

The Goyo Tarag controversy

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The recent controversy over Goyo Tarag provides a useful point of entry into current expressions of how notions of purity are tied in with questions of ethnic-nationalism, industrial production, and food security. Since 2012 Goyo Tarag has been targeted by the “Dairy Product Consumers’ Centre” NGO (DPCC), which led a media campaign alleging that the product is mislabelled and does not comply with national food safety standards. Headed by consumer activist B. Tseren, the DPCC demanded that the company cease production of Goyo Tarag, as it contains “E number” preservatives that are not permissible according to the “national tarag fermentation technology” standard (*ündesnii tarag bürekh tekhnologi*): E441 (gelatine, used as an emulsifier) and E330 (citric acid, used as a preservative and flavouring agent). (Several news outlets erroneously claimed in their headlines that Orgil Foods was mixing vinegar with its tarag, based on a misreading of the E300 additives codes.) The DPCC launched a class-action lawsuit against the manufacturer, which promptly counter-sued, demanding 78 million tögrögs in reputational damages.

In 2013, the DPCC published further alleged evidence that the manufacturer of Goyo Tarag had falsified food safety inspection documents. The DPCC later joined forces with the Consumer Rights and Education Federation (*Khereglegchiin erkх, bolovсроlyn kholboo*) in claiming that bacterial culture counts from laboratory samples of Goyo Tarag had been falsified, as actual live bacteria counts were 100 times lower than the minimum required by law.¹ The NGOs alleged collusion between food safety inspectors and Orgil Foods, asserting that the tarag is an “ordinary white-coloured beverage”, but not a natural dairy product.² Several news outlets reported in January 2013 that Goyo Tarag is manufactured using milk powder imported from Sweden,

1 The standard (MNS 4229:2011) requires a minimum 1×10^7 count of desirable bacteria per millilitre, and requires that the “E code” for additives must be indicated on the label (section 7.3).

2 M. Soniuch. “Мэргэжлийн хяналтын байцаагчид ‘Гоё’ тарагны шинжилгээг хуурамчаар үйлджээ [Safety inspectors falsified tests for ‘Goyo’ tarag]”, 2013-06-11 (<http://www.ugluu.mn/6838.html>). T. Janyerke. “‘Гоё’ тараг стандартын шаардлага хангадаггүй [‘Goyo’ tarag does not meet standards]”, *Time*, 2013-06-11 (<http://society.time.mn/content/30299.shtml>).

and accused the dairy, Orgil Foods, of “illegally” producing tarag with an extended shelf-life of three months.



Goyo Tarag label, as updated in 2013. The label reads: “Ingredients: purified water, dried cow’s milk, sugar, stabilizers (E1442, E440, E451, E331III). Lactic acid cultures: Streptococcus thermophilus, Lactobacillus bulgaricus. Storage period: 28 days in cool conditions, +2°C-+6°C.” The label indicates compliance with standard MNS 4229:2011.

Following shortly on these reports, an editorial by J. Erdenechimeg was published on several news sites, alleging that Orgil Foods was selling Chinese yogurt drink as Goyo Tarag.³ The text of this editorial begins with an evocation of Mongolia’s pastoral heritage, situating tarag consumption within a system of “traditional” practices that link Mongols to a living natural environment (“tarag is a living food”), their resilience (Mongolians “can live for several months on tarag alone during times when meat is unavailable”), and an “uninterrupted” tradition. The author points out that tarag is one of the *naiman neriin baraa*, or “eight staples” that newly privatized shops were required to sell beginning in the 1990s. Erdenechimeg goes on to argue that the Mongols, who obtain over 80 percent of their consumer goods from China, are “now no longer able to make even our national dairy products with our own hands”. Drawing heavily on the reports issued by the Dairy Consumers’ Centre, the author claims that Goyo Tarag is evidently not tarag because it contains chemicals giving it a shelf life of 90 days, but something else entirely – a “foreign” beverage. The “real” tarag is a living food, linked to a domestic national tradition, which spoils rapidly precisely because it is natural.

3 J. Erdenechimeg, *Niigmiin Toli*, June 18, 2013. “‘Оргил хүнс’ хятад таргаг савлав уу [Did ‘Orgil Foods’ package Chinese yogurt]” (<http://www.fact.mn/108780.html>).

Given the terminological confusion mentioned above, it is hardly surprising that Mongolian consumers are uncertain as to what constitutes a “pure” dairy product. Commenters on news reports concerning Goyo Tarag frequently claimed that industrially produced tarag is not in fact “real”, but rather a chemical product with unusual and potentially harmful properties, resulting from an unknown industrial process:

AIMAAR: Really if you let it go sour it turns into something nasty, bitter like medicine and pitch black, I've no idea what it's made of but it's definitely not milk ⁴

MONGOL LADY: It's true, if you leave the bottle out eventually a thick black residue forms, ordinary tarag doesn't do that. Don't give it to your kids. ⁵

ANONYMOUS: I drank a bottle of this once with my son, and we both got terrible food poisoning, after that we've stopped buying it ⁶

ZA ZA: milk your cow, boil the milk, let it sit and remove the clotted cream, then make your tarag, only then will you have real mongolian quality. Obviously any product that is made by industrial process is produced for a profit, bastards who have no qualms about anything can only do things like this, pretty soon they will probably have artificial meat produced on order by our southern neighbours then import it and deceive us ⁷

4 Comment on “Бидний амтархан уудаг ‘ГОЁ’ таргыг Хятадад үйлдвэрлэдэг үү? [Is the tasty ‘GOYO’ tarag that we drink made in China?]”, Factnews.mn, Feb. 24, 2014 (<http://factnews.mn/eoo>). “Аймаар: Үнэхээр гашилгаад үзвэл бхлиар юмбна лээ эм шиг гашуун хав хар болчихдог юугаар хийдэг юм болоо лав сүү бишээ”

5 Comment on “Made in China?”, Factnews.mn, Feb. 24, 2014 (<http://factnews.mn/eoo>). “монгол бүсгүй: Нээрээ үнээн Хоосон саванд нь удахаараа зунгааралдсан хар юм наалдаад үлдчихсэн байдаг юм шүү энгийн тарга бол тэгэхгүй ш дээ Хүүхдэдээ битгий уулгаарай”

6 Comment on “Made in China?”, Factnews.mn, Feb. 24, 2014 (<http://factnews.mn/eoo>). “zochin: Bi huuteigee neg uugaad aimar hordoj bilee tuunees hoish avahaа bolison”

7 Comment on “Made in China?”, Factnews.mn, Feb. 24, 2014 (<http://factnews.mn/eoo>). “за за: үнээгээ саагаад сүүгээ хөөрүүлж өрмөө загсааж тарагаа бүрээд л энэ чинь жинхэнэ монгол чанар Угаасаа үйлдвэрийн аргаар хийж байгаа бүх зүйлс ашгийн төлөө юу ч хийхэд бэлэн гарууд тэд иймл юм хийж чадна удахгүй хиймлээр махаа урд хөршөөрөө захиалж хийлгээд оруулж ирээд биднийг хуурах байлгүй”

MMM: it would be good to know soon whether this [claim that Goyo Tarag is Chinese] is true or false. until then it would be best not to buy this stuff. obviously if there are ingredients such as E421, E312 etc. listed on a food product they're all chemicals. these [ingredients] are even on the tarag produced by mon suu the children's milk factory. only a few [products] actually have these written on the label. there are lots more where it isn't written. we have no idea what we are eating and drinking.....⁸

But even in the case of domestically-produced milk the lines between “purity” and “unsafety” are blurred. One informant, reflecting on the alternative option of buying fresh milk from the cattle-owners who sit outside apartment buildings in the mornings, expressed strong reservations:

My parents used to have a few cows, even after they moved to the city, but that was already ten years ago. Back then we used to get fresh milk and tarag from my parents all summer. Now there are hardly any families left that keep cows at the edge of the city. They passed a law forbidding cattle inside the city limits, but mainly there is too little left for cattle to eat. No wonder you see cows foraging in the rubbish bins! The suburban districts used to be empty grass fields; now there's no open space left. Even if local families still sold fresh milk in the shops, I would be too suspicious to buy it. Without grass for the cows to eat, and living in such a polluted environment, how could the milk be safe?

Consumers' confusion in attempting to distinguish the “national” (*Mongol tarag*) from the “foreign” (*yogurt*), and the “real” (*jinkhene tarag*) from the “industrial”, is compounded by rumours that some “national” products are in fact imported. In 2013 *Ünen* newspaper published side-by-side photographs comparing Goyo tarag and Chinese yogurt, implying that the products are identical apart from the pasted-on Mongolian label.⁹ A similar editorial was run several months later by the popular

8 Comment on “Made in China?”, Factnews.mn, Feb. 24, 2014 (<http://factnews.mn/eeo>). “mmm: eniig unen hudliig hurdan ilruulmeer ym. ter hurtel ni dahij avku bval taarna. ugaasaa hunsnii buteegdehuunii orst nairlaga deer E421 E312 g m temdeglegeenuud bval bugd himiin garaltai gsn ug. mon suu gd huuhdiin suunii uildveriin targan deer hurtel baidiim bh ch lee. teed il bichsen ni hedhen. bicheegui hichneen hunsn ch bgaan. yu idej uudiin bgaan medku eeeee”

9 ““Оргил хүнс'-ийнхэн 'Гоё' таргаа хятад таргаар савладаг [‘Orgil Foods’ package their ‘Goyo’ tarag from Chinese yogurt]”, *Ünen*, June 18, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>).

news site Olloo.mn, asking whether the visual similarity between Goyo Tarag and its Chinese counterparts was due to Orgil Foods copying the Chinese packaging, or using the same production technology: “Why must they have the same packaging”, the article asked, asserting that the similarity to Chinese products “gives rise to suspicions that the product might be made in China”.¹⁰

In February 2014, a pair of blurry images taken at the railway station in Ulaanbaatar began to make the rounds of Facebook in Mongolia. These images, taken by a bystander using his mobile phone, purported to show two men next to a train box car, unloading crates of Goyo Tarag – a yogurt drink produced by Orgil Foods, subsidiary of the major Mongolian drinks manufacturer Vitafit.¹¹ What seemed out of place was that the train had, apparently, just arrived from the southern border: if this was a Mongolian beverage, why was it being unloaded from a train bringing goods imported from China? Given that Mongolia is a nation of nomadic pastoralists with 45 million livestock, it seemed a national affront, and a major food security concern, that milk products should be imported – and from China, of all places!

Within two days, the photographs had been “liked”, commented upon, shared, and re-shared by hundreds of Mongolians. Very soon they had been republished by several newspapers and online news sites, where they provoked commentary from an increasingly wide audience. Reactions to the photographs ranged from surprise and shock to anger and distress. While some commenters questioned the authenticity of the photographs, many acknowledged a troubling, yet perfectly credible, explanation: the manufacturers of this beverage had been misleading the public, by having their commodity produced inexpensively in China and falsely labelled to indicate local origin.

10 Feb. 27, 2014. “Гоё’ тараг Монгол уу, Хятад уу [Is ‘Goyo’ tarag Mongolian, or is it Chinese]” (<http://www.olloo.mn/News/1242450.html>). “Яагаад заавал адилхан савлагатай байх ёстой вэ. Энэ л хятадад үйлдвэрлэгддэг байж магадгүй гэх хардлагыг төрүүлээд байгаа юм.” The image accompanying the article appears to have been taken from Twitter (<https://twitter.com/ShineUkhaan/status/242530327589945344>).

11 See for example the public posts by “Duulian Shuugian” (<https://www.facebook.com/duulian.shuugian/posts/275014779325338>), “Delhijgees Zail” (https://www.facebook.com/DelhijgeesZail/posts/433907273409096?stream_ref=10), and “Yuu khiigeed baigaam be?” (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=233793430077896&set=a.195242403932999.1073741827.191588557631717&type=1&permPage=1>).

As interest in the photographs spread, mainstream news outlets began to report on them widely. A brief item was published by the news site Tsag.mn (though subsequently removed from that and other sites), in which these photographs were interpreted as depicting *khaltuurchin porteruud* –informal, and by implication unregulated, lightweight trucks – loading tarag at the train station on the weekend, noting that the images had raised considerable uncertainty. The news item asserted that “at this time when there is no such thing as food security, milk and dairy products with a long shelf-life continue to be imported from China”, going on to editorialize that readers should resist Chinese products:

We are unable to avoid a sensation of fear in observing that products from our southern neighbour such as Yeli and MonMilk, known as “milk with melamine”, which killed a large number of young children and which were prohibited from import for a time, are now visible on the shelves in food markets and shops. These photographs, distributed among public social networks over the weekend, reinforce this fear.

Mongols, we have the freedom to make healthy and safe choices, so we call on you not to use uncertain products.¹²

This brief editorial conflates several categories of “unsafe” products: milk products tainted with melamine, milk with a long shelf life, and Chinese goods. These are collectively “uncertain products” (*ergelzeetei бүтээгдэхүүн*), referring to the uncertainty over their origin, contents, and production process, reflecting the *possibility* – though not necessarily the conclusive fact – of non-safety. Significantly, the concept of “safety” implicit in this editorial is not linked to state control or to “safe” industrial processes, but to the fact of economic products being embedded in

12 “Зарим нэр төрлийн тараг, ундаа, салатууд Хятадаас оруулж ирдэг шуугиан дэгдэв [Rumours fly that some brands of tarag, beverages, and salads are imported from China]”. This editorial was republished from Tsag.mn (<http://tsag.mn/2588-zarin-ner-trliyn-tarag-undaa-salatuud-hyatadaas-oruulzh-irdeg-shuugian-degdev.html>) on several news sites, including bolod.mn (<http://www.bolod.mn/News/120138.html>), uls.mn (<http://uls.mn/medee/14031>), and fact.mn (<http://www.fact.mn/154625.html>). “Нэгэн цагт хилээр оруулж ирхийг нь хориглож байсан бага насны олон тооны хүүхдийн амийг авч одсон” меламинай сүү” хэмээгдэж байсан Yeli, MonMilk зэрэг урд хөршийн бүтээгдхүүнүүд Монголын хүнсний зах, дэлгүүрүүдийн лангуун дээр үзэгдэх болсон нь өөрийн эрхгүй эргэлзээ айдас төрүүлж байсныг амралтын өдрүүдээр олон нийтийн сүлжээгээр тархсан эдгээр зурагууд улам ч нотлож өглөө. Монголчуудаа эрүүл аюулгүй сонголт хийх эрх чөлөө нь бидэнд бий тул эргэлзээтэй бараа бүтээгдхүүнүүдийг хэрэглэхгүй байхыг уриалж байна.”

a known social-ecological environment. The “uncertain” products are effectively represented as “impure” due to the potential presence of unknown elements: melamine, preservatives, or indeed any food sourced from China, whose ecology and social relations are both “polluted”.

The online controversy that erupted in this case was driven by more than a simple rumour of crooked business practices. The suggestion that Goyo Tarag was actually Chinese seemed to indicate that Mongolians were not only victims to Chinese cunning, but were indeed complicit – through the self-interested corruption and bribery of dairy producers and government inspectors – in “poisoning” one another with a Chinese milk product. What is more, the rumour implied that Mongolians were unable to protect one of the few “national” products – tarag (yogurt), identified with the national pastoral heritage and “pure nature” – from foreign industrial products, which are widely seen as “artificial”. The manufacturers of Goyo Tarag eventually organized a press conference and factory tour to dispel the rumours, demonstrating that their product was in fact made in Mongolia. Despite this intervention, however, debate over whether the product was truly “Mongolian” continued, revealing an ongoing uncertainty regarding national survival under globalized market capitalism.

Mongolian fears of Chinese food products is commonplace, and is merely one of the many expressions of Sinophobia ingrained in contemporary Mongolian society¹³. Bulag has noted that Mongolians only “grudgingly” accepted Chinese flour and vegetables during food shortages of the 1990s, for example, considering them “poisonous in terms of the long-term health of the Mongols”¹⁴. Nationalist bloggers and online activists have repeatedly posted alarmist warnings about the possibility of “poisonous milk” being imported from China. Recently published articles have pointed to the ongoing risk of melamine-tainted Chinese milk,¹⁵ as well as to

13 Billé, Franck. *Sinophobia: Anxiety, violence, and the making of Mongolian identity*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.

14 Bulag, Uradyн Erden. *Nationalism and hybridity in Mongolia*. Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 200-201.

15 See for example E. Amarlin, Anti-Nuclear Movement Mongolia, Golomt.org, January 2, 2012. “Сэрэмжлүүлэг № 1: Хүнсний аюулгүй байдал-хортой сүү, самар, тос [Warning No. 1: Food safety – Poisonous milk, nuts, and oil]” (<http://golomt.org/2012/01/02/warning1/>). This article was republished on a number of mainstream news sites, including Zindaa.mn (<http://news.zindaa.mn/16jn>) and news.mn

suspicions that a batch of contaminated milk powder from New Zealand had made its way into Mongolia through a Chinese wholesaler, and used by Mongolian industrial milk processors APU, Süü, and Vitafit.¹⁶ Reader-submitted comments on online news articles discussing the Goyo Tarag rumours have similarly drawn on the premise that Chinese milk products are “dirty” or “poison”. A clear example of this attitude is found in the following comment submitted in response to a news story run in the online version of the newspaper *Ünen*, suggesting that Goyo Tarag might be repackaged yogurt imported from China:

Yeew such filty crooks. I heard that this tarag was supposed to be good for you and kept buying it for our kids. We adults couldn't drink this stuff but gave it to our kids, and now look what happens. So now we've poisoned our kids with this dirty *khujaa* poison, while we kept free of the poison ourselves, from thinking of our children. I even saw lots of pregnant women buying this product. I would like to know how many families' kids are being poisoned by your dirty money.¹⁷

The above comment reveals an unqualified assumption that, if the product comes from China, it must be poisonous to Mongolians – all the more so to children and

(<http://id.news.mn/content/94060.shtml>).

16 Kh. Saikhan, “Хортой сүү Монголд орж ирчихсэн юм биш үү [Is it not the case that poisonous milk has been brought into Mongolia]”, *mminfo.mn*, August 19, 2013 (<http://www.mminfo.mn/content/48048.shtml>); “АПУ, Сүү, Витафит компаниудын хортой сүү ард түмнийг хордуулахаар лангуун дээр өрөөстэй байх уу [Is the poisonous milk from companies APU, Süü, and Vitafit going to stay on the store shelves to continue poisoning the public]”, *Chuhai.mn*, August 7, 2013 (<http://chuhai.mn/r/27677>). Tests of milk product samples taken from markets in Ulaanbaatar ultimately did not reveal any contamination; see “Шинэ Зеландын ‘Хортой’ сүүний талаарх мэдээлэл [Notice on the “Poisonous” New Zealand milk]”, National Centre for the Study of Infectious Diseases, August 12, 2013 (http://www.nccd.gov.mn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=353:2013-08-12-08-30-01&catid=21:2011-09-01-03-24-23&Itemid=42).

17 Anonymous, June 18, 2013, comment on *Unen.mn*, “Packaged from Chinese tarag” (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>). “eooo yasan baliar har novshnuud ve. ene targiig chin chuham l goe sain geed huuhduuddee avch ogch uulgadag bsan shdee. t[o]mchuud bid nar oorsdoo ch uuj chadahgui huuhduuddee uulgaj bsan maani tegeed odoo ene uu. neg muu hujaagii horoor huuhduuddee horduulchihaad oorsdoo huuhduuddee bodoj bgaa nereer hor idehgui uldej bsan bna shdee. jiremsen huuhnuud ch gesen zondoo l avch bgaa haragddag bsan. arai dendej bgaa um bish uu. zavaan har shunaltai novshnuudaa. ta nariin haltar togrog hichneen ailiin huuhduuded hor honool bolj bgaag medej l bgaa bmaar um.”

pregnant women. The commenter describes Goyo Tarag as a “dirty *khujaa* poison” (“*muu hujaagiin hor*”), using the racist epithet *khujaa* to denote its Chinese origin. At the same time, the comment is an indictment of market capitalism, in which private greed undermines nationalism: the Mongolian importers are presumed to be complicit “filthy crooks” who poison children with their “dirty money”. Implicit in this comment, as in much public discussion of food safety and food security, is the understanding that while the Mongolians can only survive by uniting as a nation to protect themselves against the Chinese threat, their ability to do so is undermined by self-interested and unregulated business actions.

In retaliation against the DPCC allegations, the director of Orgil Foods, N. Batzayaa, gave a newspaper interview in June, 2013, during which he asserted that Goyo Tarag is made with cultures from the Netherlands (Chr. Hansen), stabilizers from the USA (Cargill), and dried milk from New Zealand. Batzayaa explained that the company uses liquid milk from “Atar Chandgana Süü”, a sister company located in the town of Ölzii in Kherlen sum, Khentii aimag, a dairy farm with 400 cows built on the site of the former Chandaga State Farm, but admitted that the liquid milk supply is not adequate to meet production needs, requiring imported reconstituted milk to be used in the production line and combined with fresh milk.¹⁸ In late February 2014, the producers of Goyo Tarag held a second press conference to debunk the Facebook rumours. Showing a freight shipping slip as proof, the company representatives explained that the photographs posted to Facebook depicted people purchasing goods from a train car at the loading area for freight trains headed to the countryside.¹⁹ At the press conference, Orgil Foods expressed a belief that the rumour that their product was imported from China had been disseminated as a deliberate attempt to injure their reputation, drawing attention to the similarity of recent news reports to the previous, “unfounded” claims made by the “Dairy Consumers’ Centre” consumer advocacy NGO, which they asserted they

18 “Оргил хүнс’ ХХК-ийн захирал Н.Батзаяа: Тарагны савалгаа хүртэл нарийн технологитой. Үүнийг мэдэхгүй хүмүүс биднийг Хятад тараг савладаг гэж хэлдэг [N. Batzayaa, president of ‘Orgil Foods’ Co. Ltd.: Even the packaging for tarag has its own specialized technology. People who don’t know this say that we package Chinese yogurt]”, *Unen*, June 19, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24201.shtml>).

19 *Baatar.mn*, February 26, 2014. “Гоё тараг’ хятадынх биш гэдгийг баталлаа [‘Goyo Tarag’ confirmed not to be Chinese]” (<http://www.bataar.mn/10020542>).

would take to court. The following day, the company offered a press tour of its facilities as further proof.²⁰

Images of the factory production line provoked few comments. Although some were suspicious of what was not shown, or questioned the fact that the equipment looked suspiciously new, for the most part commenters expressed a degree of satisfaction that the product had been made “visible”.

Ultimately, the crisis of uncertainty provoked by the rumours surrounding Goyo Tarag resulted from a combination of factors, reflecting concern over survival in every sense – biological, economic, ecological, and cultural. The threat perceived as being posed by “Chinese poison” is aggravated by increasing reliance on Chinese foods, over which Mongolians have little control. Underlying much of the discussion of food safety and food security is an assumption that Mongolians have become too individualistic – in other words, that they have come to put private gain ahead of national solidarity. Criticisms were thus directed against the Goyo Tarag producers, food safety inspectors, and even customs officers, all of whom were suspected by some readers of involvement in corrupt practices:

We’re the ones who should be called stupid animals. we have the opportunity to eat the most original [i.e., natural] food available anywhere yet we’re a stupid people, when we see someone starting to stumble we just sit by and hope they will fall²¹

ANONYMOUS: What are the professional inspection agency staff doing? So long as they can blackmail people into giving them a bit of money they have no interest in whether the public are being poisoned, or even dying.

20 “Н.Батзаяа: Түүхий сүүгээр жилийн дөрвөн улиралд тараг үйлдвэрлэхээр ажиллаж байна [N. Batzayaа: We are working towards producing tarag from raw milk in all four seasons]”, Time.mn, February 26, 2014 (<http://society.time.mn/content/42165.shtml>). See also the video report on the factory tour broadcast by Eagle TV (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqQhhUfXDl0>), and its accompanying online news article, “‘Гоё’ тараг, ‘Гоё’ технологи [‘Goyo’ tarag, ‘Fine’ technology]”, Feb. 28, 2014 (<http://economics.eagle.mn/content/read/13642.htm>).

21 Anonymous comment on “Orgil Foods”, *Ünen*, June 18, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>). “archaagui malnuud gej bidniig I helne. hamgiin orig huns hereglej suuh bolomjtoi murtluusuu unjaad bhaар unaad ireesei geed I hevtej baidag teneg ulsuud”

As a citizen, I am extremely perplexed that such people are above the law.²²

ANONYMOUS: Why don't those professionals who are supposed to be monitoring and checking [such things] speak up? Probably they are either fake-diploma graduates without any knowledge, or else bribe takers. ... America, Japan, even China import [food], but the thing is they have stringent standards and laboratory tests, why can't we implement these.²³

Some commenters indeed explicitly argued that the lack of food safety or food security is a result of the capitalist mindset – “looking at everything through the hole in a coin” – in contrast to the socialist period, during which national industry was developed to a point of almost mythical self-sufficiency:

This is a tragedy for us Mongolians. With the transition to market capitalism and democracy, we Mongolians have become hardly able to produce anything at all. Under socialism, which we used to denounce, we were able to make everything ourselves.²⁴

The notion that Mongolia was largely self-sufficient during the socialist period overlooks the immense role of both trade with the Soviet Union, and of subsidies serving to maintain inefficient processing industries in Mongolia. Yet whereas trade with the former Soviet Union continues to be described in terms of benevolent reciprocity with “Russian brothers” (*Oros akh düü nar*), trade with China is overtly a

22 Anonymous comment on “Orgil Foods”, *Ünen*, June 18, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>). “Мэргэжлий хяналтийнхан ер юу хийж байна гэхээр хунийг шантаалчилжбайж хунээсхэдэн цаас салгаж байвал тэр ард түмэн хордож байна уу хун ухэж байна тэд нарт хамаагүй. Харин ийм хумууст хууль уйлчидэггүйд иргэн хуний хувьд маш их гайхдаг.”

23 Anonymous comment on “Orgil Foods”, *Ünen*, June 18, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>). “... нөгөө хянаад шалгадаг мэргэжлийн хүмүүс нь яагаад дугарахгүй байгаа юм , мэдлэг муутай хуурамч дипломтонгууд,эсвэл авилгачид л байх ... Америк,Япон ялгаагүй л Хятадаас импортлодог гагцхүү яг стандарт,лабораторийн шинжилгээг хатуу барьдаг бид яагаад хэрэгжүүлж чаддаггүй юм.”

24 Anonymous comment on “Orgil Foods”, *Ünen*, June 18, 2013 (<http://www.unen.mn/content/24135.shtml>). “Энэ бол монголчууд бидний хувьд эмгэнэл юм. Зах зээл, ардчилалд шилжшээр монголчууд бид нар бух юмаа хийж чадахгүй шахуу болж байна. Муу хэлдэг байсан социализмийн уед бух юмаа оорсдоо хийдэг байсан юм шуу дээ.”

form of *market exchange*, in which each party tries to outdo the other – resorting to dissimulation if necessary – to maximize their own gain.

The perceived failure of Mongolians to protect themselves against Chinese “poison” can be read as a call for greater national solidarity. To some extent the perceived threat is exteriorized through projection onto the Chinese, but there are no clear-cut villains in this scenario; the “corrupt food inspectors”, “greedy milk producers”, even “lazy herders” are all to blame. Yet the threat posed by each of these actors is of a different type. Whereas the Chinese are assumed to be inherently dangerous, the Mongolians by nature have a duty to protect one another, which they have evidently neglected. This mutual protection is directed against the “foreign” in a broad sense, not only the Chinese. The danger posed by industrial milk production requiring unsafe preservatives is not explicitly blamed as “foreign”, but at the same time it is positioned against the local and national. “Mongolian nature”, “Mongolian milk”, and the like are “national” products in the sense not only of being locally produced, and embedded in a cultural tradition, but also in that they are “pure”, and therefore “safe”.

The above discussion has revealed some of the ways in which the symbolism of “pure milk” operates to position Mongolian people and culture as biologically “natural”. As I have pointed out in relation to the consumption of meat and dairy products, the “traditional” diet is widely held by Mongolians to be at least partly determined by biology, as an inherited adaptation by the Mongol human organism to the natural environment of Gobi and steppe. This diet is further embedded in the symbiotic relations between pastoralists and their livestock, which tend to be viewed as the result of co-evolution rather than domestication.²⁵ As suggested by the parallel maternal behaviour identified by Mongolians in humans and livestock – *shilrekh* (“running away”), the post-partum psychological state, and the need for maternal attachment as a prerequisite for lactation – livestock are not perceived in simple economic terms as “meat-producing” or “milk-producing animals”, but as sentient beings who need to be nurtured and coaxed. It is no coincidence that herders often describe milk as the gift or “bounty” of their animals (*malyn khishig* or *buyan*): the offering of milk is considered conditional on the lactating mother’s willingness to give milk, which in part is predicated on a psychological bond with her

25 Fijn, Natasha. *Living with herds: Human-animal coexistence in Mongolia*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

offspring. Milk is thus not merely a commodity to be consumed, but a substance that derives from a reproductive process involving a “pure” state of mind.

The industrial processing and commodification of milk clearly undermine everyday reproductive relations between pastoralists and livestock. Yet, as the advertising messages by industrial milk producers show, the symbolism of milk as “pure” and “natural” retains some resonance, despite its dislocation from the practices in which the symbols originate. The articulation of biological purity through milk implies, above all, opposition to the culturally and technologically-defined civilization of the neighbouring Chinese. Whereas China may constitute a strong civilization with greater political, economic, and technological power than Mongolia, the public discourse I have referenced in this article presents China as inferior to Mongolia in many ways. The Chinese – or “*khujaa*” – are implied to be selfish, vile, and cunning; their land is polluted; and their food products are unnatural, to the point of being poisonous. These messages suggest that while Mongolia may be smaller and weaker than its neighbour, it is nonetheless superior due to its positioning within a pure and “natural” environment. The mutualism of the Mongols, their livestock, and their grassland territory implies a wiser or more noble form of subsistence than one that gives rise to a poisonous mindset (*khoron sanaa*) and poisonous products (*khortoi büteegdekhüün*).