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978-1-107-00090-2 - Living with Herds: Human-Animal Coexistence in Mongolia

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Excerpt

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PART ONE

CROSSING BOUNDARIES



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Map P.1. Mongolia, including the location of Arkhangai (west) and Bulgan (north-west) field sites in relation to the capital of Ulaanbaatar. (Source: Created by Dr. Shawn Laffan, University of New South Wales, 2010.)

PROLOGUE

LIFE IN THE KHANGAI MOUNTAINS

Farming and city-building peoples have always looked down on nomads as “primitive” ...but this does not mean that nomads have reciprocated by looking up to the city and farm. Far from it. There is a strong tradition among nomads that they are people who have made themselves free from the drudgery of the peasant and the shut-in life of the city dweller. (Lattimore 1962: 34)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF MONGOLIA

I could see the Soviet influence on the buildings in Mongolia, as a former satellite state of the Soviet Union. The Mongolian capital's expansive main square was flanked by parliament on one side and a drama theatre with an imposing façade and huge concrete columns on another. Every drab apartment block had the same basic design with thick double doors and double-glazed windows. This environment was very different from my expectations of a Mongolia with no locks on brightly painted *ger* doors and sparse, expansive grasslands.

My first few weeks in Mongolia in November 2004 were isolating and claustrophobic. The contrast between the below-freezing temperatures outside and the intense central heating inside gave me a feeling of suffocation. I suffered through episodes of feverish sweating from a terrible flu that developed soon after my arrival and was sure my fever was heightened by the fluctuating temperature changes. Outdoors, the temperature was often below -10°C and the streets were treacherous with slick black ice on the roads and footpaths.¹ The cold would bite into any exposed skin on my cheeks and the moisture from my breath would form icicles on my eyelashes. The sky was a brilliant blue every day because it was too cold and dry to snow and the

¹ Temperatures start to drop below zero in October, sinking to -30°C in January and February, remaining below freezing until April (Mayhew 2001).

weak sun hung low in the sky, vanishing below the nearby mountain range in the afternoon so that darkness descended by 5 P.M. I would only briefly venture outdoors to buy food and found the nearby mini-supermarket had sparse pickings of pickled vegetables, frozen meat, and sweets. My breakfast consisted of semolina, which was sold as baby food. When I attempted to organise any aspect of my research, I was faced with a cold reception of stern faces and what I perceived as closed-minded bureaucracy that I suspected was an effect of the previous oppression of the Soviet era (1921–1990).

My impressions of Mongolia changed as soon as I moved into Tuul's household. I had just taken a two-week "survival course," an initial crash course in practical Mongolian, prior to a more in-depth two-month course at a private language college.² Tuul was one of my teachers, and when I inquired about possible Mongolian families to reside with during the winter months, she offered a room in her small apartment. Tuul was a single mother and her world revolved around her one-year-old daughter Mongoljin (meaning Mongolian queen). To me Tuul represents an urban Mongolian, breaking with the role expected of Mongolian women. At thirty-three she was a single parent studying toward a master's degree in Mongolian linguistics and she had supportive friends who were also single, independent, and career minded.

Tuul and her parents have always resided in the Mongolian capital and live an urban lifestyle, yet the spatial structure of Tuul's family was the urban equivalent of an extended family encampment. Within the same apartment complex, Tuul's mother, father, and second brother lived in one apartment, and her eldest brother and his family lived in another; they lived only approximately 200 metres from Tuul's apartment. This structure also incorporated semi-nomadism, for in the summer season the extended family would vacate the apartment complex and move out to their home on the outskirts of the city. They would then retreat back into the warmth of the centrally heated apartments once the temperature dropped below zero. Some herding families also adopted this strategy: They would move to a township (*süm*) during the colder months of the year, and then into the countryside for the short summer season. Some family members remain in the countryside all year to tend to the animals, whereas those who move into the town centre are often elderly or school children.

During the winter months, Tuul's eight-year-old niece lived with her to attend school in the city, and a teenage cousin came to stay over the

² Mongolian is related to the Altaic family of languages and is closely related to Turkic languages. Mongolian has no relation to Chinese or Russian, although some Russian words have been adopted by Mongolians.

weekends.³ Both of the young relatives helped with babysitting or housework in exchange for residing in the apartment. They would share a mattress that also functioned as seating for watching television, just as a bed in a *ger* is used as seating during the day. The central fire functions as a focal point within a *ger*. In the apartment the television, with its flickering light and low-level background noise, became the centre point around which the family would eat and socialise. The television was not watched with avid attention but tended to be on in the background and glanced at occasionally, just as a fire crackles and needs to be fuelled periodically.

In the next two sections I describe my initial impressions of my field sites, which were both situated in the Khangai mountain chain in central Mongolia in two separate locations: Bulgan Province and Arkhangai Province (*aimag*). Although the Bulgan and Arkhangai field locations are located less than 300 kilometres from one another, to travel between the two required a detour via Ulaanbaatar (refer to Map P.1 for a map of Mongolia).⁴ Apart from the direct arterial routes leading from the capital, roads consist of multiple two-wheeled tracks in the grassland. The roads are representative of the infrastructure of the country, where Ulaanbaatar features all that is urban. The roads are initially sealed but quickly dwindle to dirt, then just tracks in the vast grassland steppe. Beyond the capital city, facilities in the local towns are dilapidated shells of another era.

BULGAN FIELD SITE: DOGSOMJAV'S ENCAMPMENT

I had been in Ulaanbaatar for the previous three months during the depths of winter, when temperatures sink to -30°C in the coldest capital city in the world (Mayhew 2001). By March 2005 the weather was gradually becoming warmer but would remain below freezing until April. I was anxious to get into the countryside to establish the locations for my research and meet herding families with whom I could potentially live over the coming months.

During the initial three months establishing myself in Mongolia, I met three young lecturers at the Mongolian State Agricultural University who

³ As the Mongolian school system is based on the Soviet education system, children attend school in urban centres for nine months with a long summer break from June through August. The state provides education free of charge to all Mongolians. According to UNESCO (Yemba and Munkh-Erdene 2005), 97.8 percent of Mongolians were literate in 2005.

⁴ The distance between Ulaanbaatar and the Arkhangai field site was approximately 480 kilometres to the west, whereas to travel to the Bulgan field site was approximately 420 kilometres to the north-west. This meant that to travel between the two sites required four days of transport over rough roads (the Arkhangai field site was located at $47^{\circ} 16' 29''\text{N}$, $101^{\circ} 14' 36''\text{E}$; the Bulgan field site was located at $49^{\circ} 15' 11''\text{N}$, $103^{\circ} 37' 23''\text{E}$).

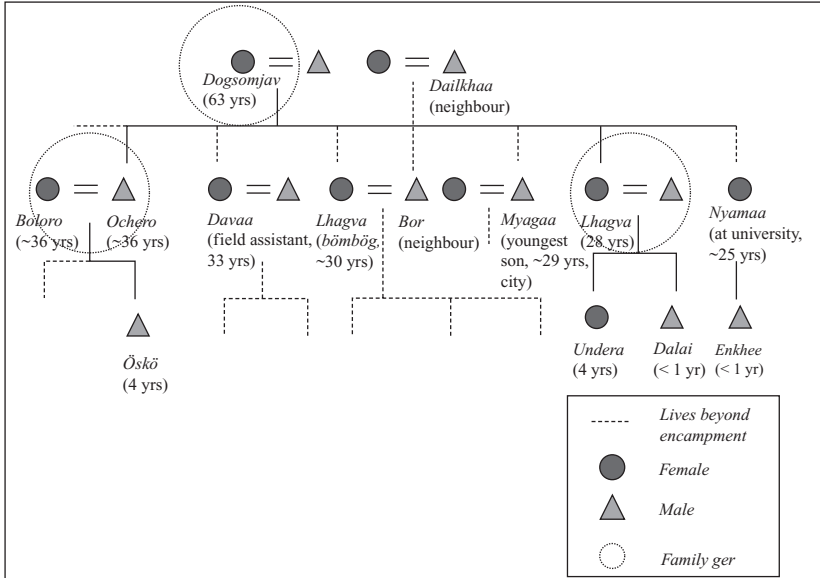


Figure P.1. Key people related to Dogsomjav's encampment, Bulgan, 2005.

offered invaluable assistance. The Agricultural University lay at the base of some low mountains, just beyond the outskirts of the smog-enshrouded capital. Under clear, blue, winter skies, I would escape the city to the comforting surrounds of academia. Inside the Ecology Department, covering an entire office wall was a map of Mongolia. I would discuss the logistics of potential field locations, using the huge map as a reference point. Tuvshin and Aagii proposed that I visit Aagii's father, who has been the local veterinarian in the area surrounding Bugat administrative district (*süm*) for the length of his working life. Aagii, like his father, trained as a veterinarian and was lecturing in the Department of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases at the University. In a break between lecturing duties, Aagii, Tuvshin, and I made a trip to Bulgan Province, in March 2005, so that I could see whether Aagii's hometown would be a good base location for meeting herders who would be open to my field research (see Map P.2).

We arrived in Bugat Süm and were welcomed in to Aagii's parents' home. This house was typical of many I visited in townships in the Khangai, consisting of a wooden exterior with thick concrete wall interiors, divided into two rooms, one with the fire and kitchen area and another for watching television and socialising but also functioning as the sleeping area at night. As with herding encampments, Aagii's extended family lived in two buildings next to each other. His eighty-eight-year-old grandmother and older sister

with her children occupied one of these houses. His grandmother, puffing away on cigarettes, was remarkably lucid and fascinated as to why I would leave my home and my family to come to Mongolia. Her questions made me reflect on why I had actually done so. It struck me as a bit of a crazy enterprise when I viewed it from her perspective, as she had remained within the same village since her marriage seventy years earlier.

A local herder arrived unexpectedly, calling on Aagii's father to help him with a cow that had been having difficulty giving birth for the past two days. I took the opportunity to go along and witness the skills of a Mongolian veterinarian. We (the women of the family and I) watched helplessly while Aagii's father heaved on the calf's protruding legs. It was a painstakingly long time before he pulled the still-born calf out of the Mongolian cow, which looked very small in stature compared with the larger European breeds of cow I was used to.

It was when bumping along on the return to the village in the jeep, feeling disoriented by the darkness outside and the rough, snow-covered terrain, that I first met Dogsomjav, who happened to be visiting this same herding family. I could perceive that the herder driving the jeep was treating this husky-voiced woman in the passenger seat with great respect, discussing the cow's unsuccessful birth. Aagii announced to me that the older woman was Dogsomjav and that I should live with her encampment (*khot ail*) in the following months. Unlike many Mongolians who seemed unsmiling and guarded upon meeting me initially, Dogsomjav beamed, revealing a distinctive gap between her front teeth. She was wearing the typical attire of older Mongolian women: a brightly coloured scarf and a beautifully crafted, hand-made coat (*deel*) with geometric-looking symbols on burgundy-coloured silk with a thick lining of lamb's hide for the cold of winter.

The next morning Aagii organised a jeep and a driver as a means of visiting some of the herding encampments. In early March the herders are still located at their winter sites. They are situated two bumpy hours of jeep drive up the broad river valley beyond the summer sites. The winter encampments are the longest distance from the local village (Bugat Süm) in comparison with other seasonal encampments. We followed the frozen Khujerin River Valley as the hills steadily became steeper and the valley more enclosed. The landscape was white apart from the exposed, windswept parts of the hills and the four-wheel-drive track we were following. On the mountain slopes bare-branched larch (in Latin *Larix siberica*, or Mongolian, *tsagaan khus mod*) and black pine (*Pinus sylvestris*; *khar mod*) grew in hardy clumps. The day was unusually warm with a north-west wind and a weak sun, which was enough to make the ice along the edge of the river slushy in places, making the going in the Russian jeep slow and treacherous.

Table P.1. Animal numbers at the Bulgan field site (per encampment)

Neighbouring encampments in Khujerin Valley (summer 2005)	No. of sheep/goats	No. of lambs/kids	No. of cattle	No. of cows with calves	No. of horses	No. of mares with young
Dogsomjav	76/73 (149)	47/45 (92)	32	18	34	7
Myagmaa	110/120 (230)	64/51 (115)	–	5	25	6
Dalkhaa	300/50 (350)	160/30 (190)	113	15	47	6
Sukhbaatar	(300)	–	–	13	36	10
Davaa	(400)	(200)	40	23	60	10
Demuul	200/100 (300)	(90)	60	22	38	7
Battogtokh	360/60 (420)	190/25 (215)	60	25	24	5
Myagmarsuren	22/18 (40)	0	15	5	4	0

Note: These numbers are herder estimates, not actual animal counts, and would be constantly subject to change. For columns representing more than one type of animal, total numbers are given in parentheses.

The first herding encampment we visited was Dalkhaa's. Four *ger* were situated on a sloping hill with a scattering of animal shelters for protecting the large sheep herd against the cold of winter (refer to Table P.1 for animal numbers). Dalkhaa loomed large within his *ger*, sitting with a shaved head and a rotund belly, looking like a wise lama. Dalkhaa had lived as a herder throughout his life and was a prominent person within the surrounding herding community during the Soviet era. He said to Tuvshin that he was pleased that a foreigner was interested in his herding knowledge and complained that veterinarians, like Aagii's father, didn't ask herders for their opinion enough. The members of this large extended family were later important as neighbours; I would often visit Dalkhaa and his thin, stately wife Dolgorsuren, or Bömbög (meaning "ball"), who married into Dalkhaa's family and is one of Dogsomjav's daughters. Dalkhaa was always willing to chat. He could no longer herd as a result of ill health but would while away the time by playing cards with neighbouring herders.

The next herding encampment was on the opposite side of the broad river valley that we were following. This was Dogsomjav's encampment, where I would stay in the following months. Dogsomjav was still visiting friends in the village centre but we were welcomed into the *ger* by Lhagva, her fourth daughter. Dogsomjav has ten children and twenty-six grandchildren. Four of these grandchildren were born during the year I was in Mongolia. Two of the children live in the encampment with Dogsomjav, namely Lhagva and Ochero, with families of their own (see Figure P.1).

Aagii's father joked that Lhagva's features were more Russian than Mongolian as she cooked us a meal of mutton on the bone and wide noodles, made laboriously by kneading flour dough and then dropping slices of the dough into the boiling broth. Lhagva did not look particularly Russian to me but she and her children had fair complexions. I could tell immediately that Lhagva was an engaging character, firing quick-witted jokes and talking animatedly.⁵ Her brother Ochero was very different in character. He came striding into the *ger*, taking a midday break from herding the sheep and goats further up the valley. He gracefully kneeled on the floor, propping one of his long-sleeved arms on his raised knee, as is the posture of many herding men. He did not say a word. Lhagva, preparing the meal at the stove, held the conversation. Lhagva's baby, Dalai, her daughter Undera, and Ochero's son Öskö were the only children within the encampment during this time, as school-age children are generally sent to urban areas for schooling.⁶ Although neither Undera nor Öskö are particularly shy, both were quiet in meeting me; like the rest of the family, they had not encountered a Western foreigner previously. I noticed that this encampment was very ordered, as the cooking implements and bowls were shining and spotless, and the area around the *ger* and animal pens was clear of animal dung. For the Khangai region, Dogsomjav's encampment herds an average-sized herd and has a good number of Mongolian cows for milking (refer to Table P.1 for animal numbers).

A neighbour happened to be visiting when we arrived and was sitting, sewing traditional Mongolian clothing (*deel*). Tuya lived near Dogsomjav's winter camp (approximately 500 metres behind the encampment) with her husband, Myagmaa, and their two adult sons in a small five-sided home (*ger*). During the colder months, Myagmaa and Dogsomjav's encampments combine their sheep and goat herds but keep their cattle and horse herds grazing separately. One of the adults from either family herds the sheep and goats every third day. Many herding families combine tasks with neighbours if the encampments do not have many inhabitants capable of herding. The partnership of two encampments for herding the sheep and goats is called *saakhalta*. In March, the female animals are not yet milked, so the

⁵ See Lhagva the Herder, available at www.cambridge.org/9781107000902.

⁶ Through the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, many Mongolian names are Tibetan in origin. Most of Dogsomjav's children were given Tibetan names for the days of the week. Two of the children were named Wednesday (*Lhagva*) but the elder of the two is always referred to by her childhood nickname of "Ball" (*Bömbög*). She is married to Dalkhaa's eldest son, Bor. Lhagva's baby son is named Dalai, as in the Dalai Lama, which means "ocean" in Mongolian (see Figure P.1).

cattle and horse herds were grazing on the sparse, dried grass stalks beneath a thin layer of windswept snow several kilometres from the encampment.

The families I visited were very welcoming. No doubt it had been helpful to be introduced by Aagii's father, who regularly visits the herders on his veterinary rounds. In winter he would visit on horseback but when the snow melted he would make his rounds by Russian motorbike. Tuvshin informed the families that we visited that I was merely considering the valley as an area for research; to my surprise, they said that they hoped I chose them. It was after this initial visit that I decided that this would be one of my two field locations (refer to Map P.2 for the Bulgan field site).

ARKHANGAI FIELD SITE: CHOIJO'S ENCAMPMENT

I went to Mongolia with the intention of establishing two field sites so that I could make a comparison between herd encampments and the differing structure of the herds. I planned to establish my two field sites in the area of the Khangai Mountains, containing forested slopes and grassland in the valleys. Through lecturers in the Anthropology Department at the National University of Mongolia, I arranged to visit a herding family who live in Arkhangai Province in March 2005. After an uncomfortable twelve-hour journey in a dilapidated bus with frost-encrusted windows, I met a relative of the family, who resides in a traditional *ger* but within Tsetserleg, the main township of Arkhangai Province. Homes in the urban *ger* districts tend to have the same layout as homes in the countryside but have the addition of electric light and perhaps a television. The following day we packed into a Russian jeep (including relatives and children anxious to visit for the day) and headed for Choijo's winter encampment. We followed an expansive river valley, passing herds of yak and yak-cow hybrids, in contrast to the Mongolian cattle inhabiting lower elevations.

Choijo's winter encampment is significantly higher in elevation (1,940 metres) than Dogsomjav's winter encampment (900 metres), although both environments are similar.⁷ The families migrate up and down two broad river valleys within the Khangai Mountains. Both areas are relatively prosperous, with enough pasture for haymaking during autumn; the quality of pasture is good and herders are able to milk mares to produce *airag*. Both areas have patches of forest on the surrounding hillsides, which can be utilised for fuel

⁷ At the lower Bulgan field site (Dogsomjav's location), the winter camp is at 900 metres; spring and autumn camp, 913 metres; summer camp, 1,182 metres. At the higher Arkhangai field site (Choijo's location), the winter camp is at 1,940 metres; spring camp, 1,905 metres; autumn camp, 1,910 metres; summer camp, 1,850 metres. Altitudes above sea level are obtained from global positioning system (GPS) positions on location.