

AT ONE WITH THE GOODS

The Politics of Liquidity on
Ulaanbaatar's Market Scene



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With the so-called transition from state socialism to market capitalism in the early 1990s, Mongolia entered a phase of enduring crisis (Bruun and Odgaard 1996). Thousands of collective farms and state-owned factories closed down, and people desperately started to look for new ways to earn money in the 'age of the market' (*zah zeeliin üye*). Meanwhile, significant changes occurred in the composition and stability of kin groups, friendship circles and social networks due to increasing job uncertainties, business opportunities and migration patterns (Højer and Pedersen 2019; Sneath 1993). Compared with the socialist 'economy of favors' (Ledeneva 1998), this postsocialist informal economy involved wider and fuzzier chains of mutually indebted people, some of whom hardly knew each other. It also sometimes involved bigger sums of money, just as it became less common for creditors to fulfil the obligation to return money borrowed or the favours bestowed on them. Accordingly, money in the form of wads of cash was on constant demand, as people spent a considerable amount of their time securing enough informal loans and credits to get by to the next month, week or, indeed, day (Fox 2019; Højer 2012; Højer and Pedersen 2019; Pedersen and Højer 2008; Pedersen

2012; Plueckhahn and Terbish 2018; Waters 2018). The result, people complained, was that ‘no one pays back what they owe’ (Pedersen 2016; see also Empson 2014; Sneath 2012).

Liquidity, Douglas Rogers argues, is the “grease” that creates the conditions for any sort of exchange’ (2005, 64). The aim of the present chapter is to explore a distinctly Mongolian—and perhaps distinctly urban—version of this postsocialist ‘politics of liquidity’ (Rogers 2005). Based on fieldwork at Ulaanbaatar’s markets in 2003 and 2004, I explore how, in urban Mongolia after socialism, ‘liquidity [was] unevenly distributed along—and help[ed] to create—[new] lines of social distinction’ (Rogers 2005, 64). I show this by homing in on the so-called changers (*chyenjüüd*), who played a prominent role at Ulaanbaatar’s markets around the turn of the millennium. A substantivised Mongolian appropriation of the English verb ‘to change’, *chyenj*, which in all likelihood became part of popular discourse with the advent of capitalism, became associated with different kinds of middlemen (indeed, they were almost always men) who had carved out a niche in the capitalist market by identifying gaps in commodity chains that others found too dangerous, immoral or not profitable enough. Indeed, the word *chyenj* was specifically associated with informal—and sometimes shady and downright illicit—business *between* or *within* market places, what many people in Mongolia and elsewhere in the postsocialist world dismiss as ‘speculation’ (Humphrey 2002). As Otgonbaatar, a male shoe trader in his twenties who was running a successful stall at Ulaanbaatar’s Karakoram Market explained to me: ‘To be a changer means exchanging things, right? Changers are not sellers. Changers are people who increase and centralise the exchange of things’.

Unlike the so-called big *chyenjüüd*, who from a smug position behind the scenes controlled much of Ulaanbaatar’s meat, cashmere, metal and used-car-businesses

(Højer 2007), these more petty changers were poor, disliked, mistrusted, stigmatised—and supremely visible. Because they did not have a stock of goods, let alone a permanent market stall, these *chyenjüüd* were constantly on the move, always trying to position themselves at strategic locations in and around the market. They sought the places from where they could best spot their customers and their customers could spot them. Apart from the capacity ‘to increase and centralise the exchange of things’ (as Otgonbaatar emphasized), this was what being a successful *chyenj* was about—to put oneself in a position from which one could see and be seen. In that sense, we can think of the changers as the ‘grease’ that creates the conditions for any sort of exchange (Rogers 2005: 64). For more than anyone and anything else at Ulaanbaatar’s markets, changers facilitated flows between otherwise disparate domains of postsocialist life. But that is not all. As we will see, through the intense material and bodily engagement that changers had with the goods they sold, these ‘market tricksters’ also came to disturb otherwise prevailing distinctions between subjects and objects and between living beings and dead things. In that sense, I suggest, the story of the emergence and prevalence of ‘changers’ during Mongolia’s first decade of postsocialist transition does not just show what happens when the flow and the availability of money and cash is radically disrupted; it also offers a rare glimpse into the affective and embodied processes that lie at the heart of market capitalism.

‘Chyenjüüd Are Chyenjüüd’

Under normal circumstances, Otgonbaatar came across as calm and laidback, but there was clearly something about the changers that got under his skin. After all, as he went on, the problem about them is that:

They don't work. They are liars by profession. They trick people by selling our goods too expensively. A changer may hold up a pair of shoes and show it to the crowd, and then make false advertising like this: 'Look! I bought these shoes in town yesterday. Alas, they are too small for me. See, it is original skin! Notice this sole and that stitching!' Changers tell lies behind our backs. This is how they con people.

But this perception raises a question: If ordinary marketers such as Otgonbaatar did not like the *chyenjüüd*, why did they allow them to 'borrow' their goods and sell these 'too expensively'? On the one hand, as noted above, changers would 'work for' prominent traders, wholesale traders and other market bosses. But, on the other hand, changers also obtained their goods from ordinary vendors who, unlike themselves, had both a permanent stall at the market and an actual stock of goods. This was done in form of a 'loan' (*zeel*) so that the changer, when 'borrowing' an item from a vendor, would promise to pay back its 'real price' once he managed to sell it. Yet given their forthright and sometimes aggressive manner, one might question whether ordinary vendors had much of a choice. Unless one was under the protection of powerful people, one was not in a position to say no when a changer wanted to 'be friends' and 'do business'.

'Let us say', Otgonbaatar sighed, 'that my partner and I have just brought in some Nike trainers from Beijing. If, say, we are selling these at our stall for 30,000 MNT [approximately US\$25], then a changer will borrow them and manage to sell them for 50,000 MNT [approximately US\$42] via false advertising. This is happening a lot here at Ulaanbaatar's markets. If the changers were good businessmen, they would have started doing their own trading long ago. But they are not, and will be *chyenjüüd* all their lives'. As this observation by Otgonbaatar indicates, vendors' attitudes towards the *chyenjüüd* were ripe with

contradictions. For while changers were considered both morally dubious and inept at planning, they were not simply looked down upon like the drunks and other ‘market outcasts’ (Pedersen 2007). Changers were also perceived as personifying the very idea of what people saw as good salesmanship, which—in the words of Otgonbaatar—‘boils down to telling lies. Wheeling and dealing. The point is to trick people’. Instead of being dismissed as annoying nuisances who did not belong in a proper urban market, *chyenjüüd* were perceived as a necessary evil that should not—and indeed could not—be done away with, even if one had the chance to do so.

It is this ambivalence—the fact that changers were both talked about as very similar to and radically different from ordinary vendors—that makes them so anthropologically interesting. Said another vendor, ‘If they weren’t here, the bosses could not sell their things’. What this and other similar comments indicated (without vendors wanting or perhaps not being able to admit) was that the changers helped boost their profits. This happened both in the concrete and practical senses. *Chyenjüüd* increased the sale of goods by acting as middlemen for vendors. In the more intangible and abstract sense, they also embodied ‘the flow’ (*güidel*) of the market as such.

A key concept in postsocialist Russia, Nancy Ries writes, is “*krutit’sia*”, meaning simultaneously “to turn, spin, revolve, whirl, squirm, circulate, twist, and contort”. . . . The Russian mafia are, in a sense, the masters of this dance. Their occupation entails a kind of “meta-spinning” among different realms of enterprise, within and between different social fields and different levels of hierarchy’ (2002: 290). Similarly, *chyenjüüd* were perceived, by themselves and by others, as the masters of a particular ‘dance’—namely, the constant movement, manoeuvring and ‘meta-spinning’ required to stitch together the various components (sellers, buyers, goods, cash) of a fragmented market.

In that sense, the changers can be formally compared with the ubiquitous pickpockets, who also never stood still, both for fear of being recognised and potentially caught as well as because the nature of their trade led them to seek out those spots at markets where, at a given time, people happened to cluster the most. As a Mongolian friend once remarked to me when I expressed surprise that there were so few *chyenjüüd* to be seen: ‘Trust me, they are here: it is just that they prefer to be somewhere around the middle of the market at the place where most people gather. Just like the pickpockets!’

Yet at the same time, there is also a sense that changers and the pickpockets are diametrically opposed figures, for while changers try to be seen by as many people as possible, pickpockets do their best not to be seen by anyone at all. And further, whereas the pickpocket performs singular acts of theft, the changer, via his ‘false advertising’ and aggressive ways, rather makes visible the overarching asymmetries at the heart of market capitalism and arguably all exchange relations (Pedersen 2016). Like a classic trickster figure, the *chyenjüüd* makes a disorder visible that otherwise remains invisible: the otherwise hidden trickery and violence needed to sustain the market and its flows. As Mongolia’s meta-spinners or market tricksters *par excellence*, the changers personified both the possibilities and the perils of subjecting oneself unconditionally to the at once centripetal and centrifugal economic forces set in train by the country’s transition from socialism to capitalism.

‘Give Me the Money. It’s Yours Now!’

Changers, it is now clear, were not just simply marginal and stigmatised figures struggling to survive at the margins of the new market economy. On the contrary, they played an important practical and symbolic role in the

dissemination and internalisation of the moral discourses and bodily affects associated with market capitalism in Mongolia and postsocialist contexts. In fact, I shall go as far as suggesting the changers were a sort of hyper-traders who, in both their excessive behaviour and labile bodily comportment, personified the very essence of the market as a place and an idea.

Chyenjüüd, as we saw, were constantly on the move, trying to position themselves at strategic intersections of busy alleyways from where they could best see and be seen. Along with being present at the heart of the densest of crowds, they would also seek to physically place goods into the hands of potential buyers against their will, bringing the notion of middleman to new heights (or, depending on one's perspective, low points). Known as *shakhah* ('to squeeze, to press'), this was a widespread sight at Ulaanbaatar's markets around 2000. Possibly it was due to this 'inverse stealing' that ordinary vendors perceived the changers to be 'selling too expensively', to the point of pushing their customers to keep the goods that they had imposed on them.

Another key thing that set apart the changers from more ordinary vendors was the fact that they were using their own bodies to display their goods. Indeed, one of my most lasting memories from fieldwork is the simultaneously tragic and comic, frightening and hilarious sight of wildly gesticulating changers wearing five or more leather jackets, sweating profusely while overeagerly trying to attract customers. The changer, I suggest, quite literally is perceived to be what he sells. Like the wheeler-dealers populating some beaches with their entire arms fitted with fake golden watches for sale at 'a special price for you', the *chenjüüd* stand out from others (barring, arguably, fashion models) in appropriating their own bodies as a platform for displaying the goods for sale. To borrow Lemon's formulation, these commodities are 'clinging onto their bodies, as if made of like substances' (1998,

25). The concept of commodity here reaches a limit point, for the goods worn by the changers are not perceived as more but rather as *less* abstract than other objects. In line with Marx's concept of fetishism proper—the sensuous worshipping of noncommoditised objects (Stallybrass 1998: 184; Graeber 2005)—the goods put on display on the bodies of changers and other market tricksters were 'material presence[s] that [did] not represent but t[ook] one's fancy' (Pels 1998: 114).

We can, then, conceive of changers as inversions of the *flaneur* figure of mid-nineteenth-century Paris's shopping arcades discussed by Walter Benjamin (1997). Instead of being a mirror image of the commodities that he buys, the changer is a reflection of the goods he sells. For if the flaneur is defined by his boundless desire for commodities, which he tragically tries to satisfy by window shopping in the Parisian arcades, the Mongolian changer seems to be defined by an insatiable desire for *selling* commodities, which blurs the ontological boundaries between living beings and dead things. This, after all, is what being a good changer is all about (apart from always 'telling lies'), to temporality become equipped with another kind of body—namely, could we say, a commodity body. Small wonder, then, that the *chyenjüüd* were called what they were. These people were not just exchanging goods like other traders; they also *changed themselves*, to some extent, into what they sold; that is, their own bodies momentarily became fused with the wares. Not unlike the manner religious specialists like shamans become one with their gods (Pedersen 2011), economic specialists like *chyenjüüd* are capable of becoming one with their goods.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the new kinds of subjectivities forged through consumption in the postsocialist

world (see, e.g., Fehérváry 2013; Patico and Caldwell 2002; Sampson 1994). Aside from the work of a few scholars (Hohnen 2005; Humphrey and Skvirskaya 2009; Konstantinov, Kressel and Thuen 1998), significantly less attention has been paid to what happens on the other side of the shopping counter, as it were, among the people who are *selling* the goods. Possibly, this relative ‘indifference of researchers may mirror the perspectives of traders themselves—that this activity, widespread though it is, is considered unimportant and not a serious economic sphere’ (Konstantinov, Kressel and Thuen 1998: 731). Or could it be because anthropologists ‘think that we know intuitively what a market is, [that] surprisingly little has been written about how [people] actually think about their activities as traders?’ (Stewart 1997, 11).

It is precisely this lacuna I have attempted to fill in this chapter by focusing instead on a certain kind of trader *subjects*. The sprawling markets of Ulaanbaatar, I have shown, were vital to the coming into being of new economic subjects after socialism, but the selves forged were not just consumer identities but also sites for the emergence of new ‘economic sentiments’ (to use Adam Smith’s term; see also Rothschild 2011) for the people trading and selling goods. Yet it would be a mistake to reduce these subjectivities and sentiments to the ‘violence of abstraction’ and the ‘creeping commoditization’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) allegedly caused by the transition from socialism to capitalism. Certainly, *chyen-jüüd* were about as far as one could be from the idealised image of ‘economic men’ who, at the moment of trade, become particularly detached from their surroundings. On the contrary, their tricks of the trade involved an *enhanced* engagement with their surroundings, both in the sociological sense of being able to anticipate customers’ desires ‘to the point of clairvoyance’ (Simmel, quoted in Astuti 1999: 91) and, in the more material sense, as they almost fused with the substance of the commodities they were

trying to sell. After all, recall how, according to Otgonbaatar, changers ‘increase and centralise the exchange of things’. *Chyenjüüd*, then, were the market’s true middlemen who, instead of making new value by moving things from one place to another (let alone producing them), made their profits by ‘adding to the velocity of dealing as a whole’ (Stewart 1997: 158). Small wonder, then, that the changers were grudgingly tolerated by ordinary vendors, despite their obscene, threatening and sometimes violent behaviour. Both literally and symbolically, it was due to the presence of *chyenjüüd* that the invisible forces of the market could be made visible and fully harnessed.

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