

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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# Mongolian pastoralism on the threshold of the twenty-first century

*Jeremy Swift & Robin Mearns*

The political isolation of China, Mongolia and Soviet Central Asia for several decades before the 1980s meant that the collectivisation of the pastoral economies of the area was not much studied by western researchers until Caroline Humphrey's great work on Buryat collectives published in 1983 (Humphrey 1983). Pastoral decollectivisation, which started in the 1980s in Inner Mongolia, in the early 1990s in Mongolia, and is still scarcely underway in Russia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics, has had more attention, but is still little documented. This is surprising, since these two revolutionary transformations, taking place in one of the great nomadic pastoral areas of the world, have important lessons for other pastoral societies, both in terms of understanding the nature of the pastoral economy and society, and in suggesting development policies which might be followed or avoided in other continents.

The papers in this special number of *Nomadic Peoples* try to start filling this gap. The geographic area of concern is the Mongol cultural area of central Asia, including Inner Mongolia in China, Mongolia itself, and, to a lesser extent, the neighbouring Mongol-speaking parts of Russia. In disciplines, the papers cover animal and pasture science, ecology, anthropology, economics, geography, demography and nutrition. In time they range from the beginning of this century to the present, as economic liberalisation is beginning to take serious hold in the Mongolian heartland, with potentially momentous consequences. The papers here also vary in focus, including both detailed case studies, and broad thematic or sector reviews. Most of the re-

search has been carried out in the last two years, and therefore reports on the current situation.<sup>1</sup>

This volume has two objectives: an empirical one, to provide information about an important pastoral area about which little is known in the West; and a predictive and policy analysis one, to provide ideas about the key policy issues arising in the present transformation of Mongolian pastoralism and the ways they might be resolved. The papers collected here have a number of common themes which transcend particular disciplines and geographic areas.

A first theme concerns ecological processes and the potential of, and constraints to, extensive pasture management. There is an important difference in this respect (as in many others) between Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, due mainly to the conversion to agriculture of large areas of pasture in the latter. Tserendash and Erdenebaatar report research in Mongolia on the seasonal and yearly dynamics of pasture productivity and the impacts of different use regimes; on the basis of these observations, they propose adapted systems of rotational use of natural pasture. The adoption of such systems will be easier since Mongolian pastoralists already recognise the importance of rotational grazing, and use, among many other indicators, changes in the dominant colour of pastures as a guide to proper use. They describe an extensive customary pasturing system in generally good condition, capable of improved management through adapted and appropriate scientific research.

Sheehy also looks at pasture dynamics and grazing strategies, comparing Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. He finds that although Mongolian pastoral ecosystems have been grazed by domestic livestock for centuries, recent changes in grazing strategy, and especially the development of agriculture in Inner Mongolia, have had an important impact; as a result, although opportunities remain in Mongolia to implement the sort of sustainable grazing strategies recommended by Tserendash and Erdenebaatar, in Inner Mongolia ecological change has gone so far that extensive grazing management strategies may no longer have a place. Sheehy believes that Inner Mongolian pastures may be on the verge of accelerated ecological decline, unless grazing and land use strategies are fundamentally revised.

The issue of environmental degradation on the Mongolian steppe is alluded to in several of the papers. Rong Ma documents the immigration of Han Chinese into Inner Mongolia and the rapidly rising population pressure and economic conversion from pastoralism to farming this triggered, with potential ecological damage. Although the slow rate of Han in-migration in Ma's study village contributed to a lack of ethnic tensions between Han and Mongols, the worsening environment has reduced incomes of both Han and Mongols and risks creating new types of conflict. Li, Ma and Simpson also describe the history of one village in Inner Mongolia over the last 40 years, tracing an important reduction in nomadic movement as a result of collectivisation and the reorganisation of production, of the general levelling of incomes and reduction in the quality of livestock management during the Cultural Revolution, and the loss of key grazing areas. Most herders considered that the quality of grassland had declined as a result of the combination of overgrazing and drier climate. However, the living and working conditions of the herders, especially of women, were thought to have greatly improved with rising rural incomes made possible by post-Mao economic reforms.

Environmental degradation is much less of a problem in Mongolia, for several reasons. Perhaps the most important is the low pressure of population on resources, and the survival of extensive mobile pastoralism as the most important form of land use. Minzhigdorj and Erdenebaatar document how this leads to high productivity and multiple uses of sheep, the most valuable animal among the five species herded by Mongolians. Attitudes towards nature and natural resources are also important. Fernández-Giménez analyses Mongolian herders' perceptions of ecological processes, and the environmental ethic which pervades Mongolian attitudes to herding. She reports that herders in the forest-steppe zone distinguish clearly between 'eaten' and 'degraded' pastures, with the former being temporarily overgrazed but likely to recover, while the latter were likely to have permanently altered plant species composition and productivity; the latter areas are usually the result of non-pastoral actions, such as passage across the steppe by motor vehicles.

Humphrey, Mongush and Telengid report herders' attitudes towards nature in Mongolia and Tuva, and find a widespread concern for the environment (not excluding people as something separate) extending into complex attitudes about nature as an interactive system, the right way to manage and use animals (and especially to manage reproduction), when animals may be killed, the use of natural products as medicines, and appropriate rituals connected to the environment. People who do not follow these rules are condemned.

Such attitudes imply that there are important safeguards in Mongolian herders' attitudes towards the environment about overuse and degradation of resources. However it is not perhaps as simple as that. Humphrey *et al.* report that 'outsiders' are rapidly blamed for environmental damage (Tuvans blame Russians, Mongolians blame Russians and Kazakh, and one might add, Mongolians probably blame Han); as elsewhere in the world, environmental dis-

course easily gets caught up with ideas of exclusion and identity, and becomes an instrument of political action. It is also clear that there are objective pressures towards greater ecological vulnerability: pressure of population on resources and the adoption of unsound land use practices in Inner Mongolia (papers by Ma and Li *et al.*), and a shift in livestock ownership towards absentee herd owners in Mongolia with attendant dangers of destabilisation of local grazing management understandings (papers by Mearns and Potkanski).

Several papers in this volume deal with relationships between environment on the one hand, and social and economic organisation on the other. Both Szykiewicz and Mearns look at the nature of property rights and how they are influenced by the nature of ecological processes. But it would be a mistake to see a straightforward causal connection. Mearns in particular, after considering the relationship between ecological variations and differences in the broad pattern of territorial behaviour on Mongolian herders, concludes that the precise form of land tenure arrangements and their continuity over time are more a function of changing political and economic conditions than of environment as such, and that they are also susceptible to a changing public policy environment. Thus, although there has been continuity in land tenure arrangements through the two revolutionary transformations of this century, attributable in part to their ecological fitness, there have also been changes reflecting political choices and economic events.

Mearns and Sneath also look at ecological influences on residence patterns, at the stability of residence, and at dispersal of households and camps. Randall considers the extent to which ecological, political and economic influences can explain the unusual demographic patterns of Mongolian pastoralists (initial low fertility, a rise in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a gradual decline, even in the absence of modern contraception). She finds no obvious and direct environmental responses, nor, more

surprisingly, direct responses to the government's strong pronatalist stance; on the other hand, changes in health services have had an important impact, and indirect effects of policy have also been significant.

The process of pastoral collectivisation and its consequences are treated in several papers. Collectivisation led to a decline in pastoral mobility in both Mongolia (Mearns) and Inner Mongolia (Li *et al.*). In the latter case, there were no limits on movement before 1956, and pastoral mobility was extensive, allowing use of a range of seasonal pastures and other resources; this changed with the gradual collectivisation of the study area in 1956-61, and by the mid-1980s herders were semi-nomadic at best. By 1992, almost all herders had permanent facilities including houses, shelters, pens and hay storage buildings, and seasonal animal movements are on a small scale, in the care of men or young couples only. In the case of Mongolia, Szykiewicz also describes how collectivisation provided stability after the upheaval of the revolution and the eradication of feudal structures.

Collectivisation brought rising standards of pastoral living in both Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (Potkanski, Li *et al.*, and Mearns), and improved health services in Mongolia resulted in declining infant and child mortality and fertility increase because of control of venereal disease (Randall). However, Strickland points out that significant health and nutrition problems remain, especially high maternal mortality and childhood rickets, resulting in part from seasonally variable nutrition. Such problems are likely to increase with the reduction in health services occurring now as a result of economic liberalisation.

As a result of the many changes triggered by collectivisation, and some (like Han migration into Inner Mongolia) that were underway before collectivisation, there are now significant differences in the nature of the pastoral economies of the two areas: in Inner Mongolia extensive nomadic pastoralism as such is probably no longer viable (Li *et al.*, Sheehy), although livestock retain

an important economic role in a mixed farming system; in Mongolia on the other hand, where population and resource ratios are very different and where successive governments, whatever their political stance, have remained closely in touch with pastoral economy and society, extensive nomadic pastoralism remains a viable and productive form of land use.

Pastoral decollectivisation, which took place slowly during the 1980s in Inner Mongolia and very rapidly at the start of the 1990s in Mongolia, has triggered a new round of changes. In both places, economic liberalisation took the form of progressive privatisation first of animals, then of use rights to land (although this latter process has not yet gone very far in Mongolia). Two main, contrasting, themes run through these accounts: that of continuity in institutions, strategies and ways of behaving, and that of change, adaptation and evolution.

Li *et al.* describe how herder incomes and living standards have risen rapidly in Inner Mongolia with rising livestock prices; it seems that growth in effective demand for livestock products, and of effective market mechanisms, have played as important a role as the transfer of ownership of productive capital into private ownership or leasing. In Mongolia, where the process has had much less time so far to develop, Edström reports that livestock markets have been slow to develop and an acute shortage of cash in the countryside has meant rather a return to barter. As a result, levels of offtake and marketing of livestock are declining. There needs to be a fundamental overhaul of attitudes towards and institutions managing the livestock trade, where, in effect, herders and small private traders are still discriminated against, and true competition does not yet operate.

Potkanski describes the emergence of new (or the re-emergence of old) forms of cooperation between pastoralists; some, such as the livestock companies, are encouraged by the authorities; others, such as genuine cooperative groups and large cooperating camps, are of a more spontaneous and

grass-roots character. Several other authors document the re-emergence of forms of spontaneous cooperation with its basis in pre-collective institutions or kin-based networks. Sneath stresses the importance of networks, often kin-based, in channelling economic transactions and creating and managing 'social relations of obligation' in an economy with otherwise weak and imperfect institutions, and Szykiewicz documents the kin-based economic exchanges which not only survived the collective period but have in some respects been strengthened since. Mearns points to important elements of institutional continuity in land user and economic groups.

A feature of the Mongolian transition has been the large number of urban people who have returned (perhaps often only temporarily) to herding, to escape urban hardships and benefit from the distribution of animals when the collectives were disbanded. The inflow of newcomers to herding and especially absentee herd owners carries dangers however, as Mearns points out, to successful cooperation in pasture management, and by creating a group of herd owners not involved on a day-to-day basis in herding.

In Mongolia, livestock privatisation has led directly to a rapid rise in rural economic differentiation, a process observed earlier in Inner Mongolia. Cooper shows that during the collective period, the previous large wealth differences were reduced, although not entirely eliminated; following privatisation, differentials increased again. Income and expenditure differences between households also increased substantially. As a result, increasing numbers of households are economically marginalised. Templer, Swift and Payne show that the ordinary processes of risk—especially severe winter frozen snow cover or *dzud*—are now much more dangerous for such poor households, since the subsidised state fodder provision, livestock insurance and other protective measures of the collective period are being removed, leaving such herders more vulnerable than at any time in the last half century. In the new situation of wide wealth

and income differentials, disasters strike poor households especially hard, and will accelerate the processes of impoverishment and destitution already underway. (It should be noted, however, that Potkanski is more optimistic about the level of risk involved.)

The conclusion drawn by Templer *et al.* is that local kin and neighbourhood solidarity and assistance must be expected to cope in the first place with individual household risk and disaster, but that wider institutional protection is needed against major, geographically-spread, covariate disasters, if they are not to become the mechanism by which an important part of Mongolian pastoral society is reduced to penury. Several authors in this collection (Ma, Mearns, Szykiewicz, Cooper and Sneath) document the way kin-based and local networks do provide important support in this way, and also structure basic economic activities in the absence of more formal economic institutions. However, the economic transition now underway is a time of danger to herders from large scale threats, which such local mechanisms cannot contain. Until livestock and fodder markets and private sector insurance are operating more efficiently, there remains an essential role for the state in providing these goods and services.

This special number of *Nomadic Peoples* gives an idea about current research on key, mainly social science, themes, and, we hope, serves to open up central Asian pastoralism more clearly than before to outside scrutiny. In other continents, research on pastoral societies has not been very successful in informing new policies and development projects. We hope that research on central Asian pastoral groups, led by our Chinese, Mongolian, Central Asian and Russian colleagues, can be more successful in illuminating the processes at work and what can be done.

## Note

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## Reference

- Humphrey, C. 1983, *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## A note on Mongolian transcription<sup>1</sup>

Modern (Khalkha) Mongolian has been rendered in the Cyrillic script since the 1940s, although this gives an inaccurate guide to the pronunciation of some sounds in the Mongolian language. There is no standard, internationally accepted system for transcribing Mongolian from the Cyrillic into English; but the following table is a guide to the conventions that have been adopted in this volume, following the system used by Professor C. R. Bawden:

Cyrillic	English
А	a
Б	b
В	v
Г	g
Д	d
Е	ye
Ё	yo
Ж	j
З	z (or dz)
И	i
Й	i
Л	l
М	m
Н	n
О	o
Ө	ö
Р	r
С	s
Т	t
У	u
Ү	ü
Х	kh <sup>2</sup>
Ц	ts
Ч	ch
Ш	sh
Ъ	"
Ы	y
Ь	' (silent letter, transcribed as an apostrophe)
Э	e
Ю	yu
Я	ya

Wherever possible, the Cyrillic spellings of the Mongolian words referred to in this volume are those used in G. Hangin's *A Modern Mongolian-English Dictionary* (Bloomington: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Indiana University, 1986). Place names follow those used in the *National Atlas of Mongolia*, published jointly by the Academy of Sciences of USSR and Mongolia, 1990; or local usage.

For clarity to non Mongol language specialists, plural forms of transcribed Mongolian words here take the English 's' rather than the strictly correct Mongolian plural form (e.g. *khot ail* becomes *khot ails*).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The editors are grateful to Dr Krystyna Chabros, Newnham College, University of Cambridge, for her helpful advice and guidance on Mongolian transcription. Full responsibility for the system as adopted here lies with the editors, however, and is not necessarily endorsed by Dr Chabros.

<sup>2</sup> There is particular disagreement on the transcription of the Cyrillic 'x' into English. 'H' tends to be used in the standard American transcription, as well as by journalists. 'X' is also being used more recently, for example by Professor C. R. Bawden. However, 'kh' is preferred here since it is widely used in recent social science and official government literature on contemporary Mongolia, including some commonly used names and words such as Chinggis Khan, Khalkha, *khot ail* (herders' encampment), etc. It is also used in earlier works by Professor Bawden.