

WOMEN’S PROPERTY IN MONGOLIAN PASTORAL SOCIETY: VALUE OF SILVER GOODS IN RURAL MONGOLIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows the voices of both women and men in Mongolian pastoral society. For this purpose, I focus on the economic sphere of their life, especially, the use practice of silver goods. Silver and silver goods have been highly evaluated as well as livestock in Mongolia. Livestock is usually managed by men in Mongolia [Kazato1999], though women bring animals when she gets married. On the other hand, each women and men owns and uses her/his own silver goods individually.

This paper is based on data collected by the method of anthropological participant-observation for 173 days between 1998 and 2004 in the Dundgov’ and Zavkhan Prefectures.

Mongolia has been in transition from a socialist to a market economy since 1991. Since then, herders have relied on livestock and enjoyed the animal wealth, as animals have provided for their needs, including food, clothing, and shelter, as well as to purchase other items in exchange for dairy products. However, harsh snowstorms assailed the region for two consecutive winters between 1999 and 2001, and as a result, 23% of all animals died. Having lost so many of their animals, herders started to compare animal wealth with other property such as silver goods, and called the latter “immortal property” .

Herders who had attempted but failed to maintain all of their animals became impoverished, whereas those who had exchanged some animals for silver-ornamented

saddles lost most of their remaining animals but still had the saddles. In Mongolia, silver is made into items such as accessories, bowls, and ornaments for horse gear, saddles, and smoking instruments. Such items are ancestral heirlooms inherited from bilateral ancestors. Small accessories are often melted down and either divided or amalgamated for distribution among the children.

Mongols consider silver goods significant because of their historical value. Furthermore, they believe that wearing silver and other metal goods on the body affects one's health and fortune. Thus, the use of silver goods is embedded in Mongolian culture and has multiple meanings. Silver goods are indispensable to the herders' lives. Herders are given silver goods at certain times of their lives such as coming-of-age and marriage; those goods are then later passed on to their own children. On such occasions, it is necessary for the herders to melt and then reform silver goods for division or amalgamation. Artisans who engage in smithery and casting are responsible for this role.

Finally, I discuss the significance of silver and silver goods to Mongolian herders, especially women. First, silver accessories or ornaments worn on the body display one's social and economic position and play a role as mementoes of family history. Second, every woman owns some silver goods. She inherited silver accessories from her maternal ancestors, and is given saddle with silver ornament by their parents. Silver goods "immortal property", though livestock under men's control are suddenly lost all at once by natural disasters. Women might sell their own silver goods at the difficulty of livelihood.