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7. Prostitution and the Transformation of the Chinese Trading Town of Ereen

Gaëlle Lacaze

Since the 1990s, a large part of the informal trade conducted by Mongols from China to Russia by way of Mongolia has followed the trans-Mongolian railway, in existence since 1956 as the main transit route for commercial exchanges between Beijing and Moscow. It was reopened in 1992 (*People's Daily Online* 2005). It then became the Mongolian "suitcase" traders' privileged path, compelling the Mongolian and Chinese governments to regulate the number of people crossing their common border. According to the people who were there during the 1990s, Ereen hot ("Ereen city") was then a very small city, with few asphalt streets, essentially limited to the current central square (see Fig. 1).¹ At that time, the city was permeated by a foul smell due to a lack of a sewer system.

The cross-border place of Erlian-Zamyn üüd was planned during the year 2000 along the railway as a Free Trade Zone by a Chinese-Mongolian bipartite contract; this contract implemented a system of permission for

I would like to thank all the members of the North Asian Borders Network, particularly the publishing team and Franck Billé for their editing work on my article.

1 *Erlian* is the Chinese name of the city and *Ereen* its Mongolian equivalent. In Mongolian, Ereen means "motley" and Zamyn üüd, "the road's door". In this article, I refer to the Chinese-Mongolian Free Trade Zone as "Erlian-Zamyn üüd" and to the Chinese city itself, which is part of this zone, by its Mongolian name "Ereen hot".

short stays in the trans-frontier zone. The Free Trade Zone of Erlian-Zamyn üüd later became for Mongols the main place of transit for Chinese industrial goods. In the 2000s, the city developed into an open market city and almost 70% of Mongolian commercial exchanges with China cross the border at this place (Ministry of Industry and Trade 2007). By 2010, urban infrastructures had been highly developed, with the bad smell of the city now but a distant memory. Overall, the Chinese government has invested almost 26,000,000 RMB [US\$ 4.1 million] for the city's development (*People's Daily Online* 2005).

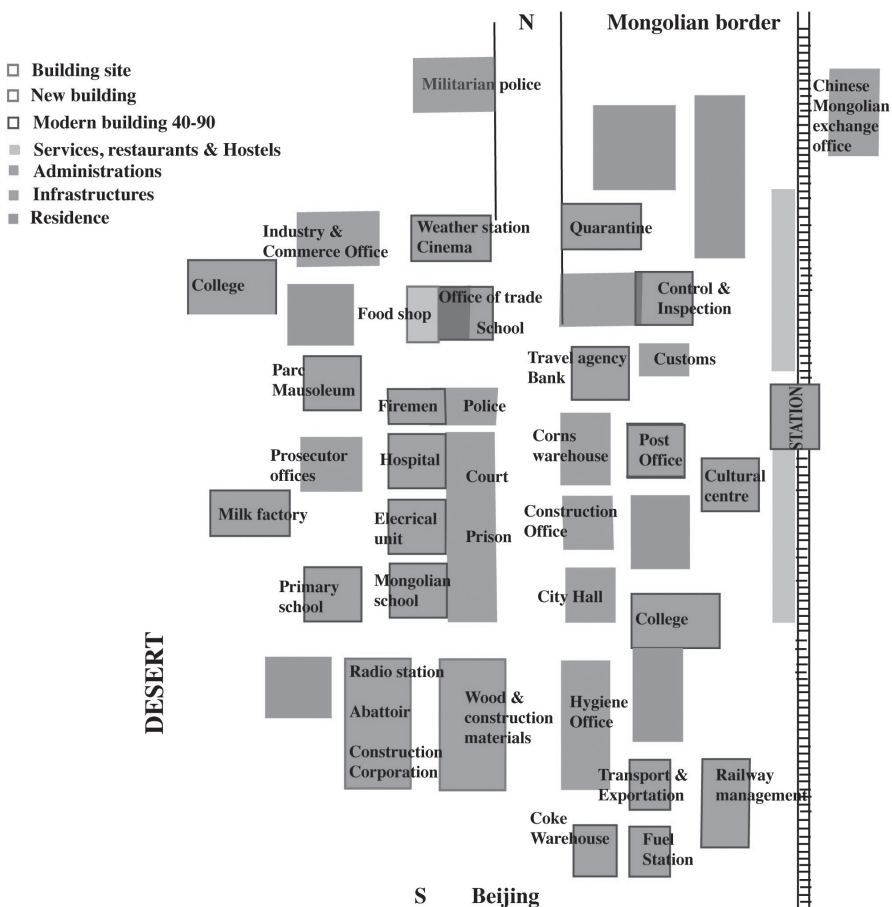


Fig. 1 Ereen city in 1989. Before the 1990s, Ereen protected the border and forbade its crossing. The town's main economy revolved around the processing of animal products (wool, milk, meat, etc.). Figure drawn by G. Lacaze from a map of the *Nei Menggu zizhi qu ditu* ce.

I have been conducting research on Mongols' activities in this Free Trade Zone since 2007. The first results of this research reveal the global organisation of the zone. Ereen acts as a big market-city while Zamyn üüd remains a transit place for people and goods. This chapter first examines the transformation of Ereen from 2007 to 2010. The main changes are the construction of "New Ereen" in the western section of the city; the opening in the south of two huge supermarkets, as large as an entire block, dedicated to construction materials; and the sculptures of dinosaurs, in the southwest, past the city gates on the road to Beijing. These changes are a good illustration of the local government's main political goals with regard to the city's development. I then examine how the appropriation of the city by Mongolian migrants underlines differential postures in terms of gender, social status and economic power. It sheds light on a new kind of nomadic activity developed by Mongols who have appropriated for themselves the political management of the city. I conclude with an analysis of the daily life of several Mongolian prostitutes. The type of sex work found in the city of Ereen reveals the contemporary strategies of some Mongolian women.

The context

While Ereen is a large open market, Zamyn üüd resembles some modern caravanserai (see Lacaze 2010). Both places attract many manual workers since the numerous commercial exchanges lead to new jobs and work opportunities such as, for instance, carrying goods, loading and unloading trucks or wagons, etc. Every day, numerous Mongols cross the border at Zamyn üüd and Ereen and their numbers increase year after year. They are "itinerant traders", wholesalers (*chanjuud*) as well as retailers (*naimaachin*), or "temporary-permanent migrants" such as drivers (*jooloch*) and prostitutes (*yanhan*). Because Mongolian citizens have the right to stay in China for thirty days without registration, some have been working and living in Ereen for several years without a visa, simply returning to Mongolia once a month. These monthly trips across the Mongolian-Chinese border enable them to permanently remain "temporary migrants" in China. I am referring to them here as "temporary-permanent migrants".

During the summer, Ereen also welcomes many Mongolian tourists. Indeed, the Mongolian "new rich" travel there to purchase furniture, school equipment or construction materials at a lower price than they

would at home. These shoppers also like to travel to Ereen because they have free time to spend in the bars, restaurants, nightclubs and brothels the city has to offer.² In the month of July in particular, a large funfair stands on the city's central square and numerous tourist attractions sprout all over during the hot season.

The temporary-permanent workers facilitate the itinerant traders' activities. The *chanjuud* and the *yanhan* stay longer in Ereen than the *naimaachin* and the *jooloch*, who carry out multiple trips between Zamyn üüd and Ereen, between Mongolia and China. The *chanjuud* and *jooloch* are mostly men, while the *naimaachin* and *yanhan* are mostly women. Thus, the appropriation of the Free Trade Zone of Erlian-Zamyn üüd by Mongols illustrates the transformations that take place in the social organisation and gender relationships of contemporary Mongolian societies, both in Mongolia and China.

In Ereen, prostitution is mainly "voluntary".³ While this means that women are not forced to work as prostitutes, it does not mean that their work is entirely free of coercion either. Prostitution in Ereen is well organised and occurs through *ger* (brothels) that are officially registered as commercial establishments. They are concentrated in red light districts like in many other cities in China (Pan 2004). The increase of Ereen brothels between 2007 and 2010 reflects the global expansion of the city where the *chanjuud*'s activities have grown rapidly in comparison with the *naimaachin*'s. The several life stories I have gathered from prostitutes during summer 2010 underline the strategies developed by Mongolian women confronted with poverty, temporary economic difficulties or unfavourable relations of domination.

2 Ereen brothels are known as *getting*, which has no meaning in Mongolian. This term is likely to be borrowed from the Chinese *gedeng* ("suspended lantern").

3 I am purposely avoiding the controversial debate of "forced" versus "free" prostitution, for two reasons. Firstly, the issue of choice is quite ambiguous. Choosing prostitution is heavily determined by numerous factors such as the incapacity of meeting financial duties because of poverty, low position in power relationships, or clashes in social status and situations – as in the case of women who have to remain subservient to their husbands while supporting their family and extended family. Moreover, on their first trip, women are not fully aware of their future working conditions; thus, one cannot argue that they have a clear idea about this work. Secondly, the issue was hotly debated in 2005 in France (Handman and Mossuz-Lavau 2005), in the context of the new regulation relating to "passive soliciting". Abolition (of prostitution), fastidiousness (regarding its regulation) and liberalism (for the abolition of regulations relating to prostitution) were the main positions expressed in this debate. None of these positions fits the Chinese situation.



Fig. 2 Satellite pictures of “the free trade zone or Erenhot-Zamyn Üüd”.

Methodology

I have used different ethnographic methods in the course of these periods of fieldwork. In 2007, I followed several *naimaachin* in their trips on the railway and across the border, as well as in Ereen, Zamyn-üüd and Ulaanbaatar. I drew the *naimaachin*'s “walking figures” (de Certeau 1991) and shed light on the traders' significant places (see Lacaze 2010). For the second period of fieldwork, in 2010, following Lilian Matthieu (2000: 99–116), I focused my research on “one place”: *ger* No. 51 in a street called Jin Cho in Ereen.⁴ Compared to the collection of life stories or to the study of politics related to prostitution, this method allows the analysis of individuals' strategies in a marginal context while avoiding the stigmatising dynamics of marginality and shame associated with prostitution.

Over twenty days I established relationships with a dozen Mongolian women selling sex both inside and outside the brothel. I spent time with them in the afternoons, teaching them English before clients started coming to Jin Cho. During this fieldwork, I made the

4 Jin Cho is likely to be the Mongolian rendering of the Chinese *Jincheng* (“Golden palace”).

conscious decision to avoid the point of view of customers and officials. I focused this ethnographic research on women from Mongolia because of the specific administrative processes managing the migrations of Chinese people.

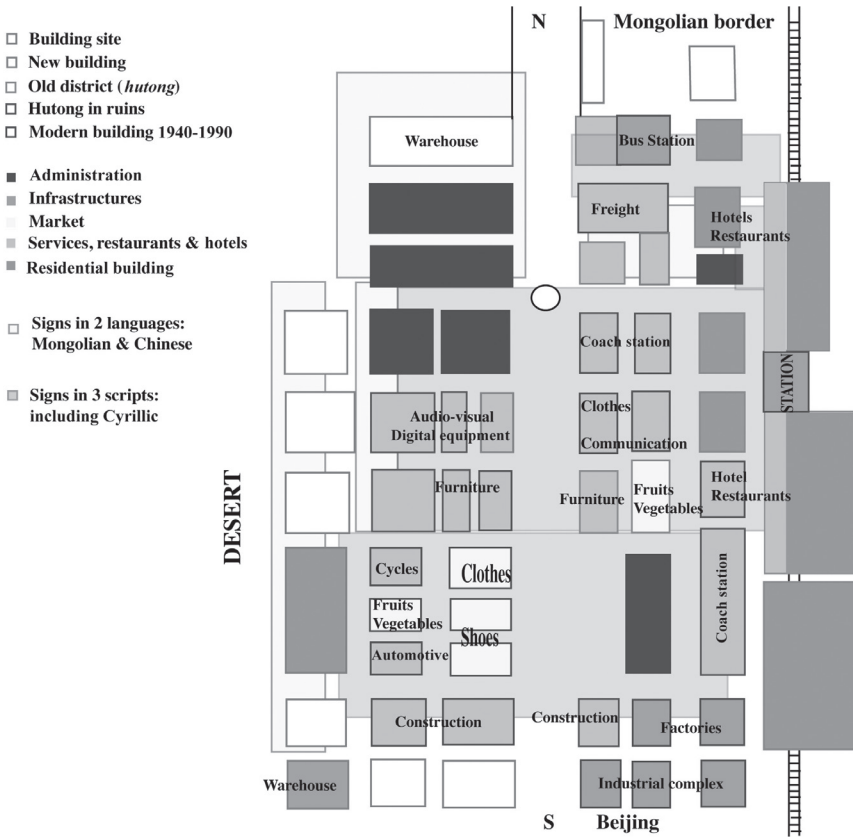


Fig. 3 Eren in 2007. The town is organised around Mongolian traders' activities. Figure drawn by G. Lacaze.

I initially investigated processes of transformation of spaces in places, according to Michel de Certeau's theory (1991), and later sought to understand the life, emotions and sentiments of Mongolian migrants settled in Eren. During both periods of fieldwork I met Mongolian drivers who organise the crossing of the Sino-Mongolian border. Except for the *naimaachin*, I did not formally collect biographies. Even if people were willing to share their life stories with me, they would only offer

some pieces, underscoring defining moments and avoiding others. Little by little, all the people I worked with shared some pieces of their life with me. Later, I tried to organise the various elements of these individual life stories. Indeed, I conducted some formal and classical fieldwork with *naimaachin* while, at the same time, collecting informal information with prostitutes. If these two phases of gathering ethnographic data are different, they also share some similarities, allowing for a comparison of the results emerging from both.

These ethnographic methods allow a comparison that underlines the city's development from 2007 to 2010. The analysis of the changes that have taken place in the organisation of the city illustrates its appropriation by Mongolian wholesalers and, in addition, the increase in temporary-permanent Mongolian migrants in Ereen. Ereen plays an important role for Mongols. By contrast, it is not as important for Chinese people even if many Chinese migrants come to the city, attracted by its "wilder" and warmer environment and somewhat less stressful life. In my study of Ereen I thus focused my research on Mongolian activities and representations.

Development of Ereen

The period between 2007 and 2010 saw vast development in the infrastructure of Ereen, and the appearance of several markets specialising in construction materials. The city's expansion is encouraged by the political agenda of both the Chinese and Mongolian governments, and by the industrial and economic interests of its Chinese residents.

In 2007, Ereen was composed of different districts of various sizes, each of them specialised in a particular activity: residential areas, shops, markets, warehouses, etc. The city was comprised of almost ten districts, mainly located west of the railway (see Fig. 3).⁵ At the centre of the city, the "new market" (*shine zah*) and the "old market" (*huuchin zah*), as well as the "window shop" (*shilen/shiliin delgüür*) and the "circular shop" (*buduun delgüür*) were the main places for buying small manufactured products. In other words, they were places dedicated to Mongolian

5 I drew this map while walking through the city. The map scale is quite approximate as it is meant as a tool to identify people's appropriation of places, the specialisation of the various town quarters, and the location of each activity.

retailers – *naimaachin*, who buy mostly shoes, clothes, furniture, mobile phones and other small digital devices. At the periphery of the city, surrounding these central places, many shops offered products intended for Mongolian wholesalers (*chanjuud*), such as construction materials, warehouses or freight infrastructures. Near these places for wholesalers were several residential buildings. Scattered all over Ereen were places for the Mongolian itinerant traders’ daily life, such as hotels, bars, restaurants and public baths, as well as places for their entertainment (bars, nightclubs, gaming houses or brothels).



Fig. 4 Ereen in 2010. The map highlights the dramatic expansion of open markets dedicated to construction materials. Figure drawn by G. Lacaze.



Fig. 5 Satellite photo of Ereen.



Fig. 6 Satellite photo of Zamyn Üüd.

By 2010, Ereen had changed considerably (see Ereen map, Figs. 4 and 5).⁶ With the exception of the central markets and shops, it had been totally reorganised. Even the centre of the city had been transformed through the ubiquitous emergence of numerous beauty institutes, hairdressers, bars, restaurants, internet cafés and sex shops. The former red light district had also been transformed, as will be illustrated in the third part of this chapter. New districts had been added to the original city: two in the north, three housing blocks in the west, two in the south and several housing blocks in the east, on the other side of the railway. Except in the east, all the newly-developed parts of the city included residential buildings, educational infrastructures (i.e. kindergartens), hospitals and free health centres, and, in the town centre, a Mongolian Arts academy and a Mongolian traditional sports complex. Several new districts are still under construction at the city's periphery, indicating that the development of Ereen has not yet come to an end (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Hostel built for wholesalers coming from Beijing. New buildings at the south-west of the city built between 2010 and 2012 (Ereen city, August 2010). Photo: G. Lacaze.

Today the northern part of the city is devoted to the administrations in charge of organising freight, like customs offices and warehouses. Its western part is now called “New Ereen”, on account of the new city square, the Dinosaur Museum, the new primary schools and the Chinese-Mongolian College located there. The architecture of these new builds is characterised by a hypermodern style. Their overall shape and external materials are similar to the buildings erected in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games (Fig. 8), even if the large windows are hardly appropriate to Ereen’s climate in the middle

6 I would like to thank the taxi driver who showed me, in detail, the city’s new developments.

of the Gobi Desert. South of Ereen, two newly built districts are dedicated to construction materials (Figs. 9a and 9b). They are open markets enclosed by buildings, including several roads. These market areas are like small “specialised cities” within the larger city. They are completely dedicated to Mongolian wholesalers. East of Ereen, on the other side of the railway, is an area dedicated to sawmills and timber warehouses. This part of the city is the centre of commercial exchanges between China, Russia and Mongolia.



Fig. 8 The new Dinosaur Museum and the new city hall (Ereen city, August 2010).
Photo: G. Lacaze.





Figs. 9a [previous page], 9b, 9c. New districts dominated by construction materials outlets (Ereen city, August 2010). Photo: G. Lacaze.



Fig. 10 Wind turbines and the town's electric power station (Ereen city, August 2010). Photo: G. Lacaze.

In the southwest, the city's government has set up wind turbines and an electric power station (Fig. 10).⁷ A little further to the west, along the road to Beijing, in the middle of the Gobi Desert, a section as wide as a plateau has been totally covered with sculptures of dinosaurs. This "Jurassic Park" illustrates the new status of the city, consecrated in August 2007 as the "Dinosaur Capital" in recognition of the many dinosaur remains discovered in the area.⁸ But despite the eagerness of the local government to transform the image of Ereen, the city remains a large "trade palace", facing a caravanserai to which nomadic people flock in their thousands for various commercial purposes (see Figs. 2, 5 and 6).

Appropriation of the city by Mongols

The global map of the city reveals its appropriation by both Mongolian itinerant traders (*naimaachin* and *chanjuud*) and by temporary permanent migrants. Its development betrays a strong increase in construction materials, which mostly concern the wholesale sector. This increase induces the multiplication of infrastructures dedicated to accommodating Mongolian wholesalers, who stay several days in Ereen in order to manage the stock of products and its freight, or wait for customs clearance and Mongolian import permits, etc. Moreover, places catering for the itinerant traders' daily needs (hotels, bars, restaurants, public baths) and their entertainment (nightclubs, gaming houses, brothels) have multiplied all over the city (Fig. 11).

Mongolian and Chinese citizens belong to different categories of migrants, undertaking different kinds of activity. They include businessmen, manual workers, moneychangers, cross-border drivers, prostitutes and other sex workers. There are also Mongolian wives of Han industrialists, businessmen or managers, needed for exchanges with traders coming from Mongolia. The latter are less numerous than the former; indeed, marriages between citizens of Mongolia and China are always perceived negatively in Mongolia. It is judged preferable for Mongols to marry Inner Mongols than Hans. In a similar way, only a few Inner Mongols are married to Hans. Inner Mongols are usually poorly educated and therefore Hans find them

7 Every day, the electricity supply is interrupted between 4 am and 6 am, except in areas with private generators.

8 The inaugurating ceremony of the "Dinosaur Capital" was retransmitted on several Mongolian television channels.

less attractive than the exotic “Other” from Mongolia.⁹ Except for this kind of multi-ethnic “sexual-economical exchange” (Tabet 2005), migrants generally develop their activities inside their own “group”.



Fig. 11 The “Mongol bar” (Ereen city, August 2010). Photo: G. Lacaze

Migrants are either Mongols or Han from China, or Mongols from Mongolia. They tend to privilege people of their own group, lineage or family. This process induces the development of ethnic niches and specialises each family or domestic group in one single economic sector.¹⁰ For example, Mongols from Mongolia and Chinese people prefer to employ persons from their own province or family. Most Horchin Mongols living in Ereen specialise in prostitution. This Inner Mongolian eastern group was deeply involved in the Chinese Communist Party and belongs nowadays to a social network – within police or juridical institutions – which allows them to develop the role of “pimps”.

9 I prefer to neutralise the gender of this “Other” because some Mongolian men live with Han Chinese women. However, the majority of multi-ethnic couples living in Ereen involve Mongolian women and Chinese men.

10 One could compare this organisation to the former guilds, which were very powerful in pre-communist China (Lagrange 2008).

Moneychangers are also quite numerous in Ereen as only one desk at the Bank of China is allowed to exchange foreign currencies such as the Mongolian *tögrög*, the euro or the dollar. Moreover, all hotel owners have to declare their customers each day. The administrative permit for a short stay in Ereen compels every itinerant person to surrender their passport to the owner of their hotel, so itinerants are not able to change money at the official bank and need informal moneychangers. The moneychangers are mostly Inner Mongolian women from the Borjigin or Harchin groups.

Among Mongolian temporary-permanent migrants, privileged relationships are less reliant on genealogical links. Less numerous and not as used to living in China as Inner Mongols, migrants from Mongolia are included in smaller kinship groups and relational networks. They are involved in less diversified activities and, as a result, their employment opportunities are more restricted. Some regional affinities therefore emerge among migrants from Mongolia because of the intermediaries or middlemen needed for various kinds of activity in Ereen.

For any commercial activity running in Ereen, a Mongolian speaker is required. Established Chinese businessmen generally employ Inner Mongols to work as intermediaries with traders coming from Mongolia. Smaller Chinese retailers – for instance those working in small shops in the two Ereen markets, the “old” and “new” markets (*shine* and *huuchin zah*) – have invented a kind of commercial dialect, a Mongolian *pidgin*. Mongolian prostitutes, for their part, have to be introduced to a pimp through a mandated intermediary who receives money for her mediation. The prostitute has to work, usually for a few days, to reimburse the pimp’s investment, her introductive debt.

The need for commercial intermediaries accounts for the rapid growth of Mongolian or Inner Mongolian temporary-permanent migrants.¹¹ Among these temporary-permanent migrants, Chinese citizens are more settled and fixed than Mongolian citizens, who regularly move across the border. Chinese citizens participate in “pendulum migrations”, returning seasonally or at regular intervals to their homeland, while, as mentioned earlier, Mongolian migrants have to cross the border once a month in order to renew their right of residence in China. Among the migrants, taxi drivers (both cars and bikes) and truck drivers, mostly men, are more mobile than other people. Some of them work together with a family member, usually a husband,

11 Commercial intermediaries play a similar role to the former *compradors*, who organised the Guild’s foreign commercial relation in pre-communist China (Lagrange 2008).

wife, mother or son. Taxi drivers within the city tend to be Chinese citizens, either Han or ethnic Mongols, while cross-border taxi drivers are Mongolian citizens. The Chinese citizens drive small cars or taxi-bikes (with or without an engine) through several official companies, while the Mongolians drive 4x4 Russian army jeeps, the so-called “sixty-nine” (*Jaran yos*), or second hand Japanese or Korean jeeps (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12 4x4 Russian Army Jeep “Sixty-nine” driven by Mongolian cross-border taxi drivers (Ereen city, August 2010). Photo: G. Lacaze.

The taxi drivers

During the summer of 2010, I spent a few days with several cross-border drivers, who used to stop their jeeps on the square in front of my hotel. I had already met some of them in the course of my previous fieldwork in 2007. Cross-border drivers come to Ereen after the morning train, full of Mongolian traders, and they return to Zamyn üüd with the other traders before the border closes.¹² Their movements are linked to those of the

12 In Erlian-Zamyn üüd, the Chinese Mongolian border is open seven days a week, from 8 am to 6 pm or 7 pm. It is closed on Mongolian and Chinese public holidays.

itinerant traders, themselves governed by the arrivals and departures of Mongolian trains. According to the railway timetable for summer 2010, two trains arrived daily to Zamyn üüd from Ulaanbaatar, a regular train at 7.10 am and an express train at 8 am. Every day, two other trains leave Zamyn üüd for Ulaanbaatar at 5.45 pm and 9.20 pm. Every night, at 3 am or 4 am, a bus arrives in Ereen from Beijing. Its customers are usually *naimaachin* and *chanjuud* returning to Mongolia.

Cross-border drivers usually reside in Zamyn üüd and only a few of them have elected residence in Ereen. Occasionally drivers residing in Zamyn üüd spend the night in Ereen, in a hotel. Then, with other Mongolian drivers, they drink and gamble late into the night. On various occasions, I noticed that only a few of the drivers who stayed in front of my hotel ever walked into the funfair on the central square, located just behind them on the other side of the avenue (see Fig. 13). In July, the city's central square welcomes several fairground stalls and Chinese open-air dances are organised on weekend nights in nearby parks and squares. One evening, as the cross-border drivers were playing cards, they did not hear the Chinese army's concert playing on the central square facing them. They spend little money and do not fully participate in the city's life and economy. They are like ghosts, haunting the city during the day, looking for customers to drive across the border or for goods to transport for Mongolian businessmen based in Ulaanbaatar. Cross-border drivers exist almost in an inter-world of itinerant trade.

Since 2000, when cross-border relationships were officially and administratively organised (see Lacaze 2010), the number of cross-border drivers has been increasing every year. They numbered 400 in 2007 and 600 in 2010,¹³ and originated mostly from the southern *aimag* ("provinces") of Mongolia (Dundgov', Dornogov', Ömnögov' and Bayanhongor), which are close to the border or in the vicinity of the railway line.¹⁴ Mongolian cross-border drivers own their jeeps. They earn on average 1,500,000 Tg [\$1,150] per month, for a 6 am to 6 pm work day, seven days a week, usually without any day off, except when the Chinese or Mongolian section of

13 This information was given to me by the drivers themselves as well as by other Ereen residents. It is not readily available in official sources but is nevertheless included in "internal" reports of the Mongolian diplomatic or customs services, as well as in the documents of a few bilateral administrations. These reports are not easily available but all Ereen residents know their content.

14 The drivers hold special passports allowing them to cross the border several times a day.

the border is closed.¹⁵ Drivers decide for themselves whether to work or not, and will regularly take a break for a few days. In 2010, among the Mongolian people living in Ereen, cross-border drivers were the largest category of migrants, paralleling the number of Mongolian women working as prostitutes.



Fig. 13 The Summer funfair in the city centre (Ereen city, August 2010).
Photo: G. Lacaze

15 In Mongolia, the standard salary for manual work is approximately 300,000 Tg [\$230].

Of their own free will?

One of the main visible transformations of Ereen has been the growth of activities related to “body care” and the sex industry. Indeed, these activities concern, in particular, beauty institutes, hairdressers, massage parlours and sex shops. These places are specifically devoted to people who work in the sex industry and need special body care daily. The city’s sex industry includes people working as striptease artists, call girls, hostesses or prostitutes. The majority of them are women although, since 2007, a few Chinese men have started to work as transsexual prostitutes in the city’s bars and nightclubs.

On the city map of Ereen in 2007, a few brothels were grouped within three enclosed quarters: the streets called Kolomby (“Colombia”) and Shin Tian Men, and at the back of the “circular shop” (*buduun delgüür*).¹⁶ Many prostitutes also worked in several hotels with special public baths (usually saunas) and in the massage parlours disseminated throughout the city. At that time, no sex shop existed and condoms were sold in pharmacies. According to several Chinese and Mongolian Ereen residents, in 2007 around 300 Mongolian women worked officially as prostitutes in Ereen. The same sources claim that Mongolian women numbered 600 in 2010. In addition, 150 Chinese women and 100 Inner Mongolian women also worked in the city. The number of prostitutes who have emigrated from Mongolia has doubled over the last three years. Its growth corresponds to an increase in sexual demand, coming predominantly from Chinese citizens, industrialists or managers, and from Mongolian citizens, mostly drivers and wholesalers who are alone and with cash to spend when they stay in Ereen.

In Ereen, sex industry customers belong to different “sexual cultures” – Russified Mongols, Sinicised Mongols and Chinese – that consider prostitution as a “normal” phenomenon or “usual” service for men seeking sexual satisfaction. Prostitution fully partakes in the Chinese “sexual culture”: besides concubines, prostitutes play an important role in Chinese masculine sociality (Micollier 2007). It does not have the same place in Mongolian or Russian culture, even if they both largely accept extramarital sexual relationships.

In 2010, Shin Tian Men disappeared from the Ereen map. The several brothels that were located at the beginning of that street moved to

16 Shin Tian Men is likely to be a Mongolian rendering of the Chinese Xinjiang Men (“Xinjiang door”).

another street, built in 2008, called Jin Cho. The number of brothels then increased rapidly. By 2010, Jin Cho was a cul-de-sac with around sixty brothels, all numbered, one next to the other. In each “red light house” or brothel, five to fifteen Mongolian women work as prostitutes. Jin Cho specialises in the higher scale of prostitution activities: the women who work there are under thirty and conform to the local standards of beauty, meaning they are thin, elegant and have white skin (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14 Mongolian woman working in Jincho (Ereen city, August 2010).
Photo: G. Lacaze.

The prostitution organisation

The Jin Cho cul-de-sac opens onto the main avenue of Ereen, through a visible arcade standing two gates away from the central police station, and it is enormously popular.¹⁷ Although prostitution is forbidden in China (Attané 2005), the Jin Cho brothels are duly licensed, officially

17 The first night I walked on the main avenue, there were so many cabs in front of the Jin Cho arcade that I thought for a moment that it was the new depot for the city's taxis.

recorded as commercial establishments – usually hairdressing salons – and their owners regularly pay taxes. According to the residents' points of view, the Jin Cho brothels are considered to provide around 20% of the city budget. Thus, the status of the brothels is quite ambiguous: they host forbidden activities but are officially licensed. At the same time, Mongolian prostitutes are officially recorded as individuals engaging in illegalities; they are routinely arrested by the Chinese police and frequently fined.

Since 2009, the Mongolian frontier-police have been allowed to control people in the Chinese part of Ereen's Free Trade Zone. The owner of *ger* No. 51 and many prostitutes in Jin Cho told me that this new allowance given to Mongolian border guards results in increased pressure on Mongolian temporary-permanent migrants, especially on prostitutes. When crossing the border once a month, Mongolian prostitutes used to bribe border guards in order to avoid the affixing of the "black stamp", which then forbids them from travelling abroad for five years. The new bipartite regulation means that prostitutes now also have to bribe the Mongolian border guards who arrest them in Ereen.

Usually prostitutes and pimps share the payment of the penalty equally, while the profits from sexual services are 30% for the pimp and 70% for the prostitute. Every month, women earn an average of 2,000,000 Tg [\$1,500]. They regularly send money home or bring it with them when they go back. They can also borrow money from their pimp at a 50% interest rate; they have to work for a few days in order to reimburse the loan. Therefore they can take more money home than they have already earned. In this case, they will need to ask another woman in the same "house" to act as guarantor for them. If the woman who has borrowed the money fails to come back, the woman acting as guarantor will need to work to reimburse this credit. Some pimps use this credit system in order to compel "their girls" to stay longer. During the twenty days I spent in *ger* No. 51, Lisa went to Mongolia for ten days when her mother was hospitalised, and later came back.¹⁸ Emmanuelle left Ereen for good, after having worked there for around two months. Betty came back after a break of several weeks and Lola went home for a while.

Given their strong reliance on each other and the routine sharing of knowledge and secrets, the women develop very close relationships.

18 All names have been changed for the purpose of this article.

During working periods, prostitutes are also allowed to purchase their individual free time, in order to spend time together or with a close friend. When a woman needs to take some time off, she needs to inform her pimp if this falls during a period of rest, and at other times she will pay him his usual share of the profits. Anna told me she felt as if she were in a “free jail” (*chölööt shoroon*). Indeed, if Mongolian women come in their hundreds “of their own free will”, working conditions for prostitutes generally remain coercive.

In Jin Cho, pimps are mostly Inner Mongolian men, Horchin Mongols. Prostitutes, by contrast, are women from Mongolia. Each actor within the prostitution activities has his/her specific duties. The pimp officially registers women working in his *ger* as temporary residents. It means that he bribes the Ereen police and pays the official licence. The pimp’s duties also entail providing a room for work activities (single tricks) and sleeping, giving condoms, and protecting the women when necessary. The *ger* regulations require prostitutes to be “at home” at 8 am when they have spent a night out with a customer, and to be ready to work at 6 pm, after their daily preparation (public bath, shopping, hairdresser, make up), except if they are already with a customer. After 3 am, when there are no more customers, they are allowed to sleep.

The duties of the prostitutes are to bring the pimp consequent benefits, to be hard-working and to adopt “correct behaviour”, which means to avoid becoming involved in scandals, drawing public attention to themselves or being drunk. Transgression of these rules results in penalties or, with stricter pimps, in beatings with a billiard cue. A wide credit system allows the pimps to tie down prostitutes and restrict their movement. Available data testify to the absence of “forced” prostitution in Ereen and the National AIDS Foundation Review mentions that women who work as prostitutes in Ereen mainly come of their own free will (2007). Nevertheless, the Ereen city brothels’ indebted process of “voluntary” prostitution appears to provide a gateway to sexual slavery. In addition, Mongolian women forced into prostitution have to pass through Ereen on their way to the south of China.

Daily life in an Ereen brothel

I spent twenty days and nights with twelve women who work at *ger* No. 51. These women felt they were lucky on account of their pimp’s kindness. They called him *aav* (“daddy”), while pimps are usually called *ah*

("elder brother, uncle") in the other *gers* of Jin Cho. In each *ger*, prostitutes rank in a hierarchy depending on their age, education, seniority, look, behaviour, etc. Nevertheless, they constitute a close-knit community that lives together and shares duties, a private room and bed, some clothes and make-up, money and guarantees, clients, information, as well as mobile phones, condoms and food. I never saw anyone eating a takeaway meal alone: at around 3 pm, one by one, women ordered a meal from one of the restaurants located on Jin Cho and always shared their food with someone. This commensality alludes to a consubstantiation process linking together the prostitutes of the same *ger*. The very character of the women who prostitute themselves completely dissolves into the community associated with the place of prostitution: they are enmeshed in a "community of destiny" (Mathieu 2007). It looks as if they share a common body, the prostitute's body, constructed as a sexual object.

The individual personalities of the prostitutes are erased by their persona; such transformation underlines the "light" of the atmosphere of the "house" (Pan 2004). This character of the prostitute, individually and collectively acted out by all the women living together in the common scene of the *ger*, induces a kind of dissociation process inside each of them. In their daily life, women appear to be enacting a role, as if they are playing a character in a play. For four to six hours every afternoon, all the women prepare their body in order to intensify their power of seduction. They require several hours to seek the character that best fits their personality and particular mood.¹⁹ This role acting is reinforced by the fact that Mongolian women use a pseudonym with their customers.²⁰ They become someone else through a kind of metamorphosis.

The transformation process symbolically protects the prostitutes against the shame related to their activity. All the women I met in *ger* No. 51 hide the true nature of their job from their relatives, friends or acquaintances left behind in Mongolia, explaining that they work in hotels or restaurants

19 Women working as prostitutes in France explain that they "act in a play", "are like in a game", "elaborate their prostitute's character" (Handman and Mossuz-Lavau 2005).

20 Women who work as prostitutes in France usually use condoms, in part to "take some distance" symbolically (*ibid.*). Mongolian women are supposed to always use condoms, but in reality this is not systematic. In comparison with French prostitutes, Mongolian prostitutes develop a less symbolic process to effect distance and to build self protection. They kiss customers for instance, while French prostitutes exclude kisses from their sexual repertoire. This may explain why the character's artifice seems so theatrical in the case of Mongolian women who need to over-invest in their role in order to make up for a lack in symbolic and bodily protection.

in China. Women who come only during the summer to work in Jin Cho tell friends and relatives that they work in Mongolian tourist camps. This activity is somewhat schizophrenic. All the prostitutes I met insist on the psychological dangers related to this dissociative process. For the prostitute, the danger is to lose her sense of "self", her real personality, and become just a prostitute in her eyes and in the eyes of others. Besides, the fact that the "character" of the prostitute lives at night, a temporal disconnection also occurs in the "real" individuals, ordinary people who live by day. This dissociation allows these women to live more or less psychologically safely with the "prostitute stigma" (Pheterson 1996).

At the end of the night, many of the women furtively leave their customers' hotels and meet in another place in order to drink alcohol together. This is seen by other prostitutes as the behaviour of "bad workers", as they may potentially cause a drunken public scene as often fights ensue between prostitutes. Such behaviour seems to underscore the violence and shame of the "prostitute stigma". Some of the women are alcoholics. In the space of twenty days, the doctor made three visits to *ger* No. 51, twice for excessive consumption of alcohol and once for pregnancy. Alcohol potentially gives women the strength to work, and it is also felt to purify tainted bodies at the end of the night. It allows the reconstitution of the "full individual", the associative process of a torn personality. But dissociation results in symbolic and affective violence, which may then lead to violent behaviour.

Mongolian women working as prostitutes also experience some positive emotions. They sometimes feel pleasure when having sexual intercourse with some of their customers – usually Mongolian men who speak the same language as them. For instance, Marilyn fell in love with a customer and ran away for six months before finally leaving him. She had just recently returned to Jin Cho when I met her. For poverty-stricken Mongolian women, prostitution represents one possibility to obtain sexual and economic autonomy as well as liberty of movement. Through prostitution, women try to improve their present and future life and, in this sense, Ereen acts as a privileged destination.

Conclusion

Officially, the Erlian-Zamyn üüd free trade zone is about ten years old. It was constructed through the Chinese and Mongolian governments'

political will as well as the financial interests of the traders, industrialists or investors of both states. The development of Ereen is all the more surprising when compared to the situation in Zamyn üüd. Initially, Ereen targeted Mongolian retailers, the *naimaachin* and, following the establishment of free trade zone, became focused on the wholesalers, the *chanjuud*. Mongolian cross-border drivers now organise the freight going through the border. Strong networks have been elaborated in order to manage the freight and trade between Ereen and Ulaanbaatar through Zamyn üüd. Intermediaries, such as cross-border drivers, have found a much needed role in the exportation channels from China to Mongolia. This later transformation confirms the status of Ereen as a major trading place.

The subsequent increase in the importance of wholesale, paralleled by a relative decline in retail, has transformed the nature of the dominant trade in the Free Trade Zone. It has resulted in an increase in the number of temporary-permanent migrants who facilitate the long stays of Mongolian wholesalers and of the Chinese industrialists who supply their demand. This process is particularly evident in the increase in the number of temporary-permanent migrant women who come from Mongolia to work as prostitutes. Indeed, in Chinese sexual culture, any contract concluded between businessmen/partners has to be consecrated through entertainment, which usually includes dinner, alcohol and the services of a prostitute. Compared to the number of cross-border drivers, the number of Mongolian prostitutes is increasing more rapidly. This suggests that the growth in commercial relationships is speedier than the growth in the number of people crossing the border. Further, it may also underscore the degradation of the socio-economic situation of women in Mongolia.

It remains to be seen whether these trends are indicative of a transitional or permanent orientation. Many elements suggest that the city's dedication to wholesale trade will probably endure, despite the city government's goals to promote a new official image for Ereen as the Dinosaur Capital. Nevertheless, this image reinforces another specialisation of Ereen; for several years now, Ereen has been welcoming many "shoppers" who come for holidays to engage in gambling, prostitution and drinking in this "city of pleasures". On an economic and political plane, wholesale trade and tourism offer the most "interesting" vector for a rapid development and permanent enrichment of Ereen.

