

Book Review:

## Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands

Orhon Myadar\*

*Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands: A Proportional Share* by Hedwig Amelia Waters, 2023, UCL Press.

*Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands* by Hedwig Amelia Waters is a meticulously researched and insightful exploration of the complex interplay between social, political and economic forces within Mongolia's borderlands. The book, available as an open-access resource, offers a rich narrative that sheds light on the moral economy amid the shifting landscapes of post-socialist Mongolia. Waters' engaging writing style and in-depth ethnographic approach bring to life the stories of "Magtaal"<sup>1</sup> residents and shed critical light on the lived realities of people in the Mongolian borderlands.

This book contributes to recent scholarship on post-socialist transitions in Mongolia, exploring socio-economic and political landscapes in both historical and contemporary contexts (see, for instance, Myadar, 2021; Marchina, 2022). The author's nuanced examination of the lived experiences of residents in the Mongolian borderland region makes this work a valuable contribution to Mongolian studies, particularly in understanding how this transformative period has impacted these border communities.

Waters foregrounds the central theme of the book through Mongolian artist Nomin Bold's striking painting, *Mirror*. As the author interprets it, the painting represents the tension between public perception and private reality through an image of a woman who navigates the challenges of material scarcity while striving to maintain her outward social appearance.<sup>2</sup> The painting mirrors (pun intended) how contemporary Mongolians grapple with the pressures of the market age, finding creative ways to negotiate the layered challenges they face during volatile economic times, akin to "repair the front seam with the back seam" (p.1). At its core, the book reveals the metaphorical "back seams" or "the creative strategies individuals invent to finagle themselves out of pressure-filled situations" (p.1).

The bulk of the book's discussion centres on Waters' field site, "Magtaal," where she conducted research between 2015 and 2017. Located in the northeastern part of Mongolia, "Magtaal" is noted as the "site of a legendary Second World War battle" (p. 27). Waters explores how residents have negotiated their changing livelihoods amid the complex dynamics of post-socialist transformation, often drawing upon environmental resources, even when this means crossing legal boundaries. The "back seams" therefore represent moral economic dichotomies, where individuals are compelled to navigate or skirt moral and legal hurdles due to limited alternatives. Waters stresses that these dichotomies are particularly stark in "Magtaal."

Waters focuses on two primary case studies to examine these dichotomies: the illicit trading of fish and Siler Herb (*Ledebouriella Divaricata*), both banned during her fieldwork. The extraction and commodification of these resources illustrate complex social relations, where material

\* E-mail: [orhon@hawaii.edu](mailto:orhon@hawaii.edu)

1 The author renames the town in this book. To indicate that this name is not the actual name of the place referenced, I will use quotation marks in this review.

2 An important detail in the painting that is not discussed by the author is a magpie with a human face observing the woman in the foreground. According to the painter herself, the magpie symbolizes the inherent duality in life, representing both light and dark elements (Bold, 2024). The magpie's watchful gaze therefore seems to serve as a reminder that inner contradictions are part of the human experience, urging the viewer to approach judgment with caution, recognizing that appearances may conceal complex, often conflicting, truths within.

transactions reflect deeper historical and cultural meanings within collective struggles and adaptability to shifting socio-political contexts.

I appreciate that Waters situated these prodigal “back seams” within the context of collective resistance against external profiteering and political marginalisation. Following feminist scholar J.K. Gibson-Graham, this perspective moves away from a *capital centric* vision to imagine a “multifarious diversity of relations” (p.165), where social bonds and communal solidarity shape economic behaviours. The concept of “conversion” reflects how local worldviews are reshaped to fit within market systems. Through examples such as *suljee* (community network) and the significance of *nutag* (homeland and communal belonging), Waters shows that these moral economies are not just responses to economic hardship but also expressions of cultural identity and communal resilience. The intricate economy of favours is an example of a collective effort to balance both financial stress and social solidarity where the residents of “Magtaal” mobilise their social ties to mitigate the pressures of bank debt by exchanging favours, goods and services across the community.

Structurally, the book is organised into five primary chapters, along with introductory and concluding sections. Chapter One establishes the historical and political contexts necessary to understand how “Magtaal” residents navigated and managed their “entrenched political-economic neglect” (p. 56). Waters emphasises how residents have rescaled the broader socio-political contract to fit within local frameworks by relying on *nutagism*, or loyalty to the homeland (*nutag*). In doing so, they transform the “tripartite social contract down to the level of *nutag*” (p. 57), using localised networks of solidarity to counter the failures of state and economic institutions and to reclaim their proportional share of the national resources to which they are entitled. Chapters Two and Three focus on two distinct illicit trades: the trade of *undes* or Siler Herb in Chapter Two and the cross-border fish trade in Chapter Three. These chapters highlight the social and moral frameworks guiding residents’ interactions within illegal economies, illustrating their efforts to balance their subsistence based on these illicit trades while upholding their community values. Chapter Four examines how “Magtaal” residents continuously negotiate debts and distribute socio-economic burdens through two historical conceptions of debt: social debt, which emphasises collective obligations, and exchange-based debt, which focuses on self-interested, contractual relationships. Waters explores how these frameworks coexist in contemporary Mongolia, with residents using a blend of both to maintain social ties while managing financial pressures. Extending this discussion, Chapter Five explores the moral loan continuum that bridges formal and informal systems. The relationship of “Magtaal” residents with these two forms of debt exemplifies this continuum and is a microcosm of the broader moral economic dichotomies examined throughout the book.

Despite the many strengths of this book, there are a couple of minor points of contention that are worth mentioning. First, as a native Mongolian scholar, I found the author’s decision to anonymise the town’s name unfortunate. Although the intention to protect her subjects is understandable, de-identifying a site does not demand the same ethical rigour as protecting individual identities. The detailed geographic and socio-political context makes it easy for any informed readers, including the residents, to identify the town, undermining the anonymisation. While the author acknowledges this, she does not address how renaming risks erasing an important articulator of social relations to borrow from Doreen Massey (1991). For Massey, each place embodies “a particular, unique, point of intersection” defined by “articulated moments and understandings” (1991, 28). Named after the river that runs through the town, the town’s name serves as a vital articulator of its identity, shaping the social relations of its residents and those beyond its borders. By renaming the town, the author risks erasing these intimate place-based connections.

Similarly, the author’s choice to use the Chinese plant name for Siler Herb, or *undes*, as the “Magtaal” residents call it, also seems ill-advised. Given the prominence of this plant in the book, particularly in Chapter Two, using the English name for narrative flow or the Mongolian name for cultural sensitivity would have been preferable.

Despite these concerns, *Moral Economic Transitions in the Mongolian Borderlands* is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in economic anthropology, Mongolian studies, or the complexities of

post-socialist transitions. The book invites readers to consider the broader impacts of market forces on local cultures and is a significant contribution that will resonate with both academic and general audiences. It offers valuable insights into how communities adapt to external pressures while preserving cultural identities, making it an important addition to understanding Mongolia's socio-economic landscape in general and the border communities in particular.

**Orhon Myadar** is an Associate Professor of Political Geography at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She is the author of *Mobility and Displacement* (Routledge, 2021).

## References

- Bold, N. (2024). Personal communication. October 21, 2024
- Marchina, C. (2022). *Nomadic pastoralism among the Mongol herders: Multispecies life in the grasslands of Inner Asia*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463721424>
- Massey, D. (1991). A global sense of place. *Marxism Today*, 38, 24–29.
- Myadar, O. (2021). *Mobility and displacement: Nomadism, identity and postcolonial narratives in Mongolia*. Routledge.