

Memories of Mardai: Stripping the Iron and Remembering Russian Presence in Mongolia

In the first years of the 1980s, following a secret agreement signed 10 years earlier allowing the USSR to prospect for and exploit uranium within the territory of the Mongolian People's Republic, the town of Mardai was created next to a large deposit of uranium in the far eastern Dornod Province. Within a few years, the town had developed into a small city equipped with all the modern infrastructure of Soviet Russia and supplied with goods which were seldom if ever found in the rest of Mongolia. Russian workers worked in the mines and tended the shops, Russian teachers taught their children in a large school and kindergarten, and Russian policemen patrolled the town. Up until 1990, the city had about 10000 inhabitants, while remaining secret and forbidden to the Mongolian population. After the end of the socialist regime, the city partially opened and Mongolian people coming to find work there discovered it with amazement. Uranium production continued until 1995; two years later, Russian citizens were called back to their home country, and within a few weeks, the city was left completely empty.

Given the high price of iron at the end of the 1990s on the Chinese market, this empty Soviet city was no less than a gold mine for the local population. Thus began a process of meticulous stripping of the city's iron components: lamp posts, railways, fences but also the framework of concrete buildings and roads... Nothing was left that could be taken, leaving the city not only deserted but also in ruins. Today, people who have known Mardai tell tales of fashionable clothes shipped directly from Moscow, of swimming pools, of orchards providing fruits in the middle of the steppe, and of an airport welcoming planes so huge that they could not land at any other Mongolian airport.

Based on these nostalgic memories of an inaccessible city and its subsequent stripping down to pieces within a few years, this paper intends to reflect more broadly on Mongolian memories of Russian colonialism. It will show that the process of appropriating iron parts of the city tends to reinforce the local people's relationship to their historic past, rather than it undermines it.