

Holy Rollers: Monasteries, Lamas, and the Unseen Transport of Chinese–Russian Trade, 1850–1911

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the roles of Mongolian monasteries and lamas in transportation between the Qing Chinese (1636–1911) and Russian Romanov (1613–1917) empires during the latter half of the nineteenth century. A series of treaties between 1858 and 1882 granted Russian subjects the right to trade in Mongolian territories under Qing sovereignty, and the resultant increase of Russian trade across Mongolia provided new wage-earning opportunities. Larger monasteries, with their access to pack animals and laborers, acted as brokers, while for poorer lamas haulage was one of the few sources of paid labor available in Mongolian territories, making working in transportation a strategy of survival for many Mongolian lamas. Mongolian porters provide a window on to how the broad processes of nineteenth-century imperialism in the Qing empire affected labor on the Sino–Russian frontier, and on to how imperialism was experienced in one of the most remote corners of the Qing empire.

INTRODUCTION

The influential American Sinologist Owen Lattimore wrote of his travels in Mongolia in the 1920s that “the caravan men and traders were not different in any important respect. Everything that I saw, felt and heard would have been seen, felt and heard, with little exception, by a stranger travelling two hundred or two thousand years ago”.¹ Lattimore and other Western travelers in the early twentieth century promoted the trope of the Mongolian steppe as an unchanging region immune to global change: a living remnant of the ancient Silk Road.² As naturalized parts of a supposed

1. Owen Lattimore, “Caravan Routes of Inner Asia”, *The Geographical Journal*, 72:6 (1928), reprinted in *idem*, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers 1928–1958* (London, 1962), pp. 37–72, 38.

2. See, for example, Pavel Iakovlevich Piasetskii, *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg: cherez Sibir, Mongoliu, vostochnoi-srednyi i severo-zapadnyi Kitai* (Moscow, 1882); Nikolai Przhhevalsky,

age-old landscape, Mongolian porters have remained largely invisible as historical and economic actors. This myopia is further compounded by contemporary treatment of nomadic societies that often take nomadic production to be outside the sphere bounds of regular, quantifiable economic activity.³

Contrary to images of ancient porters traversing a pristine nomadic space, by the latter half of the nineteenth century a burgeoning labor market had developed in Mongolia, much of it centered on the transportation of goods between the Qing Chinese (1636–1911) and Russian Romanov (1613–1917) empires. Although Mongolian monasteries had been involved in trade before the mid-nineteenth century, a series of unequal treaties from 1858 to 1882 granted Russian subjects the legal right to move Chinese goods across Mongolia – then a part of the Qing empire – into Siberia, as well as to engage in trade within Mongolia itself. Although Russian trade missions had periodically crossed Mongolia through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the nineteenth-century treaties facilitated the rapid growth of Russian and other foreign trade in and across the region.⁴

Working in transportation between the Russian and Qing empires became a strategy of survival for many Mongolian lamas in the nineteenth century. Mongolian porters provide a window on to how the broad processes of nineteenth-century imperialism in the Qing empire affected labor on the Sino–Russian frontier. The Opium Wars of the 1840s, the subsequent unequal treaties, and a series of large domestic rebellions taxed the coffers of the Qing state. This increased financial strain resulted in decreased subsidies to many parts of the empire, including to both monasteries and military installations in Mongolia.⁵ As their stipends decreased, many turned to the informal economic sector,

Mongoliia i strana Tangutov: trekhletnee puteshestvie v vostochnoi nagornoi Azii (St Petersburg, 1875–1876); James Gilmour, *Among the Mongols* (New York, 1883); “Vvedeniie”, in *Moskovskaia torgovaia ekspeditsiia v Mongoliu* (Moscow, 1912), pp. 1–2.

3. Jörg Gertel and Richard Le Heron (eds), *Economic Spaces of Pastoral Production and Commodity Systems: Markets and Livelihoods* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 5–6.

4. For an overview of pre-nineteenth-century trade, see Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728* (Cambridge, 1971). See Sarah M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY, 1996) for the diplomatic history of the Russian–Chinese border.

5. On how late-Qing financial crises affected provincial subsidies, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society, and Economy in Inland North China, 1853–1937* (Berkeley, CA, 1993). In 1898, Aleksei Matveevich Pozdnev estimated that there were 1,076 state *gers* (portable dwellings) in the postal relay system, and that combined with those in required service at the *karauls* (guard posts), there were 6,000 Mongolian families in service by the late nineteenth century; Aleksei Matveevich Pozdnev, “Sovremennoe polozhenie i nuzhdy russkoi torgovli v Mongolii”, *Baykal*, 15 (12 (24) April 1898), pp. 2–3.

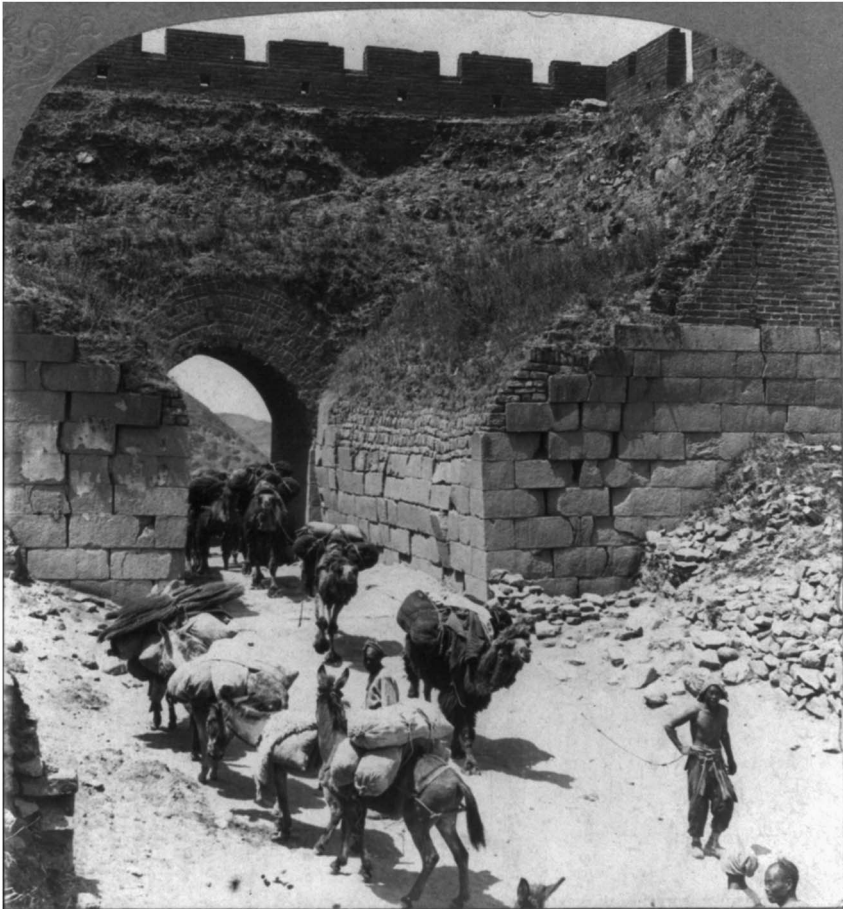


Figure 1. Porters moving with camels through the Nankou Pass by the Great Wall, roughly 50 km from Beijing. The porters in this photograph were most likely Chinese men. Mongolian lamas rarely, if ever, took goods into Chinese cities, instead ending their contracts in towns along the Inner Mongolian frontier such as Hohhot and Kalgan.

US Library of Congress. Used with permission.

in which poor lamas and border soldiers traded requisite camels, oxen, and food.

The increase of Russian trade across Mongolia provided new wage-earning opportunities. Larger monasteries, with their access to pack animals and laborers, were able to act as brokers, while poorer lamas found portage to be one of the few sources of paid labor available in Mongolian territories. Portage, therefore, provides a lens on how imperialism was experienced in one of the most remote corners of the Qing empire: large monasteries

increased their wealth, while members of smaller monasteries and unattached lamas became part of a mobile labor force. Russian imperialism's impact on the working lives of many Mongolian lamas highlights the connection between the global and the local in late Qing Mongolia, while the work of Mongolian porters underscores that rural borderlands, as much as urban centers, were relational and interconnected places whose circumstances were shaped by their connections.⁶ As Marcel van der Linden has pointed out as well, global histories of labor can be told as micro-histories.⁷

Mongolians participated in trade and transportation on the fringes of legality. Although Qing archives are prolific, they are the product of bureaucratic and military elites.⁸ Central Qing offices in Beijing conducted no surveys and only rarely regulated Mongolian porters. It is therefore difficult to obtain demographic data or original contracts between lamas and Russian merchants and, with the exception of major cases of lost products, one obtains only incomplete information about any given lama and his cargo. Mongolian territories were specially administered regions of the Qing empire: outside the regular provincial structure, Mongols' participation in trade was highly circumscribed. Monasteries, however, had special regulations, and their economic practices were unregulated – neither permitted nor condemned – by the Qing legal code. Although officials stationed in Mongolia begrudgingly allowed Mongolian participation in trade, for those in the imperial center it remained “unseen”, and as such has remained unexplored in the existing historiography.

This article utilizes previously unused documents from the National Central Archive of Mongolia, as well as those from the office charged with handling foreign affairs in the Qing dynasty, the Zongli Yamen. It also draws from accounts by Russian travelers and economists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mongolia, which provide some information on labor brokering that is absent in Qing materials.

Qing ideas of proper governance were essential in shaping the contours of labor in Mongolia. The Qing government based its economic policies in Mongolia on the protection of a nomadic or Mongolian “way of life” [Manchu: *banjire were*]. Official policies viewed nomadism as an economic and cultural mode that existed in isolation from markets and paid labor outside the family. As policy developed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Mongolians' participation in trade, mining, and even

6. Charlotta Hedberg and Renato Miguel de Carmo (eds), *Translocal Ruralism: Mobility and Connectivity in European Rural Spaces* (Heidelberg, 2011), pp. 3–4.

7. Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), pp. 57–76, 62.

8. Ottoman historians writing on labor have faced a very similar challenge. See Donald Quataert, “Labor History and the Ottoman Empire, c.1700–1922”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (2001), pp. 93–109, 95.

the use of specie was circumscribed, as Qing administrators argued that such participation would inherently corrupt nomads' "simple" natures and lead to societal unrest. Moreover, since Mongolia was regarded as a sensitive border zone between the Qing and Russian empires, the movement of people and goods there was much more strictly regulated than in the Chinese interior. Qing policies aimed at maintaining a fragile balance between granting Mongolian elites a degree of autonomy and maintaining Mongolian territories as subordinate parts of a wider Qing empire, a particular challenge after a series of large-scale wars and rebellions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹ Within Mongolia's complex governmental matrix, culturalist justifications often buttressed strategic logic.

Some Chinese firms, often based in Shanxi province and known as "traveling Mongolian firms", were licensed by the Qing government to conduct limited trade in Mongolian territories.¹⁰ Chinese firms acquired Mongolian raw materials, such as hides and furs, through exchanging products such as tea, tobacco, and sugar. The exchange rate between the commodities was manipulated in such a way that through each transaction, Mongolians became further indebted to the Chinese firms. In turn, the firms themselves profited by acquiring inexpensive goods and selling them at a significant mark-up in Chinese cities.¹¹ By the early twentieth century, large portions of the male population of Mongolia, including lamas, were indebted to Chinese merchants. Their indebtedness provided another incentive for working in transportation, and marked them as neither wholly free nor bonded.

In this restricted environment, rife with debt, monasteries after the treaties of the 1850s emerged as centers of Mongolian commercial life, and lamas provided the majority of transportation between the two empires. Lamas who worked or had trained in these monasteries were often literate and adept in contracting and conducting cross-border trade, and through monasteries had access to capital and labor. Legal regulations prohibited native firms in Mongolia, making monasteries the only corporate organizations with the requisite access to animals, labor, and relevant experience. As direct competitors with the Chinese for Mongolian raw materials, however, few Russian merchants were able to utilize the Chinese merchants' networks.

9. For an overview of the Zungar wars and the Qing solidification of power in inner Asia, see Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 133–292.

10. On the origins of Chinese firms in Mongolia, see Ren Xiaofan, "Qianlong nian jian Lü Meng Shang piaozhao shenqing zhidu chutan", *Jinzhong Xueyuan Xuebao*, 29:2 (2012), pp. 79–81.

11. The classic account of Mongolian debt is M. Sanjdorj, *Manchu Chinese Colonial Rule in Northern Mongolia* (London, 1980).

This article begins with a brief overview of the social and political context of Mongolian transport workers, including the monasteries' corporate structure, and lamas' participation in cross-border trade before the treaties of the 1850s. It then examines how post-treaty trade with Russian merchants coincided with a retreat of state funding in Mongolia. Portage further exacerbated pre-existing wealth discrepancies among lamas, as it became a source of wealth for larger monasteries and a means of basic survival for others.¹² It concludes with a case study of lost cargo and a subsequent legal case between a Russian merchant and a group of Mongolian lamas. Reconstructed from archival documents from both Mongolia and Taiwan, this specific case reveals labor's connections to broader social and political contexts, and provides a rare opportunity to examine in detail how lamas drew upon their unique range of resources to attempt to manage risk while working without legal protections.

LAMAS AND COMMERCE BEFORE THE TREATIES

The variation in the size and resources of monasteries set the background for the different roles available to lamas in the nineteenth century. Men who had taken monastic vows comprised a significant proportion of the male population of Mongolian territories by the late nineteenth century, potentially as high as one in three.¹³ The term "lama" itself designated both men who worked at large monasteries as well as those who had taken monastic vows but attached themselves to no particular temple. Some of these unattached lamas worked around *karauls* – the military border posts between the Russian and Qing empires – while others traveled, sometimes to Tibet.¹⁴

Religious connections between Mongolians on both sides of the Qing–Russian border facilitated the movement of goods and people before the international treaties of the 1850s, establishing ties that carried into the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Lamas had been engaged in cross-border trade between the Russian and Qing empires before the mid-nineteenth century.

12. Already Charles Bawden has pointed to this fact in his landmark general account of Mongolian history: Charles Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia* (New York, 1968), pp. 142–143.

13. Przhevalsky estimated that in the 1870s one in three Mongolian males were lamas; Nikolai Przhevalsky, *Mongolia, the Tangut Country, and the Solitudes of Northern Tibet: Being a Narrative of the Three Years' Travel in Eastern High Asia*, 2 vols (London, 1876), I, p. 11.

14. *Karauls* were guard posts located along both the Qing and Russian sides of the border. They housed up to several hundred soldiers. Listings of early twentieth-century Russian and Qing *karauls* can be found in Naitō Torajirō (ed.), *Kūron Mōga Karin taishōbyō* (Tokyo, 1920).

15. See, for example, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, Archive of the Zongli Geguo Shiwu Yamen [hereafter, ZLYM] 1-02-010-02-37, 01-02-011-02-066, 01-02-010-02-010, and 01-02-010-02-13; Mongol Ulsyn Undesnii Töv Arkhiv [National Central Archive of Mongolia,

Qing-subject Khalkh Mongolian lamas regularly traded livestock and other goods with Buriat Mongolians, the vast majority of whom were Russian subjects. Many Qing-subject lamas had established long-term relationships with Russian-subject Mongolians.¹⁶ Lamas drew upon their cross-border ties to act as important facilitators between Russian subjects and Qing soldiers at the *karauls* along the border. Some trading parties were substantial. To take an example from an already later period (in which intra-Mongolian trade, however, continued), one trading party led by a Buriat Mongolian lama in 1895 deviated from the usual route between Kiakhta on the Russian–Qing border and Doloon Nuur in north-eastern Mongolia and was caught moving eastward towards the Huabaigt *karaul* with 59 pack horses, 5 rifles, and 4 carts loaded with goods valued in total at 1,200 rubles.¹⁷

Karauls' importance as sites of trade was further emphasized by the growth of nearby smaller monasteries. From 1820 to 1880, local elites established these smaller monasteries along the border, often replacing monasteries that had been previously funded by the central court but that had lost support as Beijing turned its attention towards other regions of the empire.¹⁸ Most were located along roads and near to *karauls* and postal relay stations [Chinese: *yi zhan*] between the cities of Urga and Uliastai.¹⁹ Although some were small outposts, others had permanent populations in the hundreds.²⁰

Many lamas who worked in transport traded with the border posts that dotted the Qing–Russian borderlands. The decrease in stipends from Beijing forced soldiers in the borderlands' guard posts to earn money as providers of pack animals for nearby lamas. Soldiers were required to provide their own horses, tents to sleep in at the *karaul*, and provisions. By law, the commanding officer was required to provide a small living stipend, although there is archival evidence that these were rarely paid in full. One extant long deposition taken from a soldier at a border *karaul* provides a window into some border lamas' complicated ways of acquiring transportation animals.²¹ In 1855, a Mongolian border soldier named Jamsaran had traveled to

hereafter, MUUTA] M1 [Office of the Amban at Ikh Khüree] Delo [hereafter, D] 1.4, doc. 6481.11, M1 D1.3 4780.1, M1 D1.1 2414.124a.

16. ZLYM 01-02-010-02-010.

17. ZLYM 1-17-049-04-001; ZLYM 1-20-014-02-40. In 1871, another small Buriat trading party of seven people had also tried to pass illegally through this *karaul*, as they were supposed to trade solely through Kiakhta and travel to Doloon Nuur through Urga. See ZLYM 1-20-019-01-093. See also ZLYM 1-20-013-04-008.

18. Lkham Purevjav, "Patterns of Monastic and Sangha Development in Khalkha Mongolia", in Bruce M. Knauff and Richard Taupier (eds), *Mongolians After Socialism: Politics, Economy, Religion* (Admon, 2012), pp. 249–268, 255.

19. Purevjav, "Patterns of Monastic and Sangha Development in Khalkha Mongolia", p. 258.

20. Torajirō, *Kūron Mōga Karin taishōhyō*.

21. MUUTA M1 D3 276.27, M1 D3 271.18.

another *karaul* to purchase items of daily use from a local lama. In his lengthy deposition, he recounted his deals with the lama, Gombu, who arranged to trade brick tea and cloth for animals from Jamsaran's herd. Underfunded by his official stipend as a soldier, Jamsaran traded with nearby local elites to obtain more animals. These animals were used for military purposes and as items of exchange to trade with lamas for necessary daily use items. Although Jamsaran and Gombu's dealings were illegal, they drew up letters of guarantee [Manchu: *akdulara bithe*] to record their transactions. As Jamsaran ran out of livestock and funds, he confessed that he raided the herds of several nearby members of the nobility in order to trade with the lama. For raiding the herds, Jamsaran was sentenced to eighty lashes with a whip, and, for trading without a license, ordered to pay a fine of five livestock. The primary lama involved in the case, Gombu, received sixty lashes and was fined two livestock.

The increased opportunities to work in transportation in turn sharpened pre-existing wealth discrepancies between different monasteries. Lamas from large monasteries with extensive landholdings and access to capital through their treasuries and storehouses profited more readily than their smaller counterparts. Monasteries in Mongolia were subject to three primary jurisdictions: the ecclesiastical estate under the leadership of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu; monasteries under the jurisdictions of the four northern Mongolian administrative regions; and those established directly by the central Qing government. The wealthiest and most powerful was the ecclesiastical estate, whose considerable landholdings were distributed throughout northern Mongolia. The estate maintained vast herds, favorable grazing lands, and lay subjects, who provided essential manpower and served as envoys, porters, and labor in monastery construction and maintenance.²² In the banners [*khoshuun*], i.e. the smaller administrative divisions interspersed with lands under the ecclesiastical estate's jurisdiction, head lamas determined both grazing areas and migration routes, and they often laid claim to the most fertile pasturelands, rich in streams and free from stony slopes.²³

Large monasteries mobilized their considerable resources to take advantage of Russian–Chinese trade which ensued after the 1850s. The Jebtsundamba Khutuktu had protested the Russian consulate's establishment in an area already used frequently by pilgrims – a major source

22. Maria Fernández-Giménez, "Sustaining the Steppes: A Geographical History of Pastoral Land Use in Mongolia", *The Geographical Review*, 89 (1999), pp. 315–342, 320; Robert James Miller, *Monasteries and Culture Change in Inner Mongolia* (Wiesbaden, 1959). On the duties of the subjects of the monastic estate, see D. Tsedev, *Ikh Shav'* (Ulan Bator, 1964), pp. 33–54.

23. Andrei Dimitriyevich Simukov, "Materialy po kochevomy bytu naseleniia NMW", *Sovremennaiia Mongoliia*, 2:15 (1936); S. Natsagdorj, "The Economic Basis of Feudalism in Mongolia", *Modern Asian Studies*, 1 (1967), pp. 265–281.

of revenue for the religious leader.²⁴ The ecclesiastical estate enhanced its generated wealth not only through its large herds and substantial treasury, but also through renting land to Chinese shops.²⁵ By the late nineteenth century, the ecclesiastical estate had expanded its business to supply camels even to Chinese shops. The Russian scholar and pundit Aleksei Pozdnev remarked about his 1876 travels through Mongolia that

[...] it seems that in Khalkh [northern Mongolia] nowadays nobody is as rich in cattle as the monastery residents, and therefore if a Chinese needs a caravan of 50 or 60 camels, such a caravan is always supplied by the treasury of one or another monastery, or of one or another *khutukhtu* [incarnate lama].²⁶

While exact statistics are not available, many lamas were attached neither to the ecclesiastical estate nor to larger monasteries. For these men, working as porters, guides, and livestock handlers were the only means of livelihood available. The lamas' financial difficulties were further compounded by widespread indebtedness to Chinese firms. As mentioned above, by the late nineteenth century a large segment of the adult Mongolian population was in some degree of debt to Chinese, and increasingly Russian, firms.²⁷ This combination of debt and the ecclesiastical estate's economy of scale led many living near Urga to work for the monasteries of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu. To do so, they had to pay an up-front fee to the monastery; in Pozdnev's words "every disciple who wants to join the monastery caravan has to pay for permission to join, or in other words to pay for having been provided with profitable work".²⁸ He concluded that "the disciples' transportation business gives the *khutukhtus* great profit, and thanks to this the treasuries of *khutukhtu* monasteries are getting rich at no outlay, at the expense of their serfs".²⁹

NEGOTIATING RUSSIAN MERCHANTS

Lacking Chinese firms' transportation and labor infrastructure, both individual Russian merchants and larger firms needed to recruit both

24. MUUTA M1 D1.3 4780.1.

25. Aleksei Matveevich Pozdnev, *Ocherki byta buddiiskikh monastyrei i buddiiskogo dukhovenstva v Mongolii v sviazi s otnosheniami sego poslednego k narodu* (St Petersburg, 1887; repr. Elista, 1993). He reported that in the Erdeni Zuu monastery Chinese shops paid 20 *taels* per year for rental space, 25 *taels* at Zaya pandita, and 12 *taels* at Baruun Khüree; *ibid.*, p. 30. The *tael* was a unit of measurement of silver. Several measures of silver *tael* were in circulation during the Qing period.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 31. All translations are mine.

27. MUUTA M1 D1.1 2343 6b–7a.

28. Pozdnev, *Ocherki byta buddiiskikh monastyrei*, pp. 32–33.

29. Onerous charges at Urga's monasteries in the early twentieth century were also recorded by the lama Jambal in his memoirs; Jambal, *Tales of an Old Lama* (Tring, 1997), p. 11.

pack animals and porters to transport their goods in the post-treaty period after the 1850s. This was often exacerbated by their need to swap their oxen for camels upon leaving the taiga and wheat fields of northern Mongolia in preparation for the arid Gobi Desert en route to Beijing. Even if Russian merchants used their own horse-drawn carts to move goods from eastern Siberia through Kiakhta, the major port of entry on the Qing–Russian border, they often needed additional animals and local porters with knowledge of the difficult and harsh terrain.³⁰ Several routes connected the entrepôts of Kiakhta and Kosh-Agach with Beijing, but they were often dangerous and poorly marked.³¹

Although the treaties permitted Russian subjects to transport goods across Mongolian territories and to trade within Mongolia, Qing officials in Mongolia protested Russians' hiring of Mongolian porters. This issue arose immediately when a group of twenty men, the first group of treaty-permitted Russian traders, arrived in Kiakhta in 1861. Niktaev, a Russian official at Kiakhta had reported that "in addition to being unfamiliar with your local roads when they go and trade at the places before the capital [Beijing]", these merchants were unable to manage their large cargo over such a long distance. He therefore requested that local officials not interfere in their renting camels from Mongolians.³² As the *amban* (the lead Qing official in Urga) pointed out, however, there was no specific treaty clause that allowed for such exchange between Russians and Mongolians. Niktaev argued that the auxiliary hiring of animals and labor fell within the parameters of Article VII, which stipulated that Russians "be free of vexations from local officials [...] they may sell and buy things both retail and wholesale. They make pay money or barter, deliver on credit, and receive credit, as confidence occasions". As such, he concluded, blocking these transactions was a hindrance of "free trade".³³ Qing officials in Urga could muster no legal argument for why such arrangements with Mongolians could not be allowed, and acquiesced.

Lamas' labor fell between two legal regimes: that of the international treaties, and that of pre-existing Qing codes on monastic behavior. The *amban* could not claim that Russian hiring of Mongolians was illegal, as no explicit statute in Qing legal codes existed to address this. Rather, he described an imagined scenario of a troublesome future,

30. MUUTA M1 D1.4 6481.31.

31. "Vvedeniie", in *Moskovskaia torgovaia ekspeditsia v Mongoliiu*, pp. 4–7; Nina Evgen'evna Edinarkhova, *Russkie v Mongolii: osnovnye etapy i formy ekonomicheskoi deiatel'nosti (1861–1921 gg.)* (Irkutsk, 2003).

32. MUUTA M1 D1.3 4825.28.

33. *Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitaem, 1689–1881 gg.* (St Petersburg, 1889), p. 164.

in which Mongolians' livelihood was stifled by an exploitative Russian presence:

In the following days gradually many houses will be built, and this population will [make] many hindrances in Mongolian pastures. As for Mongolians, their innate nature is unrefined and simple-minded and their thoughts are too coarse. They seek broad grasslands in the empty spaces and make a living by herding the four types of animals. With everything, it is Russian nature to say "he would take only a finger, and take a rib", [so] how if Russian posts [*giyamun*] are set up in Mongol pastures [and] all low Mongols are coerced and find themselves in a difficult situation, being lorded over and oppressed, how can it be that issues don't arise?³⁴

Qing ideals of Mongolian good governance are visible in the *amban's* response to the Russian claims, as his primary objection to Mongolian participation in camel renting was grounded in his view of what constituted the basis of a Mongolian livelihood: open access to pastureland. This line of thinking relied upon vague understandings of pastoralism, which led to a line of reasoning that saw a proliferation of settlements as hindrances to Mongolians' access to pasturelands. His complaint did not acknowledge that many Mongolians were already engaged in activities other than herding.

The model of the recently signed international treaties provided the basis for the *amban's* solution: just as China and Russia conducted trade according to the written terms and conditions of the 1860 Treaty of Beijing, written contracts should also be drawn up between Mongolians and Russians. The intended result of that would be that Mongolian camel renters and Russian merchants would be held to the same standards – in fact, the same Manchu-language term, *boji bithe*, was used for both. The *amban* hoped that written agreements would mitigate such future complications as fraud and theft, which would arise from Russians and Mongolians "mixing up" in Urga. Moreover, Mongolians' "inborn simplicity" made them more likely to be taken advantage of.³⁵

Once both sides had agreed upon written contracts, the first official Russian trade caravan, headed by merchant Ivan Nerpik, his 18 porters, 170 rented camels, 14 boxes of silver, 337 bolts of fabric, and 15 boxes of equipment for the journey, was allowed to continue onwards.³⁶ Russian merchants of various guild levels quickly came from around eastern Siberia – Irkutsk, Chita, Verkhneudinsk (contemporary Ulan-Ude) – and

34. MUUTA M1 D1.3 4825.28.

35. *Ibid.* Large firms concerned Qing officials the least, because their members would be easier to track down in case of any subsequent malfeasance. Small firms and individual merchants, however, worried the *amban*, since "although small traders will trade a little, they may not engage in lending, [as] one cannot permit traders without shops to run away and hide".

36. MUUTA M1 D1.3 4825.29.

even the cities of western Siberia and European Russia to move goods legally across Mongolian lands to and from the Chinese capital. These initial trading parties rented camels and hired porters brokered through three lamas, all members of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu's estate, who was the highest-ranking religious authority in Mongolia.³⁷ The porters' names, cargo, and dates of departure were all recorded bilingually in Mongolian and Russian. Thus, already the Mongolian lamas and Russian merchants who followed Nerpiik through Kiakhta produced the types of written agreement that the Kiakhta official had requested. With the aid of Buriat translators, Russian officials at the Kiakhta Customs Authority [Kiakhtinskaia tamozhnaia] stamped the agreements written in both Russian and Mongolian, with amounts of goods, dates, and locations, and numbers of camels and laborers hired.³⁸

Written agreements were not novel in Mongolian trade. Although not explicitly referenced in the communications between Russian and Qing officials in Kiakhta, Mongolians had already been employing written agreements, known in Manchu as "contracts" [*boji bithe*], and "promissory letters" [*akdulara bithe*]. Written agreements appeared in two major contexts: first, between Chinese firms, and second with the monasteries' own treasuries and storehouses. The written agreements reached by Chinese firms and their hired laborers, both Mongolian and Chinese, approximate to both contracts and trade licenses. They approximate to contracts insofar as both include the amounts of goods and employees and dates of the journey. They also attached an "itemized list" [Chinese: *ji kai*] of the names, ages, and occasionally places of origin for the workers.³⁹ These circulated to Mongolian elites as notifications that they should be expecting a certain Chinese trading party in their districts. This was not simply a courtesy; rather, the local government relied on the Mongolian nobility to aid in the expulsion of these trading parties when the duration of their licenses were up. The terms of labor, such as wages, were outside the scope of these codes, and were regulated internally by Chinese firms.⁴⁰ So while the Qing state did not regulate disputes about payments between hired laborer and firm, Qing officials referred to these documents when Chinese merchants violated the durations of their licenses, died, or committed another crime.

Monasteries also frequently used written agreements to manage their own commercial transactions. Stipends from the central government and

37. MUUTA M₁ D_{1.3} 4825.30.

38. MUUTA M₁ D_{1.3} 4869.28.

39. MUUTA M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.15, M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.16, M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.22, M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.30, M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.32, M₁ D_{1.3} 4780.33.

40. Imahori Seiji, *Chūgoku hōken shakai no kikō: Kisui (Fufuhoto) ni okeru Shakai shūdan no jūtai chōsa* (Tokyo, 1955), pp. 336–365.

revenue generated from livestock were rarely sufficient to support a monastery. Lamas often conducted other business, such as money-lending, renting land, or selling manufactured goods, to support the monastery. Because monasteries were both corporation and bank, they provided lamas with both the incentive and means to profit from trade and transport. In order to facilitate these transactions, monasteries had storehouses, known in Mongolian as *jisa*, which were designed to provide permanent support for departments and schools within the monastery, as well as to fund special religious services.⁴¹ These reserves of capital provided a modicum of stability for monasteries, which contrasted sharply with the nature of herding and animal husbandry, which were seasonally dependent and high risk.

As quasi-banks, monasteries occasioned opportunities for lamas to develop degrees of financial literacy: Treasuries and storehouses required lamas to maintain account books. Loans given from the *jisa* also required written agreements, which later became a valuable skill in working with foreign firms. Regional monasteries had particularly elaborate *jisa* systems, which made them well suited to the complexities of engaging in multiple industries, including providing pack animals and transportation.⁴² Within a single monastery, each *jisa* was independent from the others and from the monastery as a whole. Working at a monastery did not guarantee an income: *jisa* had to be continually supported. Moreover, while a central account was held with the *tsogchin jisa*, the general assembly hall at the center of major monasteries, most funds remained individually allocated. This required lamas to supplement their incomes through trade in addition to reading scriptures or performing medical services, as they could not rely on monastery support to provide either for their own needs or for the monastery's as a whole. This need was only exacerbated as stipends continued to decrease throughout the nineteenth century.

GETTING BY TOGETHER? RUSSIAN MERCHANTS AND MONGOLIAN LABOR

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, increasing numbers of small-scale Russian peddlers, many impoverished themselves, were entering northern Mongolia. Although the specifics of the socio-economic composition of merchants in Qing Mongolia are still being debated among Russian historians, most were small traders with only limited

41. In practice, monastic funds were also held in a treasury [Mongolian: *sangai jisa*]. A small monastery had one or two *jisa*, while larger ones would have between 10 and 20 and sometimes over 100.

42. Purevjav, "Patterns of Monastic and Sangha Development in Khalkha Mongolia", p. 257.

access to capital.⁴³ Many Russian settlers were not much better off than their Mongolian counterparts, and some of these traders fueled the rental market away from major centers of trade. Those who could not afford the rates charged by larger monasteries looked to smaller monasteries or unattached lamas with lower rates.

Russian merchants adapted their hiring practices to the seasonal trading schedule used by Chinese merchants. They often contracted with Mongolian porters in December or January for work in the following autumn, providing them with a cash advance for the following nine months. The high cost of transport made finding the cheapest porters a priority for most Russian traders, and debt obligations to Chinese firms made many poorer lamas contract for lower rates. By 1910, one Russian economist reported that so many Mongolian men were arriving in the western Mongolian town of Uliastai in hopes of finding work as porters to the town of Ongudai, on the route to the Siberian cities of Biisk and Minusinsk, that there were too many porters, which drove down wages.⁴⁴ This coincided with increased financial troubles at one of the major Chinese firms, Da Sheng Kui, which had recently begun to demand debt repayment in silver. The economist reported that the pressures exerted by Da Sheng Kui further lowered the wages of many Mongolians, as they became increasingly desperate for any silver to repay their Chinese lenders.⁴⁵ Mongolian labor in transport was not immune to fluctuations in the global marketplace. As Chinese firms struggled to remain profitable in the early twentieth century,⁴⁶ their increased demands on their Mongolian debtors drove more Mongolians to work for lower wages.

Hardship in late nineteenth-century Mongolia extended beyond the border posts. The decrease in state subsidies coincided with increased pressure on natural resources such as wood and water, and led to increases in theft, homelessness, and uncontrolled outbreaks of epidemic disease.⁴⁷ The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the 1890s increased the

43. Aleksandr Vladimirovich Startsev, "Russkie predprinimateli v Mongolii: sotsial'nyi oblik is obschestvenno-kul'turnaia deiatel'nost", in *Vostokovednye issledovaniia na Altae* (Barnaul, 2004), IV, pp. 63–85, 64; Vladimir Vasil'evich Ptitsyn, *Selenginskaia Dauriia: ocherki Zabai-kal'skago kraia* (St Petersburg, 1896), p. 75; Ivan Mikhailovich Maiskij, *Sovremennaia Mongoliia* (Irkutsk, 1921), pp. 95, 203; Mikhail Ivanovich Bogolepov, *Ocherki russko-mongol'skoi trgovli; ekspeditsiia v Mongoliiu 1910 goda* (Tomsk, 1911), pp. 109, 172.

44. *Ibid.* Bogolepov, *Ocherki russko-mongol'skoi trgovli*, p. 370–371.

45. Shanxi Sheng zheng xie "Jinshang shiliao quanlan", bianji weiuian hui (eds), *Jinshang shiliao quanlan* (Taiwan, 2006), I, pp. 392–414.

46. Representative of this process is the decline of Shanxi banks. See Tang Zhenguo, "Shanxi piaohao shuaibai de zhidu xing yinsu fenxi" (MA, Fudan University, 2008).

47. Bawden, *The Modern History of Mongolia*, pp. 142–144; Elena Mrkovna Darevskaia, *Sibir i Mongoliia: ocherki russko-mongol'skikh sviazei v kontse XIX-nachalo XX vekov* (Irkutsk, 1994), pp. 99–113.

number of Russian settlers in eastern Siberia near the Mongolian border, which put further pressure on resources and increased demand for tea and other products from China. In the decades that followed the treaties, many conflicts arose between Russian merchants and Mongolian porters, and Russians reported stolen goods and lamas trading under false names.⁴⁸ Although there was no shortage of willing Mongolian porters, camels were often in short supply.⁴⁹ Solutions to the problems were twofold. First, Iakov Parfenievich Shishamrev, the Russian consul in Urga, declared in 1899 that the transportation of tea and other goods was such a “very important affair” that it needed to be increasingly regulated in order to diminish the frequency of theft, loss, and extortion. The number of shops engaging in the tea trade and its transport needed to be capped at the current figure. Secondly, regular written agreements between transporters, shops, and Russian merchants needed to be continued.⁵⁰

LABOR AND LOSS: A CASE FROM DOLOON NUUR,
1885–1892

With the exception of high-ranking lamas of the wealthy ecclesiastical estate, most Mongolian porters worked in a precarious, high-risk environment. Their ambiguous legal position between the Qing code and the treaties offered few protections. Although local state officials encouraged written agreements, these had no clauses to establish limited liability.⁵¹ And while some lamas went to banks in the early twentieth century, there was no option to purchase insurance. In short, there were no laws in place that established clear procedures when cargo was lost or destroyed. The case below explores how lamas made use of the resources available to them – monastery treasuries, loans from Chinese merchants, and extensive trans-local networks – to conduct business and cope when something went wrong.

The challenges lama porters faced are exemplified in a legal case that unfolded between 1885 and 1892 involving a Russian merchant named Sefetov, who lost 588 boxes of tea while in transit, and a group of lamas from the Shanyin monastery in Doloon Nuur.⁵² This case involved lamas from a relatively large monastery who were transporting a considerable volume of Russian tea, and it therefore produced a sufficient body of documentation, including depositions from many of the lamas and other

48. MUUTA M1 D1.1 2343.5a–5b, M1 D1.1 2343 6b, M1 D1.1 2414.142a–152a.

49. MUUTA M1 D1.4 7001.4, M1 D1.4 7001.5.

50. MUUTA M1 D1.4 7001.11.

51. The lack of corporate law in late imperial China is explored in William C. Kirby, “China Unincorporated: Company Law and Business Enterprise in Twentieth-Century China”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54 (1995), pp. 43–63.

52. MUUTA M1 D1.4 6481.18; ZLYM 01–20–002–04.

hired laborers, that one may reconstruct its details.⁵³ The case came to light because of Sefetov's subsequent demands for repayment to the Zongli Yamen, the Qing foreign affairs office, which then conducted a thorough investigation into the circumstances that led to the tea's disappearance. This specific case study provides insight into how lamas attempted to mobilize all available resources to conduct business and manage risk, as well as a rare glimpse into the networks of lama porters.

The Russian merchant Sefetov had entrusted lama Tudebubašar, a resident and representative of the Shanyin temple in Doloon Nuur, to oversee the transport. Following the requests of the *amban* at Ikh Khüree and officials in Kiakhta, the initial agreements between Sefetov and the lamas from the Shanyin temple were settled by a written, Chinese-language contract. Tudebubašar was an experienced porter, and first contracted with Sefetov in Kalgan seven years prior to 1885.⁵⁴ Tudebubašar's first step was to send a team of lamas with ox carts to Kalgan, where they made arrangements to transport the goods through Khalkh territory to Uрга. The lamas organized by Tudebubašar lamas affiliated with the Shanyin temple, both from his home region and from the neighboring Tumot banner.

Details of Sefetov's loss of tea during transit came through in multiple depositions taken by Qing officials. One lama, Baoma, reported in his deposition that he had been following his teacher Tudebubašar to a place called Darhan Cegelen in the Cecen Han *aimag* [province]. Anticipating an overnight stop, plans changed when it became clear that some of the porter-provided pack animals were becoming ill, with some dying near the planned stopping point. The party was unable to continue towards the Russian border and therefore stopped, and some members of the party returned to Doloon Nuur for more pack animals. The problems of the porters were further aggravated by natural conditions, since it had been a poor year for rain, and the grasses throughout the region were dry, leaving the remaining animals weakened and in need of rest. Sefetov's tea was put up in the storehouse of a man named Bašar, who was a "black man", a colloquial term for a Mongolian who had not taken monastic vows.⁵⁵ The lamas' connection with Bašar underscores the socially embedded networks many monasteries maintained: monasteries in Doloon Nuur, like those

53. These documents are held both in the National Central Archive of Mongolia in Ulan Bator and the Academia Sinica in Taipei. Although cases of loss were not rare, losses were often partial. For example, in 1871 two Russian traders' six boxes of otter pelts, tanned leather, and silver goods were lost when pack animals panicked and scattered somewhere between Kiakhta and Kalgan; ZLYM 01-20-001-04-001.

54. ZLYM 1-20-02-04-15:01.

55. "Black men" living on lands under the jurisdiction of the Ikh Shav' were often viewed by the Qing government as potential thieves and accomplices in tax evasion. See, for example, *Veritable Records of the Jiaqing Emperor* 24.1, *juan* 353, p. 652.

throughout Mongolia, housed not only lamas but also homeless and unmarried people, many of whom made a scant living as hired workmen at the monasteries, providing lamas with access to potential lay partners.⁵⁶

Tudebubašar had also hired Chinese laborers to help transport Sefetov's cargo. More detailed information about the subsequent prairie fire came from one of the Chinese men, Zhang Yuxi from Zhili. Zhang and the other hired laborers were all from the Zhili area, and had gone to the Shanyin temple in Doloon Nuur to find work.⁵⁷ Zhang had been instructed to stand guard by Bašar's storehouse. A Mongolian hired worker was also left behind at the site. This man left before the fire, however, to sell the skins of the dead cattle in Urga, leaving nothing to waste. After a day had passed, Zhang sat watch during sunset when he saw a fire arise among men who were picking up piles of animal droppings to later be dried and used as fuel. As the fire "came slanting" across the prairie, it engulfed the storehouse, and Zhang was able to extract only eleven boxes of the tea before the rest burned, along with Bašar's home.

Tudebubašar was then faced with repaying Sefetov the value of the lost tea. Tudebubašar's attempts demonstrate how he drew upon all available resources, both within his monastery and from local Chinese merchants, in an attempt to repay the loss. The burden of repaying both the value of the lost tea and an indemnity to cover expected profits fell upon Tudebubašar and the other lamas from the Shanyin temple involved in the case. The *demci* lama – a lama charged with overseeing monastery finances – reported that he was unable to repay any more than a fraction of the calculated cost. In principle, the *demci* lama's position made resources from the temple's *jisa* and central treasury [*sang*] available to him to repay the debt.⁵⁸ In his deposition, he recounted how, following the fire, he had attempted to recoup the lost funds for the tea. He estimated the losses at 1,000 *taels*, although the amount was significantly higher in other accounts.⁵⁹ He had gone to the acting head of his monastery, Kambu Gokcukrasai, to leverage *sang* property towards the debt. This fell far short, however, producing only 200 *taels* – hardly sufficient to cover a significant portion of such a major loss.⁶⁰ With the monastery unable to help, he took out a loan from a local Chinese, putting up his ox carts as collateral. In the end, the *demci* lama explained, he had tried everything. "My temple, the lamas of this temple are completely

56. Pozdneev, *Očerki byta buddiiskikh monastyrei*, p. 30.

57. ZLYM 1-20-02-04-15:02b.

58. Isabelle Charleux, "Padmasambhava's Travel to the North", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 46 (2002), pp. 168–232.

59. As already mentioned, several measures of silver *tael* were in circulation during the Qing period; in this case, the specific type of *tael* is not given.

60. MUUTA M1 D1.4 6481.23: 2b.

unconnected”, he pleaded. “Having arrived at the extreme of destitution”, he simply could not muster the interest, let alone the required principal.

The struggles of Doloon Nuur’s monasteries encapsulated the problems of the empire as a whole, and show how the conditions of lamas’ labor were shaped by the weakening of the Qing state in the late nineteenth century. Even allowing for hyperbole in the *demci* lama’s account, 1,000 *taels* was an extreme sum of money for a lama in an impoverished town on the edge of the steppe. Moreover, Tudebubašar’s situation was not unique: lamas in other cases of loss went to both monastery treasuries and Chinese merchants to obtain capital.⁶¹ At the time of their eighteenth-century founding, lamas were guaranteed rations of grain and stipends for tea, paid out by the county.⁶² By the late eighteenth century, however, the central government enforced stipends for only the lamas situated permanently at Doloon Noor, and not for those who had been sent as representatives of their home districts. As in the case of the border soldier Jamsaran discussed above, with the support of the central state receding, these men relied on their home regions, increasingly afflicted by the dual burdens of debt to Chinese firms and declining central stipends to support their imperial service.

Not all individual lamas within these monasteries fared equally well, and they struggled to earn enough to keep themselves sufficiently clothed and fed in the harsh climate. Although the temple exteriors and main halls were well-maintained, filled with bronze statues [*burkhan*] and even a pair of stuffed tigers and human skulls mounted in silver, the housing of the lamas was rarely luxurious; Pozdneev described their dilapidated state, with some so decrepit that monks erected their own *gers* (portable dwellings) rather than live in the ruined structures.⁶³ Once centers of bronze statue production for the Tibetan Buddhist world, Doloon Nuur’s monasteries had been transformed into scrapyards of empire: ruined structures around which lamas and poor men vied to make a living from the Russian imperial presence.⁶⁴

The Shanyin temple lamas’ vulnerability was further intensified by poor communication between the Qing authorities in Doloon Nuur and the Russian consulate. The Russian consul accused both Doloon Nuur’s

61. MUUTA M1 D1.4 7110.32: 2a.

62. Lai Huimin, “Qingdai Guihua cheng de Zang fu fo si yu jingji”, *Neimenggu Shifan Daxue Xuebao*, 39:3 (2010), pp. 88–101, 93.

63. Aleksei Matveevich Pozdneev, *Mongoliia i Mongoly: Rezul'taty poiezдки v Mongoliiu, ispolnennoi v 1892–1893 gg.* (St Petersburg, 1896–1898), p. 298; see also “Account of a Journey in Mongolia by Mr. Kidston and Mr. Flaherty in September–November 1903”, in *China: A Collection of Correspondence and Papers Relating to Chinese Affairs*, Great Britain, Foreign Office, China No. 3 (London, 1904), p. 10.

64. Pozdneev, *Mongoliia i Mongoly*, pp. 277–279, 282.

sub-prefect and the monastery of theft and of profiting from the loss of Russian tea.⁶⁵ By 1892, seven years after the prairie fire itself, Sefetov settled on a compensation amount of no less than 12,000 *taels*, which included both the value of the tea lost as well as lost expected profits. Sefetov calculated that each of his 588 boxes was worth 21 *taels*. As for transportation costs, the lamas received 1 silver *tael* and 8 copper coins for each box, giving a rough total of 1,000 *taels* – the amount that the *demci* lama thought he was initially responsible for repaying. Sefetov also reported paying an additional 570 *taels* to the lamas. While the addition is not exact, through these combined costs Sefetov arrived at the sum of 12,000 *taels*, which he communicated through the Russian consul to both the Zongli Yamen and to the famous statesman Li Hongzhang, then the Commissioner for Military and Foreign Affairs in the North.

Li's final decision recognized the differences between wealthy lamas as brokers and poorer lamas as porters. "Mongolian porters are all connected to being hired laborers", he wrote, "and most are impoverished".⁶⁶ Wealth discrepancies at the Shanyin temple were obvious to Li, who explained that the "camel proprietors are all (of) powerful families". Li's aim was to find a way to obtain compensation for Sefetov's lost tea while not allowing the more powerful lamas to "shift the burden" onto the porters themselves.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, as with many cases between lamas and Russian merchants, the documentary record is incomplete, and the final outcome of the case is not known.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Lattimore's descriptions of Mongolian porters as living embodiments of the ancient past, labor in Mongolian transportation was not ahistorical. Rather, it was deeply embedded in social and political contexts that changed over time. The decline in imperial support and monastic living conditions pushed many impoverished lamas into low-paying jobs in caravan transportation, while simultaneously drawing wealthier monasteries into the burgeoning trade. Lamas possessed a set of unique resources that enabled them to participate, and occasionally thrive, in transport: familiarity with numeracy and contracts, access to monastery treasuries that provided reserve capital in a high-risk environment, prior experience in cross-border trade, and widespread social networks.

The growth of the transportation industry was closely tied to the spread of the Russian empire and the retreat of the Qing state. As state subsidies declined, Mongolians faced increased financial burdens, forcing many to

65. MUUTA M1 D1.4 7110.32.

66. ZLYM 01-20-002-04-25:1.

67. ZLYM 01-20-002-04-25:2.

seek additional sources of income. Russian traders – the motors of Russian imperialism in Qing Mongolia – made use of Mongolian lamas' need for paid labor. Although Qing Mongolia lacked plantations, large-scale mines, or other, more recognizable sites of labor, transport in Mongolian territories draws attention to the importance of wage labor in reshaping the livelihoods and social worlds of many Mongolian men in the region.