

& GHOST STORIES

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Abstract

Sometimes it's simpler not to know—the interrogation of an origin story can send us down complex and wide-reaching rabbit holes. This text is an autoethnography, delving into my personal family history, detailing the belonging/non-belonging of a mixed-race Chinese-Danish individual, and the chronicling of my family's tethering to the city Baotou, home to China's largest rare earth mineral mine. Jumping between a first-person account of my grandfather's funeral in Baotou

and an academic register detailing the violent history and destructive effects of the mining upon its locality, the writing mimics the cognitive dissonance experienced by the diasporic subject who belongs to both sides of a planet divided between extraction and consumption. While exemplified via diasporic subjecthood, this cognitive dissonance is one that extends to us all in the face of our shared climate crisis.

In the spring of 2023, my mother calls me. She asks me where I am and I respond that I am in my room. Alone, she says, and I say, yes, alone.

‘姥爷 (lǎoyé) er dǒd (姥爷 is dead),’ she says. I hadn’t seen him since five years prior to his passing.

I arrive at Beijing Capital International Airport past midnight. In my uncle’s home, I sleep as long as time allows. We get up early. We drive into the city.

‘This is the one I chose,’ my uncle points to a simple boxy urn of dark wood inside its glass vitrine, flanked by other examples of varying ornamentation. The staff bring it out and my uncle wraps his puffer jacket around it, expressing thanks. Inside of the blue jacket, the urn is bound in a shiny red cloth.

It’s tradition that the urn is not to touch the ground, so my mother holds it when we get into the car. She will sit with her father’s ashes in her lap for the seven-hour drive.

‘Let’s go home,’ my uncle says and he starts the engine.

Baotou is the largest city in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), located in northern of China. It is home to China’s largest rare earth mineral mine, the Bayan Obo. A group of exceptionally magnetic and conductive metals, rare earth elements, otherwise known as the lanthanide series, including yttrium, scandium, and europium, are most commonly used in alloys and employed in a wide range of purposes. Rare earths are essential components of solar panels, lasers, wind turbines, drones, smart-phone magnets, weapons, hospital equipment and hard drives alike. According to Julie Michelle Klinger, “global finance, the Internet, satellite surveillance, oil transport, jet engines, television, GPS, and emergency rooms could not function without rare earth elements” (45). Due to their wide application and consequential high demand, the production of rare earth confers great economic power onto its supplier. Rare earths are contentious, however, as their extraction and refining come with great environmental costs.

The Bayan Obo rare earth mining district is the largest in the world, producing approximately fifty percent of global rare earth supply. It is located 100 km from Baotou city centre, and the Baogang tailings dam, which contains mining waste, is located twenty kilometers from the

city centre. In the dam sit 200 million tonnes of radioactive slurry, accumulating and emanating.

We get up early for the burial. The sky is dark still. My auntie passes me a steamed bun. Its gentle fragrance enters through the car window and its smooth white skin is soft in my hand. My mother takes it, splits it in two, gives me half. Tells me to put the other half in my coat pocket. It's for luck.

Adjacent to the graveyard parking lot is a place to burn offerings for the dead. It's an open building, concrete, one story split into three equal spaces that are all missing a fourth wall. A large exhaust is installed in the ceiling of each divided space, opening up through the simple concrete roof. The section we have rented is filled with a variety of objects made of thick paper with images printed on them: large colourful birds, a BMW with a young man's face printed in the driver's seat, servants, a large house with a fence, its kitchen outfitted with a refrigerator and dishwasher. We carry much paper money and a large plastic bag filled with shiny paper ingots, yuanbao. They rustle, gold.

We place the urn on a small table in front of the tableau of offerings. The ground is dry and dusty, ochre. One of the staff members walks up to the paper car as he extends the blade of a box cutter. He cuts open the door of the car, then of the house. Now the spirits can enter. My mother, the eldest child, sets fire to a large bunch of paper money. She throws the burning handful onto the house before the flames can lick her fingers. The fire catches. Half of the yuanbao are poured onto the pyre. Everything burns away in a minute, leaving behind a few sticks and the house's metal wire frame. The house, car, driver, servants and garish birds have all crossed the threshold to the dead. It's cold. We smoke cigarettes. Ash falls silently in the wind-still air.

The presence of the Bayan Obo in Baotou is no matter of geological coincidence. China's rare earth dominance is built upon a myth of natural abundance, but the reality of rare earth mining in the IMAR is contingent upon many geopolitical and historical factors. Despite being dubbed rare earth metals, this eponymous scarcity is fallacious. In fact, "most countries have enough reserves to be self-sufficient" (Klinger 70). The simultaneous high value and high environmental sacrifice

of rare earth production renders the industry high risk, high reward. Therefore, the deposits that are eventually mined are not chosen purely based on availability. Rare earth mining emerges in places that are deemed worth sacrificing by extralocal powers for economic gain and leverage. Following Klinger, “the geography of rare earth production is driven by a fundamental tension between the desire to control their production and the need to confine the hazards in places deemed sacrificable” (104). Baotou is one of these places deemed sacrificable. In *Rare Earth Frontiers: From Terrestrial Subsoils to Lunar Landscapes* (2017), Klinger identifies power as the driving force behind the locations of rare earth mining:

The political lives of rare earths are many and complex, but the complexity boils down to questions of power. Because rare earths confer tremendous power to those who acquire them, power is exercised in the capacity to make hegemonic claims to subsoils containing rare earths. Power is manifest in the ability to subject some and exempt others from the toxic and radioactive byproducts of mining and processing (59).

A ‘sacrifice zone’ is a space in which death and environmental destruction are disproportionately relegated. In the name of industrialisation, progress and economic growth, certain parts of the world are deemed more suitable than others to bear the brunt of these processes. Ryan Juskus asserts that sacrifice zones are often racially and economically coded, globally and nationally, exposing the overlapping and interlocking of social discrimination and environmental injustice (11-12). The concept of the sacrifice zone is relational, as it makes us aware of the ‘offering’ that is made by some for the benefit of others. Through the metaphor of the sacrifice, these real and inhabited spaces of extraction and production are linked to their spaces of consumption, “intended to reveal the human and ecological costs that are often unnoticed, hidden, or even intentionally concealed by market mechanisms: the market price of a thing [...] does not reflect its full costs” (Juskus 17). These hidden,

concealed places are made visible through the image of a sacrificial offering. After having been eviscerated, their lands are resuscitated; re-animated, undead sacrificial lambs. This manifests in Baotou through high cancer rates, diseased animals, polluted tap water and the so-called ‘cancer villages’ in the rural and peri-urban areas around the mining district. Representing Baotou as a sacrifice zone reconfigures it to a place deeply compromised by far-reaching global chains of production and consumption.

My uncle draws a semicircle in front of the grave with a stick of bamboo and we arrange fruit and cakes and bread neatly on the small stone steps. A fistful of incense is lit. We burn the rest of the paper money and golden ingots and prayers are said for 姥爷 (lǎoyé) to receive his house and his consumables and his car and his cash. We, his children and grandchildren, take off our black funeral armbands and throw them onto the fire. Everyone throws their white lapel flower. I had intended to keep these objects as mementos before I knew of their fiery fates. My uncle sees me fingering the little blue pompom that was pinned to my armband and tells me to hand it over. He throws it into the fire and I watch it wither with the heat, shrinking and turning brown as the seconds tick on. Everything quickly turns to ash. We eat the steamed buns we’ve been keeping in our jackets. We break bites off and throw them onto the ashes for the dead. I imagine my grandfather eating a freshly steamed bun, his teeth sinking into the soft bread while his dark lips close around it. His glasses fog up, steam rising from the bun as he brings it from his face, bite-marked.

My mother kowtows first. Then my uncle, then my two aunties and my cousin.

‘Vil du også? (Do you also want to?)’ my mother asks me, her voice breaks as she gestures towards the ground. I get on my hands and knees eagerly in the dry, dusty earth and face the ashes and the grave. I bow my forehead to the ground thrice and cry as if to say ‘I know I am foreign and voiceless and absent and arriving too late, but I care and I am here now and—’

In order for the Chinese state to convert the southern Mongolian steppe of the contemporary IMAR into a ‘red hinterland’ for extraction,

it was necessary to first lay claim to the land. Several strategies were utilised in order to empty Inner Mongolia of the ethnic minorities who had historical and cultural ties to the land and repopulate it.

Initially, the Bayan Obo emerged as a 1950s Sino-Soviet project with the goal of bolstering both republics against Western capitalism and Japanese imperialism (Klinger 70). In order to stimulate rare earth mining for the development of China's nuclear power, industry and economic growth, vast portions of the ethnic minority populations indigenous to Inner Mongolia were eviscerated. Mass death and state-sanctioned killings were mobilised; ten percent of ethnic Mongolians were executed and uncounted killed; Han Chinese were incentivised to migrate and re-populate the area to secure the land (Klinger 88). Han women from eastern China were recruited by the People's Liberation Army and sent to marry soldiers in the IMAR under the guiding principle "the party assigns and the woman agrees" (Klinger 88). 'Bayan Obo' is taken from the original Mongolian name of a mountain resembling a large yurt. While the name remains, the mountain has been turned from convex to concave through the processes of the mining industry (Klinger 92-93).

China came to dominate the rare earth market by the beginning of the twenty-first century; production peaked in 2010 at ninety-seven percent of global supply (Klinger 1). The Bayan Obo became the world's main supplier of the crucial rare earth minerals by way of the concurrent neoliberal policies of Reagan and Thatcher coinciding with Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of 1978. This included Deng's 'Open Door Policy,' which encouraged foreign investment and entrepreneurship in China. 'Special Economic Zones' were introduced, which were specifically established for foreign investment through altered economic policies and regulations. This was combined with a move towards privatisation of industry instead of widespread state-ownership, a significant change from economic policies under Mao. The cocktail of Chinese and Western neoliberal political developments was a catalysing agent in the outsourcing of many industries from the West to the East, including rare earth mining.

Many companies sought to either move or outsource their rare earth production to China where environmental regulations and labour rights concerning this highly polluting industry were less stringent (Klinger 56). After the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ had restructured the social and economic fabric of China through Maoist communism, Deng’s overhaul of economic policies sought to develop China’s economy. However, the costs of this ‘development’ are manifest in the dehumanising transformation of people into cheap labour and inhabited land into zones of extraction and pollution.

According to Klinger, “globalization as we know it would be unthinkable without China’s 1978 re-forms [...] After all, how impactful could the neoliberal turn in the West be without the deregulation of the East?” (110). The action of moving pollutive and extractive industries from West to East, which was facilitated politically by both parts of the world in the name of economic progress, carries with it unsavoury implications. Beneath these policies lies a shared consensus that the destruction and exploitation of some places and people are a fundamental part of socioeconomic advancement. This consensus seems an echo of the colonial violence justified by ideologies of racial hierarchies, which effectively cast the lives and landscapes of non-European ‘others’ as expendable. As Klinger points out, it could be “a holdover of these ideologies that racially code China as a space of exception in the making of the contemporary neoliberal world order” (108).

After the burial we have lunch in a fancy restaurant. We have a room to ourselves with a table in the middle, huge and round. The glass plate in the middle of the table rotates by itself, spectral. It’s fixed with hidden mechanics. Usually you can spin them manually on a wheeled system. You can tease the people you are eating with, spinning the plate faster as they try to grab the tastiest bites. It’s impolite to mess with the spinning plate, but I used to do it as a teenager when I lived in Beijing. Today the dishes approach me at a steady, mechanised pace.

A wealth of delicious things are served. Seafood in spicy soup, Peking duck, several different stews, duck head, fried sticky yellow cakes, crispy and chewy and filled with red beans, dip them in syrup, they were 姥姥’s (lǎolao) favourite, when she was alive that is, she could

eat that entire plate to herself, yes she could, her children never liked them much but I do, maybe it skips a generation, fried dumplings filled with vegetables, different kinds of melon with rinds cut and arranged decoratively. And so on and so forth. Try this, this is good, eat this one, this part is really delicious. I eat until I feel ill, which will become a familiar sensation by the end of the week.

We stay in Baotou for a few more days. I play with my little cousin. My aunts joke that our Mandarin level is about the same—in this city I'm just four years old. I put a giant branch on my head and pretend to be a prideful bird. We chase each other. He's laughing. I'm out of breath from tailing him and from the cigarettes and the new climate. The sun is bright and the sky is clear every day. The ochre streets are warm. Evenings are cold. It's dry and I'm thirsty all of the time. Desert air.

At night in the bed we share, I hold my mother. This memory flickers over and over beneath my eyelids: the hard mattress beneath us, her body nestled against mine like a child, her head in my arms, the feeling of her chest spasming as she cries silently.

'Jeg savner min far (I miss my dad),' her voice is thick. The last time she saw him was six years prior to his death.

The extraction and refining of rare earths in Baotou municipality has caused irreparable damage to the surrounding environment. Mining rare earths brings many hazardous elements from below ground to the surface: arsenic, heavy metals and radioactive materials are all dug up and separated from the rare earths in their production process. The presence of rare earth elements frequently coincides with radioactive mineral deposits, as they share conditions for their natural geological formation (Klinger 117).

Twenty kilometers from Baotou city centre is the Baogang tailings dam. Since the conception of the Bayan Obo mining district in the 1950s, it has grown to become the "worlds largest rare earth lake" (Klinger 121). The circulation of radioactive residues reaches past the area around the Bayan Obo mining district. Radon gas, a decay product of uranium and thorium, is constantly emanating from the dam. Its density is higher than air, causing it to move close to the ground. In a few days it can spread across one thousand kilometres with a steady breeze

(Klinger 121). The effects of pollution from mining are evident in the following statistics:

[...] the cancer mortality rate in the Bayan Obo mining district rose from 107.93 per 100,000 in 1989– 90 (three times the national average and five times the average for western China), to 155.7 per 100,000 in 1997. In the mining district, the three leading causes of death are cancer; unspecified poisoning and accidents; and infant mortality. (Klinger 120-121)

Ten days later, I fly home to Amsterdam. I feel spectral still. I eat the garlic flavoured peanuts my uncle bought me in Beijing as I read the introduction to Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon explicates our need for a new conception of violence, one which can accommodate the accumulative and perhaps more insidious nature of violence which is carried out through decades of the slow poisoning of environments and their inhabitants. Many lives are touched by the lethal byproducts of warfare, military testing and industrial pollution. Sustained exposure to an environment high in toxicity through water, air and produce often lead to high rates of cancer and birth defects in a population, amongst others. The results of slow violence are the same as 'regular' violence: people die and landscapes bleed.

The words do something to me. I had always known that my mother's hometown is in a very polluted part of China. I never looked into it further.

I finish Nixon's introduction. I open a new tab. I punch Baotou into my search engine and online databases. I skim abstracts and introductory paragraphs alongside Wikipedia, clicking back and forth, back and forth. The articles have titles like "The effects of short-term exposure to air pollution on mortality in Baotou, China, during 2015–2019," "The Bottom of the Smart Weapon Production Chain: Securing the Supply of Rare Earth Elements for the U.S. Military," "Grain-size distribution and contamination characteristics of heavy metal in street dust of Baotou, China," "The geopolitics of China's rare earths: a

glimpse of things to come in a resource-scarce world,” “Prevalence and causes of low vision and blindness in Baotou: A cross-sectional study” etc. If you type Bayan Obo into your usual image search engine, you will see what I saw then: maps of excavation, grey images and colourless sludge spurting out of a large pipe. Orange skies.

I find Klinger’s *Rare Earth Frontiers: From Terrestrial Subsoils to Lunar Landscapes* (2017). I start reading the introduction, but I feel unwell. The information hurts my brain and I struggle to overlay it across images of Baotou, of food, of hills in the desert, of my family. Dust from the streets is still stuck to the woollen fibres of my coat, tiny particles of ochre earth embedded in the soles of my shoes. Mongolian barbecue, spiced lamb’s meat, steamed dumplings and pig trotters consumed in Baotou are all assimilated in my body as my eyes move across the screen. My mouth dries up. I close the file.

In my mind, I see the grey, dusty earth, stained and wet with tears. Then I see the white headstone. Earth, headstone, earth, headstone, earth, headstone. I kowtow thrice in front of my grandfather’s grave. Smoke from fistfuls of incense rises up into the clear sky.

My grandfather came from a small farming village, from a poor family. He had many siblings. His name was 王彦彪 (wáng yànbīāo). He was very short and claimed that this was due to the malnutrition of his childhood and adolescence in poverty. He was the only person of his generation in the village to attend university.

After relocating to Baotou, my grandfather was instrumental in finding employment or a spouse for many of his siblings, nieces and nephews. To mobilise his family members from a poverty-stricken fate in rural China to an urban life, a better life, was a proud achievement of his. Everybody owed him their life in Baotou.

My mother wanted very much to escape Baotou and her parents’ home. She moved to Denmark after marrying my father. She had never been there before. They were 23. He bought her a bicycle and a rain suit upon arrival.

Last year, my auntie found a lump in her breast. It was malignant. She traveled from Baotou to Beijing for a lumpectomy.

As I interrogate my mother's hometown, a heritage reveals itself—one that reaches beyond me and touches history. Inevitably, this search into my past only underscores the dissonance of my present. To reckon with my family's history is to reckon with a history of sacrifice and mutilation, one in a myriad of tales explicating the consequences of a globe carved up into parts where wealth, consumption, waste, pollution, toxic labour and environmental devastation are disproportionately concentrated.

The asymmetric relationship between abundance and destruction is in turn exacerbated by the advancement of climate change, which casts a dark and complex shadow over the collective future of the globe. According to Ian Baucom, the 'forces' of human politics, history and culture, that have had such an impact on global divisions of poverty and prosperity, and the 'forcings' of climate change need to be held in conjoined regard in addressing "the fully planetary condition of the Anthropocene" (14). The histories of racially justified exploitation, discrimination and unfreedom are entangled with our shared planetary condition, as "the play of historical forces and climate forcings are not autonomous from one another but exacerbate and intensify one another" (Baucom 14). Our contemporary climate situation is constituted by the idea that some lives are worth more than others.

Discourses have power. As systems of representation—even when the representations differ wildly from reality—they carry tremendous political power because they shape thought and action in consequential ways. (Klinger 36)

It is not geological fact that pens the cartography of rare earth mining—it is the discourse of power veiled in myths of scarcity. The environments and their inhabitants sacrificed in order to facilitate rare earth mining are the physical manifestations of these discourses. There is real life affectuality in narratives predicated on the idea that some lands and lives are worth sacrificing in the name of a shared 'greater good.' And, as the demands of the 'greater good' continue to rise, the

sacrifice zones are ever-expanding, migrating, infiltrating all of our lives.

How do we seek to recognise ourselves amidst this dark and ever-darkening legacy?

In my own tethering to the history of Baotou, I see the potential in diasporic narratives to short-circuit the idea of a one-way relationship between extraction and consumption, sacrifice and concealment. The incoherence in belonging to both sides of a globe that is divided between the expending and the expendable is one that often marks diasporic personhood. This incoherence, however, is one that marks us all, given the ubiquitous reach of our shared planetary crisis.

The place my grandfather fought to make his family's home in the pursuit of a better life is the same place my mother left in her own pursuit of a better life is the same place I contemplate to make sense of my life. The more I search, the more I dissolve. Histories turn to ashes in my hands. Then my hands turn to ash and soon my entire body. Each illness or death of another family member far away is a mark on my large, strong body, swimming in the North Sea off the west coast of Denmark.

That could have been you, the waves break rhythmically and ensconce me, that could have been you, that could have been you, that could have been you,

I am made up of that material and so are you, so are you, so are you.

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Biography

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She holds a BFA from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and an MA in Artistic Research from the University of Amsterdam.