Chinese Ghosts in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a rumour that has been circulating lately in Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar. People report encounters with Chinese ghosts, who appear in the form of long-bearded old men dressed in silken clothes. These curious apparitions are recognised by the population as the souls of Chinese merchants, who remained attached to the place where they buried the wealth they accumulated during their life. At a time when Chinese economic expansion raises concerns among the Mongolian population, these ghosts of the colonial era sound like a warning against present-day Chinese migrants. Introducing several of these stories, this paper shows that Chinese people are imagined as essentially parasitic beings, who not only come to Mongolia to trade but stick to the place, even beyond their own death, to suck out its vital resources.

Keywords: haunting, capitalism, ethnicity, migration, parasitism

In the summer of 2008 in downtown Ulaanbaatar a huge billboard could be seen, advertising a ‘haunted house’ (sünstei baishin), showing half a chalk-white face with tears of blood. Below a heading warning that ‘this is not a movie’, there was a text:

Have you experienced ghosts from movies so far? You have now the opportunity to experience them in person by entering a scary haunted house. A family of Chinese origin (Hyatadyn yazguurtan ger büül) slaughtered each other for obscure reasons. They remain in this haunted house. While the house masters who became ghostly corpses will serve you some tea, the dead children will run around you.

Inside, a young hostess welcomed visitors, selling tickets for 2,500 tögrög (about £1). Along a corridor covered with monstrous faces vaguely reminiscent of popular horror-movie characters, you would be led to a dimly lit and windowless room, the main scene of the attraction. Obviously, the room was not meant to resemble a Mongol house at all. It was arranged in a way that was more reminiscent of European interiors, fully furnished with what Mongolians call ‘Russian

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furniture’ (*Oros myebyel’*), as well as a lustre chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a wooden cupboard, scenery paintings on the wall, and flowers in a basket (see Figure 1).

Most of all perhaps, it was the position of the table and chairs that looked foreign. Contrary to Mongolian dining rooms, where tables are usually pushed against the wall – and contrary to the inside of a Mongolian yurt (*ger*) of course – here the table was set in the middle of the room, with the chairs disposed all around it. On closer inspection, some details hinted at the Chinese origin of the ghost family announced on the billboard: paintings of curved-roofed Chinese houses, wall-hangings depicting Chinese armoured warriors, and a tea set neatly stored on a cupboard. Obviously, the intention of the room’s designers was not so much faithfully to reproduce Chinese life-style as to convey the strong, and presumably unsettling, idea of something absolutely foreign. On the walls, painted portraits depicting the grave features of a man, a woman and their two children were meant to add to the realism of the whole scene, and to convey the impression that one was about to meet the long-dead owners of this place.

After taking a seat at the table, you would wear a pair of headphones that was lying on the table before you. Then the hostess closed the door, and after a short moment, the lights would go out. In the pitch-dark atmosphere, a voice would come to your ear. Although the voice was certainly frightening in itself, a detail

![FIGURE 1. A Chinese ‘haunted house’ in Ulaanbaatar. (Photo: Gregory Delaplace 2009)](image)
made the attraction very singular, and in a way more baffling in the first place than really frightening. The voice was speaking exclusively in Chinese, without any kind of translation or even the slightest indication for the non-speaker of what was being said. For approximately three minutes, several characters spoke one after the other, in which you would easily identify the father, the mother and the children whose portraits were on the wall. They all spoke in different manners, either shouting, whispering, moaning or laughing, but always in Chinese.

Although this ‘haunted house’ is not meant to be serious, being explicitly intended as an attraction, it provides a good introduction to some of the themes this paper intends to explore, through pieces of material that fall in oral history’s sphere of interest. It is interesting that Chinese life-style, first of all, is shown in this ‘haunted house’ as a blend of typical elements borrowed from several other cultures – European among others. Through the setting of this sitting room, Chinese people appear as some sort of hyper-foreigner, whose culture is imagined as a heterogeneous assemblage of typically non-Mongolian features. Chinese language, furthermore – perhaps one of the most prominent items of Chinese culture to foreigners – is seemingly meant to be frightening in itself to Mongol ears. During a later interview, the manager of this ‘haunted house’ explained that the whole device had been bought in China, after she had experienced the attraction herself and thought it could make a profitable business in Mongolia. Considering the language barrier was not too big a problem, she introduced it as it was. It worked, and the attraction met a fair success in Ulaanbaatar for a few years – although she confessed that it was starting to recede a little now – showing that the foreign language might even have been more of an advantage than a drawback.

This haunted house is interesting simply also because it echoes a growing concern for supposedly ‘real’ Chinese ghosts, who are reported to haunt houses in Ulaanbaatar and other cities with a notorious history of Chinese migration, such as Hovd or Ulaastai in the western part of the country. In fact, the haunted house illustrates a recent outbreak in the capital city: Chinese ghosts are reported to appear as old men with silken clothes roaming around the places where they once lived, in search of their gold and other buried goods.

In this paper, I will present several such stories, mostly taken from an anthology of ghost stories published in several volumes from 2003 to 2007, but also collected through interviews conducted in the summer of 2008. Commenting on these narratives, I propose to explore two main questions: first, what makes Chinese ghosts so frightening to Mongolians? And second, why are these of such concern to the inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar nowadays? I will show that Chinese ghosts returning from the past, mostly from the colonial past as we shall see, actually speak of the present, and echo Mongolian people’s current concerns for Chinese migration flows. In these stories, Chinese ghosts appear as excessive migrants, who not only come to Mongolia, but stick to the land and suck out the country’s vital resources. In other words, these stories feature Chinese people as historically and essentially parasitic, living off Mongolian expenses and threatening Mongolian ethnic integrity.
CHINESE GHOSTS AND ORAL HISTORY

Most stories presented here are extracted from an anthology in seven volumes called *Anecdotes of people who encountered devils and ghosts*. It presents a large collection of short stories of up to a thousand words each, describing encounters with all sorts of dead people. These narratives are not works of literature, or at least, they are not presented as such. They rather take the form of testimonies, either collected by an inquirer or written down by the witness directly, often preceded by a short introduction, presumably written by the editor.2

Although these narratives differ from what is usually considered as oral history – ‘the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction’ (Perks & Thomson 2004: 1) – they are worth being considered by the oral historian for at least two reasons. First, the stories contained in these volumes are presented as oral material, taking the form either of accounts of interviews, or of personal statements by the witnesses themselves. Furthermore, the moment when the story was recorded is always mentioned, while the names of the persons involved are often concealed or changed, so as to protect the interviewees’ anonymity. Interestingly, some of these narratives also report witnesses interviewing elders about the history of their neighbourhood so as to discover the identity of the disturbing ghost, thus picturing people themselves performing a work of oral history.

Second, history figures prominently in these stories, as they almost always relate the present manifestation of the ghost to the past presence of Chinese colonials or migrants. Several anthropologists have emphasised how, on many occasions, the ghosts’ manifestation could be seen as a materialisation of a given society’s historical memory, the lingering sequels in the present of traumatising events of the past, such as war or colonisation. Heonik Kwon (2008), for example, has recently published an illuminating book on *Ghosts of war in Vietnam*. He shows how pacifying the roaming souls of French, American and Vietnamese soldiers of both sides is key in the process of national reconciliation after the civil war. In a similar perspective, Laura Bear (2007) has considered the interactions of Catholic Anglo-Indian railway workers with domestic ghosts as means of connecting generations. Through interactions with ghosts, these families can assert a connection with their genealogy and with the place they inhabit, in spite of the foreign ancestry for which Indian people bitterly reproach them. More broadly, in her introduction to the same volume, Janet Carsten (2007) emphasises that ghosts can often be seen as the materialisation of disrupted memories. In sum, anthropologists have studied ghosts, and rituals made to appease them, as techniques of mending social fabric within groups affected with a troublesome collective memory.

On the other hand, one of the interesting things in the stories I will present here is that, often, ritual attempts at appeasing Chinese ghosts do not really work. Moreover, even when they do work, these rituals do not manage to expel Chinese ghosts completely and can only subdue them for a time. As will become clear, it is
the Chinese ghosts’ excessive foreignness that leaves people short of ways to understand and thus to appease them by the same means used for any other ghosts. Therefore, these stories seem to raise awareness of an ongoing situation, not only recounting how Chinese ghosts have appeared to some people sometimes, but warning that they continue haunting Mongolia today, and that nobody really knows how to get rid of them.

GHOSTS OF CHINESE CAPITALISM

Throughout the stories collected in the aforementioned anthology, Chinese ghosts appear under different forms, and account for somewhat less than 10 per cent of the size of the volumes. First of all, as in Vietnam (Kwon 2008), there are ghosts of war in Mongolia. Several stories feature people claiming that they saw the ghosts of Chinese soldiers killed during the most notorious battles for Mongolian independence fought in the beginning of the twentieth century. One story, for instance, reports the encounter of people with the roaming souls of the Chinese soldiers who fell during the battle for the liberation of Hovd, in 1912 (Anecdotes … 2003: vol. 2, 161–3). In another, an old man recalls his encounter with ghosts of general Xu Shuzheng’s revolutionary soldiers (gamin), when he was an apprentice in a monastery in Zavhan province (Anecdotes … 2004: vol. 5, 185–7). Interestingly, these stories do not report any attempt to expel or appease the ghost: when they realise the nature of their strange experiences, the witnesses simply run away as quickly as they can, reflecting only afterwards on their brief encounter with history.

However, these constitute only a minority of Chinese ghost stories published in these volumes; people I could interview on this topic, moreover, never even mentioned them. Much more frequent, on the contrary, were stories about ghosts of Chinese merchants who, after having become rich during their life, came back to claim the goods they could not take with them into the beyond. As a matter of fact, Chinese ghosts in Mongolia are prominently ghosts of Chinese traders, as if the economic exploitation aspect of colonial power had left deeper scars in collective memory than wars or political violence. 3

I will focus here on two of the narratives. The first was published, or republished, in 2006, but it is supposed to have taken place in the 1980s (Anecdotes … 2006: vol.7, 86–9). A man called Dash settled with his family in an abandoned courtyard containing a mud house, in Ulaanbaatar (Denjiin Myanga). Although the neighbours told him that nobody had lived there in the past two years, the salesman swore to him that everything was fine, the only problem being that it was a bit far from school for the children. So the family decided to settle there and bought a big dog to keep burglars away. It did not take a while, however, before odd things began to occur: on the first night, the dog barked and kept going from one side of the courtyard to the other, as if it was running after an animal. Thus awoken one night, Dash looked through the window to see what his dog was after
and, instead of a burglar, he saw a man standing in gleaming white clothes, without shoes or a hat. When he called him, the man disappeared. The following night, Dash woke up again and heard the man saying with a Chinese accent: ‘Where is my water-carrying horse cart? Have my two powerful pure-bred horses been stolen and eaten? I know where I have put my gold. Be aware that the one who found it is a headless man!’ After a lamentful moan, everything became silent again.

Dash’s wife, who also witnessed the scene, convinced her husband to have a Buddhist monk (lam) come to perform a ritual. At that time, the temples were not working openly, but the couple eventually managed to find a religious specialist and asked him for help. Using his divinatory skills, he told them: ‘In this courtyard of yours, there was a Chinese man who got very rich by carrying water on a horse cart in summer, and by digging up latrines in winter. The Chinese man was knocked off his horse cart and was heavily injured, he lay sick for a long time and died. While he was lying in bed, he thought he did not want to give away his house, his horses, his cart and his money. It is taught in Buddha’s book that when one passes away, their wishes come true.’ The monk concluded that he would try and perform a ritual to get rid of this ghost, but warned the family that it was a delicate one and that it might not be successful. He requested a yellow sheep with a white patch on the forehead (shar halzan hon’) for the day after, to use as a substitute (zolig). On the following day, he came again to read prayers. He drummed his tambourine, then scattered millet, rice (shar tsagaan budaa) and barley; before he left, he placed the prayer book he always carried, together with a ceremonial silk scarf (hadag) on the household’s chest. The ritual proved successful; there was no more noise thereafter and the dog eventually stopped barking.

Another story, published in 2003, runs along the same lines, although it does not end as well as the first one (Anecdotes … 2003: vol. 2, 43–7). It is also located in Ulaanbaatar, but it is said to have occurred in the present. Contrary to the previous one, this one takes the point of view of the neighbour of the haunted courtyard – called Mr X by the narrator, so as to protect his anonymity. Mr X kept wondering why families would never stay in the neighbouring courtyard for very long. One night, as he went out in the middle of the night because of a bad stomach, he heard a voice coming from the other side of the fence, lamenting with a distinct Chinese accent: ‘Hey my money, hey my money!’ When Mr X saw his neighbour through the fence the following morning, he took the opportunity to question him about this nocturnal visit. To his surprise, the neighbour suddenly became pale and asked him to come back after his wife and son had left. There, he confessed that the nightly visitor was in fact a ghost, which had been appearing in his courtyard since he had moved in, constantly claiming his money with a Chinese accent.

At the end of their discussion, the two men therefore courageously decided to put an end to these disturbances, and started inquiring from the elders of the neighbourhood about the previous owners of the courtyard. Thanks to the memories of an old lady, they soon discovered that a Chinese man, whose Mongolian
name was Tsagaan, had indeed stayed there until 1950. Through further inquiry, the two neighbours learnt that Tsagaan was the owner of a restaurant in a small mud house, which was quite renowned in the vicinity as the ‘round restaurant’. The food was very good, and Tsagaan had become fairly rich; nobody knew exactly his marital situation, but all the single girls were after him. After he died, rumour had it that his soul was still there, and had ‘taken refuge’ (horgodo-) in his money. As Tsagaan was very well integrated in Mongolian society, his Chinese acquaintances had not considered it necessary to perform the usual Chinese funerary rituals after his death, like burning paper money, for example. As a consequence, the soul had remained stuck in the courtyard and could not find a rebirth. To remedy this situation, the two men thus decided to have all sorts of shamans and lamas come to perform rituals in the courtyard and exorcise the soul. However, none was successful, and the owner fell into deep distress. One night, out of sudden anger, he threw a 100 tögrög coin in his courtyard saying: ‘Bad greedy Chink, take this money then!’ and to his surprise, the noise stopped. The ghost had not left, however, and the owner was forced to give money every single night so as to keep him quiet; he finally gave up and resigned himself to moving out to another place.

In these stories, Chinese souls appear in the form of what is called in Mongolian a luuhan, or a danjaad. A luuhan is, so to speak, a typical Chinese in the Mongolian imagination: a long-bearded old man with silken clothes, who walks with small steps and speaks with a funny accent. The figure of the luuhan is closely associated with the historical figure of the danjaad, which is also a name used to describe Chinese ghosts. What is a danjaad? Historically, it is a company manager (see Figure 2). During the whole period when Mongolia was under the control of the Qing dynasty (1691–1911), Chinese trade flourished in the country’s urban areas (Bawden 1968: 97). Shops were usually owned by panzchin or ‘speculators’, who provided the capital but usually remained in

FIGURE 2. Chinese traders in early-twentieth-century Urga. (Mongolian National Cinema and Photography Archives)
China; the danjaad, on the other hand, would own a small share of the business, and be in charge of its management locally. In addition, there were many wage workers in each shop, who all dreamt of becoming danjaad, which was not uncommon; the danjaad, for his part, would rarely become a ‘speculator’.

These managers, or danjaad, would thus spend long periods of time in Mongolia, in spite of the loose regulations imposed by the Qing court. Charles R. Bawden (1968: 98) emphasised that these danjaad would often become ‘mongolised’: this is also illustrated in the story above, where the restaurant owner Tsagaan even acquired a Mongolian name during his life, and was apparently so well integrated locally that his Chinese acquaintances neglected to perform the Chinese funerary rituals. Bawden also stresses that, notwithstanding a law that forbade it, Chinese merchants would often take a Mongol wife and start a family in Mongolia (see Figure 3). It is also well known that, many of these merchants being seasonal workers, they often had families back in China.

FIGURE 3. A Chinese man and his Mongol wife in early-twentieth-century Urga. (Mongolian National Cinema and Photography Archives)
Notwithstanding their often close relations with the Mongol population, Chinese merchants operated a very harsh credit policy on Mongolians, benefiting for this from the help of the local authorities. As Bawden (1968: 83) puts it:

The reverse side of the Manchu policy was its permissive, if grudging, attitude towards the penetration of Chinese trade, with its associated usury, from the early eighteenth century on. Operating at high interest rates, and enjoying the connivance and even occasionally the active partnership of local officials and lamaseries, the Chinese merchant houses were able, in spite of the restrictions imposed from Peking, to overrun defenceless Mongolia to the extent that the entire country was in effect mortgaged to them during the two centuries of Manchu domination.

Bawden adds that most of the revolts that occurred in Mongolia under Manchu rule started with, or included, the ravaging of these resented Chinese shops. Robberies of Chinese shops elicited support from the Mongol population, and far from being stigmatised as thieves, their perpetrators were praised as ‘good fellows’ (sain er), Robin Hood-like figures who were believed to take money from the rich creditors only to give it back to their impoverished debtors (Bawden 1968: 143).

In the two ghost stories translated above, even if the ghosts are not exactly souls of Chinese merchants, they are very evocative of them, either in their appearance or in their attitude. In all the stories indeed, whatever the activity of the Chinese person during his life – carrying water, digging latrines, growing vegetables or managing a restaurant – and whatever the time he died, his ghost appears in the guise of a luuhan, or of a danjaad, craving his gold. There is indeed one main, if not a single, reason for Chinese souls to remain in this world: stinginess. This evil economic morality echoes the harsh mercantile ethics of Chinese merchants in Mongolian history. The ghosts return to claim their money back, in a similar way that Chinese money-lenders are remembered to have done with their Mongolian debtors in the past. Moreover, contrary to Mongolian ghosts, Chinese ghosts are not always the result of the unusual circumstances in which the persons died, or of the failure to perform the right rituals for them (Delaplace 2008: 193). The second story illustrates that Chinese people may become ghosts even when they die naturally, at the end of a successful life.

CHINESE GHOSTS AS HYPER-OWNERS

This can be further illustrated through an experience related by a Mongolian shaman, who told me that she had been contacted two years previously by the sons and daughters of a Chinese man and a Mongol woman. These ‘half-breed’ people (erlitiz), as she called them, had experienced many difficulties since the death of their parents, so they called the shaman to have a ritual made to remedy the situation. In shamanic rituals, patients are supposed to give offerings to the
shaman’s ‘auxiliary spirits’ (ongod), and on this occasion, the spirits were said to request five metres of silk. Explaining that they were very poor, the family apologised and gave only a small piece of material. However, when the spirits were ‘let in’ (oruul-) by the shaman, they became very angry, claiming that the house did contain silk. The shaman, under her spirits’ influence, started to jump repeatedly in one particular part of the house, and the floor indeed sounded as if there was a cellar below it. After digging in under the spirits’ command, the family discovered rolls and rolls of silk, as well as gold and other goods. They swore to the angry spirits they had no idea about this; according to the shaman they seemed all in all quite distressed to realise that their father had kept this wealth secret, even when he had died, and that he had not even transmitted it to his own children.

It is indeed Chinese people’s imagined inability to detach themselves from their belongings, even for the sake of their own children, that is supposed to hold their soul prisoner of this world. Their soul is said to ‘take refuge’ (horgodo-) in their goods. Of course, this extreme stinginess stands in sharp contrast to Mongolian economic morality, which ideally values a certain detachment from material goods, most of all before death. It is said, perhaps as a result of Buddhist influence, that attachment to one’s belongings constitutes an obstacle to one’s rebirth. These ideas have been studied by Caroline Humphrey (2002), who has taken them as a basis to study Mongolian concepts of ‘personal property’. Humphrey stresses that, ideally, an old man has already distributed most of his property among his heirs by the time he dies, so that the destination of his remaining belongings can easily be sorted out after his death. Mongolian funerary rituals, however, include a sequence during which the ‘refuge thing’ (horgodoson yum) is designated by means of divination. This refuge thing is usually an item that belonged to the deceased, and more specifically something he used a lot, such as a pipe, a bowl or a diary. Because of this special attachment, the soul might ‘take refuge’ in it and therefore will be unable to find a rebirth. The family ought to bury this thing with the deceased, or destroy it lest the soul becomes a ghost. Humphrey (2002: 68) thus emphasises that this refuge thing is something like an ‘hyper-personal property’: as if the person belonged to the thing, rather than the other way around.

With this in mind, it seems striking that in the stories presented above, Chinese people remain attached not only to one item among their belonging, but to all of them: in these stories, Chinese people relate to all their possessions – and typically to the most precious ones – as ‘hyper-personal property’, in which they will definitely ‘take refuge’ after their death. In other words, these stories describe Chinese people as standing in opposition to the Mongolian regular ethic of ownership, being incorrigible hyper-owners. Characteristically, they appear to belong to their wealth rather than the other way around: unable to find a proper rebirth, their soul remains attached to the wealth that their imagined monstrous and inherent stinginess prevented them from distributing before their death.
Chinese people thus seem to be characterised in Mongolian imagination by a sense of excess: not only hyper-owners, but also hyper-foreigners, as already hinted at in the arrangement of the ‘haunted house’ at the beginning of this paper. In these stories, however, they appear as excessively foreign for different reasons: whereas the haunted house represented an assemblage of many different features of foreignness, these narratives rather describe exaggerated features of foreignness. As well as appearing in the guise of an old man with a white beard wearing a silken costume and speaking with a pronounced accent, the Chinese ghost is associated in these stories with typical features of Chinese way of life, real or imagined. For example, Chinese ghosts only claim a certain category of goods – water-carrying horse cart, gold and silk among others – which are associated with Chinese commercial activities. Moreover, the narratives translated above also feature mud houses, and most of all cellars, where the goods they ‘took refuge’ in are said to be buried.

This might indeed have been quite a distinctive feature of Chinese way of life until the beginning of the twentieth century: they used to live in mud houses, and they used to store things under the ground. Meanwhile, the idea is quite widespread in Mongolia that ‘nomads’ (nüüdelchid) do not leave traces after staying in a place. Once the collapsible habitation (ger) has moved, it leaves only a circle of packed earth which will eventually disappear as grass grows again. Mongolians also avoid digging the earth, and regard this an unpropitious gesture. Of course, these ideas tend to change somewhat when people settle in cities but still, Chinese people who build permanent mud houses and dig cellars to store goods stand out in sharp opposition to Mongolian ethics of dwelling.

This excessive foreignness makes it very difficult for the shamans and the lamas to expel Chinese ghosts, as illustrated in the second narrative above. The problems arising when dealing with a foreign soul were clearly put to me by the shaman whose experience I already related, as an introduction to the narrative translated above:

It is very difficult to appease the soul of a Chinese, it takes a long time. It is much more difficult than any other soul. We don’t know what kind of food or drink he likes. For Mongolians, it is white food, and we drive him away using a small bit of his old clothes [...]. But the soul of a Chinese, we don’t know where it comes from, apart from the fact that China is southward. To appease the soul of a Chinese, you need to shamanise one to three times. But even then, it is difficult to appease him completely, because they are jealous or suspicious or something like that, and they take refuge in their belongings, it’s very troublesome.

Interestingly, the situation is not easier when the soul to expel is that of a ‘mongolised’ Chinese. In the story of Tsagaan the restaurant manager, as in the story told by the shaman, it is indeed clearly stated that these people were rather well integrated in their neighbourhood. But even though they may have become
Mongols during their life, they remain Chinese after their death. This is well illustrated in the story of Tsagaan, which mentions that he had not received the usual Chinese rituals, as he was considered a Mongol by his fellow citizens. But even though his way of life was Mongolian, his soul had remained Chinese, and therefore had the ritual needs of a Chinese soul. In other words, Chinese-ness is not thought of as an acquired quality, it is an *essence*: culture is not only embodied, it is at the core of an individual, and integration can thus only be superficial.  

This conception of ethnicity as an essence is very reminiscent of discourses about blood in contemporary Mongolia. It is a widespread idea among the population, including intellectuals, that Mongolian people share the same ‘blood’ (*tsus*). Typical characteristics attributed to Mongolian culture, such as strength, generosity, freedom, but also patriotism, are linked to the possession of that blood. It is not only the most nationalist groups who nowadays go so far as to link pure Mongol-ness with ‘purity of the blood’. People with non-Mongolian ancestry, and most of all people born of Mongolian and Chinese parents, are considered as less Mongolian than supposedly ‘pure blood’ Mongolians. Recently constituted groups like *Dayar Mongol* or *Höh Mongol* have acquired a certain notoriety for openly promoting these ideas. They circulate them through websites and publications, but also sometimes complement their ideological work with violently xenophobic actions.

However, these ideas are not new, and they have already been described in detail by Uradyn Bulag (1998) as being widespread in the beginning of the 1990s. Bulag reported accusations of not being Mongol directed to members of the government. Attempts were made by their opponents to discover Chinese ancestry in their genealogy, which would disqualify them as politicians. It is indeed still a well-asserted idea that people with Chinese blood have their mind irresistibly turned towards China. As if they were contaminated by a sort of invisible foreign agency, these ‘half-breed people’ (*erliiz*) are thought always to favour Chinese interests in their decisions, at the expense of Mongolian ones. I heard a Mongolian friend of mine living in Ulaanbaatar firmly asserting that it took seven generations for Chinese blood to clear out from the progeny of a mixed marriage.

**CHINESE MIGRANTS AS PARASITES**

Therefore, it seems that these stories about Chinese souls, while emerging from the past, echo a current concern about Chinese migration. They all concur in presenting Chinese people as a particular, and indeed a particularly dangerous kind of migrant. Chinese migrants do not just settle for a time and work there, they are thought to stick to the place, to imprint an indelible mark in it by digging holes and sucking out Mongolian resources through unfair and immoral economic activity. These stories, by showing the systematic fate of the soul of Chinese
people dead in Mongolia, express the idea that Chinese people are essentially parasitic to Mongolian resources.

Parasitism sounds like a good metaphor to describe current ideas about Chinese migration in Mongolia. This can be illustrated, in one way, by the lyrics of a hip-hop song, performed by a very young band called ‘Four directions’ (4 züg). The title of the song is: ‘Don’t overstep the limits, you Chinks’, and the chorus is quite unequivocal: ‘Call the Chinese call call call / And shoot them all all all’. The rest of the song is a description of Chinese people’s parasitic character. Interestingly, the song starts with an untranslated introduction in Chinese which runs: ‘We are Chinese, you are paupers sitting on gold / We have the money to buy everything you’ve got / Your women, land, dignity, down to everything you own. You just wait and see!’ The part in Mongolian then runs: ‘Mongolian girls who became 5-penny whores below them / Snub-nosed Mongolian stray dogs as their food menu / The poison comes straight down to our empty stomach / Right away, (they) suck out the Mongol blood’.

In this song, as in daily discourses I heard in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolians are supposed to be individually stronger; the Chinese only have the upper hand because they are more numerous, and because they have enough money to bribe the government. They are pictured as weak, but living off fresh Mongolian resources, and thus preventing Mongolians from using these themselves to develop their own country. Moreover, Chinese are not only parasitising gold and wealth, driving out the cash flow from the country, they are also parasitic directly to Mongol blood, by marrying Mongol women who are thus prevented from conceiving Mongol children. This trend is imagined to result in the diminution of the number of Mongolian people, already few compared to the Chinese – Mongolian blood is seen as a scarce resource – and in the end, as Franck Billé (2008) has emphasised, in the total extinction of the ‘Mongol race’. The imagination of Chinese people as parasites is thus a complement to the imagination of Mongol people as forming a single body, sharing one and the same blood distributed among them (Bulag 1998: 152–3). Chinese people, living or dead, are seen on the contrary as a multiplicity of interchangeable beings who little by little suck the life force out of the Mongolian people.

CONCLUSION

Why are Chinese ghosts so frightening to Mongolians? And why are the inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar so interested today in stories of people confronted in their courtyard by a Chinese soul coming back from the past? I have tried to show in this paper that there is a single answer to these two questions. Chinese ghosts are frightening because they bridge a collective memory of past colonial exploitation and a present concern about migration. These stories picture Chinese people as essentially excessive, abusive migrants, not only disgraceful to an idealised Mongolian way of life but also economically immoral. These stories emphasise
that Chinese are essentially parasitic to Mongolian society. These stories also hint that, even if they are less recognisable now that they no longer affect a long white beard and silken clothes, even if their distinctive way of life is less obvious in present-day Ulaanbaatar, Chinese people are still essentially the same; their soul has not changed. These narratives conflate a present situation of economic imbalance between the economic hardships of Mongolia and the disproportionate capitalist development of China with a past situation of colonial domination. They picture present-day Chinese migrants not as new businessmen, but merely as returning colonial merchants, as current instances of an ongoing parasitic relationship.

NOTES

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2 I say ‘presumably’ here because no author name is written on any of the volumes, although they were published on a regular basis between 2003 and 2007, roughly on the same model. Sampildondov Chuluun (personal communication), from the National University of Mongolia, recalled that one national newspaper, Shar Sonin, had been publishing such stories since the beginning of the 1990s. These books might therefore be collections of these stories. At any rate, these anthologies were very popular in Mongolia at the time of my research on the topic in 2008, and new volumes coming out were very quickly sold out. I am very grateful to Ai Maekawa for sending me the first volumes of this anthology in 2004.

3 One could venture to explain this imbalance as the result of Socialist propaganda, which undoubtedly shaped Mongolian collective memory by singling out Chinese economic exploitation as a symbol of colonial oppression.

4 According to Bawden (1989[1968]: 97), the term danjaad is a corruption of the Chinese tang-chia-ti (dangjiade in pinyin spelling), which means household head, or shop owner.

5 I am very grateful to Sampildondov Chuluun for his help in translating this interview.

6 Francisco J. Gil-White (2001) has argued on the basis of the results of experiments led among the Torguud of Western Mongolia that ethnies were treated by the human brain as species. In other words, for adaptative reasons, humans tend to attribute ethnic belonging to an essence, ‘something inside’, which can be called blood, soul, or anything else. In this perspective, Mongolian ideas about Chinese people would only be the radical formulation of a universal predisposition. It is important to point out, however, that the view of Chinese people as bearing essentially the excessive features depicted in these stories is not shared by the whole population. Moreover, there is a stark difference between ‘intuitive’, somehow light and perhaps universal ethnic essentialism, and the overgrown, ‘conscious’, hard essentialism expressed in Mongolian stories of Chinese ghosts. To put it bluntly, ethnic essentialism does not always involve ideological racism, happily.

7 Translation of the introduction in Chinese by Franck Billé. I am also grateful to Franck for communicating the Mongolian transcription of the whole song’s lyrics.
REFERENCES


