

INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES

NORTHEAST ASIA IN FOCUS: LIFE, WORK AND INDUSTRY BETWEEN THE STEPPE AND THE METROPOLES, 1900-2020

Essays in Commemoration of Flemming Christiansen's Retirement

Festschrift

Edited by Christine Moll-Murata

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Northeast Asia in Focus: Life, Work and Industry between the Steppe and the Metropoles, 1900–2020

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EDITED BY CHRISTINE MOLL-MURATA

Christine.Moll-Murata@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

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Institute of East Asian Studies / Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften

University of Duisburg-Essen Duisburg Campus, Forsthausweg 47057 Duisburg, Germany

- **T** +49(0) 203 37-94191
- **F** +49(0) 203 37-94157
- E in-east@uni-due.de

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NUTAG COUNCILS AS POST-SOCIALIST LIFELINES BETWEEN THE STEPPE AND THE METROPOLES IN MONGOLIA

Ines Stolpe and Tümen-Ochiryn Erdene-Ochir

Nutag councils (*nutgiin zövlöl*)¹ are dynamic multi-local networks that connect rural and urban spheres within and beyond Mongolia's borders. Initially established after socialism as an answer to the sudden disintegration of the countryside, they have become the most widespread yet – for outsiders – least visible features of the civil society landscape. *Nutag* councils (NCs) are self-governed by people who feel committed to support their rural homeland after they had migrated from the countryside to province centers, cities or abroad. They operate independent of foreign aid and their manifold activities provide, like a prism, key insights into distinctive structures of relevance, knowledge cultures and (socio-) logics of practice which are characteristic for modern Mongolia.

Today, more than half of the country's population resides in cities, and a large number of citizens is living abroad. When Mongolia's countryside (*khödöö*) is considered a reservoir of cultural authenticity, it is often overlooked that prevailing notions of intactness include aspects of modern life that originated in socialism. This applies in particular to centers of rural districts (*sum*),² which are primary foci of *nutag* council activities. During the socialist era, *sum* had become congruent with economic units, each with either a herder collective (*negdel*) or – to a lesser extent – a state agricultural farm (*sangiin aj akhui*). They provided income, created prosperity and facilitated the development of a modern infrastructure. Each sum got its center with social institutions such as a school with dormitory, a hospital, a veterinary post, a cultural center, a library, a post office with communication facilities, a kindergarten, an electricity station, a shop, a bank, a repair station and an administration. Even though herder collectives and state farms mostly disintegrated with privatization, Mongolia's rural economy is still primarily administered through sum centers. The rural districts remain not only important for governing the country but also as focal points of collective territorial, socio-cultural and – last but not least – deeply felt emotional identification. Sum are, more often than provinces, local reference points for *nutag* councils and, in a way, act as centripetal forces to keep in contact after out-migration.

NUTAG COUNCILS AS LIFELINES

Given that they form a considerable part of Mongolia's civil society, NCs are strikingly unexplored. The following narrative outlines selected findings of an ongoing research project. Its collection of data is based on interviews with urban members of nutag councils and their rural counterparts (herders, local administrators, teachers, directors of schools, museums, libraries and cultural centers, monks, border guards, nurses, physicians, veterinarians, shop owners, artists, janitors, horse trainers, pensioners), on questionnaire-based surveys among rural and urban Mongolians, participant observation, informal talks, specialized literature and the analysis of documents as well as a large body of written materials published by NCs in books, brochures, journals and a wide range of digital formats. Af-

¹ The first word is the genitive of *nutag*, often translated as 'homeland' or 'Heimat'. Considering that conceptions and semantic fields only overlap partly (for discussions and comparative analyses see Stolpe 2014, 2015, 2019, 2020), we prefer the native term. For readability, Mongolian words, names and toponyms appear in a common pragmatic transcription.

² Currently, Mongolia's 21 provinces (*aimag*) are divided into 331 districts (*sum*) and 1,575 subdistricts (*bag*).

ter a brief description of *nutag* councils with regard to their goals and legal forms, structures, members, activities, communication channels and forms of self-representations, we will introduce an exemplary case and a recent initiative.

NCs emerged from the 1990s, and their goal was initially to mitigate negative consequences of the institutional void and the neglect of rural infrastructure by establishing direct lines of redistribution. They represent genuine Mongolian knowledge cultures and are not easy to categorize due to their flexibility. NCs usually don't have offices, their degree of formalization is low and their existence is mainly visible through initiatives. So, how many exist countrywide? According to Mongolia's general authority for state registration, there are 275 legal entities listed directly with the designation 'nutgiin zövlöl'. For fiscal reasons, they are registered as non-governmental organizations.³ However, there are many more NGOs that are in fact *nutag* councils but did not exactly use that term when registering. Instead they appear under names such as 'people (nutgiinkhan) of Bulgankhangai' or 'children from Bulgan *nutag*',⁴ and it needs some background knowledge to determine them as NCs via their structure, shared purpose and/ or the person leading the board.⁵ Based on the number of provinces and districts, one would expect a minimum of 350 NCs in Mongolia. However, each *sum* may have up to six councils: one in its province center, one in the capital and perhaps one in the cities of Darkhan and Erdenet and/or in the frontier towns Zamyn Üüd (bordering China) and Altanbulag (bordering Russia). Sometimes those smaller urban reference points might act as branches only. But then one also needs to take into consideration that rural

districts located close to the capital have either no *nutag* council or only one in Ulaanbaatar. Finally, many NCs have target-group oriented sub-branches, such as for young people. For all these reasons, the exact total number of NCs in Mongolia is hard to define. Although registration provides some indication, it came with the introduction of the law on NGOs in 1997 that we find the councils, many of which had existed long before, in that category.

NCs⁶ represent a broad spectrum of civil society interests, and their activities are as diverse as the ideas, potentials and capacities of their active members. All have in common that they contrive ways and means to (re-)integrate rural areas into processes of progress and development and to increase their visibility. Membership is generally open to anyone who emotionally identifies with a rural district; it does not have to be the place where the person was born or grew up, even though that would be the classical constellation. Each nutag council has a board (udirdakh zövlöl) with about 10–30 people, most of which are in high-ranking and/or prestigious positions and preferably represent a greater variety of the society. Thus, we find politicians, businesspeople, principals of public or private institutions, scientists, journalists, army officers, sportspeople, monks, artists, and various professionals with a good reputation. In order to gain public attention for realizing bigger projects, it is desired to recruit a number of influential members for the board. Usually, we find a chair, a vice-chair, one or more secretaries, sometimes a treasurer, and always a number of ordinary board members. All use their affiliation with heterogeneous social worlds to establish contact zones and to open up and utilize opportunities. In Mongolian, this is usually described as *bolomj*, a term that dynamically includes resources in the widest sense. Local knowledge and good networking are essential for successfully using potentials

³ Ulsyn bürtgeliin yerönkhii gazar.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Among the great things about doing research in Mongolia are the ample opportunities to find people related to their *nutag*, which is just another demonstration of the uniqueness and key role of that concept.

⁶ The following section is partly based on an earlier publication (Stolpe 2014).

that derive from a plurality of starting points and approaches. Having influential people on the board of a *nutag* council allows to turn some of the dilemmas of asymmetry between rural and urban areas into win-win situations.

NCs do not have a preconceived agenda. Instead, most activities are need-oriented and conducted in coordination with the state-aided local development plans (oron nutgiin khögjliin tölövlögöö). Calls to action happen by means of mobile phones, the internet (primarily via Facebook) and mass media. Typical activities of NCs include the support of social and cultural events with *nutag*-relevance, infrastructural and business development, talent promotion, tourism, local historiography, environmental protection (especially in mining areas), emergency aid in cases of disaster or calamity such as *zud*,⁷ and, more continuously, the support of public institutions, such as schools, dormitories and gyms, hospitals, libraries, and cultural centers. Very common are support strategies along the lines of the members' own qualification or professional occupation (mergejliin chigleleeree), so that teachers are often particularly engaged with educational institutions, physicians with hospitals, businesspeople with companies, historians with historico-cultural heritage and/or historiography, biologists with nature protection, monks with monasteries, athletes with sports facilities etc. This also underlines how strongly nutag networks are connected to interpersonal relations and to social ties developed in public institutions.

NCs mobilize resources primarily via their own channels and only exceptionally take external fundraising into consideration. However, the benefits are anything but a one-way transfer of resources. In fact, most rural-to-urban migrants seek and find emotional and/or spiritual support from their *nutag*, try to visit it regularly and make sure that pictures and photographs of signature places (mostly worshipped mountains or waters) are present in everyday settings of their urban surroundings, often as wall decorations or screensavers.⁸ Supporting their *nutag* is less often motivated by gaining prestige than by the wish to give something back (*ach khariulakh*), a concept that is central in Mongolian and goes way back into cultural history. People who have become successful are expected to take over some responsibility for their *nutag*. Even though they could reject a request, the moral pressure makes that very unlikely.

Despite the time flexibility, there are recurring spatio-temporal reference points, constituted by two main factors: the Mongolian festival calendar and anniversaries of and in administrative units (*aimag/sum*). This includes anniversaries of local institutions, such as schools, dormitories, kindergartens, hospitals, border posts, museums, veterinary stations etc. Namsaraeva's concept of "multiple temporalities of a Mongolian *nutag*"⁹ can be extended to members of NCs for they keep sight of their homeland's timings even when living far away. Jubilees are welcome opportunities to launch bigger fundraising campaigns. Apart from those occasions, at least two mutual visits take place every year: in celebration of the national holiday *naadam*, members of the now-urban elites travel to their places of origin, and after the Mongolian lunar New Year tsagaan sar, representatives of rural administrations travel to Ulaanbaatar. Let's briefly outline what typically happens around these two traditional holidays and what other temporal reference points exist:

The cooperative arrangement of local *naadam* festivals belongs to the popular activities of NCs. They often finance the renovation of venues, organize equipment and donate the prizes for winners of sports competitions (classical: wrestling,

⁷ We will further elaborate on *zud* in the next section of this paper.

⁸ For examples from urban offices, see Manalsuren (2020).

⁹ Namsaraeva (2020), 107, Italics in original.

horseracing and archery). Naadam may also be used to inaugurate newly built monuments or landmarks which often show the names of the main sponsors. During their stay in the countryside, urban elites celebrate their affiliation to their rural place of origin, while rural communities proudly celebrate the social mobility of elites who have risen from their nutag. Thus, many publications of NCs show photographs of elites typically in their urban work environment (usually in Western-style business attire) as well as in their rural nutag (usually in festive Mongolian dress, together with wrestlers, archers and/ or horse-trainers). Entirely different are gatherings at *tsagaan sar*, where paying respect to the *nutag's* elders, who are now living in cities, is central. Thus, NCs organize special mutual greeting ceremonies (tsagaan saryn nutgiin zol*golt*). During these meetings, people from one nutag do not only celebrate New Year and exchange greetings, but also information and ideas for future collaboration. In order to keep a nutagoriented community sense, NCs furthermore organize New Year parties for young people, who celebrate in December and, in reminiscence of the Russian word for the New Year tree, called this yolk. Finally, many NCs organize a matinée (ödörlög) for veterans several times per year as well as special days to promote the culture of their respective rural districts (sumyn soyolyn ödrüüd).

All these occasions promote the exchange and production of locally oriented publications on internet platforms or CDs, as well as radio and TV broadcasts and books. Usually, members of the NCs are also greatly involved in the creation of special anniversary publications called *taniltsuulga* (introduction) which are in fact self-portraits of rural Mongolian localities and institutions.¹⁰ Developed during the socialist era¹¹ and inextricably linked with notions of *nutag*, Mongolian *taniltsuulga* are the most informative sources for local identity concepts in connection to modernization and change. Although they accentuate unique regional characteristics, the following categories typically appear and thereby indicate aspects that constitute a modern Mongolian *nutag* on the rural districts' level:

- biological and geographic characteristics, including natural monuments, featuring worshipped mountains and waters
- early local history, including cultural monuments and events of transregional importance
- economic foundations, including statistics of livestock numbers
- the local history of progress and prosperity, strongly connected to modern institutions, personalities, professional groups and achievements
- local heroes historical and contemporary, featuring 'heroes of labor' and champions
- prominent representatives of sports, arts, science, media and politics
- representatives of charismatic animals, such as popular racehorses or signature animals and/or those who are on the red list of threatened species
- local or locally oriented literature, featuring poetry, songs, legends, fables and blessings (yerööl) for the nutag
- locally relevant ethnic characteristics and religious activities, including historical events of transregional importance
- facets of locally anchored cultural heritage
- social events celebrating the *nutag*
- personal memories

Many of these publications are either results of collective authorship or were written by academicians who are usually prominent members of NCs. All of them radiate unshakable patrio-

¹⁰ For a comparative analysis of this specific Mongolian genre see Stolpe (2019).

¹¹ On selected *taniltsuulga* published in the socialist era see Ressel (2018).

tism and optimism, and they always emphasize their respective *nutag's* unique features to establish them as corporate trademarks (*nutgiin brend*).

Some NCs have been criticized for aggressive lobbying, especially when it comes to taking people from their own *nutag* into high-ranking positions.¹² However, even though this might be about personalizing channels of allocation, it is – in contrast to *aryn khaalga*,¹³ the most widespread form of clientelism in Mongolia – not motivated by private interests but rather those of the rural *nutag*'s community. As dynamic, multi-local groups, NCs practice political action beyond, but usually not behind state politics.

In principle, *nutag* relations are not contestable. Whether living in a city or a foreign country, people remain part of their nutag (nutgiin khün). According to most of our interlocutors, this belonging is much stronger and more powerful than ethnic, religious or party political affiliations. But in a few cases the NC was dominated by one of the two most powerful Mongolian parties, which is why supporters of the other did either refuse to engage and/or founded their own NC. However, such incidents seem to be exceptions so far and were classified as stupid (teneg) by our interviewees. Some emphasized how much they considered it important that NCs would keep clear of the excessive politicization of administration (khalaa selgee) that has paralyzed important aspects of social and political life in Mongolia since 1996. Another controversial issue is the claim of multiple territorial affiliations during election campaigns,¹⁴ a more recent phenomenon which Munkherdene and Sneath subsumed under "nutagism".¹⁵

15 Munkherdene and Sneath (2018), 822, Italics in original.

Before we proceed with our case study, it should not go unmentioned that not all of Mongolia's NCs are active and successful. Some lack ideas, motivation, initiative, stamina and/or leadership skills to mobilize their *nutag's* potentials, while others concentrate on rather easy tasks such as sponsoring festivities, which was by many of our interviewees considered to be not sustainable (*togtvortoi bish*).

CASE STUDY: SAIKHAN *SUM,* BULGAN *AIMAG*

Bulgan province is located in northern Mongolia and mostly covered with forest steppe. It was established in 1938 and is currently divided into 16 districts. The province's self-representations highlight the fact that it was in several respects a pioneer and produced remarkably many forerunners who were the first of their kind in Mongolia. The most prominent figure is J. Gürragchaa, the first - and so far only - Mongolian who undertook a space flight (in 1981). But also social events of national importance, such as the first trained physicians (1949), the first naadam festival for students (1959), the first gold medal won by a schoolboy at an International Mathematical Olympiad (1964), the first Olympic gold medal in Judo (2008), and the first meeting of young herders (2009) are part of the collective memory and appear in *nutag*-related self-presentations.¹⁶ On these grounds, Bulgan is known and proudly marketed as the home and cradle of vanguards (ankhdagchdyn ölgii nutag).

Saikhan *sum* is nationwide known for its superb *airag* (fermented horse milk), which has become one of the major economic factors since it reaches high prices on the market. It is one of the most densely populated districts of Bulgan province with an area covering 277,276 hectares¹⁷ and 3501 inhabitants,¹⁸ out of which 700

¹² Cf. Mendee (2012), 14.

¹³ Literally: 'back door', most common metaphor for bypassing (primarily bureaucratic) hurdles with the help of influential contacts (*tanil talaaraa*).

¹⁴ Byambabaatar (2017).

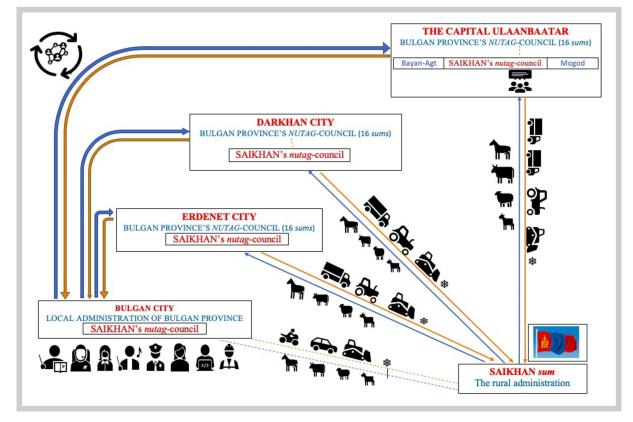
¹⁶ For example: Erdenebat / Ganbold (2018).

¹⁷ Ündesnii khögjliin gazar (2016).

¹⁸ National Statistics Office of Mongolia (2020).

reside in the center. This district was established under its current name (which means 'nice/beautiful' and was derived from the toponym of the area's worshipped mountain Saikhan Uul) in 1930.¹⁹ Its center was settled in the present location in the early 1930s at a distance of 101 km to the *aimag* center and 524 km to the capital. Saikhan *sum* is divided into six sub-districts (*bag*).²⁰ Most of its residents (ca. 80 %) live from animal husbandry, looking after a total of 373,700 animals of all five Mongolian species.²¹ Saikhan *sum* has altogether four *nutag* councils: in Ulaanbaatar, in the province center of Bulgan *aimag*, and in the two cities Erdenet (160 km away) and Darkhan (329 km away). People from Saikhan district migrated to these places primarily in search of work and better life conditions, but also for better educational opportunities, most of all in higher education. Our illustration (Figure 1) shows the basic exchange relations and communication structures between the four *nutag* councils of Saikhan *sum* and the rural administration:





- 19 Until 1691, the area was known as Tüsheet Khany khoshuu, from 1691 to 1911 as Daichin Vangiin hoshuu (both Tüsheet Khan aimag), from 1911 to 1922 as Khalkhyn Tüsheet Khan aimgiin Erdene Daichin Vangiin Khoshuu, and from 1923 to 1930 as Bulgan Khan Uulyn khoshuu of Bogd Khan Uulyn aimag.
- 20 These are Manuult, Ugalz, Khulj, Undrakh, Ikh Khüremt and Saikhan-Ovoo.
- 21 Mongolian: tavan khoshuu mal horses, sheep, cattle, camels and goats. The numbers given are according to the last livestock census, National Statistics Office of Mongolia (2019).

The cities Erdenet, Darkhan and Ulaanbaatar host the *nutag* council from Bulgan province as well as NCs from all 16 districts. Our illustration shows that there are strong direct connections between the *sum*-level and each city, whereas the connections between the four NCs in those cities are rather weak. Gold-colored lines for annual visits of rural-to-urban migrants to their homeplaces, blue lines stand for the annual visits of rural administrators to the cities shortly after the Mongolian New Year *tsagaan sar*. During

these visits, they introduce their rural development plan to NCs, mention problems and ask for possibilities of support and collaboration. Hereby the rural administration does not only keep connection to the NC in each city but also ensures that there is no doubling of activities and that they are integrated well into the rural development plans. The dotted line on our illustration indicates that, due to the relative vicinity to the aimag-center, most individuals living there have strong direct connections to the sum of their origin. Some districts do not have a *nutag* council in the province center because they are located in close proximity, while in a few other cases the NCs are not very active. This refers a general tendency in Mongolia: the further away a district or a province is from urban centers, the more likely it is that its NCs work very actively and sustainably. On our illustration, the number of vehicles indicates that the amount of donations and other support from the cities depends on the number of migrants living in urban areas, while the icons of livestock²² show the supply of dairy products and fresh meat to the *nutag's* migrants living in cities. Although this is not exactly an NC activity, all rural-to-urban migrants prefer food from their *nutag*.²³ Thus, each visit is used to transport what is called *nutgiin idee* (food from the *nutag*, i.e. meat and milk products) to the cities. In the case of Saikhan *sum* it would be unthinkable for the now-city dwellers to celebrate any festivity - whether traditional or modern - without their famous airag.

Our icons of people indicate that elected board members of NCs mostly hold high-ranking and prestigious positions. The current board of the council of Saikhan *sum* in Ulaanbaatar consists of 19 people, 4 of them female. These members were elected during the mutual *nutag*-greet-

ing ceremony at tsagaan sar in February 2019. The chairman is a gold medal winner in Judo (Olympics 2008) and a national wrestling champion with the title 'elephant' (zaan), also awarded as 'hero of labor' (khödölmöriin baatar). The vice-chairman is the head of a department in the Ministry for Construction and City Planning, both secretaries (male and female) have a PhD, one works at the center for educational evaluation, the other at the National University of Mongolia. Among the board members is a head of the Central Health Insurance, an advisor for the Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industry, an engineer, a deputy head of the Ulaanbaatar railway, a singer and merited actress, a head of a logistics project, a wrestling researcher (bökh sudlaach), a principal and lecturer for a policy center, and six directors of companies (one of them female).

Over the last decade, the NC of Saikhan *sum* in Ulaanbaatar has, apart from the regular biannual meetings, organized the following activities:

- fundraising and donation for emergency aid during the *zud*²⁴ in 2002–2003 and forest fires in 2005
- engineering consultancy and infrastructure planning for a water tower in the center of Saikhan district in 2019
- a demonstration and campaign under the slogan "Let's save our holy mountain"²⁵ in order to stop coal mining in 2008
- donations for scholarships for talented students from low-income families
- certificates enabling talented students to study without tuition fees (with the help of the former NC chairman who established a private university)
- educational advice for rural school teachers and students

²² In the case of Bulgan *aimag*, this does not include camels.

²³ This is part of a Mongolian tradition, called *övliin idesh* (winter food): Each year in late autumn, slaughtered frozen animals (usually about one large and five to ten small livestock) are delivered to families in cities for their consumption until the next summer.

²⁴ For further information on *zud* as endemic disasters see Stolpe (2011).

²⁵ Shüteen uulaa avar"ya.

- co-organization of the annual worship of Saikhan mountain (Saikhan uulyn takhilga) in early June, together with local school alumni and the rural administration
- implementation of a small project to improve the breeds of cows, sheep and racehorses
- donations to the sum administration throughout the anniversary of the district's establishment
- erection of a gate on the main road to the district center of Saikhan *sum*
- erection of one statue of a famous local wrestler and one of a general
- production of a documentary about the making of this *nutag's* famous fermented horse milk (Saikhany *airag*) and related ceremonies
- funding of the composition of the song about the local holy mountain in 2013, written by a local poet²⁶
- New Year parties for the youth of Saikhan *sum* living in Ulaanbaatar
- organization of an annual festive day to commemorate the International Day of Older Persons (in early October) for veterans from Saikhan *sum* living in Ulaanbaatar
- donations for a concert of a Saikhan-born female singer in Ulaanbaatar in 2019
- donations for salaries and publication costs for an anthology book featuring famous people from Saikhan *sum* prepared for its 90th anniversary.

The most recent activity started off in the wake of the corona crisis²⁷ and sheds light on the international dimension of NCs. A native from Saikhan *sum*, now living in South Korea, wanted to support his *nutag* during the crisis and started a collection of face masks and a fundraising campaign via Facebook. During that time, Saikhan *sum* was hit by a disaster the Mongolians call white *zud*, i.e. the pastures were highly covered with snow and prevented the livestock from grazing. In order to support the herders struggling with this hardship, the fundraiser redirected his campaign and called his fellow natives to support an "Encouragement of our herders" (*malchdadaa setgeliin dem ögökh*).

Very soon, people from Saikhan *sum*, now living in cities in- and outside Mongolia, donated a total of nearly eight million Mongolian *Tögrög* (MNT). When it turned out that the finances of the local administration were sufficient to rent vehicles to clear the snow on the roads and to provide the pastoralists with hay bales and other fodder supplies for the starving animals, the fundraisers decided to distribute foodstuff and other items to all herder families of Saikhan *sum*. This was done by employees of public institutions with the help of the six *bag* governors who know the localities of mobile herder camps very well.

Far more important and impressive than the actual amount of support was, from the herders' perspectives, the emotional support offered by so many people living all over Mongolia and in foreign countries. Herders were very happy, because these migrants have proven that they care about the herders in Saikhan during this difficult time and truly act as people who originated from the same homeland (*nutgiin khün*). As usual with fundraising campaigns organized by NCs, all information on donations are transparently accessible.

CONCLUSION

Our case study briefly introduced some aspects of how Mongolia's rural-urban civil society networks can provide lifelines after migration which work both ways in a dynamic balance. *Nutag* councils allow, like a prism, to gain a deep understanding of the social dynamics and concepts

²⁶ Saikhan Uul, lyrics: Ts. Buyanzayaa. Accessible on You-Tube.

²⁷ On Mongolia's handling of the corona threat see Erdene-Ochir and Stolpe (2020).

that underpin various mobilities from the perspective of those who shape and propel them. They shed light on intersections between state and civil society, on Mongolian concepts of societal participation and development as well as on the impact of (modern) heritage and intellectual history on future visions of the present society.

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