

Chapter 5

Encountering the Franchise State:

Dzud, Otor, and Transformations in Pastoral Risk

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Editor's introduction: Harsh winters in Mongolia have a periodically devastating impact by killing livestock of herders. This has been a key and continuing feature of Mongolian society, but as Dr. Daniel Murphy shows in this strongly researched contribution, the contexts and outcomes of this environmental and livelihood stress are changing in contemporary Mongolia.

Though a large portion of the Mongolian population continues their pastoral livelihood in expansive rural areas, the flexibility for herders to migrate under harsh winter conditions to save a larger percentage of their livestock has become much more selective. Relatively richer, larger, and more politically well-connected herder camps are now much more successful in relocating to save their livestock under locally harsh winter conditions that are poorer and smaller herder family groups. To a significant extent, as Dr. Murphy shows, this is due to the post-socialist political reorganization of rural administration, which makes it more difficult for disadvantaged herders in particular to obtain permission to migrate temporarily to less stressed areas under conditions of climatic crisis.

Below a certain threshold of livestock, such groups cannot viably continue their herding lifestyle, and are thus forced to sell their remaining livestock, hire themselves out as paid workers to larger herding groups or, often ultimately, move as impoverished squatters to urban centers, especially the capital of Ulaanbaatar, which now has large and increasing numbers of dislocated herders in slums on its expanding periphery. As a result, the spiraling cycle in Mongolia of selective rural impoverishment, lifestyle disruption, and residential dislocation and dependence is related in significant part to issues and problems of rural political administration that are often overlooked and not effectively addressed.

Introduction

Since 1991, rural administration in Mongolia has undergone dramatic change. Much of this change initially was the result of a dramatic drop in state revenue and an overhaul of fiscal policy as well as a major shift in state priorities regarding national economic development (Fernandez-Gimenez and Batbuyan 2004). Guiding rural administrative policy since this time have been two over-arching rhetorics of decentralization and local capacity building. This has occurred in the following primary ways: 1) administrative responsibility for local resource management has fallen to *soum* and *bag* governors and their respective councils and 2) community-based resource management institutions are promoted as a means to fill the void left by the collapse of collectives and supplement the institutional roles of local state actors. These strategies amount to “franchising” the state or, in other words, devolving state authority to non-state actors or empowering state actors with wide leverage in decision-making so that their “word” is imbued with the power of the state.

These policies are particularly neoliberal in that they are rooted in the increasing marginality of the pastoral sector within policy-makers visions of a future Mongolian economy. Though herders make-up a significant size of the Mongolian population, their importance in policy discussions and as a political constituency has largely been side-lined by more economically lucrative industries such as mining. These visions are further supported by the cultural marginality of herders in an increasingly urbanizing and “modern” Mongolia. Moreover, the “efficiency” of the franchise state is lauded as a means to reduce the size of the central government and develop the fundamental basis of a market-society. In this contribution, I chart out the effects of such policy shifts on rural resource management, mobility, and the distribution of

risk among herding households. Additionally, I argue that the recent *dzud* disasters have largely been a result of not nature but of neoliberal transformations in state-society relations.

Background: Research Site and Methods

The data discussed in this paper were collected from December 2007 to November 2008 in Uguumur county in Mongolia. Uguumur, nowadays officially referred to as the 3rd district or Tsantiin Ovoo, is located in Bayanxutag *soum* in southern Xentii Aimag on the eastern steppes of Mongolia. Uguumur has a total population of 609 registered citizens divided into 166 registered households. Many of the citizens and households registered in Uguumur do not currently reside there nor do they actively herd. Only 139 households actively herd livestock and most that do live on the products of their herds. This research was collected from 68 of those households through interviews and observation. In addition, I spent 12 months living with herding families on the steppe actively participating as much as possible in their everyday tasks and activities.

Mobility and Risk

The connections between rural social transformation and *dzud*-based livestock loss are found in the way households manage both their herds and risk. Herding households in Uguumur face a variety of risks including predation from wolves, dogs, and birds-of-prey, disease, theft, and larger scale events like flooding, drought, spring dust and windstorms, and *dzud*. Though many of these pose a risk of herd loss, some do not, and some risks, like drought, are significantly more *covariate* or widespread in nature while predation is more *idiosyncratic* or limited in its damage beyond a single household. Events like dust storms are seasonal but frequent, whereas flash flooding

events are rare and temporally sporadic. Some events like *dzud* pose a risk of catastrophic loss and others, like theft, minimal loss.

Drought and *dzud* pose the greatest risk to herders and their livelihoods. Drought, though it does not pose an immediate risk of loss, threatens the future survivability of stock in winter, lowers body weight and fat reserves which affects fertility and sale returns, and can encourage overall weakness in animal health potentially fostering disease outbreaks. The conditions that produce *dzud*, however, pose an immediate, direct, and catastrophic threat of livestock loss to herding families.

Dzud is a complex social and ecological phenomenon. In western descriptions of the term, *dzud* refers to a meteorological event typified by extreme winter precipitation (e.g. snowfall) and below average winter temperatures. In essence, the combination of snow and/or ice along with excessively freezing conditions covers available forage thereby inducing massive livestock losses. These events have also been described as either stemming from summer droughts or being exacerbated by them. Recent work, however, has shown that there is no significant correlation between *dzud* and drought (Sternberg et al 2009). Yet, I would argue these descriptions and analyses misunderstand the definition of the term because according to Mongolian logics, the term *dzud* refers specifically to the massive death of livestock not to any one or any specific combination of environmental conditions. This is evident in the descriptors that are applied to the variety of conditions in which *dzud* occurs such as iron *dzud* (ice), black *dzud* (drought followed by no snow), white *dzud* (blizzards), cold *dzud* (extremely low temperature) or hoof *dzud* (trampling of pastures). Because *dzud* cannot be correlated with any specific condition, the term becomes complex for western epistemologies to grasp. Nevertheless, the ecological sources of these events cannot be denied.

There a number of strategies households can employ in these contexts. In the case of *dzud*, households provide additional fodder reserves, prepared feeds such as *xiiveg* or *barashig*, cover livestock with *nemxii* amongst other strategies. Some households try to prevent exposure to extreme cold by building complex *saravch*, adding *buuts* to the *xot*, and erecting *xalxavch* to guard stock from the wind. Yet, the primary risk management strategy in these conditions is herd and household mobility.

In normative analyses of household herd movement among Mongolia pastoralists, households are shown to move four times annually according to the season. Households move from one customary seasonal campsite to the next; for example, a household will move from their *zuslan* to their *namarjaa* in late August or early September. Though most households in Uguumur try to move in this pattern, many do not, moving either more or less depending on a variety of factors. When households leave this annual migration cycle, they conduct a movement strategy called *otor*. In my research, it was difficult to come across a commonly held definition of *otor*. Some households claimed that *otor* was only conducted in fall, while others stated that a household could do *otor* any time of the year. Some argue it is for fattening and others argue it is for escaping drought and *dzud*. In the scholarly literature some argue that *otor* is conducted in specially held “reserve pastures” while others point out that *otor* is practiced beyond soum, aimag, and in rare circumstances, national boundaries. For our purposes, I define *otor* as simply any move outside the four season campsite rotation cycle.

Many households conduct regular *otor* over the course of the year, typically in late spring and early summer for recovery and fall for fattening. But this is not the only kind of *otor* strategy. In my work I found a variety of *otor* strategies, all largely the result of an improvisational resource use strategy.

There were significant differences between short *otor* under 20 km and long *otor* over that distance. Short *otor* is typically used for recovery and fattening whereas long *otor* is used for drought and *dzud* avoidance. Some households also continually move over the landscape particularly during drought and when they exhibit little capacity to make claims on campsites. Others make long term investments in long distance *otor* camps, some times staying for a year or more. Some households move en masse in large groupings up to 20 households and others move alone, wary of being noticed by locals or administrators. Households with sufficient labor, either from members or from hired employees, also split their herds and place their *taviul mal* with households in other soums or even aimags. Some households, particularly the poorest, cannot move at all and this exposes them to the greatest amount of risk of total herd loss.

A number of factors impact the mobility strategies that households employ. Clearly, livestock have different seasonal needs; for example, the importance of xujir (salt and soda deposits) in the fall is paramount for effective fattening and breeding. Landscape formations, forage species diversity and mix, and other environmental factors strongly impact where and when households move. Economic resources like labor and cash for truck rental, additional hay, buuts for bedding, and fuel such as xurzun or coal also impact the distances households move. Often neglected, however, are the various political, cultural, and spiritual factors that impact migration decision making. In order to settle on new campsites household have to be able to make claims to those resources and establish some source of right to use them. Though rural soum administrators are required to establish *otor* contracts in the event of a *dzud*, households must still be able to enter into peaceful negotiations with local households. This requires not only a capacity to deal politically with local agencies and

households, but also a deep cultural understanding of how such things are or should be arranged and the ability to then do so. This is a dramatic contrast to the coordination of *otor* in the socialist period. Clearly, the means by which households secure access to campsites and other resources necessary for *otor* movements has been greatly impacted by the collapse of the rural collectives.

Institutions and Rural Transformation in Mongolia and Uguumur

Since 1991 the Mongolian state has embarked on a massive shift in rural governance; however, the realization of these regime strategies have only slowly emerged. For the greater part of the last 20 years, there has been an utter lack of involvement from the central state in resource management. In particular, the largely open access resource regime resulting from administrative decentralization and fiscal centralization created a space for informal institution building. Research data gathered in Uguumur county during 2007 and 2008 demonstrate that institutional transformations have been quite dramatic. In contrast to images of the moral economy of the steppe in which reciprocal access to campsites was governed by an ethic of mutual aid, I found major shifts in rural property practices. In addition to shifts in governance, these shifts I found were also driven by massive gains in livestock wealth and product prices which have fostered increasingly competitive resource practices over the last decade.

In this context, I found that local collectivities of kin-related households have emerged as the primary backbone upon which institutional change has been built. In short, the age and gendered hierarchies within kin groups, referred to as *ax-duu* or senior-junior relations, have become central principles of resource management and control in Uguumur. In

these kin collectivities, senior males or ax act as central figures of authority, organizing and at times delegating resource use practices, particularly in the context of environmental stress. These groups have also developed a variety of territorial defensive practices. Kin groups use territorial saturation and xuux or expulsion as primary tactics. Kin saturate a landscape through strategic spacing between households and herds delimiting the available pasturage to non-kin households. Expulsion practices include verbal threats but also livestock theft and physical violence.

Coupled with these new territorial practices I found that households were also engaging in new modes of exchange. Households reported selling, buying, renting, bribing, gifting, and otherwise transacting for access to campsites, wells, and even hay pastures within the customary territories of other households and kin groups, even local ones. Though in cases of gifting these practices mirror customary ethics; sales, rents, and other forms of transaction mark a significant departure from previous tenure regimes. In sum, these new informal practices impose additional costs to other households in making migration decisions and produce a highly fragmented pastoral landscape marked by social exclusion and hostile territoriality.

In addition, this shift in informal land relations has also been paralleled by recent developments in formal, administrative ones. Though passed in successive legislation in 1994, 1998, and 2002, in 2006 the Uguumur ITX began issuing campsite possession leases. Concurrent with this major policy shift was the implementation of a new community-based resource management program instituted by IFAD that served as a vehicle for possession leasing. The new herder cooperatives created through this initiative, in practice, simply reflected the kin-based territorial groups and formalized their ties to land through contractual leasing thereby furthering the territorial

exclusions that had already begun to mark the landscape. Moreover, though rarely practiced since decollectivization, the provincial and county governments issued cross-boundary winter migration contracts following the drought of 2007. These contracts in effect permit households to make large-scale migrations in times of crisis without fear or threat from local administrations and households. Access to these contracts is mediated, however, by a shadowy politics of strategic gifting and corruption.

Though these practices and institutions seem like dramatic ruptures in rural Mongolian society, in effect, their presence was only visible in a moment of crisis like the *dzud* that some households faced in January of 2008. During “normal” times many of these issues are moot, because boundaries are only apparent when they are crossed. For instance, during good years, transacting for campsite access is relatively unimportant because it is simply not necessary. Moreover, expulsion and territorial saturation are less critical during times of plenty. And though the exclusions cemented by the leasing programs are apparent during these times, the exclusions that result from winter migration contracts are only apparent in dire circumstances. The impact of this temporally restricted fragmentation on household vulnerability and herd loss is seen clearly in these moments.

Dzud of 2008

The primary distinction in household herd loss from the winter of 2007-2008 is household location during the crucial months of January and February. Households that were able to move to unaffected soums in the central and northern regions of Khentii aimag experienced few to no losses. In effect, they escaped *dzud*. In contrast, households that remained behind, particularly those that could not leave Uguumur in the western

side of the soum, herd losses were dramatic. In one case, a single household lost nearly thirty percent of their total adult herd to starvation. These dramatic distinctions are critical in thinking not about how *dzud* impacts rural households but also for thinking about resource and risk management in the current political climate.

Table 1. Herd loss rate based on household location. Bayanxutag is the home soum.

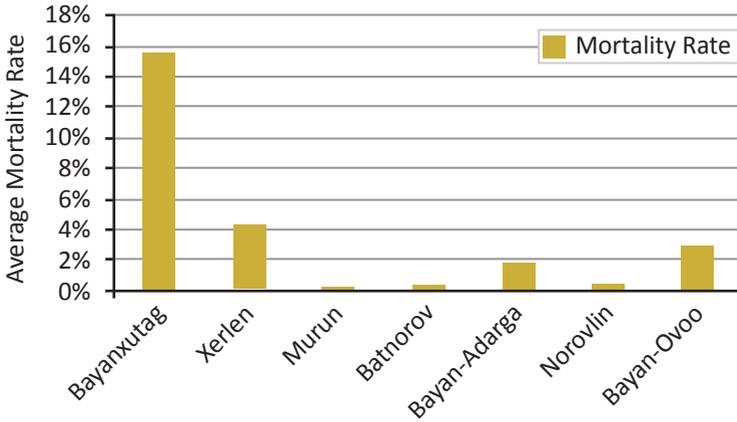
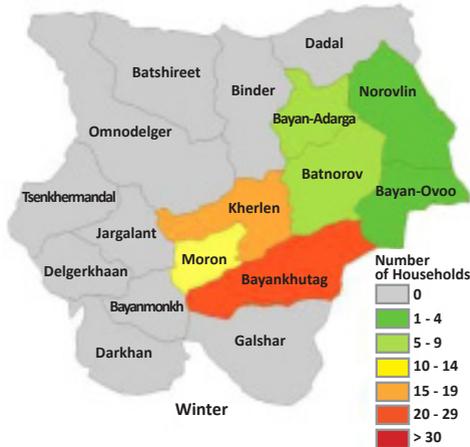
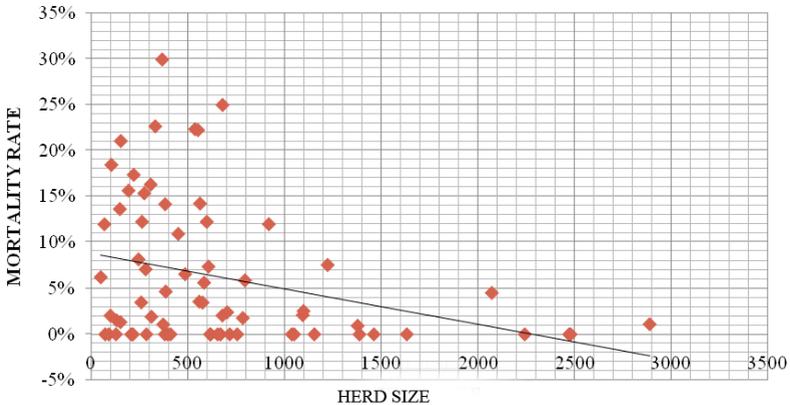


Table 2. Location of households during dzud of 2007-2008. Contracts were established for Bayan-Adarga, Norovlin, Bayan-Ovoo, and Xherlen soum on behalf of various wealthy herders. Batnorov and Murun soums refused contracts.



In contrast, households that stayed behind were largely poor or limited in their social networks. In particular, households with limited kin connections found themselves even more exposed to herd loss since they could not access the economic, political, or cultural resources to make *otor* a possibility. Only poor households who were able to either become clients or hired herders for the wealthy were able to escape massive herd losses; however, becoming a client household or hired herder surrenders a great deal of independence and foregoes the likelihood of growing one's herd to the point of being capable of independence. Clearly, then households lose herds for a number of reasons, many of which are largely out of their control.

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Conclusion: State at Risk

The massive *dzud* losses in 2010 have been blamed on a number of factors including herder malfeasance through environmental degradation. Surely, overgrazing stemming

from excessive goat herds played a partial role, but similar rhetorics were issued following the 1999, 2001, and 2002 *dzuds* even though total livestock herds before the events were significantly lower than they were prior to the *dzud* of 2010. What my research here demonstrates and demonstrate elsewhere, are that the herd losses during these *dzud* were not the result of herder impropriety, laziness, or ineptitude but rather the utter lack of administrative focus on rural resource management and disaster prevention stemming from the increasing cultural and economic marginalization of herders from national development goals and priorities. Similarly, the unequal distribution of such losses stem from the ways in which the “franchising” of the state has fragmented pastoral landscapes and excluded the poor. Only by rethinking the role of the state in rural pastoral regions and de-fragmenting an exclusionary landscape marked by corruption, bribery, and patronage can we effectively address the problem of *dzud*.

Endnotes

My use of the name “Uguumur” is somewhat arbitrary. The area is typically referred to as ‘gurav dugaar district’ or third district in local speech and on official documents as Tsantiin Ovoo. But “third district” is too cumbersome and many would not recognize the name Tsantiin Ovoo. In the past, however, much of the area was referred to as Uguumur owing its namesake to a large mountain in the middle of the district. Each area of the district has its own place name and many of these overlap into other districts and soums. Taking the middle path, as my Buddhist friends would advise, I have chosen Uguumur.

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