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Special Section: Multispecies Co-existence in Inner Asia

Introduction: Resituating Domestication in Inner Asia

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In this special section our focus is on human relations with animals in the domestic sphere (or *domus*) in Inner Asia. In the existing academic literature, there has been greater attention paid to human–nonhuman relations in North Asia (or Siberia), often between hunter and prey animal. The intention of this special section is to ask what we can learn about relations between humans and domestic animals when we shift the focus to Inner Asia, a region that has long been characterised by multispecies pastoralism. The various contributors to this issue have conducted research across a broad swathe of Inner Asia, from Buryatia in the southeast of Siberia (Oehler), Mongolia (Bumochir *et al.*, Fijn, Hutchins, Swancutt), Inner Mongolia (White), Qinghai (Bumochir) to the southwest of China (Swancutt).

Within anthropology, a multitude of terms have emerged for a focus beyond the human, now superseding older literature within ecological or environmental anthropology to become ‘multispecies ethnography’ (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010), ‘anthropology beyond humanity’ (Ingold 2013), or an ‘anthropology of life’ (Kohn 2013). This terminological proliferation has occurred in the context of the broader ‘animal turn’ in the humanities and social sciences and the ‘ontological turn’ within anthropology. These diverse bodies of literature share a concern with thinking beyond the anthropocentrism which has historically dominated the humanities and social sciences, previously confining attributes such as subjectivity and agency to humans alone. This concern has gained a

particular urgency as scholars engage with the concept of the Anthropocene, a new geological era characterised by the planetary-scale effects of human activities. Donna Haraway (2003; 2008) and Anna Tsing's (2015) work has been particularly important in the emergence of multispecies research and the 'species turn' within anthropology. Similar to Bruno Latour's (1993) claim that 'we have never been modern', Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway remind us that we have never been human. Tsing (2013) argues that 'human nature is an interspecies relationship'; in other words, humans are always entangled in relations with nonhumans (even our bodies are made up of innumerable biota).

How does an ethnographic focus on Inner Asia contribute to this emerging literature? First, the Inner Asian perspective requires us to rethink conventional understandings of domestication as a process through which humans gain total mastery over nonhuman animals, which are thereby rendered into objects and machines rather than individuals. Secondly, Inner Asia is characterised by multispecies pastoralism, which leads us to ask how herders live with and think about different *kinds* of domestic animal. Thirdly, a focus on Inner Asia allows us to rethink the notion of the herd, seeing collectivities of domestic animals not merely as inert 'stock', but as sites of affective, aesthetic, and cosmological engagement, whose varying multispecies composition is the subject of much reflection. Thirdly, we show how in Inner Asia a particular emphasis is placed on the mediation of the relationship between humans and herd animals (or *mal* in Mongolian), whether in the form of material objects or parts of animals.¹ In this introduction, our intention is thus to highlight how herd animals are engaged with at different scales. Finally, we argue that Inner Asia affords a different perspective on the classical anthropological theme of sacrifice, illustrating this through a discussion of the practice of liberating an animal from slaughter through ritual consecration practices.

1 Rethinking Domestication

Recent attempts to move beyond anthropocentrism have involved a rethinking of the concept of domestication. Anthropologist Heather Swanson and her co-authors (2018), for example, seek to move away from conventional domestication narratives, in which domestication is seen as an epochal moment in

1 The focus of the contributors to the special section is largely on those domestic animals which are herded in Inner Asia. We do not discuss in detail dogs, whose status differs from that of herd animals, and which have been the subject of several thorough articles (e.g. Fijn 2018; Humphrey 1976; Terbish 2015).

a story of human progress, and instead draw attention to ongoing practices of domestication and the variety of forms these take. The book examines different kinds of 'marginal domestications', such as the relationship of people with reindeer, dogs or salmon. The editors stress that domestication is a mutual process and one which is not unidirectional, thereby complicating the distinction between domestic and wild.

In another recent edited volume, Stépanoff and Vigne (2018) also advise against seeing domestication as 'a great programmed march leading to a sole destination', instead preferring to see it as a 'becoming, a process set in time', which should be analysed through both biological and social (or 'biosocial') approaches. Similarly, our intention here is to expand the concept of domestication to encompass other ways of being, which are not predicated on intensive 'factory farming', artificial insemination, and the principle of total human control, but instead involve other forms of co-existence. By 'co-existence' we mean living with herd animals within a hybrid multispecies community, which will be further described below.

In the past, the focus on domestication within social anthropology was predominantly on the human side of the equation, particularly in terms of ownership of animals as property and a relationship of domination and control (Mullin 1999). Many anthropological texts quote the archaeologist Juliet Clutton-Brock's definition of domestication: 'the keeping of animals in captivity by a human community that maintains total control over their breeding, organization of territory and food supply' (2012: 3). The defining feature of domestication is thus seen as the 'purification' (Latour 1993) of 'domestic' and 'wild', the domestic viewed as a part of 'culture', while the wild is a part of 'nature'. Such sharp distinctions, however, fail to accommodate the nuanced relations that unfold between humans and nonhumans, who co-exist in many other parts of the world, such as across Inner Asia.

Even within the narrow scope of Clutton-Brock's definition, which applies largely to Euro-American contexts, humans rarely manage to maintain 'total control' over animals' breeding or where they forage. Moreover, in some parts of the world that are considered 'remote' from this Euro-American context, the incorporation of animals into the domestic realm does not necessarily entail the complete isolation of a population from free-roaming individuals, and they may co-exist with humans while maintaining the inherent social structure of a herd. If the consideration of domestication is limited to social relations with animals that are subject to intensive selective breeding and farming practices, according to models of industrial agriculture (Blanchette 2020), a large proportion of the human relationships with animals that have existed throughout history is inevitably excluded (Cassidy 2007).

In order to rethink the concept of domestication, some scholars have suggested that it may be more productive to use alternative terms for our co-existence with other beings, such as Fijn's (2011) 'co-domestic sphere'; Haraway's (2003; 2008) 'becoming with' companion animals; Tsing's (2013) use of the term 'more-than-human sociality'; Kohn's (2013) 'trans-species habitus'; or Lestel and colleagues' (2006) 'hybrid communities', all of which are more encompassing of different kinds of relations with species of animal than the concept of 'domestication'. Such propositions reflect a push within contemporary anthropology to replace concepts that rest on nature–culture binaries with more open-ended descriptive terms.

In an early book, addressing the question of 'what is domestication?', in relation to reindeer, Tim Ingold (1988) made a strong distinction between hunting and pastoral systems within his ethnography. Viewing domestication as part of a social mode of production, rather than seeing reindeer as subjective agents, he divided production into three distinct modes: taming in the hunting economy, ecological relations in the pastoral economy and technical breeding in the ranching economy. It is clear from more recent ethnography (including Ingold's own writing) that such systems are not always distinct but can coexist with one another.

Much anthropological literature on human–animal relations pivots around a contrast between hunting and herding. The Siberian anthropological literature has been prominent in describing different kinds of relationships with 'wild' animals that do not accord with the Eurocentric norms regarding the animal. Drawing on Mauss' theory of gift exchange, ethnographies from across the Arctic regions have also shown how hunters regard prey as giving themselves up to the hunter (e.g. Nadasdy 2007). Morten Pedersen suggested that an ontological shift occurs from northern North Asia, where hunting has tended to predominate, to southern North Asia (Mongolia), where herding is more central (Pedersen 2001). With regard to human social relations, he emphasised the difference between animist and shamanist modalities in the North, compared with more hierarchical Buddhist underpinnings further south, which he categorised as totemic.²

Ingold ([1994] 2000) later sought to emphasise how the scholarly debate on domestication tended to be about the control of an animal's reproduction, while 'wild' animals were, therefore, perceived as *out of control*. He argued that hunters in fact form a relationship of trust with their prey, whereas for pastoral

2 Philippe Descola (2013) developed four broad ontological frameworks of naturalism, animism, analogism and totemism, based on separate cosmological underpinnings. According to Descola's criteria, Mongolia would be ascribed with an analogic framework through the adoption of a hierarchical Buddhist cosmology.

peoples the relationship with domestic animals is one of domination. Others, however, have argued that the hunter only attains fleeting glimpses of their prey and often perceives the prey as a species, less as an individual being; herders, by contrast, have daily cooperative encounters with individual herd animals (Knight 2012).

In a different essay, Ingold ([1994] 2000) developed a more nuanced approach to the classic ideas surrounding domestication, pointing out that the idea of the animal as an object that is to be designed and made, like a machine or tool, is peculiar to Western thought. In other contexts, of which Mongolia is a good example, the emphasis is not so much on *making* an animal solely through human selective breeding, but on nurturing an animal to *grow*. Ingold writes: 'There is thus a sense in which people and their domestic animals grow older together, and in which their respective life-histories are intertwined as mutually constitutive strands of a single process' ([1994] 2000: 86). Rather than the notion of a human dominating an animal through producing it like an object or machine, this understanding is based on nurturing, care and reciprocity, and is what Fijn refers to as a form of 'co-domestic co-existence' within the Mongolian herding encampment, which involves 'social adaptation of the animals in association with human beings by means of *mutual* cross-species interaction and social engagement' (2011: 19).

The view from Inner Asia prompts us to move away from such stark dichotomies and to think beyond Eurocentric perspectives on how humans engage with 'domestic' animals. On the basis of herders' perceptions of the personal and agential characteristics of beings within the herding encampment, or *khot ail*, Fijn (2011) suggests that herders in Mongolia could be attributed with an animistic perspective, arguing that this is not confined to hunting peoples in northern North Asia. In this special section, Oehler shows how both hunting and herding are characterised by a similar ethos of care. Expanding out from a narrow Eurocentric understanding of domestication, the special section highlights the importance of multispecies co-existence, accompanied by similar ontological frameworks, across the pastoral areas of Inner Asia. (Figure 1).

The Inner Asian perspective shows how the degree of independence in the domestic animal is dependent upon the species of ungulate, the skill and knowledge of individual herders, and the kind of landscape. At one end of the spectrum, in northern Siberia, reindeer can often exist largely independently of humans. Sheep and goats on the Mongolian grassland steppe, however, require more human contact and active protection to avoid predation by wolves, while horses and camels are understood to have the admirable traits of self-reliance and independence, yet are still amenable to engaging with humans and on the whole are cooperative in performing tasks required of them.



FIGURE 1 The hybrid community of the herding encampment, including the sheep and goat herd, horse and herder, Arkhangai, Mongolia
PHOTO: NATASHA FIJN, 2017

Stépanoff and anthropological colleagues based in Paris have written of the ‘joint commitment’ and communication between domestic animals in North Asia (including Mongolia), but also show how they may fluctuate between close human contact and relative autonomy across the different seasons and during different phases of their lives. They describe this as a form of ‘intermittent co-existence’ with humans (Stépanoff 2012; Stépanoff *et al.* 2017). In this special section, Bumochir, Ichinkhorloo and Ahearn critique the use by Stépanoff and colleagues of the notion of ‘autonomy’. With the ethnographic example of horse herding in Mongolia, they instead advocate the use of indigenous concepts to understand human–animal relations. Herders, for example, seek to afford animals ‘serenity’ (*taa*), while allowing herd animals to ‘follow their intuition’ (*zöngöör n mallakh*).

Bumochir *et al.* also remind us that human–animal relations are affected by broader political-economic changes. They describe how horses become lost because of labour shortages in the countryside, as more herders move into the city in search of work. In western Inner Mongolia, camels were formerly used for transportation in the winter and were thus seasonally an important part of the ‘co-domestic sphere’. Today, however, they are largely left to roam freely all year round, as new modes of transportation and the shortage of labour in pastoral areas mean that they are rarely trained and ridden. Herders lament the fact that these animals are now much less willing to work with humans (White forthcoming). The view from Inner Asia thus reminds us that there is a temporality to the degree to which herds live a free-roaming existence, not

only in terms of the cyclical time of the seasons, but also in terms of historical change.

2 Kinds

In one of the most famous anthropological descriptions of a pastoralist society, Evans-Pritchard (1940) wrote of the Nuer of today's South Sudan that 'their social idiom is a bovine idiom', so entwined were their lives with those of a single species of domestic animal. More recently, Radhika Govindraján has noted the tendency of multispecies ethnographies to focus on human relationships with a single species (2018: 25). The rethinking of domestication in the context of Siberia, for example, has emerged from rich descriptions of the relationship between humans and reindeer. In Inner Asia, however, multispecies herds are the norm. Mongols speak of the 'five muzzles' (*tavan hoshuu mal*): horses, camels, cattle (including yak), sheep and goats. (Figure 2).

An earlier generation of anthropologists, particularly those influenced by structuralism, were fascinated by the ways in which human groups classified animal kinds (e.g. Douglas 1957; Leach 1964). In contemporary anthropological studies of human–nonhuman relationships, interest in the drawing of boundaries which classification entails has given way to an analytic focus on the 'entanglement' of humans and nonhumans. However, we argue that the distinctions which herders in Inner Asia make between kinds of animal is central to the ways in which they interact with these animals (cf. Govindraján 2018: 21).

While the presence and proportion of these various species depends upon environmental and economic factors, the presence of all five is often seen to characterise the ideal Mongolian encampment (*khot ail*). In Inner Mongolia it is common to find large posters on the walls of herding households depicting herds of each of the five muzzles crudely superimposed onto the kind of lush grassland that is now rare in this arid region. Such posters often contain the phrase *tavan hoshuu mal* written in large classical Mongolian script. Failure to live up to this ideal provides Inner Mongols with an index of recent environmental deterioration, as well as the increasing incorporation of animal husbandry into global commodity chains, as in certain regions cashmere goats have come to predominate over other kinds of domestic animal, for example.

Mongols divide the five muzzles into the 'cold' (camels and goats), 'warm' (sheep and horses) and 'neutral' (cattle and yaks) muzzles. This classification dictates when their meat should ideally be eaten, whether they are suitable



FIGURE 2 The combined sheep and goat herd, foraging near the herding encampment and leaving fresh tracks in the spring snow, Arkhangai Mongolia

PHOTO: NATASHA FIJN, 2017

for sacrifice (for instance, cold snouts should only be eaten in the summer and should not be used for sacrifice) (Meserve 2000: 36), and the kind of pasture and part of a mountainside that they should be grazing upon. Among the Mongols, the camel and the horse are classed as 'long-legged' (*urt hültoi*) animals, which enjoy more freedom to roam than the 'short-legged' (*bogino hültoi*) sheep and goats. In his article within this special section, Kip Hutchins shows how attentive herders are to the different gaits of the five muzzles, to the extent of incorporating their rhythms into musical compositions.

Many Mongol herders recognise a hierarchy among the five muzzles, with the greatest prominence accorded to the horse (Jagchid & Hyer 1979: 14). Indeed, to paraphrase Evans-Pritchard, we might say of the Mongols that 'their cosmological idiom is an equine idiom'. This can be demonstrated through the concept of the 'wind horse' (*khii mor*), a symbolic steed that assists deities riding into the heavens. As Katherine Swancutt (2007) writes, the Mongolian concept of *khümor*' is aligned with a person's vitality, inner strength and good fortune. Wind (*khii*) is one of the main elements, functioning as a balance between the sky and the earth and, like the concepts of cold and hot parts of the body, is a key medicinal tenet in relation to balancing a person's health in Mongolian medicine. *Khümor*' is represented on prayer flags with Buddhist imagery as a flying, winged horse, wearing a cloth saddle surrounded by clouds. The symbol of the 'wind horse' is the physical representation of a spirit being: it is deemed to be the riding

animal of the spirits, containing a powerful energy, granting luck and prosperity to herders and their herd animals (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012). A 'wind horse' is also represented on the Mongolian national flag. Uradyn Bulag describes the horse as seated 'in the depths of the Mongol heart'. He writes that 'the horse is essentially a symbol of Mongol identity, a nation on horseback, and as the proverb goes, *mori-üqüi hün moho* [a horseless person perishes]'. This animal is also symbolic of an 'ever-living, prospering spirit' (1998: 258).

In Mongolia, goats seem to be the least favoured of the *tavan hoshuu mal*, partly due to their propensity to degrade grasslands through their grazing, even though income from their cashmere is often what sustains a herding family financially throughout the year. Mette High (2008) describes how a herder in Arkhangai Province took pride in the fact that he had amassed large herds of yaks and sheep, without resorting to goats, which he referred to derisively as 'money animals'. A 'real herder' (*jinhen malchin*) did not need money to demonstrate their wealth and thus had no need for goats. Here we can see how the species composition of the multispecies herding household is also a means by which herders fashion themselves as moral subjects, an inherent part of a herding families' identity and perceptions surrounding wealth. In his article, Alex Oehler shows that Oka pastoralists in Siberia, who have historically been characterised as reindeer herders, are today motivated to herd a diversity of species by the principles of balance and care which guide their relations with nonhumans.

In western Inner Mongolia, the logics of the market and the environment mean that it makes economic sense for many Mongol herders to keep a small number of donkeys. However, donkeys are widely denigrated as 'Chinese animals', and herders will rarely mention owning any. They are left to wander the grassland, ignored by the herders; here this appears less the respectful granting of freedom than an explicit expulsion of 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966) from the co-domestic sphere. Whereas the five muzzles can all be treated as persons, donkeys are regarded largely as commodities, always already belonging to the realm of the wider 'Chinese' market rather than the Mongol household. Pigs and chickens tend also to be disparaged by Mongols, even though the latter, for instance, now provide a source of income to some herders in western Inner Mongolia affected by the stocking limits and grazing bans imposed by the Chinese state. Following our Inner Asian interlocutors' thinking about animal kinds thus reveals the moral economies, idioms of care and ethnic boundary-marking practices that have developed alongside the increasing influence of the market on this region.

3 Herds

Having discussed the multispecies nature of pastoralism in Inner Asia, we now turn to consider a different scale of animal collectivity: the herd. While a few multispecies scholars (e.g. Kirksey & Helmreich 2010) have drawn on Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) celebration of packs and swarms, it is fair to say that multispecies ethnography has been predominantly concerned with taking account of animals as individual persons or subjects. In the words of Radikha Govindrajana, 'multispecies ethnography must focus on tracing the trajectories and outcomes of individual animal lives' (2018: 20). Indeed, to treat domestic animals as a herd might appear on the surface to render them into the kind of anonymous mass from which multispecies ethnography seeks to rescue them. In this section, Bumochir *et al.* have retained the term 'livestock', but emphasise the living component in the word ('live-stock'), and thus the work of keeping animals alive. While we have argued that in Inner Asia herd animals are often engaged with as individuals, it is also true that herders spend much of their time engaging with *herds* of animals with particular social structures.

As we discuss in more detail below, many rituals in Inner Asia are directed at the protection or flourishing of the herd. In Chinese Inner Asia, however, state power is directed at the very opposite, as it seeks to reduce herd sizes in a bid to halt the desertification which is blamed on overgrazing (White forthcoming). Herders receive some financial compensation for the reduction of their herds, but they do not regard this as equivalent to the loss of their herd animals and the wealth that they embody. Herders lament the loss of their 'animal fortune' (*malyn buyan*).

This illustrates how herds are conceived of as far more than mere sources of commodities readily fungible in terms of cash. Instead they are part of a 'cosmo-economics' that structures relationships between humans and nonhumans (spirits as well as animals) in Inner Asia (Empson 2019). For Mongol herders, herds are stores of fortune (*buyan-khishig*), the dispersal of which households are at great pains to avoid (Empson 2011). The herd animals are a family's source of both spiritual and economic wealth and their means of survival. They are also a particularly visible form of wealth, opening up households to judgement and assessment by others (High 2008; see also Bumochir *et al.*, this volume).

Herds play a central role in the appreciation of landscapes in Inner Asia. In the words of one Inner Mongolian herder, 'pastoral regions are beautiful when there are animals there' (*maljih oron, maltai goy*). He described how his elderly mother, despite possessing a house in the town, preferred living in the countryside, where she could look at animals, since she found it comforting.



FIGURE 3 A 'herdscape' of horses and yak (*sarlags*) in Arkhangai, Mongolia
PHOTO: NATASHA FIJN, 2017

Rather than thinking in terms of 'landscapes', with all the connotations of European aesthetics that this word conjures up, perhaps it makes sense in the Inner Asian context to speak of 'herdsapes'. As such herdsapes become rare in Chinese Inner Asia, they leave behind them a palpable sense of loss among those who still live in the countryside. Kip Hutchins' paper in this special section indicates that the conception of herdsapes is not limited to the visual, as the aural pleasure afforded by the sounds of herds is also an important part of herding life, and central to certain forms of Mongolian music.

4 Material Parts

We have so far shown how Inner Asian pastoralists engage with animals not only as individual persons, but also as multispecies kinds ('muzzles') and as herds. In this special section we reflect on the ways in which herders engage also with the material *parts* of animals and with the material objects used to mediate relationships between human and other animals.

As Victoria Peemot (2017) describes, Mongolians and neighbouring Tuvans admit their love of horses but this does not dissuade them from eating them in the winter. One sign of great respect for a horse is that after death its skull is

taken onto a mountaintop or high pass to be closer to *Tengger* (the sky deity). The site will be designated by a sacred stone cairn, or *ovoo*, as recognition of the power of the site. The individual may have been a particularly fast racehorse, a consecrated animal, or may have held special meaning to that person. The tradition of leaving horse skulls at particular elevated locations may have continued over generations within a herding family, as a means of indicating an extended family's connection with their homeland (*nutag*). The skulls function as a memorial to individual horses, but are also a symbolic reminder of a connection between Mongolian herders, horses and the land (Marchina *et al.* 2017). In this special section, Bumochir, Ichinkhorloo and Ahearn show how Mongols in Qinghai, China, also place the skulls of favoured animals in the home, in order to summon fortune (*buyan*).

Animal parts also become significant while the animals are still alive. Among the Buryats of northern Mongolia, when a cow is sold a piece of tail hair is kept back and contained in the house, so as to prevent the dispersal of the fortune which might be contained within the animal (Empson 2007: 115). Krystyna Chabros (1992: 37) writes that 'the hair of the animal is regarded in Mongolia as a seat of its vitality, an attribute which may be detached from the rest of the physical animal'. The horse, cattle or yak hair can then become integrated within the actual structure of the home, through being used as plaited string to secure the lattice walls of the circular yurt (*ger*).

It is not only the organic parts of an animal that receive this kind of treatment. In western Inner Mongolia, camel nose pegs are collected in large numbers in the herding household, as well as being offered to *ovoo* (White 2016). The multiplicity of this particular object, a prosthetic part of the camel's body, is metonymic for the flourishing of the herd. The key point is that in Inner Asia it is not only individual animals that are treated with respect, but also *parts* of animals, and that these parts are not just related to the whole of an individual animal, but are often representative of the herd.

Scholars working in Siberia and Arctic regions, Anderson *et al.* (2017) have recently drawn attention to the ways in which relations between humans and domestic animals are mediated by material 'architectures of domestication', such as tethers, enclosures and traps, in ways which cannot be reduced to mere domination. In keeping with this, Oehler (2020) describes the training of horses in Oka to accept being caught and restricted by ropes as a conversation between human and animal, something akin to a choreographed dance.

While much multispecies ethnography has focused on 'intersubjectivity', 'entanglement' and 'blurring' of boundaries between humans and other species, the view from Inner Asia reminds us that material objects can intercede between humans and domestic animals. Rather than getting in the way of

relations, however, certain objects are what make such relations possible, and they may be imbued with an agency of their own. For instance, Mongolian herders often place a blue silk sash (*hadag*) on an object when designating them as containing an animate power, such as the sweat scraper used on race-horses (Fijn 2011: 233–4). Domestication practices in Inner Asia, rather than rendering animals into objects, can instead render objects animate.

Kip Hutchins' paper also shows how musical instruments in Mongolia, such as the horse-head fiddle (*morin khuur*), and the music that they produce, can be a form of mediation in the relationship between humans and herd animals, as animals are imagined as an 'audience' for compositions, listening beyond the enclosed surroundings of the home to music emanating out across the steppe.

5 Sacred Individuals

In this section we explore the significance of a particular kind of herd animal: the sacred animal. In Mongolia an individual animal, often a horse, but also cattle, yak, sheep, goat, camel or reindeer, is singled out from the rest of the herd by a blue sash (*hadag*) around its neck, colloquially referred to as '*seter*' (Tibetan *tshé thar*). The blue sash signifies that an animal has been dedicated to the eternal sky, or *Tengger*. A particular individual (often a castrated male) with specific characteristics is selected, often based on coat colour. The individual animal goes through a consecration ceremony (*seterlekh*), with a shaman, a Buddhist monk, or a respected elder performing the rite of passage.³

Humphrey and Ujeed (2013: 237–8) note that in the Urad region of Inner Mongolia, an animal is consecrated and then set free in order to provide a mount for the deity residing in the local sacred *ovoo*. The animal is essentially an offering to the deity, which is made in order to ensure the prosperity and fertility of both the family and other herd animals. According to David Holler, with reference to *tshé thar* in Tibet, the ceremonial release of an animal is a substitute for animal sacrifice, whereby 'the freeing of an animal is considered especially effective to make up for the sin of killing' (2002: 210).

While living in a herding encampment in the Khangai Mountains of Mongolia, Fijn noted two different kinds of sacred animal ceremony: in one instance the ceremony was performed by a Buddhist lama, in order to counter

3 The practice seems to be an ancient one. Walther Heissig (1979: 398) writes that during the time of the Mongol Empire 'the word *seterlekü* (Tib.: *se t'er*) designated the Mongolian religious custom of entwining ribbons of five colors into the manes of domestic animals consecrated to the gods. Such an animal (*seter*) was no longer to be ridden or worked'.

the illness of a young adult member of a herding family; in the other instance, the *seter* animal was represented as a drawing on paper. A year earlier, at the time of the death of the family patriarch, a female shaman was summoned to conduct a ceremony to counter the old man's death and to bring future prosperity through the symbolic representations within the drawing (Fijn 2011: 230–35). In the first instance, the ceremony was Buddhist, with a monk leading the proceedings; while in the second instance a shaman advised the herding family on the measures they should take to protect their family and herd animals. In both instances, it was the monk and the shaman that initiated the need for a *seter* animal.⁴

Urgunge Onon recounted to Caroline Humphrey (1996) that while he was growing up as a Daur Mongol, a saddled horse (*hwailag*) was tethered outside the home in the yard of a deceased relative. A thin rope, or lead rein, was attached to the corpse so that the soul had a mount on its journey into the other world. The horse was chosen carefully: he had to be a castrated, elderly male and have lived a long life, so that together they could journey into the next life. These specifications also had functional purposes, as to kill a young animal that had not yet produced offspring could jeopardise the health of the herd. Humphrey and Onon define sacrifice amongst the Daur Mongols as 'the mystical giving up of the life of an animal in return for transcendental energy, which infused the social group with *kesi* (blessing, good luck, fortune)' (1996: 145). In this respect, a deity takes away the life force of the animal.

Humphrey and Laidlaw (2007) divide animal sacrifice into three parts: the killing of a living being; the offering of life to a spirit or deity through the blood of the being; and the acquiring of benefit or fortune of some kind by consuming parts of the animal.⁵ The ritual components of a consecration to designate a sacred *seter* individual can be divided in a similar way: the release of a living being from relations with humans; the beneficial association of a living animal with a powerful deity, resulting in positive rewards for the liberator; and the benefit of protection from external negative forces, through the release of an individual animal. With the *seterlekh* ceremony, however, the ritual does

4 Many Buddhists throughout Asia regard the liberation of animals as an act of compassion, a means of 'saving life' (Chinese: *fangsheng*) through the release of wild animals, such as fish, birds or tortoises (see, for example, Shiu & Stokes 2008). Yet this practice is different from the consecration of a domestic animal in a herding context, as a means of counteracting illness or misfortune.

5 When slaughtering an animal for food, Mongolian herders try to avoid spilling any blood. The avoidance of any blood being spilt is achieved by making an incision in the chest of the animal, reaching inside and snapping the aorta to the heart, resulting in a quick death with a minimum amount of blood spilt (for further details, see Peemot, 2017).

not require the killing of the animal, or the consumption of flesh. Instead, the energy from a significant living being is transferred through the individual animal's release to ensure protection of the herding family and the herd through the added protection from powerful supernatural forces.

What is the philosophy behind the ceremonial release of beings from their former roles with humans? In Yutaka Tani's (1996) view, drawing upon Yuki Konagaya's earlier ethnography, the *seter* in Mongolia is functionally equivalent to the shamanic concept of the Master of Animals (*Manakhan*), or chief animal of the forest. According to Tani, pastoralists 'justify their killing and consumption of animals by prohibiting the slaughter of a special individual held to be responsible for the herds' prosperity' (1996: 411). The herder is then ascribed less guilt in having to kill other beings regularly as food, similar to the understanding, widespread in the circumpolar north, of a prey animal offering its life as a gift, rather than fighting death. Tani (2018) views the consecration of the *seter* animal in Mongolia as a specific feature of Inner Asian pastoralism, and argues that there is no equivalent concept amongst shepherds in the Mediterranean. Tani describes shepherds and domestic animals in this region as forming a master–slave dynamic, whereas Mongolian social dynamics are more egalitarian in structure in relation to free-roaming multispecies herds. (Figure 4).

In her article in this special section, Katherine Swancutt compares ethnographic examples from Buryats in northeast Mongolia with the Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman group in southwest China. She makes a connection between the delay of death through sacrifice and the way in which the liberation of an animal still results in eventual death. In Swancutt's Buryat example, an animal is released as a substitute for a human, in order to guard against the death of a young Russian Buryat man who has been sent off to war. In this example, the human is insured against potential death in a war zone through the release of another being. This ties in with concepts of reincarnation, according to which an animal can take the place of, or become a substitute for, an individual human. In other consecration scenarios, the premise is to give this special being freedom and to handle it as little as possible, releasing it from the burden of being killed, even while it remains within the family herd.

Shinjilt has emphasised the relationship between the individual animal and the person selecting a sacred animal, among the Tibetan Mongols of Qinghai. The intention behind the practice is that 'everyday experiences of joy, anger, humour and pathos are shared between the pastoralists and the domesticated animals as individuals' (2012: 439), which is then recognised through ritual practice.



FIGURE 4 Free-roaming Mongol horses, yet connected with a larger horse herd and a nearby herding encampment, Arkhangai, Mongolia

PHOTO: NATASHA FIJN, 2019

Among the Tozhu of Tuva, southern Siberia, consecrated reindeer are also singled out as sacred (*ydyk*) through their distinctive characteristics, coat colour or personality. 'Visible atypical features are interpreted as indices of an uncommon personality, an individual essence. From this essence, this reindeer is expected to be graced with other aspects, such as occult powers and relationships with invisible agencies' (Stépanoff 2012: 302). These powers are interpreted by shamans and not by Buddhist monks in this region, yet there are similarities to Buddhist ceremonies in that the reindeer is fumigated with juniper, while ribbons are attached to its neck and milk is poured over the reindeer. Unlike a Buddhist ceremony, however, the reindeer is grasped about the head and made to bow before the sun three times. According to Stépanoff and colleagues, such practices 'devote considerable attention to the diversity of individuals and to the presence of uncommon singular beings within living species, including livestock' (2017: 25).

Both the authors of this introductory article have found in recent years that families who previously had *seter* animals within their flocks are no longer designating individuals for consecration, or are transforming consecration practices in response to changing material conditions. One reason given by a few

herders to Fijn was that they did not like to see the animal becoming ill or helpless in their old age and felt sorry that the individual was no longer a functional part of the herd with its own role. Such rituals are not isolated from the distinct political economies in which these pastoralists are caught up. In western Inner Mongolia, for example, one herder reported to White that he no longer tied a blue sash around the neck of his *seter*, as this was in danger of getting caught on the barbed-wire fences which have recently been installed in many parts of the region, thereby strangling the animal. We could read this as an example of the cruelty and control manifest in the form of a new architecture of domestication, but this case also shows how, even in times of unsettling change, cosmology and care continue to influence the ways in which Inner Asian pastoralists engage with their domestic animals. It remains to be seen whether this selection of unique individuals within a herd becomes less prominent, as pressures to commodify domestic animals increase across the region.⁶

6 Conclusion

One feature of Inner Asian pastoralism is that both humans and ungulates live in hybrid multispecies communities with herd animals as integral components of the family encampment. Within this introduction, we have focused on engagement with herd animals across Inner Asia, pushing beyond older conceptions of domestication to consider animals at differing scales: from different kinds of multispecies herds to the herd itself; to different parts of an animal or the material objects used as a means of communication between herder and herd animals; and, finally, to the consecration and subsequent release of the individual animal. Herders consider the animals they co-exist with across these different scales on a daily basis, in both a conceptual and in a practical manner. So rather than seeking to contrast herders and their relationships with individual animals to hunters and their engagement with animal *types* (cf. Knight 2012), we can see that living with animals in Inner Asia involves careful attention to *multiscalar* multispecies relations.

In fact, a recurring element in several of the papers in this section is the similarities between the perceptions of hunters with their prey and that of herders in relation to herd animals. Oehler ascribes comparative notions of 'care' to both herder

6 In December 2019, for example, the World Bank approved a \$30 million loan for the Mongolia Livestock Commercialization Project (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/12/20/new-world-bank-loan-approved-to-boost-productivity-of-mongolias-livestock-sector>).

and hunter in the engagement with other species. The deity of the mountains, Khangai, features as a protector of herds in both Oehler's fieldsite in Buryatia in southern Siberia and Bumochir and Ahearn's fieldsite in Bayankhongor Province in Mongolia. Bumochir *et al.* also describe the importance of fortune and luck (*khishig*) in relation to success as a hunter and, for the herder, in terms of the prospering of herds. From these articles we can see that both herder and hunter care for and nurture the continued existence of multiple species as part of a similar ontology relating to more-than-human beings, whereby hunted animals are nurtured and protected by powerful deities, while herd animals are nurtured and protected by herding families (see also Tani 1996).

The case of the sacred individual animal across Inner Asia exemplifies some underlying similarities between herding practices across the region, yet it also illustrates the diversity in which these conceptualisations regarding animals are performed. There are multiple rationales for initiating consecration ceremonies, or alternatively, ceremonies to sacrifice an animal. What is evident from the diverse ethnography is that the practice of releasing herd animals from slaughter extends across the Inner Asian region, from reindeer herders in Siberia to yak pastoralists in Tibet. Although the rationale for the ritual differs, it is evidently an ongoing practice with a long history, incorporated within both shamanist and Buddhist practices. The diversity and reoccurrence of the ritual act of animal release across Inner Asia is highlighted within this section in order to show how we can expand our understanding of domestication to encompass practices that cannot be described merely in terms of human 'control' over animals. The concepts through which we think about human relations with other animals are inevitably the product of particular ontologies, histories and ecologies. Careful ethnographic description, such as that contained within these articles, allows us to think beyond existing understandings by resituating domestication in different contexts, and thus to apprehend better the many ways humans can co-exist with other animals.

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