Skill, Social Change and Survival in Postsocialist Northern Mongolia - Summary

At the most general level, this dissertation is about postsocialist change. Or, more specifically, it is about how people living in a remote part of Northern Mongolia have experienced the recent changes to have occurred over the last ten to fifteen years since the postsocialist transition. My main argument is that while Mongolia's postsocialist transition occurred over twenty years ago it is not at all clear what has come after socialism, or how we as anthropologists might conceptualise the contradictory, fuzzy, and often reversible experiences of people during the so-called postsocialist period. To this end I develop in this dissertation a new hermeneutic framework for elucidating the polydirectional experience of postsocialist change, taking the form of an extension of Tim Ingold's (2000, 2001) concept of enskilment – and inspired by a broader anthropology of skill and practice¹, as well as the comparative literature on postsocialism² and de-modernisation in Africa (Geschiere, et al. 2008) – combined with a critique of the teleological metanarratives which underpin normative conceptualisations of change (Ferguson 1999; Mosse 2005; Tsing 2005; Arce & Long 2000; Garden & Lewis 1996; Inda & Rosaldo 2001). I argue that these metanarratives fail to capture the full spectrum of co-existing variations as they are experienced by people in the late postsocialist context - including the differentiation within individual communities and between the generations, non-linear changes, transformations and transpositions, as well as non-teleological reversals - specifically because of their implicit allusion to the teleological metanarrative of 'modernisation', the hidden trajectories inherent within related concepts such as 'globalisation', 'marketisation', 'sedentarisation', and 'urbanisation', as well as the broader teleological doxa of change which remains embedded within much academic discourse. In opposition to this I develop a processual and polydirectional perspective grounded in skilled practice, which envisions the transmission of skills as not only being re/produced between the generations (Ingold 2000), but also new skills learnt in articulation with change, as well as skills that are lost, forgotten, transformed, adapted, and transposed in relation to transforming social, economic, and political contexts. By extending skill in this way and observing transformations in skilled practice I argue that we are afforded better insight into the polydirectional experiences characteristic of the late postsocialist context, and which can better reveal a more diverse range of processes as they are experienced by people in their everyday lives.

Here I use this hermeneutic framework to investigate different aspects of social life as I encountered them during my fieldwork in Mongolia between 2012-2013, including herding strategies, hunting and ontological presuppositions, uses of new technologies, trans-frontier trading, and the migration of people from rural areas to the capital city. In each case I describe the transformations in

¹See e.g. Marchand (2008); Portisch (2009); Gieser (2008, 2014); Chaiklin & Lave (1996); Coy (1989); Harris (2005, 2007); Willerslev (2007); Grasseni (2009); Downey (2005); Froerer & Portisch (2012); Van Ede (2009)
²See e.g. Berdahl (1999); Borneman (1997); Hann (1994); Verdery (1996, 2003); Berdahl et al. (2000); De Soto & Anderson (1993); Kideckel (1993); Humphrey (2002)
skilled practice and problematise what I see to be four major narratives which influence normative conceptualisations of change: namely, the relationship between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ and the teleology of temporality; ‘globalisation’ and the teleology of technological innovation; the advent of ‘marketisation’ and the transition from socialism to capitalism; and the rural-urban dichotomy as epitomised in the concepts of ‘sedentarisation’ and ‘urbanisation’. In the process, I demonstrate how a consideration of people’s skills allows one to prioritise the lived-experience of change and reveal the non-linear experiences brought about by the postsocialist transition, as well as the mutual co-existence between continuity and change in the re/production of social life. In this regard, the dissertation should also be seen as a critical reflection on how we as anthropologists think about change in both explicit and implicit ways, where I use the ethnographic particularities of life in Mongolia to problematise normative assumptions and critique the enduring legacies of modernist teleological metanarratives.

With this approach, I aim to contribute both to an anthropological understanding of social and cultural change and to the wider sub-fields of postsocialist studies and Inner Asian societies. At the same time, I contribute to the recent theoretical debates concerning the anthropology of skill, practice, and embodied learning, and develop a processual conceptualisation which I believe has broad ethnographic value. In particular, I develop this approach as a counter to the widespread assumption that so-called phenomenological perspectives fail to capture the political and economic context in which human beings experience the world and the changing dynamics in which skills are taught and learnt. Thus, by extending the concept of enskilment and combining it with a critique of the teleological metanarratives of change I develop a political-economy of skill that moves beyond theoretical considerations and is applied to a real-world ethnographic context.