Vignette: Borderline Gardening – Sino-Mongolian Relations and the Construction of Extractive Enclaves with Horticultural Characteristics

MIKKEL BUNKENBORG

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese nationals working in Mongolia, this research note explores various forms of gardening that unfolded as side-projects at sites where Chinese enterprises were engaged in the extraction of oil, zinc and fluorspar. At first, the organisation and activities of these Chinese operations appeared to stem from a penchant for walled compounds and gardening. However, on closer inspection, the horticultural enclaves were not really a unilateral imposition of a culturally determined aesthetics, but rather the outcome of a negotiation, informed by prevailing ethnic stereotypes, of the proper form a Chinese presence could assume in Mongolia.

Keywords: *garden; China; Mongolia; natural resources; extractive industries*

Introduction

It was only when we got out of the car to take a closer look that we noticed the stones and saplings that seemed to trace a faint perimeter around the Chinese fluorspar mine. Situated in the wild and dry landscape of the Mongolian Gobi desert, the encampment consisted of just two shafts with winches, a few ramshackle sheds and half a dozen of the circular tents known as *gers* that constitute home for many Mongolians. The site was inhabited by ten Chinese miners and a score of Mongolian workers, and apparently someone had begun to turn the camp into a walled courtyard with trees. Morten Pedersen and I had recently set out to do ethnographic research on relations between Chinese nationals and locals in sites where state-owned enterprises and small private companies from China engaged in natural resource

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extraction in Mongolia.[1] The gardening activities of the miners puzzled us, as they seemed so entirely irrelevant to the business of extracting flourspar. The Chinese manager, Mr Lin, answered our questions readily: 'It is just to improve the environment. When we started planting the seedlings, someone said, "Let's make things pretty and orderly around here", and we decided to make two rows with ample space for each of the trees to grow tall and strong'. Mr Lin had traced the outline of a wall in front of the *gers* with rocks chipped clean of fluorspar and planted two rows of saplings. The reason why Mr. Lin had tried to produce a semblance of domesticity may simply have been that his ten-year-old son, who had come to spend the summer in Mongolia, was constantly complaining that there was nothing to see or do around the camp. Even so, there was something incongruous and intriguing about this incipient garden in the middle of the Gobi desert.

During the years that followed the 2008 financial crisis, the Chinese economy seemed to be an unstoppable powerhouse, and Chinese enterprises involved in natural resource extraction established operations across the globe. Few countries experienced the surge in Chinese demand for energy and minerals as acutely as Mongolia. Scarcely populated and rich in natural resources, Mongolia was rapidly turning into 'Mine-golia' (Bulag 2009), and the country thus provided ample opportunities for studying how Chinese companies engaged in natural resource extraction abroad. It was with the ambition of providing some ethnographic flesh to theories of extractive enclaves and new modalities of capitalism that we first set out to visit Chinese oil fields and mines in Mongolia in 2009, and we were almost immediately intrigued by the gardens planted around the Chinese enterprises.

The Chinese gardens in Mongolia were not just curiously out-of-place; they also failed to conform to the Euro-American idea of gardens as apolitical spaces particularly suited for retirees. 'Let us cultivate our garden', is the conclusion to Voltaire's satirical enlightenment novel describing how the optimist Candide goes through war, earthquake and many other calamities before he finally resigns himself to cultivating a garden. First published in 1759, Voltaire's book contributed to popularising the idea of the garden as an apolitical space where a private life free of weariness, vice and want can unfold. However, clearly something rather different was at stake with the Chinese gardening activities unfolding in Mongolia. In the Sino-Mongolian borderlands, it proved hard to escape the stereotypical idea of a perpetual conflict

between nomadic Mongolians raised on milk and meat and sedentary, vegetable growing Chinese. We should obviously have dismissed such stereotypes as orientalist fabrications, but this research note is an honest account of how these tired, old tropes both attracted and fooled us. In the context of Mongolia, gardens could hardly be dismissed as private and apolitical, and as we attempted to analyse a growing number of ethnographic cases of gardening in Mongolia, we could not help but speculate that these gardens might be part of a more concerted imposition of Chinese aesthetics and values in Mongolia.

Seeing Ecological Civilisation like an Oil Company

The largest extractive enclave we visited in Mongolia was an oilfield owned by Petrochina. Located in the flat and sparsely populated Tamsag basin in Eastern Mongolia, the company and its subsidiaries employed a workforce fluctuating between 2500 and 6000 of which 90 per cent were Chinese nationals. Dispersed over a wide swathe of grassland full of nodding johns and dirt tracks, the workers lived in numerous large and orderly camps that consisted mainly of container homes. The environmental impact was considerable, but the Chinese managers stressed that the company had strict protocols for HSE – Health, Society and Environment. They were doing all they could and criticised their Mongolian counterparts for delaying the implementation of initiatives that would mitigate the environmental damage and contribute to 'the construction of ecological civilisation' (*chuangzao shengtai wenming*).

One morning, we had a rare opportunity to witness in practice how the oil company contributed to the construction of ecological civilisation. Just outside the canteen, we ran into Ms. Cao, a university student from Daqing who had spent the summer in the oilfield. She was trying to mobilise a couple of Mongolian workers to drive an excavator and said that they were going to plant some trees in the compound. The two Mongolians appeared to be incapable of understanding her gestures and phrases in Chinese and Mongolian, and with increasing exasperation, Ms. Cao explained that they were probably just pretending not to understand her. She checked their nametags as if to make a note of their obstinacy, but then an interpreter from Inner Mongolia arrived and within two minutes, the excavator was on its way. The interpreter was an obnoxious person, with whom she had argued all summer, Ms Cao confided and added that she generally found the Mongolians unreliable, rude and primitive. She had spent the summer restoring

grasslands damaged by spillage and had managed to replant an area with the optimal types of grass. But the locals were so ungrateful, they just wanted the original vegetation back, even when it was not particularly good.

Arriving at an open square with containers on three sides, the stout, middle-aged Mongolian driving the excavator impatiently revved up his engine and started digging. Mr. Shu, the young manager in charge of HSE, had not actually finished explaining where he wanted the holes. He started pacing about and gesticulating frantically, waving a measuring rod and shouting at the top of his voice to make it clear that he wanted two rows of evenly spaced holes. The worker in the excavator could not be bothered with the niceties of measuring, and he started to dig an irregular series of enormous holes along the cement walkway. Realising that the holes were so big that the saplings could easily be positioned correctly within the holes, Mr Shu gave up shouting at the run-a-away excavator and squatted down with his measuring rod to show the workers with shovels that he wanted the saplings exactly one metre from the cement walkway. Having satisfied himself that the workers understood the plan, he proudly explained to us that the planting of trees around the containers was part of the company's comprehensive HSE strategy that aimed to mitigate the adverse environmental effects of oil extraction.

The Mongolian workers seemed to find the day's exercise in environmental beautification rather silly, and I quietly remarked that trees were really quite unusual on the grasslands. In fact, the newly planted saplings were quite probably the only trees within a radius of two hundred kilometres. 'That may be so', Mr. Shu retorted, 'but the species are indigenous. To show our respect for Mongolian culture, we spared no effort to procure Mongolian trees, and these saplings have come straight from Ulan Bator'. Mr. Shu then walked off in a huff at my unreasonable skepticism, and there was no opportunity to quiz him or Ms. Cao further on their views of environmental protection. We were bemused by the talk of carefully optimised blends of grass species, the planting of saplings imported from 900 kilometres away and the military precision with which they were planted. We were also quick, perhaps too quick, to conclude that environmental protection was just a pretext for the Chinese company's attempts to civilise the 'barbarian' Mongolian ecology and to carve out a space where they could bring the natural scenery into conformity with Chinese gardening aesthetics.

Extractive Enclaves

When we started our tour of Chinese resource extraction projects in Mongolia, we were inspired by an emerging literature on enclaves and technologies of zoning. Describing extractive enclaves as a new modality of capitalism, James Ferguson (2005, 2006) has argued that companies engaged in resource extraction in Africa increasingly carve out useful territories where they can operate with little concern for the country as a whole:

> Usable Africa gets secured enclaves – noncontiguous "useful" bits that are secured, policed, and, in a minimal sense, governed through private or semiprivate means. These enclaves are increasingly linked up, not in a continuous, territorial national grid, but in transnational networks that link dispersed spaces in a selective, point-to-point fashion (2005: 380).

In a simultaneous, but separate debate, Aihwa Ong (2004, 2006) has suggested that the post-Mao Chinese state purposefully created 'spaces of political and economic exception' within and around China. This occurred not only in the form of special economic zones that were meant to take the lead in the transformation from socialism to capitalism during the early years of reforms, but also in the formation of special autonomous regions such as Hong Kong and Macau. Ong argues that, 'zoning technologies provide the mechanisms for creating or accommodating islands of distinct governing regimes within the broader landscape of normalised rule, thus generating a pattern of variegated but linked sovereignty' (Ong 2004: 75). The creation of such zones originated in Western colonial practices that created special treaty ports and customs areas in dominated lands, including China. Now, Chinese companies are extending and developing these technologies of zoning in overseas territories.

The idea of the extractive enclave as a new modality of global capitalism and the idea of a Chinese penchant for technologies of zoning intersect in accounts of Chinese enclaves in Africa. With the Chinese engagement in Angola as a point of departure, Bergesen (2013) coined the term 'surgical colonialism' to describe 'resource extraction by a foreign power that involves a minimum of local disruption' (302). Bergesen suggested that Chinese state-owned enterprises are at the forefront of such enclaved developments in Africa where the colonisers bring along their own labour for exploitation. The sales pitch for such projects, Bergesen humourously suggested, might go like this:

> For the first time the exploiter will exploit himself, and further, to make sure there is no mess or social disruption made in getting the oil, copper,

> gold, diamonds, iron, and uranium we need, we will build – below cost – and completely finance, manage, and use our own labor (and even our own cement) to build hospitals, schools, sports stadiums, rail lines, highways, apartment buildings, government buildings. In short this is a neo-neocolonial extraction process that is purely surgical in nature. You won't even know we are there (308).

With our tour of Chinese resource extraction projects in Mongolia, we intended to explore whether the idea of extractive enclaves might apply to Chinese companies operating in Mongolia and provide some ethnographic data. What is left out of a pointed desk study like Bergesen's, is not only that many Chinese companies operate without clear ties to the Chinese state, but also the fact that even state-sponsored and supposedly 'surgical' interventions often prove to be quite messy. Enclaves are called 'flying lands' (*feidi*) in Chinese, but they are not entirely detached from their local surroundings. As Ching Kwan Lee (2009) notes, 'some are more socially embedded and integrated with the local society than others'. We did not expect to find surgical efficiency, but the extracurricular gardening around Chinese companies in Mongolia was a form of messiness that came as a complete surprise.

The Zinc Mine that Aspired to be a Flower Garden

Perhaps the most ambitious gardening project we encountered on our trip was a Sino-Mongolian zinc joint venture located near Baruun-Uurt, a provincial capital in southeastern Mongolia. Employing an average of 350 Mongolians in addition to 50 Chinese, the mine was a significant employer in the area. The Chinese CEO was proud to inform us of the company's achievements when he took us on a guided tour around the open pit mine and the shiny white factory complex that produced zinc ore concentrate. To our surprise, it was evidently important for the CEO to demonstrate that the mine was not only producing top-grade zinc concentrate but also high-quality vegetables. Walking amidst enormous piles of potatoes and carrots in the muddy fields behind the factory, he bragged that the potato harvest that year amounted to ten tons and that the largest potato weighed no less than 1.6 kg. In addition to the fields, there were four large greenhouses with heating where a group of Chinese technicians managed to grow more than twenty different vegetables. The CEO picked a cucumber and munched it while explaining that it was not even necessary to wash the vegetables, as they were grown organically. Having sampled a variety of greens and noting how the strong ultraviolet light in Mongolia

made the chili peppers and bitter melons unusually pungent even though they were grown from seeds from China, the CEO explained that his dream was to make a 'flower garden style mine' (*huayuanshi de kuangchang*).

More than just a question of aesthetics or practicality, then, the well-kept mining grounds with trees, flowers and vegetables involved a larger vision of 'creating a small society' (*chuangzao yige xiao shehui*). For in the CEO's vision, the future 'flower garden mine' would not just provide the workers with vegetables and meat produced on site. In accordance with the socialist ideal of the 'work unit' (*danwei*) as an all-encompassing social institution, the work place also take care of housing, leisure activities and education for the workers as well as their families. This is similar to the state socialist collective farms and institutions studied by anthropologists in the former Soviet Union, Mongolia and China (Humphrey 1998; Lu and Perry 1997). Having noted an increasing number of marriages and children among co-workers, the CEO was even considering the possibility of opening a kindergarten on site. 'Maybe we could even open our own university', he told me jokingly, 'then we could hire you to teach Chinese'. When I translated that particular joke to Pedersen and our Mongolian driver, they were not at all amused. Indeed, the prospect of Mongolian workers learning Chinese and eating vegetables in a flower garden mine made both of them think that a hidden menace was lurking behind the seemingly innocuous flowers and vegetables.

Horticultural Characteristics

If Euro-American gardens are generally understood to be free of politics as suggested by Voltaire's *Candide*, much the same would seem to apply to Chinese gardens. According to Wing-Tsit Chan, an eminent expert on Chinese philosophy, the Chinese garden is where man finds relief from the cultural strictures associated with the house: 'Inside the house he is a Confucian with all his moral codes, conventions and a prescribed way of life, whereas in the garden he a Taoist, a romantic, primitivistic, care-free, "new-born child"'(1950: 33). The garden is where man interacts with nature and finds his place. On the one hand, 'man asserts himself in the garden and turns it into an arena for the expansion of his ego', yet on the other hand, 'he sinks into insignificance for in the midst of natural splendor and beauty his position can never be impressive' (Ibid.: 30). Exploring the gardens

of scholar-officials, and more importantly, representations of such gardens in paintings and literature, sinologists have constructed the Chinese garden as an integral part of the timeless essence of Chinese culture. However, in their attempts to decode the refined aesthetics of gardening, they seem to have ignored not just the fact that most gardening is actually concerned with the production of vegetables but also that gardening, in certain contexts, can be profoundly political.

The gardening habits of General Zuo Zongtang offer an interesting corrective to the idea of the garden as a purely aesthetic form without political implications. In the year 1880, a German journalist paid a visit to general Zuo in the remote oasis town of Hami in Xinjiang. As a champion of the Qing dynasty, General Zuo played a decisive role in crushing the Taiping rebellion and led the military campaigns against Muslim rebels in northwest China. What really impressed the German journalist, however, was the amount of time General Zuo spent in a vegetable garden he was cultivating next to the military barracks. Rising at dawn, the old general would spend quite a while contemplating his garden, and every evening, he found time to oversee the watering. The general reportedly consumed no less than six bowls of vegetables for breakfast. He sent a letter requesting his sons to send seeds for his garden and for the soldiers under his command. 'At the edge of the desert', Peter Lavelle writes in his article on Chinese horticulture in the Qing borderlands, 'the general found the land offered some hope for reproducing seeds from China proper' (2014: 215). Producing vegetables from Chinese seeds was evidently part of the plan for integrating the newly conquered territories. and perhaps it would be safe to say that for General Zuo, gardening was not so much a private hobby as a continuation of war by other means.

Obviously, the gardening projects we encountered in Mongolia grew around Chinese companies engaged in natural resource extraction, not from military encampments. It is not unlikely that the Chinese gardeners themselves regarded their own activities as an entirely innocuous pastime. In a Mongolian context, however, gardening immediately evokes ideas about a perennial conflict between sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic pastoralists, and the Mongolian workers likely took a more sombre view of the horticultural proclivities of their Chinese managers and colleagues. Franck Billé (2015) suggests that the apparently timeless enmity between Chinese and Mongolians is actually a fairly recent phenomenon but relations

between Mongolians and Chinese are nevertheless conceptualised as a perpetual clash of civilisations:

> More than simply historical enemies, the Mongols and the Chinese are representatives of two systems fundamentally at odds with each other: nomadism and sedentarism. From journalists to travellers, historians to anthropologists, most speak of an unbridgeable divide in the traditional way of life of these two ethnic groups (38).

At the very heart of this ethnic divide is the practice of growing and eating vegetables: 'This lack of compatibility emerges particularly clearly through the symbolism of food. As cultivators, the Chinese are vegetable eaters, while the Mongols are great consumers of meat and dairy products' (39). In reality, Mongolians do eat vegetables and Chinese consume plenty of meat and dairy products, but food symbolism is nevertheless a key to Sino-Mongolians relations.

When we first began our tour of Chinese companies in Mongolia, we initially held on to the idea of gardening activities as inherently private and apolitical. However, as we discovered one Chinese gardening project after another, it seemed increasingly unlikely that they were all just random add-ons to resource extraction projects. Knowing how vegetables are associated with China in Mongolia, we found it difficult to dismiss them as apolitical. Discussing our interviews with Mongolian workers, we were increasingly convinced that the Chinese gardening projects that seemed so harmless were in fact a very subtle and therefore particularly sinister aspect of neo-colonial expansion.

Fluorspar and the Seeds of Empire

When we returned to the fluorspar mine a year after our first visit, it turned out that Mr. Lin had not returned to Mongolia and all but one of his saplings had died. Professor Guo, the bespectacled mining engineer who had replaced Mr. Lin, was quite dismissive of his predecessor's gardening skills and he outlined a far more ambitious gardening plan. A new building and a wire fence had been erected, and Professor Guo now envisioned the installation of an irrigation system that would allow him to grow trees and flowers inside the perimeter of this fence. 'It would be so nice', Professor Guo stated, 'if I could sit in my office and look out upon a garden full of flowers instead of this colorless and boring landscape'.

Our suspicion that gardening served a subtle but crucial role in the expansion of Chinese influence in Mongolia seemed to be confirmed.

Neither Mr. Lin nor Professor Guo came across as intentional agents of Chinese territorial expansion, but then again, imperial effects might be achieved without imperial intentions. In *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought* (1990), Rolf Stein suggests that the miniature gardens cultivated in China and elsewhere in East Asia are not mere toys but embody magical power. Fashioned as miniature worlds where the entire universe may be reduced to the size of a seed, such gardens are not simple representations of the cosmos; they are magic acts of world-making that render the universe manipulable: 'Whenever hermits draw or cultivate dwarf plants in a miniature landscape, they create for themselves, as does a magician-illusionist, a separate world in miniature' (1990: 52). Stein's take on Chinese gardening as a cosmogonic practice might be far-fetched, but it seemed quite possible that the world-making of the Chinese managers took place as much though extracurricular gardening as through the business of extracting oil, zinc and fluorspar. As Catherine Lutz (2006) has aptly put it, 'empire is in the details', and we had finally convinced ourselves that it was in the seemingly trivial Chinese gardens in Mongolia that one might discover the seeds of a Chinese empire in the making.

Not long after, the interpretative balloon was suddenly deflated. We came across a letter in Mongolian that was sent to the fluorspar mine from the District Council. The Chinese company was in a conflict with the local herders for depleting and polluting water resources and with the local authorities for hiring too few Mongolians compared to the number of Chinese employees. The District Council had issued a demand for action:

> As part of our supervision, we found that the environment, hygiene, comfort of workers' places to live, workers' social issues and order in the […] mine are very bad compared to other mines. We accordingly demand that the following problems be addressed.

The letter then mentions provision of safety equipment, payment of social and health insurance, improvement of kitchen hygiene, the building of roads and wastewater channels, but most significantly, the letter demands a beautification of the surroundings:

> Improve the appearance and style of the ger quarters and put fixed paths between the gers and the work place. Improve conditions for workers to spend their leisure time in a right way (by building a pavilion and a square for basketball, volleyball and billiards). Plant trees, bushes, perennial plants and grasses in order to protect soil and stop desertification.

We had automatically assumed that the Chinese managers had taken the initiative to organise the layout of the mine and plant trees, but it was suddenly clear that the real impetus had come from the Mongolian side. The emerging contours of a garden at the fluorspar mine were not, after all, traces of an incipient empire, they were probably just half-hearted attempts to appease the Mongolian officials and live up to their ideas about well-organised work places with 'trees, bushes, perennial plants and grasses'. Rethinking our collection of cases, it suddenly seemed very likely that the environmental inspectors and other Mongolian officials overseeing the operations of the oil field and the zinc mine had issued similar demands, which we had overlooked in our eagerness to uncover an insidious horticultural conspiracy.

Conclusion

The idea of gardening as an instrument devised to expand Chinese influence in Mongolia proved to be untenable, but our tour did leave us with two distinct impressions of the nature of Chinese extractive enclaves. Firstly, that such enclaves are not in practice as perfectly detached from their surroundings as Bergesen's (2013) concept of surgical colonialism suggests; secondly, that the organisation of such enclaves, including such apparently irrational excesses as gardening, are not linear projections of colonial blueprints, but take shape through encounters with local expectations. Rather than a Chinese technology of zoning used to carve out extractive enclaves and impose Chinese aesthetics, what was behind the Chinese gardens was a series of demands from Mongolian bureaucrats and a defensive response from the Chinese managers who set up gardens in ways that appeared distinctly Chinese.

Detaching an extractive enclave from its local surroundings is something that requires an ongoing effort. In an ethnographic study of oil production off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, Hannah Appel (2012a, 2012b) points out that oil companies only manage to use their own rules, technologies and labor regimes by actively distancing themselves from the specificities of the country in which they operate. Offshore oil is perhaps the most egregious example of a form of resource extraction that seems to operate in splendid isolation from the host society. However, maintaining this isolation requires a great deal of work, Appel argues, and refers to the work of Callon (1998: 252): 'Instead of regarding framing as something that happens of

itself, and overflows as a kind of accident which must be put right, overflows are the rule and framing is a fragile, artificial result based on substantial investments'. The gardening projects around Chinese extractive enclaves in Mongolia seemed like an excess that had no relevance for the business of extracting oil, zinc or fluorspar, but conceptually, they contributed to set the enclaves apart from their surroundings. In contrast to the case described by Appel, however, it was not so much the company managers as the local bureaucrats who were working to disentangle and contain the extractive enclave in this way.

Even though the gardens may have looked like examples of a specifically Chinese aesthethic, the fact that Mongolian officials provided the impetus for the beautification of the enclaves suggests that the incipient gardens were not merely a reflection of an interest in gardening among Chinese managers. They were instead a response to Mongolian expectations of how a work place should be organised and how Chinese companies ought to behave in Mongolia. Rather than an execution of a technology of zoning brought from China, the extracurricular gardening that unfolded around the Chinese enterprises in Mongolia was the outcome of a fraught engagement with local society that ended up providing the extractive enclaves with a recognisably Chinese flavour setting them apart from the landscape and the society in which they were situated.

MIKKEL BUNKENBORG is Associate Professor of China Studies at the University of Copenhagen. His research revolves around contemporary Chinese society and the anthropology of the sinophone world with an emphasis on bodies, medicine, and food, on ritual, politics, and morality in rural China, and on Chinese globalisation as it unfolds in Africa and Central Asia. Email: bunkenborg@hum.ku.dk

NOTES

1. The ethnographic fieldwork in Mongolia described in this article was part of the project *Imperial Potentialities* (2008-12) funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research in the Social Sciences (FSE). The project aimed to explore and compare China's growing political-economic involvement in Mongolia and Mozambique. The project included a third anthropologist, Morten Nielsen. See also *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization* (Bunkenborg et al. 2022).

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