Bolor Sambuu fosters international trade with Mongolia and Canada

by Natalie Bruckner

WHEN BOLOR SAMBUU graduated from UVic in 2011 with an MBA in entrepreneurship and a newfound appreciation for sustainability, mining wasn’t exactly top of her list as a sector to explore. “Sustainability and mining are a bit of a contradiction in terms,” laughs Sambuu. “No one leaves university, especially after those specializations, and wants to work for a mining company.”

And yet, Sambuu credits the MBA program with opening her eyes to new values in new ventures. “I was taught to look at things from all angles and realize I could make more of an impact from within an organization,” she says. And as a native of Mongolia—a country where mining is one of the top industries and a primary driver of bilateral commercial relations with Canada—it was a sector where she felt she could bring her unique specializations, and wants to work for a mining company.”

However, her world opened up when friends visiting from Mongolia described the country’s rapid growth and suggested she return to explore international trade opportunities. “International students who come to Canada often feel conflicted about returning home, but you need to realize you may have more opportunities there. It’s about opening yourself up to possibilities—the global aspect of the course allows you to see that,” explains Sambuu.

Back in Mongolia, Sambuu secured a job as an IPO Specialist at Erdenes Ovoo Tolgoi Co. and as a shareholder in the Mongolian Metal Exchange. “The industry was changing and this exposed me to a network that I would never have had access to if I had stayed in Canada. I got great experience under my belt and a better understanding of how global investment was impacting Mongolia and the political challenges happening within the country.” These insights proved invaluable when she finally returned to Canada in 2013. “I came back to Canada to gain more experience, and to be close to my now-husband, who is Canadian. But I didn’t want to lose my ties with Mongolia,” she says. Instead, she strengthened them.

Up until that point, two-way trade between Canada and Mongolia was limited. Canadian exports to Mongolia amounted to approximately $27.3 million in 2017, and imports from Mongolia amounted to approximately $2.5 million.

Sambuu saw an opportunity. “Within the first two weeks of arriving in Toronto I founded the Women in Mining Mongolia. I came across the Women in Mining Canada group and realized it would be a great platform to encourage networking with like-minded women in the industry from Mongolia and Canada.”

“The government of Mongolia was starting to understand that its minerals sector is critical to its national plans for sustainable development, and Mongolia was also having a lot more influence beyond mining; the cashmere trade, for example, was starting to take off.”

Now, as Canada-Mongolia trade relations enter what Sambuu describes as “stage two” in its development, with greater investments, an exchange of ideas between the two countries and a greater networking hub, Sambuu reflects on the advice she would give graduates wishing to enter the international trade environment. “Don’t limit yourself with where or who you work for,” she says. “You may be an environmentalist at heart, but realize that you can make greater impacts from within.”