

Versatile Living under Socio-natural Fluctuations in Mongolia: Movement between Urban and Pastoral Areas

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Abstract: Increasing population growth and urbanization have taken place in Mongolia since the beginning of the 20th century. Using micro- and long-term analyses, this study examined how Mongols divide their time between living in urban and pastoral areas. Urban areas were chosen when children were of school age, jobs with high wages were available in urban areas, and livestock was lost due to natural disasters. Pastoral areas were chosen for summer vacation or childcare leave and in times of job shortages due to recession. Both occupational skills and social relationships are indispensable for adapting to unpredictable socio-natural fluctuations, which are developed from the experiences of moving between urban and pastoral areas starting in childhood.

Key Words: Mongolia, rural area, socio-natural fluctuations, urbanization, urban area.

1. Introduction

In Mongolia, with a population of 3.1 million (in 2016, National Statistical Office of Mongolia (NSO) website) and a surface area of 1.56 million square kilometers, in 2012, 65.9% of the population was concentrated in urban areas, including the capital city, Ulaanbaatar (NSO, 2013a: 82-83). Mining and quarrying (18.6%) contributed most to the country's GDP, followed by agriculture, forestry, and fishing (14.8%) (ibid.: 127), with livestock herding employing only 10% of the population (ibid.: 80, 222). It is under these circumstances that Mongolian herders increasingly express the desire for their children to be well educated and gain employment in urban areas. This brings into question whether nomadic pastoralism will soon die out in Mongolia.

Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization have advanced relentlessly over the past 100 years in Mongolia, following the People's Revolution of 1921. The politico-economic changes of this period can be divided into three stages: socialist modernization after the 1920s; the transition to democratization and marketization from the 1990s; and the remarkable economic development since the start of the 21st century. Considering the livelihood of animal husbandry, while nomadic pastoralism has continued, the organization of herders and livestock ownership have changed twice; from the 1950s, herders and livestock were organized into socialistic cooperatives (Kazato, 2009: 201-218), but in the 1990s the cooperatives were dismantled, and herders were forced to start raising their own livestock under individual management (ibid.: 134-155).

With these changes, the population of Mongolia has grown rapidly, increasing about fivefold from 648,000 in 1918 (NSO 1981: 75), to 3.1 million in 2016 (NSO). The larger

population has been absorbed as the workforce in urban areas, and urbanization has increased (Konagaya, 2003: 3-6). The level of urbanization in Mongolia increased to 65.9% in 2012 from 44% in 1969 (Niisleliin zasag dargyn dergedeh statistikiin gazar 2012).

Mongolia has three major cities: the capital and largest city, Ulaanbaatar (with a population of 1.27 million people in 2012, according to the NSO); the manufacturing city of Darkhan [population: 180,000 in 2010 (Wikipedia: Darkhan City)], and the mining city of Erdenet [population: 96,000 people in 2013 (Wikipedia: Erdenet City)]. In addition, there are various other settlements, including the administrative centers of 23 prefectures (*aimags*) and districts (*soums*).

In the cities, since the start of the socialist era, the Mongolian people have adapted to a collective and sedentary life with formal school education (Mongolian Scientific Academy History Research Institute 1969(1988-1): 421-425) and military service (Narangerel, 2010: 148). There has been compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6 and 18 years, and in 2012 the elementary school attendance rate was 97.9% (NSO, 2013a: 332), which indicates that almost all herder children attend schools located in cities and settlements.

Although the text above focuses on distinguishing between urban and pastoral areas, ethnicity indicated by language group can also be used to explain the continuity between these two areas. In Mongolia, where around 95% of the population speaks Mongolic languages (data from 2010; NSO, 2013b: 1), both urbanites and herders speak Mongolian. In other words, urbanites and herders can be differentiated by their livelihoods and lifestyles, but not their ethnicities or languages. Furthermore, almost all Mongolian urbanites at some point moved to urban areas from pastoral areas.

As mentioned above, Mongolia has experienced significant social upheaval in the 20th and 21st centuries, but nomadic

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Fig. 1. Map of research area.

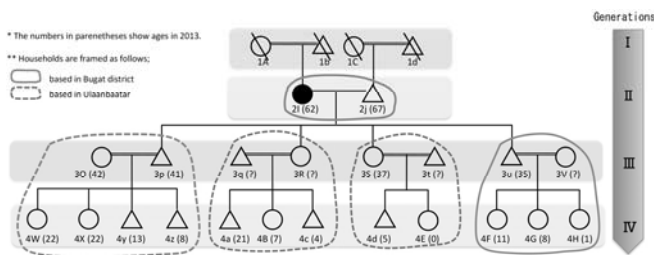


Fig. 2. The extended family of 2I and their home bases in August 2013.

pastoralism has continued while also undergoing some changes. This paper examines how Mongols choose where to live and their livelihoods under increasing urbanization based on anthropological micro-observations. Specifically, we investigated 26 persons from one extended family, living between the 1910s and 2016, and examined how these people moved around over a large area, including urban and pastoral areas, and the activities they engaged in at each place.

2. Materials and Methods

Our study was carried out in three locations: B District in Bulgan Prefecture, Erdenet City, and Ulaanbaatar (Fig. 1) in August-September 2013, May 2015, and September 2016. B District is a typical peri-urban area with easy access from large cities such as Erdenet 32 km away, the administrative center of Bulgan Prefecture 52 km away, and Ulaanbaatar 370 km away.

Twenty-six subjects were included in this study: 2I (a 62-year-old female) from B District and her extended family, including deceased family members (Fig. 2). We collected information on where the subjects lived and what activities they engaged in, and analyzed the data based on three characteristics: generation, life-stage, and season. In 2013, 22 individuals excluding the deceased were divided into five households, two in Ulaanbaatar and three in B District.

We divided the locations of the household members into two areas: urban areas including cities such as Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet, and Darkhan, and prefectural capitals; and pastoral areas including B district. We divided the generations into four categories by kinship order. There were four people in

Generation I (the deceased, born in the 1910s), two people in Generation II (60-70 years old), eight people in Generation III (30-40 years old), and 12 people in Generation IV (0-20 years old).

We divided each individual’s life into five stages: childhood, school period, college period, middle age, and retirement. In addition, a year was divided into four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter (Kazato, 2009: 17-20). The study subjects lived in one location from September to May (the late fall to the beginning of summer), and in a different one in June to August (summer to the first half of fall); hence, we defined the “analytical seasons” as “fall, winter and spring” (Sep to May) and “summer” (June to August).

For location, we used the location where the person stayed for more than 1.5 months with or without resident registration. We defined occupation as that which the person had primarily engaged in for several years, although people often changed jobs or engaged in side businesses.

3. Results

Table 1 shows 2I family’s life-stages and locations since the 1910s. Family members are listed in ascending order of generation, and each individual is denoted by their generation number and a letter, with females denoted by capitals and males by lower-case letters.

3.1. Living in Both Urban and Pastoral Areas

In general, all of the family members in Table 1 have lived in both urban and pastoral areas during their lives. We examined the details of their movements, focusing on generation, life-stage, and season. Comparing generations, subjects from Generations I and II spent most of their lives in pastoral areas, whereas those from Generations III and IV stayed mainly in urban areas.

Considering life-stage, subjects born in pastoral areas moved to urban areas to enter school (2I, 2j, 4F, 4G), for employment (2I, 2j), and to retire (1A, 1b, 2C, 2d), whereas some urban students and workers moved into pastoral areas when they started working (3u, 3V) or retired (2I, 2j). In addition, 3p, a university teacher, expressed the wish to leave his job in Ulaanbaatar and move to B District, but his wife, 3O, disagreed with this move. Regarding season, all subjects stayed in pastoral areas in summer.

3.2. Residential Locations

We converted the choice of residential location into point scores. Table 2 shows the tendency to choose pastoral areas to live in. We allocated counting units to seasons as follows: “+1” denotes a season when the person stayed in a pastoral

Table 1. The life-stages and locations of 2I's family.

No.	Individuals	Age	Whereabouts									
			(1) Childhood		(2) School period		(3) College period		(4) Middle age		(5) After retirement	
			Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer
1	1 A	Deceased	○	○	○	○	n.d.	n.d.	○	○	■DH	○
2	1 b	Deceased	○	○	○	○	n.d.	n.d.	○	○	■DH	○
3	1 C	Deceased	○	○	○	○	n.d.	n.d.	○	○	■DH	○
4	1 d	Deceased	○	○	○	○	n.d.	n.d.	○	○	■DH	○
5	2 I	62	○	○	○	○	■BL	○	■DH/ER	○	○	○
6	2 j	67	○	○	○	○	■UB	○	■DH/ER	○	○	○
7	3 O	42	■DH	n.d.	■DH	■DH	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-
8	3 p	41	■DH	○	■DH	○	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-
9	3 q	n.d.	■UB	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	■UB	○	-	-
10	3 R	n.d.	■DH	○	■DH	○	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-
11	3 S	37	■DH	○	■DH	○	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-
12	3 t	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	■UB	n.d.	■UB	○	-	-
13	3 u	35	■DH	○	■DH	○	■UB	○	○	○	-	-
14	3 V	n.d.	■BL	■BL	■BL	■BL	■UB	○	○	○	-	-
15	4 W	22	■DH	○	■UB	○	■abroad	○	-	-	-	-
16	4 X	22	■DH	○	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-
17	4 y	13	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
18	4 z	8	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
19	4 a	21	■UB	○	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-
20	4 B	7	■UB	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
21	4 c	4	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
22	4 d	5	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
23	4 E	0	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
24	4 F	11	○	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
25	4 G	8	○	○	■UB	○	-	-	-	-	-	-
26	4 H	1	○	○	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

○ Pastoral areas, ■ Urban areas including abroad

BL: Center of Bulgan prefecture, DR: Darkhan, ER: Erdenet, UB: Ulaanbaatar

n.d.: no data, -: unreached life-stage

Table 2. Tendency to choose pastoral areas.

Generation	(1) Childhood		(2) School period		(3) College period		(4) Middle age		(5) After retirement		Total (points)	Persons (person)	Average (points)
	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer	Fall, winter and spring	Summer			
I	12	4	12	4	0	0	12	4	-12	4	40	4	10
III	6	2	6	2	-6	2	-6	2	6	2	16	2	8
III	-21	4	-6	2	-21	6	-12	8	0	0	-40	8	-5
IV	-18	12	-24	8	-9	3	0	0	0	0	-28	12	-2.3
Total point score of life-stage	1		4		-25		8		0		9	26	0.3
Average point score	0.0		0.2		-1.5		0.6		0.0				

area, and “-1” denotes a season when one stayed in an urban area, including those outside the country. If no data were available, this was denoted by “0”. The average scores of generations I and II were “+8~+10”. These high numbers indicate that the elders strongly preferred pastoral areas. The point scores decreased through the generations, and generations III and IV preferred urban areas, as shown by the scores of “-5~-2.3”, although there were differences in the

length of the life-stage.

Comparing life-stages and generations, urban and pastoral areas were given equal preference in childhood (0.0) and after retirement (0.0), although urban areas were preferred more during the college period (-1.5), and pastoral areas were preferred more during the school period (+0.2) and middle age (+0.6).

Comparing seasons, the average score for summer

(+1.0=69/71) was double that of “fall, winter and spring” (-1.1=-81/77) (not shown in Table 2), indicating that pastoral areas were preferred by twice the number of people in summer than in the other seasons. During summer school vacation in 2013, 86% of the 22 living family members stayed in B District, although most of them moved to Ulaanbaatar on September 1, one day before the start of the new school term, and only 36% (8 people) were left in B District thereafter (Fig. 2). Those individuals remaining in B District were the 2j couple (herders), the 3u couple (herders) with their children under school age, and 3S, who was on childcare leave from an IT company in Ulaanbaatar, with her children under school age.

Thus, the 100-year history of 2I's family revealed the follow four features: all of the family members had experienced both urban and pastoral lives; members from the younger generations tended to stay longer in urban areas; considering life-stages, family members stayed more in pastoral areas during younger and older life stages, which was a common tendency among all generations; and significantly more family members stayed in pastoral areas in summer.

4. Pastoral Experience and Education

In this section, we describe the experience of pastoral life in summer, the season during which most Mongols stay in pastoral areas, focusing on children, on whom Mongolia's future depends. Because childhood is the time during which people regularly receive education, we explain the educational environment of Mongolian children from two perspectives: cultural socialization and formal education.

Considering cultural socialization, Mongolians like to visit relatives and children start to visit and stay at their grandparents' or relatives' houses at the age of about three. Adults from the house invite a favorite child and take him/her home, if the child agrees. At the beginning, the children stay only 1-2 days in the relatives' house, and then their stay is extended to several weeks or months once they have become accustomed to the environment. In this way, the individual moves around and creates new social networks from infancy. We might call this early nomad education.

In fact, 2I's grandchildren visited their grandparents in B District from Ulaanbaatar every summer. Talking about the charm of pastoral areas, 2I said, “We can drink kumis here”. This comment reflects the enjoyment of Mongols in consuming fermented horse milk, the ethnic beverage from summer pastoral areas. 4X (a 22-year-old female) explained why parents send their children to pastoral areas as follows: “Because there are domestic animals in the pastoral areas, and the children learn to work with them. The air is clean. And

they can eat fresh dairy products.” Thus, it is perceived by Mongols that, in urban areas, children spend much of their time staring at computers, televisions, and smartphones, but that the work of animal care is both physically and mentally beneficial, and that fresh air and organic fresh dairy food are good for the children. 4X, the daughter of the 3p couple working in Ulaanbaatar, was raised with the 2I couple in Erdenet and often visited 2I's sister, who engaged in animal husbandry.

In the formal education system, the rate of elementary school attendance is almost 100%, as mentioned in Section 1 (NSO 2013a: 332), and children aged 6–8 years move to urban areas to attend school. The children of herder families stay in school dormitories and relatives' houses during the years of schooling.

Herders with children cope with their children's move by managing families and animals within and between households. Within the household, the family is often divided as follows: the father keeps domestic animals in pastoral areas and the mother and children stay in urban areas so that the children can attend school; or the parents keep animals in the pastoral area, while children attend school, caring for themselves in urban areas. Herders generally have an extra ger or a house in the settlements. Between households, parents leave their children or animals with other families. For example, Kazato (2009: 92-94) described a family that took care of the children from two families to enable them to attend school in the urban area, while another family looked after the animals of both families in the pastoral area. All of these measures represent ways of managing the family's needs to both care for their animals and educate their child.

In Mongolia, the school summer vacation is long, lasting three months from June through August. Thus, the children of both herder and urban families can spend three months in pastoral areas each year. If this pattern is followed for 20 years, it represents a total of five years in pastoral areas. However, there are also urbanites who have no connection to pastoral areas because their ancestral homeland is located in a remote area or their ancestors moved to the city longer ago.

Nevertheless, the study of 2I's family indicated that children gathered in pastoral areas to spend time with people whom they liked being with, and to enjoy being surrounded by nature when they did not need to be attending formal school. During their stay in pastoral areas, children were trained in life skills by their elders, including their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, who usually lived separately, but engaged in communal life by eating and sleeping together in a ger. Thus, remote relatives introduced life skills to the younger generations and social relationships were constructed and maintained among them. 2I's summer camp in 2013 acted as a “summer school” including children of a distant relative and

a friend (not shown in Fig. 2).

In addition to children, adults often take a month-long vacation in summer and they commonly go out to pastoral areas (hodoo garah). This seasonal move has been supported by Mongolian labor laws and technological development. In recent years, antennas for mobile phones have been installed in pastoral areas, and the use of smartphones and the Internet has become widespread. These systems and solar power allow adults who have taken time off from their jobs to continue their business in pastoral areas. In general, technology has made staying in pastoral areas easier for Mongols. In addition, 2I commented that when living in gers (mobile dwellings) they did not have to pay for public utilities such as lighting and fuel, and that food expenses were also lower due to self-sufficiency in the production of meat and dairy products.

5. Living under Socio-natural Fluctuations

Modernization in Mongolia has been characterized by urbanization. In addition to the trends shown by national statistics from the 20th century, the almost 100-year history of 2I's family demonstrates the process by which Mongols have moved from pastoral to urban areas. In general, the young live more in urban areas than the elderly, and herders have moved to urban areas for the opportunities offered for school enrollment, employment, and retirement.

However, focusing on personal practices revealed that most members of 2I's family stayed in pastoral areas in summer, and that they moved to and fro between urban and pastoral areas. As a background to this, Mongols generally valued the nature of their motherland, fresh air, and fresh dairy products. On this basis, it was widely perceived that it was beneficial for adults and children to engage in pastoral labor and eat fresh local dairy food, staying in pastoral areas during their holidays. By focusing on one extended family over the past century, this study revealed two important features in modern Mongolia that are not apparent from national statistics. First, Mongols create opportunities to gather with their elders in pastoral areas and engage in pastoral labor with others connected by blood or regional ties. Second, we found that many urbanites, if not the majority, tended to move into pastoral areas to find jobs or support their livelihoods after retirement.

In Mongolia's recent history, people have wandered between urban and pastoral labor. When politico-economic systems changed in the early 1990s, many urban workers lost their jobs and moved to pastoral areas to become herders. In the 20 years since, repeated dzuds (severe winters with heavy snow and extremely low temperatures), especially in 2000–2001, have threatened the livelihoods of herders. If the herd collapsed, herders moved to urban areas to seek employment.

Since 2015, a serious recession has affected the urban job market, and some urbanites have moved back to the pastoral sector.

Illustrating this trend, the Nb couple (a 43-year-old male and his wife), who were distant relatives of 2I, carried out animal husbandry in the 1990s, but moved to Erdenet to look for work after the collapse of their herd in a dzud. Nevertheless, as life in Erdenet became increasingly difficult for them, in 2016, the Nb couple moved to B District and started to work as 3u's helpers for wages.

Although animal husbandry is an important sector of production, supplying the meat that forms the basis of the Mongol diet, it does not provide a stable means of livelihood under the influence of the changes taking place in the national economy and the natural environment. Urban production sectors are also subject to unstable conditions. To adapt to such unpredictable socio-natural fluctuations, not only occupational skills but also extensive social relationships to facilitate the exchange of information, opportunities, labor, and pastureland, among others, are crucial. Such social resources are derived from the very experience of moving to and fro between urban and pastoral areas since childhood, and participating in communal life with kin and neighbors who are from both urban and pastoral areas.

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