



## Breathing What Air?

Reflections on Mongolia  
Before and After Covid-19

---

Cloud and Sheep, Inner  
Mongolia. PC: Jonathan  
Kos-Read.

Rebekah PLUECKHAHN

**T**he rush of government responses to curb the spread of Covid-19 throughout different parts of the world has highlighted existing inequalities in stark terms, as well as facilitating the emergence of new ones. In urban areas, lockdowns, while very much effective in reducing the spread of the virus, have formed a rapid, unprecedented, and unforeseen (in most spheres) rupture. Lockdowns, as Arundhati Roy (2020) writes, have ‘worked like a chemical experiment that

suddenly illuminated hidden things’. For many, though, these ‘hidden’ inequalities were well known before Covid-19 began to spread. In most places, certain segments of the population, including those in precarious work, insecure housing, or with existing health conditions, have borne the brunt of the effects of the virus on the body, as well as many of the reverberating effects of the implementation of responses adopted to curb its spread (Fassin 2020). The diffusion of Covid-19 has demonstrated—if

it had not already been evident—the need to invest in equitable health and other essential infrastructures and services in preparation for major crisis events.

Focussing on legacies of inequality opens up a longer *durée*—the ‘before’ Covid-19, as well as a wider perspective on the many rapidly changing events now unfolding each day. While there will possibly be new paths opened by these virus-eliminating strategies that may reshape our political spheres, our senses of a collective social responsibility, or government welfare programmes, it has yet to be seen whether the weights of ‘previous’ unequal wealth distributions and infrastructural provision will be too cumbersome to reshape at times of such rapid change. In the meantime, there is a chance to zoom out, as it were, to consider what kinds of ‘life’ are being preserved by, or neglected in, attempts to combat the virus. In the examples I refer to here, drawing from ethnography in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and reflections on recent developments in Australia and elsewhere, the lungs and surrounding air are paramount. So, too, is the preserving of life. But *whose* life, and *what* air remain striking questions both ‘before’ and ‘after’ this current age. These questions, like the virus itself, emerge from the hyper-connectivity and diverse types of accumulation that form some of the inherent features of late capitalism.

## Rethinking Hyper-connectivity and Isolation

Between 2009 and 2013, mobility and connectivity were reshaping Mongolia’s economy. Flows of investment into mining infrastructure in southern Gobi Desert regions gave rise to heightened investment in secondary industries and construction in the urban capital, Ulaanbaatar. Long-planned-for systems of housing finance were launched. Trucks laden with coal barrelled

one after another through the desert on open stretches of road towards Mongolia’s southern border with China, fuelling China’s need for coking coal and helping to support booms in urban construction. Connectivity formed types of economic stimulus that opened new possibilities, giving rise to complex forms of financialisation and boosting personal ambitions and profits.

This connectivity was also an impediment—Mongolia’s economy was extremely sensitive to a subsequent downturn in commodity prices, China’s lessening need for coal, and a withdrawal of different forms of financial investment. Conducting ethnography during those years of economic flux highlighted the seductive distraction of ‘boom and bust’ narratives. It also revealed the rupture effect of discourses of crisis or *hyamral* (in Mongolian), fuelled by an environment of steepening personal and public debt (Bonilla 2016). At the same time, tracing experiences of economic flux also exposed fundamental senses of time that stretched well before any kind of postsocialist economic ‘boom’. Visions of what might be possible in an unclear future shaped people’s creative strategies in finding new solutions in the present strategies that drew from past familial networks and entrepreneurial techniques (Empson 2020).

On a global scale, Covid-19 has similarly called into question some of the contradictory outcomes of hyper-connectivity. It has, as Roy (2020) further writes, unlike flows of capital, sought proliferation, not profit, and has in many ways ‘reversed the direction of the flow’. Since January 2020, there has been a reshaping of what it means to be a so-called success—one that is far more linked to health outcomes, rather than the economy-centric understandings of success that have shaped so much of geopolitical power relationships for a long time. Success stories, such as New Zealand with zero new cases in June and July, are those with the ability to successfully isolate. Staying apart, as an Australian government slogan goes, keeps us together and saves lives—messaging that people in Victoria,

Australia, see emblazoned on freeway message boards and Facebook ads as we live through another, more stringent lockdown due to a significant rise in community transmission of the virus. Success stories now are those that avert disaster—an economy that is more shut off, protecting people’s health and the health systems that support them.

However, as noted by Minnegal and Dwyer (2020), there are reverberating ironies to isolation and attempts to curb the spread of Covid-19. One irony is that reducing the spread of Covid-19 has given rise to new vulnerabilities and is having cascading effects that are likely to outlast the virus. Some of these reverberating effects will be something that people living in less infrastructurally equitable urban environments have long experienced.

## Managing Air Pollution in Ulaanbaatar

As I walked up an uneven dirt track with Saraa (pseudonym) towards her home in Ulaanbaatar in October 2019—well before there was knowledge of Covid-19—the wind whipped against our bodies. We pressed ahead, passing through a narrow walkway between two fenced parcels of land and emerging out on to a crest of a hill. The land plots on this newer part of a district of Ulaanbaatar were more sparsely placed. The fences closely hugged this narrow, unpaved road that arched away from the city. From this crest of the hill, the city lay below us in a sweeping panorama—clusters of apartment buildings, both old and some very new, lay surrounded by rolling mountains.



Ger districts and Ulaanbaatar’s centre, October 2019. PC: Rebekah Plueckhahn.

In the late afternoon autumn sun, plumes of smoke rose up from Power Plant No. 3 to our right—the thermal power plant that partially heats Ulaanbaatar’s District Heating Service, supplying heating to the city’s apartment and commercial buildings. Expanding out from this centre of Ulaanbaatar were land plots like Saraa’s—fenced parcels containing self-built homes or *ger*, the collapsible felt dwellings used by Mongolia’s many mobile pastoralists. These *ger* districts, as they are known, constitute a significant amount of Ulaanbaatar’s urban land mass, and are not connected to the city’s heating service, running water, or sewerage.

Since the early 2000s and until that autumn, Ulaanbaatar had experienced severe seasonal winter air pollution, as a result of households burning low-grade raw coal to keep warm in the *ger* districts. These continuing seasonal experiences of severe pollution, as coal smoke settles over the city trapped by its surrounding mountains, had been culminating in a perpetuating sense of environmental and political crisis. This context directly arises from legal and political processes that have shaped Ulaanbaatar’s postsocialist experience (Sorace 2018). As a larger response to continued air pollution, when I visited Saraa last October the Ulaanbaatar municipal government had just initiated a programme whereby the burning of raw coal for heating was banned and residents were required to only burn new ‘smokeless’ briquettes called ‘*sainjrulsan tülsh*’ or ‘improved fuel’. These are ‘tablets’, or *shahmal*, consisting of a type of compacted, washed coal powder. In these early weeks of the programme, the sky had been noticeably clearer, arguably a watershed moment in Ulaanbaatar’s postsocialist environmental history. However, as this was happening, other stories were emerging. This new fuel source, it was rumoured, burnt differently, using up different levels of oxygen compared with the raw coal that people were used to (Bayartsogt 2019). Several people had unfortunately died, purportedly from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, and the company producing the

new tablets had been urging people to keep their stoves clean in order to minimise risks (Bayartsogt 2019).

As I researched in this district that month as part of a project examining public transport access, I travelled with several municipal workers as they conducted an active educational public health campaign that consisted of visiting households one by one from 5pm into the evening, communicating with them on the need to keep more air flowing through *gers* and houses in order to avoid CO poisoning. While CO poisoning had also previously occurred due to burning raw coal in households, this new fuel required adjustments, education, and adaptation.



A sign informing people of the new fuel as well as providing instructions on how to burn it safely. PC: Rebekah Plueckhahn.

As I spent time in this *ger* district, I reflected on the inequities emerging through this fuel transition. Changing the fuel did not address the underlying need for a more sustainable, comprehensive form of heating infrastructure throughout the *ger* districts. While it has been reported that there was a subsequent improvement in particulate matter pollution that winter in Ulaanbaatar (Ganbat et al. 2020), the coal briquette solution—arguably a lot cheaper to implement than centrally supplied heating infrastructure—offset the costs on to *ger* district residents.

Watching the different events around the world over the past few months caused me to reflect on the unfolding of the new coal programme and seeing Ulaanbaatar residents grapple with government policies that had reverberating effects. People around the world have now needed to significantly adjust, withdraw, and compromise to limit the spread of Covid-19. It has given rise to vulnerabilities that span beyond and within existing power relationships—*every body* is vulnerable to this novel virus. The virus has, to quote Judith Butler (2016, 25), highlighted vulnerability, not as a subjective disposition, but as a relation between a body ‘to a field of objects [and] forces ... that impinge on or affect us in some way’.

Saraa in Ulaanbaatar did not describe herself as someone who struggles. She articulated resourceful ways she was attempting to negotiate the physically and infrastructurally uneven landscape around her. Our very first discussion was about her plans to set up a playground using land within her fenced plot so that nearby children have somewhere to gather. She had devised clever ways of minimising the cost of the more expensive private taxis in getting her two children to school up and down arduous unpaved roads, with one child sitting on another’s lap in order to save on taxi fare. These strategies required work—the intermittent nature of the informal ‘taxi’ service required her to vigilantly watch for her children every afternoon after school, as she was not sure when they would arrive exactly. These strategies created possibility, but also required the labour of hypervigilance.

## Coping with Seismic Shifts

Mongolians have demonstrated time and time again their ability to move through and adapt to seismic shifts. The transition from socialism to a market economy after 1990 saw the proliferation of different kinds of

enterprise and diverse economies, as well as the sequestering of wealth into the hands of a minority through uneven processes of privatisation (Byambabaatar 2018). In recent years, new strategies have emerged as Mongolia has grappled with considerable economic flux (Empson 2020; Plueckhahn 2020).

Understanding the very real risk of health catastrophe that this virus could bring, the Mongolian government implemented lockdowns at the very beginning of Covid-19, suspending flights to and from China on 1 February and all flights to and from South Korea and Japan by the end of the month (Munkhbat 2020). A long-term closure of schools and universities followed, along with non-essential businesses shutting down or shifting to work-from-home arrangements (Krusekopf and Mendee 2020). The restricting of flights continues to this day, even severely limiting the ability of many Mongolian citizens currently abroad to return, as government evacuation flights are few and demand outstrips supply (Walker et al. 2020). While there are some programmes of repatriation, this lack of wholesale government-organised return of citizens has been criticised by many Mongolians stuck abroad. In the lead-up to national parliamentary elections in June 2020, the national government declared that international arrivals will be restricted until a vaccine is available.

Overall, such efforts to lock down the country have been described as a success, albeit a bittersweet one (Krusekopf and Mendee 2020). In April, a video was posted on Facebook that included a renamed Mr Bean sketch where Mr Bean (aka ‘Mongolia’) vanquished a Judo opponent (aka ‘Covid-19’) by sneaking up behind him, pushing him over, rolling him up in the martial arts mat and sitting on him rather than fighting with him directly (Düürenbayar 2020). This appropriated comedic sketch rings true—the numbers of confirmed cases have remained small, with 310 total cases occurring from returned travellers as of 5 September 2020 and no evidence of community transmission.

However, like many other places around the world right now, such ‘success’ has come at an economic cost. Claims for unemployment have increased within Mongolia, and businesses and individuals reliant on freight or large and small-scale cross-border trade have been severely affected (Odbayar 2020). Many borrowers have requested the deferral of mortgage repayments (Krusekopf and Mendee 2020). As seen during other periods of local economic hardship, such as the economic downturn and flux that spanned 2014–16, there is a tendency towards buying locally produced foods and gifts, especially in the lead-up to this year’s Tsagaan Sar, or Lunar New Year celebrations, in February (Bayarsaikhan 2020).

Many people within the *ger* districts rely on sourcing goods from China to sell locally, as well as working as traders at Ulaanbaatar’s train station. While there is no doubting the effectiveness of the lockdown, like many places around the world, those who have been affected most acutely are often those who have been shouldering the greatest levels of economic precarity well before the spread of Covid-19.

## Realignments

Like the briquette programme introduced last winter in Ulaanbaatar, attempts to create infrastructures of improvement or containment that lessen the impact of both air pollution in Ulaanbaatar and the spread of Covid-19 have had considerable social repercussions. Hyper-connectivity and increasing urbanisation, both forming conditions of late capitalism, have given rise to the adverse effects of increasing air pollution (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019), and easy pathways for this virus to spread. Those most vulnerable are often asked to bear the brunt of attempts to alleviate these environmental and health crises, creating complex reverberating types of responsibilities borne by those without safety nets. While the new fuel programme in Ulaanbaatar

allowed the air to be clearer for all, *ger* district residents needed to adapt to a new fuel that, for some, had devastating consequences. While we all may be vulnerable to the virus, or to air pollution, attempts to curb its spread are felt very differently.

Covid-19 has created new alignments in the distribution of economic precarity on a global scale and the types of power relationships that underpin them. It is definitely ‘more than a virus’ (Roy 2020). However, this has happened at such a fast rate and there is no way of knowing whether such revisioning or realigning is temporary or not. Covid-19 has also given rise to significant temporal shifts. While it came on extremely quickly, we do not know how long we will need to adapt. Whether or not this ends soon or over a number of years, people like Saraa will need to navigate uncertain urban landscapes, strategising ways to incrementally alleviate different kinds of infrastructural ‘gaps’ that existed long before lockdown. ■

Sections of this paper draw from research conducted in 2019 as part of the Ulaanbaatar Accessibility Appraisal (UNAA) Project funded by a University College London Grand Challenges for Sustainable Cities Award. I would like to thank Munkh-Orgil Lkhagva for assistance with the ethnographic research and Sanchir Jargalsaikhan for providing me links to some of the secondary source material cited in this article. I would also like to thank Benjamin Hegarty for providing comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,  
edited by Ivan Franceschinim and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.23](https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.23)