**Mobile Pastoralism in Inner Asia: Mongolian Cultural Perspective**

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**1.** **Introduction**

My name is Dorjraa Purvei and I was born in and raised in a Mongolian herding family in Hobogsair, northwestern border region of China, among a Mongolian community of about 30,000 people. Today, approximately 170,000 Mongolians live in Xinjiang, dispersed across various Mongolian autonomous regions, including Bayangol, Bortala, Hobogsair, Ili, Har Us, and Altai. I did my primary and secondary school education at a Mongolian school in Hobogsair town and went to Inner Mongolia in 2010 to study in the university and eventually settled in Hohhot, the provincial city of Inner Mongolia. Currently, I am a PhD candidate at Inner Mongolia University, China, and a visiting scholar at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge. Over the past ten years, I have worked with the unit as a local research assistant on a project called *Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation*, a project dedicated to recording the endangered cultural heritage of Mongolians in Xinjiang, China.

As a herding family, we raise five types of animals: horses, camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. We move seasonally between four to five pastures, which include mountainous areas, steppes, and the Gobi region. Most herders established their main base in the winter pasture, where they have built animal sheds and store hay and other winter forage. This is because winter pastures are privately grazed by each household. The pastures we use in other seasons are mostly public within the village. We usually move with a yurt, but some of our pastures also have small cottages and stone sheepfolds. My family’s winter pastureland is approximately 1,600 acres, and the longest distance we move between our winter and summer pastures is about 100 km, from one mountain to another. Other herders also migrate seasonally over varying distances.

This leads to following key questions: How do Mongolians exist in China, and how can they maintain their traditional herding practices? To address this, let me draw your attention to a short historical description.

**2.** **Historical description**

On the vast Central Asian steppe, many smaller nomadic powers flourished and declined from prehistoric times until Genghis Khan founded the Mongol Empire in 1206. This empire united the various clans of Eurasia and expanded to become the largest contiguous land empire in history. The Mongol name also appeared since then. His grandson, Kublai Khan, conquered China proper and established the Yuan dynasty. About two centuries later, when the Yuan Empire weakened in the fourteenth century and retreated to the Mongolian Plateau from China, the Western Mongols, or Oirats, emerged as a new power in contrast to the Central or eastern Mongols. Their geopolitical location in what is now Xinjiang and western Mongolia allowed them to dominate Tibet and Central Eurasia once again while challenging their former overlords, the so-called Central Mongols under the golden lineage of Chinggis Khan.

Unfortunately, in the eighteenth century, Oirat or western Mongolian power in Eurasia sharply declined due to the rise of the Qing Empire from the east, a newly emerging alliance of the Jurchen from Manchuria and Eastern Mongols. The Qing Empire then systematically implemented divide-and-settle policies for all the Mongols. First, by utilizing the geographical distinction between the south and north of the Gobi Desert, it separated Inner and Outer Mongolia under different administrative systems, and each of them further divided into smaller banners, 49 in Inner Mongolia and 45 in outer Mongolia. Under this system, the Mongols were restricted to move between banners without permission. The western Mongols in Xinjiang were divided into four leagues, their political unity was destroyed despite a nominal Khanship was retained. This status lasted for over two centuries until the Qing Empire collapsed in 1911. In that year, outer Mongolia declared independence, but their power was far weak to reclaim Inner Mongolia and northern Xinjiang, which had been under separate Qing administration.

In the subsequent years, the fate of the Mongolian People’s Republic was closely tied to the Soviet Union’s support and became a satellite communist state in 1921. Seventy years later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the Republic of Mongolia embarked on the path of democracy. If we see Mongolia from contemporary perspective, it is a landlocked country in Northeast Asia, bordered by Russia to the north and China to the south. It covers an area of 603,909 square miles, with a population of 3.5 million, making it the world's most sparsely populated sovereign state. Geographically, much of Mongolia is covered by steppe, with mountains to the north and west, and the Gobi Desert to the south. Ulaanbaatar is the capital city, and it is also the coldest capital city in the world (as low as −36 to −40 °C). The city is also home to roughly half of the country’s population (1.7 million).

What about the rest of the Mongolians? When the outer Mongolia declared independence and heavily relied on northern neighbour, Inner Mongolians were abandoned by their brothers and had no choice but to collaborate with the Chinese Communist Party to repel the Japanese invasion and regained their homeland, Inner Mongolia. As a result of this contribution to the Chinese Communist Party, Inner Mongolia successfully attained autonomous provincial status in China in 1947, two years before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Similarly, Mongolians in Xinjiang were also involved in various external and internal conflicts, eventually securing smaller autonomous positions within the PRC. Today, the Mongolian population in China is roughly equal to that of Mongolia itself—around four million people—dispersed across various autonomous regions, with the majority residing in Inner Mongolia. Unfortunately, as Chinese policies towards ethnic minorities have tightened in recent years—particularly in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, the three largest autonomous regions—many aspects of traditional Mongolian culture are disappearing at an alarming speed. This is why I am engaged in efforts to preserve Mongolian endangered cultural heritage in China through visual documentation. In this project, I have visited various Mongolian communities and recorded over two hundred hours of video footage, including everyday life, history, literature, folk music, language, food, dress and many more. As the final product, these recordings have been edited, categorised and stored in the online repository system of Cambridge University Library, where they are freely accessible for viewing and downloading.

**3.** **Cultural practices in relation to animals**

As this is a farmers' group meeting, in the following discussion, based on my previous work, I will focus on the Mongolian mobile pastoralists and how they coexist with their animals. I have selected a couple of daily life videos to provide you with a visual and auditory impression, rather than relying on lengthy written descriptions. As illustrated on the map, people in pastoral regions generally rely on their animals for sustenance and livelihood, given the high altitude and insufficient precipitation to support crop cultivation. Therefore, for thousands of years, converting grass into nutrients essential for human survival has been the most viable means of subsistence. Today, land in both China and Mongolia is owned by the state, but pasturelands in China were allocated to local individual herding households in 1983 for a period of fifty years when the Chinese government decided to dismantle the commune system. Herders do not own the land (as all land is state-owned), but they have long-term use rights without lease payment.

Animals on the other hand are privately owned. However, rather than conceptualising animals purely as property, commodities, or metaphors for human behaviour, it is more accurate to recognise herd animals as actors in their own right, actively engaged in the ecological and socio-economic fabric of pastoral life. In the case of Mongolian pastoralists, horses, camels, cattle, sheep, and goats constitute an integral part of a sophisticated pastoral system in which animals, nature, and herders are intricately connected. Sheep and goats typically graze together on the grasslands during the day and are brought back to the settlement at night to protect them from predators such as wolves and bears, as well as harsh weather. There is very little fencing, and a herd is generally free to roam and potentially intermingle with neighbouring herds. Therefore animals are marked with a hot brand or a nick in the ear, for instance, sheep and goat herd and cattle herd are given earmarkings, whereas horses and camels are given hot brands. Given the lack of grass on pasture compared to UK, these animals often forage across vast circle to access sufficient food, necessitating that herders ride horses or camels to manage the herd effectively. Additionally, camels (Yaks in some area) play a crucial role in the transportation of yurts and essential supplies between seasonal pastures. A traditional Mongolian yurt comprises a wooden frame bound together with camel hide, felt, and ropes produced by sheep and goat wool. Animal products also extend to clothing and equipment: camel wool, sheep and lambskins are used for winter garments, while cattle hide serves as the primary material for horse tack, including head collars, bridles, cinches, whips, and hobbles.

On top of these products, their meat and dairy food are the staple diet of pastoral communities thereby in the common sense, food without meat is not a food, tea without milk is not a proper tea at all. Let’s take a look at meat consumption. Every part of the animal is consumed in various ways, with the simplest and most common meal consisting of boiling meat cuts (including bones) in water with salt and cooking noodles in the resulting broth. Bones are considered just as important as meat and also feature in kinship terminology, distinguishing between ‘bone kin’ and ‘flesh kin’. However, an elaborate ethical framework governs the consumption of livestock meat, in which meat, bones, and organs carry specific meanings in particular contexts, such as social and kinship organisation, divination, entertainment, and worship. For example, the fore flank bones of sheep are exclusively served or presented as gifts for elderly females, showing their respectfulness, while the ankle bones are served to young female guests, symbolising their future fertility. The use of sheep shoulder blade (scapula) meat, which is considered the most desirable part and the best choice for treating important guests. During the meal, guests will also share back the meat to everyone in the household. Beyond its culinary significance, the shoulder blade also serves as a tool for divination. Therefore, people usually cut a small crack on the costal surface of the scapula after eating the meat to prevent unintended divination practices. The first spinal bone next to the tail is known as ‘*heldeg yas*’, literally meaning ‘bone that can say’. This bone is used in a traditional practice where individuals pose questions or riddles to it for entertainment after the meal. As a result, those who are unfamiliar with the riddle exercise caution when selecting meat from the shared plate. Some bones hold more profound symbolic meanings for the family, humanity, and gender equality. For example, among livestock bones, ‘*bogino havs’* – the shortest pair of ribs closest to the neck – is also known as ‘*khishig yas’* or fortune bone, and only the wife of the family is allowed to eat its meat. The reason is that in a human origin story from the Epic Jangar, a woman saved the life of her husband by giving a pair of her own ribs and her thyroid.

Secondly, meat consumption in the summer is less than dairy products. Cow, sheep or goat is the most common source of milk in most seasons, and herders make their own butter, yoghurt, cream, cheese, and even distilled milk wine. Camel milk is regarded, as well as scientifically proven to be highly nutritious milk, while mare’s milk, or *kumis*, is particularly good for lung and stomach ailments. Hence, many herders milk camels and mares during the summer for special consumption. For instance, my personal record was drinking 15 litres of *kumis* over two days when I returned to the countryside last year. Some people rely solely on kumis for two to three weeks every year to treat stomach ailments.

**4.** **Facing challenges**

Although the pastoralism in Mongolian context is more historical, practical and rich in cultural content, the contemporary mobile pastoralism is facing challenges in various ways.

Throughout my previous project, one of my primary aims was to document the lives and challenges associated with mobile pastoralism, including those arising from climate change, policy implementation, and tourism-led land grabbing. Persistent drought over the past ten years has made pasturelands, including the mountains, more barren than ever before. Herders explained that their livestock have had to be fed until the end of June, which has never happened before, and that winters remain unpredictable. Although seasonal migration between pastures could mitigate the situation, pastoralists in China find it increasingly difficult—if not impossible—to access good pastureland, as most fertile lowland pastures have now been occupied by Chinese peasants who have migrated to the area under explicit government resettlement policies. Consequently, herders are now forced to negotiate with Chinese farmers for high-priced farmland leases to ensure their animal’s survival during the winter months (typically from November to the end of March). This marks a shift from seasonal movement between pasturelands to a cycle of relocation between cash crop agricultural land and pastureland. The distance travelled varies, with some herders moving as far as 500 km from their pastures in search of affordable crop stubble. But, crop stubble is not without risks, largely due to the extensive use of chemical fertilisers in Chinese farmlands. Long-distance trucking and contaminated stubble pose significant threats to livestock health and welfare. For instance, a herder in Bayangol explained to me that over 20 of his sheep and three cows became sick and died after consuming cotton residue during the winter of 2022. In addition to the challenges induced by climate change, some minority herders along the Chinese-Kazakhstan border have also faced forced resettlement in other areas since 2017, following the implementation of new Chinese border policies. As a result, access to high-quality summer pastures near the border is now severely restricted. The traditional practice of residing in summer pastures, where herders produce dairy food to supplement their diet and reduce red meat consumption for improved health, is on the verge of disappearing.

Another factor contributing to cultural disappearance in the region is the generational gap, as the younger generation becomes increasingly disconnected from their cultural roots due to compulsory education in Chinese and further alienation caused by university and work opportunities in big cities far from their homeland.

Overall, at least in Mongolian pastoralists’ context, one of the crucial facts is that how they make profit from their animal to keep up with the rising costs while preserving their traditional knowledge. In case of herders in China, cheap sheep meat from Kazakhstan and New Zealand, along with beef from Brazil, has significantly impacted China’s meat market in recent years, adding further difficulties for struggling herders. Beef imports from Brazil increased from 470,000 tons in 2015 to 2.74 million tons in 2023, accounting for approximately 42% of China’s total beef imports. A recent regionally based study conducted in northern Qinghai Province, China, found that only six out of 31 butchers sell domestically produced, grassland-raised meat, while the remainder sell imported meat. Another regional dataset indicates that only three out of 11 butchers offer domestic meat. This is alarming, as most consumers unknowingly purchase cheap imported meat, particularly in restaurants, without awareness of its origin. It is also important to recognise the impact of deforestation in Latin America caused by beef production.

What about sheep and meat of Mongolia where politicians today trying to sell their meat to the Chinese market? Similar challenges are evident in the animal product industry due to factors such as seasonality, disease control, and international production standards. But in the academic field in relation to the mobile pastoralism, although western scholars have conducted empirical ethnographic studies in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Mongolia, which useful for us to understand ourselves through the eyes of others, but they primarily focus on the historical and cultural significance with few comparative analyses involving other regions, particularly with Britain. At the same time, studies by Mongolian scholars are less visible in international comparisons, even though their future goal is to align with the Western animal husbandry industry. This gap highlights the need for comparative studies to enhance understanding across different pastoral systems. My research is focusing on British government policies on sheep and the local economy, the cultural and regional significance of sheep in Wales, and the environmental impact on farming, as well as the changes and transformations it brings to local communities in the Wales.