The Dangers of Excess
Accumulating and Dispersing Fortune in Mongolia

Rebecca Empson

Abstract: This article explores practices concerned with the accumulation of fortune in present-day Mongolia. By contrasting practices associated with the accumulation of animal herds, children, and immovable property, we see how some are viewed as morally commendable while others are considered morally suspect. It is suggested that when people accumulate too much fortune, misfortune strikes, thereby ensuring the redistribution and release of fortune. By examining the different ways in which fortune and wealth may be released, harnessed, or contained, more general ideas about new ways of accumulating wealth and the dangers of excess in the market economy emerge.

Keywords: accumulation, capitalist economy, excess, fertility, forms of wealth, fortune, misfortune, vitality

When traveling to Mongolia’s capital, Ulaanbaatar, with friends from the countryside, we sometimes stop and wonder in awe at the ‘new rich’ (hurgan bayan, literally, the ‘rich lambs’) who can be seen passing through the streets in their large, blacked-out, 4x4 Jeeps toward their exclusive villas or exchanging wads of money for lavish banquets in Korean restaurants. In Mongolia’s present-day burgeoning capitalist economy, these forms of wealth are a visible feature of what some Mongols have termed ‘wild capitalism’ (zerleg kapitalizm), whereby some appear to have gained money as if from nowhere, while others have none at all.¹ The turns of fortune involved in the accumulation of this kind of wealth are frequently judged as suspect. Somebody somewhere, it is often claimed, must have been seriously cheated in order to secure these possessions.

In contrast, wealth that is visible among herding households in the Mongolian countryside takes the form of animals that roam the pastureland, sometimes at a great distance from the people who herd them. With the collapse of state-run cooperatives in the early 1990s, many families in Mongolia’s countryside turned to household-based animal herding as a form of subsistence. Animal
herds are a vital resource for these families, but not just for food. Through the sale and exchange of animals, a family might also ensure that their children study at a university and that goods such as DVD players and solar panels may be purchased. Accumulating wealth through animal herds is considered commendable and an obvious outcome of people’s genuine hard work and labor.

While each of these forms of wealth turns on its own kind of serendipity, it is on the latter form that I focus in this article. Among the Buriad, an ethnic Mongolian group who migrated to Northeast Mongolia from Siberia in the early 1900s to a district called Ashinga, pastoral herders enact a variety of practices to ‘harness fortune’ (hishig hürteh) for their households. These may be large collective ceremonies such as those at mountain cairns, or they may be lone, everyday acts carried out when someone gives away a pail of milk or sells a cow to a friend or neighbor. In focusing on the flows of fortune so central to these acts, I suggest that they revolve around a particular morality concerned with ideas about when it is appropriate to accumulate or separate off some portion of fortune. Drawing on ideas from my book Harnessing Fortune (Empson 2011), three different practices are explored. The first is concerned with the accumulation of animal fortune for one’s herds, while the second focuses on the fortune of fertility for the survival of one’s children. I will suggest that these two practices share certain features that point to wider ideas about the morality of conducting social relations. My final example examines the consequences of accumulating too much fortune. This allows for an analysis of misfortune and practices that result in the violent dispersal of fortune.

Kinds of Fortune

Like other Mongols, Buriad households in Northeast Mongolia distinguish between kinds of fortune. Hiimori (vitality, might) is generally considered to be individual to a person and circulates inside his or her body. It rises and falls or increases and decreases throughout life according to a person’s behavior and actions, but it is never lost entirely. The kind of fortune I focus on is called hishig (hesheg in the Buriad dialect). This term has been translated into English in a variety of ways, including ‘blessing’, ‘favor’, ‘benefit’, ‘grace’, ‘fortune’, ‘felicity’, and ‘good fortune’. This kind of fortune is conceived as something that circulates outside of the subject but can be harnessed and carefully ‘contained’ in certain forms to secure the growth of people, animals, and things. Actions, such as ‘bestowing’, ‘capturing’, ‘harnessing’, ‘beckoning’, ‘distributing’, ‘receiving from above’, or ‘accepting from a senior’, are often used to describe practices that involve containing this fortune for differing effects (Atwood 2000, 2006; Baumann 2008; Chabros 1992; Humphrey 1987, 2001; Humphrey and Onon 1996: 179; Jagchid and Hyer 1979; Merli 2006; Pedersen 2007). Chabros (1992: 191), for example, explains that this kind of fortune “understood as good-fortune … is in permanent circulation in the world. One may gain it simply by catching it in a suitable vessel, without performing any ritual.” Other scholars have drawn attention to the historical shifts in this
concept. Atwood (2004) explains that, at certain periods, fortune meant one’s turn, place, time, or opportunity in a scheduled and alternating order. While this kind of fortune is linked to a series of related qualities, such as ‘vitality’ (hiimori) and ‘might’ (süld), throughout this article I gloss the term hishig as ‘fortune’ (see also Empson 2007, 2011).

Unlike the English word, which brings to mind ideas about chance or luck as an external, arbitrary force affecting human affairs, fortune here does not necessarily refer to something that happens to you, without your control. Instead, the presence of fortune is evidenced in relation to something outside of yourself, such as the growth of animals or people. Oyunaa, a diviner in Ashinga district, explained it this way: “If you have a lot of food, many animals, clothes, and lots of children, it means you have accumulated a lot of fortune.” In this sense, we may talk of the presence of fortune as something that is realized through its appearance in particular forms, be they children, animals, or various objects.

While fortune may be visible in certain forms, it is also perceived to be an inherently mobile quality or force that exists in the world yet is liable to depart, disperse, or be lost or snatched away. The uncertain residence and fluid nature of fortune means that people take daily precautions so as not to lose it or let it slip away unnoticed to outsiders. In response to my inquiries about fortune, people tended to refer to practices that involved containing it in some way. A host of daily household practices can be understood as motivated by the need to attend to the containment of fortune (something also described by Daniels, this issue; see also Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2012, forthcoming). In the following, I focus on two such practices: harnessing fortune, first, for one’s herds and, second, for the survival of one’s children. These practices point to ideas about when it is acceptable to share or disperse fortune and when it is necessary to contain and accumulate it.

Although this article focuses on one kind of fortune—that accumulated through animal herding—it is important to stress that this kind of fortune is often held to work in tandem with other forces (see Hamayon, this issue; see also Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2012, forthcoming; Pedersen 2012, forthcoming; Swancutt 2012, forthcoming). Intertwined, these forces influence each other in various ways. For instance, in 2005, a local shaman in Ashinga district described these different forces as linked to each other inside the confines of the human body, whereby one force literally ‘rides’ on the back of the other. Another way in which these forces are viewed as co-dependent is through their external circulation, whereby the presence of one kind of fortune is held to ‘attract’ the presence of other kinds. In my discussions with pastoral herders in 1999 and 2000 (Empson 2003), people spoke of these forces as existing in tandem with each other. For instance, one woman explained: “If the household vitality-fortune (geriin hiimori) is bad then everything for that family is bad, including the animal fortune (malyn hishig) … if you have animal fortune it means your food will never be in short supply. Household vitality-fortune means the family will be without diseases and grief and all deeds will be successful … Animal fortune is about food and the family. Vitality-fortune (hiimori) can also be internal and specific to an individual person” (ibid.: 144–145). In this description, we see that people
develop complex ways of thinking about the co-dependence of different kinds of fortune as they try to gauge the presence or absence of one kind or another. From the situated perspective of the domestic encampments of pastoral herders, these forces are intrinsically linked. They permeate people’s interactions with each other and the landscape in a multitude of ways. While I will be focusing on practices that tend to a distinct kind of fortune, it is important to keep in mind that people often think of these different kinds as interdependent ‘fields of fortune’ (see da Col 2007: 215) that are working together alongside each other. Tending to these fields of fortune can be said to take the form of an economy that involves acts of exchanging, hoarding, and accumulating.

**Accumulating Animal Fortune**

One afternoon in late spring, some men came to collect a young bull from the herding family I was living with. Before they took the animal away, Delgermaa, the mother of the household, swiftly reached across the animal and wiped the inside of her coat over its muzzle. She then pulled out a pair of scissors, which she used to cut off a small handful of hair from the bull’s tail. She tied the hair into a loose knot before placing it inside her pocket. Her actions were quick, and it would have been easy to miss them. I later learned that they had to be performed before she handed over the animal to the men who had come to collect it. The money from the bull’s sale would go toward her daughter’s university fees, and its meat would go to people in the district center or travel farther to the markets of Mongolia’s capital. But the knot of tail hair would remain contained inside the house.

This account highlights one of the many practices that involve containing a part of an animal in order to harness ‘animal fortune’ (*malyn hishig*). Buriad pastoralists tend to refer to their domestic animals as a gift that allows them to live, rather than simply as owned property. The presence of animal fortune allows one’s herds to reproduce and prosper, but the exact location of this fortune is unknown. Because of this, all animals have to be treated with respect in order for the herd to increase and grow. When separating an animal from the herd or giving away some animal produce, people extract a piece of the animal being separated. Because the animal fortune may be contained in just one cow, actions that involve keeping back a piece when the animal is sold ensure that the fortune, essential to the whole herd, does not depart with that single animal. “Maybe just one cow in the herd contains this animal fortune,” Delgermaa warned. “If you sell the animal that holds the fortune, there will be problems, for instance, your animals may die.” Extracting a piece of tail hair or rubbing one’s coat across an animal’s muzzle prevents this. As Delgermaa explained: “We take the fortune, and it does not leave the household with that animal.” In this instance, extracting a piece of tail hair is not held to stimulate growth of the animal itself. Rather, by containing a piece of the animal when it leaves, fortune is retained as a collective resource for the herds that remain. Containing a piece thus allows for growth outside of the animal that it has been separated from.
Some households display these collected tail hairs in a visible spot in the household. They may place them in a small bag, sometimes called the ‘fortune bag’ or ‘fortune vessel’ (*hishigiin sav*), which is suspended by a rope in the center of the house. Through such display, visitors are invited to observe the household’s fortune or efficacy, and it is hoped that this display will lead to incremental fortune. Bat-Ochir, for instance, was a wealthy herder whose share of animals, gained when the local cooperative dissolved, had grown into large herds. He was selective about their breeding and owned the biggest bulls in the district. He also made regular offerings to a nearby mountain cairn (*oboo*) and frequently visited the diviner to ensure that his fortune would continue to increase. From the smoke hole in his home (*ger*), several long tail hairs from prized racehorses and cattle could be seen prominently tied to a long rope. Others, however, choose to conceal these pieces inside the household chest, thereby obscuring their resources and capacities from the gaze and judgment of others.

It is useful here to recall Stafford’s (2003: 1) analysis of the “separation constraint.” His phrase refers to the universal anxiety surrounding forms of separation—both of persons from each other and from places—which can be said to amount to a human dilemma in its own right (Stafford 2000). Indeed, it is because of this that we are forced to master the complexities of attachment (or dependence) and separation (or autonomy) on various occasions throughout our lives, and it is often through this that we develop a sense of self. The complex tension between desiring the presence of others while also striving for distance permeates our social relations with people and with the material world around us. Taking into account the ambiguity surrounding different forms of separation, I suggest that similar practices of keeping back a portion at moments of departure and separation can be noted on other occasions, such as when a daughter leaves her natal home at marriage, or during collective mountain ceremonies, or when a child is separated from the spirit world. During these events, certain actions that involve keeping back a piece from the person, animal, or thing that is departing ensures that fortune is retained for the household. Animal fortune may also be harnessed through the consecration of an animal. Such animals are not ridden or sold and are sometimes blessed at annual mountain ceremonies. This animal should not be viewed as an offering to some ‘higher being’. Rather, through consecration, it is transformed into a vessel (*sav*, also meaning ‘uterus’) that roams across the surface of the landscape, accumulating fortune for the rest of the herd.

In relation to this, Humphrey and Hürelbaatar (forthcoming) have noted that, at the most basic level, it is the herds, wild animals, and spirits who are the landscape. It is they who traverse the land and gather the fortune that engenders the fertility and vital energy that makes places. For example, it is the roaming goats that turn areas of barren mountains into pastureland, thus carrying the fortune that sustains the fertility of places and vital energy of people. We may say that it is not so much the land but rather the animals traversing the landscape that gather and carry its fortune and vitality. It is they who are the animated part of the land. This essentially shamanic perspective of a mobile landscape can be harnessed so that a portion of its fecundity may be brought into the household.2
The ability to harness this mobile force suggests that it is not just animals that carry this fortune. Any produce derived from them may also contain fortune and has to be treated in particular ways. When giving away cream or milk, for example, the giver pours the contents of her or his container into the recipient’s container, placed on the ground. When the recipient’s container is full, the giver pours back a small amount of the cream or milk into his or her own container so that the ‘sacred portion’ (deej), held to contain the fortune of one’s animals, is retained. Delgermaa explained that when selling cream or milk or giving it away to some relatives in the district center, she always retained a portion of this produce to make sure that the fortune did not leave the household.

Animal herds are the main source of wealth for many households in Ashinga district, and families are very careful to attend to them in a multitude of different ways. Ensuring that animal fortune is contained affects the life of households in ways that have ramifications for every member. If fortune disperses or is lost, a household may be vulnerable to misfortune in the form of animals dying and people falling ill, spirit and human curses (lusyn haraal and tsagaan/har hel am), or pollution that enters from outside (buzar). Respect for animal fortune, in part due to people’s wishes to have abundance and plenty, is also necessary because portions of milk products are used at morning libations to the invisible ‘masters of the land’ (gazaryn ezen) that populate the landscape. People thus benefit from the fortune of their animals and retain things that may contain this fortune in order to use portions of it in offerings. Rituals such as these draw attention to the idea that people are not the absolute owners but rather the ‘custodians’ of the seasonal places where they live and that their residence in any place may be contested and challenged in various ways (Empson, forthcoming; Sneath 2002).

I have suggested that wealth in herds and an abundance of their produce are attributed to the presence of animal fortune, and that if a family harnesses this fortune, their life will be plentiful. However, the spatial uncertainty of fortune means that people have to take daily precautions to ensure that the part of their fortune that exists somewhere among their animals and their produce is not liable to slip away. A host of daily household practices can be explained by understanding animal fortune (1) as residing in the landscape among animate beings who roam its expansive territory, (2) as ‘rubbing off’ as material memory on certain objects or produce, and (3) as something one has to engage with in a particular way because, if neglected, it is liable to disperse or drift away.

Here, fortune appears as a facilitating feature that permeates one’s wealth and assets. It is also an unstable feature that threatens to make one’s wealth temporary. Because this kind of fortune is external to oneself, one can never be entirely certain of its presence. Yet certain practices, it is hoped, ensure that one has harnessed some part or portion of it. These ways of harnessing fortune to a particular household contrast with the second example of conducting social relations that I am examining, in which fortune may be carefully shared and distributed between families through the loan of particular objects.
The Fortune of Fertility

It was not only state-run cooperatives that ceased to function in the early 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia’s infrastructure and economy came to an almost complete halt. While hospitals and clinics had previously been widespread throughout the country, medical professionals suddenly found themselves without salaries and resources. Many doctors, nurses, and veterinarians were forced to leave their professions and herd animals in the far countryside. Throughout Mongolia, seemingly everyday medical treatments became unavailable. As transport and medicine became scarce, women increasingly gave birth at home, infant mortality rates rose, and primary healthcare facilities declined.

With the rise in infant mortalities, many young mothers now increasingly spend the first few years of their children’s lives concerned with a host of different practices that are believed to ensure their survival. Women in Ashinga district refer to households with many children as ‘families with many umbilical cords’ (tíii buten ail). The reference to umbilical cords is literal. After a child is born, a piece of the umbilical cord is carefully retained, wrapped in a blue ceremonial silk scarf, and placed at the bottom of a chest, common to most Buriad households. These pieces are not passed on over generations and are very rarely handled or exposed for view. The presence of these objects, concealed inside the household chest, is held to contain the fortune, vitality, and blessing needed for the survival of one’s children. The pieces are thought to have an effect on those who live in their vicinity. Their presence gathers further fortune to the household, acts as a form of protection for the children, and ensures the appearance of future children. In this sense, ‘households with many umbilical cords’ are considered to be ‘with fortune’ (hishigtei), and their children are a visible manifestation of the fortune that resides therein.

In contrast, families with frequent infant mortalities are considered to be lacking in fortune. Alongside what may be termed a range of biomedical and herbal remedies, such as crushing penicillin and applying it as a paste on sores or soothing mastitis with a bear paw, these families may borrow bits of material, clothes, and cots from families with many children in order to make sure that their infants remain healthy. Such objects are held to contain some part or portion of the fortune that ensured the survival of the children who used them. It is also hoped that they may generate fortune for those who engage with them. Togtoh, the kindergarten cook in the district center, for example, explained that it is common for a single cot to be passed between different households as it accumulates the fortune of having cared for many infants and distributes this fortune to its users. In turn, clothes used by many children are worn by children from families with frequent infant mortalities: the material is thought to envelop them in a shield of fortune, helping them to survive. In fact, Togtoh’s own son spent the first few years of his life wearing the elaborate ribbons and dresses of a neighboring family who had many healthy children.

From these examples, we see that material objects, such as dresses and cots, are believed to contain some element of fortune that will affect those who
engage with them. Fortune, here, appears to reside in things that have to be carefully managed so that it can be distributed to particular people who may need it or are lacking it. Loaning these kinds of objects to others is, of course, not without risks. Fortune may be stolen, or the object could become ‘polluted’ (buzar) through further use. In cases where a family has lost many children, an infant may be temporarily housed with another family ‘with many umbilical cords’. In so doing, people hope to prevent the souls of deceased children from appropriating the body of the young infant, thereby perpetuating the cycle of loss. By disguising their child as belonging to another family, parents also hope that their child will itself act as a kind of vault or vessel that harnesses some of the other family’s fortune as their own. Like the collected umbilical cords or pieces of tail hair, the presence of these other children on the child is thought to affect its survival.

Togtoh came from a family of 10 children. When she was young, a neighboring family that had lost several infants placed its young child with her family as a way to ensure its survival. She explained: “In our family there are as many boys as there are cattle. Because of this, the mother came to us and asked if she could leave her child at our house. That child grew up with us. Later, when he was about three years old, he returned to his family, but he would sometimes get ill. His mother would say, ‘You are not my child,’ and she would send him to our house and he would get better.” From these brief accounts, we get a sense that body parts, such as tail hairs or umbilical cords, and material objects, such as cots and clothes, are gathered or carefully exchanged in the hope that they may harness fortune. Here, fortune appears to be necessary for the reproduction and growth of humans and animals. It is a component or feature of many animate things that are dependent on its presence for survival. In this sense, fortune may be viewed as one way in which the Buriad hold that growth and generation are achieved. This is not to suggest a non-naturalist ontology, but that a naturalist ontology might take a form that includes elements such as fortune, vitality, and might (Empson 2011).

Fortune is not always confined to the generation of living things. It is also necessary for the accumulation of forms of wealth that we may view as objects. In this sense, objects, animals, and people are all attributed with fortune. They are the visible manifestation of harnessed fortune, as well as the conduits or vessels for gathering further fortune. They are the vaults in which fortune rests, as well as the mediums through which fortune passes. In all cases, it is never entirely certain where this fortune resides. Precautions that involve keeping back a piece ensure that fortune is retained or circulated in acceptable ways so that things may continue to multiply and grow.

It should be clear that fortune is conceived by the Buriad as a quality that determines the health, welfare, and prosperity of a person. A person’s body is not simply composed of various parts, such as the kidney, liver, and heart; it is also dependent on the presence of various forces that can escape the confines of the body entirely, leaving it vulnerable to misfortune or illness. The presence or absence of these forces highlights a fluctuating way of being, a point that has been made by da Col. In his work on Tibetan concepts of personhood,
da Col (2007) highlights that a person may be viewed as donning a ‘clothing’ of fortune that determines the person’s capacities. These capacities are dependent on the state of fortune present in the person (ibid.). This fluctuating way of being allows for different temporal possibilities determined by the presence or absence, or the increase or decrease, of fortune due to one’s actions and those of others. Keeping in mind the idea that it is the actions of people and their relations with others that determine a person’s capacities, I focus now on when it is acceptable to give or disperse this fortune and when it is acceptable to contain and accumulate it.

The Flows of Fortune

While people may specify where fortune resides, they hardly ever elaborate where fortune comes from. Certain practices or actions are held to harness fortune, but this is not because someone else ‘owns’ it. When I asked Oyunaa, the local diviner, where fortune comes from, she explained simply that “people call and harness fortune that resides in the mountains and cairns and keep their share.” At times, various religious specialists gave complex explanations about who or what granted fortune to people. These ranged from the invisible ‘land masters’, who inhabit cairns and other sacred places, to ancestral spirits, who reside in the ‘good fortune sky’ (located in the ‘eastern 44 skies’). People sometimes stressed that they could be ‘with fortune’ if they received something, such as a sweet or a gift from a senior, or if they overheard a piece of crucial information. Yet this aspect of fortune—as something that may be received from someone else—was usually emphasized only at large-scale ceremonies or by religious specialists. Even then, the giver often remained an abstract donor rather than a personified subject.

By focusing on everyday practices that are understood to harness fortune, we may say that, rather than being something that is bestowed on people, fortune is “in the world [and is] always and pervasively ‘there’” (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 145), although certain steps need to be taken to ensure that it is contained in a suitable way. Many people carry out these acts on their own, in the context of everyday life, because they are intensely felt to be the right way to do things. In this regard, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have argued that, rather than a definable category of distinctive kinds of events, ritual is a quality that action can come to have. They make the important point that ritual is a feature of an act and that this feature does not necessarily have to be religious. The feature or quality of action that they suggest defines ritual is the modification of normal modes of intentionality. In rituals, participants both are and are not the authors of their acts. Acts in rituals tend to be stipulated in advance, and the thoughts and intentions of participants do not alter these acts (ibid.: 5). Ritualized acts are, thus, unlike usual acts that are given meaning by the intention of the person acting, in that, in these cases, the intentions of the person appear suspended.

Some of the practices I have been describing seem to echo this definition of ritualized acts and suspended intentionality. Loaning particular objects, such
as a cot, is a deliberate act that is directed toward particular outcomes, yet when harnessing fortune through lone everyday activities, people suspend their intention and claim that it is not the meaning of the act that is important—what is important is that the act itself is carried out in a particular way. This, they argue, is the right way to do things. While most people are not interested in identifying where exactly, or from whom, fortune comes, as long as one conducts certain acts, I was repeatedly told, one may be lucky enough to gather some of it. Rather than be motivated by some desired outcome, it was important to carry out these acts as a part of one’s everyday activities. Through this, fortune might be harnessed.

Humphrey and Laidlaw’s (1994) approach is useful in understanding why people find it unimportant to describe explicitly how these practices work. While some give complex cosmological explanations to account for their fortune, most people do not think of it as being bestowed on them from some higher being. Instead, they reason that if they carry out certain acts and attend to its containment, they will have fortune. In this sense, the acts themselves do not demand that people think explicitly about what they will achieve through them, and most people say that this is just what we do. Not being able to explain how such acts work is to maintain a kind of favorable skepticism as to their efficacy. It is this combination of skepticism and faith that motivates the repetition of these acts. In focusing on practices enacted to harness fortune, I may not be describing what fortune itself is; rather, I am examining the way that fortune is made to appear through various practices and actions. This is to privilege the idea that techniques used to make visible the lone, everyday private acts and wider practices become the means by which we understand what fortune is.

While acts performed to harness fortune occur at diverse occasions, within these actions we can identify a set of shared features: (1) at moments of departure or transition, a piece is extracted from the person, animal, or thing that is departing; (2) this piece is carefully retained inside the house; and (3) this piece is held to contain fortune that is made visible outside of the piece itself. These shared features point to a wider sense of what we might call an ‘aesthetic of propriety’, which generates particular ways of interacting with others (Empson 2011). The term ‘aesthetics’ has suffered particularly badly in anthropology. Gell (1998), for example, has criticized the evaluation of art objects in relation to aesthetics. An aesthetic view, he claims, reduces objects to representations or vehicles of symbolic meaning. This risks reducing our analysis to a branch of semiotics, whose theoretical affinities lie in Western theory, and obscures the technological skill and social interactions that go into the making and use of objects (ibid.: ix). Instead, Gell posits a technological model for the explanation of the agency of art objects. Here, objects appear efficacious because they act as indexes of people—that is, they abduct the agency of their producers and “enmesh patients” (such as viewers) in relations and intentionalities sought by the agents who make them (ibid.: x). Gell’s concept of agency has affinities with the idea of animism, whereby intentionality may be attributed to or abducted by inanimate objects. For Gell (ibid.), objects appear to have a kind of agency because they mediate relations between humans (see Thomas 2001).
One may say that while Gell does not offer a very clear definition of what he means by the term ‘aesthetic’, he is very clear about what he wants to avoid in the use of an aesthetic approach to objects.

Other anthropologists have used the term ‘aesthetic’ in a broader sense, beyond the confines of art objects, to focus on ideas about the form that certain social relations take. For example, Weiner (2001: 16) suggests that aesthetics need not be “restricted to a consideration of how a notion of beauty or sensory fitness is achieved in any given tradition.” Instead, he suggests that the term ‘aesthetic’ may refer to the elicitation and judgment of proper social forms. These judgments are often tacit, such as, for example, ideas as to what constitutes a proper house or marriage (ibid.). In this view, the judgment of particular social relations may be described as an “aesthetic act” (Leach 2002: 717). Drawing on this broader sense of the term, an aesthetic sensibility points to what we might generally understand to be a kind of morality. Strathern (1988: 277) uses the term ‘aesthetics’ in this way when she comments: “The criteria that I have been calling aesthetic with regard to form can also be called moral: the self is judged by the way it activates its relationships.” If people are judged by the kinds of relations that they are able to activate, then reproducing judgments of this kind may be viewed as an aesthetic and political activity (Jay 1992; Redfield 2006: 273).

I have suggested that practices involving harnessing fortune often point to wider judgments concerned with the right or correct means of accumulating wealth. This sense of correctness reveals a more general sensibility about the way in which things should be performed, not because they hold some powerful symbolic meaning, but because they are held to be morally right or correct (zōv). I use the term ‘morality’ here to refer to the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities and to the more general idea that individuals constitute themselves as subjects through such moral conduct (Humphrey 1997: 25, 44). To be a proper person, for example, I had to learn how to carry pails of milk correctly and when to retain a portion of this milk for the household when giving it to a neighbor or relative. Carrying out these practices correctly was a way of constituting myself as a person who was part of a nexus of wider social relations. Doing something in a different way would not simply reflect badly on me as a person; things could also go wrong if these activities were not carried out as they should be. Fortune could be lost, animals could die, or relations with others might be upset, provoking jealousy and suspicion. Attending to the flow of fortune through everyday practices is, then, part of a wider way to manage one’s relations with others (Empson 2011).

Here we see that ideas about what counts as proper social ‘form’ can apply to areas where we would normally look for ideas about morality or politics. My use of the term ‘aesthetics’ is thus meant to bridge ideas about ethics as a form of self-cultivation or individual desire and ideas about morality as a shared and relational mode of subjectivity. In this regard, practices involved in harnessing fortune may be said to scale outward to different spheres. Fortune, in this sense, is a mode of action. It is what motivates action and the form that action takes. Importantly, actions such as these not only illuminate how people go
about interacting with each other, but also point to ideas about what relations and people are being made through these kinds of practices.

The Misfortune of Fortune

In this section, I return to the example presented at the beginning of this article. If we recall, the means by which the ‘new rich’ accumulate wealth is often assumed to be suspect. Wealth in herding, however, is seen as an outcome of people’s hard work and labor. I do not have the space here to outline how the morality or immorality of accumulating wealth might be traced historically (for details, see Empson 2011), but in contrast to the socialist period, in the present capitalist economy of Mongolia there is a stark and very visible difference between kinds of wealth accumulation. A major feature of this has been the emergence of private property as something that is owned by individuals (Humphrey 2002). Among pastoral herders, we have seen, wealth appears and then disappears in the mobile herds that traverse the landscape and can be distributed between different family members. In contrast, wealth in private property is often not distributable (at least not in the same way) and is tied to individual people. In addition, it is often unclear what activities or exactly which relations went into the accumulation of this kind of wealth. These aspects frequently make the appearance of stationary forms of wealth appear morally suspect.

For the past 10 years, people in Ashinga’s district center have been sabotaging, destroying, and burning down each other’s private property in an attempt to separate each other from these new forms of wealth. Over 55 elaborately decorated wooden houses and shops, for example, have been burnt to the ground through acts of arson. Each time a new shop opens in the district center or a two-story wooden house is built, residents take precautions to ensure that their buildings and stock are safe from sabotage. Despite their efforts, fires keep occurring and buildings are destroyed. Through these kinds of attacks, the accumulation of wealth in private property is constantly being challenged and contested. It is not simply that people associate the accumulation of wealth in private property as immoral; rather, I suggest that what is being challenged in these acts of destruction is the means by which such wealth has been achieved. Being able to run a well-stocked shop or live in a two-story, wooden house is viewed by many as an outcome of mysterious and generally unobtainable resources. In short, accumulating this kind of wealth stands against the idea that wealth is something to be gained through collective activities that can be distributed and shared.

Burning down each other’s houses is not simply a comment on the means of accumulating and distributing wealth. It is also a way to separate people physically from the form that fortune takes, not least because the carefully gathered pieces that are held to harness fortune to a particular household, such as tail hairs, umbilical cords, and cots, often disappear in these flames. While fortune itself cannot be stolen, the means by which it is harnessed and the form that it takes can be destroyed. Burning down houses in the district center is one way
to detach people from these sites of accumulated fortune, thereby separating or releasing this fortune, making it mobile and available to others. What is realized through such acts of release is not wealth itself but the ability to acquire and the potential to catch fortune. In this sense, arson may be viewed as a deliberate act of redistributing and releasing fortune.

As we have seen, fortune is linked not only to tangible wealth but also to people’s capacities, such as fertility and vitality. Fortune can thus be understood as a facilitating element or feature that can take the form of varied kinds of assets, including private property as well as herds and aspects of people. Burning down someone’s house and everything in it is a very visible act of humiliation that renders the victim lacking in multiple ways. At a time when there is increasing contrast between forms of wealth, people are concerned with harnessing fortune as an element that will ensure success in varied and different spheres. They have to be careful about the ways in which they do this, however, lest the accumulation of too much fortune invites its polar opposite: misfortune (see also Broz and Willerslev 2012, forthcoming). In this regard, it is perhaps not surprising that the word for ‘arson’ in Mongolian (shataah) is also the word for ‘bankruptcy’. This word is also a well-known curse word that may be uttered at people when wishing misfortune and destruction to befall them. In addition to being viewed as a very literal way of detaching people from their fortune, the act of arson, then, is a more general comment on the mistrust generated by new ways of accumulating wealth and on the dangers of excess in the rapidly changing economy. This sense of mistrust extends to include the ambivalence people feel toward the wealth to be gained from mining Mongolia’s mineral resources, while avoiding the dangers and pitfalls associated with a rentier state.

**Concluding Remarks**

This article has attempted to outline some of the basic features that underlie practices concerned with harnessing fortune for Buriad households in Mongolia. It has linked these to current concerns with the accumulation of wealth and prosperity in the capitalist economy. I have suggested that certain features aimed at harnessing fortune are replicated in different kinds of interactions and may be viewed as part of a wider moral sensibility—or aesthetic—that points to ideas about the correct way to accumulate fortune through particular kinds of social relations. Here, the means by which people accumulate fortune becomes a reflection of how they constitute themselves as subjects. In saying this, I intend to highlight features of certain practices that are held to engender specific effects. While people in Ashinga insist that harnessing fortune through these practices ensures the growth of animals, people, and things, I also suggest that certain social relations are deliberately being generated as an outcome of these practices.

These social relations may be said to pivot around a series of tensions that aim to strike a balance between the separation and containment or the concealment and display of wealth in objects, animals, and people. New and emerging
ways of accumulating wealth are being questioned, with judgments being cast on when it is acceptable to share, to contain, to withhold, or to release fortune. In this process, new kinds of social relations are continuously being forged as people encounter the ever more complex flows of fortune in their midst.

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Rebecca Empson is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at University College London. Prior to this, she held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship and a Leverhulme Trust Research Associateship at the University of Cambridge. Her monograph Harnessing Fortune (2011), on which much of this article is based, is published by Oxford University Press.

Notes

1. The term ‘wild capitalism’ is sometimes contrasted with the term ‘developed capitalism’ (högjiugüi kapitalizm).
2. Like the continual movement of large shoals of fish sought by fishermen at sea, the animals roam the landscape, while people capture and utilize the animals’ vitality and fortune for their own means.
3. The term ezen is usually translated as ‘owner’, but also means ‘lord’, ‘head’, or ‘master’ and is used to denote asymmetrical relations entailing obligation at several different scales or levels. For example, the word ‘master’ (ezen) is used for the eldest male of a household, for the head of a factory, or the heads of other large-scale enterprises (cf. Sneath 2001: 47).
4. In Humphrey and Laidlaw’s (1994) terminology, the word ‘ritual’ says something different and more precise than the term ‘aesthetic’. ‘Ritual’ has features in relation to constitutive rules, which ‘aesthetic’ does not necessarily have. Plus, it does not have the connotations of style or art that ‘aesthetic’ has.
5. I am aware that in this broader sense the term ‘aesthetics’ may become a kind of substitute for the term ‘culture’. See Howell (1997b), who makes a similar point regarding the term ‘morality’.
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