

## Chapter 5

### Human Predation and Animal Sociality: The Transformational Agency of ‘Wolf People’ in Mongolia

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This chapter examines the recent proliferation of ‘wolf people’ following the advent of the Mongolian gold rush. By analysing ethnographic and historical material on the position of wolves in Mongolian cosmology, I demonstrate how these beings call into question the relationship between animality and humanity. Concealed in human bodies and destined to a solitary life of greed, ‘wolf people’ challenge the human potential for peaceful and productive living. Demonstrating the importance of moving away from a human-centred perspective on morality, I argue that relations between humans and animals reveal how personhood is a matter of persuasion.

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In the mountainous region of Uyanga, there is concern about the recent surge in a kind of people who are regarded as different from other humans living in the area. Although these people are not new to the region, they have apparently never been as numerous as they are now. Whereas at first sight they look like everyone else, closer inspection might reveal subtle differences: an unusually firm stare, a sudden move of the arm, or a quick pointing of the ears. These differences are not lasting physiological features that are available for later examination and discussion. They exist only in the present moment and may disappear from view as soon as they are noticed. Locals pay much

attention to the appearance of these indicators and discuss their discoveries in hushed voices. Their main concern is how to live peacefully together with a people who are considered predatory and essentially related to the wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*). More than being *like* wolves, ‘wolf people’ (*chono hiin*) are said to transcend crucial distinctions, blurring divides between human and nonhuman realms. Whereas continuities between the human and the nonhuman have been richly documented elsewhere (e.g. Vilaça 2002; Vitebsky 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Willerslev 2007), large parts of the Mongolian region place much emphasis on their distinction and separation (Pedersen 2001). Entering the nonhuman realm is considered eminently dangerous for humans and even shamans often refrain from such voyages. However, as growing numbers of wolf people are said to have emerged in Uyanga, this distinction is now becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

In Western folkloric accounts and legends, the metamorphosis of humans and wolves usually entails the transformation of a human into a wolf (Baring-Gould 2009: 7). By shape-shifting into a theriomorphic wolf-like creature, often at times of full moon, werewolves (*lycanthrope*) attain extreme powers and can inflict harm on humans by biting their victims and potentially passing on the curse of the werewolf. On returning to their human form, werewolves are said to become physically weak and suffer intense pain (Baring-Gould 2009). In Uyanga, however, wolf people do not engage in periodic shape-shifting and their bodies remain human. Nonetheless, despite their familiar human form, they are regarded as wolf-beings. Rather than drawing on zoologists’ elaborate classification of the *Canis lupus* species or the fantastic accounts of cryptozoological entities akin to werewolves, this chapter takes its analytical cue from

the Mongolian association between wolves (*chono*) and wolf people (*chono hiin*). By examining ethnographic and historical material on the position of wolves in Mongolian cosmology, I will argue that relations between humans and animals reveal both social continuities and moral ambiguities. In a region that has become the epicentre of a large gold rush, the search for mineral resources and the transformational agency of wolf people demonstrate the importance of moving away from a human-centred perspective on morality and personhood.

*Fascination with wolves*

In many parts of the world, wolves are surrounded by elaborate cultural understandings (Lindquist 2000; Knight 2003). As the predator *par excellence*, their fierce strength and intricate social behaviours have given rise to an enduring interest among human audiences. In myths and legends, wolves often occupy a prominent agentive position. At times they are responsible for creating human beginnings on earth, whilst at others they set in motion a human demise. In contemporary eco-politics, environmental advocacy groups express their fascination with the species whereas farmers and pastoralists often voice their frustration and opposition to wolves (see Lindquist 2000; Moore 1994). Irrespective of the kinds of relations that wolves have with humans, they appear to be beings who command human attention. And this is no less the case than in the Mongolian cultural region, where unparalleled popular attention has, in recent years, centred on the wolf. Selling more than twenty million official copies in the first three years of its publication, the novel 'Wolf Totem', written by Chinese author Jiang Rong,

has become an instant ‘super-seller’ (Mishra 2008).<sup>1</sup> Describing a man’s fascination with, and intricate understanding of wolves, the novel depicts the so-called ‘totemic relationship’ between wolves and nomadic herders of Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. The novel has not only found a large readership and profitable market, but also drawn attention to wolves as a significant species in the region.

When Mongolians talk about wolves, they often comment on the strength, intelligence and determination of the animal. Many regard these qualities as admirable and highly desirable for both wolves and humans. Positioned as ‘teachers’ (*bagsh*) for hunters and herders, wolves are respected for their superior abilities in making a life on the Mongolian steppe. Although such praise and admiration for wolves may have inspired Jiang Rong’s view that Mongolians ‘worship’ and ‘follow’ their ‘wolf totem’, my informants do not view wolves in such singular moral terms. The reverence and explicit prescription of admirable wolf qualities does not amount to a species-rooted yardstick for judging human actions. Rather than being positioned as axiomatically ‘good’ (*sain*), wolves occupy a broad terrain of moral evaluation. This diversity in character surrounds wolves whether they take on their familiar body (*biye*) of a greyish coat, yellow eyes and bushy tail, or take on a different kind of physical forms. Given their multiple bodies and moral evaluations, understanding the centrality of wolves in local descriptions of wolf people requires a broad investigation into their various manifestations and transformational agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf Totem is said to be serialised on radio, recast as a children’s book, re-written as a comic strip and scripted for a feature film production (Morrison 2008).

*The revered wolf*

A commonly evoked reason for regarding wolves as beings worthy of unmatched respect is their association with the ethnogenesis of the Mongol people. Whereas warring groups inhabited the region for centuries, their unification and the emergence of a Mongol nation is a feat that is today attributed to Chinggis Khan (see Kaplonski 2004). As the founder of the Mongol Empire, Chinggis Khan is seen to have brought together isolated groups and transformed local enmity into solidarity and loyalty to a greater Mongol vision. According to the 'Secret History of the Mongols', Chinggis Khan descended from the unity 23 generations prior of *Börte Chino* ('wolf' or 'blue-grey wolf') and *Qo'ai-maral* ('beautiful doe') (Cleaves 1982: 1; Onon 1990: 1).<sup>2</sup> In some chronicles these names appear as personal names for specific individuals, whereas in others they are positioned as explicitly mythological beings.<sup>3</sup> Scholars still debate the exact interpretive significance of these names (Onon 1990: n4). But rather than partaking in this debate, Mongolians commonly remark that they, as a nation, are 'descended from the wolf' and that the animal should be 'honoured accordingly'. Whether or not the old epic referred to a human or a nonhuman, a mythological creature or a historical figure, the wolf as an agentive being is attributed a foundational role in unifying the Mongols.

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<sup>2</sup> The Secret History of the Mongols is an epic of the early Mongol Empire written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> The Persian chronicler Rashid Al-Din (1247-1318) describes how the Mongols descended from an honourable chief called Börte Chino (see Boyle 1971). This humanised view of Börte Chino is also evident in the 17th century Mongolian chronicle Altan Tobchi (see Bawden 1955). Written at a time of Buddhist conversion and Tibetan influence, Börte Chino is described as the youngest son of a descendant of a Tibetan ruler. For examples of Börte Chino as a mythological being, see Sinor (1982: 241).

In Mongolia, the wolf also appears as the progenitor and guardian of important individuals such as epic heroes, influential Buddhist lamas and notable political leaders. Stories abound of how packs of wolves or single she-wolves nurtured abandoned children (Jila 2006; Sinor 1982: 238-239). Rescued and reared by wolves, the children become exceptional individuals whose names have left marks on history.<sup>4</sup> One such story is found in *Jangar* – the heroic epic of the Oirat Mongols. In this epic the male hero is abandoned on the steppe from the age of two and is saved by a nurturing she-wolf. She lets him suckle her milk and eventually he grows strong and courageous, ready to embark on his eventful journeys. Appearing as mythological nurturers and Chinggis Khan's ancestor, wolves are represented as powerful beings endowed with immense creational abilities.

Such creational agency is also displayed every night on the Mongolian sky. Travelling across the sky as the brightest star *Sirius*, the heavenly wolf is said to 'lead', if not 'carry on its back', the sun, the moon and the wandering stars along their separate paths.<sup>5</sup> In his comprehensive study of Mongolian astrology and divination, Brian Baumann (2008: 270) shows how *Sirius* contributes to the creation of balance and order in the universe by endowing constellations with location and direction. Since all events on earth are tied to some phenomenon in the sky, the nocturnal journeys of *Sirius* are central to predicting the future, turning time and space into forces that are conducive to, and supportive of, human life. This important cosmological role of the wolf is reflected in

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<sup>4</sup> There are strikingly similar stories in other parts of Asia and Europe. Perhaps the most famous story concerns the mythological founding of Rome where the twins Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf.

<sup>5</sup> This identification of Sirius with the wolf is not unique to the Mongolian cultural region. Indeed, according to Brosch (2008: 32), the star is cross-culturally often identified with a dog, jackal or wolf.

expressions that refer to the wolf as a ‘communicator’ or ‘link’ between the sky and the earth. In Uyanga, for example, colloquial expressions highlight the wolf’s proximity to, and collaboration with, the spirit called *lus*.<sup>6</sup> When referring to wolves, people call them ‘messengers of the *lus*’ (*lusyn zarlaga*) or ‘the *lus*’s horse’ (*lusyn unaa*). These expressions are not only used in esoteric and abstract discussions, but also on an everyday basis when referring to wolves. The wolf’s role as a messenger for spirits is further evidenced in the widespread practice of using honorific terms such as *tengeriin nohoi* (heavenly dog) and *hangain nohoi* (dog of the mountains) rather than the common noun for wolf (*chono*).<sup>7</sup> If someone uses the word *chono*, it is claimed that wolves may hear the direct, offensive calling and in response inflict harm on the particular person. Since the wolf has created and every night recreates the possibilities for human life, he or she should be met with the respectful address that humans accord other powerful beings, whether human or nonhuman. As a progenitor of the Mongols and their universe, wolves have thus contributed to the foundations of human life positioned delicately between greater forces.

#### *The predator*

These nationalistic and respectful conceptualisations of wolves coexist alongside everyday concerns among nomadic herders about wolves attacking their herds of yaks, sheep, goats and horses. Herders talk constantly about wolves and stories concerning

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<sup>6</sup> For further details on conceptualisations of the *lus*, see High (2008: chapter 5) on the landscapes of spirits and High (2013a) on rumours about the emergence of new and even more powerful ‘black’ spirits in the mines.

<sup>7</sup> Showing respect through honorific terms also extends to prominent mountains and certain other powerful animals (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 91).

packs of wolves wounding, if not killing, animals abound in the countryside. These stories are often accompanied by disgruntled remarks about the unchecked rise in wolf populations and the current government's disregard for local concerns. An elderly herder commented how 'democracy has helped the wolves, not us!' During the socialist era the government played a key role in wildlife management. It mandated countrywide wolf extermination campaigns, including 'wolf cub campaigns' held in the month of May. Wolves were officially hunted in order to keep their numbers under control and to provide furs for trade and gift-giving.<sup>8</sup> However, today these state-concerted efforts are no longer in place and it is now up to individuals to curb the wolf population. People are legally free to hunt wolves for private and industrial purposes without any quota restrictions or seasonal limitations, and wolf hunting has become a favourite pastime for many newly rich Mongolians. Another herder commented how 'city people come in Japanese jeeps, sometimes even in helicopters, and race across the steppe. They shoot again and again, but wolves are too clever to be caught like that.' Hunting wolves is not like hunting any other prey and according to a Mongolian saying 'no one can kill a wolf unless it chooses to submit.' In the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolian and international wolf hunters have described this saying to me as a tribute to the skill and bravery of wolf hunters. Informants in the countryside, however, have emphasised the powerful and wilful position of wolves where their consent is needed in order for humans to be able to kill them (see also Nadasdy 2007).

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<sup>8</sup> Between 1926 and 1985 wolf killings in Mongolia averaged 5,308 animals annually with a peak of 18,000 animals in 1933. These numbers include only state-recognised hunts and do not take into account unofficial hunts carried out to protect livestock. As the wolf population declined rapidly, a ban was introduced between 1976 and 1980 (Wingard and Zahler 2006:98).



Since wolves are said to bite to death as many animals as possible, herders in Uyanga take considerable precaution to prevent wolf attacks. A male household member usually stays up at night to watch over the animals. Often equipped with an old Russian rifle, the aim is to kill a wolf if sighted. Herders also take part in an elaborate scheme encouraging the elimination of wolves in the area. When a hunter kills a wolf, each family in the *bag* (smallest administrative regional unit) is expected to pay him 1000 *tögrög* (83 cents<sup>9</sup>), amounting to about 200,000 MNT (167 USD) in total. Such amounts far exceed ordinary earnings on the steppe and local hunters often talk enthusiastically about the prospects of killing a wolf.<sup>10</sup>

Wolves are not only feared for their attacks on herds, but also for their association with the *lus*, mentioned earlier. The *lus* is seen to reside primarily in the rivers and the mountains, and is usually invisible and un-gendered. It can be benevolent towards humans by ensuring an abundance of clean water and ripe berries, but can also become angry, especially if humans transgress taboos that inform human interactions with the landscape (*baigal'*), which, apart from the *lus*, also hosts many other spirit beings. As one informant described:

Trees have life (*mod amtai*). You should therefore always collect only the dead wood on the ground. If you break off a fresh branch, even by accident, you hurt the tree. It doesn't like that, so it will get upset at you. Maybe it is not that particular

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<sup>9</sup> I use the rounded average exchange rate 1 USD=1200 MNT.

<sup>10</sup> In Ulaanbaatar, young men also express much interest and pride in killing wolves, and Mongolia has become a popular destination for international travellers keen on wolf hunting.

tree (*yag ter mod*) that will get upset at you, but the *lus* protecting the forest. If the *lus* gets upset (*uurlaval*), it's very bad for you and your family...

If humans disregard a taboo and upset the *lus*, diseases, accidents and wolf attacks may befall anyone living in the vicinity of where the transgressive act was carried out. As the Mongolian gold rush has unfolded, involving the frequent disregard of fundamental taboos related to the land (High 2013b), people have begun to live in perpetual fear that the *lus* and its wolf messenger might punish them.

Around the year 2000 a gold rush broke out in Uyanga, attracting more than 8000 informal sector gold miners; that is, about four times the local population of herders. The gold rush brought growing numbers of miners to the area and problems soon emerged. Disputes arose and meetings were held in the nearby village in attempts to resolve the emerging conflicts. Locals were not only concerned about miners encroaching on common land and monopolising its resources, but also feared the consequences of miners transgressing taboos. As miners dug into the ground in their search for gold, spirits residing in the landscape were seen to become increasingly angry (*uurlah*) and capable of inflicting calamities on people living within or near the mines. For local herders, the most common way for the *lus* to punish them was through wolf attacks. As 'the messenger of the *lus*', the speed, slyness and aggression with which wolves attacked their prey were seen as indicative of their position. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates the perceived link between wolves and spirits:

One day my younger host brother Davaa was herding sheep and he happened to pick some wild garlic (*zerleg songino*). According to my host sister, less than ten

minutes after picking the wild garlic a pack of wolves attacked the herd and killed a sheep. Just before picking the wild garlic, Davaa couldn't see any wolves at all. "It was as if the wolves came out of the ground right when he picked the garlic. 'Normal' wolves can't do that, so it was definitely because the *lus* was angry. If the *lus* is upset, wolves will appear", she said.

The image of the *lus* sending wolves from the underground hinges on particular ideas about wolves that transcend their mere predatory nature. When herders talk about wolves, they invariably describe the many wicked characteristics of the animal in a slow and dramatic voice. Whereas the word 'bad' (*muu*) seems the preferred description, it is also labelled a 'thief' (*hulgaich*) who steals from others (see also Lindquist 2000:179). Since wolves rarely devour all of their prey, people often lament that they steal without even 'needing' the stolen animal. Herders condemn such greedy theft as 'purposeless' (*utgagüi*) and entirely 'selfish' (*aminch*) of wolves. By only taking from humans and never giving anything in return, wolves are criticised for intruding into human life and destroying the wealth that humans have built up.<sup>11</sup> As such, wolves can be seen as *anti*-human, epitomising dangerous autonomy and careless individuality (see also Moore 1994).

Ideas about 'pollution' further consolidate the position of wolves as antithetical to human life and prosperity. By consuming the stolen goods (that is, their prey), wolves absorb all the pollution involved in such theft, which is in turn passed on to humans if

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<sup>11</sup> Although people in Uyanga complain about the selfish and ruthless behaviour of preying wolves, they do not stress a common 'humanity' among people and animals. In contrast to perspectivist cosmologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998), I have never heard informants posit that humans and animals, with their different bodies, share a unitary form of subjectivity (see also Pedersen, Empson and Humphrey 2007: 149).

they come into contact with wolves. It consequently becomes paramount for humans to avoid all exposure to the predator. The pollution surrounding wolves is referred to as *buzar*, which in daily language is used in similar ways to the word for 'rubbish' (*hog*), denoting something as filthy and disgusting. Although pollution can affect all members of a household group (*ail*), women and children are considered particularly vulnerable. Since the future longevity of the household is in this way at risk, protective bracelets and necklaces are worn, often in conjunction with birth year or Buddhist deity necklaces. As the wolf here embodies the very characteristics that undermine the reproduction of the household, it is morally evaluated as an inversion of human sociality. Feared for both their predatory hunger for herders' animals and their contempt for human life, wolves are what humans ought not to be. Contact with dead wolves, however, is an entirely different matter. Wolf pelts, adorning the hoods of urban wolf hunters' jeeps and displayed in front of rural wolf hunters' *gers* (round felt tents) after successful hunts, are not regarded as polluted but rather as aesthetically beautiful and fortune-giving. Certain parts of dead wolves are used for medicinal purposes, such as dried wolf tongue for respiratory illnesses, while other parts such as wolf paws are seen to pass on the benevolence of spirits. At the moment of death wolves thus become unambiguous for humans, finally returning the wealth and fortune that they acquired during their lifetime.

#### *Wolf people*

Although the predatory position of wolves provides a compelling moral framework for evaluating desirable and admirable human sociality, it has not given rise to stark

oppositions between the human and nonhuman realms in the Mongolian gold mines. If the predatory wolf exemplifies the undesirable and manifest failures in sociality, humans are not juxtaposed as its corresponding moral opposite. Whereas ritual practices reassert distinctions and separations, the wolf people of Uyanga highlight the increasing fragility of the ontological boundaries between wolves and humans.

For the first many months of fieldwork in Uyanga, I never heard any mention of wolf people. It was a topic that was only broached after I witnessed a wolf person entering my host family. It all began with a family dispute, which took place in the early autumn when men get excessively drunk on the season's last strong fermented mare's milk and home-brewed vodka. Together with my host mother and three sisters, I had left for a one month extended migration with the weakest yaks in order to fatten them up quickly before the onset of winter. Since we were only women on the migration, we had no means to prevent a fight in case a drunken visitor became aggressive. This difficult dynamic may partly explain the cautionary behaviour of my host mother in this situation, as recorded in my fieldnotes:

We heard a motorbike approach our *ger* and it turned out to be my host mother's younger brother and one of his friends. They were both drunk and demanded to be served more alcohol. My host mother served them but tried to limit conversation. But an intense argument began between her and her brother. Eventually she walked over to the door, opened it and told him to leave. He fixed his eyes on her with great intensity but said nothing. Instead of relieving us of his presence, he grabbed hold of one of my host sisters and shouted into her face: "What kind of family is this? What kind of woman asks a visitor to leave? Are you all idiots?" My host

sister started crying and my host mother grabbed hold of him and shouted furiously at him: “That’s enough! Leave our place now! Now! What has happened to you? Look at yourself! You are always drunk, you do no work, you show no respect. Leave!” He let go of my host sister, jumped over to our burning stove and kicked it with full force. The teapot placed on top of the stove landed on the ground, spilling tea all over the floor. The flimsy metal chimney attached to the stove broke off and the *ger* was soon filled with thick smoke. My host sisters covered their eyes and ears whilst crying out bits of Buddhist mantras. The youngest ran over to the altar, lit butter candles and incense, and spun the prayer wheel repeatedly. But he was not done yet. He grabbed my host sister again and shouted into her face: “Wolf (*chono*)! You are a wolf! I know you are!” He then let go of her, ran out of the *ger* and left with his friend as my host mother shouted: “I will never see you again! Don’t ever come back to us!”

By destroying the stove, the man angered the Master of Fire (*galny ezen*) who resides in the stove and attacked a concrete manifestation of the lasting nourishment and happiness of the ‘patriclan’ (*ovog*).<sup>12</sup> In this way threatening the stability of the group, he made a powerful statement that was encapsulated and intensified in the dreaded and very rarely used swearword ‘*chono*’, conveying that my host family was behaving with wild autonomy and dangerous greed.<sup>13</sup> But in contrast to other swearwords, the labelling of someone as ‘*chono*’ goes far beyond the more usual lexica of debasing commentary. It is an identification that not only comments on how you are seen to

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<sup>12</sup> The term ‘patriclan’ here refers to ego’s own nuclear family, their agnatic kindred as well as the few previous patrilineal generations that people usually remember (rarely more than three generations).

<sup>13</sup> Humphrey with Onon (1996: 99-100) discuss an interesting account of a person whose personality reveals the character of a wolf. Among the Daur Mongols of Inner Mongolia such animacy is regarded as a manifestation of traces of the person’s soul from a previous life. Although understandings such as reincarnation are widespread in Uyanga, I have never heard informants view wolf people in this perspective.

behave, but also what kind of being you are perceived to be. It is an identification of essential difference, marking the person as having become categorically distinct from others.

Several years after the dispute, my host sister was still worried about having been called a wolf by her maternal uncle. She asked for repeated reassurance from her kinsmen that, although wolf people had an increasing presence in the area, she was not one of them. Despite living near the mines, her household group rarely took part in the mining and this was, for her, evidence that she had been wrongly denounced. She decried the kind of life that she would be destined to have if she really was a wolf person. Rather than marrying, having children and becoming part of her affinal household group, she described to me how she would be destined to live alone for the rest of her life, only interacting with others through her greed and thieving. In this way endangering those humans she came into contact with, she would be a predator and all others would become her prey. Apart from threatening the peaceful conviviality of others, she would prevent the balancing of forces in the landscape (*baigal*). By not respecting other human and nonhuman beings, she would ultimately put everyone's potential for peaceful and productive living at risk.

Destined to such a solitary life, wolf people cannot have offspring and as a result they only pose a risk during their own lifetime. They can never have descendants and pass on their wolf-being to future generations. In turn, they are not regarded as inheriting their wolf-being from previous generations, not even in an indirect line. Although ideas about reincarnation strongly inform local conceptualisations of human relatedness, wolf

people are thus not viewed in such terms. Rather, these human predators are described as emphatically generational and corporeally contained, revealing their wolf-being only through personal actions in the present.

Whereas people whose bodily exterior conceals a wolf-being are said to have a deep history in Uyanga, today there appears to be a growing abundance of them. As thousands of people enter the mines and pan for gold in the streams, the *lus* is becoming increasingly upset with the actions of humans and punishes humanity by sending its messenger, the wolf. At a time when herders remark on the burgeoning wolf population and criticise the government for not trying to keep the predators in check, distinctions between humans and nonhumans are becoming increasingly blurred. In people's search for gold, they assert a predator relationship with both other humans and the *lus*. Finding themselves in a cosmological struggle with spirits and wolves, questions of intentionality and morality appear ever-more crucial for the preservation of everyday conviviality as well as local understandings of human and nonhuman relations in Uyanga.

### *Conclusion*

Following the advent of the gold rush on the Mongolian steppe, wolves have become increasingly common in both human and nonhuman domains. At times they make their appearance as feared predators sent by the *lus* to prey on livestock. At others, they mingle with humans, physically similar to other humans, but destined, by virtue of their wolf-being, to become immoral recluses. Regardless of their particular manifestation,



wolves possess powerful capabilities that affect humans in the most fundamental ways. Capable of stealing animals, polluting people and taking on human bodily forms, wolves can strongly influence the material prosperity and survival of local households. However, wolves are beings that do not lend themselves cogently to analytical attempts at singularisation and categorisation. It would be a gross oversimplification to cast wolves in terms similar to those used by herders when they complain about wolf attacks. Wolves are not simply 'bad' (*muu*), stealing animals at a pace that no human thief can match. Admired for their strength, intelligence and determination, wolves are also highly esteemed beings who are often honoured through depictions, gift-giving and linguistic practices. As central figures in both mythological accounts and the popular historical consciousness of Mongol origins, wolves are more than feared predators. They possess a unique agency among animals. For example, when a person is in serious need, a lone she-wolf may come to the rescue; when in the wrong, an angry wolf may inflict his punishment. Whether or not the wolf punishes or rescues, destroys or creates, he or she is capable of affecting human lives in fundamental ways.<sup>14</sup> Just as Sirius travels across the sky every night in his recreation of cosmological order, wolves also travel across the steppe in pursuit of potential prey. The wolf is a powerful force within the landscape that demands human attention. More than a mere currency for representation, the wolf is a being of multiple agentive forms.

In the Mongolian context, the ability to transcend boundaries and destabilise discontinuities is a rare ability associated specifically with shamanic processes

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<sup>14</sup> The close relationship between wolves and humans is also evident in Mongolian hunting practices. In a discussion of the notion of *hiimori* ('windhorse', often translated as a principle of personally related luck), Charlier (forthcoming) describes how the wolf is the only animal that is *hiimoritoi* ('with luck') like humans and capable of passing it on to the hunter.

(Humphrey 1995; Humphrey with Onon 1996). According to Morten Pedersen (2001), the Mongolian region is dominated by a form of 'totemist differentiation'; one that emphasises comparative differences between humans and nonhumans. In this 'heterogeneous conglomerate of mutually independent domains inhabited by humans as well as nonhumans' (2001:418), the world appears as a 'grid' of strict boundaries and discontinuities. This grid, Pedersen argues, is contingent upon the more general vertical organisation of society evidenced in a hierarchical ethos, inherited leadership and patrilineal descent. The ability to circumvent hierarchies and travel across ontological boundaries is not an ability available to most beings, but rather a highly specialised and restricted ability surrounded by much fear and danger. Whenever shamans, the experts in metamorphosis, undertake such journeys, the preferred perspective is thus still human (often ancestral) rather than nonhuman.

Although Mongolian shamans predominantly invoke spirits (*onggod*) from the human realm, valued precisely for their proximity rather than their distance to human life (Swancutt 2008), they do occasionally master spirits that come from unknown clans or the nonhuman world. Many of these are regarded as 'nameless demons' (Humphrey with Onon 1996) or 'vamporic imps' (Swancutt 2008), capable of much evil-doing. Other nonhuman *onggod* are sought for their valuable insights and approached with much care and deference. Regarded as particularly powerful, wolf *onggod* belong to this latter category (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 348). Indeed, wolf *onggod* are among the few nonhuman spirits that are said to be capable of human speech (Czaplicka 1914: 231). Positioned between the human and nonhuman realms, wolves are intimately aware of human happenings and behaviours, perhaps not unlike close ancestral spirits. Capable

of traversing otherwise separate domains, wolves transcend boundaries and collapse distinctions that are often seen to characterise everyday life in Mongolia.

This transcendence of boundaries between human and nonhuman realms is thus not something new and unprecedented, simply brought about by the advent of a gold rush. There is a long-standing tradition of shamanic practices that enable communication between animal *onggod*, such as wolves, and humans. Whereas the flexibility and movement of wolves into various domains is not unique to the gold mines, their unwanted appearance in human bodies outside of the shamanic trance is approached locally with much fear and hostility. Concealed in human forms, wolf people bring into question the relationship between animality and humanity. Given the remarkable agency and transformational abilities of wolves, it is perhaps not surprising that it is precisely this predator who has now entered the human domain in Uyanga. In the face of ambiguity and uncertainty, human personhood has thus become a matter of persuasion.

Rather than attempting to delineate an encompassing modality for reckoning cryptozoological species, this chapter has sought to move away from a human-centred perspective and instead take seriously the unique position of wolves in Mongolian cosmology and sociality. By recognising the continuities and ambiguities of human and nonhuman relations, we are better able to understand local people's critical comments about the Mongolian gold rush. Moreover, we are also in a position to pursue dynamic and contextual notions of morality and personhood. Rather than approaching such notions as exclusive and static human properties, we can see how they are precariously

2016. *In* Hurn, S. (ed.) *Anthropology and Cryptozoology: Researching Encounters with Mysterious Creatures*. London: Routledge.

positioned within much broader cosmopolitics involving humans, spirits and, not least, wolves.

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