Mobilities
Vol. X, No. X, 1–15, XXXX 2012

Roads that Separate: Sino-Mongolian Relations in the Inner Asian Desert

MORTEN AXEL PEDERSEN & MIKKEL BUNKENBORG

Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT *We usually think of roads as tools of social and material connection which serve to enchain places, things and people that have not before been as directly, or intensely, linked up. Yet, in the sparsely populated grasslands and deserts of the Sino-Mongolian border zone, it is equally much the other way around. Rather than facilitating more interaction between local Mongolians and the growing number of Chinese employed in mining and oil companies, the many roads that are now being built or upgraded to transport natural resources, commodities and labour power between Mongolia and China serve to kerb both the quantity and the quality of interactions taking place between Mongolians and Chinese. Thus, roads here act as technologies of distantiation, which ensure that the two sides become less connected as time passes.*

AQ1

Introduction

In recent decades, Mainland China has seen massive public and private investments in roads, airports, railways and waterways intended to connect the poorer inland provinces with the relatively affluent coastal regions. Between 1978 and 2006, passenger transportation via air, road and rail grew at the staggering average annual rates of 17.2, 11.2 and 6.6%, respectively (Bai and Qian 2010). The construction of expressways, for instance, only started in 1988 but there is now more than 70,000 km of expressway in China. As noted by Nyíri and Breidenbach (2008, p. 128), the slogan 'Want to get rich? Build a road first! (*yao zhifu, xian xiu lu*)' is a common sight in the countryside, and roads are built with the express purpose of stimulating economic development in the backward hinterlands.[1] The civilised, modern existence that the Chinese state sees as its role to offer its citizens is to a large degree predicated upon the engineering of a 'material civilisation' that will serve as the material corollary of an emerging 'spiritual civilization'. Indeed, construction of infrastructure is integral to Chinese visions of development to such an extent that road construction itself may be construed as a civilising project that will transport backward peasants into the global economy (Flower 2004).[2] Roads

Corresponding Address: Morten Axel Pedersen, Department of Anthropology, Øster Farimagsgade 5, opgang I, 1353 København K, Denmark. Email: morten.pedersen@anthro.ku.dk

1745-0101 Print/1745-011X Online/12/000001-15 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.718938

offer a promise of connectivity, they seem to accelerate the circulation of people and goods, and connect even the most distant peripheries to the economic growth experienced by the centre.

However, the emphasis on infrastructure is not just evident in internal development strategies, but is a dominant feature of Chinese investments and development projects across the Third World. Recent years have seen a great deal of academic interest in China's new political-economic clout in Africa (Alden *et al*. 2008, Taylor 2006, Brautigam 2009). However, a similar – but by scholars largely neglected – contest for resources is played out in Central and Inner Asia (Kleveman 2003, Swanström 2005). While examples from Nepal (Campbell 2010) and the Altai Republic (Nyíri and Breidenbach 2008) suggest that local people are not necessarily keen on being connected to the Chinese grid, China's enormous capacity for infrastructure construction is evident in a increasing number of road and railway projects along the country's North-western and South-western borders. This tendency to deliver packaged material solutions, alongside with the economic focus on the construction of roads, power plants, dams and government buildings, is oddly reminiscent of the modernisation theory that inspired Western development assistance in the decades after the Second World War, and also calls to mind the politics implemented by Mongolia's state socialist government in its ambition to 'bystep capitalism' and catapult Mongolia directly from 'feudalism' to 'communism' for much of the period between 1921 and 1990 (Bawden 1989, Bruun *et al*. 2006). Designed and built by the Chinese with what often seems to be little consideration for local needs and participation, it could be argued that infrastructural projects have emerged as 'zones of awkward engagement' (Tsing 2005) in which Chinese and local worlds meet, mix and clash in the co-construction of complex infrastructural entities.

Mongolia is a case in point. Especially over the last decade, the country has witnessed a huge inflow of public and private Chinese investments, ranging from the purchase of derelict cement factories in Ulaanbaatar that have been closed since socialist time to formerly secret uranium mines in remote Eastern Mongolia. Few people in Mongolia are in possession of an overview, let alone specific data, on the scope and the nature of Chinese investments in the country, including the local officials, journalists, academics and international aid programme and NGO officers we have spoken to. The Chinese seem to be conducting their investments and indeed themselves in a particularly low-key manner in Mongolia. Rather than making high-profile and high-risk investments into potentially profitable but unexplored mines like many Western companies (notably the mining giant Rio Tinto which is soon about to start mining the world's biggest undeveloped gold/copper deposits in the South Gobi desert in corporation with its partner, Ivanhoe Mines), the bulk of Chinese economic interventions in the country are focused on procuring stakes in small – and medium-sized firms with a known capacity to generate stable profit through already developed mines and other natural resource deposits. One consequence of this is that whereas virtually everyone in Mongolia is aware of, and has opinions about, the presence of Western mining giants like Rio Tinto, surprising little attention has been directed to fact that, by 2008, more than half of the country's FDI (55.73%) stemmed from Chinese companies. Indeed, according to official figures obtained from different ministries and government agencies, 6926 (or 49.52%) of all foreign companies registered in Mongolia from 1990 to 2010 were Chinese. While these figures do not say anything about the size of these companies (many of which are bound to be shops and restaurants), let alone about how many of them of

them are still active, they do back up an impression shared by virtually everyone in Mongolia, namely that 'the Chinese are buying up our country', especially in the natural resources sector, and that there hardly is anything that can be done about it, short of joining the local Nazi party and other ultranationalist movements that have mushroomed in Mongolia over the last five years or so (Højer forthcoming).

The system of roads that crisscross the sparsely populated landscapes of Mongolia is famously inadequate. While the total length amounts to almost 50,000 km, only some 2000 km are paved while the rest are dirt roads that are narrow, dangerous and sometimes impassable. The transportation infrastructure is a significant constraint upon the growing number of companies extracting minerals and oil, and as Mongolia gradually turns into 'Mine-golia' (Bulag 2009), there are plans to use part of the revenue to improve the highway system. At present, the only paved road from the capitol of Ulaanbaatar to a border crossing is the one that leads north to Russia, but a new paved road leading south to the Chinese border at Zamyn Üüd is approaching completion, and there are plans for an additional north-south transport corridor through Western Mongolia as well as an east-west corridor known as the millennium highway. As evident in the interminable debates about the gauge of new railroad projects (Russian or Chinese?), there is a good deal of apprehension about growing Chinese influence, but it seems hard to avoid an increasing integration with Chinese systems of transportation. As noted by The World Bank, 'There has been one significant change in the external context, the massive increase in trade with China, which will impact on the pattern of demands for transport infrastructure and services in the next decades'.[3] Obviously, a share of the total Chinese FDI in Mongolia is spent on roads, either in the form of bilateral aid from the Chinese government aimed at upgrading Mongolia's existing highway system (several such projects have taken place in different parts of the Gobi), or in the form of new roads built by Chinese companies to cater for mines and other remotely located resource extraction adventures.

This article[4] explores what effects these roads have on Sino-Mongolian relations within the context of two oil Chinese oil explorations in Southern and Eastern Mongolia. It is commonplace to think of roads as harbingers of connectivity, which enchain places and people that have hitherto not been as directly, or intensely, connected. According to Harvey and Knox (2008), this 'historical desire for "connectivity"' inheres in the 'assumption that such infrastructures offer a technical solution to problems of economic and social integration … as subjects of economic development, road-building programmes are pursued for the possible contribution that they are able to make to greater economic well-being and social connectivity within and between nation-states' (2008, p. 80). But perhaps roads, and in particular those that are being built in border areas, should instead be studied as 'sites of passionate engagement holding the promise of transformative potential in ways that create an unlikely and unpredictable convergence of interest' (2008, p. 80)? From this perspective, which is based on the stipulation that certain social relationships entail a 'disjunctive (rather than an additive) mode of "inclusion"' (2008, p. 79), these roads separate as much they connect (Willerslev and Pedersen 2010). Indeed, is there a sense in which we may think of them as technologies of distantiation, which deserve to be studied ethnographically and theorised anthropologically in this capacity?

Judging by the handful of cases we have explored in our ongoing research in Mongolia,[5] there is indeed reason to question the common assumption that the growing number of roads in the Sino-Mongolian borderland results in ever more connectivity. Thus, as we are about to see, roads and other infrastructural artefacts do not only connect things; they also keep them apart. Rather than facilitating increasing interactions between the growing number of Chinese nationals and local Mongolians, the roads now being built or upgraded to export the natural resources extracted in Mongolia's deserts and import increasing amounts of labour and commodities from China, serve to kerb the quantity and the quality of interactions taking place between Mongolians and Chinese. What is more, this detachment is seen as a desirable outcome by Chinese and Mongolian leaders alike, as both sides seem keen to interpolate a maximum distance between Chinese workers and local Mongolians with a view to maintaining a peaceful coexistence. Thus understood, the roads and other infrastructural objects that represent our focus in this article forge an optimal balance between engagement and detachment in the Sino-Mongolian borderland: by continually hollowing out the relationships between Chinese workers and local Mongolians, these artefacts facilitate an ongoing stabilization of the radically uncertain and potentially conflictual relation between the two sides in Eastern Mongolia. It is precisely in this sense that such roads are distinct 'technologies of distantiation': they are carefully crafted social tools that ensure that people can remain minimally connected over time and thereby continue to partake in highly circumscribed but also profitable mutual engagements.

Case A: Chinese oil drilling in the Gobi desert

Let us begin by recounting a revealing anecdote from a car journey we undertook in 2009 as part of our search of Chinese investments in the Gobi desert, and then move from there to our main ethnographic case, which revolves around the expansion of a state-owned Chinese oil field in the Tamsagbulag Basin of Eastern Mongolia's Dornod Province.

Once, during one of our 'expeditions' (Bunkenborg and Pedersen 2012) studying Chinese mining and oil companies,[6] we stopped for tea at the autumn camp of a nomadic household (*ail*) in a remote swath of the South Gobi desert near the Chinese border. As we entered the *ger* (yurt), we caught a glimpse of an oil tower looming in the flimsy horizon to the south, some 10 km away. Over a serving of salty tea, the head of the *ail* – a weather-worn man in his late 50s – confirmed that, 'yes, some Chinese are apparently drilling for oil over there', but then quickly added: 'No, we don't know who they are, or what they are doing'. Indeed, for the rest of our conversation the nomad missed no chance to stress his lack of interest in the *hoja moja* (the popular but disrespectful Mongolian vernacular for a Chinese person).

This indifference came as a surprise to us. After all, the oil field was the closest neighbour to the *ail*, the nearest *ger* being more than a dozen kilometres away. Surely – as we asked ourselves as we waved goodbye to the man from our jeep – these nomads must be interested in knowing what is going on at the oil field? Even taking into consideration that most Mongolians are suspicious if not downright hostile towards Chinese – indeed, relations between the two peoples have been fraught for centuries (Bulag 1998), and the anti-Chinese rhetoric from ultra right-wing nationalist is becoming increasingly popular among large segments of Mongolia's population (Bille 2008) – yet one would expect an isolated nomadic *ail* like this to engage with *hoja moja* for pragmatic reasons. Surely, money can be made by work-

ing with the Chinese, as hired hands or via trade? At the least, one would expect the nomadic children to be curious – it is not as if a lot happens in the course of an average Gobi afternoon.

Our cosy backseat reflections were brought to an abrupt conclusion as the rear axle of our four-wheel drive suddenly snapped and brought us to a grinding halt. The fact that we were some 150 km from the nearest town explained why our driver looked unusually glum as he examined the fractured axle. It dawned upon us that we were going to stay in this particular patch of desert for a while. There was no one in sight, but, on the horizon, one could glimpse the Chinese oil field for which we had originally been heading. We had quite literally and entirely accidentally, become stuck in the middle of our object of study – a road – with the nomadic family's *ger* and the Chinese oil tower figuring in opposite directions separated by 10 kilometres of wasteland. It was only natural that we decided to pay the Chinese a visit.

We found three scores of oil engineers, geologists and workers living in camps surrounding three drilling rigs with a few kilometres between them. The camps consisted of neat rows of white containers, each equipped with bunk beds, electric heating and air condition, in addition to a shared bathroom and a common kitchen. The supplies were trucked in from China via the nearest border crossing and the food was prepared by a Chinese cook. Asked whether they had any interaction with the local Mongolians – they would exclaim, 'but there is no one here!' and point to the undulating steppe stretching into the distance without any sign of human habitation. The situation reverberated with classic distinctions between mobile nomadic and stationary sedentary peoples. We were close to a border separating traditionally agrarian China from traditionally pastoral Mongolia, and the Chinese oil workers ensconced in their smug containers seemed entirely disconnected from the Mongolian nomads following their flocks. Caught midway between what came across as two different worlds, our initial conclusion was that everything fitted into the stereotypical image of sedentary Chinese and nomadic Mongols living radically different and disparate lives.

Yet, things were not what they seemed. The following morning, a pick-up suddenly passed by: it was only the second car we had seen for two days. Much to our surprise, it turned out to be the head of the nomadic *ail* and two of his sons, along with a full-grown goat placed in the back of the lorry. 'Where are you going?', we quizzed unnecessarily. 'Over there, to the oil rig', was the curt reply. And ever so slowly, we were able to decipher – beneath the half-finished sentences, forlorn looks and downcast eyes that our questions were met with – that the nomadic family was regular suppliers of meat to the Chinese oil workers, who, as they reluctantly explained, purchased 'a couple of goats every fortnight', delivered and paid at the gates of their container compound. Needless to say, we eagerly wanted to ask the man, in the least awkward way possible, how this new information squared with what he had told us a few days before. Alas, the chance never arose, for in that same moment, he stepped on the gas pedal and the car disappeared in a cloud of Gobi dust.

Many anthropologists would probably regard this story as a vindication of the old truism about the inherent discrepancy between what people say and what people do. Indeed, this is very much the conclusion we reached in the immediate aftermath of the event. Aha!, we told each other, so there was a hidden interest behind the old nomad's striking indifference towards his Chinese neighbours during our visit to his household a few days before, namely that he had not wished to disclose what was evidently a very good business arrangement, just as, very possibly, he had also

felt ashamed about his friendly relations with the mistrusted Chinese. Yet, as our thoughts returned to the encounter en route to our next destination – a bigger Chinese oil field 1000 km to the east – we had a nagging sensation of having missed something and that an alternative interpretation of the nomad's apparent lying might present itself to us.

Case B: The Chinese oil field in Eastern Mongolia

'The relationship between the Chinese company and the local people is flawless'. Such was the self-assured assessment by a high-ranking Mongolian government representative, whom we met by chance on a lonely hilltop in the Tamsagbulag basin, a remote corner of Far Eastern Mongolia until recently known mostly for its low population density even by Mongolian standards (less than 0, 5 persons/km^2) and for the flocks of gazelles roaming across its protected steppe lands. In 2005, Daqing Oil, a Manchurian-based subsidiary of the state-owned Chinese energy group PetroChina (which, for a spell in 2009, was the world's largest company measured by share holder value) bought a partly developed oilfield in the Tamsagbulag Basin of Mongolia's Dornod Province from the American exploration firm SOCO Oil. In 2008, PetroChina Daqing Tamsag LLC (as the Mongolian arm of Daqing Oil is called) produced 1 million barrels of crude from around 20 wells spread across the four blocks over which the company holds exploration and extraction rights. With an $511 million investment in 2009 and an annual windfall tax of $19 million to the Mongolian state, the oil field is Eastern Mongolia's biggest Foreign Direct Investment. Indeed, with a work force of around 5000 employees, more than 90% of whom were Chinese nationals, Matad was home to one of Mongolia's biggest concentrations of foreign labour in 2009. Already in 2007, its population of some 3000 individuals, mostly pastoral nomads, was surpassed by the number of Chinese workers.

The official cited above was not alone in presenting relations between the predominantly Chinese workforce at the company and the purely Mongolian population of the Matad district in rosy terms. All company representatives, whether Chinese or Mongolian, and most (but not all) local officials that we spoke to about the oil field gave the same positive answer, and there also seemed to be consensus among the majority of officials and politicians in Ulaanbaatar that the terms of the product sharing agreement were favourable to Mongolia as a whole (though it was also recognised that the oil law from the 1990s does not contain adequate provisions for the distribution of fee, taxes and profits to local and regional governments). In the words of Mr Chimetseren, the former Matad district mayor responsible for mediating the interactions between the people of this district and the foreign companies operating on its territory from 2005 to 2008: 'This company plays by the book. The last thing they want is to have bad relationships with local people let alone the government. This is not some rag-tag firm polluting the desert and underpaying its workers like many private Gobi mines. This is the Chinese state, and they are doing everything they can to follow the rules and leave a favourable impression'.

In fact, the local Mongolian leader partly had a point. Unlike many other Chinese (as well as other foreign and indeed Mongolian) companies in the natural resource sector, the Mongolian workers employed at the oil field received stable and high salaries (around $500), which were topped up by a reliable pension scheme and a generous health insurance. The food and accommodation at the headquarters were of an equally high standard, especially compared with what one usually sees at mining sites in the Mongolian countryside. The living quarters and the bathroom facilities – which both took the form of identical air-conditioned special-purpose

containers – were clean, spacious and functional, just as the food was plentiful and geared towards different tastes (the Chinese were served Chinese food cooked by a Chinese cook, and the Mongols consumed Mongolian food prepared by a Mongolian cook).

More generally, PetroChina is officially committed to high standards of corporate social responsibility, as explained in its annual publication of reports on sustainability and something known as HSE – health, safety and environment. These reports – readily available on the company website[7] – contain examples of initiatives to promote education, enhance the environment, and alleviate poverty in various places. While the reports offer little information on operations in Mongolia, the Chinese managers stationed at the Tamsagbulag oil site were evidently conscious about this discourse and listed a number of ways in which the company sought to contribute to the local community development and minimise the environmental impact of their operations. Apart from providing well-paid jobs to more than 100 Mongolians (at least a handful of whom were from the local district, we were told that the company had financed a US $1 million water processing facility in Matad (which, like many settlements in Eastern Mongolia, only had limited water supplies of inferior quality), offered scholarships to students at the Technical College in the regional capital of Choibalsan, and boosted the local economy by purchasing livestock from the nomads. The managers were acutely aware that most people in Mongolia were sceptical about Chinese investments in the country as a whole, but they were also convinced that this negative image derived from encounters with uneducated, 'low-quality' Chinese entrepreneurs on business adventures in the Gobi and elsewhere. Small wonder that all the managers we met were keen to project an air of professionalism, uniformity, reliability and accountability.

Even so, nearly every Mongolian person that we have talked to during our four visits to Eastern Mongolia have voiced scepticism, if not downright hostility, towards Petrochina's oil adventure in Tamsagbulag. Indeed, the general picture in Matad as much as in Ulaanbaatar is that 'China is not merely portrayed negatively – a belief that the country harbours sinister intents and is plotting to destroy the Mongols' very existence is prevalent and expresses itself in a wide range of stories and rumours' (Bille 2008, p. 1). Crudely put, peoples' worries mostly seemed to represent three areas of concern: environmental, cultural and economic. We shall now consider these in turn.

Many people in Mongolia – ranging from concerned citizens in the Matad district to environmental NGOs in Choibalsan and Ulaanbaatar – expressed concern that the Tamsagbulag Basin's unique ecosystem was being destroyed. Part of the environmental degradation was understood to consist in the disturbance of gazelle migration patterns caused by the presence of this company and its thousands of workers and trucks in the midst of what has officially been designated a protected area. Yet, the Mongolian environmentalists were even more concerned with documenting how the vegetation was damaged by the constant traffic of heavy equipment and how the company failed to seal the open pools used for spillage from the drillings, allowing toxic waste to seep into the ground and destroy the grass. A number of NGOs in Choibalsan had assembled documentation about these issues and sent letters of complaint to persons in the central government. The state environmental inspector assigned to Matad district had in fact notified the company of these complaints, but the NGOs thought that he lacked the legal authority to force the Chinese company to address the issues. According to one of the Chinese man-

agers at the main camp, however, the company had done a great deal to resolve the environmental problems. To minimise damage to the vegetation, drivers were ordered to follow existing wheel ruts, markers were set up along the tracks and the drivers who took their vehicles onto unspoilt grass were fined. As for the open pits with waste, the Chinese manager claimed that the locals had no realistic appreciation of the toxicity. Once the waste was treated with appropriate chemicals and covered with earth, there really was no danger to humans or animals, and the people and journalists who complained about these things displayed 'a profound ignorance of scientific oil production'.

As for the cultural anxieties harboured by local Mongolians in Tamsagbulag and Matad towards Chinese oil workers (and vice versa), it would take a whole paper to list them. But it was clear that most of them were based on prevailing Mongolian ethnic stereotypes about Chinese which have circulated in Mongolia for centuries, and which have already been discussed extensively by several scholars (see, e.g. Bawden 1989, Bulag 1998, Bille 2008). These are, to mention some of the most popular stereotypes, the notion that Chinese people are hardworking but also stingy and cunning (as opposed to Mongols who are supposedly lazy but also honest and generous); the idea that Chinese men are unmanly wimps who are unable to fight and like to gossip like women (unlike Mongolian men who know how to fight and like to speak straight); and the widespread conception that Chinese like to eat vegetables (which they grow right next to their toilets!), in opposition to real Mongols [*jinhene Mongol*], whose ideal diet consists of meat and milk products from sheep, goats and cows.

But the main cultural fear entertained by the people in Matad revolved around the 'fact' that the Chinese oil workers and managers were after the Mongolian women. During the first couple of years following PetroChina's purchase of the oil field in 2005, a number of tragic-comical incidents took place, or are rumoured to have taken place, which played on this particular cultural stereotype and the fears they generate. Apart from vague rumours about sexual liaisons between Chinese workers and local Mongolian girls ('they are stealing our women and polluting our blood', lamented one driver), some of the most dramatic stories were about the first batches of Chinese oil workers, who, soon after having arrived at the Tamsagbulag oil field, had started approaching local nomads to purchase meat. Because of the language barrier, other forms of communications were used in the attempt to conduct the transactions, but often with unintended effects. Said Mr Chimetseren, 'Once, some Chinese workers approached the nomads to buy meat. They tried to convey their intentions by holding their hands to their heads, as if equipped with cow or goat horns. Alas, the men had all gone hunting, and their wives and children could not understand what the strangers wanted, and became so afraid that they fled from their homes. Such chaos! Stories also began to circulate that some of our Mongolian women were having affairs with Chinese men, and that bastard (*erliz*) children were being born'.[8]

Still, above all, the complaints about PetroChina Daqing Tamsag were economical. As reported by Mongolian newspapers, internet blogs and TV stations in recent years, many Matad inhabitants find that they receive too little of the fees, taxes and revenue paid by this oil company to the Mongolian state, and this and other perceived injustices was the subject of a petition sent to the central government.[9] Many people in Matad also questioned why so few local people were employed at the oil field. As one resident asked, 'Thousands of Chinese workers and hundreds of people from Ulaanbaatar are working at the Tamsag oil field. But only few people from

this district have been able to find work there, some of whom were subsequently fired, and this despite the fact that we are desperate to find jobs here! How can this be fair?' People were also dissatisfied about the lack of trading between people from the district and (Chinese) people from the company. Said one man; 'There are now more people working at the oil field than in our district. Yet, they hardly buy anything here. Everything is shipped in by truck from China or from Ulaanbaatar; in fact, we are not even allowed to trade individually with them there anymore'. He was referring to a new and more formalised set of principles for the interaction between workers at the oil field and the local population that was apparently reached at a meeting around 2007 between the managers of the company, the police chief from Choibalsan, and Mr Chimetseren. Alongside with a new rule that no Chinese employed at the oil field was allowed to leave its premises without permission from the managers (who, in keeping with what appears to be standard practice in companies employing Chinese nationals in Mongolia, were also in possession of their passports), Chinese drivers, who sometimes before visited nomadic *ails* for business or other purposes en route to the border, were instructed to stay on the roads even in case of mechanical problems, and local people were banned from carrying out informal trade with anyone from the company. A non-profit firm was set up by the district administration, through which all trade with the oil firm from now on had to be conducted at a fixed price renegotiated once annually between PetroChina representatives and Mr Chimetseren. 'Soon after', as the latter proudly recalled, 'all the disorder and the strife had disappeared, and had been replaced by an orderly trade arrangement'.

Technologies of distantiation

One of the really striking things about the PetroChina Daqing Tamsag oil field in Eastern Mongolia is the fact that both the quantity and quality of interactions between Chinese workers and local Mongolians in and around the Tamsagbulag oil field seems to have become gradually reduced as the years have passed. Indeed, several local officials that we spoke to, including the former mayor of Matad district mentioned above, expressed pride in having accomplished just that: carving out a maximum workable distance between the allegedly radically different worlds of Chinese and Mongols, which, while depending on each other, should also be kept separate at all costs.

Our own visits to the Daqing production headquarters support this observation. Before our first two trips to Eastern Mongolia in 2009, we had read reports of occasional quarrels and fights between the Mongolian and Chinese workers, but there was no sign of conflicts at the headquarters. The fact that Chinese and Mongolian workers were eating different food in different cafeterias and formed separate groups of people smoking and chatting outside meant that there was little interaction between the two sides and what did take place, while working in the same drilling team or queuing at the common shower container before dinner, seemed perfectly amiable, to the point of being so polite and infused with measured tolerance that the two sides could be suspected of maintaining a subtly forged mutual indifference.

On our second visit in 2010, the Chinese presence had been scaled down. Some of the container towns had disappeared, others appeared to be empty, and the heavy truck traffic on the steppe that was so remarkable on our first visits, had been brought to a near standstill. A Chinese manager revealed that the company was

only maintaining production and that the number of Chinese on site had been reduced to a mere dozen. A new levy on foreign workers had been introduced, the cost of taking a truck across the border had quadrupled, and an outbreak of hand, foot and mouth disease had complicated things further, so the numerous Chinese subsidiaries contracted for the summer had called off.

The Chinese manager explained that the main difficulty about operating in Mongolia was the uncertain legal framework and the apparently arbitrary way bureaucrats issued rules and fines without any reference to legislation. As an example, he mentioned the question of environmental protection, which, he insisted, had been built into very design of the operation from start. The clustering of wells and the expensive slanted drill holes were intended to minimise traffic upon the grass, and the company had applied for permission to install pipes between the wells. The pipes would make it possible to operate with a staff of only 50 persons and make the traffic of heavy vehicles unnecessary, thus reducing the environmental impact significantly. The Mongolian authorities, however, had procrastinated for years and the issue was still not resolved. As for the open pits, the company had long since offered to build a facility to clean the water properly. The Mongolian authorities, however, were sceptical about the Chinese specifications, but they lacked the technical expertise to formulate what they wanted instead, and so the negotiations dragged on for years.

A very revealing moment occurred when the manager explained how the company had been obliged to upgrade the nearest power plant in Choibalsan (the regional capital 250 km away) and pay for the power cables to the headquarters. In any other country, the manager said, the electricity company would provide the infrastructure and set up a metre, so all you had to do was to pay your bills. The most desirable model for relations between Chinese and Mongolians, the manager seemed to suggest, was simple, predictable and fully automated, a metre that went tick-tock as the Mongolian kilowatt-hours poured into the Chinese headquarters. With an appropriate infrastructure of roads, pipelines and cables serving to minimise friction, spillages and interactions, such an unproblematic relation was both conceivable and desirable from the Chinese perspective and the only thing that prevented the company from realising it was the interminable red tape of Mongolian bureaucrats. The perfect set-up envisioned by him was not one where Chinese and Mongolians over time were to become trusted partners or close friends inhabiting an intimate, inter-subjective space. Rather, what he hoped for was the creation of highly circumscribed if not 'automated' relation that served to keep the two sides apart while still maintaining a semblance of connection rendered possible by a certain technology of distantiation, in this case the technical instrument of the metre.

During our most recent visit in the summer of 2011, the Chinese manager's hopes seemed to be coming to fruition. Because Russia shutdown the export of diesel oil to Mongolia for several months that same spring, the Mongolian government had decided that domestic oil production had strategic significance for the country's security. Indeed, the prime minister and a several high-ranking officials had already visited the PetroChina Daqing Tamsag that year, and, possibly as a result of this, the oil company had been allowed to boost the number of Chinese workers and proceed with the stalled plans for establishing pipelines and electrical cables between its wells. In fact, according to one persistent rumour, a handful of state inspection officers were fired following the PM's visit, some of whom had subsequently sued the head of the government agency in question for having been unlawfully laid off their jobs. 'They simply did their jobs in closing down a number of

operations at the oil field last year', complained one local environmental activist. 'And this is what they got in return!'

The roads remained a problem, however. Despite its remote location and sparse population, the Tamsagbulag is full of roads. Not only the network of roads between the different production units and the production headquarters as well as local communities in the Tamsag region, but also the main roads from the headquarters to Choibalsan and to China. Due to its proximity to the border with China, and due to the fact that Mongolia has no oil refinery, the Tamsagbulag oil is transported directly to Daqing, China, by truck (in fact, according to one of its Mongolian managers, PetroChina Daqing Tamsag is the largest oil field in the world, which transports its crude oil over land by truck as opposed to pipe-line). The drivers transporting the oil are almost exclusively Chinese employed by the subsidiary companies mentioned earlier, who, for the same reason, are unable to communicate with the local nomads that they might encounter en route to the Chinese border. However, (at least until they or some of their colleagues lost their jobs), officials from the Mongolian state inspection office were unimpressed with the upgrading of the road to China, complaining that it was too narrow to allow two cars to pass each other and that it did not conform to Mongolian standards. They wanted the Chinese company to establish proper roads so that the oil could be transported with as little friction as possible. The better the roads along which the drivers were taking their loads, the idea seemed to be, the less interaction took place between them and the Mongolians living in the area.

In summary, it is clear the construction of roads in Tamsagbulag was fuelled by an explicit desire for mutual disconnection as much as mutual connection. As the ex-mayor of Matad, Mr Chimetseren made clear, it was thus only after a 'proper road' was made between the PetroChina Daqing Tamsag production centre and the local district centre, along with various legal, economic and political deals between the managers from the oil company and local leaders, that the 'chaotic' and 'conflictual' relations between the Chinese workers and local nomads were transformed into 'orderly trade arrangement'. What Mr Chimetseren and other Mongolian and Chinese leaders were conveying, then, was that some roads detach people as much as they attach then, for what did the Tamsag-Matad road accomplish other than kerbing an initially indeterminate and multi-faceted assemblage of Sino-Mongolian relations (including conflicts and sexual encounters) into a determinate and singular 'economic relationship'? Indeed, is that not what all roads are: technologies of distantiation that stretch out people and things from one another while at the same also connecting them? Certainly, as our case study have demonstrated, officials and leaders from both sides seemed to have worked hard to minimise whatever possibility there might arise for ad hoc interactions between the two sides, whether in form of romantic relationships, trade and barter exchanges, or roadside encounters. And crucially, this development towards ever less informal contact has been appreciated by the majority of both Chinese and Mongolians; indeed, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that a tacit 'anti-social contract' (Højer 2004) has been established between them.

Conclusion

Somewhat paradoxically, there thus seems to be grounds for concluding that, as the years have passed since Petrochina's take-over of the Tamsagbulag oil field in 2005,

there has been ever less – as opposed to, as one might have expected from inter-ethnic relationships of this kind, more and more – interaction between Chinese employees and local Mongolians. With this and our other findings and conclusions about the Matad oil field in mind, we may now return to the our initial story about the goat-trading nomad in the south Gobi desert and question whether this ethnographic moment should be interpreted as yet another example of the old Malowskian distinction between 'what people say that they are doing' and 'what they are actually doing'. According to this new interpretation, the road between the *ail* and the oil rig served as a technology of distantiation by which the two sides could retain optimal distance, while at the same remain in a mutually beneficial trading partnership 'without any strings attached', to use a common Western characterisation of bilateral relations between China and Africa (Alden 2005). Thus understood, the nomad really did mean what he was telling us during our first meeting, for he and the rest of this Mongolian household genuinely did not 'know anything about' the Chinese oil workers, since the distance inserted into the relation between this Mongolian household and its Chinese neighbours by the stretched-out extension of the road between them had the effect of reducing what could otherwise potentially have been a multitude of social relations into a singular relationship characterised as 'pure business'.

This adds a final twist to our analysis. Seen in hindsight, the concept that allowed us to make this alternative interpretation of our encounter with the Gobi nomad was thus present in front of our noses all the time, namely in the form of the road between his nomadic camp and the Chinese oil rig, along which we were accidentally forced to camp for three days. On this 'lateral' (Maurer 2005) or 'recursive' analysis (Holbraad 2012), the road served as an ethnographically derived aesthetics of description (Strathern 1988, Riles 1998), that allowed us, in both conceiving of and writing this article, to treat the old man's claim that 'we do not know anything about that oil rig' as a genuine description of the social relationship at hand. Very possibly, the old man was himself not aware of this potential for conceptual 'scaling' of the road between him and his Chinese neighbours; indeed, he might well find our interpretation strange or plain wrong. But this is beside the point, for, although the road as a matter of concern is indigenous of origin (after all, both Mongolians and Chinese agree that there is road between the Mongolian *ail* and the Chinese oil rig, and that it is of key importance for their social relations), the scaling of it is not. It is us doing the 'roading', not them, which is another way of saying that we had, unbeknownst to us, been driving on what later became our main concept.

Thus understood, the two stretches of road we have discussed in this article were themselves versions, objectifications and indeed 'analyses' of the social relationships they served to proportion (see Pedersen 2011, pp. 180–182). To underscore this point, consider the conventional depiction of a relation within the social sciences, namely a line connecting two separate points. For, one could recursively ask, what does this abstraction of a social relationship resemble other than a flat stretch of a desert road in Mongolia? As Dalakoglou (2010, p. 146) has rightly noted, roads are the 'archetypical human-made networks'. But why is it that roads look like model relations (networks) and relations (networks) like model roads? With our discussion of Sino-Mongolian roads in mind, we would like to end by making the more general stipulation that roads, in addition to representing an exemplary model of social relationships by virtue of their capacity for bringing people and places together, are also visualisations of an often overlooked aspect of all relationships,

viz. their capacity to outstretch and separate things. In that sense, the length of a given road may be seen as a visible depiction of the invisible capacity of all social and material practices, namely that of interpolating an optimal distance into relations whose terms might otherwise be perceived to be too close to or too far from one another: the longer the road, the more singular and hollowed out the connection between its endpoints, or so at least in the two ethnographic cases that we have analysed in this article.

Notes

1. The idea of infrastructure as a tool for integrating and developing backward areas is evident on a grand scale in the strategy for opening up and developing the Western Regions *Xibu da kaifa*. In the course of a decade, the three Gorges Dam made it possible for large ships to reach the inland port of Chongqing, the seemingly impossible railroad to Lhasa was completed, and a new network of roads, pipelines and power cables served to open and develop the far West of China.
2. Infrastructure may be said to constitute 'the connective tissues and the circulatory systems of modernity' (Edwards 2004), and while China has a long tradition of public works, the present notion of infrastructure as 'basic installations' □□□□ bears the imprint of Marxist materialism. As in the Soviet Union (Humphrey 2005), infrastructure seems to be cast not just as a precondition, but as an agent of modernization in its own right and the engineering of 'material civilisation' □□ □□ to boost 'spiritual civilization' □□□□ has been a central concern to successive politburos dominated by engineers.
3. Http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/EXTEAPREGTOPTRANSPORT/0,,contentMDK:20767661~menuPK:2069306~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:574066,00.html
4. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual research seminar of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen held in October 2011 and at the 'Scales and Movement' workshop organized in London in June 2012 by the Contemporary Cosmologies Research Group at the UCL. We thank the participants in these events, as well as the editors of this special issue and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments.
5. The research project is called 'Imperial Potentialities' and is funded by a research grant from Danish Council for Independent Research in the Social Sciences (FSE). In it, the two of us along with Morten Nielsen from the University of Aarhus, who is a specialist on Mozambique (and a contributor the present volume) explore China's growing political-economic involvement in Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa via three integrated ethnographic fieldworks on Chinese interventions in infrastructure and resource extraction in Mongolia and Mozambique. Our project design involves the implementation of what we call the dual perspective approach: three tightly integrated subprojects that explore Chinese infrastructure projects from a local and a Chinese perspective, thus defining both internal and external comparative axes. More specifically, the project consists of: (1) a study of Chinese interventions in Mozambique from the perspective of African workers and state cadres, (2) a comparable study of similar interventions with respect to the same kinds of agents in Mongolia and (3) a study carried out in and around the same project sites as the others but from the perspective of Chinese workers, managers and officials.
6. The 3.000 km long journey took us to a number of mining and infrastructure projects controlled by Chinese. In addition to the two oil fields described in the present paper, these included several fluorspar as well as coal mines, a zinc mine that was a Mongolian-Chinese joint venture, a highway road construction project financed partly by the Chinese government and the Asian Development Bank, a team of Chinese surveyors preparing for the construction of a huge Beijing-sponsored power plant atop a giant coal deposit, a Chinese-owned iron ore processing plant and a Chinese-owned agribusiness.
7. http://www.petrochina.com.cn/Ptr/Society_and_Environment07/
8. To our knowledge, few or no offspring have resulted from romantic relations between Chinese men and Mongolian women in the Tamsagbulag context. However, as several officials and researchers in Ulaanbaatar have stressed to us, such liaisons present an 'increasing problem' in the country, as the influx of unaccompanied Chinese men and the high number of poverty-stricken Mongolian women (many of whom are single mothers who have divorced or been widowed from

alcoholic and violent men) offer fertile conditions for interethnic relations and marriages. Needless to say, such women are bound to entertain quite different views about the nature and ideal scope of Sino-Mongolian relations than your average (male) official.

9. As the current governor (June 2012) of the Matad district, an energetic former school director from the Democratic Union (the main opposition party) who took over from Mr. Chimetseren's Revolutionary Party after her victory in the 2008 local elections, complained to us in 2009, 'annually, the central government receives millions of dollars in taxes and revenue from Petro China Daqing Tamsag. Yet, all we receive in our district, on whose territory most of the drilling is taking place and which is taking the brunt of environmental damage and other hazards brought upon us by this company, is a water-tax amounting to a petty one million Tg. (700$)! Some time ago, a group of concerned citizens submitted a petition to the government listing their concerns and requesting a redrafting of, or an amendment to, the flawed and obsolete oil law from the 1990s. This to ensure that five percent of the annual income generated from foreign oil companies operating on Mongolian soil should go to the district where production takes place, and another ten percent to the *aimag* this district belongs to; unlike now, where virtually everything stays with the central government in Ulaanbaatar'.

References

Alden, C., 2005. China in Africa. *Survival*, 47 (3), 147–164.

Alden, C., Large, D., and Oliveira, R.S.d., eds., 2008. *China returns to Africa: a rising power and a continent embrace*. London: Hurst.

Bai, C.-E. and Qian, Y., 2010. Infrastructure development in China: the cases of electricity, highways, and railways. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 38 (1), 34–51.

Bawden, C.R., 1989. *The modern history of Mongolia*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Bille, F., 2008. Faced with extinction: myths and urban legends in contemporary Mongolia. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 28 (1), 1–26.

Brautigam, D., 2009. *The dragon's gift: the real story of China in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bruun, O., Narangoa, L., and Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2006. *Mongols from country to city floating boundaries, pastoralism and city life in the Mongol lands*. Copenhagen: NIAS, NIAS studies in Asian topics-34.

Bulag, U.E., 1998. *Nationalism and hybridity in Mongolia, Oxford studies in social and cultural anthropology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bulag, U.E., 2009. Mongolia in 2008: from Mongolia to Mine-golia. *Asian Survey*, 49 (1), 129–134.

AQ5 Bunkenborg, M. and Pedersen, M.A., 2012. The ethnographic expedition 2.0. *In*: C.J. Ries, K.H. Nielsen, and M. Harbsmeier, eds. *Scientists and scholars in the field: studies in the history of fieldwork and expeditions*. Århus: Aarhus University Press.

AQ6 Campbell, B., 2010. Rhetorical routes for development: a road project in Nepal. *Contemporary South Asia*, 18 (3), 267–279.

Dalakoglou, D., 2010. The road: an ethnography of the Albanian & Greek cross-border motorway. *American Ethnologist*, 37 (1), 132–149.

AQ7 Edwards, P.N., 2004. Infrastructure and modernity: force, time, and social organization in the history of sociotechnical systems. *In*: T.J. Misa, P. Brey, and A. Feenberg, eds. *Modernity and technology.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Flower, J.M., 2004. A road is made: roads, temples, and historical memory in Ya'an County, Sichuan. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 63 (3), 649–685.

Harvey, P. and Knox, H., 2008. 'OTHERWISE ENGAGED' – Culture, deviance and the quest for connectivity through road construction. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 1 (1), 79–92.

Højer, L., 2004. The anti-social contract: enmity and suspicion in Northern Mongolia. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 24 (3), 41–63.

AQ8 Højer, L., forthcoming. Neo-Nazis and protest movements: contours of (post)authoritarian Mongolian politics. *In*: L. Højer and M.A. Pedersen, eds. *Political movements in postauthoritarian Asian regimes*.

Holbraad, M., 2012. *Truth in motion: the recursive anthropology of Cuban divination*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Humphrey, C., 2005. Ideology in infrastructure: architecture and Soviet imagination. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11 (1), 39–58.

Kleveman, L., 2003. *The new great game: blood and oil in Central Asia*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Maurer, B., 2005. *Mutual life, limited: Islamic banking, alternative currencies, lateral reason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Nyíri, P. and Breidenbach, J., 2008. The Altai road: visions of development across the Russian–Chinese border. *Development and Change*, 39 (1), 123–145.

Pedersen, M.A., 2011. *Not quite shamans: spirit worlds and political lives in northern Mongolia, culture and society after socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Riles, A., 1998. Infinity within the brackets. *American Ethnologist*, 25 (3), 378–398.

Strathern, M., 1988. *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia, studies in Melanesian anthropology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Swanström, N., 2005. China and Central Asia: a new great game or traditional vassal relations? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14 (45), 569–584.

Taylor, I., 2006. *China and Africa. Engagement and compromise*. London: Routledge.

Tsing, A.L., 2005. *Friction an ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

AQ9 Willerslev, R. and Pedersen, M.A., 2010. Proportional holism: joking the cosmos into the right shape in Northern Asia. *In*: T. Otto and N. Bubandt, eds. *Experiments in holism: theory and practice in contemporary anthropology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.