Research Review

Provincializing Energy in the Mongolian Gobi

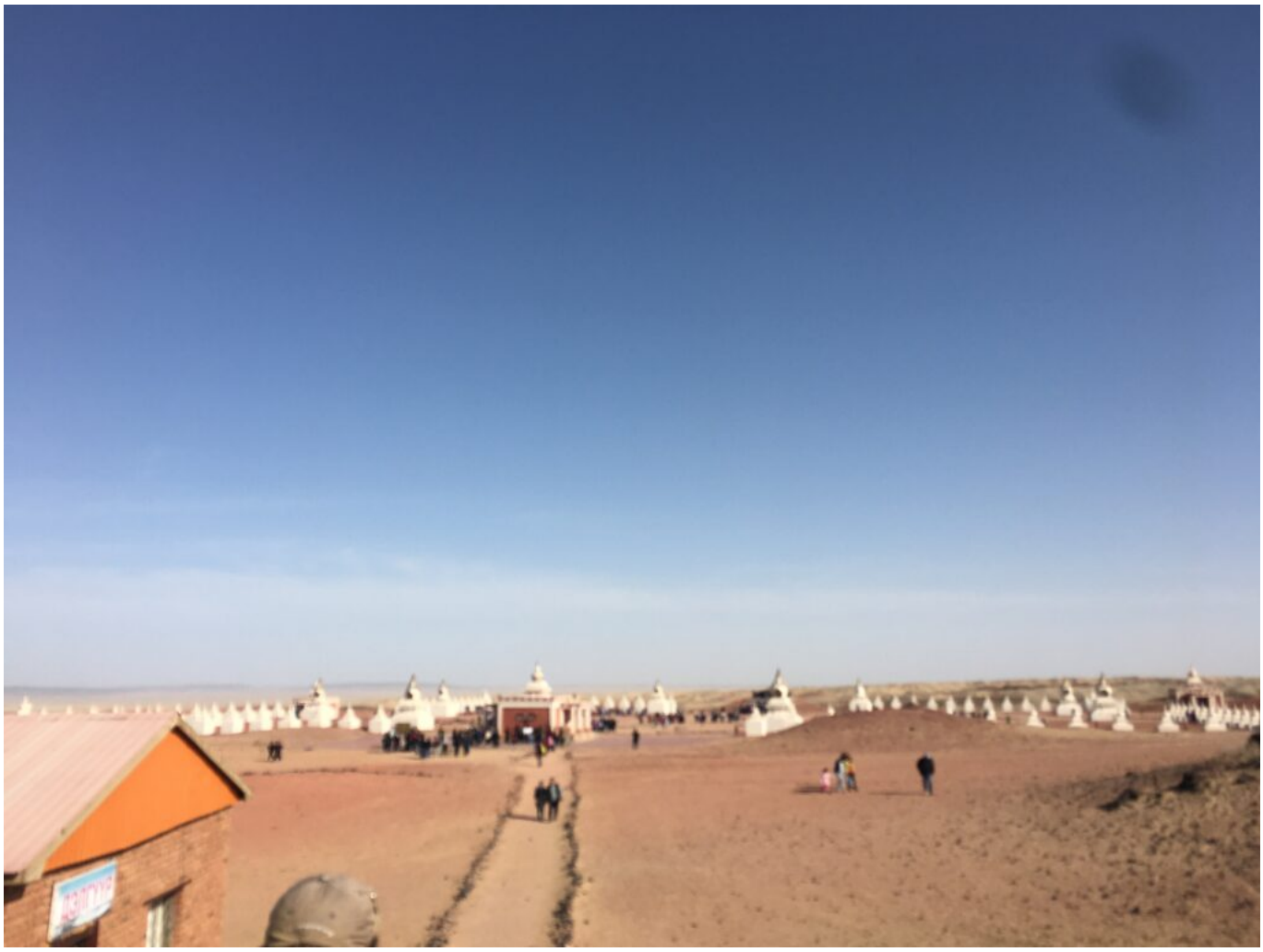
October 29, 2024

In the spring of 2018, I boarded a night train that would take me from Ulaanbaatar central station to Sainshand, the capital of Dornogovi province in the southeast of Mongolia. A good portion of the crowd was other women in their thirties, many still wearing their business casual office attire and herding a few young children. We made up the weekly Friday night throng of pilgrims on our way to the Energi Center. The plan was to arrive at dawn, complete the pilgrimage circuit, and head back to Ulaanbaatar on another overnight train that evening.

We settled in for the night in the "wagon" car: an open room stacked with metal bunk beds. I struck up a conversation with the woman sitting across from me, who worked for the Trade and Development Bank in Ulaanbaatar and was traveling with her elderly mother and two children. She was going to the Energi Center to lift her exhaustion—she worked at the office all week and took care of her children by herself. Springtime, the most exhausting of seasons in Mongolia,[1] only exacerbated this feeling. She had been having pains in her lower back and was worried about her kidneys. "Exhaustion is an epidemic for Mongolian women," she told me.

The collapse of socialism at the end of the twentieth century brought significant changes to Mongolia. Drastic economic measures—an immediate liberalization of trade and privatization of publicly owned assets—quickly led to impoverishment, especially in rural

parts of the country. Women born in the late 80's and 90's, with only faint memories of socialism who have spent their entire working lives in the midst of Mongolia's mineral extraction boom and what Manduhai Buyandelger calls "neoliberal shock therapy," balance high domestic and care expectations with commonly being the only breadwinner in their family.[2]



View of Shambala Energi Center. Sainshand, Dornogovi Province, Mongolia. Photo by Jessica Madison Pískatá, 2018.

Viewed by satellite, Sainshand appears as a swath of red in the middle of the camel-colored expanse of desert. This red-colored stone marks the location of Shambala Energiin Töv

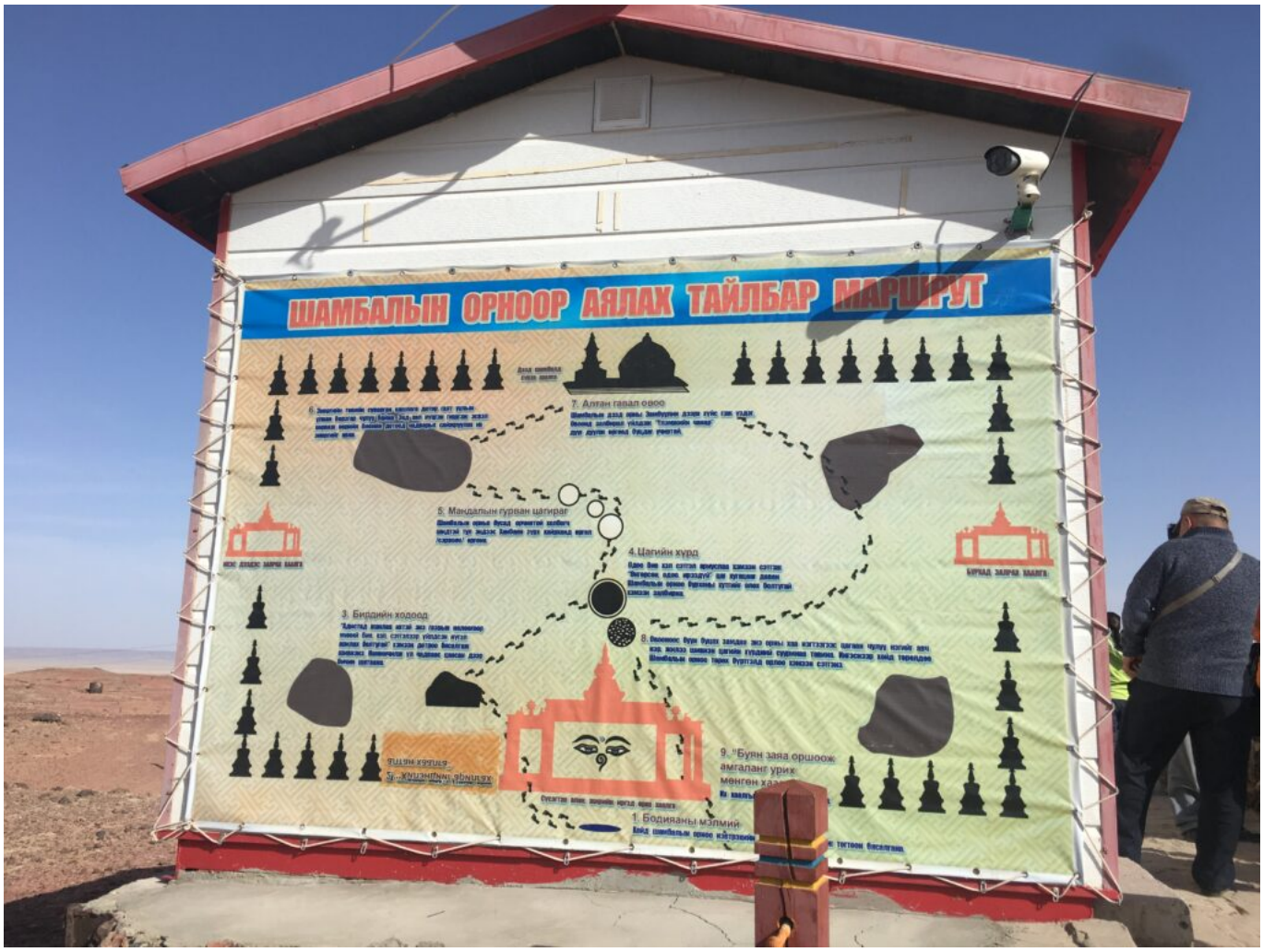
(energy center)[3], one stop on a pilgrimage circuit that includes Khamaryn Khiid, a Nyingma Buddhist monastery that, like many countryside monasteries in Mongolia, has undergone a cycle of founding, destruction, and rebuilding alongside the historical ruptures of the last few centuries.[4] At Shambala, groups of pilgrims renew the vitality of bodies exhausted by the demands of a labor force still reeling from the neoliberal shock treatment of the early 1990s[5] The pilgrimage circuit situates particular sites of healing to places where the liveliness of stone can be sensed by the human body.

This capacity to sense the liveliness of stone and martial it in service of healing is enabled by pre-existing relations between people and landscape entities.

> ***Unfortunately, the logic of industrial capital disregards this relationship between the people and their environment. Instead, capitalists seek to corral the landscape's material resources into combustible energy that can be translated into labor power. The workings of the Energi Center require an integrated, holistic understanding of a particularly Mongolian constellation of knowledges about geological landscapes—drawing on Buddhist, historical, "shamanic"/böö, scientific, gendered, and literary epistemologies that allow for multiple coexisting ontologies of "energy".***

Approaching the Energi Center on its own terms allows us to make space for particularities

that may not fit within post-industrial, fuel-based understandings of energy.[6] Thus, this opening up makes space for particularities in other places to rush in, unraveling the universalizing assumptions of power that seek to make everything instantly recognizable and therefore flat. However, even a specific and localized approach finds itself attached to global flows. This could also be said of the concept of *energi* itself, which encompasses local understandings of energy and re-appropriates them into the capitalist framework of energy while also exceeding it.



Map of pilgrimage route at Shambala Energi Center. Sainshand, Dornogovi Province, Mongolia. Photo by Jessica Madison Pískatá, 2018.

The Energi Center derives its power from *energi,* a post-modern Mongolian energy epistemology that functions both within and in excess of the notion of energy at the center of capital: an extractive and combustible mode of value adjudication that understands energy as primarily defined by fuel (as a materially extracted resource) or work (as productive labor extracted from the body). *Energi* is a mode of understanding the liveliness of nonliving things—particularly as it relates to healing exchanges between human and mineral bodies. *Energi's* conceptual hybridity allows it to be appropriated by evaluating systems of capital while always remaining too slippery to be measured or defined. Here, energy and *energi* are analogous to Dipesh Chakrabarty's conceptualization of two histories—one posited by capital ("History 1") and the other unfolding as "more effective narratives of human belonging" ("History 2").[7]

> ***By provincializing "energy" into energi, we can define the two concepts more clearly: 1) energy, evaluated in terms of work and fuel as well as the ability to produce value through labor or combustion and 2) energi, produced not by labor abstraction or extraction but by productive relations between human and mineral bodies that creates new capacities in humans, and perhaps in minerals as well.***

The manner in which *energi* both adjudicates value and creates extra-sensory capacity via an expanded view of material landscapes subverts and provincializes rationalization. *Energi*

here might be called “Energy 2,” in that it is produced not exclusively by and for the demands of capital but instead by a more-than-secular web of relations that have been accreted over the course of a longstanding epistemological palimpsest of interactions between humans and minerals.

Provincializing Energy in Mongolia

Pilgrims enjoy the sun. Sainshand, Dornogovi Province, Mongolia. Photo by Jessica Madison Pískatá, 2018.

Energi (pronounced “enyergee” or “enerik”) is a loan word from Russian that first came into usage in Mongolian in the mid-20th century, among Soviet-educated scholars returning home after the Second World War. It was first used in the sciences during the 1960s and 1970s and came into its colloquial usage in the late 1990s. *Energi* as a term is nimble enough to encompass intensely local understandings while also pointing to the ways in which global historical flows and colonial abstractions both influence these understandings and are exceeded by them. Here I define *energi* broadly as a local epistemology that both encompasses and surpasses understandings of “energy” as it is defined by modernity (socialist and post-socialist), while also drawing on long pre-existing relations with invisible landscape entities and qualities.

Energi was constructed in a context where capitalism did not introduce modernity nor capital. Instead, the “other modernity”[8] of socialism ushered in the industrial era and an understanding of energy as primarily linked to capital. The socialist Mongolian state conceptually tied the expansion of “Lenin’s Light,” electric energy used as fuel for industry[9] (to a narrative of progress that promised to bring the people out of the darkness of superstition and belief in spirits[10] and into a perfectly rational, and productive socialist

society via the introduction of modern ways of knowing and doing. This attempt to corral *energi* into the exclusive space of modernity and capital was only partially successful. In Mongolia, people integrated pre-revolutionary Indigenous,[11] [12] Qing,[13] socialist, and post-socialist ways of knowing into an understanding of the world that is hybridized, kaleidoscopic, and undeniably local.

The emergent field of energy humanities calls on us to engage with epistemologies of energy beyond the industrial frame.

> ***Daggett argues that the problem of climate crisis cannot be addressed by swapping one fuel source for another, but rather, the concept of energy itself must be decoupled from its attachment to industry, fuel, work, and the "veneration of waged labor."[14] Energy must be provincialized, both through historicization, as in Daggett's work, and through the examination and elevation of alternate energy epistemologies that either precede or have emerged outside the industrial frame.***

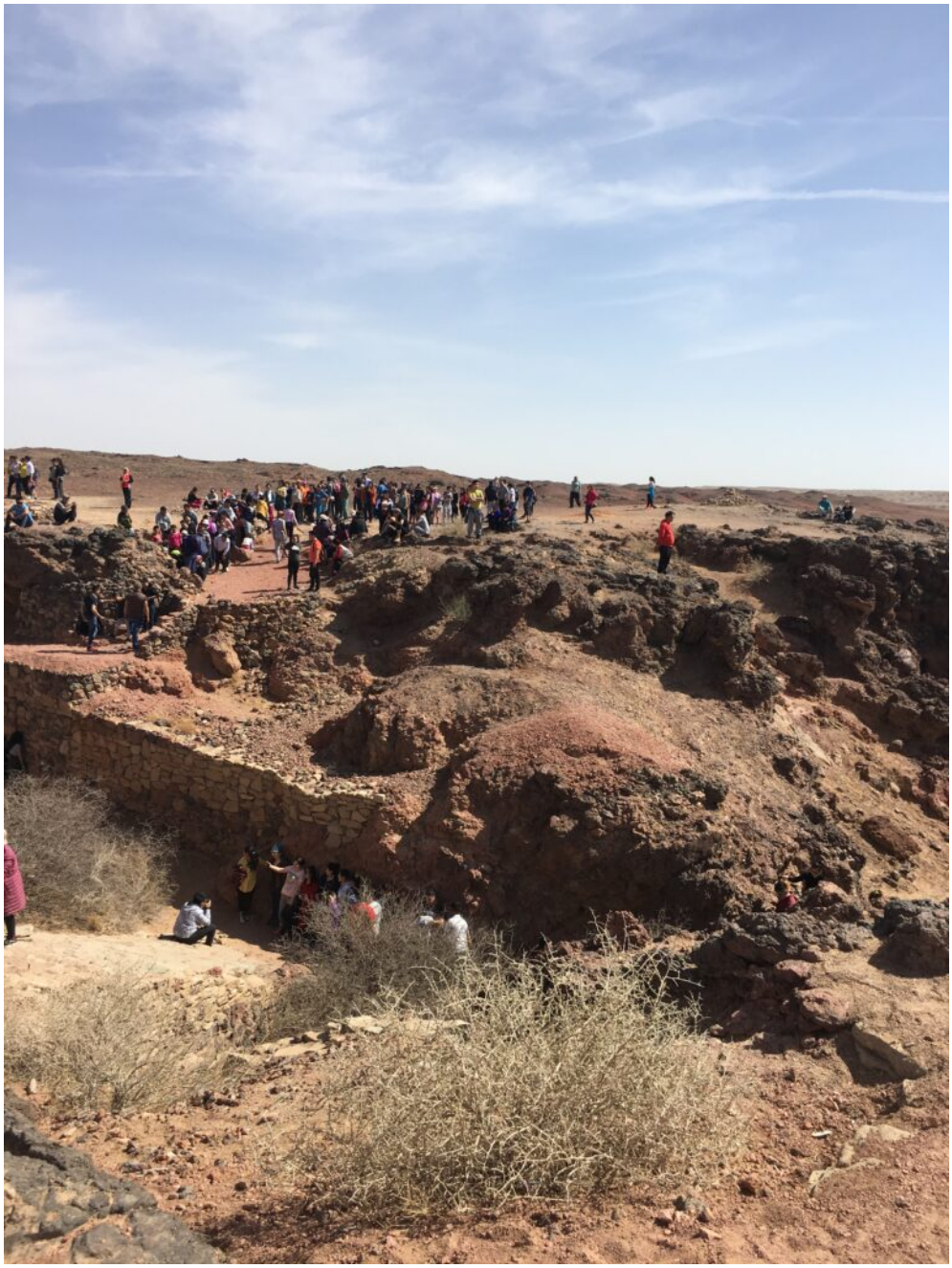
In the context of the Energi Center, the dominant epistemologies of the Mongolian extraction economy[15] and an industrialized workforce overlap with multi-layered cosmologies. They also overlap with a significant pastoral economy that relies on intimate embodied and sensorial knowledge of the geological terrain. This is a context where the excesses of energy make themselves known clearly in moments of connection between

human and mineral bodies. Humphrey defines the phenomenon of “energies in nature” as another way of understanding the social agencies of various entities on the landscape. She argues that these agencies work to build spatial awareness for those reading said landscape.[16] At the pilgrimage site, industrial capital appropriates these agencies in service of healing the exhausted laboring body in the interest of maintaining productive capacity. Though *energi* may initially appear to be a conceptual flattening of a multitude of local landscape entities into something that is legible to both global and post-socialist forms of capital, the historically-ingrained presence of these entities enables a relation between stone and human bodies where value is adjudicated beyond the capacity to labor. This new kind of adjudication is enabled by the ability of certain human bodies to sense liveliness in non-living stones in a way that relies on an extra-sensorial capacity. This capacity is unquantifiable and resistant of what Povinelli calls the “geontological frame”[17] that separates non-living from the living.

Geological Haptics and Mineral Liveliness

In the steppe and Gobi regions of Mongolia surrounding Sainshand, human interactions with geological forms like worshiped mountains, stone cairns, mineral deposits, slag heaps, pilgrimage sites, and mines take on their own kind of life. My collaborators’ understanding of geological liveliness confounds and outpaces representations of the animate non-living produced by neocolonial geontological frameworks. Their understanding of geological liveliness is predicated on sustained and accreted acts of intimacy rather than overarching abstract cosmologies or ideologies. Near the Energi Center, I was told to visit the “Mother Cave” complex. From a distance, it resembles an enormous stone beehive set down in a small canyon. The complex got its name for the narrow passages that pilgrims could navigate to be reborn, crawling on their bellies through a stone birth canal in order to

remove their negative attachments.



Entering the Mother Cave. Sainshand, Dornogovi Province, Mongolia. Photo by Jessica Madison Pískatá, 2018.

The path that leads through Mother Cave ends with a rusty-colored flat rock up against the

side of the hill. As each person filed by, they pressed a part of their body against the stone. I asked a woman in front of me what to do, and she instructed that if I had pain, I was to press the part of my body where the pain originated to the rock, and it would help with the healing. “I have arthritis in my back,” she told me. “This is really good for bad backs and kidneys.” She showed me how to press my upper back against the warm rock as I shuffled sideways along the path behind her.

The Energi Center illustrates a way of being lively that is also somewhat predicated on being tactically recognized or felt as lively by the living. This liveliness relies on the sensorial capacity of a biologically living body to haptically sense liveliness in stone. To feel the *energi* of stone is not unlike feeling a shift in barometric pressure, as I was told by my queue-mate at the Mother Cave.

“Everyone feels it in their body, but some people have the knowledge to say ‘hey, this is what it is.’ Like a meteorologist or a *bariach* (bonesetter). These people know how to correctly identify the invisible aspects of nature. But you or I can feel them.”

> ***In this case, energi represents the vitalizing effect stones can have on the human body in removing the exhaustion of the neoliberal market. Energy-as-capital appropriates pre-capitalist ways of engaging with invisible landscape entities via their transfer of liveness to human bodies. At the same time, exhausted laborers traveling to Sainshand to “recharge their batteries” are ultimately putting the liveliness of these stones into the service of capital by***

> ***increasing their labor potential.***

This is not to say that *energi* is a direct negation of energy-as-capital. Rather, it supports the laboring body in its capacity to produce while also exceeding the secularizing logics that make it legible to capital.

Conclusion

There are many theories about what exactly the Energi Center is, but none of them are in particular tension with the others. While purchasing offerings (spring water, wheat berries, vodka, juniper incense, and a small copper bowl came in an all-in-one package) at the gift shop near the entrance of the Energy Center, I asked the attendant behind the counter where the Energi Center's *energi* came from. I was curious because the week before arriving in Sainshand, I had had a conversation with Tuya, one of my coworkers who had visited the Energi Center the previous year. I was admiring a small copper wire sculpture of a tree with tiny amethyst "leaves" that she had displayed on the windowsill behind her desk.

> ***"Oh, that's like an energi thing—they say the tree shape is for good luck and the amethyst is for a clear mind." She had purchased it, she told me, at the gift shop at Shambala Energi Center, and though she didn't usually go for "superstitious stuff" like this, the "magnetic energi" she felt while at the geological site had her at least partially convinced. "I don't know if it really***

> ***works," she told me, "but it feels nice to have it."***

Tuya, a self-described atheist, was able to recognize the Energi Center as a "religious" place in a technical sense. Even beyond this technical acknowledgment, she could detect something in the landscape: something unidentifiable and yet materially present. Her interpretation allows for the co-existence of seemingly contradictory material ontologies that erode the logics separating the religious and the secular.

Back at the gift shop, there was a shelf of the same delicate stone and metal trees that Tuya had on her desk displayed alongside other decorative stone accoutrements. I asked the proprietor where she thought the *energi* of the Energi Center came from—what did it consist of? To her understanding it had something to do with the configuration of the geological landmarks that made up the region, particularly those on the pilgrimage circuit. "*Energi,*" she suggested, "comes from the *ongon gazar* (consecrated landmarks) here, and the red color comes from the earth in the same way."

During my time in Sainshand and in the months following, I asked everyone familiar with the place where exactly they thought this *energi* stemmed from. One explanation was that the oxidized iron present in the red dirt could be absorbed through the skin much like an iron supplement. Another was that it came from the blessing of its founder, the "Lama of the Gobi" Dulduityn Danzanravjaa. Yet another said that it was the result of repeated recitations of "Ülemjiin Chanar" ("Your Perfect Qualities"), Danzanravjaa's ode to his lover Dadishura.[18] Each potential explanation opened to another emergent possibility, with none negating the others.

This ambiguity between all the explanations for the red tinge to the landscape and the *energitei* characteristic this color represents brings us back to the question of the two Histories (and, therefore, the two Energies). *Energi* is analogous to History 2 precisely because it cannot be pinned down: it's kaleidoscopic and multimodal, subverting certain binaries—not only between capital and its excesses but also between secular and nonsecular ways of knowing. Pilgrims at the Energi Center articulate understandings and experiences that muddy the epistemic boundaries of the dominant paradigm of energy-as-capital carrying with them the excesses of the place even as they utilize its power, heading back to the office via the night train to Ulaanbaatar.

Footnotes

[1] The climate during spring is extremely unpredictable in Mongolia. Death and hardship are often caused by impassable dirt roads, sunny spells, blizzards, and rain showers.

[2] "Without knowledge about the market economy, adequate infrastructure, legal frameworks, or start-up support," Buyandelger observes, "neoliberal reforms undid their own goal: to make the rural nomads into property owners capable of caring for themselves. Instead of bringing the expected capital, neoliberal 'shock therapy' brought lingering economic devastation."

[3] For the remainder of this piece, I will refer to this place as the *Energi* Center in order to maintain clarity and ease for the Anglophone reader. *Energi* is difficult to translate into English, but "*töv*" is used in much the same way as "center" in most contexts.

[4] Abrahms-Kavunenko, *Enlightenment and the Gasping City: Mongolian Buddhism at a*

Time of Environmental Disarray.

[5] Buyandelgeriyn, "Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism, and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia."

[6] Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, & the Politics of Work*.

[7] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 71.

[8] Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*; Yoshimi, *What Is Modernity?*

[9] Sneath, "Reading the Signs by Lenin's Light."

[10] Pedersen, *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*.

[11] via concepts like *khüch* (power), *uran* (creativity/genius), *khiimori* (pneuma), and others.

[12] Sneath, "Reading the Signs by Lenin's Light."

[13] Yoshimi, *What Is Modernity?*"

[14] Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, & the Politics of Work*.

[15] High, *Fear and Fortune: Spirit Worlds and Emerging Economies in the Mongolian Gold Rush*.

[16] Humphrey, Caroline, "Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia," 35.

[17] Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*.

[18] Ravzhaa, D. and Wickham-Smith, *Perfect Qualities*.

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