

# Book Review: Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi): Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism edited by Hermione Spriggs

*In Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi): Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism, editor Hermione Spriggs brings together visual and verbal documentation of five art-anthropology exchange processes alongside further reflections on Mongolian art and culture, deep time and the art-anthropology hybrid. Situating itself within the 'chaotic forces of transition' shaping Mongolia, this collaborative effort not only offers insight into contemporary Mongolia, but also future-orientated and hopeful encounters, finds Lilly Markaki.*

**Five Heads (Tavan Tolgoi): Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism. Hermione Spriggs (ed.). Sternberg Press. 2018.**

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*What does the future look like, or feel like, from the perspective of a yak in the coal-mining district of Khovd? From the perspective of a Mongolian root extracted, illegally traded and sold internationally as a pharmaceutical product? Or from that of the toolkit of an urban shaman securing economic futures for professional women in Ulaanbaatar? (back cover)*

In discussing the criteria of interpretation 'of things that are in the world', [Umberto Eco](#) once noted that while a table can be perceived to be many things – 'a desk, a chair, a dining table, a support for a surgical intervention [...] a mere ensemble of atoms, and even as a raft in case of shipwreck' – it can hardly be interpreted as a vehicle for transportation between different places: one simply does not use a table 'to travel from Athens to Thessaloniki'. It would be interesting to know what the Italian author's position would have been on the object that is the book, given the difficulty, especially, of separating the latter from its contents. Examined from a material perspective, books, like tables, surely have limits: they are designed for readers, not passengers. Still, somehow, books often exceed this physical boundary, allowing us to be in two places at the same time, transported as we read. It is to this category of magical objects that the little book in question here, [Five Heads \(Tavan Tolgoi\): Art, Anthropology and Mongol Futurism](#) edited by Hermione Spriggs, belongs.

Conceived in parallel with the homonymous [exhibition at greengrassi & Corvi-Mora](#) in London, itself part of UCL's European Research Council-funded project [Emerging Subjects of the New Economy](#), the book presents visual and verbal documentation of five art-anthropology exchange processes. Each with a different focus, these 'five heads' are accompanied in the volume by further written contributions on Mongolian art and culture, deep time and the art-anthropology hybrid. Together, the different kinds of thinking and seeing interlaced here assemble a transportation device, enabling the reader to travel not only through different regions of Mongolia, but also backwards and forwards in time, into different moments from the country's lifetime.





Image Credit: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia ([Francisco Anzola CC BY 2.0](#))

In the early 1990s, and following the country's Democratic Revolution which saw the end of a 70-year-long period of Communist rule, Mongolia transitioned from a single-party political system to a socialist, multi-party one. This transformation was accompanied by both constitutional and market reforms, with the latter leading, gradually, to the development of a free, largely privatised economy. On 1 July 1997 and in order to further accelerate growth, the Mongolian government introduced a number of revised provisions to its Mineral Resources, Foreign Investment and Tax laws, encouraging foreign participation and investment in the country's mining activities. Having tapped into its mineral resources, by 2011 Mongolia was, as Spriggs and Rebecca Empson note in their introduction to *Five Heads*, 'the fastest growing economy in the world' (6). Yet the sudden boom was followed by an equally dramatic fall, and by 2015 the country found itself dealing not only with increasing external debt, but also with a landscape altered to such a degree that it now threatened the nomadic heritage it once sustained and with which Mongolia is, to this day, associated in global imagination:

Once again delegated to the periphery, and cast as just another story of what could have been, Mongolian people are now trying to put themselves and their country back together and envisage a new kind of future (6).

It is here, 'in the midst of these chaotic forces of transition' (6), that the collaborative effort that is *Five Heads* positions itself, in an attempt to offer not only a comprehensive image of contemporary Mongolia, but also hope. The art-anthropology collaborations and accompanying essays in the book are, thus, future-oriented: they are structured, as Empson and Spriggs tell us in their introduction, around a principle of exchange found in Mongolia, whereby a fragment of something in the process of departing – person, animal or thing – is separated from its root and preserved so that not all is lost, but the departure marks only a new beginning: 'The fragment that remains generates further fortune and so calls into being new things' (7).

Exactly how it is that each of the volume's sections performs this fortune-calling ritual would be impossible to summarise in this instance – something itself astonishing, given the book's small size. The pages of *Five Heads* are, furthermore, rich in noteworthy passages and, having read the book, I am also left with the impression that there is something for everyone in it. Some of my own favourite moments come from the diary-like, ethnographic texts in the book – that of Lauren Bonilla, for example, whose entry, 'Dusty Encounters in Boom-Time Tsogttsetsii', opens with the lines: 'It is April 2012 in Tsogttsetsii, and dust is everywhere. There are days when thick dust storms roll across the landscape like an approaching tidal wave coloured in shades of yellow, red and brown...' (56). Or of Rebekah Plueckhahn when, in 'Bodies in Between: Free Workers and Urban Possibilities', she writes (also in present tense):

In Zuun Ail, newer forms of apartment housing rise up overshadowing older, smaller Soviet housing, while other land plots are cleared of inhabitants but the ground is left vacant as developments stall [...] On the main street sits a hudaldaany töv, a seller's "centre" housing a large number of small scale traders naimaachid, who sell construction supplies. However, the wide, steep, stone steps leading up to this building hold a different purpose. Here, a number of [...] chölööt ajilchid, or "free workers," itinerant day-labourers, gather each day to wait in the hopes of gaining temporary construction work [...] They create a "public" space for themselves in between the overlapping, contesting and shifting private boundaries in this landscape in-the-making (15-18).

Indeed, all of the ethnographic entries in *Five Heads*, supported as they are by their equally significant artistic counterparts, give us not only images, but also a sense of what the sites and people they encounter *feel* and even *sound* like – with the Mongolian equivalent of words often given in the text – allowing us to imagine that we, too, are or were once there, experiencing the dust blocking our throats or holding in our hands the *Fang Feng* root that Amina and her family now illegally gather and sell in order to survive (134-38).

Produced by scholars working in various fields, the other essays in the volume too have much to offer, provoking a great deal of thinking and at moments also an emotional response. An example of this is, for me, Richard D.G. Irvine's essay, 'Seeing Environmental Violence in Deep Time: Perspectives from Contemporary Mongolian Literature and Music'. Despite the incongruity between time as humanly experienced and the deep time registered and narrated by geological processes, the two, Irvine argues in this essay, are intimately connected:

*Human stories of life, of production and reproduction, are not only situated within wider genealogies which expand the life history in time through kinship, but on an active, constitutive relationship with the resources upon which we depend, whose formation stretches over time-spans which appear to dwarf that of a human life and yet are necessarily present – either recognised or unrecognised – in our economic and social activity (67)*

The biographical time of anthropology comes into contact with deep time *in* and *through* our relationship with the land that we inhabit, so that deep time, 'the temporality of the landscape', is, in the end, 'made intimate in each life as a home' (68-69). It should come as no surprise, then, that shifts in land use, such as the ones Mongolia has been witnessing since the early 1990s, raise not only ecological concern, but translate also into fear regarding the very identity of the nation.

This latter anxiety is one that Irvine explores here through its manifestations in lyrical expression, including the 2011 '[Leave me my homeland](#)' by Mongolian rapper Gee. 'I fear that we see the future where Mongolia will be called a desert' (71), we hear at one point, while the video, Irvine explains, 'shows Mongolians of the future left wandering through a barren geology trying to piece together a history from what they find buried in the dust' (73). At the heart of all this, and of the other examples discussed in the essay, is 'a concern about continuity of descent through time' (82). Irvine writes:

*To quote Gee, "Our fathers never abandoned us/But we have forgotten our own children." This is what shocks in the image of a future homeland that has become dust; [...] It points to the disquieting possibility of a future in which such relationality cannot be read into the landscape, in which nutag [the homeland] cannot be traced. What is left is uncertainty: what kind of life is possible when the deep past and future of life and land is obscured? (82)*

The question of what life will or can look like from the perspective of a future determined by ecological devastation – or what Irvine, after Rob Nixon, calls 'slow violence' (73) – is of course not specific to Mongolia and, as in so many other moments in this book, the particular connects here to the universal. But if the crisis of the *oĩkos* concerns us all, so does Irvine's observation that the future, as precisely that which has not yet happened, can still be saved. 'Rather than focus on the post-apocalyptic destruction that late capitalism leaves in its wake', Spriggs and Empson state earlier in their introduction, 'we have – in the encounters you will experience here – exposed the seeds of possibility for new worlds to come into being' (9). And *this*, I think, is why *Five Heads* deserves our attention.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*