

Review: Harnessing Fortune

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Empson, Rebecca, 2011. [Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory and Place in Mongolia.](#) Oxford University Press.

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One of the issues in teaching material culture studies under the auspices of an anthropology department is explaining what is, at least in my case, a very conservative attitude to ethnography. I have always insisted that my PhD students understand and undertake what could be called classic ethnographic research as the basis for their PhD. The research must be based on working with a specified group of people for at least a year, being as much engaged with their every day activities as possible. In my case I have always insisted that even in the digital field this had to be as much an off line as on line experience. But to persuade people of this it helps if one has to hand exemplary ethnographies that really do demonstrate the 'added value' of sustained ethnographic study. There are of course classic studies, of which my bedrock has always been Munn's *Fame of Gawa* but one also wants to see current exemplifications that tackle the often far more dynamic situations of the contemporary world.

Rebecca Empson's 2011 monograph *Harnessing Fortune* works a treat for these purposes.

Empson was a student of Caroline Humphrey at Cambridge, who has consistently produced key papers in material culture studies throughout her career. As with Humphrey, Empson also works with the Buriad (Buryat) peoples of Mongolia. If Annette Weiner described her work in terms of "Keeping while Giving", Empson is more focused on Keeping while Separating. The economy of herding requires considerable mobility of various kinds and separation both cyclical and developmental is essential in the region. But these populations have complex means for retaining certain elements of persons, horses and other features that are moving on, thereby securing the element of fortune that was associated with their initial presence and possession. The study is thereby able also to show how accumulation and indeed possession operate alongside the fluidity of mobility.

The monograph has a broad range of concerns including the sense in which people are retained within other's bodies as in rebirth, and the hidden dimensions of relatedness that revolve around shamanistic practice. For scholars specifically interested in material culture chapters two to five are the most valuable. Chapter five, for example, has a fascinating discussion of mirrors as revelations of that which otherwise cannot be seen, and chapter two provides much of the analysis of the retention of fortune using retained material forms. But the heart of these more material aspects of this book is found in chapter three. This is concerned firstly with the household chest but most especially with the photographs, both those displayed on the outside of these chests and also in albums within. Careful attention to every aspect, from the juxtaposition of montage, to the formality of pose, to the ethnographic sense of when and in front of who photos are either displayed or hidden all become part of the analysis of how material forms and images are able to constitute and retain relationships even when person of property is otherwise absent and separated.

Showing how photographs stand in the stead of, but also greatly extend the role of genealogies,

many of which were previously destroyed for political reasons, has been very helpful to me in trying to think of how to work with the change from older genres of photos to the visual aspects of Facebook which is something I want to work on more in the future. In each of these iterations one can see how other networks of relatedness move beyond but also appropriate ideas of obligation that derive from kin relationships. In an Appendix she provides the illustrations and more detailed analysis of seven households. In her final chapter there is dramatic shift to the issue of arson, which reminds us that there are still more devastating loss of presence in the world beyond wiping out ones online presence.

As well as the dense ethnography, Empson also clearly places her material in relation to theorists such as Gell and Strathern, helpfully concentrating on the differences between the implications of her study and previous discussions of agency and relatedness. The book is the product of several fieldtrips conducted both for PhD and later Post-Doctoral research and has that aura of confident knowledge of her ethnographic context that comes with this intensity and longevity of fieldwork. The writing is unpretentious and effectively engages readers with the empathetic experience of that fieldwork. As with most good monographs the end result is not grand theory, but a clear sense that the particular material cosmologies of these people demonstrate possible ways of using material and social relatedness that were not captured by our prior theoretical discussions which now have to be re-thought and nuanced in the light of this new evidence. Which is exactly what a good ethnographic monograph should do.