

# Review of Fear and Fortune

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## Introduction

Mette High's *Fear and Fortune* is an anthropological text which explores how Mongolians in Uyanga adapt to and navigate the artisanal mining (ninja mining) as a viable and preferred way of life to herding. Fraught with issues of pollution (as a social ordering concept) and morality, ninja mining and gold money carries with it great risk of misfortune. With an extended fieldwork spanning two-and-a-half years, High unpacks how the cosmoeconomy of the Mongolian gold rush in Uyanga challenges conventional ideas of economics, exchange, money, and morality.

Instead of employing the 'moral economies' approach, High draws on da Col's (2012) work on cosmoeconomy to analyse the intricate intertwining of humans and nonhumans in the gold rush. Instead of focusing on distilling universal concepts, High acknowledges and focuses on the plethora of diverse views within the community to exemplify its 'thick' and multiple understandings. The book is also concerned with issues of money and exchange, in particular the divergence from conventional understandings of the functions of money and static conceptions of exchange. While economic understanding of the functions of money rely on the stability of money as a currency for exchange and its reification

of a certain value, High contends that these assumptions cannot be straightforwardly transposed onto gold and gold money in Uyanga. Conventional exchange logics emphasise the agency of the bearer of money/valued-object and sees money as a means to an end. High pushes back against this dyadic framework and encourages readers to see money as an agent in itself, capable of shaping and changing the nature of social relations. High explores these themes in a multi-sited ethnography in Uyanga, Mongolia, where she stayed with various host families and lamas.

## Methods and Challenges

During her fieldwork, High faced numerous challenges from the following factors: (A) ninja mining was considered illegal at the time of the fieldwork, (B) High was considered a foreigner by those she was not well acquainted with, and (C) the constant threat of *altny gai* ('misfortune of gold'). This meant that she could only rely on conversations and could not employ the help of a research assistant. Furthermore, the fear of accidentally transferring the *altny gai* to her host families or experiencing the misfortune herself meant she had to be extra cautious and she 'never went to the mines unaccompanied' (15). While it was challenging to record data and conversations while working in the mines or with the herding families, High soon relied on memorising sentences in Mongolian, which allowed her to focus on the nuances and deeper meanings in conversations. Her ethnographic evidence hence comprised daily conversations, accounts and reflections from participant observation.

High's positionality as an outsider meant that she could not conduct formal data collection without raising suspicions about possible links with the local authorities, and this also limited her access to encounters which involved external parties who were extremely cautious of the authorities (see Chapter Six). While this may seem rather limiting, High's book is still a well-stitched together patchwork of carefully curated ethnographic encounters, peppered with anthropological theory and comparisons, and historical background for building context. While the historical background and rich ethnographic detail and vignettes help to immerse the reader in the scene, at times the chapters could have benefitted from a more in-depth exploration of themes raised or anthropological analysis. Examples of this will be raised as appropriate in the review of the individual chapters.

### **Structure and Chapters of the Book**

The structure of the book traces the multiple and diverging paths of gold from the point of extraction in the mines to its transformation into gold money and other material investments. The involvement of other actors such as the *altny chanj* (unregistered petty gold traders), nonhuman spirits, shopkeepers, lamas, and *tom darga* ('big boss') are fleshed out in the various chapters to fully explain the moral implications and practices that surround the storage, transfer, and use of the money associated with ninja mining.

The first two chapters (*The Burden of Patriarchy* and *The Power of Gold*) set the

context of the hardships endured by the community and present both push and pull factors that draw and keep the ninja miners working at the mines. Chapter Three (*Angered Spirits*) delves into the presence of nonhuman spirits and the dangers surrounding ninja mining, as well as the importance of the concept of cosmoeconomy to understand these complex relations between humans and nonhumans. The final three chapters (*Polluted Money, Wealth and Devotion, and Trading Gold*) focus on the tensions between wealth and morality, and pollution and risk, arising from the extraction of gold and gold money. These three chapters also uncover the methods employed to navigate the risk and moral dilemmas by various agents.

### **Setting the Context and Discovering Motivations**

The first chapter, *The Burden of Patriarchy*, touches on the push factors of rigid patriarchal structures within the social ordering of nomadic pastoral life in Uyanga that motivate people to turn to ninja mining as a viable alternative way of life. The second chapter, *The Power of Gold*, delves into the spiritual world and engages the concept of cosmoeconomy to explain the coexistence (albeit not a peaceful one) of humans and nonhumans. The chapter explains the pull factor of the gold dust that has a hold over the miners, luring them to (and continue) working in the mines.

The first chapter opens with a rich vignette describing the frustrations and suppressed anger felt within one of High's

host families as a result of the stifling patriarchal kinship structure. However, High does not approach the issues surrounding this vertical kinship structure immediately. She describes the historical background of the mining industry in the region and the events at the turn of the millennial to explain the emergence of informal gold miners (*ninjas*) who started their own artisanal mining operations. Following this description, High explains a push factor of the prolonged extreme weather events of the *udaan zud* that resulted in huge losses in livestock. While poverty pushed some households to ninja mining, High also notes that some wealthy families became ninjas and develops the point of stifling hierarchy mentioned in the introductory vignette to the chapter. The various contributing factors of (A) virilocal marriages and the subordinate liminal position of the daughter-in-law in the family, (B) hypogamy and (C) agnatic kin ties result in tensions and suppressed anger that makes living in such households almost dreadful. Decisions are made almost exclusively by the head of the household which contributes to the frustrations within the *ail*.

The chapter could have benefitted from a clearer structure, placing the theoretical discussion of the kinship structure after the ethnographic detailing. Furthermore, while peripheral reasons and context-setting background information is not unimportant, the chapter could have benefitted from a deeper theoretical exploration of the kinship structures. For example, it would have been beneficial to include an ethnographic description or images for readers to visualise the

spatial organisation of the gers which are produced by and reproduce the hierarchical kinship structures.

The second chapter focuses on the pull factor that lures and keeps ninjas working in the mines. Instead of developing the concept of cosmoeconomy fully in this chapter, High enters a detailed explanation of the social organisation among ninja miners. High describes the social ordering within mining communities as based not on kinship or patriarchal hierarchies, but on the ability and skill of individuals. While this is a useful comparison to the previous chapter's analysis of the social organisation among herders, it could have been better placed in the previous chapter to add analytical depth and detail. High describes *altny chadvar* (power of gold) as an invisible, strong and centripetal force pulling people to continue working as ninja miners and also as a force capable of inflicting harm and misfortune. Where a development of the concept of cosmoeconomy could have been beneficial, the analysis instead turns to developing Strathern's arguments about moral standards of actions that were guided by nonhumans, and *altny chadvar* as a temporal marker. The preoccupation with developing ethnographic and historical detail for background context diverts attention away from what could have been a richer theoretical analysis and insight into *altny chadvar* and the agency of nonhuman spirits or the issues surrounding morality as hinted by the inclusion of Strathern's argument.

## **Complex Relations Between Humans and Nonhumans**

## (Cosmoeconomy)

The third chapter focuses on the plurality of agents – human and nonhuman – central to the Mongolian gold rush. In *Angered Spirits*, High discusses the dangers surrounding ninja mining arising from the risk of misfortune from transgressing taboos and disrespecting spirits. High illustrates the precarious mutual existence of and relationship between humans and nonhumans that has to be continuously maintained by rituals, respecting taboos, and following certain practices of *hishig*. *Hishig* is an example of the multiple and at times incongruent understandings and interpretations within the community. *Hishig* can be used to describe the abundance of resources, the ‘process of hunting and the game [hunters] kill’ (67), ‘health of household members’ (68), and methods of cultivating and keeping fortune within the ail. *Hishig* supports and underpins the social ordering of kinships structures, and promotes harmony and cooperation within the household.

While High compares such practices within predominantly herding households to that of ninjas, who ‘[marginalise the] largely benevolent white *lus*’ (73) and focus on appeasing the black *lus* (landscape spirit), the chapter could have benefited from a stronger link between the different practices of navigating the cosmoeconomy. With fortune and the risk of misfortune intimately tied to the appropriate management of relations with nonhumans, High could have provided deeper insight into related anthropological themes of human-nonhuman relations and the cosmoeconomy. However, credit is due

here when High reiterates the need to appreciate local understandings in their own right – judging their ontological grounding against that of conventional or ‘universal’ principles is akin to denying locals their intellectual agency. Economic life can be seen as a manifestation of human and nonhuman interaction, relying on careful nurturing of relations with spirit beings; accumulation of wealth and resources, and health and vitality can be understood as tied to local understandings and cosmology.

## Navigating Moral Hazards and Risk of Misfortune

The final three chapters form an important section on the ways in which different people navigate the dangers and misfortune that comes with ninja mining and gold money.

Chapter Four (*Polluted Money*) explores why and how gold money is differentiated from the national currency, Tögrög, and how different people navigate the ‘weight’ it carries from pollution. High alludes to various anthropological theories of money, wealth and morality to show how wealth and (polluted) money are more than abstract symbols or objects used in exchange, but rather objects that have strong links to the spirit world and emotions of jealousy. High contrasts the issues of wealth faced by the herding community with the experiences of those who come into contact with the polluted gold money. Herders and ninjas prefer to transform their existing wealth or gold into money and material objects to prevent potential *hel am* attacks or the

misfortune of gold money.

Firstly, the ability to generate wealth is predicated not solely on skill, but also on the ability to sustain peaceful relations with spirits and to manage the ail well. The wealth and prosperity from herding has to be quickly converted to other physical means such that the household will not be at risk of potential *hel am* attacks. For example, by '[converting] their milk into unknown amounts of concealable money, their wealth thereby evades easy quantification, rendering *hel am* attacks more difficult' (83). While High relates this to kinship structures and management of the household, she quickly diverts to an descriptive historical account of the Tögrög, which adds little analytical value to the overall discussion.

Secondly, High unpacks the concept of pollution after mentioning it briefly in previous chapters. This explanation may have been better positioned earlier in the book for the benefit of readers who may not have background knowledge of pollution as a social ordering principle. Providing ethnographic detail about the transgression of the polluting boundaries in ninja communities, High explains how such immoral behaviour results in misfortune that can be transferred to gold money. To prevent the potential misfortune, those in possession of gold money ritually cleanse it or spend it on non-durable items, such as vodka, to prevent the permanence of pollution in the household. Shopkeepers also prioritise the circulation of the gold money to prevent pollution and stagnation of their unsold stock. Shopkeepers constantly reassess the

value of the Tögrög based on its physical condition which is perceived as linked to the degree of pollution and misfortune. Hence, High cautions against analysing such behaviour using capitalist notions of profit without understanding local moral considerations. It was interesting to read how different shopkeepers employ various methods of managing the polluted money, reiterating the point on individualised moral understandings.

Chapter Five (*Wealth and Devotion*) further expands on the methods that various parties engage to navigate the risk of misfortune and the 'weight' of pollution of gold money. Instead of focusing on circulation, this chapter focuses on appeasing the spirits involved. The mining community turns to local Buddhist lamas for appeasement rituals and to 'relieve the physical pain they experience from [mining]' (99). Another moral and ethical dimension emerges in this chapter, with lamas facing dilemmas on whether to carry out appeasement rituals. By carrying out appeasement rituals, they can be seen to legitimise the practices of the mining community which cause suffering to spirits and the environment, and is antithetical to Buddhist understandings and goals. However, nonaction would prove to be more dangerous to disregard the anger and suffering of the spirits. Lamas assume that ninjas continue mining because of their lack of respect for spirits and request for appeasement rituals to maximise their economic yield. However, ninjas see mining as the only viable alternative to herding, and they request for appeasement rituals precisely because they acknowledge these spirits. The disjuncture of views

within the local community reveals the incongruence of understandings of cosmology. It would have been interesting to note if there was any mediation of the opposing perceptions between both parties. High also notes the inversion of understandings of polluted money when contrasted with the lay people. While the community is mainly concerned with *hel am* and misfortune that the accumulation of wealth, and pollution brought about by gold money, respectively risks, the lamas are more concerned with respecting money as a material object, utilising it for the upkeep of the monastery. High could have expanded more on the comparison between these divergent views in order to give a more definitive structure and wider-picture analysis of the community.

In the final chapter, High expands on how polluted gold money can be renewed to become profitable and reduce the misfortune it carries. While she emphasises that local understandings of economy and profit cannot be judged based on conventional theories, she does not develop the concepts of asymmetry or thresholds fully. The chapter focuses on the *tom darga*, the 'big boss' (112) of *altny chanj*, who sets the gold exchange rate among the gold traders and trades gold with Chinese to renew gold money through the yuan, which is seen as more profitable than Tögrög, heavy with the pollution of gold money. High also includes ethnographic evidence of the differentiation between dead and profitable money, emphasising that physical contact with a vessel of fortune was crucial to ensure continued prosperity. Here, the method of managing the pollution of gold money relies on

business acumen and economic risk management to renew money's origins. While this chapter shows the path of gold extending beyond national boundaries, High does not develop the chapter in this manner. As the 'illegal trade was already a priority for the police', High's presence as a foreigner could potentially increase the risks further (119). Hence, this limited her access to exchange and negotiation processes between the *tom darga* and Chinese traders.

Therefore, instead of focusing on the external path of gold, High expanded on the distaste among the local community of the Chinese yuan, where 'some felt it was rubbish (*hog*)' (123). Regardless of whether the money was renewed, being able to trace the money back to the extraction of gold meant it was still polluted and hence undesirable. Linking this to the overall structure of the book which follows the path of gold and gold money, while intersections of pathways occur where broader perceptions converge, there are still divergences among local understandings of morality, cosmology, pollution and risk.

## Conclusion

*Fear and Fortune* provides valuable insight and ethnographic detail that vividly portrays how the community in Uyanga has adapted to ninja mining as an alternative way of life. Through the introductory vignettes to each chapter and the themes discussed, the book sheds light on the complexities, dilemmas and moral implications that come with the extraction of gold and gold money. Issues

of morality, economy, pollution, mutual reliance and coexistence with spirits result in various methods of navigating risk and fear through different roles. The book traces the path of gold, exchanged through various actors, to portray the multiple axes of actors and localised understandings of cosmo-economy and morality.

At times the book could have benefitted from more in-depth theoretical analysis and exploration of sub-themes instead of its heavy use of ethnographic detailing and background information. Furthermore, instead of elaborating one historical detail, including secondary information mentioned in the introduction from sharing notes with her interlocutors would have made for a richer and more nuanced analysis. While High did not explicitly state her positionality nor reflect on her experience as both a female and an outsider in patriarchal households, she does include ethnographic encounters with females of the household who felt repressed under the oppressive hierarchical structures. Reflections on her positionality as a female and an outsider could have added analytical depth to the contrast between the herding community's vertical hierarchy to that of the mining community which is gender-blind and focuses instead on individuals' ability.

For a multi-sited ethnography spanning an extended period of time and the complexity of the themes explored, the book could have benefitted from a more robust conclusion to tie together the interconnected concepts and ethnographic material. As noted in the book's conclusion, *Fear and Fortune* can be used as a springboard for research

in other related areas. For example, the anthropology of money, environment, or mineral extraction. The book can also serve as part of a wider selection of research material for area studies on the Mongolian region, and has the potential to include in-depth research into the livelihood of households engaged in different work. Overall, the book challenges the reader to go beyond conventional ways of thinking to understand complex ways of living that acknowledge the agency of nonhumans to navigate the risk and fear that comes with fortune.

- Da Col, G. 2012. "The elementary economies of Dechenwa life: fortune, vitality and the mountain in Sino-Tibetan borderlands". *Social Analysis*, 56, 74-98.
- High, Mette M. 2017. *Fear and Fortune: Spirit Worlds and Emerging Economies in the Mongolian Gold Rush*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/st-andrews/detail.action?docID=4857537>.