– speak about the Russian population of Mardai, they usually do not distinguish between Buryat and other Soviet Nationals.
The Internet, through such media as picture sharing and mapping software (like Google Earth and Panoramio), provides us with testimonies from former inhabitants, who post pictures and comment on each other’s recollections. Pictures of the central square, of the social club, and of the school, had been commented with great emotion by people evoking their years as children or workers in this town (plate 13):

“- Ramon: My beloved school!

- Ser. Terexov: As for me I have spent the most refined moments under the building of this school. I’d like to exchange photos of this village and its surroundings. My address is […]

- Elena: The best school ever. How it hurts to see what remains, I’d like everything to be back there again… So sad…”

This nostalgia might also turn into deep sorrow when former residents come back to the town and realise what it has become. Tögsöö told me the story of a Buryat foreman who shed tears when he came back on a visit only one year after he left, in the Autumn of 1999. Tögsöö was there, and he remembers the old man lamenting: “it has become like Chechnya!” as if the city had been destroyed by war. The comparison is interesting, first of all because it illustrates how much Russian settlers, even of Buryat origin, imagined the place as part of Russia, and Mongolia as a potentially dangerous colony. But it illustrates also that the destruction of Mardai was felt as a violent act by former Russian and even Buryat residents –something comparable to an act of war.

Interestingly, the image of a “war zone” is also conjured up by a (presumably) Canadian visitor, who describes on a picture sharing website (http://www.pbase.com/buznsarah/mardai) how depressed he or she felt upon seeing the city in such a “distasteful” state: “Unlike a war zone where the destruction takes place through external forces, here it has been internal...”

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7 Quoted from comments on the picture of Mardai’s school linked through Panoramio to its geolocation on Google Earth (http://www.panoramio.com/photo/14413674). Translation from Russian by S. Batchimeg.

8 Although Mongolia was always nominally independent from the USSR, the total subordination of the ruling Communist Party (Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party) to its Soviet counterpart made Mongolia an actual colony. A popular saying in Russia at that time put it in no uncertain terms: “A chicken is not a bird, and Mongolia is not really abroad” (quoted by Sneath 2003: 40).
forces”. One can only be surprised with this confident assertion that Mardai was actually “internal” to Mongolia, and this description actually raises several angry comments from (presumably) Mongolian users. Yet, this impression shares with that of the foreman a comparable bewilderment: how could such a large and modern town be demolished so thoroughly? What kind of violence –and directed to whom– does this act of destruction entail?

Surely, the violent character of bringing down a whole town, unanimously considered as a jewel of Soviet modernity, occurred to the local population too. During my trip, people appeared notably embarrassed when they recalled such episodes as the one just told about the Buryat foreman. I could hear several discussions about the possibility that Russians would come back to restart the mine, and that they might even rebuild the city. The main idea that came out of these discussions was that Russians should be very upset to see their beautiful city brought down to pieces. People assumed they would be reluctant to build it again from scratch.

However, there was notoriously no attempt among the local population to deflect responsibility for this upon other people, and to blame some irresponsible and shameless profit seekers for its destruction. Moreover, there was obviously no aggressiveness associated with the dismantling of the city, no idea that the destruction of Mardai was a revenge taken by Mongolian people on Russians for being excluded from the city, and no sign whatsoever that the scraping was associated with any kind of violence. We have seen how Tögsöö himself, who took an active part in the dilapidation of the city, cultivated the memory of its previous state. It seems that the stripping of the iron, Mardai’s ruination, was not aimed at erasing the past, at re-conquering Mongolian space. In other words, it would be a mistake to understand Mardai’s dilapidation as a process of obliteration.
On the contrary, this whole city left for the local population to exploit was seen as the long-lasting testimony not only of Russian greatness, but crucially also, of their *generosity*. This, and the sharply contrasted feelings elicited by Chinese presence in the country, was clearly expressed by our driver, a resident of the regional centre Choibalsan who had already been to Mardai once and seemed happy with this opportunity to come again. Gazing at the city remains, after a long discussion on what each building used to be, he commented to us thoughtfully: “Russians, at least, they left things for us to take… Chinese people would have buried everything under the ground.” Tögsöö could not agree more.

**An open air treasure**

It must be clear now that contrary to foreign visitors and former inhabitants, Tögsöö and presumably other Mongolian people living around Mardai do not consider it as a ruin. Still vividly envisioned as a jewel of modernity in the middle of the plain, cultivated and maintained through its remains, Mardai actually looks like the opposite of a ruin –something akin to a treasure. More precisely, I think, it resembles this particular kind of entities found in the landscape and that Mongolians call “treasure things” (*erdenii züil*).

During his fieldwork trip across Northern Mongolia in the end of the 1990’s, Morten Pedersen (2013) has encountered several mentions among Darhad people of these “treasure things”: they can be precious items left behind by travellers (hunters, typically), celestial bodies “fallen from the sky”, bezoar stones, or objects struck by lightning, among others. These objects, crucially, are deemed immovable: neither shamans nor spirits are deemed capable of lifting them. They come as given wholes and, as argued by Pedersen, *holes in an otherwise intrinsically relational landscape*: while herders sustain multiple interactions, through cairns (*ovoo*) for instance, with land masters held to inhabit the surrounding mountains, they face these “treasures” as non-relational entities. These and the “power” they
enclose may be used by shamans, but never transformed by them: they remain anyhow the wholes they had always been. They are, according to Pedersen, “islands of nature” pockets of non-relational spaces in an landscape otherwise defined by its relational character (Humphrey 1995).

As an island of modernity, an immovable whole, and a concentrate of riches, as a dangerous and powerful entity, discovered as an already constituted entity, which remained complete in people’s mind whatever scraping operation was carried out on it, Mardai is as far from a ruin as a “treasure” can be – although neither Tögsöö nor anyone else in Dornod ever mentioned this term in this context. Describing Mardai as a “treasure”, however, seems like an adequate characterization, and allows for an important contrast concerning the materiality of colonial vestiges. Mardai stands opposed to or “hidden” (dald) Chinese cellars, as thoughtfully reminded by our contemplative driver, in its “open” (il) character. The hidden or open attribute of colonial vestiges seems therefore to predicate their status as ruins or treasures. It seems indeed that Chinese buried treasures become ruins, while Russian open air ruins become treasures. Thus, while Western folkloric topoi locate ruins above ground and treasures down below, Mongolians seemingly expect “treasures” to be standing in the open, and worry about ruins buried in their soil.

References


