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PASTORALISM IN WESTERN MONGOLIA: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

(LINDA TUBACH AND PETER FINKE)

Profile

Linda Tubach studied Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Non-Western Societies at the University of Amsterdam. She is currently a PhD student and assistant at the University of Zurich. Her fieldwork focuses on Western Mongolia where she has conducted research on political and economic aspects of hunting processes among Kazaks in Bayan-Olgii. Her new project is on social strategies of pastoralists in situations of uncertainty among Mongolian herders in the Khovd area.

The steppes of Western Mongolia have been a place of pastoral nomadism for many centuries, which has shaped the life of its local communities in profound ways. And this life has always been one exposed to particular risks due to pastoralists' high dependence on dynamic natural and social conditions, including human and animal predators, epidemics and climate conditions. This is true for Mongolian pastoralists as much as for pastoralists anywhere in the world. In recent decades, these risks have, however, experienced new forms and have partly turned life into a state of uncertainty. This project follows these changes and analyses the strategies that pastoralists adopt to deal with them.

In the course of the 20th century, Mongolian pastoralists have experienced dramatic transformation processes starting with the collectivization and establishment of a socialist production regime since the 1930s (Rosenberg 1981; Goldstein and Beall 1994; Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Rossabi 2005). Through the pastoral cooperatives social and economic services like health care, free education and transportation, veterinary services, hay production and winter shelters were provided. The cooperatives also controlled most aspects of the pastoral production, including specialisations in herding and annual grazing cycles. What this also implied was a transfer of responsibility and risk from the individual producer to the state (Potkanski 1993; Finke 2004).

Once the Soviet Union and with it socialism suddenly collapsed in 1991, the situation changed again rapidly. Mongolia had to implement fundamental reforms towards a market economy that were followed by extremely high unemployment rates, increasing poverty and general uncertainty. The collectives in the rural areas were dismantled and livestock privatised turning herder house-

holds into small private enterprises again (Potkanski 1993; Finke 2003; Sneath 2003). The relapse of the formerly stable and subsidised economy caused a crisis of the existing political, economic and social institutions and radically cut people off from their secure and well-organised lives under socialism (Rossabi 2005).

We will look in this project at the impacts these changes had on pastoralists in the western parts of the country, more specifically in the northern part of the province of Khovd. The region is also known for its natural beauty, composed of the high mountain ranges of the Mongolian Altay on the one hand, and steppe lowlands, which include the world's most northern deserts on the other hand. In-between are some of the largest lakes in the country, although most of them salty. With annual average temperatures around zero and precipitation rates between 100 and 300 mm local ecology poses a serious challenge for human economic activities aiming to secure their livelihoods. Most of the area may only be used as seasonal pastures that allow the raising of sheep and goats, cattle, horses and a few camels. As vegetation is scarce, grazing cycles are very complex and in need of substantial space and flexibility. Agriculture as a supplement does exist along the lower course of some of the major rivers, and may locally be of high importance. In cultural terms, the region is considered the most heterogeneous in the country. Besides numer-



Photo 1: The statue of Galdan Boshigt, last ruler of the west-Mongolian Oyrats, in the city of Khovd (P. FINKE, 2011)



Photo 2: Summer pasture in western Mongolia, along the river Buyant

(L. TUBACH, 2013)

ous Mongolian groups like Khalkha, Zakhchin, Dörvöd or Ööld, Khovd province also harbours a large number of Turkic-speakers, primarily Kazaks and a few Tuvinians, as well as Uryankhai. This ethnic diversity has impacts on pastoral land allocation as well as on differences in economic and social strategies employed in dealing with the current challenges.

In spite of this, the region and its people have seen comparatively little scholarly attention. The challenges that pastoralists in Khovd – as in other parts of the country – face ground, first of all, in the on-going difficulties of adapting to a new economic regime. Problems of market access and high transaction costs were particularly severe during most of the 1990s (Finke 2004). In the case of the Kazaks, the main strategy to counter this was to broaden the basis of ones household by diversifying economic activities, particularly including agriculture and trade where suitable. This was to reduce risks among less well-off households while for the rich it provided a mean to accumulate and spread wealth. At the same time, increasing ones herd size was also designed as a risk-minimizing strategy while the shift to more goats was to take advantage of the only animal resource easily and profitably to be marketed, namely cashmere. The increase in livestock and the rise of transportation costs, however, resulted in a decrease in mobility and growing discontent regarding access to land rights. The redistribution of livestock in private hands and the return to multi-species herds also played a key role in this (Finke 2000). At the same time, a general mistrust in social institutions, and often in each other, did not make cooperative solutions easy to achieve (Finke 2004). In the meanwhile, due to the sudden uncertainty and economic



Photo 3: Milking goats

(L. TUBACH, 2013)

downturn of the early 1990s, many urban citizens took refuge in rural areas and picked up nomadic pastoralism as an alternative livelihood, since jobs and even food supplies were hardly to be found anymore. The number of herder households in rural areas thereby increased significantly (PALD 1993; Rossabi 2005). This was a marked contrast to the increasing sedentarization processes in other parts of the pastoralist world (Fratkin 1997).

However, since the end of the 1990s this trend started to reverse and pastoralism to lose on its long-term role as national economic backbone (Mearns 2004; Galvin 2009). While a certain flourishing of markets and rising demand for meat in urban places has benefitted pastoralists, at the same time, increasing risks detain people more and more to act upon those directly. One of these threats is natural disasters. Between 1999 and 2002 a series of severe droughts and harsh winter hazards (called *dzud* in Mongolian) caused enormous loss of livestock. Many pastoralist existences were tragically disrupted. Although animals had recovered by 2005, this was unequally spread among herders. Then, most tragically, another *dzud* hit Mongolia in 2009 and repeatedly in 2010, when again 20% of the total national livestock population was lost. The Western regions were in both cases among the most severely affected areas. Mongolian pastoralists traditionally used to have a very sophisticated knowledge of *dzud* and people are aware that those are part of their natural ecological environment. But the frequency in recent years is perceived as unnatural and assigned to climate change and global warming (Fernández-Gimenez et al. 2012).

A second challenge is related to land allocation rules. During the privatization process in the early 1990s pastureland was explicitly excluded. At the same time,

the Mongolian state steadily withdrew from its involvement in pasture regulations (Mearns 1993; Finke 2004; Upton 2012). This causes ambiguity and confusion among herders. In many places the concentration caused “overstocking, declined seasonal movements and out-of-season grazing” (Himmelsbach 2012: 165). Additionally, growing territorial conflicts prompted “a breakdown of pasture use norms, trust and cooperation amongst herders” (Upton 2012: 229). Trespassing for instance had become a significant problem and source of offence (Finke 2000, 2004). In part, ‘new nomads’ or ‘newcomers’ have contributed to such conflicts due to lacking awareness or acceptance of customary rules (Rossabi 2005; Upton 2012). New national land laws are on their way for some time and are expected to become implemented sooner or later. They consider Western neoliberal economic models that suggest privatization of land increases private responsibility and therefore stimulates economic growth effectively. This would, however, complicate the customary use of pastureland and reduce the herders’ mobility, since – as in other parts of the world – “land tenure changes from communal to private ownership often fragments grassland” (Galvin 2009: 186). Different scholars have argued that mobility in itself plays a key role in sustainable pasture management in Mongolia (e.g. Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Sneath 2003, Stumpp et al. 2005; Sternberg 2012). Still, Mongolian herders lack influence on governmental regulation matters (Sternberg 2012). Bottom-up approaches focus on herder-groups that were implemented through these projects for increasing resilience against natural risks. Advantages of the law would be a reduction of free-riding, decreasing transaction costs through enhanced interpersonal trust, and growing social capital through bottom-up unionism (Himmelsbach 2012). Such expectations are, however, mainly based on theoretical grounds and very little on actual empirical proof. It has been demonstrated that state regulations or privatization of commons from ‘outside’ are often less effective than locally organised cooperation (Ostrom 1990). Furthermore, relevant questions concerning the pastoralists’ membership, the levels of people’s actual participation and in- and exclusion processes prove to be rather ambivalent (Upton 2012). Mongolian, as well as Kazak, pastoralists appear to rather avoid formal associational groups and prefer participating within personal and informal networks (Finke 2004; Byambajav 2012). And, concerns are that enhanced group cohesion among established herder-groups might stimulate an exclusion of the poorest (Upton 2008; Himmelsbach 2012).

Finally, as a third threat, the growing legal and illegal mining sector in Mongolia is another strain on the herders’ customary institutions regulating pasture usage and their relationship with the government, but in fact also with one another. While the mining industry has been most beneficial for the national market value, on its downside it heavily pollutes and destroys pastureland. As a result, many herder households have been displaced without receiving appropriate compensation (Dierkens & Byambajav 2012). Collective resistance lacks sufficient social infrastructures and mainly depends on non-local, national and in-

ternational mediators. Collective action against illegal mining, commonly referred to as *ninja* mining, is even less cohesive due to growing conflicts of interests between herders and its ambivalent implications. It is not used to generate long-term wealth, as an alternative to herding, but is rather an expression of temporary autonomy. Money earned through illegal mining is perceived as ‘polluted’ and often immediately spent, mainly on alcohol, which makes *ninja* mining rather “an auxiliary economy to herding – not its replacement” (High 2008: 210). Herders are said to end up mining in the areas that they initially tried to protect, despite their awareness of the negative long-term effects on pastureland, in other words facing a problem of collective action. This additional pressure on local cooperation could enhance a ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968) by investing in short-term benefits while at the same time destroying the commons the herders depend on.

Prospects of a rural livelihood in Mongolia have thus arguably changed from a situation of calculable risks to menacing uncertainty. Hence it is doubtful whether Mongolian pastoralists’ traditional economic and social strategies are still sufficient. The intention behind this project is to come to understand the consequences and responses among Mongolian pastoralists, their actions and considerations from a micro-level perspective. At the core will be the various strategies, economic, social or cultural, that people employ to deal with a situation full of uncertainties. Also, little is known about people’s perceptions of such changes as well as their effects on formal and informal social institutions. At the same time, the on-going economic and social stratification among pastoralists has not been of help to increase coop-



Photo 4: Kazaks selling potatoes to a trader from Ulaanbaatar

(P. FINKE, 2011)

eration either. They have become a far less homogenous group and vulnerability becomes a more individualised matter. At the same time, obscurity about customary and formal rules that no longer apply trigger conflicts concerning territorial issues among pastoralists. Although by and large peaceful, ethnicity may also start playing a significant role in the way people create social loyalties and boundaries, especially within the context of a dominant ethnic Khalkh nation and state ideology (Bulag 1998).

What the crisis in the pastoral sector has also invoked is a return of the earlier urban-rural migration. Many who have lost their animals in the consecutive *dzud* have decided to move to town, either the regional centre, the city of Khovd, or to the national capital Ulaanbaatar. As livestock losses affected many of the 'new nomads' in particular, these are also prominent among the families seeking refuge in an urban setting. Decisively different is the situation among the local Kazaks. While there has also been a minor migration to Mongolian towns, the vast majority has decided to leave the country altogether and move to neighbouring Kazakhstan (Finke forthcoming). In combination with ongoing stratification, the temptation to move is expected to lower social cohesion and mutual trust making collective action an even more difficult to achieve task.

In theoretical terms, the project looks at issues of risk and uncertainty, property rights and institutional change as well as the decision-making processes related to that. Rapid socio-economic stratification processes and anxiety about the meaning and outcome of ongoing transformations inevitably will change social life. Institutional changes are significant since they are expressed through new formal and informal arrangements (Knight & Ensminger 1998). This applies to post-socialist Mongolia, where the state predominantly withdrew from its former responsibilities, in a very specific way (Finke 2004). Further, the lack of formally implemented regulations and sanctioning as well as ambiguity towards informal norms significantly increases the levels of uncertainty. However, risk can also be approached as a phenomenon that inter-relates "cognitive frameworks people use to interpret misfortune and [...] strategies people adopt to cope with crises" (Bollig 2006: 9).

In an uncertain situation however decision-makers lack such information, which makes calculations even more difficult, especially when social and political institutions malfunction. Crucial in this regard are property rights. The meaning and credibility of land laws in Mongolia, however, are unclear due to the deficiency of the sanctioning of misbehaviour, like in the case of illegal gold miners, and lack of necessary time depth and reliability (Finke 2004). This perspective prevents the simplifying assumptions that firstly, social cohesion and social capital necessarily exists among people from the rural areas and secondly, that people's individual aims match with general pastoral group-interests. Instead, social institutions, actions and perceptions are approached as process-oriented and studied from within at an empirical level of everyday life.

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