

ISA INTERNATIONAL GUEST LECTURE

**MORAL ECONOMIC DICHOTOMIES IN THE
MONGOLIAN BORDERLANDS****HEDWIG WATERS**

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Prior to the 1980s, the field of economic anthropology extensively debated the question of how a population changes when newly integrated into market systems. Post-1980, these early models were extensively dismissed as teleological and overly materialist, as the field shifted to a focus on how the nuance of circumstance and context affects economic behavior. Nevertheless, the rapid and sudden shift from socialism to market political-economic systems allows an opportunity to revisit this debate on how larger structural shifts affect local nuance, but now with a focus on how individuals make sense out of and relational meaning within them. To this aim, I present the case study of postsocialist Magtaal, a rural township on the Mongolian/Chinese border, whose population largely subsists off of high-interest loans from Mongolian consumer banks paid back through the illegal extraction and cross-border sale of local wildlife (namely, medicinal plants and fish) on the Chinese market. Although these resource-extractive entrepreneurial market activities are locally shaped by historical precedents from both pastoralism and Buddhism/shamanism, they are simultaneously characterized by sentiments of unease, moral ambiguity and statements of defensive justification. In this talk, I discuss the emergence of moral economic dichotomies – namely, locally-created categories or scales concerning when it is or is not moral to engage in certain economic activity – which have proliferated in postsocialist Magtaal, theorizing them as mechanisms through which populations attempt to stabilize historical or locally-held values within contexts of rapid integration into translocal political-economic systems.



Hedwig A. Waters is a Horizon Europe ERA Postdoctoral Fellow at Palacky University, Czech Republic. She received her PhD in Anthropology from University College London (UCL) in 2019 and the subject matter of this talk is expounded upon in her upcoming monograph *Moral economic transitions in the Mongolian borderlands: A proportional share* to be published with UCL Press in June 2023. Her new project is inspired by her previous experience with informal Mongolian medicinal plant harvesting, analyzing how the traditional Mongolian medicinal plant market is priced and constructed.

