Mobility, Flexibility, and Potential of Nomadic Pastoralism in Eurasia and Africa

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In Chapter 1, Fernandez-Gimenez described changes in mobility patterns during the last decade in Mongolian pastoral society based on data collected from the same two districts during field research conducted in 1995, 1999, and 2006. In 1995, the area experienced the aftermath of the desolution and privatization of collectives; in 1999, the revised Land Law affected the land tenure of herders, allowing them the right of possession over winter and spring campsites; and in 2006, the loss of livestock caused by harsh winters had not yet recovered, whereas the ninjas' gold rush was transforming the physical and economic landscapes of the districts.

Fernandez-Gimenez discussed the influences of these factors on the use of five key strategies for sustainable grazing management in Mongolia: mobility, diversity, flexibility, reciprocity, and grazing reserves. She concluded that "Mobility, flexibility and reciprocity continue to function as key strategies for Mongolian pastoralists as they adapt to changing climatic and environmental conditions (p. 20 in this volume)."

It must be noted that Fernandez-Gimenez presented another dimension of mobility other than "traditional pastoral mobility." Whereas increasing disparities have appeared in household well-being during the last decade, "wealthy households becoming more mobile and poorer households less mobile (p. 17 in this volume)." However, as the data suggest, the latter households have adopted rural-urban migration as a strategy for adaptation. Because people move across the boundary of the pastoral sector in rural-urban migration, this type of mobility can be called "trans-sectoral mobility." Mining activities by local herders in rural areas are also covered by this concept of mobility, which is not unidirectional, but bi-directional. In fact, in the early 1990s, the pastoral sector absorbed a mass of unemployed individuals from urban areas, thereby functioning as a social safety net. As a result, the total number of herding households more than doubled from 75,000 in 1990 to 185,500 in 2001.

I will return to Fernandez-Gimenez's paper later; but first, I will comment on two other papers from the perspective of the strategy of mobility.

Watanabe's paper (Chapter 3) dealt precisely with trans-sectoral mobility. Against an accepted "entropic" discourse where pastoralism will be lost by modernization, he demonstrated the vital mobility of transhuman pastoralism in Nepal by depicting individual life histories of herders and ex-herders, including their hopes and desires. He concluded that pastoralism is "reproducing," although the total balance is shrinking: many are leaving, but fewer are arriving.

One of the most important points that Watanabe highlighted is that upon retiring from herding, a herder converts his sheep into another form of property, e.g., land or a house in a village. As hinted by Fredrik Barth, Watanabe used "transfer of property" as a term to identify this phenomenon. However, in this society, which is similar to most modern societies where everything has been commodified and desires have been diversified, sheep can be converted into anything via money. The fact that sheep can be easily sold and
bought with money greatly helps the mobility and flexibility of pastoralism. It would therefore be better not to use this term in its original context. Two concepts in this paper, i.e., “boundary of economic sector” and “transfer of property” beyond the boundary, can be applied to other pastoral societies.

Sun’s paper (Chapter 2) demonstrated quite a different strategy of adaptation to modernization factors such as fast-growing towns and the growing cash economy. The ecological conditions and communal use of pastoral resources make the five key strategies listed by Fernandez-Gimenez also function in Rendille pastoralism. Sun’s paper shows how the Rendille pastoral society succeeded in solving the problem of maintaining the two contradictory merits of sedentarization and pastoral mobility at the same time by reorganizing the dual residential system of settlement and herding camps, which is based on the age system, in particular by both the sedentarization of settlements near town on the one hand and keeping animals at herding camps on the other. However, as is evident in the tendency to raise more cattle, Rendille pastoralism is always challenged to further adapt to the money economy. Consequently, this must orient the pastoral production from subsistence to market.

The contrast of the two strategies, i.e., pastoral mobility and trans-sectoral mobility, reminds me of David Sneath’s model, i.e., dual productive modes of pre-collective Mongolian pastoralism. Humphrey and Sneath wrote:

I represent pastoral households as operating within a range of productive activity bounded by two ideal-typical poles, the ‘yield-focused’ or ‘specialist’ mode at one end of the spectrum and the ‘subsistence’ or ‘domestic’ mode at the other extreme. [...] The ‘yield-focused’ or ‘specialist’ mode was based upon the ownership of large numbers of animals by a single agency [...] It also often made use of a relatively large amount of movement. [...] In terms both of length of migration and frequency of moves (1999: 225).

The former “yield-focused” mode was developed along with the penetration of the commodity economy into Mongolia, and long movements were more often organized in drier Gobi regions (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999: 228). This may suggest that a pastoral production system that is well adapted to the ecosystem, such as the Rendille system, also has the ability to adapt to a market economy.

Paradoxically, as Humphrey and Sneath argued, the collectives inherited the yield-focused specialist mode from former large livestock owners, namely feudal lords and monasteries, and “expanded it to include all of the pastoralists and most of the livestock” (1999: 231). They estimated annual exports of about 5% in 1917 during the pre-revolutionary period and 4.7% in 1985 during the collective period of the total national herds in sheep units, respectively (1999: 232). This shows the high potentiality of Mongolian pastoralism.

Now I will present two topics concerning the paper by Fernandez-Gimenez.

First, not only informal miners (‘ninjas’), but also formal mining activities are adversely affecting the ecology. A number of mining companies are active in Mongolia, some of which raise money from the global stock market and have had a number of disputes with local herdsmen about pastures, water pollution, and other issues.

The Mineral Law provides that “both exploration and mining license holders should deposit an amount equal to 50 percent of their environmental protection budget in a special bank account established by the governor of the relevant district” (The Mineral Law of Mongolia, Articles 29 and 30; The World Bank 2006: 25-26), and that the license holders should rehabilitate the area affected by mining by planting grass, as well as filling and plugging (The Mineral Law of Mongolia, Article 33). However, few mining companies comply with these regulations. It is even possible that the ninja play a scapegoat role for these mining companies, although they are indeed affecting the ecology. The Mongolian Parliament recently passed amendments to the Mineral Law, as well as to the law to formalize the current informal mining activities.

Second, the practice of organizing herder groups at the initiative of the local government is evident throughout Mongolia. This is most often inspired by “Community-based Pastureland Management,” a development model that international donors such as the World Bank and UNDP have introduced into Mongolia since the mid-1990s. A herder group usually consists of more than a dozen herding households that stay at neighboring winter campsites in most districts in To’v Prefecture, which I visited September, 2006. In spring or summer, member households move to their next campsites, regardless of the residential relations in the winter. Moreover, as Fernandez-Gimenez reported in the case of Bayanhongor Prefecture, it is a common occurrence that “their campsites were used by others or that they used others’ campsites’ campsites (p. 17 in this volume)” particularly in southern districts.

This shows how difficult it is to implement a development project with a “Community-based Pastureland Management” model in Mongolia.

In contrast to three other papers that discussed the mobility and flexibility of current pastoralism, Kazato’s paper (Chapter 4) discussed the management and evaluation of livestock during the collective period in Mongolia.

The collective was a socialist version of modern development. During the period between 1960 and the late 1980s in Mongolia, thousands of new settlements were constructed for the collective activities. In pre-revolutionary Mongolia, there had been no settlements as political or economic centers, although there were several religious and military settlements. The socialist construction, like most developments, had converted “smooth space” to “striated or metrizable space” by dividing the land into two classes: the center and the countryside (to’v and ho’doo) at each administrative level.

Kazato finds a parallel process in the relationship between domestic animals and herdsmen in which a domestic animal transforms itself from the singularized to the commoditized. She seeks the momentum in the production and management of common animals: the division into herds of uniform individuals by categories such as species, sex, and age, and the trust system of the categorized herds to the herdsmen with a term of 1 year. As she argued, although these changes made common animals quantifiable and exchangeable and disconnected individual relationships between domestic animals and a herder year by year, this was not the case with privately owned animals. Of course, the difference in ownership does not seem to have worked as distinctly.

Concerning this matter, I remember a scene from a film made in the late 1980s in Mongolia in which collective herdsmen referred to the livestock as “our livestock.” When I saw the film for the first time, it sounded strange to me because the livestock did not belong to the herdsmen, but to the collective. I soon took “our livestock” to mean the livestock under our control.” However, more confusing, several minutes later they said they loved the livestock (maid hairtai). The word hair is a common Mongolian term used to express affection. It also means attachment, but in this case, care or concern is the more appropriate translation of this word. Care or concern for livestock is an expression of their ethics of profession.

When I visited one of the most mobile herdsmen in the district at his remote campsite,
he said “they don’t care for livestock, but for humans” (hu’n bodood mal bodohgu’i), criticizing the less mobile herders who stay near the district center, whose strategy, however, is also another type of flexibility to adapt to the need of access to market and/or administrative services. This shows the importance of ethics and norms to drive and make the pastoral mobility function, as argued by Fernandez-Gimenez.

REFERENCES


COMMENTS ON CHAPTERS 5 - 8

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In Chapter 5, Takakura used the example of horse herding to illustrate the reorganization of social relationships among the Sakha in the face of national changes in Russia. Despite a major political shift from socialism to privatization, the Sakha kept their horse bands under a free-range management system that they adapted to the harsh Siberian ecological conditions. Following privatization, ownership of the horses was transferred from a state farm to individuals living in urban areas. These city dwellers, who act as silent owners to take advantage of the cultural and economic value of horse products among the Sakha, enter into a horse-trust system with independent horse herders in rural areas.

Some pastoral groups in East Africa also employ such a system. However, whereas East Africans developed their livestock trust to adapt to their harsh, arid land (e.g., Soga, 1997), the Sakha created theirs to adapt to the upheaval in Russian economic policy. As Takakura stated, this was a unique way to adapt to a market economy.

In addition to the horse trust system, independent horse herding also emerged as a result of privatization. I am interested in the relationship between the resource management system and independent horse herders. According to interviews with independent horse herders, it is very difficult for a standard horse herder to become employed as an independent. Takakura pointed out that current Russian law allows only entities such as agricultural cooperatives to hold title to land, and that these cooperatives manage land and resources. I suspect that the agricultural cooperatives also regulate the number of independent horse herders.

This informative paper provides further evidence for this assumption. Independent horse herders fear for the future of horse husbandry because the number of horses is decreasing. Herders believe this decrease is caused by a lack of reproduction management, for which agricultural cooperatives had been responsible during the Soviet era. Takakura described in detail the change undergone by the reproduction management system. The amount of pasture land reserved for independent horse herders is also telling. Exploring the relationship between resource management and the activities of independent horse herders provides another glimpse into the social reorganization of Sakhan society.

In Chapter 6, Falkenstein redefined the ethnic identities of pastoral societies and described the reorganization of social relations as a result of national changes. Two points were of key importance: mobility during the colonial period and in the present day.

I will first comment on mobility during the colonial period. Schlee (1989) described precolonial pastoral societies in northern Kenya as being flexible and open. Small groups of households moved around the vast region and easily interchanged ethnic identities.

Many anthropologists and historians (e.g., Spear & Waller, 1993) have described how colonial policies interrupted such movement by limiting the herding range, and succeeded in establishing the ethnicity of crystallized fluid societal boundaries. However, Falkenstein maintained that the process of ethnogenesis among the Ariaal was not as simple as this. Using specific data, he pointed out that interethnic migration had reached its climax.