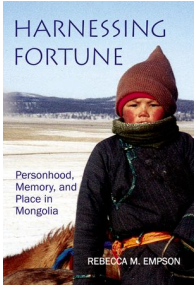


REVIEW: *HARNESSING FORTUNE*

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Empson, Rebecca M. 2011. *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory, and Place in Mongolia*. UK: Oxford University Press. xv+388. Illustrations, notes on the text, appendices, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0197264737 (hardcover, 115USD).

Harnessing Fortune explores the multiple meanings of personhood in the daily lives of the Hori Buriad, pastoral herders residing in Eastern Mongolia near the Russian border, by emphasizing unitary, as opposed to binary, relationships between the separation (blood, mobility), and containment (bone, replication) of fortune. "The concept of separating and containing fortune" provides "a window through which differing modes of relatedness can be discerned" (183). The book's introduction provides an overview of the area, including the urbanizing district center and the countryside; briefly explains the notion of location in a household; outlines the chapters; and delineates the major concepts that mutually shape the relationship between people and things among the Hori Buriad. The concise conclusion reintegrates the chapters, suggesting different ways of understanding personhood among the Buriad in Mongolia in relation to the existing anthropological literature, and a broader application for the study's findings. By casting previously conceived binaries, such as affinity and consanguinity, as "intertwined, consumed, and internal to each other" (325), the ethnographic material suggests that "the tension between separation and containment seems a motif that could be used to explore different spheres" (326).

The remaining eight substantive chapters are divided into three sections: "Part One: Sites that Gather," "Part Two: Separation as Growth," and "Part Three: Absent Presences." Individually, each offers critical views of intertwined, blurred, shifting, and dependent motifs that emerge in Buriad daily life: movement and rootedness, separation and containment, affinity and consanguinity, outsiders and insiders, concealing and revealing, the deceased and the living, the invisible and the visible, and distributed and accumulated wealth. While this well-constructed ethnography on the Buriad will doubtless interest anthropologists of East Asia, it also contains material that will engage scholars of comparative sociology; of East Asian, Chinese, and Russian studies; of post-communist regimes; and of gender studies.

Chapters one and two contain 'aesthetic metaphors' of a small mountain as a lord's runaway daughter (Chapter One) and tufts of horses' tail hair (Chapter Two) that are artifacts both acting on and being acted upon by the Hori Buriad. The 'myth' of the runaway daughter offers an entrée into the particular narratives "discharging a particular effect on the people telling and listening to them" (38). The Buriad's migration from Russia to Mongolia in the 1900s, in addition to their ongoing persecution as a marginal ethnic group within Mongolia during the socialist period, have both produced painful narratives of loss and absence. Among the Buriad, internal distinctions – whether one is Hori or Hudir Buriad, for instance – serve to monitor exogamy practices and keep pre-socialist notions of 'homeland' alive amidst a country, region, polity, and economy in transition and flux. Mongolia's transition to a neo-liberal market economy has reinvigorated differentiations among people economically (class), demographically (district center or rural areas), and occupationally (pastoral herder or urbanite).

Within the large numbers of people who turned to household-based subsistence economies to survive during this period, notions of households, kin networks, and relations of obligation come to the fore as modalities of personhood, alliance, and connection. As a result, Hori Buriad have become increasingly interested in genealogies, exogamy, and shamanism due to a need to understand "who they are in the historic sense" (63). Efforts to reclaim the past that socialism

attempted to eradicate also emerge in vessels, such as the tuft of horses' tail hair, designed to 'harness fortune' for households. Made to appear through a variety of practices, 'fortune' has multiple meanings, but primarily refers "to the concept of a life-force... that can be understood through actions that involve tending to a part of an animal or person" (71). Fortune is also always conceived of in relation to such things as animal herds or children. When animals are sold, a part of them, like tail hair, is kept in the household. Containing the piece of the animal allows for growth in a household's fortune. Cairns (*ovoos*), like houses, contain numerous offerings and act as ceremonial sites where monks "'beckon' fortune" (84). *Ovoo* ceremonies are events that both engage people as land custodians (not owners) with the land's 'invisible masters' and legitimate those humans designated by these invisible 'higher authorities' as community leaders. A contained part of an animal and mountain ceremonies are "aesthetics of propriety" – acts that deem the "right way to conduct one's social relations" with people and things (95).

Chapters three and four demonstrate how personhood emerges in relation to other people through interactions with objects on and in the prominently displayed household chest. On the chest (Chapter Three) are photographic montages and embroideries that display kinship connections. Montages are means by which relations and therefore personhood are created, rather than mere representations. Working to dispel the idea of a timelessly nomadic, ahistorical pastoralist culture, Chapter Three describes how objects at the household chest circulate as the household moves through its seasonal places. This circulation incorporates absent people, including outsiders, into the household's wider social connections. For instance, the author's picture with her host family was included in one of the photographic montages on the household chest. In Mongolia's neo-liberal economy, these social connections increasingly include ties to the broader Buriad diaspora and to support networks outside the clan. Montages include pictures of the living and the deceased, thus signifying the ongoing presence of the dead. As with household ancestor portraits in China, the part of the deceased person included in the montage receives offerings from the

living. Serving as modern day genealogies, these montages are as much memories as they are connections to others in alliances.

Chapter Four draws attention to the inside of the household chest with an emphasis on objects such as umbilical cords and tufts of children's hair. As personhood is a process of crafting links to others and separating parts of oneself, the objects inside the chest serve a concealing function. Like the tuft of tail hair from the horse sold in Chapter Two, umbilical cords suggest ways in which people separate themselves throughout their lives, as when daughters mature and leave their natal family for their husband's home. People maintain ties to their home and land of origin, but add layers to themselves as people as they separate from their families and pasts. Maintaining such ties while moving onward in life is another way of evoking fortune for the household in the 'lifeforce' sense of the word.

Chapters five and six focus on the creation of personhood and fortune through the modalities of reflection (Chapter Five) and rebirth (Chapter Six). As "houses both embody and generate different forms of sociality," triptych mirrors above household chests "reflect or deflect knowledge," reveal diverse "modes of agency and personhood," and show a whole that "encompasses multiple modalities" (183). Set behind objects on the chest, such mirrors reflect the objects in front of them and accumulate fortune through these reflections. Mirrors can reveal things about those gazing into them, including otherwise invisible aspects of personhood. The household chest and the objects on or surrounding it form a display that "points to different aspects of people's relations at different points in time" (196). Similarly, people can become vessels that house others through the notion of rebirth. Contained within a living human body, "intra-kin rebirths," demonstrate "a new relation to a severed past" (204). A rebirth in which a living relative houses a deceased kin member allows the Buriad to mourn the deceased while pushing the living to separate themselves from the dead and become relational persons, such as sons and daughters, in the present. Unlike a structural-functional conception of personhood, Buriad ideas of rebirth reveal peoples as made up of attributes that are "different modes of subjectivity that emerge from different encounters" (215). Narratives engendered through the process of rebirth also define

morally acceptable behavior. Memories of the deceased and moral aesthetics for the living emerge from rebirth.

Chapters seven and eight discuss the ways land-based resources and fire reveal broader social anxieties and legitimate people's relational status. Young male hunters (Chapter Seven) move between center (encampment) and periphery (forest) to obtain goods to sell to traders. Mongolia's shift to a neo-liberal economy has brought new ideas, including anxieties, about land privatization and resource access. Men may hunt, but women also engage in actions that "manage and attend to the hunters in the forest" (246). Hunting blurs internal and external boundaries and can thus bring or contaminate household fortune. Reinvigorated attention to land and resources accompanies a resurgence in shamanism. Ambiguously viewed, shamanism is seen by some as a new way of earning income; others view it as an important legitimization of the Buriad position in Mongolia.

Acts of arson (Chapter Eight), like shamanism, hold an ambiguous power among the Buriad. Occurring in the urbanizing district center, fire, in the form of arson, played a purifying, moral, and fear-evoking role. Houses in the district center, as in the countryside, act as 'agentive artifacts' that show the status of those linked to them. People demonstrate their capability to amass fortune and social prestige through their houses. People responded to the threat of arson by more vigilantly protecting their houses. Fire in a house's hearth was viewed as able to accumulate fortune in the form of "fertility, success, and longevity of the family" (286). Arson, on the other hand, was a technology used to make moral claims about the injustices of wealth inequalities produced by a neo-liberal economy. It also further revealed Buriad ambiguities over their persecution by and complicity with Soviet state power in the socialist past. Acts of arson, like other modalities of accumulating fortune and generating personhood in the volume, hold much in common with practices in other societies undergoing periods of wider political shifts and economic inequalities. These practices are ways of confronting and questioning 'contemporary problems' of shifting modernity.

The concluding chapter deftly draws together these different modalities for facing modernity among the Buriad in Mongolia.

However, readers might have appreciated a longer conclusion given the incredible depth and detail presented in the book's well-crafted, nuanced, and rich ethnography, especially as it could have highlighted concrete examples of the volume's broader application or offered suggestions for future research on ethnic groups in Mongolia. Nevertheless, these few comments do not detract from this ethnography's excellently depicted, well reasoned, and aptly supported presentation of alternative, more enlightened ways of understanding practices in daily Buriad life amid a period of tumultuous transition.