In the nearly twenty years since the collapse of the socialist state and the barrage of consecutive rural reforms that followed, configurations of state power in the management of pastoral resources have undergone significant changes. This presentation will explore the institutional dynamics that have emerged at the local level, the responses of rural citizens to these shifts, and the impact that this new political landscape has had on mobility and risk management. In particular, I will focus on cross-boundary resource use and the migration strategy known as otor. In times of drought and difficult winter conditions, herding households are often pressured to migrate beyond the boundaries of their customary territories such as the bag or soum. In these contexts herders must contend not only with the variety of institutions and property claims that constitute the socio-political landscape within districts and counties but also those that regulate the use of resources between them. Moreover, as households ‘go on otor’ (otroor yavax), they must contend with the new guise of the ‘state’. In this short presentation I look at three brief case studies of households in Bayankhutag soum, Khentii aimag as they confront various these manifestations of state power and explore the political strategies that are necessary to access resources.

A number of reforms, including decentralization, electoral reform, community-based resource management initiatives, and well and campsite leasing, have variously impacted the ways in which households navigate the social and political landscape that
structure migration possibilities. Decentralization policies have significantly weakened the presence of local administrations in day-to-day resource management while electoral reforms (or the lack of them) have reconfigured accountability in ways that divorce governors from local responsibility. Yet, at the same time, as soums have become semi-personal fiefdoms of local governors, the power of governors, an important rural commodity, has also strengthened for these very reasons. Community-based resource management initiatives and well and campsite leasing have also devolved considerable power over pasture and territory to individual households and the kin groups that occupy customary territories within districts. Each of these shifts in governance, what I call the franchising of the state, has altered the political calculus of migration.

I present three case studies of resource use that demonstrate the ways these dynamics impact cross-boundary resource management. Firstly, I discuss how the CBNRM and leasing programs have encouraged the development of local, and hostile, territorial exclusions which delimit the space in which otor households can migrate. Secondly, I describe how the lack of administrative involvement has created space for new kinds of exchange between individual households such as campsite rents, gifting, and part-time employment. And thirdly, I show how otor contracts between soum officials on behalf of herders are deeply implicated in fostering a personal politics of patronage and persuasion. Lastly, I will briefly discuss the moral economy of these new practices and the way local and non-local households perceive them. Some argue that these practices amount to wholesale corruption and the severing of traditional moral economies while others contend they are necessary to contend with an absent central state.