

BOOK REVIEW

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# Book review of *Mobility and Displacement: Nomadism, Identity and Postcolonial Narratives in Mongolia* by Orhon Myadar, 2020

Caroline Upton

## Book details

Orhon Myadar

*Mobility and displacement: Nomadism, identity and postcolonial narratives in Mongolia*

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In this timely and thoughtful book, the author, a Mongolian political geographer now based in the USA, takes issue with what she considers to be environmentally deterministic and orientalist treatments and understandings of pastoral nomads and nomadism, both within Mongolia and beyond. As she states in the introductory chapter, her goal in writing this book is to ‘contest both the orientalising projections by spectators of Mongolia and the self-objectifying tropes Mongolians routinely deploy to represent Mongolia as a land of nomads’ (Myadar 2021:2). Essentialising narratives and the figure of ‘the nomad’ are thus addressed and critiqued throughout this book, both as conceptualised by non-Mongolian, Euro-American scholars, and perpetuated and performed by Mongolians themselves, as an aspect of national identity.

Myadar’s ambitions are realised through a number of thoughtful and fascinating chapters. In Chapter 1, she seeks to situate Mongolia, both geographically and conceptually, and begins to trace out some of the connections between the two. A key assertion here is that common recitations of Mongolia’s geographical/environmental

characteristics, typically by non-Mongolians, often lead seamlessly into environmentally deterministic understandings of pastoral nomadism as the only viable/principal livelihood strategy. However, the author elsewhere adopts a more nuanced stance to acknowledge that environmental characteristics may indeed make nomadism—or at least mobility—a suitable adaptation and that assertions to this effect are not, in fact, inaccurate. Thus, there is something of an under-acknowledged tension here between the author’s acceptance that mobility can be a productive response to prevailing environmental conditions (as advanced in many of the sources highlighted in the book), and conflation of such assertions with environmentally deterministic arguments that consider these the primary or even the sole defining characteristic of local livelihoods and practices.

In subsequent chapters, she goes on to develop her core argument that Mongolia is not in fact a ‘land of nomads’ through attention to the construction of this central figure (Chapters 2 and 3). She highlights how ‘Mongolian herders are treated as exotic beings in a disappearing world’, through both their occupation of an imaginary habitus and a ‘space without borders or

Correspondence: [cu5@le.ac.uk](mailto:cu5@le.ac.uk)  
University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK



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enclosures' (Chapter 2) and the orientalist production of the nomadic 'Other' by diverse historical and contemporary actors and by film and documentary media (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 then focuses on the performance of nomadic identity, drawing on Butler's work on performativity (e.g. Butler, 2006). In particular, it examines the role of the state in creating and perpetuating this 'master narrative' and what Myadar terms a form of 'banal nationalism'. Taken together, these three chapters establish the performative and constructed nature of Mongolian nomadic identity in a considered and insightful way.

Attention then switches in Chapters 5–7 to different historical periods, with the author's stated goal that these chapters will highlight how various barriers have constrained herders' mobility or displaced them over time, and in doing so will challenge and ultimately undermine the 'romantic notion that Mongolia is a land of nomads'. These chapters are interesting and perceptive, although the central argument that herders' mobility is shaped and constrained in various ways is perhaps not as contentious or novel as the author suggests here. The allegedly common misunderstanding that Mongolia's 'traditional nomadic lifestyle' was destroyed during the collective/Soviet period has, of course, been challenged elsewhere, with constraints on mobility in the pre-Soviet era already widely understood and reported. This is evident in the range of both Mongolian and non-Mongolian academic sources cited in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 asserts that 'the sole use of an environmentalist lens to understand the causes of herder mobility would overlook the intricate complexities that dictated people's mobility in socialist Mongolia'. Indeed—I doubt that many contemporary scholars of Mongolia would seriously disagree with this contention, and much work has already been done examining and documenting these 'intricate complexities'.

More interesting—and novel—is the analysis of the role and rationale of the post-Soviet state in developing and promulgating a form of romanticised 'nomadic identity' for Mongolia in Chapter 7, situated in a discussion of wider policy and land reforms, and the growth of tourism and mining following decollectivisation. Further examination of the techniques and rationale for this particular reconstruction of the national identity would have been welcome here, in order to develop this particularly valuable aspect of the book's contributions.

Overall, the author's core arguments seem to rest on a particular understanding of what she terms 'pure nomadism' in which there are, for example, no regulations or actors shaping land rights, access and mobility and herders are able to roam freely without any regular place of settlement. She argues that 'I define the nomad figure as an individual who moves frequently and irregularly in a smooth space, and whose mobility is primarily dictated

by environmental factors .....who move(s) frequently and irregularly unconstrained by boundaries...' (Myadar, 2021: 21). Elsewhere she refers to a 'common imaginery' of nomadism, and her conclusion states 'if- as has been argued by various scholars-nomadism rests upon perpetual mobility, freedom, and political independence, then nomadism hardly characterises Mongolian society...'. This is a big 'if'. While some scholars may share this definition when they talk about nomadism in relation to Mongolia, it seems clear that a considerable number do not, as evident in the sources cited in Chapters 5–8 and the huge body of work that documents the complex drivers of and multiple constraints on mobility, contra assertions of environmental determinism and romanticised imaginations of the 'nomad'. As Terbish (2021:468) in their review of the same book comments, 'The question arises as to whether, to be counted as nomads, herders must be able to move unconstrained by geographical-administrative boundaries and be devoid of any fixed sense of place? If this rigid definition is the main criterion, there probably never was a true nomadic society in the recorded history of Eurasia'. Indeed. Having said that, 'Mobility and Displacement: Nomadism, Identity and Postcolonial Narratives in Mongolia' offers important insights into aspects of historical and contemporary Mongolian society and in particular the constrained and regulated nature of pastoral livelihoods, mobility and land use, contra more romanticised representations. As such, it is a valuable addition to scholarship on the region.

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