Parasitic Chinese, vengeful Russians: ghosts, strangers, and reciprocity in Mongolia

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This paper considers stories of haunting by ghosts of a foreign origin that have been circulating lately in the capital city of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar. These narratives, it is argued, depict Chinese and Russian people as very different kinds of strangers, defined by contrastive regimes of relationship with their host. Contrary to Russians, who are still remembered – rightly or not – as great providers, Chinese people are pictured in these stories as some kind of parasites, who constantly take from Mongolian land and never give anything in return.

Although some kind of belief in the possibility that dead people might come back among the living is probably universal, societies concerned with the souls of strangers – that is, who report being haunted by ghosts of a distinctive foreign origin – are a bit rarer. Rarer, yet far from absent from the literature, as testified, for example, by Heonik Kwon’s work (2008) on the cosmopolitan ghosts of war in Vietnam; or by Nicholas Long’s (2010) analysis of haunting in Tanjung Pinang, Indonesia, as a multicultural and ‘multicosmological’ issue.

Mongolian people are very fond of ghost stories. Beside narratives of haunted plains where horses stop mysteriously, of lonesome souls of youthful dead coming back to those they loved during their life, Mongolian people also tell stories of haunting by the souls of foreign people who died on their land. This paper focuses on one rumour that has been circulating lately in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia: ‘Chinese ghosts’ (Hyatad süns), in the form of white bearded old men wearing silken clothes, are reported to appear in the areas where they used to live several decades ago. With a distinct Chinese accent, these are said to claim the wealth they buried there before their death, threatening the local population, and harming anyone who would dare to get too close to the precious goods they have hidden under the ground.

These stories seem to be in line with other occult rumours about strangers collected elsewhere by anthropologists and historians: Chinese ghosts could be seen as a mere addition to an eerie collection already composed of white vampires draining bucketfuls of African blood for mysterious purposes (White 2000), or of imperialistic Zionist penis-snatchers who prey on Sudanese fertility (Bonhomme 2009: 116). Contrary to
vampires or penis-snatchers, however, Chinese ghosts – by definition – arise from the past, and materialize the haunting presence of a bygone era.

Basing myself mostly on an anthology of narratives about ‘people’s encounters with ghosts and spirits’ edited in no less than nine volumes between 2003 and 2007, I will thus show in the first section of this paper that stories of Chinese ghosts evoke the time of colonization. They refer to the period when Mongolia was part of the Chinese Empire under the Sino-Manchu Qing dynasty (1691–1911), before the 1921 revolution, which led Mongolia to become the first satellite republic of the Soviet Union three years later. Drawing on Ann Stoler’s analysis of colonial ‘ruination’ (2008), I want to show that the ongoing presence of Chinese ghosts materializes the long-lasting effects Chinese colonial merchants are felt to have had on the Mongolian land and population.

However, in the second part of this paper, I will consider the equally interesting fact that Russian ghosts, about which stories circulate also, do not seem to raise such concerns among the population. Although the Russian presence throughout the socialist period could be seen as equally ‘ruinous’ for the Mongolian population and culture – and has been analysed as such by some Mongolian historians (see, e.g., Baabar 1999) – stories of Soviet soldiers’ ghosts, or of spectres of Russian long-haired women with white dresses, are far less numerous. Most crucially, the damage they are reported to inflict occasionally seems nothing compared to the inexorable process of ruination caused by Chinese ghosts.

In the last section of this paper, I will thus show that Chinese and Russians are pictured in these stories as two very different kinds of strangers, who do not entertain the same kind of relation with the Mongolian land and people. Contrary to Russians, who are still remembered – rightly or not – as great providers, Chinese people are pictured in these stories as some sorts of parasites (cf. also da Col, this volume), who constantly take from Mongolian land and never give back. These stories show Chinese people as essentially un-integrable beings, doomed to remain, even after their own death, hostile and ruinous strangers.

An anthology of ‘true’ ghost stories

Ghosts have quite a prominent place in the daily life of the Mongols. It is not only herdsmen in rural areas who tell stories of nightly visits by long-dead relatives, nor just hunters who report uncanny encounters on the loneliness of their mountain bivouac; city-dwellers also talk about wandering ‘souls’ (süns), ‘ghosts’ (chötgör), and other ‘invisible things’ (üzegdehgüi yum). In the capital city Ulaanbaatar as much as in the rural areas of the country, ghosts might be used as explanations for people’s misfortunes and thus occasion rituals intended to expel them or to counter their nefarious influence (Delaplace 2009). But ghost stories might also be told informally, in a matter-of-fact way, when the topic comes up or just for pleasure. Besides, it is not rare to find such stories in the back pages of newspapers, most of all in the sensationalist press, which readily publishes tales of the extraordinary in-between celebrity gossip and the agony column, eliciting no less interest than these latter features.

The narratives I will consider here are drawn from an anthology of such stories, simply entitled Anecdotes of people who encountered ghosts and devils, and published in nine volumes between 2003 and 2007. It has the peculiarity of being completely devoid of any mention of an author or editor, while it has been produced under the same title
and in a similar format by three different printing houses. Each volume contains a little over fifty stories of 300 to 1,000 words (in translation). Stories take the form of personal accounts in the first person, of reports in a journalistic style that seem to make a synthesis of several testimonies, or, more rarely, of interviews with witnesses of an apparition. Although they are presented as 'true stories', rather than as works of fiction, the narratives contained in these volumes oscillate in their genre between supposedly real accounts – which are meant to be credible – and more literary tales – which pleasantly elaborate on classic spooky themes. Most stories fall in between, and the readership is of course divided on their truthful character: some people argue that they are all 'lies' (hudal), and some other might believe in some of them only. Most people I could talk to, however, were ready to admit the existence of such ghosts, whatever they thought of the particular narratives reported in these volumes. These met with great success, and each volume sold out shortly after its release.

Most of the narratives contained in these volumes, as well as the huge majority of those I could collect myself, do not make any mention of the origin of the ghost encountered by the witnesses, taking for granted that most of the ghosts found on Mongolian soil are 'Mongolian'. Stories compiled in these volumes report such various accounts as malicious laughter heard by people who found themselves locked in their own house from outside, nightly encounters of herders with silent horse riders who surround them until they faint, or relatives seen standing in the streets of Ulaanbaatar after their decease. Beside these, however, a not inconsiderable portion of stories, a little less than 10 per cent on the whole, deal with ghosts of an alleged 'Chinese' (Hyatad) origin.

The stingy ghosts of Chinese merchants

Some of these ghosts are, like in Vietnam or elsewhere, ghosts of war. Several stories feature people encountering spectral armies of Chinese soldiers on the site of some of the most notorious battles for Mongolian independence fought at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, these ghosts of war are only a small minority compared to ghosts of Chinese merchants who, after having become rich during their life, come back to claim the goods they could not take with them in the beyond. Below is the summary of such a story: it was published in 2003, and is supposed to have taken place around that time (Anecdotes ... vol. 2, 2003: 43-7). The story is told in the third person, but claims to rely mostly on the testimony of a neighbour whose name has been concealed as Mr X.

Mr X kept wondering why families who moved in the house next to his would never stay very long. One night, however, as he went out in the middle of the night, 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 inquired about this nocturnal visit. To his surprise, the neighbour suddenly became pale and confessed that the nightly visitor was in fact a ghost. It had been appearing in his courtyard since he had moved in, constantly claiming his money with a Chinese accent. The two men thus 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. They soon discovered that a Chinese man, whose Mongolian name was Tsagaan [White], had indeed stayed there until 1950. 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. After he died, rumours had it that his soul was still there, and had 'taken refuge' in his money. As Tsagaan was very close to Mongolian people, his Chinese acquaintances had not thought it necessary to perform the usual Chinese funerary
rituals after his death. As a consequence, the soul had remained stuck in the courtyard and could not find a rebirth. To remedy this situation, the two men decided to have shamans and lamas come to perform rituals and exorcize 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 [5 pence] in his courtyard, saying: 'Bad greedy Chink, take this money then!' and to his surprise, the noise stopped for a while. 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.

This story illustrates an idea present in all of these stories, which was also what everybody I talked to in Ulaanbaatar would say about Chinese ghosts: it is ‘greed’ (shunal), and reluctance to detach themselves from their wealth, that prevents them from leaving this world – they are said to ‘take refuge’ (horgodoh) in their possessions. Importantly, this is not a statement made about some Chinese people specifically; the idea is not even that Chinese people tend to have difficulties detaching themselves from material goods. Rather, what these narratives say, which is widely accepted among the population, is that all Chinese people are inherently stingy.

Of course, this stinginess is seen by Mongolians as absolutely opposed to their own economic morality, which values a certain detachment from material goods, most of all before death. Attachment to one’s belongings, on the contrary, is said to hinder one’s wished ‘rebirth’ (dahin töröh) as a newborn baby – the most desired fate for one’s soul. This ideal of detachment from material goods might be a result of the Buddhist influence to which Mongolians have been exposed for several centuries, and most of all since the end of the sixteenth century, when the population was massively – and often forcibly – converted to Buddhism, while the practice of shamanism was banned by Mongol Princes (Heissig 1970: 26-7). Even after seventy years of Soviet-inspired anti-religious policy under the socialist regime, Buddhism is still the most widely practised religion in Mongolia, although shamanism has also known a renewed interest in the past few years (Buyandelgeriyn 2007).

As a matter of fact, it is not only Chinese people who might ‘take refuge’ in their possessions: in her study of Mongolian concepts of property, Caroline Humphrey (2002) showed that this was a very serious concern around the moment of anybody’s death. ‘To die in a proper way’ involves ‘distancing oneself from material objects’ (2002: 67), most of all from jewellery, which the dying ideally usually give up before passing away. Nevertheless, and however willing the dead were to give away their possessions, it is still believed that they might remain attached to one specific item, with which they developed a special relationship during their lives. This particular item is called the ‘refuge thing’ (horgodoson yum); it need not be of value – it could be merely a bowl, or a diary – but it is always something the deceased used often. It is designated by an astrologist during the funeral, by means of divination, and it is thereupon placed in the coffin or scrupulously destroyed, lest the soul remain attached to it and become a ghost.

Humphrey thus emphasizes that this refuge thing is something like an ‘hyper-personal property’ (2002: 68): as if the person belonged to the thing, rather than the other way around. Chinese people, precisely, are accused by Mongolians of developing this kind of ‘hyper-personal’ relationship with all of their possessions. As already argued elsewhere (Delaplace 2010), Chinese people stand out in these stories as some kind of hyper-owners, who belong to their wealth rather than the other way around, and therefore remain attached to it after their death.
The other striking aspect of this story, which is common to all the others also, is the stereotypical way in which the Chinese ghost is depicted. Most interesting here is that the person in question was seemingly quite well integrated in Mongolian society, to the point where his fellow citizens would not even care to perform Chinese funerary rituals for him. But the fact that he had a Mongolian name, and that he probably spoke fluent Mongolian during his lifetime, does not change the way he appears as a ghost – an old Chinese man who speaks just enough Mongolian to claim his gold. In other words, however integrated he appeared during his life, his soul remained foreign.

This essentialist conception of Chinese people as absolute strangers, and their perfect interchangeability in Mongolian eyes, is well illustrated in the narrative summarized below, which was published in 2007 and is supposed to take place around 1990 (Anecdotes ..., vol. 9, 2007: 123-7).

The story is set in a locality of Northern Mongolia, where the ghost of a Chinese gardener was still to be seen on the land he had been cultivating during his life. Locals claimed that every morning the old man was seen going out from a mysteriously well-preserved cellar to tend to his garden. The apparition was so tangible that they could even exchange greetings with it. One day, however, a Mongolian man called Denzen, who was passing by on his horse, started to beat him up with his whip. Under the influence of alcohol, he said: ‘Bad old Chinaman, you died long before. What are you doing remaining like that on Mongol land? Clear off to this China of yours’. The old Chinese hunched up under the strokes, but replied: ‘Hey, you don’t say that. Your grandfather Molom borrowed 30 poods [1 pood = 16.36 kg] of flour and 120 silver coins from me, and he hasn’t yet given them back. I’m not leaving here, because I must reclaim this debt’. Upon hearing this, Denzen got even madder and beat the old Chinese man until he was left whining in the ditch. While he was boasting around the place of having rid the neighbourhood of its ghost, people grew concerned that he might have killed an actual old Chinese man, rather than a ghost, and they reprimanded him. However, before the day ended, the inert corpse left for dead in the ditch was picked up by an exactly similar old Chinese man – ‘like two peas in a pod’ – and taken back to the old cellar. The same night, Denzen died mysteriously after being harassed by invisible aggressors: he was left on the ground as if he had been beaten to death, in the exact same state as the old man he had ‘killed’ the day before. After this, people were still seeing the old Chinese man going out of his cellar, but would not dare to approach him anymore. People were saying that he had been until 1921 a rich firm manager during his life, to whom all Mongolians in the vicinity were indebted. He was ruined after being robbed, and had hanged himself in his garden’s cellar. The story continues with accounts of local people’s unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the cellar with torchlights, and to have Buddhist monks come and say prayers for three entire days to expel the soul. It concludes that in spite of these attempts, the soul continued to come out on a regular basis, although it reportedly stopped interacting with the population.

This story is quite uncommon for the very palpable form it gives to the ghost, so much so that the local population is not quite sure at times whether it is the ghost of an old merchant, or an actual Chinese migrant. Although it resembles a tale more than the account of a lived experience, it is still interesting for the vivid illustration it gives of themes which are thoroughly present in all stories of Chinese ghosts in Mongolia.

Crucially, it makes an explicit connection – often only implicit in other stories – between these Chinese ghosts and the merchants who are resentfully remembered for their credit policy in Mongolia before the revolution. During the whole period when Mongolia was under the control of the Qing dynasty, and even sometime after the 1921 revolution, Chinese trade flourished in the country’s urban areas. The description by the historian Charles R. Bawden of Chinese merchants and money-lenders’ abusive
economic practices at that time is perfectly consistent with the way the Mongolian population remembers it today:

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 1968: 83).

The story, moreover, makes an uncanny equation between the colonial merchants of the past and the present-day Chinese migrants to Mongolia. After being expelled from the country in 1963, following the Sino-Soviet dispute, Chinese workers – mostly from the poor regions of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Hebei (Billé 2010) – have started to come again and work in Mongolia since the 1990s. Chinese businessmen, moreover, have not failed to notice the economic potential of the Mongolian market, and have massively invested in the booming sectors of construction and mining. Finally, the multiplication – and the success – of Chinese restaurants in the centre of Ulaanbaatar, as well as the flooding of Mongolian shops with products of Chinese origin, are a cause for concern to Mongolians, who see the colonial ambitions of the past in the economic endeavours of the present – an anxiety which translates in a profusion of rumours about Chinese people’s evil intentions towards Mongolia (Billé 2008).

In the story reported above, the eerie doubt as to the real status of the victim – dead or alive, ghost or living migrant – conveys the identity between Chinese merchants of the past and Chinese migrants today, and thus bridges the colonial past with the present. These stories, in a way, seem to concern the present as much as the past, the return of Chinese traders as much as their initial presence. In this light, stories of Chinese ghosts bear some resemblance to the rumours about zombies and witches that Jean and John L. Comaroff (1999) have shown to accompany the occult economy of ‘millennial capitalism’ in contemporary Africa. The Comaroffs famously argued that rumours of witchcraft dealt with the anxieties linked to capitalism’s ‘Second Coming’ by explaining the unexplainable: the possibility, specific to this economic system, of creating wealth from nothing. If it seems that Chinese ghosts indeed express a nagging anxiety about wealth among the Mongolian population, it is clear, however, that they do not explain anything. The fact that Chinese merchants would inevitably haunt the places where they buried their wealth does not account in any way for the success of Chinese businessmen today. Rather than an elucidation of the occult inner workings of Chinese economic practices, these stories appear as a mere judgement on them. Rumours of Chinese ghosts, in other words, do not explain anything; they qualify.

At a time when Mongolia is engaged on the path of capitalism, when Mongolians have taken up personal enrichment as a legitimate activity against Buddhist ethics and the communist legacy, stories of Chinese ghosts pose the crucial question of economic morality. Surely, by construing Chinese people as the epitomes of economic evil-doers – in a way that is very reminiscent of anti-semitic discourses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe – Mongolians absolve themselves of all possible wrong: they can safely think of themselves as the good capitalists in the face of inherently bad ones. Interestingly, they do so through a reference to the past, by stating that the ruinous effects of Chinese colonization extend far beyond the strict temporal limits of colonial rule.
Ghosts and colonial ruination

Ann Stoler (2008) has recently proposed reconsidering the temporality of colonialism by emphasizing the long-lasting and often subterranean effects that ‘imperial formations’ continue to have on subjected people even long after the end of colonial state structures. By studying these imperial formations through the ‘ruins’ they leave in land and people – and she counts as imperial ruins not only Vietnamese landscapes devastated by ‘Agent Orange’, but also French suburban cités dortoirs where immigrants from previous colonies are accommodated today – Stoler proposes to highlight the long-lasting process of ruination that these continue to cause long after the end of independence wars. In this light, Chinese ghosts appear as a very good illustration of the long-lasting ruination that the Sino-Manchu imperial formation, experienced locally through the economic agency of Chinese merchants, is seen to have initiated in Mongolia, the effects of which perdure until now. Ghost stories assert that colonial-era merchants remained attached to Mongolian land even after independence, that they keep claiming their debt from the population beyond their own death, refusing to let go of the wealth they accumulated through their much-resented practice of usury.

This enduring presence is all the more heavily felt since Chinese ghosts are said to be extremely hard, if not impossible, to expel. Unlike the case with their Mongolian counterparts, attempts at subduing them meet very seldom with success: both stories presented above, typically, end with an acknowledgement of failure to expel the ghost, leaving the protagonists no choice but to resign themselves to its presence, having sometimes to keep satisfying its unquenchable thirst for gold at their own expense. People usually explain the immunity of Chinese ghosts to exorcism rituals by the extreme strength of the ‘envy’ that keeps them tied to this world, on the one hand, and by their absolute foreignness, on the other hand, which leaves specialists short of adapted techniques to deal with them. It is therefore no wonder that Chinese ghosts can be at the same time closely associated with the figure of the colonial merchant and linked with contemporary migrants, to the point of being uncannily confusable with them. These stories speak precisely of a temporality that stretches from colonization until now: ghosts – and this may well be one of their characteristics, as recently argued by Janet Carsten (2007) – collapse the present in the past, shattering the strict time limits of colonial rule to emphasize its ongoing effects in the present.

However, if Chinese ghosts are the ‘ruins’ of the Sino-Manchu imperial formations, it is then interesting to notice that comparatively little concern is raised by Russian ghosts among the population. Not only are Russian ghost stories far less numerous than Chinese ghost stories in these volumes, but, more crucially, they do not describe a similar process of ruination. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the Russian presence has had as disastrous an effect on Mongolian land and culture, through a colonial policy that Mongolia’s independence as a ‘People’s Republic’ could not conceal even at that time. Although they were actually conducted by Mongolian officials, there is a well-established Russian influence in the mass-murder campaigns that saw the death of thousands of Buddhist monks in the late 1930s, shortly after the purges carried out in the USSR. Moreover, the damage to cultural transmission caused by Soviet-inspired education policies throughout the country is now well known, and Mongolian historians such as Baabar (1999) have since 1990 operated a revaluation of Mongolia’s contemporary history, stressing its status of ‘Puppet
Republic’ throughout the socialist period. Notwithstanding this, stories of Russian ghosts do not seem to reflect any kind of long-standing ruination of the Mongolian people and land.

**White ladies and vengeful soldiers**

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, the great majority of Russian ghosts are linked to military issues. They are less often soldiers, however, than Russian war prisoners’ wives, who died with their husbands while they were trying to escape in the aftermath of the Second World War. Most ghost stories involving Russian people in the anthology concerned a particular group of prisoners referred to as the ‘prisoners of the 505’. These are said to be the soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army, a military unit in the German army during the Second World War composed exclusively of Russian soldiers. Under the command of former Red Army General Andrey Vlasov, it intended to use the German invasion to overthrow the communist regime in Russia (Andreyev 1987). At the end of the war, prisoners from this unit were sent to labour camps in Siberia and in Mongolia, where they were set to build the new railway. Several stories recount apparitions, at particular locations on these railway tracks, of lonely Russian women with white gowns (*daashinz*) and astonishingly long hair, subsequently recognized by the locals as Russian women who were shot with their husbands as they attempted to escape. These narratives usually do not report any measures taken by the population to get rid of the ghost: once train drivers become aware of the particular locations where such apparitions occur, these cause no further trouble. Thus, although stories of Russian ghosts report an ongoing presence of Russians who died tragically on Mongolian land, they do not seem to emphasize any process of long-standing ruination linked to it. Not only are these ghosts most often harmless, but their presence does not seem to make a statement about Russian presence in general. These feminine ghosts of prisoners – what is more, traitors to their country – can only have a quite distant and indirect link with the presence in Mongolia of Russian engineers, teachers, diplomats, or even soldiers that characterized its status as a satellite republic of the Soviet Union.

There is one story in this nine-volume anthology, however, that seems to make a clear statement about the Russian military presence during the socialist period. It was published in 2007, and although its ending takes place in the present, most of the facts it relates occur before 1990 (*Anecdotes ...*, vol. 8, 2007: 56–8).

It is set in a region of the Southwest, where a Soviet military unit had been quartered. One day, a robbery was perpetrated in a Mongolian shop nearby, and Derem, the shop attendant, strongly suspected that a Russian soldier called Ganya was behind it. Ganya had already been caught once before, trying to steal livestock from herders of the area, but these affairs had been kept quiet so as not to prejudice ‘the friendship between [younger and elder] brother countries’. This time, however, Derem was upset and he did not want to let this go, so he insisted that an investigation should be opened. Ganya, understanding that he was a suspect in this case, and that Derem had accused him, got into a rage, and went around claiming his innocence. Once again, the will to preserve ‘an unfailing friendship between the two brother countries’ led the administration to bury the case. This did not appease Ganya, though, who went to Derem’s place with a few other soldiers and brought his house down, saying: ‘All the time I’ve been in Mongolia, you’ve never been nice to me!’ Around that time, a dispute broke out between the soldiers in the barracks, and Ganya got killed. Shortly after that, in 1990, Russian soldiers were repatriated, leaving the barracks empty. Soon, the place earned the reputation of being haunted, and locals became quite concerned as the suicide rate increased. Notwithstanding this, people kept going to the old barracks to collect anything that could...
be resold, like bricks, for instance. Derem’s son was one of them: one day, he was brave enough to
go all the way inside the barracks with a friend, but was then crushed beneath a brick wall that fell
on him. A local witness who had worked there before 1990 noticed that he had been crushed at the
exact same location where Ganya’s bed had been. Upon hearing the tragic news, Derem fell in utter
distress and revealed that the night before he had a dream in which Ganya told him he was claiming
his son as a revenge. Local people believed that this was indeed what Ganya had done as after this
the haunting ceased.

The facts related in this narrative are quite frightful indeed, arguably even more so
than in Chinese ghost stories, where hardly anyone actually gets killed as a result of the
soul’s ‘greed’. This story seems to picture Russians as excessively vengeful people, who
will hold the most destructive grudge against anyone who dares only suspect them,
even for a wrong that they might actually have done. Moreover, in this story as well as
in the others, Russian ghosts are associated like Chinese ones with the most typical
traces of their presence, and seem to take a typically Russian appearance. The difference
with Chinese ghosts, however, is that Russians are not reported as trying to integrate
into Mongolian society, which means that they appear after death as they probably
looked like during their life.

No matter how fierce, it seems that Ganya’s violent and obviously unfair eagerness
for revenge does not cause any more long-standing and collective process of ruination
than does the apparition of war prisoners’ wives. Even in this most tragic instance, the
trouble stops when, quite shortly after the departure of Russian soldiers, revenge is
taken: there is no comparison, at any rate, to the souls of Chinese merchants, which
are still impossible to uproot decades after their deaths. Crucially, Russian people do
not all remain attached to Mongolian land just as a result of merely dying on it. Contrary to Chinese ghosts, their souls continue to haunt the scene of tragic events
that happened to them individually: they become ghosts not because they are foreign,
but because of circumstances that concern them personally. Moreover, the outburst of illegitimate violence cannot even threaten the ‘unfailing friendship between [younger
and elder] brother countries’ that is brought up twice in the story. This expression,
directly quoted from socialist-era propaganda, seems here to be used without any
irony, as if this respectful friendship of Mongolia for its Russian ‘big brother’ was still
taken seriously.

**Big brothers versus parasites: on strangers and reciprocity**

Anthropologists working in Mongolia have not failed to notice the positive feelings
that still animate Mongolian memories of Russian presence. David Sneath has shown
that the socialist ‘technology of imagination’ picturing Mongolia as ‘a permanently
junior fraternal partner to the Russian brother’ (2003: 48) remains vivid. Russians are
remembered as great providers, and their liberality in dispensing the products of
socialist ‘modernity’ has secured their position until today as ‘elder brothers’ to Mon-
golia. The railways, the roads, and the cities built mostly after the Second World War
are still remembered by Mongolians as owing very much to the Russian presence.
And it is this aspect of Russian agency which is emphasized in memories of their
presence, rather than the Soviet-inspired totalitarian system and the mass-killings
it perpetrated.

Also, as the Ganya story shows, Russian people left behind in 1990 the buildings
they had built for their soldiers, citizens, and workers, thus allowing Mongolians
to collect the raw material these contained and resell it. This happened all over
Mongolian territory, and, interestingly, has also been cited to me as a token of Russian generosity – the mark of a liberality that Chinese people were deemed incapable of. This happened while I was visiting the abandoned Russian town of Mardai, located next to a uranium mine which had been exploited exclusively by the Soviet government between 1988 and 1995, in the far eastern part of Mongolia. After the mine was closed and its Russian inhabitants were repatriated, the town was meticulously stripped of its metallic components by the local population, reducing to ruins what is still remembered now as a beautiful town. People I met there kept praising the richness of the town’s infrastructure, and the endless amount of resellable goods it contained. This was also the opinion of our driver, who, looking at these ruins, commented thoughtfully: ‘Russians, at least, they left things for us to take. Chinese people would have buried everything under the ground’. It seems as if the sustainment process initiated by the Russian presence, symmetrical to the long-lasting ruination initiated by Chinese merchants, was extended even after their departure through the buildings they left for Mongolians to exploit. The things they have given then seem to compensate for the resources, such as uranium, they have taken, and the liberality with which they are remembered to have entertained this reciprocal relationship with Mongolians secures their status as respected yet feared elder brothers. Strikingly, stories such as the one about Derem and Ganya quoted above almost echo a certain anxiety on the part of the Mongolian population about the possible retaliation they incur by ‘ruining’ old Russian settlements, an idea I have often heard around Mardai.

Conversely, Chinese people are pictured in the ghost stories quoted above as essentially incapable of reciprocity. Not only are they said to bury their wealth, thus making it impossible for the Mongolian population to seize, but several stories claim that they are even incapable of passing it on to their own wives and children. It is indeed quite frequent in these stories for Chinese merchants married to Mongolian women to be accused of concealing their wealth from their own family, refusing to let go any of it even beyond death. Stories of Chinese ghosts vividly describe Mongolian widows left in utter misery after the death of their rich husbands, who denied them any bequest. One even reports the case of a Mongolian woman allegedly haunted by the ghost of her Chinese husband who claimed back the jewellery he had given her as a present during his life (Anecdotes ... vol. 7, 2006: 108). Chinese people are therefore typically described as wife-takers who shamelessly go against the classical logic of marital exchange. By refusing to give anything to their Mongolian wives, and most of all to their own progeny, they prove incapable of the most basic reciprocal relationship, thus unmistakably failing their possible integration as community members in Mongolian society.

The practices by which a reciprocal exchange relationship might progressively be established between strangers have been studied in a paper on hospitality by Julian Pitt-Rivers (1968), which the editors of this volume have proposed as one of its core references. Basing himself on examples drawn – classically – from the Mediterranean region, but also on Boas’s ethnography of the Eskimo, Pitt-Rivers compares the institutions by which the simultaneous hostility between strangers is turned progressively into a successive exchange between a host and a guest. This relationship of exchange between partners, who become patron and client to each other, might in time result in the integration of the stranger into the community. Thus hospitality, while being offered under the guise of a free gift, sets the scene for a reciprocal – yet asymmetrical...
– relationship which entails some kind of a return, at some point. The way a stranger is supposed to give something in return to his host is of course highly variable and most often takes forms that might not be directly identifiable as a return. Although it is not really central in the literature on hospitality, which more often focuses on the initial phase of the exchange, some authors have mentioned occasionally the problems that arise when this return fails to be given. Michael Herzfeld (1987), in his well-known paper on Greek hospitality, describes the derogatory way in which low-budget ‘hippie’ travellers are regarded by their Greek hosts. As tourists with no significant purchase power who, nevertheless, expect hospitality on foreign land, they are considered no better than ‘fleas’ – which they are also thought to carry in great quantities – by hosts who feel wronged in the process.

Chinese people are seen in Mongolia to present a far greater danger, because they are not only guests or visitors in Mongolia, but settlers. By marrying Mongol spouses, by installing their trade in Mongolian cities and perhaps also by wearing Mongolian clothes and learning Mongolian language, they claim a place in Mongolian society. The stories presented above picture them as necessarily failing this integration, when they refuse the reciprocal relationship that might have allowed it. Notwithstanding this, Chinese people are seen as doomed to remain attached to Mongolian land, even beyond death, by the very stinginess that prevents their integration. They are described as some kind of parasites, who stick to Mongolian land and suck away its resources, while refusing ever to give anything in exchange. Attached yet not integrated, their ghosts remain as hostile strangers within.

Conclusion

The obvious question that is left unanswered at the end of this paper is: why? Why do Mongolians operate such a strong distinction between Russian and Chinese people? How can they pass so quickly over the disastrous effects of Soviet influence in Mongolia, while they insist so decidedly on their grudge towards Chinese merchants? Answering such questions would indeed require considering more broadly the contemporary reasons for the outburst of expressions of racism towards Chinese people manifested in the Mongolian media recently (Billé 2008; Delaplace 2010), as well as the patent lack of public concern over the memory of the socialist purges (Kaplonski 2008). It would also involve a close examination of Mongolia’s long-term historical relations with its two gigantic neighbours. This paper had to content itself with a more humble task. It has shown that conceptions of the beyond, or more precisely the narrative elaborations on the belief in ghosts, seemed crucial in the distinction between two kinds of strangers in Mongolia, associated with two different regimes of relationship. While a relation of ‘brotherhood’ is claimed with Russians, Chinese are described as parasites who, under the guise of integration, suck out resources from the country while refusing any kind of reciprocity. Whereas Russians are thus given a place in Mongolian society as respected and feared ‘elder brothers’, Chinese are described as stingy ghosts who remain attached to Mongolian land to pursue even after death the ruinous exploitation they wrought during their lives. The irony of it is that Russians are never described in these stories as making any cultural effort to be culturally integrated into Mongolian society, whereas Chinese almost always seem to.

Heonik Kwon (2008), in the book mentioned at the outset of this paper, does not confine himself to a mere acknowledgement of the presence of foreign ghosts of war on
Vietnamese land. Drawing on Georg Simmel’s well-known essay, he takes this observation as the starting-point of a general theory of ghosts as strangers. Kwon argues that ghosts in Vietnam share the fundamental characteristics recognized by Simmel as that of strangers, notably mobility and diversity: they are not only displaced, but also form a heterogeneous constellation of beings with various life-histories and backgrounds. At a deeper level, ghosts are for Kwon those who, like Simmel’s strangers, are near and close at the same time, dangerous yet craving for sociality; they are the alterity within that takes part in the constitution of identity. The place they are given, as strangers, contrasts with that of the ancestors to whom conventional rituals are addressed; however, the more informal practices of adoption directed to ghosts are not less crucial in the process of post-civil war Vietnam social reconciliation.

Meanwhile, the stories presented above show that not all strangers are deemed fit for adoption. Whereas some strangers might be given a place as fictive elder brothers, whose generosity is at the same time sought out and feared, others are depicted as parasites, whose essential inability to reciprocally exchange makes them unfit for any place in the Mongolian social sphere.

NOTES

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In this paper, ‘Mongolia’ thus refers exclusively to the independent Republic, which territory roughly corresponds that of ‘Outer Mongolia’ during the Qing dynasty, as opposed to the southern ‘Inner Mongolia’, which is now part of the People’s Republic of China with the status of an ‘Autonomous Region’.

The reader will find a diachronic overview of Mongolian conceptions of death in a paper by Marie-Dominique Even published in 1999; for an account of the representations of the afterlife in a rural context today, see Delaplace (2009: 185-93).

Most of all, quite curiously, Chinese people are credited with a hyper-personal relationship to the kinds of possessions – gold, rolls of silk, and other items – which have a purely monetary value, as opposed to silken clothes or jewellery, which might be imbued with a personal value.

It is not clear when exactly Chinese usury practices were banned in Mongolia: archives show that at the end of the 1950s, and before the repatriation of Chinese citizens in 1963 following the Sino-Soviet split, Chinese traders were employed as wage-workers in co-operative shops, where they were not allowed to practise usury or sell with profit. However, it seems in these stories that they could somehow pursue their commercial activity at least until the Second World War, despite a law cancelling all the debts contracted by Mongolian citizens towards Chinese merchants, passed on 24 September 1924.

Nazi discourses about ‘Jews’ might even become an explicit reference among Mongolian ultra-nationalist groups when talking about the Chinese presence in the country (see Billé 2010). Drawing on Judith Halberstam’s (1993) discussion on the parallels between anti-semitic depictions of Jews and vampires, Chinese ghosts could indeed be seen as a comparable ‘technology of monstrosity’ which fuses race, class, and gender.

Thus the Russian saying reported by David Sneath: ‘A chicken is not a bird, and Mongolia is not really abroad’. The author notes, however, that ‘if national independence was largely symbolic, it was not entirely fictional’ (2003: 40). Sneath reminds us, for example, that the forced collectivization campaign was pushed to its end at high human cost in the USSR, while it was abandoned in Mongolia because of its unpopularity.
The town of Mardai was established in 1981 next to a 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 Russians (about 10,000 according to estimates).

Anthropologists working in Mongolia have already tried to bring some answers to this question. Franck Billé (2010), for example, argues that Mongolians' violent attitude towards the Chinese presence is an attempt to repress the Asian aspects of Mongolian culture, since the socialist-inspired promotion of European civilization. It is worth adding that divergent memories about Chinese and Russian rule in Mongolia might also derive from a perceived difference in their current presence in the country. Whereas the end of Russian tutelage in 1990 saw the definitive repatriation of almost all soldiers and workers, the quasi-uninterrupted presence of Chinese merchants on Mongolian land seems to perpetuate Manchu rule even after its overthrow.

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Chinois parasites et Russes vengeurs : fantômes, étrangers et réciprocité en Mongolie

Résumé

L’auteur examine ici les histoires de fantômes d’origine étrangère qui circulent depuis quelque temps dans la capitale de la Mongolie, Oulan-Bator. Ces récits dépeignent les Chinois et les Russes comme des étrangers relevant de deux sortes, différenciées par des modes de relations avec l’hôte différents. À la différence des Russes, dont les Mongols gardent encore, à tort ou à raison, le souvenir d’un peuple qui leur a apporté beaucoup, ces histoires décrivent les Chinois comme des espèces de parasites qui passent leur temps à s’approprier la terre des Mongols sans rien donner en retour.

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