

WHEN DOMESTIC ANIMALS LEAVE THE COMMODITY WORLD: VALUE AND INDIVIDUALITY OF ANIMALS IN POSTSOCIALIST MONGOLIA

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We discuss what domestic animals mean for pastoralists in postsocialist Mongolia, by examining how herders evaluate animals and identify them individually. The pastoral regions of Mongolia have been impacted by macro socioeconomic changes, such as the collectivization of animal husbandry, begun in the second half of the 1950s, and privatization, which began in the 1990s. During these periods, animals have been traded, in theory, as commodities. As a food source, a means of exchange, and as production capital under the current market economy, animals have become the most important property of herders, especially since the transformation of economic systems. However, some animals have been recognized not only as commodities, but also as unique individuals. An individual animal may evoke memories of a person or a group of people who have shared common experiences in the past. However, herders tend to claim that they raise animals only for eating, suggesting that they refrain from becoming emotionally attached to any particular animal. Nonetheless, although the economic base may change, animal husbandry is an everyday practice involving direct human–animal interaction. Through such interaction, some animals might be identified individually and no longer considered a commodity. In addition to serving as the basis of subsistence in a market economy, domestic animals may be used as gifts, or kept out of the market due to localized cultural value.

Keywords: commodity, domestic animals, individuality, memory, postsocialist Mongolia

MARKET RELATIONS

Market Location

For the Sihan, hunting-gathering activities remain central for subsistence, food, and cash income. The nearest market was located about 4 km from the village, or 1.5 hours on foot. The Sihan were the only hunter-gatherers among the hill paddy farmers living near the market town.

Cash Income and Expenditure

The Sihan earned 72% of their cash income by hunting and fishing. Staple food purchases were the major expense, comprising 40% of total expenditures. Although the Sihan have been hill paddy farming for 40 years, they still rely on hunting-gathering to provide most staple-food requirements.

Income Stability

The Sihan earned RM706 a month on average, which was more than the RM600 earned by general wage labor locally. These forest products are in demand by neighboring hill cultivators, but the Sihan also have structures to stabilize incomes among themselves. For example, they divide the work of selling game at the market among many villagers. They also divide their incomes with as many people as possible, to ensure cash incomes even for those who cannot hunt game.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Among the Sihan, hunting-gathering is important both for food and cash income. Even after 40 years of farming experience, the main subsistence activities remain hunting and fishing. In all, 70% of their diet was supplied by hunting-gathering and 20% by farming. Wild plants were more widely used than cultivated plants, both in number and in kinds of use. The cash income of the villagers was superior to wage labor, owing to their sales of wild animals and plants at market. In addition, income was stabilized through the division of cash, under a positive principle of equality.

Although the Sihan have settled into village life and are influenced by the market economy, they have adapted their hunting-gathering activities to the market economy. By selling forest products, they achieve a steady income. Thus, hunting-gathering has not declined but is, in fact, more focused. This differs from the usual hypothesis, that hunting-gathering by former nomads has declined in favor of farming.

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Abstract

We discuss what domestic animals mean for pastoralists in postsocialist Mongolia, by examining how herders evaluate animals and identify them individually. The pastoral regions of Mongolia have been impacted by macro socioeconomic changes, such as the collectivization of animal husbandry, begun in the second half of the 1950s, and privatization, which began in the 1990s. During these periods, animals have been traded, in theory, as commodities. As a food source, a means of exchange, and as production capital under the current market economy, animals have become the most important property of herders, especially since the transformation of economic systems. However, some animals have been recognized not only as commodities, but also as unique individuals. An individual animal may evoke memories of a person or a group of people who have shared common experiences in the past. However, herders tend to claim that they raise animals only for eating, suggesting that they refrain from becoming emotionally attached to any particular animal. Nonetheless, although the economic base may change, animal husbandry is an everyday practice involving direct human-animal interaction. Through such interaction, some animals might be identified individually and no longer considered a commodity. In addition to serving as the basis of subsistence in a market economy, domestic animals may be used as gifts, or kept out of the market due to localized cultural value.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Mongolia has experienced a transition from socialism to a market economy and democracy. In the pastoral regions, people rely on animal husbandry for their subsistence, raising cattle, horses, sheep, goats, and camels. Domestic animals are used for production, consumption, and as a means of exchange; that is, they are commodities in the contemporary economic system in Mongolia. However, there are exceptions. For example, there was a sheep that was loved and given a personal name, and died after many years without being slaughtered. This shows that domestic animals might have special meaning as well as economic

value.

Concerning the cultural value of domestic animals, anthropological studies of pastoral societies have shown a unique cultural system in which animals play important roles in religion, economy, and politics for sacrifice, bridewealth, and compensation [Fukui 1987]. A typical example is the East African Cattle Complex [Herskovits 1926]. In such pastoral societies, each animal is individually identified [Ohta 1987a, 1987b; Fukui 1991].

The individuality of animals has been discussed from the perspectives of classification and individual recognition. Classification is a form of recognition that categorizes animal, be it by species, sex, age, or coat color, for example. Individual recognition is a technique that distinguishes a certain individual from all others. In fact, pastoralists identify each animal individually, just as people are distinguished from one another [Ohta 2002: 26]. In other words, domestic animals are often thought of collectively and classified into categories, in some contexts, they are distinguished from others and given an absolute singularity.

In his work on changing value of things, Igor Kopytoff proposed two ideal types of transactions based on the concept of value equivalence. At one extreme, "everything (is) so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange" and at the other, "everything (is) a commodity and exchangeable for everything else within a unitary sphere of exchange" [Kopytoff 1986: 70]. He defined a commodity as, "a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value" [Kopytoff 1986: 68]. He argues that anything can be included or excluded as a commodity over time. Like people, everything has its own biography, which can be discriminated against, classified, compared, and sacralized [Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986: 13].

This paper assumes the biographical point of view of Kopytoff. Although animals are commodities, they are living things that change physically in time, and interact with people. I explore the economic and cultural value of domestic animals and their individuality under the macro socioeconomic changes in Mongolia, by examining the animal-human relationships.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Mongolia has a semiarid climate with four seasons. Rainfall occurs primarily in the summer, and it snows and is extremely cold in the winter. Temperature fluctuations throughout the year are substantial. In fact, every 12 years, many livestock die in the springtime due to extreme weather conditions, a phenomenon called *zud*. It often results from an overlapping of rough conditions, such as a summer drought followed by a colder and snowier winter than normal. Livestock are vulnerable to natural threats, and the success of animal husbandry relies on such vulnerability.

The History of State Policy on Animal Husbandry in Mongolia

Animal husbandry was collectivized under the socialist regime from the second half of the 1950s to the end of the 1980s. Animal husbandry cooperatives (*kho'doo aj akhuin negdel*), called *negdel*, were established in each District (*sum*). Herders were organized as members of cooperatives, and most of their livestock were "socialized" as common property of the cooperatives, but a small portion remained as the private property of herders. In 1991, however, most cooperatives were dismantled, along with an increased demand for democratization that began at the end of the 1980s. In early 1990, almost all of the animals were privatized. Each pastoral household began to engage in animal husbandry independently based on its private livestock.

This paper is based on research performed June–September 2001 in Deren District, Dundgov' Prefecture. The district encompasses 390,000 hectares 200 km south of the capital city, Ulanbator, and is part of the Gobi desert steppe. According to unpublished official statistics of the Deren District, as of December 2000, there were 2,600 Mongols living in 612 households whose subsistence was based largely on animal husbandry.

My research is based on the ethnographical data of one family and the animals they've herded over the past 60 years. The head of the family is DD¹ (a 76-year-old male), and the family is referred to herein as the DD-family. DD and his wife, Bz (63 years old), have five children. The eldest three are married and live in settlements such as the District or Prefecture Centers. A son (age 31) and the youngest daughter, Ot (age 22), her husband (age 24), and their son (age 3), live together with DD and Bz in one yurt called *ger*. They raise cattle, horses, sheep, goats, and camels, and move their campsites seasonally. The DD-family owns a total of 215 animals, and look after 259 animals, including those of three children who live in the settlements.

THE VALUE OF DOMESTIC ANIMALS UNDER A MARKET ECONOMY

Living on Domestic Animals

In the Deren District, each herding household has several species of animals. During the transition to a market economy, herders experienced an increase in consumption. During the socialist period, the cooperative had provided veterinary services, fodder for winter, and machinery, but after privatization, herders had to prepare everything necessary for managing animal husbandry by themselves, as well as to market animals and dairy products. Furthermore, educational services and medical treatment that were free during the socialist period became partial benefits under the new market economy. In addition, private traders brought radios, cassette recorders, televisions, generators, and other goods that have sparked an appetite for consumption in herders.

Over time, non-commodity items have become commodities, and many new commodities have

¹People's names are fictitious, using two capital letters for men, and a capital letter and a small letter for women. Their ages in 2001 are shown in parentheses.

flowed into the countryside. Herders rely on domestic animals as commodities in a variety of ways: for food, capital to produce dairy products, and as a means of exchange for cash, goods, and services, to name a few.

Animals as Assets

How are livestock evaluated in a market economy? The research was carried out in 2001, following two consecutive years of serious *zud*, and many livestock died in Deren District. The DD-family lost many of their animals. At the end of 1999, the family looked after 513 animals, and at the end of 2000, only 258. With low birth rates and the theft of some animals, the number remained as 259 in 2001.

In the summer of 2001, herders in Deren often referred to the animals that were lost in *zud*. DD would say, "Livestock is bad *o'moch* (1. ownership, property, 2. private property [Ozawa 1983])," whenever he referred to *zud*. He explained, "Although how much livestock you have, nothing is left after only a winter if *zud* strike down." Then, I asked, "What is *o'moch* except for livestock?" Bz explained that it included rings, earrings, and bracelets of precious metals, saddles with silver ornaments, and carpets, which were goods that DD and Bz had actually given to their children as inheritance property.

In other words, DD emphasized that livestock were the most vulnerable of assets amongst all the *o'moch*. Domestic animals were living things that die, while other *o'moch* were permanent property. Because Mongolians prefer not to eat the meat of dead animals, if an animal dies, the value diminishes. This perspective might, however, be the result of extreme disappointment after losing most of their property to *zud*.

How Herders View the Reproduction of Livestock

Case 1

DD says his family's current herd of horses comes from a mare he bought for 50 to'g. (=to'grog Mongolian currency) in the 1940s. The price of this mare's *udam* (1. bloodline, descendant, 2. heredity [Ozawa 1983]) rose to a million to'g. However, most of the DD-family's horses were lost in the *zud* from 1999 to 2000. Nonetheless, a few horses survived, including a gray mare, a brown mare, and white castrated horses, all of which belonged to the first mare's *udam*. Later, DD added that, through an exchange with a descendant of the first mare, one of them is a descendant of another mare.

In this case, the relationship between extant horses and a special mare that existed in the past is represented as bloodline continuity by using the concept of *udam*. Furthermore, an individual horse that actually had no kinship relation to the mare was also connected to it by the blood idiom. What DD did by forging pseudo-kinships was to emphasize the fertility of the first mare and the ability of domestic animals to reproduce. DD, one of the oldest residents in Deren District, experienced many

zud in his life and also witnessed the process of regeneration among herds of domestic animals again and again. DD argued that, based on his own experience, herds had the ability to recover from a natural disaster.

INDIVIDUALITY OF ANIMALS

Individual Identification of Animals

In everyday husbandry, herders do not recognize their animals by number, but rather, they identify each individual animal. Individual identification is a technique applied to day-trip herding. When two herds come close together and mingle with each other, herders can distinguish those belonging to his or her own herd. They are able to recognize animals by face.

Ohta reports, "When animals are recognized individually, then it becomes possible to recognize mother-child relationships at the same time" [Ohta 1987b: 818]. However, the DD-family members did not necessarily recognize the mother-child relationships of their sheep. Individual recognition is a necessary condition of mother-child recognition, but not a sufficient condition.

The knowledge of mother-child relationships was not distributed evenly amongst the DD-family members. DD and Bz, who had taken care of their herds for a long time, had vast knowledge regarding kinship ties among their sheep. They not only knew mother-child relationships but also such indirect relationships as those of siblings, aunt-nephew/niece, cousins, and second cousins. On the other hand, young Ot knew only the relationships amongst extant individuals, not previous generations. Moreover, Ot's husband, who joined the DD-family in 1998, did not even know the relationships among extant individuals. One comes to recognize mother-child relationships through the process of delivering and caring for them. That is to say, the knowledge of an animal's individual biography is each herder's personal knowledge gained through his or her personal experiences of interacting with each individual animal.

Animals as Triggers of Past Memories

Features of an animal's body may provoke memories in herders.

Case 2

In the DD-family's herd of goats, some individuals had black fur and very small ears, one inch in length. The stunted ears is a rare inherited characteristic in goats, called *khuv*.

DD said the *khuv* goats of his herd originated from a stud goat that had been distributed from the cooperative during the socialist period. When the DD-family looked after the cooperative's sheep and goats about 10 years ago, they formed a *suur'* (residential group and unit of production under socialism) with a woman head-of-household, whose daughter would later marry DD's first son. In the autumn, "Don breed" stud goats were distributed to each *suur'*

for breeding. DD's *suur*' was given one with long black hair and *khuv* ears. As it was released into the sheep and goats herd of DD's *suur*', a part of the matured female goats of both the cooperative's and private became pregnant. Since that time, the bloodline of the black *khuv* goats continued in the DD-family's private herd.

The Don breed stud was brought to Mongolia from the Don River area in Russia to increase cashmere production as a state project of breed improvement in 1958 [Sundui 1976]. Several studs were distributed to the DD-family's herd, accidentally including one with *khuv* ears. Accordingly, many black *khuv* baby goats were born the next spring. Although the state project did not intend to breed *khuv* goats, the *khuv* ears were inherited and passed down from generation to generation until today.

Throughout the individual animal's life, herders observe such features of the animal body as coat color and ear shape, and congenital characteristics that appear through generations. These features continue to remind people of past individual animals. In fact, when DD referred to black *khuv* goats, it prompted him to remember the time when the first black *khuv* goats came to him: (i.e., when they looked after the cooperative's sheep and goat herds, and they formed *suur*' with their first son's future mother-in-law). The bodies of black *khuv* goats have the potential to evoke memories of the cooperative period for the DD-family.

Names of Domestic Animals

Generally speaking when investigating individuality, it is important to consider the names given to things [Deguchi 1995].

Case 3

In spring 1998, one of the DD-family's private sheep bore a female lamb. The mother died soon thereafter, and thus the lamb was raised through artificial suckling. It became attached to people. In fact, it followed people, as they gave it fried dumplings and candy. All the members of the DD-family loved (*khairlakh*) it. In time, they named it "Delbee" (Delbee>*delbe*; penal, ear lobe [Ozawa 1983]), because it had big ear lobes that expanded (*delbagnekh*) when it ran.

When Delbee was a year old, DD and Bz gave it to their youngest daughter, Ot, who was three years old at the time. Ot was nine years younger than DJ, her closest brother, and all the members of the DD-family loved (*khairlakh*) and spoiled (*erkhlekh*) her. Consequently, no one could kill Delbee, Ot's sheep, and so Delbee lived its natural lifespan.

I asked the DD-family whether they had animals besides Delbee with names (*ner*). They said, "We raise domestic animals for eating. If we give a name to an animal, we come to love it and then cannot kill it. So, we don't give them names."

They recognize that to give names is to make a personal relationship with the animals, and furthermore, it conflicts with slaughtering and eating. In the contemporary Mongolian diet, meat is

much more important than milk, though you can take milk from live animals. Basically, they intend to maintain animals as commodities to be consumed, and avoid giving them names, because they see that such action strengthens the individuality of the animals.

WHAT DOMESTIC ANIMALS MEAN TO HERDERS

How the Individuality of Animals Is Embodied

In Mongolia, domestic animals have been treated as commodities under both a socialist regime and a market economy. Nonetheless, throughout time, some animals have demonstrated individuality so strong that herders have considered them something other than a commodity. This is due to several factors. For example, animals are living things whose interactions with humans change over time. For instance, animals that have survived an intense *zud*, along with their descendants, are seen as having strong bloodlines. These individuals and their descendants might be given special significance, because they provoke memories of the *zud*. In addition, each animal has a unique body, and those with particular characteristics might become more appealing to people than others. Finally, animals interact with herders, making the relationship between people and animals personal.

Based on their habits, lineage, and interactions with people, the meaning, significance, and value of animals shifts and changes in time. If each animal is identified individually, such changes are integrated into the individual. It is only when herders identify animals individually that fragmented information and independent events that happened over time are integrated into the individuality of an animal.

On the other hand, herders practice restraint in ascribing individuality to their animals. For example, they give names to a limited few and avoid giving them to others. Once an animal has acquired special significance, herders comprehensively distinguish it from others, as DD gave Delbee to his much-loved daughter. In other words, because they are raising animals to be consumed, the herders must restrain themselves from having a personal relationship with every animal.

Why Herders Recognize the Individuality of Animals

The significance of individually identifying animals is two-fold: it is an important technique in maintaining subsistence, and, by representing past memories, such animals become symbolically meaningful.

Individually recognizing animals helps herders maintain their herd, allowing them to ensure no one animal is lost. Individual identification also provides a basis for knowing mother-child relationships, which is necessary for managing suckling. Moreover, it is important to select and multiply individuals of strong bloodlines that survived *zud*. Individual identification makes possible the equally important task of recognizing weak animals. Herders also have to pay attention to the behavior of individuals who tend to leave the herd during day-trips.

However, knowledge of their individuality can extend beyond the technical necessity to maintain subsistence. This is particularly true when an animal assumes a symbolic significance related to past memories. DD was proud of his horse herd. When he emphasized its prosperity, he thoughtfully expounded on its bloodline. It was beyond the pragmatism of selecting and breeding a good pedigree line. Furthermore, when DD spoke of past animals, he included his own and his family's history as it related to the animals. In fact, for Mongolian herders, domestic animals are not only commodities but living things with multiple significance, and which provoke memories.

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FISHING GROUNDS IN THE LOWER MUN RIVER REGION OF NORTHEAST THAILAND: A STUDY OF "LUANG"

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Abstract

Along the downstream region of the Mun River basin¹ in Northeast Thailand, the inland fisheries are prosperous and are the main economic base for villagers settled along the river. The villagers operate the fisheries using different types of fishing gear specific to the topographical features of the riverbed. More importantly, the villagers observe certain regulations in determining the fishing grounds, a widely defined concept known as *Luang*². *Luang* is an indispensable part of the local fishery, as it also denotes a specific area established for installing fishing gear. This survey demonstrates the many ways in which *Luang* is defined and also explores customary fishery rights, cooperative fishing management, and the area of fishing gear installation. In addition, I discuss the impact of *Luang* after the 1994 construction of the Pak Mun Dam at the mouth of the Mun River.

Keywords: Fishing gear, Fishing ground, *Luang*, Mun River, Pak Mun Dam

INTRODUCTION

The survey area is the Mun River, which flows through Northeast Thailand for 750 km. The river basin area is the largest of all the Mekong tributaries in Thailand, and the river catchment area is 117,000 m² [TEAM Consulting Engineers Co., Ltd. 1982]. The Mun River begins in the Nakhon Ratchasima Province and flows into the Mekong River at the Thai border with Laos in the Ubon Ratchatani Province. The Mun River basin is in a tropical monsoon climate zone, where the rainy season lasts from mid-May to the end of September and is regulated by the Southwestern Monsoon. The dry season (October–May) is influenced by the Northeastern Monsoon. In a tropical monsoon climate zone, the dry and rainy seasons differ drastically in amounts of rainfall, and thus river water levels also vary greatly with season. Although the Mun River area fishery is economically important, it has not received intensive study [cf., WCD 2000; Ubon Ratchatani University 2002; Mekong Watch 2004].

¹ This report concerns three districts of the Ubon Ratchatani Province, in the downstream areas of the Mun River: the Phibunmansaharn, Sirintorn, and Khongjiem districts.

² Romanization of Thai first appearing in *Ratchabandit Sathan* 1999.