

Globalization and Mongolia: Blessing or Curse?¹

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"After us the descendants of our clan will wear gold embroidered garments, eat rich and sweet food, ride fine horses, and embrace beautiful women but they will not say that they owe all this to their fathers and elder brothers, and they will forget us and those great times."

"Whoever can clean his own house can rid the country of thieves."

Sayings of Činggis-qan (Riasanovsky, 1965: 88, 89)

Since 1991, Mongolia, no longer part of the Soviet command economy, has been in the process of adapting to the demands of a new world economic system. It is now required to sink or swim based on the dictates of a distant marketplace that has very little to do with conditions in Mongolia itself. It has been able to cope only to a most limited degree and today Mongolia survives largely from handouts from international organizations and donor countries. As has been the case in many other parts of the world, the demands of globalization have dislocated Mongolian society at its very roots. In the pages that follow, we will look at one key area of this dislocated society, Mongolia's pastoral sector. There privatization, a key goal of Mongolia's economic modernization as dictated

¹ We would like to thank Morris Rossabi and Gene Anderson for taking the time to read over and criticize our paper. Their help and encouragement were invaluable.

by its creditors, has undermined not only pastoral production itself, but Mongolia's whole traditional way of life in the process. Among the casualties has been Mongolia's ability to feed its people. Pastoralism remains its primary native source of food and has remained so for centuries. Given its other needs, imported petroleum and petroleum products,² for example, and a high debt load, Mongolia lacks the wherewithal to import enough food to feed its growing population adequately. In addition to the products of its pastoralism, Mongolia does produce other kinds of foods, principally grain, potatoes, and hardy vegetables, but supplies are in no way sufficient to need and privatization has had a highly negative impact on Mongolia's grain and vegetable agriculture as well as on its pastoralism. What is available from local production is, in most cases, very expensive. Only in the products of pastoralism, dairy products and meat, the source of cheap food for the vast majority of the population, is Mongolia fully self-sufficient, although distribution problems often limit availability and production is becoming more and more inefficient. All other food products, beyond the little grain and vegetables produced locally, and small amounts of game meats and traditional gathered plant foods, must be imported and once Mongolia has paid for its oil and industrial goods, and has serviced its debts, not much foreign exchange to meet a growing food deficit remains. Hunger and mal-nourishment, rarely the case before, are now real threats.

² In 2003, the last year for which full figures are available Mongolia imported 512,900 tons of petroleum products, including 259,100 tons of gasoline and 214,800 tons of Diesel fuel, and had a trade deficit of 185.1 million US dollars (*Statistikiyn Emkhetegel*, 2004), largely due to its petroleum imports. By contrast, Mongolia exported, to China, 159,900 barrels of oil to China from its own oilfields located in the wrong part of Mongolia to contribute to national needs. Although an increasing amount of Mongolia's gasoline is processed in its own refineries, to save money, its dependence upon foreign petroleum remains large and its financial burden from this source has grown greatly with the major price increases of recent years. Only further development of Mongolia's own oil is likely to change this situation and this will have to wait not only increased exploration and development, but considerable investment in local and national infrastructure to bring domestic oil to the domestic market. Thus Mongolia's position as a net oil importer is unlikely to change any time in the near future. Most of Mongolia's oil now comes from Kazakhstan (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004).

Despite its participation in the new world economy of globalization, Mongolia thus remains heavily reliant upon the declining output of its traditional, pastoral sector as its primary food source. It has no other choice but the sector is in serious trouble and as hunger grows in Mongolia there is increasing social dislocation. The reasons for this are many. Key are organizational changes, namely the collapse of much of Mongolia's rural infrastructure, and changing herding practices brought about as a consequence of organizational breakdowns and the associated privatization of livestock since the end of Mongolia's Soviet period. At another level, greater forces are at work, running the gamut of all on-going social change in Mongolia. Mongolia, for example, is squandering its traditional social capital, the glue that has held Mongolian society together for centuries.

Social capital may be defined in various ways (Sobel, 2002). The World Bank (PovertyNet: "Social Capital") defines it the "norms and networks that enable collective action," a definition that works very well for Mongolia. There the term above all refers to the traditional collective institutions and associated social laws and mores that keep Mongolian society functioning. It also implies certain traditional resources, such as traditional knowledge systems and human resources. This includes the traditional leadership of pastoral society, those individuals who know how to make pastoralism work best in difficult and environmentally sensitive areas, the case virtually everywhere in Mongolia.

Mongolian pastoralism continues to embrace more of the territory of Mongolia than any other economic activity. It clearly involves much more than simply having a few animals, pasturing them as needed, and getting them to market, however possible. Good pastoralists must know exactly how to raise their animals, exactly how and where to pasture them, when to move them, and, most importantly, how to keep them alive or with minimal losses through the winter. Mongolian pastoralism also involves a sophisticated understanding of the environment, in terms of its direct uses for pastoralism and in terms of other possibilities that it offers for survival beyond pastoralism. The good pastoralist, for example, must know how to gather plant foods when pastoral products are in short supply, or how and what to hunt. To accomplish these things, the good pastoralist must know how to utilize social

institutions, his social capital, to his own benefit. He needs systems of mutual support and cooperative institutions to coordinate pastoral activities. This is a vital function in an unforgiving landscape (Fernandez-Giménez, 1999; Sneath, 1999; 2002; Sheehy, 1999; Humphrey and Sneath, 1996; Telenged, 1996). It may or may not take a village to raise a child, but it certainly takes a whole network to raise livestock in the Mongolian steppe.

Once its traditional social capital, above all its truly capable herdsmen working together as part of formal institutional networks, and all the traditional knowledge and systems associated with them, is gone, Mongolia could face starvation; at the least an unacceptable level of adverse social and cultural change. Today the brightest and the best are steadily fleeing the pastoral life,³ meaning growing future difficulties in sustaining it. Larger movements, which have already begun to take place with the worsening of conditions, could spell national catastrophe. If Mongolia's pastoral population as a whole, or most of it, moves into the cities, not only will the pastoral sector itself collapse but with it Mongolian society as a whole. An Ulaanbaatar of two or more millions, twice the present population, mostly poor people, with a few sheep and other livestock, right in town, and living in smoky yurts⁴ without plumbing or other amenities would mean disaster by any measure. Ulaanbaatar is barely able to sustain its present overflow, much less twice as many.⁵ And how can such an overflow exist solely on

³ This is particularly true for the better educated population of the Mongolian middle administrative units, the *somon*, formerly the principal service centers supporting pastoralism locally. Some 77 percent are now in danger of disappearing and within them virtually all social and other services to the pastoral sector (EDN, 15 November 2002; 3 December 2002).

⁴ According to an estimate published by the Mongolian newspaper *Unen*, some 140,000 families in the Ulaanbaatar *ger* or yurt district used wood and coal for heating in early 2003, often in inefficient hand-made stoves. Some 140,000 tons of wood and 600,000 tons of coal were then being consumed. Demand is likely to have risen since. Also contributing to Ulaanbaatar air pollution, among the worst in the world, are the city's coal-fired power plants, the source of 60 percent of its air pollution (EDN, 6 January 2003).

⁵ The official population of Ulaanbaatar is projected to reach 919,000 by 2010 at present growth rates. Official estimates were 821,800 at the end of 2002, up 3.9 percent over the previous year, and 854,200 at the end of 2003. Some 23,778 officially migrated in 2003, with the total population growth of the capital amounting to 25.8 percent between 1995 and 2001. None of the current off-

imported food given that Mongolia is unlikely to develop economically fast enough for it to obtain the required foreign exchange (most of Mongolia's trading partners are unwilling to take tugriks) to feed a loose population in the millions?

Below we look carefully first at Mongolia's traditional pastoralism, as it has developed over the centuries, in the more than 800 years since the Mongols first achieved nationhood, and at its distant Eurasian roots. Particular attention will be paid to pastoralism as a strategy for producing food and as a social system to apply *Mongolian social capital to producing food*. Next, we will look at *the threats that exist to the pastoral way of life today and the ways* in which it is changing, adversely, in response to these threats. In the end, if globalization is going to be of much benefit to Mongolia, it must not be at the expense of its traditional way of life that still employs a majority of Mongols and it must not destroy Mongolia's food production base in the process. To be sure, a new Mongolia, one based in mineral extraction and industrialization, with better infrastructure, the current focus of foreign aid, is em-

icial population figures takes into account the floating population estimated at between 70,000, a low estimate, and 200,000. Nearly a third of Ulaanbaatar's population is comprised of children under 16 and there are large numbers of street children, at least 3500 of them in 2001, and other derelicts living in the sewer system, at least some 10,000 homeless people in all. Some 70 percent of the total population lives in the city's *ger* districts, which lack rudiments such as running water and sewage systems and where most of the available electricity there is illegally tapped. It is estimated that 27-38 percent of the capital's able-bodied population lacks permanent employment. Although Ulaanbaatar now accounts for only about one-third of Mongolia's total population, it accounted for 47.5 percent of all Mongolian crime in 2002, pointing up the social problems of the capital (*EDN*, 9 April 2001; 28 March 2001; 13 December 2002; 8 January 2003; 20 January 2003; 9 April 2003; 12 December 2003; *UBPost*, 6 December 2004). Ulaanbaatar is Mongolia's largest market for food products. In 2002, its population consumed 98.2 kg of meat per capita, along with 51.2 kg of milk and dairy products, some 138.3 kg of flour, 0.5 kg of butter and oil, 21.2 kg of granulated sugar, 38.7 kg of potatoes, 17 kg of vegetables, 0.5 kg of fish, 17.1 kg of rice, 12.8 kg of fruits and berries, 24.1 kg of eggs, and 9 kg of vegetable oil (*EDN*, 16 May 2002). According to another estimate, Ulaanbaatar in mid-2002 had an annual requirement of 59,000 tons of meat and meat products, 147,800 tons of dairy products, 5.1 thousand tons of cream, and 70,900 eggs. By 2010 the figures are expected to be 82,800 tons of meat, 175,500 tons of milk, 52,200 tons of flour. Altogether, demand was expected to increase 1.2 times by 2005 and 1.5 times by 2010 (*EDN*, 9 April 2001; 31 July 2002).

erging. But this new Mongolia will need substantial help from abroad, help often with strings attached, for decades to come, just to function. There is the question as to whether or not this new Mongolia will come into being fast enough to offset the losses of production and social capital in the pastoral sector. Mongolia will remain dependent on it for the foreseeable future if its people are going to eat and if a growing population is going to find adequate employment. We conclude that perhaps another approach will be needed, one protecting the old Mongolia while the new develops.

THE MONGOLIAN BACKDROP

Mongolia is a large country (1,565,000 km² or about a fifth the size of the United States), with a relatively small population estimated by the *CLA World Factbook* at 2,791,292 in July 2005. This is about 1.78 persons per km². The population is predominately young, with a median age estimated at 24.28 in 2005 and is growing at an estimated rate of 1.45 percent per annum. This is a considerable drop over earlier years. Literacy is high, nearly 98 percent in 2002 (*CLA World Factbook*), although, given the collapse of much of Mongolia's social infrastructure, including education, there is probably reason to doubt this figure and it has almost certainly fallen since. There are substantial mineral resources of every kind, most importantly copper and gold but also some petroleum, but Mongolia's infrastructure, particularly its transportation system, is too underdeveloped to maximize profitability. Mongolia's principal trading partners are Russia and China, with the United States an increasingly important economic participant, taking 23.2 percent of Mongolia's exports in 2003 although contributing few of Mongolia's imports in that year, only 2.9 percent (*Statistikiin Emkhtgel* 2003). The country remains relatively poor with a GDP of an estimated \$5.332 billion in 2004, about \$1,900 per capita (*CLA World Factbook*).⁶ Mongolia has one of the highest debt bur-

⁶ Year 2004 GDP was said to be an increase of 10.6 percent over 2003 when GDP was up 5.5 percent over the previous year (Mongolia, Mineral Resources and Petroleum Authority, 2005). Internal estimates of per capital GDP tend to be considerably lower and are calculated on a different basis. See, for example, *EDN*, 30 December 2002.

den ratios in the world.⁷ The country requires a steady flow of loans and subsidies to survive as a nation, although much of this is being invested productively (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004). The most significant is infrastructure development, for example, including the Millennium Road Project (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004), to drastically improve a transportation system that has been good only around the capital, with a northern connection to Russia and a southern one to China, and in a few other favored areas.

A large part of Mongolia's population, about 42% in 2003 (*CLA World Factbook*), is directly involved in pastoralism to some degree or another, and thus full time in some form of food production.⁸ Mongolia's pastoralism has its roots in the distant past and has been the subject of much study pointing up the considerable variety of the activities involved (Buell, Anderson, and Perry, 2000; Bold, 2001). In general terms, for much of the last 3000 years almost the entire steppe zone of Eurasia, not just a few limited parts of it as today, was occupied by pastoral nomads. They lived in a world apart, by their own rules, and according to their own principles. Only the coming of the railways in the nineteenth century definitively altered this fact by making an effective military conquest and foreign occupation possible for the first time, and

⁷ In 2001, Mongolia's foreign debt equaled 90 percent of its GDP (*EDN*, 8 February 2002).

⁸ At the end of 2003, Mongolia had 25,427,700 head of livestock, up somewhat over 2002, with a total decline of more than 8 million head since 1999, the high water mark of Mongolia's capitalist pastoralism. There were, by contrast, 25.8 million head in 1990, at the beginning of Mongolia's transition to the market place. At the end of 2003 the Mongolian annual animal census showed 1,968,900 horses, 10,756,400 sheep, 10,652,900 goats, 1,792,800 cattle and 256,700 camels. Animals added during the year were 7,885,500, an increase which must be set against any losses and animals slaughtered, 3,707,400 in 2003, down sharply from previous years, including 8,119,300 in 2000 (*Statistikiin Emekhtgel*, 2003). This decline indicates that Mongolian herds are being sustained only with difficulty and that too many animals may have been slaughtered in the past to maintain herd viability, currently a major area of economic difficulty in Mongolia. Under normal conditions, some 6.5 to 7.5 million animals are consumed each year, more if meat exports rise (*EDN*, 3 January 2002; 2 January 2003; 7 January 2003; 4 March 2003; 13 March 2003; 7 November 2003). At the end of 2002 there were 243,200 families with animals of some kind, include 175,900 herdsman families, down somewhat over previous years, including 398,800 total herdsmen (*EDN*, 29 May 2003).

bringing with it a mass migration by sedentary farmers in many areas. The surviving pastoral nomads were in many cases made sedentary, absorbed or driven back to a few refuges too dry or too cold to support regular agriculture.

Three key elements make the pastoral nomadic way of life possible, and in the past gave pastoral societies the power to dominate other, sedentary societies located in their proximity.⁹ First is the availability of horses in quality and quantity. The horse has been and remains the centerpiece of steppe life, culturally and economically. It is what makes both the mobility and extensive herding of the steppe nomad possible. In a few drier areas it has been supplemented, but rarely completely replaced, by the camel.

Second have been the herd animals that provide the primary livelihood of the nomad. Most important is the sheep. Today's steppe sheep is relatively small and generally has a poor quality wool, adequate for felt-making but usually not of much use for weaving, for which the nomad rarely has the time or interest to pursue. It has primarily been bred, like other steppe herd animals, for its ability to withstand difficult conditions. The open steppe is fiercely hot in the summer and cold in the winter, and the only regularly available fodder is often scanty natural pasture.

Less numerous, but scarcely less important, has been the goat. It is a more aggressive user of pasture resources than the sheep, and thus a useful supplement to less hardy sheep under particularly difficult conditions. Cattle remain uncommon since they are more difficult to maintain, but they were very useful in traditional times, before the coming of the automobiles and trucks, used for the same purpose today. They were then the only means for drawing the wooden carts upon which the worldly possessions of the nomad would be assembled.

Third is the physical paraphernalia of pastoral nomadic life. They have been developed over long periods of time with the specific requirements of steppe life in mind. A major component is the traditional nomadic tent, or yurt. It is easily transportable and yet warm and sturdy, with a framework of open lattice work over which layers of felt are added, today topped by a water-proof canvas. Also important are well-adapted clothing, primarily of sheep-

⁹ The following is based on Buell, 2004. See also the updated information in Buell, forthcoming.

skin, an efficient harness for horses and cattle, and a great variety of specialized equipment and tools such as the lasso pole, or *urga*, used by the Mongols to catch horses without having to bring them to the ground.

The pastoralism practiced by the Iranian, Turkic, Mongol, and other nomadic peoples once and presently inhabiting the steppe zone has primarily involved a system of annual movement between low-lying winter pastures and mountain summer pastures, with many local variations.¹⁰ Movements are carefully staged and planned in advance. Variations have included movement along rivers, upstream in summer, downstream in winter, and in flat, purely steppe areas, in a broad circular movement. These movements are to prevent exhaustion of local fodder resources by remaining in any one general area too long, and also to take advantage of seasonal resources such as the rich grass that grows in the mountains during the summer.

Foods¹¹ have come primarily from animals herded. Some food may come from whatever else can be secured during the annual trek, as long as the additional activities involved are not prejudicial to herding. Trading is included, and formerly, in less settled times, raiding. Herd animals provide milk, milk products, and meat, although during much of the year they are simply too valuable to slaughter. They are used instead primarily for breeding. Not only do animals raised for such purposes provide more dairy products, but yield larger herds in the autumn and early winter. Large numbers of animals then mean security over the rest of the winter when herd losses can be quite severe. It also gives the nomad the ability to cull animals at his choice for meat, when other sources of food are becoming rarer during the winter, and to manage herds in response to specific winter conditions. The trick is to reach the spring with a herd that is not too large for existing fodder resources, but which is still large enough to start the cycle over again. Meat eating is thus not the *raison d'être* of nomadic life, but is rather part of a specific strategy for life. It is dairy products, available throughout much of the year, in fresh or preserved form,

¹⁰ For Mongolia these have been classified in Erdenebaatar, 1996.

¹¹ The discussion here is primarily from Buell, Anderson and Perry, 2000; Buell, 1999; 2002; 2004. On the sacred biology of the Altaic world see also Roux, 1966.

that are actually the nomad's most important food source, and not meat. Excessive meat eating usually occurred in nomadic societies only in extended contact situations such as after conquests.

Living primarily on dairy products is not a problem for most Europeans, but is for steppe groups since almost all are unable to digest fresh milk. We assume that this was true in the past as well. Thus dairy products were most commonly consumed by the nomads in an easily assimilated fermented form.¹² This was so widely the practice, in fact, that it came to be considered a characteristic of the steppe world by sedentary societies. Some even borrowed some of their terminology for fermented milk products from the steppe. It is thus no accident that the English word yogurt is a loan word from Turkish.

Various forms of yogurt are eaten in the steppe world, including yogurt dried for preservation (modern Turkish *kurut*). Used to produce it is primarily sheep's or goat's milk, but also cow's milk when this uncommon food was available. Horse and camel milk is technically also available for this purpose, but the preferred application of these milks is to make kumiss (*airag*). This was the food with the highest prestige in early steppe societies and continues to be so today, albeit under somewhat changed circumstances since few nomads today are able to own the necessary number of mares to produce a steady supply. It takes about sixty mares, though fewer milk camels, to supply one individual with a steady supply of kumiss during the summer months. This was the only season when an excess of horse or camel milk was available for kumiss production. Thus only the rich could enjoy the food in abundance, although almost any could enjoy at least some, and the rich were obligated to share. Even the rich rarely, if ever, had enough camels to supply any significant quantity.

Kumiss is sufficiently alcoholic to intoxicate, but its limited availability discourages alcoholism from this source. Kumiss is made in a large kumiss-making bag hung near the doors of traditional yurts. Everyone entering was responsible for giving it a punch or shake to keep the fermentation going. Once made, kumiss can be clarified to produce "black" kumiss. This process conc-

¹² For an introduction see now Indra, 2003.

entrates the alcohol slightly by removing the particulate matter but does not in any sense distill.

Meat, when seasonably available or when a special occasion arises, is usually eaten fresh. It can also be dried, as the Mongols of the imperial period (the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) did to make campaign rations (Middle Mongolian *ši'usu*). All parts of a slaughtered animal are consumed, except for the wool, the hooves, and excrement. The latter should be pressed out of the intestines so that they too can be used, as noted in one of the sayings of Činggis-qan. The preferred cooking method is boiling because it is believed to capture the animal's essence or soul. It also helps make limited supplies of meat go farther, and meets the needs of thirsty nomads living in dry environments. In the past, meat was also occasionally roasted, but this practice varied from group to group, and also dependent on the amount of available meat. Moreover, unlike broth, roasted meat is more difficult to divide evenly with among the members of a group. Kebabs, the name of which points to their Persian origin, were not known among the early Central Eurasian nomads who seem to have adopted them not until the Middle Ages.

In addition to providing meat, slaughtered animals also provide fat for cooking other foods, although frying has been uncommon. Not all Central Eurasian nomads have the fat-tailed sheep whose tail (and rump) fat has become a staple in many areas, both for use as a cooking fat and for enriching other foods. Popular among Turkic nomads to this day is the stuffing of intestines to make a large sausage. Fat (suet) and blood are essential ingredients. Special parts of the sheep or goat are considered delicacies and are reserved for special personages. Among some steppe cultures, for example, the eyes are given to a senior person participating in a feast. In the past, rules also governed reserving certain parts of a newly slaughtered animal or game for guests or even for a passer-by, a practice among the early Mongols.¹³

¹³ "After that, when Dobun-mergen one day when to hunt on Toqocaq Rise, he encountered Uriangqadai people in the forest. They had killed a three-year-old deer and were cooking its ribs and intestines. When Dobun-mergen spoke he said: "Please give me [some meat] as the share of meat due another [*nökör sirolqa ke'ejiü'ü*]." Taking [only] half a breast side of the meat with the lungs, and the hide, they gave all [the rest of the] three-year-old deer's meat to Dobun-

As with many other cultures, eating is a community activity among steppe groups and is governed by rules that are sometimes rather complex. Similarly complex rules have also governed hospitality since ancient times. Among the Kazakhs, the powerful used to take advantage of these rules in order to eat at the expense of well-off nomads who were obligated to provide free feasting. Listen to poor Kiregkeng's lament, as told by the traditional Kazakh poet Aq-Balkhi Korghanbay:

Much wealth of fortunate Kiregkeng,
just like a boundless lake.
Just like at an inlet on a river's side,
Our whole people has come out to drink.¹⁴

Supplementing milk products and meat from herd animals with many gathered plant foods has been the practice since ancient times, as the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the earliest Mongolian historical work, makes clear. It records how, when Činggis-qan and his brothers were abandoned in the steppe by their father's retainers after his death, they were nourished by their mother Hö'elün with despised wild plant foods:

The Tayyici'ut elder and young brothers, set out on trek, leaving behind on the pasture grounds Hö'elün-üjin [Lady Hö'elün], the widow, and the little children, the mother and the children:

Hö'elün-üjin, being born a wise woman,
when she nourished her little children,
attaching firmly her *boqta* [high Mongolian hat],
tying up her robe tightly,
she went running upstream and downstream the Onon,
She went collecting the wild apples and the bird cherries,
day and night she nourished their throats.

mergen" (Buell, Anderson and Perry, 2000: 31-32; text in Rachewiltz, 1972: 14-15).

¹⁴ Tolybekov, 1971: 124.

Mother Üjin, born with courage,
 when she nourished her children favored by ancestral
 power [*sutan*], taking cypress sticks,
 she nourished them digging up garden burnet and
 cinquefoil roots.

Mother Üjin's

children, nourished with wild garlic and wild onions,
 managed to grow up to become *qans*.
 The children of the proper Üjin-mother,
 nourished with scarlet lily [bulbs],
 became wise, well-behaved children.

The beautiful Üjin's

proper children,
 nourished with garlic chives and wild onions,
 became ancestral figures with posterities [*qoyira'ut sayii*].
 Ending their lives by becoming hero-ancestral figures
 [*eres sayii*],
 Bold and brave ones they would seem to have been
 made.

Agreeing with one another to nourish their mother,
 stationing their mother on the banks of the Onon,
 making bent fish hooks together,
 they went fishing with hooks for miserable fish.
 Bending a fish hook from a needle,
 they were fishing with hooks for *jebuige* and *qadara*.
 Weaving together nets and weirs,
 they were fishing out little fry.

But they nourished to satisfaction their mother.¹⁵

Although the text implies that such foods were eaten only under conditions of extreme hardship, recent ethnographic data suggest that this practice was actually much more common. The modern Mongols know and use for their food scores of wild cere-

¹⁵ Buell, Anderson and Perry, 2000: 37-38. Text in Rachewiltz, 1972: 28-29. We are indebted to Igor de Rachewiltz for help in identifying the plants and animals mentioned (unpublished letter of 19 October, 1990).

als, fruits and berries, mushrooms, bulbs, nuts, tubers, roots, and greens (detailed in Buell, Anderson and Perry, 2000), but we know that this practice was already recorded by Herodotus in his account of the steppe peoples of his time and by many later observers as well. It seems to have been a characteristic of pastoral steppe life from the beginning. Moreover, some of the plant foods were gathered for their medicinal value as well.

Another major source of food for steppe nomads is game, although they cannot hunt as freely today as they once did. Observers of the early Mongols and of other steppe peoples repeatedly noted their great interest in hunting, and not just of large animals. Among those mentioned are deer, wild pigs, wild sheep, antelopes, wolves, foxes, hares, marmots, and even rats and mice. The list is by no means exhaustive and does not include the large number of fowl that Marco Polo mentioned as Mongol game. Some Mongol groups also fished, as did Činggis-qan and his brothers, in order to survive. Some steppe groups even made a specialty of fishing, a fact noticed by an early thirteenth-century Chinese observer, the Taoist Li Zhichang.

During the time of the Mongol empire most animals were taken individually when in season, but the Mongols also engaged in massive battue hunts. Several groups, cooperating as they did in herding, would move in from all sides, driving all animals before them to be hunted at close quarters in a closed area. As game became gradually scarcer, this practice was eventually ended.

Some animals have sacral character and have to be killed in special ways, although most were simply hunted with bow and arrow in the old days before guns. In recent times Kazakhs, for example, try not to shed the blood of wolves, but capture them in such a way that the animals break their own necks after being roped to a saddle of a moving horse.¹⁶ Among the early Mongols there also seem to have been taboos associated with particular animals. Some could not be hunted at certain times of the year, while others, captured in the great battue hunts, were intentionally set free. Such custom had also the practical value of preserving wild animal stocks. The modern Kazakh word for a natural reserve, *qoryq*, originally designated a sacred area, often where some poten-

¹⁶ R. Berdibayev, personal communication, summer, 1991.

tate was buried, where animals could not be hunted out of respect for the soul of the diseased.¹⁷

Mongols and others, including the Chinese, believed that certain animals possessed special powers. As a consequence, once they had established their empires, they made a conspicuous display of eating exotic animals. By so doing they believed that they absorbed the power of the animal being eaten and thus increased their own.

Cultivated grain is uncommon almost everywhere on the steppe. It is rarely grown there, although some modern groups, including the Mongols, have tried to develop farming in part to provide for what is now a large urban population. During the era of the Mongolian empire, the conquerors sought to introduce a more regular cultivation by using captive farmers specially settled in Mongolia for that purpose, but because the same environmental constraints affecting growing grain in the steppe also affected such farming, these efforts were soon discontinued. Migrant farmers, usually Chinese, have also grown grain in areas adjacent to the Mongolian steppe and sometimes, when conditions were favorable and taking great environmental risks, actually in the steppe itself. Nonetheless, some traditional steppe groups do plant crops in the spring on their winter pastures, then leave them to go on their trek, and gather the harvest when they return in the autumn. Millet is specifically mentioned as being grown this way among the early Mongols. The anthropological theorist Alfred L. Kroeber characterized the Mongols as a "half-culture" since they were supposedly dependent upon sedentary grain to survive, but this was never actually the case.¹⁸ The traditional diet, in all its aspects, provided a more than adequate basis for maintaining life. When steppe peoples consume grain, they generally do so by choice, not by necessity, except in those areas such as Inner Mongolia where a dominant majority forces its foods and food practices on the min-

¹⁷ The Mongols also have a tradition of respect for the animals they herd and an unwillingness to overuse what nature provides in general terms. Mongol values in these areas are in strict contrast to Christian approach, the basis of most externally imposed development, which places man in control of nature with no questions asked in the event of overuse or waste.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Kroeber and his views see Harris, 1984: 319ff and *passim*.

ority or restricts traditional sources of food so the steppe groups involved have no choice but to eat non-steppe foods.

The system described above has continued for the Mongols more or less down to the present day except that modern Mongolia has acquired a large, urban, and sedentary sector, along with manufacturing, mining and mineral extraction and other industries. Today, the traditional pastoral sector is smaller than it was in the nineteenth century and earlier, but it remains the heart of Mongolian national life and livelihood. This is true even if Mongolia's agricultural sector contributes less, on paper, to Mongolia's current GDP than in former times. Since 1900, Mongolian pastoralism has undergone many changes, without any of them having so far fundamentally altered its nature. During the 1920s and early 1930s, forced collectivization (Murphy, 1966: 92-130), carried to extremes, did threaten the very Mongolian way of life and resulted in enormous death and destruction, including of livestock, whose numbers took many years to recover. Nonetheless, despite the excesses of the era of forced collectivization, the traditional herdsman was not much disturbed during Mongolia's main Soviet period beginning in the late 1930s. There had been, at first, much opposition to outside control, even a major revolt in response to leftist excesses, but by the 1940s conditions had quieted. Russia, needing Mongolian food and other resources during the second world war, deemphasized the idealistic collectivization of traditional Mongolia (Murphy, 1966: 131-146). As a result, the cooperatives that finally emerged, the *negdel*, were often clan controlled and differed little from earlier pastoral systems (Saunders, 1996: 45-46). By 1959, 70% of the pastoral land was in the hands of such cooperatives (Saunders, *loc.cit.*). Other Mongolian land was controlled by state farms (Saunders, 1996: 105-106), in which members were employees, including a carefully supported grain production system that worked relatively well since it was fostered by the government and by the Soviet Union.

The final system that emerged in the People's Republic was thus very much a compromise with tradition. Communist institutions closely meshed with older kinship-based systems for regulating and coordinating pastoralism.¹⁹ In the end, the Communists

¹⁹ On how this worked out in general see Humphrey and Sneath, 1999: 68ff.

did not seriously threaten the traditional ways of doing things. Only specific institutions such as educational, health, and veterinary services were new and were supported by the central government. These services were provided at the *somon*²⁰ centers. The Communists were particularly successful in raising the living standards of the herdsman, including literacy which is very high in Mongolia. In fact, it is unusually high for a developing country and could serve as a basis for further development of a new, industrial and urbanized Mongolia (see Fernandez-Gimenez, 1999; Sneath, 1999; 2002).

While the Communists, except during the era of Leftist deviation (1929-1932), never seriously threatened the Mongolian way of life, and helped provide a basis for a new way of life to exist in parallel with the traditional systems, rampant capitalism now does. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed and Mongolia gradually became a democracy. Gone were Soviet-era subsidies, leaving Mongolia scrambling since.²¹ Also vanished was a system that protected collective as opposed to individual ownership of resources. For the last “2200 years of statehood in Mongolia, land has never been privately owed, but belonged to ...highest body of legislature” (Tumenbayar). Now even this may change and land privatization, even pastoral land, has become a real issue.

In 1990, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party finally lost its monopoly on power after decades of one-party rule, although it still remained the single largest party in the Mongolian parliament or *Khural* and thus continued in power. An era of radical experimentation with capitalism and the market place began, fostered by the international organizations that moved in to replace the Soviet Union as Mongolia’s guarantors. Serious dislocations resulted, the effects of which are still being felt today (Rossabi, 2005). The Communists finally lost power in 1996, but regained it in 2000 in a resounding success, only to lose it again in 2004. A coalition now governs, but one Communist president has now been replaced by another. Unfortunately, the Communists of today are not the Communists of pre-1991 and are also devoted to

²⁰ Mongolia is divided into *aimag*, or provinces, *somon*, equivalent to counties, and *bag*, the smallest units in the system. Most local services have been grouped at the *somon* centers.

²¹ The best account of this era is now Rossabi, 2005: 1-79.

economic reform. Their position has been complicated by Mongolia's depressed state as a debtor, and thus they must follow the dictates of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other creditors and investors, and accept restraints imposed after Mongolia's first wild experiments with capitalism.

One result has been a general drive for privatization, which has proven to be the greatest threat ever to Mongolian traditional pastoralism because it is based upon individualistic assumptions that cannot be applied to a necessarily collectivist pastoralism. Although only livestock and equipment once belonging to the old cooperatives (*negdel*) have so far been privatized, there is pressure to privatize pastures too (Pocha, 2005). Unfortunately, individually held pastures, whatever the theory of land ownership behind them, and restricted movement of herds spell disaster, all the more so because Mongolia has serious environmental problems.²² They are an issue in and of themselves, but the overuse of pastures that has resulted from privatization of livestock and a too rapid build-up of livestock numbers by individuals anxious to maximize their profits, regardless of the condition the pastures are in, has made them all the worse.

Privatization laws were enacted in 1992, so as to accord with the liberal economic reforms then being carried out by Mongolia's

²² But not all of Mongolia's environmental problems are due to herding. Mining has, for example, devastated much Mongolian land and gold mining is a serious competitor with herding for scarce water resources. See the discussion in Rossabi, 2005: 175ff. See also Badarch, Batsukh and Batmunkh, 2003; Pocha, 2004. In 2000, Mongolia consumed some 443 million m³ of water, equal to 1.5 percent of reserves, but water consumption, thanks to gold mining in particular, may now be up considerably. Mongolia's biggest water problem is in the Gobi, a naturally dry region where 60 percent of Mongolian wells are located, to serve around 200,000 herding households. These are too few wells serving too many (EDN, 24 March, 2003). Recently, as an indication of the scope of the problem, the Tuul River, from which most of Ulaanbaatar's drinking water comes, has begun to dry up. Falling water levels are primarily due to industrial use and there is increased water pollution due to the same origin as well (EDN, 15 May, 2002). In 2002, 42.5 percent of Mongolia's territory was threatened by desertification with moving sands having seized 1.44 million hectares of once productive land over the last thirty years, including much formerly useful pasture land, 70 percent of which have now been affected by sand intrusion (EDN, 20 December, 2002). This has led to increased disputes over those pastures that have still not been degraded (EDN, 25 December, 2002).

democratic governments (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004). These reforms were then seen as necessary to speed economic development and enhance a sustainable investment in land. They also met demands by the World Trade Organization and the World Bank as preconditions for those organizations to support Mongolia (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004). Included as part of this reform effort were two other important reform laws, a revised Mongolian Constitution, and a new general Land Law.²³

The new Mongolian Constitution was the first document in Mongolian history to enforce land entitlement institutions. The land is now essentially the property of the state, unless given to a citizen on the basis of private ownership. Even then, the state retains the power to confiscate land from landowners, who are responsible for the maintenance of land, and to order exchanges of land with compensation in order to meet certain state needs. The state may also confiscate land in order to ensure public health, the prevention of environmental degradation, and for reasons of national security. The new Constitution was followed by the 1994 Land Law. Mongolia's land is currently zoned by the Land Law, which has designated 76% for agriculture and grazing. The Law has allowed, under the Mongolian Constitution, state owned land to be leased to Mongolian citizens, businesses, and organizations for up to sixty years (Tumenbayar).

Privatization endorsing individual, not state, ownership of the means of production has been considered critical for Mongolia's capitalist development, and developmental aid has generally been formulated on a basis that is antagonistic to any collective ownership. Here the dominant influence has been Garret Hardin's famous "tragedy of the commons" idea:

The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons... As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain... The rational herdsman concludes

²³ On Mongolian land reform see also Hanstad and Duncan, 2001. Most of the relevant documents have now been published by the Mongols in English translations.

that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system which compels him to increase his herd without limit — in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (Stavins, 2000: 13)²⁴

Though first discussed in 1968, the concept of the “tragedy of the commons” is still relevant when discussing the overgrazing problem in Mongolia. The maximization structure offered by capitalism, for example, with each herdsman striving to raise more and more animals, has destroyed a key area of Mongolia’s traditional social capital, the cooperative institutions of Mongolia’s pastoral way of life which has served as the traditional source of food for Mongolia. The ending of the old system has led, in essence, to impeded rights of entitlement to the food provided by livestock. In the past, if a herdsman wanted to keep many more livestock on common pastures, he would have had to negotiate with other users of the same pastures, usually meaning the rest of his clan. By contrast, in the capitalist system of Mongolia, the control over access is lost, for “[The] 1994 [Law] makes it impossible to prevent free-riding or to exclude outsiders from grazing” (Griffin, 2003c: 68). The huge number of deaths among livestock in recent years has been one result as the carrying capacities of many pastures have been exceeded.

The problem, as Fratkan and other critics of Hardin’s idea point out is that commons are not truly commons. Ideally, in economic terms, commons are a common good with minimal costs accruing from their use, since these are spread finely over the maximum number of users. In fact, most of the world’s commons, particularly pastoral lands used traditionally, are not even remotely an open, common good. There are significant marginal costs associ-

²⁴ In fairness to Hardin, he later modified and moderated his ideas and recognized the fact that the problem lay in unregulated commons. Unfortunately, it was Hardin’s original idea that has had the greatest and most enduring influence.

ated with their use due to traditional controls and sanctions imposed on their users and over-users. In fact, if these controls and sanctions did not exist, the societies having the commons would mostly likely have themselves ceased to exist long ago. Overuse of common land would have destroyed the given environments that have formed the very basis for commons' use. In fact the only true commons in an economic sense are probably those created by the imposition of Hardin's ideas, where the traditional controls and sanctions have been done away with in the name of a misplaced development (see the discussion in Fratkin, 1997) and the rule of law needed to control the new use of formerly common lands has not yet emerged. This is precisely the problem in Mongolia.

Ever since the first emergence of the Mongols as a people with a history, there have been various mechanisms in place for controlling the use of pastures.²⁵ At the one level, the mechanisms have been political, for example, the assignment of pastures by higher authorities, including rulers and princes and, in later times, monasteries, and the control that all higher authorities have exercised over actual pastoral practices including movement (Bold, 2001; Fernandez-Gimenez, 1999). At the other, as Roux points out, religious beliefs, principally those involved with the worship of the spirits of the lands and waters, with sacred mountains and animals, have restrained pasture use and the use of other environmental resources. How this worked out in practice is seen in the recent example of the *negdel*. Although older religious ideas became somewhat submerged while not completely vanishing under the influence of Communist ideology, the *negdel* was until the end an effective means of regulating pastoralism within its jurisdiction and keeping pasture use under strict control. It worked in close accordance with the dictates of Mongolian society. The *negdel* was also an effective marketing mechanism, channeling the products of pastoralism to the center, where they could be further distributed. As already indicated, it also functioned as the basic Mongolian unit for social services, including, education, medical and other treatment, and even modern veterinary support (Fernandez-Gimé-

²⁵ On the general topic of the sustainability of pastoralism under Mongolian conditions see Sheehy, 1999. On pastoralism and livestock breeding see also Telenged, 1996.

nez, 1999; see also Bruun, 1999). Although a Communist institution, and associated with a modern world of medicine and education, in their work the *negdel* were not all that different from the religious units that controlled much of Mongolian society before 1911 or, for that matter, formerly existing princely domains. But now Mongolia has a true commons in every sense of the word, and such regulatory institutions no longer exist in the name of privatization, and the sanctions coming from below and from above are no longer sufficiently strong to prevent “tragedy.” The result has been a paradox: the attempt to avoid the “tragedy of the commons” has been its very cause.

The important thing is that the old Communist structures are gone and the new land laws form the basis of property rights for a capitalistic society. They may, in the end, improve the Mongolian way of life under a capitalistic society. Nonetheless, it is still important to understand that the privatization provisions of the new land laws do not recognize the traditional land use of the herders or the traditional principle of collective or group ownership, since clans are not technically corporations, i.e. collective units whose rights are protected in Mongolian law (Tumenbayar). Traditional herders being the main force behind the land, there is an apparent disconnect between economic structure encompassing anti-herding practices and a system of social capital which has dealt with geographic restraints of Mongolia.

Since privatization was introduced, Mongolia’s main source of agriculture is still livestock. Some 88% of Mongolian agriculture is related to pastoralism (Griffin, 1997). Unfortunately, as much as 95% of Mongolia’s land is classified by some as highly vulnerable to desertification, and the size of Mongolia’s deserts grows each year, which is a visible phenomenon (Tumenbayar), although there are varied explanations of precisely what is taking place and even of the actual size of the phenomenon. Although the media and scholars have generally explained privatization in terms of overgrazing by the herder (Griffin, 1997; 2003c: 33; Leicester; Tumenbayar), this reason merely scratches the surface. As Griffin has put it: “The claim of widespread overgrazing is...exaggerated.” In fact, while grazing has increased for some land, it has decreased for other (Griffin, 2003c: 70), in part due to a decline in distances migrated as part of a normal pastoral regimen (Fernandez-Giménez,

1999; Sneath, 2002). This is due to the decreased support available for migration itself and to inexperienced herdsman, including many forced out of Mongolia's swollen cities back to the land, trying their hands at livestock raising, for good or ill (Sneath, 1999; 2002). Thus the true issue is the concentration of intensified land use which has been caused by the structural issues emerging from privatization.

The concentration of pastoralism on limited lands is Mongolia's post-Soviet problem. It has been caused primarily by rural decline due to the mass migration of herdsman to the northern areas of the country, where there are more jobs outside agriculture. Life is more comfortable there in the larger established settlements with such amenities as heating systems and thick-walled apartments. Nonetheless, although many herdsman are attracted to the north for reasons of comfort and opportunity, leading to rural dislocation and even labor shortages, the main issues with the changes taking place all involve the transformation into a free market system.

Extracting minerals for trade has been the main focus of Mongolian governments since liberalization,²⁶ and has pushed for the creation of numerous settlements, actually small rural shanty towns, to appear along the northern border with Russia in order to transport the minerals to the railways needed for shipping. In addition, by placing most of its social resources within these settlements, the government has unintentionally encouraged the migration of herdsman to the North. During the Soviet era, resources were concentrated in local settlements, primarily *somon* centers, to encourage some sedentarization that would enhance the control over the nomads. Since 1991 and the final collapse of the Soviet Union, these settlements, because they have relatively more resources than other sites, combined with the new ability of herdsman migrate freely, are being taxed to serve the local population in ways never intended while at the same time they are themselves in decline and even in the process of disappearance. The migration north has only been intensified since the new government has allowed wells to dry up in the Gobi, and veterinary services and int-

²⁶ See, however, the recent summary provided in Badarch, Batsukh and Batmunkh, 2003. Minerals have not always provided the greatest amount of short-term foreign exchange, even if emphasized in terms of capital investment.

ermediary livestock transport of the past have all but disappeared outside the larger settlements (Griffin, 2003b: 65-66).

To make matter worse, the Law on Land Fees, passed in 1997, has placed an additional burden on settlement land. It allows the exemption from grazing fees and offers a tax exemption of fifty *tugrik*, now worth a few cents, for every animal produced, thereby encouraging herders to raise more animals than the land can maintain. Whereas in 1990, there were only 75,000 herdsman families, that figure increased to 187,000 in 2000. This is a more than a 100% increase of users of a land that has already been stressed by past increases in numbers of herders. However, as Tumenbayar observes, "new entrants to the herding communities are constrained in gaining access to pastures, as they tend to have much less developed kinship and other social networks and have greater tendency to remain sedentary". This has meant more pastures closer to the settlements with a resulting increase in pasture damage and desertification. This dire scenario was created by the improper use of pastures that is slowly destroying the most important means of access to food in Mongolia.

While the rural lands are facing their own problems, cities have also begun to reflect the negative effects of the Land Law. Ulaanbaatar, the capital, is the only true modern city in contemporary Mongolia and may soon or already have a population exceeding one million. In and around the city the importance of livestock and the degradation of land is evident. According to Tumenbayar, in 1990 Ulaanbaatar contained only 76,000 private livestock, but this figure increased to 301,000 in 1998.²⁷ The increase of land use involved has led to lands next to the city, as is the case with the settlements, becoming overgrazed. To make matters worse, the dust blown up from the degraded pastures has been added to the soot and smoke emanating from cooking stoves that are using

²⁷ A somewhat lower figure of 233,000 is given for the end of 2002 but this is likely an underestimate (*EDN*, 8 January, 2003; 10 April, 2003). This trend may accelerate in the future since it is now official policy to promote an intensified animal husbandry close to the large population centers, in part because of the problem of marketing distantly produced food and other agricultural products. Among those enunciating this policy was former Prime Minister N. Enkhbayar, See *EDN*, 11 March, 2002; 19 May, 2003; BBC (Asian-Pacific, 24 October, 2003).

dung, wood and coal, making Ulaanbaatar one of the most polluted cities in the world (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004).

While desertification and pasture degradation have endangered the future development of food production, the movement of people to herding or city jobs has also diverted resources from grain farming, thereby deepening food insecurity (Tumenbayar; Sneath, 2002). In the 1950s, the government began to form large to midsized grain farms which increased domestic grain production and thereby lessened the need for imported grain. Now, in accordance with the Land Law, the land has been fragmented into small units whose owners do not have the capital to properly maintain their fields which, according to Tumenbayar, have greatly deteriorated. As a result, Mongolia's grain production fell from 718,000 tons in 1990 to 195,000 tons in 1998 (Sneath, 2002: 196) all the way down to 106,900 tons in 2002 (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004), before slightly improving to 165,000 tons in 2003 (*Statistikiyn Emkhtgel*, 2003)²⁸ The result of this calamitous downturn has been that Mongolia now has to import grain, something it did not do regularly under Soviet sponsorship (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004; Griffin, 1997). Mongolia suffers as a result, since funds are lacking to import all the grain needed. Some 139,300 tons of wheat were imported in 2002, and although this figure fell to only 61,500 tons in 2003 (*Statistikiin Emkhtgel*, 2003), not all of the decline can be accounted for by increased Mongolian production. In any case, importation of flour has remained particularly high, 75,200 tons in 2003, compared to 96,900 tons in 2002 (*Statistikiin Emkhtgel*, 2003).²⁹ Demand

²⁸ In addition, 65,446 tons of potatoes and 24,596 tons of vegetables were harvested in 2002, figures well below Mongolia's minimal needs. Not only were harvests smaller in that year, but 2 million head of livestock were also lost (*EDN*, 15 January, 2003). In 2003, in addition to the nearly 165,000 tons of wheat, 78,000 tons of potatoes and 58,100 tons of vegetables and about 3,000 tons of other grain crops were harvested. Of the wheat, 29,400 tons was to be reserved for 2004 seed. This is a high figure. The Mongolian harvest for 2003 was said to meet approximately 30 percent of its flour needs, 52 percent of its potato needs, and 31 percent of its vegetable needs (*EDN*, 27 August, 2003; 19 November, 2003).

²⁹ Other food imports by Mongolian in 2003, that is, beside wheat and flour, included 100 tons of vegetable oil, 3,000 tons of margarine, and 19,000 tons of sugar, 5,100 tons of candy, 5,200 tons of "flavored flour products," 100 tons of canned fruits and nuts, 14,800 tons of rice, 1,900 tons of tea, 23,300 tons of

for both grain and flour will continue to grow rapidly since a growing urban population generally lacks the production wherewithal to supplement limited grain foods with those from an active pastoralism. That is to say, Mongolia's position in these areas will only grow worse with each passing year.

Although Mongolia continues to export food, like beef to the former Soviet Union (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004), as a result of various pastoral dislocations described in the preceding paragraphs, the country has nonetheless gained recognition in the media as being a center of hunger. Headlines such as "Mongolia Herdsmen Face Starvation" (BBC News, 14 March, 2000), "Alarm over Food Crisis" (BBC News, 28 June, 2000), "Mongolia's People, Tradition Threatened by Disastrous Winter" (Leicester) are common in articles relating to hunger in Mongolia, that often describe its vast emptiness and the dangers encountered by Mongolia's sparse inhabitants. To be sure, these headlines are connected with the severe *džud* conditions of the early part of this decade as animals were unable to feed due to blizzard conditions or severe icing but the main reason why millions of animals died in single years was a too rapid increase of herds under conditions of privatization of ownership that encouraged the raising of too many animals beyond the capacities of the pastures and the pastoral infrastructure, which continues to be in decline, to support them.

Some of the metaphor used in such press reports might lead the reader into believing that the source of hunger is Malthusian: Mongolia simply has too few resources to maintain its current population, thus the hunger, but this interpretation gives an entirely false impression. The true issue is the structural changes that have taken place in Mongolia since the end of Mongolia's Soviet period in 1991, when subsidies and protectionism began to disappear and the pastoral infrastructure and marketing mechanism began to crash (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004; Sneath, 1999; 2002; Fernandez-Giménez, 1999).

fresh fruit, 5 million liters of soft drinks, and 17.2 million liters of alcoholic beverages, of soft drinks, commodities not usually produced in Mongolia, but also 55,100 tons of butter, a very high figure, and up substantially over the previous year, 40,200 additional tons of potatoes, 7,100 tons of onions and garlic, which can be produced locally, and 6,200 tons of millet, which also can be produced locally.

Mongolia has since the beginning of recorded history been a country dedicated to pastoralism, and has not experienced real hunger as a nation until the last decade. Against Malthusian theory, Mongolia's population has begun to increase far more slowly than in the recent past, and growth has been quite moderate during the present occurrence of hunger. In fact, Mongolia's period of rapid population growth, marking a recovery from a low point in the twentieth century, was under the Communists and during that period living standards actually improved. There was no hunger. Since then the rate of population increase has dropped from 2.9% in 1980 to 1.4% in 2000 (Griffin, 2003a: 6). It has, since leveled off (*Jane's Sentinel*, 2004) at about that plateau, barely a replacement rate when the aging of the Mongolian population is taken into account and likely future growth rates if present trends continue.³⁰ The statistics thus show a 51.7% decrease in the true population growth rate (Griffin, 2003a: 5). Therefore, Malthusian theory simply does not explain Mongolia's problems since population pressure is now minimal in a country that was sparsely populated to begin with.

To be sure, one could strengthen the Malthusian argument by pointing to environmental problems, principally the continued expansion of Mongolia's deserts and ground contamination caused by gold and other mining activities, that have reduced the total amount of Mongolian pasture. Moreover, the climate may be worsening, with the frequent *džud* having been particularly severe in recent years (BBC News, 14 March, 2000; *Jane's Sentinel*, 2004). While each of these environmental problems has contributed to hunger in Mongolia, the main reason why Mongolia has faced real hunger in the last decade or so, is its turn to a free-market economy, a change that has had a strong adverse impact not only upon Mongolian pastoralism, but even on its limited grain agriculture.

³⁰ The reasons for the decline in the population growth rate are many. Economic conditions today are certainly factors but the fact that Mongolia is becoming increasingly urban and urban populations are more likely to restrain births is clearly a factor too. The death rate will rise as the population ages further decreasing the growth rate if fertility remains the same.

THE FORGOTTEN WAY OF LIFE

Mongolia's shift to a free market has not only dislocated Mongolian society in fundamental ways, physically shifting its population and resources around and dislocating links, but it is also slowly undermining Mongolia's traditional modes of production. These are urgently needed if Mongolia is to produce enough food under sharply limiting environmental conditions.

Over the centuries Mongols have developed an intricate web, a key part of their traditional social capital, for food access. Like other Eurasian pastoralists, most Mongols have remained almost totally dependent on their livestock. Their traditional foods have been largely and nearly exclusively what Mongol pastoralists can gain and consume from animals, usually without seriously depleting their herds. In practical terms, this has meant a variety of fermented dairy products some of which, when dried, last virtually forever, thus allowing dairy products to be stored indefinitely.³¹ Other foods, including rare meat, grains and grain foods consumed by preference to break the monotony of a primarily dairy food diet, play only a minor role.³² The Mongolian diet is not a rich nor certainly a varied one but it is more than adequate, and it is ideally suited to local conditions and given environmental resources. In thousands of years, no one has much improved on it.

Aligned with this diet, and in part to sustain its production, Mongolia has pursued its highly complex pastoral support system, directly involving everyone in the community. This system is now breaking down. In the past, the system nearly always involved movement in regular cycles, often over quite large distances, as re-

³¹ Fresh milk production was 3.1 million liters during the first eight months of 2003, but Mongols rarely consume dairy products fresh. See *EDN*, 7 November, 2003.

³² The Mongols do now fish on a large scale, licenses being issued for a catch of 21,000 tons in 2003. Much of this appears to be exported (*EDN*, 12 May, 2003). Gathering of plant foods also continues, including buckthorn fruits, which are also cultivated, and probably pine nuts and other nuts, although most of those collected may be exported (*EDN*, 19 August, 2003; 4 December, 2003). Also a source of supplemental food for the Mongols is hunting. Some 58,593 marmots were taken in 2003, along with far smaller numbers of larger animals, although most of these go to foreign hunters who pay for the privilege of hunting in Mongolia (*EDN*, 3 December, 2003).

quired by sustainability, usually by small groups of herdsmen moving and camping along with their livestock. In the Soviet period, herding families were grouped into larger units during the colder months of the year, when they most often camped next to towns which provided education to their young and social services to everyone. This was part of the *negdel* system (see Fernandez-Giménez, 1999).

Thus during the winter and spring herding families were usually established at a permanent camping site, situated at a low altitude in order to find more protected shelter for livestock birth in the early spring. The true nomadic life, by contrast, was expressed during summer and autumn when the herdsmen created small nomadic camps, usually at higher altitudes, called *hot ail*. They included two to eight families on average. Depending on the specific natural circumstances of their local environments -- mountain pasture (*bangai*), semi-desert (gobi), desert (*els*), dry plains, river valleys, etc. -- the *hot ail* could separate for part of the summer-autumn herding season. The *ail* formed the foundation for societal communal land use, for within this family unit the distribution of resources, most significantly pasture land and water wells, took place (Buell, Anderson, and Perry, 2000: 30-34; Fernandez-Giménez, 1999). This remains the case even today, although the structure of families has often changed, in part due to the return of unemployed relatives from the city, and movement is usually now only over short distances.

Under Mongolian conditions, resources are usually too limited for groups to compete with one another, although this is another area of traditional Mongolian life that is now changing rapidly. In the past, usage was carefully coordinated over a larger region leading *hot ail* to form larger social networks called *neg goliinbon* or *neg nutgiinban*. They were co-users of a pastoral environment and established the right to land use for all participating herdsmen (Tumenbayar). Generally speaking, these larger social networks were clan-based (Buell, Anderson and Perry, 2000: 30-34). There were no exclusive, private rights of individual herdsmen over land use.³³ The land remained a communal property and the individual herdsman had to be connected to a group, for example through kinship,

³³ This facet of pastoral society is discussed in particular detail in Tolybekov.

in order to gain access to the land and its pastoral resources. Since higher-level groups coordinated pasture land use, a herdsman was prohibited from grazing without the approval of the *neg goliinbon* or *neg nutgiinban*. If conflicts over land issues did occur, oral agreements were made to resolve the issue, intermediated, if necessary, by clan or group elders or, in more recent times, by local officials at the *somon* or even *aimag* level (Fernandez-Giménez, 1999; Bold, 2001). The *negdel* usually coincided with the *somon*, although having its own governing body.

This is the part of pastoralism in Mongolia that has now more or less collapsed, with devastating results. Herding units still exist, but they are now little coordinated beyond a basic level with severe negative consequences for the environment and herding in general. By contrast with today, traditional Mongolian society was sensitive to the limitations of the land, and the ways in which traditional herdsman have used it have involved a complex system of sustainable exploitation by careful regulation of the usage of space in time. In addition, the Mongols have obviously developed a diet that works for them and a pastoral system to support it. This system, by tradition, entitled everyone within a group or kinship unit to access to pasture in some form or the other, even when primarily herding someone else's animals, and to pastoralism's main product, food, which by Mongolian tradition had to be shared.³⁴

In short, traditional Mongolian society offered a highly developed system of social capital, now being eroded. It allowed for subsistence in harsh terrain through providing the essentials of life: housing (covered by felt made from sheep's wool), clothing (felt and skins), water (cooperatively controlled wells and other sources, food and, most important, the right not to go hungry. This is in addition to social capital in the form of mutual assistance provided in herding and other forms of social networking promoting survival and effective pastoralism.

³⁴Contributing to the sharing of food in Mongolian society is its nature. A Mongolian sheep, usually small, when slaughtered provides just about enough meat to feed a family. Traditionally, any left over meat is given to neighbors ensuring distribution across families (Buell, Anderson, and Perry, 2000: 30-34). It will not keep otherwise. The same has been true for many seasonal foods such as *kumis*, available for only a relatively short time and thus to be shared.

MARKETING ISSUES

Most of this is now gone. Much of the higher organization of Mongolian society has now vanished and even the ways in which pastoralism is done have changed (Sneath, 1999; 2002; Fernandez-Giménez, 1999). Although land remains, in theory, common, live-stock are not in any way, as was once the practice. All have been divided up after the demise of the *negdel*, meaning that present herds are individually owned and pastured.

There are two main problems with this. One is that movements are now over a shorter distance, in part because the support network that the *negdel* once provided in assisting movements no longer exists. Even when individuals have taken over vehicles once belonging to the *negdel* they often cannot maintain them, since gasoline and diesel fuel have become far more expensive, when available at all, not to mention spare parts. There is also the problem, and here lies the “tragedy,” that individuals, in order to maximize profits, try to keep more animals even if their resources will not support them. There are also far more herdsmen now, as the unemployed return from local centers and cities, anxious to compete for their own right to exist (Sneath, 1999; 2002; Fernandez-Giménez, 1999).

These facts and the reduced movements mean that the negative impact of the current pastoralism on the environment is now far greater than before. Some pastures are being used to exhaustion, others barely. Secondly, the *negdel* was also the means by which local products were channeled, sometimes through forced requisitions, a form of taxation, from the pastoral sector to the center, particularly Mongolia's towns and cities. Now the forces of the market place apply but the market does not really work.³⁵ Most products produced locally remain local, resulting in a shortage of

³⁵ This is not only true for food marketing. Mongolia's wool and skin processing industries were only operating at a 5-40 percent capacity at the beginning of 2003 due of a shortage of basic raw materials and uncontrolled exports, meaning the raw materials were being trucked over the border in a raw state to meet *ad hoc* demands by-passing local processors (EDN, 23 January 2003). Also an indication of marketing dislocation to some degree, although the need for foreign exchange is important too, is Mongolia's continuing exportation of meat, about 20,000 tons annual, nearly all of it to Russia (EDN, 24 January 2003).

food products at the national level. Instead of a plethora of dairy products, which should have been the logical result of more herdsmen and more animals, there is now a shortage and the present system, in part due to large-scale losses of livestock on account of concentrated overuse of limited pastures, is far less efficient than the old. Environmental pressures have thus increased but there is no real gain from them, while the prices for those foods reaching the national market have gone up considerably, as has everything else.

Thus Mongolia's enforced worship of the market place has resulted to a great degree in a collapse of the market locally. In most respects, when we also take into consideration the high prices that people in the pastoral sector must pay for just about anything they do not produce and consume, government policy has resulted in deep economic isolation. A dangerous cycle has developed in Mongolia: the country must now import more food, but the cost of this food is competing with the cost of industrial goods needed to develop Mongolia so that it can become less dependent upon its own pastoralism.³⁶ That is to say, inept policy threatens the very thing that Mongolia needs to survive in the future as well as in the present (Sneath, 1999; 2002; Fernandex-Giménez, 1999; see also Rossabi, 2005).

³⁶ Aware of this, Mongolia briefly imposed a 15 percent import tariff on imported potatoes, cabbages, beets, carrots and flour between 1 August, 2003 and 1 April, 2004, but such responses only make the problem worse since shortages remain and prices will rise to match greater import costs (*EDN*, 28 July, 2003). To supplement limited locally produced wheat, the United States supplied 24,500 tons in 2003 as a grant (*EDN*, 31 July, 2003). Japan was to supply another 20,000 tons in 2003 and a purchase of 40,000 tons from Russia was later under consideration. Formerly, wheat was purchased from Kazakhstan but this has proven far too expensive for the Mongols (*EDN*, 5 March, 2001; 27 August, 2003). The Mongols currently consume about 240,000 tons of flour a year, about 30 percent of which was to come from domestic production of wheat in 2003 (*EDN*, 7 October, 2003). Apparently 300,000 tons of high quality wheat need to be raised to produce this much flour (*EDN*, 30 October, 2003). Nonetheless, even if Mongolia produces wheat at this level again, it may still import cheaper Chinese and Russian flour, undermining local production (*EDN*, 28 November, 2003). The deficit of wheat and flour in Mongolia were estimated at 167,500 tons and 122,400 tons respectively at the end of 2003 (*EDN*, 31 December, 2003).

JUDGMENT DAY

We have argued that the social dislocation and resulting hunger characterizing much of Mongolia today is the result of structural changes and the inability for the Mongols to adapt themselves to a newly formed capitalistic society that has emerged since 1990. Mongolia, in short, simply does not have the right kind of social capital to respond to new conditions. In fact, when traditional social capital is applied in the new environment it is often construed as corruption and is regarded entirely negatively, as if it were something out of place. That is to say, the very traits and interactions that make the Mongols so potentially successful in a pastoral environment is counter-productive in an urban, industrialized environment.³⁷ A new system of appropriate social capital for the new economic and social environment has yet to emerge, and until it does traditional values will run largely counter to what is required for it to be a part of the modern world.

Hence, in Mongolia, a country known for group collaboration in the form of clan control over resources, particularly pastures (Buell, Anderson, Perry, 2000: 27-35), traditional communalism is not in sync with the need to develop in a capitalistic society, with individuals functioning through self-interest rather than through group decision. Yet it is group decision that has been the basis of Mongolia's past success in feeding its people with limited geographic resources and has prevented, through group censure, the "tragedy of the commons" arising through overuse of fragile pasture resources. In short, liberalization has undermined much social stability and curtailed access to food, a social necessity, by stressing individual over social needs. It leaves people ill fitted to function under new conditions because of a lack of social capital and to develop and sustain an economic system that is able to feed the hungry and sustain them socially.

In addition, hunger produced by scarcity is deepened by the poverty and inequality prevalent in all capitalistic societies. In the traditional pastoral system, inequality was low, but privatization of

³⁷ One example is the practice of living in yurts and trying to herd animals right in the city. This practice has meant not only a lower standard of living for the urban migrant but also a highly polluted urban environment. Cattle wandering free along the main streets does not work very well in a large city, alas.

the once communal livestock has created vast inequalities, with the herders having the most experience and political power receiving most of the livestock. In 1992, the top 5% of the largest herders held 200 animals, while the bottom 42%, comprised of female-headed households and young herders, had on average thirty-one animals (Griffin, 2003b: 18). Since then the situation has further deteriorated, not so much because the number of animals per household has fallen, but primarily because the cost of everything else has skyrocketed.³⁸ In a society that still bases most food access through livestock, the inequality inherent in capitalism has certainly destroyed the food security for the common Mongol. The ultimate question is whether or not it will also destroy Mongolian society as a whole.³⁹

CONCLUSION: A RACE AGAINST TIME

What should Mongolia do? The answer is to pay heed to the past while planning for the future. Owen Lattimore many years ago pointed out that the most efficient use of Mongolia's territory is for pastoral nomadism, and that for ecological reasons grain agriculture will never take root on more than a limited or temporary basis (Lattimore, 1962). To feed themselves from their pastoralism, Mongols have had to develop a highly complex system of seasonal land use, which has proved to be the most productive possible land use, given the country's geographical conditions. The drive towards privatization, stressing individual rather than group ownership of land, is slowly destroying the traditional system of land use and with it food production, thereby creating substantial social dislocation and hunger in Mongolia. Mongolia is rich in mineral resources, and profits from these minerals could be used to sup-

³⁸ In 2002, while 87.5 percent of all families of herds owned 200 or so animals, the lowest standard for survival was then set at 390 head and those families having the average of 200 or so were considered potentially poor, although some were involved in other occupations as well as herding. Only 2.5 percent of all herding households were then considered well off and 47.8 percent were officially poor (*EDN*, 11 August, 2003). At the end of 2001, 639 families had 1000-1499 head, thirty-eight had 1500-2000, and thirty-one had more than 2000 (*EDN*, 29 January, 2002).

³⁹ See also examples and information in Rossabi, 2005: 132ff and *passim*.

lement Mongolia's existing food production, even if it declines further. The question, however, is whether these resources will be developed quickly enough, given Mongolia's infrastructure problems, to compensate for a decline in domestic food production. If they are not developed rapidly enough, hunger may turn into starvation in wide areas of Mongolia. This is the process that Mongolia's government has to deal with as it seeks to develop privatization further in response to the demands of the capitalistic world market. We are not advocating in this paper that Mongolia should abandon its path of modernization, but simply to moderate it. Nothing less than Mongolia's national survival is at stake in a world in which little Mongolia is being stared at intensely by two giants, Russia and China.

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